

Love and Other Historical Accidents

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by [PacificRimbaud](#)

Summary

Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy never intended to blow up their life's work, but that's rather what they've gone and done. Now they're trapped 200 years in the past, with a broken Time Turner, a missing snuff box, a handful of overly-eligible daughters, and a House-elf in a cable knit cardigan. It will require the combined power of their keen intellects to get them home, if they'd stop arguing long enough to use them.

As it turns out, history is just one damned accident after another.

For fans of Harry Potter, Jane Austen, and Connie Willis, a historical romantic comedy all about time, and getting the hell out of it.

The Explosion

Chapter Notes

This work contains original characters with plot lines of their own and passages of descriptive world-building throughout. Please mind the tags, especially **farce**, **slow burn**, and **miscommunication**.

It's my small fanfiction homage to some of my favorites: Oscar Wilde, P.G. Wodehouse, Jerome K. Jerome, and especially Connie Willis' time travel comedy *To Say Nothing of the Dog*.

I hope you enjoy. ♥

“You know you’ve got frosting at the corner of your mouth, Malfoy?”

Draco Malfoy looked deliberately at Hermione Granger, standing on the opposite side of the lift, and stuffed his gob with the final, massive bite of the chocolate frosted donut pinched with aristocratic decorum between his fingers. Without taking his eyes off her, he chewed and swallowed. Then he swiped his thumb at the corner of his mouth, slid the tip between his lips, and sucked.

When he pulled his thumb out of his mouth, it made an audible, wet pop.

"Better now?" he asked.

“You're the worst.”

“We all have our appetites, Granger. Can’t help if mine are a little naughty. What did you have for breakfast? Overnight oats with chia seeds, seasonal fruit and a splash of unsweetened vanilla almond milk?”

“I prefer soya,” said Hermione before she could stop herself, and then, quietly, “*Damn it.*”

The lift slid smoothly down to Level Nine of the Ministry, and disgorged them both into the quiet of the corridor.

“Do you have your weekend all planned out, then?” asked Draco. “Perhaps some yoga, a bit of gratitude journaling, take your cat for a walk?”

Hermione refused to give him the satisfaction of rolling her eyes. It was Friday, and he’d burned through her last nerve on Wednesday.

“I have a perfectly lovely weekend lined up, thank you for asking. Do you plan to enjoy your usual debauches at the Manor? Does everyone involved sign a confidentiality agreement, or are they free to share what goes on behind closed doors? I imagine things can get a little *sticky*.”

“Oh, an air-tight non-disclosure, always.” Draco opened the door leading to the Department of Mysteries and held it for her, the corner of his mouth tugging up in the earliest stages of a smirk. “Although sadly, all of that may be coming to an end. You’ll have to hold your breath for juicy

details from some other quarter.”

Hermione entered the round foyer of the Department. The formerly unmarked doors once revolved at random around the entry room's circular walls. They now stood still, and were flanked by neat brass plates displaying titles such as *Magico-Neurology*, *Affective Studies*, and *Thanatology*. She drew her wand from the pocket of her fitted, cropped trousers, and held it against one of the door knobs until a small light just above it flashed green.

“*God* this place is pedestrian since you lot Muggle-ized everything.” He poked a finger at the brass plate reading *Temporospatial Research and Development*.

"Government transparency is something of an adjustment, I realize." She swung the door open, and he followed her through. "Things like oversight and broadly agreed upon rules for the use of human test subjects may be indispensable to the ethical expansion of human knowledge, but I see how you might find them tiresome."

"I do. I like this style you're experimenting with, though." He watched her remove her jacket. "The trousers, the loose, tucked—that's a t-shirt, correct? Like a refined tee? Very laid-back, California woman-entrepreneur getting down to business, if anyone actually conducts business in California. You look centered, empowered, and ready for a midday mojito. I'm waiting for the imminent arrival of golden highlights and beachy waves." He sucked at the opening in the lid of a paper take-away coffee cup and winced. "Why is this coffee such *absolute* shite?"

"Your capacity for complaint is positively supernatural," said Hermione. "I keep telling you, if you wait until we get into the office, I'll do a proper brew. The witch at the tea cart thinks coffee is a Muggle conspiracy and prepares it accordingly. And stop reading my fashion magazines."

"But I'm addicted now," he drawled in his oval aristocratic tones, "to your hateful beans, and to *Who Wore It Best?*" He flung the leather satchel he'd been carrying, embossed in black-on-black with the initials of a highly exclusive Wizarding fashion house, onto a weathered desk at the left side of the room. Then he set down his coffee cup, removed his outer set of robes, and hung them from a peg by the door.

When he turned around, Hermione was staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing. Only you look like an MI6 agent about to motor about Rome on a Vespa in search of a decent cappuccino. Do you mean for your trousers to be that tight, or have war reparations made sufficient fabric an unaffordable luxury for the Malfoys?"

Draco looked down at his suit, a close-fitted, matte-black affair in fine-grained wool.

"It's called tailoring. I understand that fit is an unfamiliar concept when one is accustomed to oversized cardigans and blouses from the high street cut at nothing but right angles." He lifted his chin and regarded her. "Do you realize that I heard you use the term 'sweater paws' when you were muttering to yourself the other day? And what's a Vespa? Some kind of Muggle street-cleaning equipment? Would I look good on one?"

"No." Hermione slammed her own plain olive-drab canvas bag down on a matching desk on the room's opposite side before turning back to him. "You wouldn't."

"Then I'll find something else to ride." He lifted an eyebrow at her.

Hermione breathed out in irritation as she made her way to a table centered in the room supporting

a complicated-looking machine, and began fussing with a row of knobs.

The apparatus consisted of a series of brass tubes and gleaming glass lenses, and mounted in its center was a small hour-glass filled with subtly shifting, luminescent sand. Interlocking brass rings circled the hour-glass, which began rotating slowly when Hermione tapped them with her wand. Below it a wide, highly polished lens hung directly over a round basin filled with a still, dark liquid.

Draco opened his satchel, pulled out a metal object, and brought it to the table.

Hermione stopped twisting an etched brass dial.

“What do you mean, ‘All of that may be coming to an end’?”

“Are you suddenly taking a legitimate interest in what I get up to during my after-office hours?” he asked.

He set the metal object at the end of the table.

"I'm not in the least bit interested in what you do with your—oh, good God." Hermione stared. "I thought you said it was shaped like a swan?"

Draco looked at the object.

“It is.”

“That has never looked like a swan in its entire life. How could you *possibly*...” She trailed off and shook her head as if to clear it. "If anything—and this is being extraordinarily generous—it looks like a recently deceased badger.”

The object under scrutiny was a small silver-metal box, roughly the size of a woman’s fist. Two hinges connected the top and bottom pieces on one side, and a perfunctory clasp held it closed on the opposite. There was, one would have been forced to concede, a certain quality of extreme repose in the figure. It may have been dead or merely sleeping, but the essential fact was that it had come to its place of rest. Whether it was a badger, a swan, or some intermediate species heretofore undiscovered, was open to lively debate. What must have been agreed upon, in light of the evidence, was that it was loosely in the shape of an acorn lying on its side, with a pert triangular tip at its wide end like a little tail, and a series of lumpy, improvisational protrusions at its narrow end. It was delicately etched over its entire surface with what might have been feathers, and might have been thick strands of fur, the grooves having oxidized to black and setting the fine, ambiguous work of the craftsman in sharp relief. There was a pair of what were clearly goggling round eyes—a triumphant exemplar of the artist’s ability to wordlessly convey meaning—and the stately open chambers of a pair of ears or, perhaps, nostrils, depending on which part of the figure was supposed to be the head.

It smelled like stale cigars.

“This treasured object has been in the possession of the Wiltshire Malfoys for at least eight generations,” said Draco, frowning, with no small degree of hauteur. "Every single one of them has referred to it as the cursed, *swan-shaped* snuff box. It is an *avant-garde objet d’art*, and has been sitting on a shelf in the large drawing room at Malfoy Manor for two hundred years. Forgive me if I defer to the expertise of its faithful stewards over a caffeine-peddling, Muggle-minded swot like yourself."

“I didn’t know you felt so strongly about the cursed metallic mustelids you keep lying about the

place,” she answered, “but if that’s a swan, I’m a harpy.”

“There’s nothing to say to that which isn’t going to end in my losing something of great anatomical value to me.”

Hermione looked at him with disdain. “Will you just help me adjust the focus on the Potentiograph? It’s gone soft.”

“Has it? It looks fine to me.”

“It has. I can see it plain as day. Get your hand over the glass and help me fix it.”

Draco moved close to a raised glass square at the machine's far end, and tapped it with his wand. It was suddenly illuminated from below with a diffuse, bright white light. It projected upward into a long run of glass lenses mounted in tubes and interspersed with angled mirrors, ending at the Time Turner suspended over the basin. He placed his hand over the glass, and looked at Hermione.

“Well?”

Hermione peered down at the reflective surface of the liquid in the basin.

“Oh!” she said in genuine surprise. “That’s unusual.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh *my*. Say that again. I'd like to file it away for later.”

“Shut it and come and look.” She motioned for him to trade places with her.

He did.

She stuck her hand over the glass where his had just been. “What do you see?”

“Your hand. It’s forty five minutes into the future of your fingernails, and you haven’t stopped biting them.”

“And what else? Look at the background, not the hand.”

“Oh! Well that’s interesting, isn’t it?” His brow furrowed. “Is that...it looks like mud, maybe? Rather deep, at that. Merlin, you’re actually grabbing a handful of it, how pastoral of you.”

“I’m sure I will have a perfectly good reason,” she said pointedly. “Minus the mud pies, I saw the same when you put your hand on the platform. Interesting, eh?”

“Very.”

“Stop the Turner then start it again and see what happens. It may just be acting up. We’ve certainly seen stranger things,” she said.

Draco brought out his wand, tapped it to halt the Time Turner at the heart of the machine, then restarted it again.

“What now?” asked Hermione.

"Your hand is in the lab. You're making me a coffee."

Hermione offered him a personally crafted expressionless stare.

"It seems like just a bit of potentiality leakage. Nothing we haven't seen before in one form or another. No playing about in a field of muck for us today, unfortunately." He reached over and tweaked the focusing dial. "Focus is dialed in. Shall we have a look at the cursed snuff box?"

Hermione looked uncertain.

"Do you have your emergency jump kit on you?" she asked.

Draco looked anywhere but at her.

"*Merlin*, Malfoy, you cannot be serious. I've told you a thousand times at *least*. They need to be on you at all times: Time Turner, age-stabilizer potion. Both, at *all times*." She pulled a heavy leather pouch out of her trouser pocket and shook it at him. "Honestly, I'd report you to Shackbolt if it wasn't your own self-interested, toff backside you're putting on the line by not having your safeguards in place."

"Having that kit in my pocket ruins the lines of the suit." He laid a hand protectively across the waistband of his trousers. "And I need a well-fitting suit to lure unsuspecting witches to my depraved orgies."

Hermione snorted. "No witch in the entire Ministry could possibly be unsuspecting at this point."

"That's true. Every witch on the premises is perfectly informed about what I get up to at the weekend."

"Do you want to bring this lab down with you?" Hermione asked. "You're welcome to live out the rest of your days as a peat cutter in the year 1386 if that suits your fancy, but I'd much prefer to stay here and continue our work. We've only had two full years with our Time Turners. If you'll recall, they took us three rather frustrating years to re-develop in the first place."

"Yes, I was there."

"We haven't even begun to scratch the surface of what can be done with the spelled restraints placed on them, let alone what's possible if we can demonstrate that it's safe to take them off."

"Fine," said Draco. "I'll put the potion in my pocket, but there's no need for us both to carry an emergency Time Turner. If we get in a spot of trouble, we'll use yours." He pulled a vial of shimmering puce-colored potion out of his desk drawer, and shoved it in his pocket.

Hermione caved to temptation and enjoyed a deeply satisfying roll of her eyes, then slid over to make one final adjustment to the focus dial.

"Alright. Go ahead and put the badger on the projection plate."

Draco looked at her meaningfully, placed the awful ornamental snuff box on the illuminated glass square, and came to stand beside her, looking into the basin.

Nothing happened for a long moment, and then the surface of the liquid flashed an alarming neon yellow. The apparatus shook slightly, and the Time Turner made a sort of grinding noise, and seemed to reverse itself. It made a high-pitched squeal, a metallic *ping*, then came to a complete stop and went dark.

Hermione realized after a long moment of silence that in her alarm, she'd dug her fingers into the expertly tailored sleeve of Draco's suit jacket. She looked up at him and unhooked herself.

"That wasn't anything we've seen before." He brushed off his sleeve and looked at the Potentiograph as though it was about to start frenetically spouting live kittens like popping corn leaping from the machine at the fair.

"I don't understand." Glaring at the machine, she pointed her wand at the Time Turner and gave it a resounding tap. It remained dark and motionless. Next, she leaned in and gave it an irritated plink with her index finger. "What the blasted, *withering*—*damn* it! How many Curse-breakings have we looked at ahead of time?"

"Hundreds."

She counted off on her fingers. "Exsanguination, instant death, boils on the bollocks—every known family of curse has crossed this wretched thing. We've given the Curse-breakers foreknowledge about scores of objects by now, and none of them has ever *broken* the bloody *machine*. I honestly can't think of what could possibly be so awful that it's just decided to pack it in."

"Well, I suppose it's best to set it aside and let the Curse-breakers know. Are you keen to make me that coffee yet?"

"Sod off, Malfoy."

Hermione was incensed. Not only was the machine apparently broken, but they'd failed, and failure made her *itch*. When she itched, she needed to work.

"I'm firing up the Dislocator. We can pick up where we left off on Tuesday with the apples."

Draco shrugged. "Alright. We'll put the recalcitrant machine in a time out so it can think about what it's done." He picked up his now cold coffee, took a drink, and set the cup down on the corner of the Potentiograph table. Then he turned to a wooden bench that spanned the entire rear wall.

A machine sat on the bench's left end. It was built along similar lines to the Potentiograph, only it was much smaller, and instead of a basin and lenses, it stood on brass legs over an empty wooden platform.

"I'm driving today," said Draco.

Hermione indulged herself in another luxurious eye roll, and moved to retrieve a shiny brass stopwatch from her desk. With a wave of her wand, a parchment roll rose into the air and bobbed along beside her, with a quill hovering at the ready over its surface. She took a position at the opposite end of the bench to Draco, in front of a slightly raised wooden surface identical to the one under the Dislocator machine.

A bowl of apples with hazy, speckled yellow and blush-pink skins sat next to the machine. After Draco tapped his wand against the Time Turner at the heart of the device, he used a pair of tongs to carefully slide an apple along the wooden platform below it. When it reached the center, it seemed to wink out of existence with a soft pop.

Draco plucked a particularly large apple from the bowl and looked at it philosophically.

"Do you think eating time-shifted apples is going to do me any harm?"

"One can only hope," Hermione muttered.

He took a laggard bite while the machine continued to hum cheerfully.

"Not to worry," he said once he'd chewed and swallowed. "We'll get the Potentiograph up and running again in the afternoon, and take a look at something particularly good. There's a cursed pair of Italian loafers in the storage closet that I'd like to wear to the Ministry Winter Solstice party, and the more information we can have about them before I put them on my feet the better."

Hermione's lips twitched in irritation. She kept a keen watch on the empty platform in front of her.

"We've certainly had worse days," said Draco. "Everyone's going home with all of their personal bits and bobs in place today." He made steady work of his apple, pulled a seed from the core, then flicked it, hard, across the wooden platform under the Dislocator, where it disappeared mid-flight.

"What did you mean, before? About putting an end to your single life." Hermione narrowed her eyes, still refusing to look at him.

"I don't believe I used those exact words," he said carefully. "In any case, it's nothing *you* need to worry about, I'm sure." He fidgeted with the perfect knot of his elegant tie before bending down and slinging a second apple seed into the machine at an upward angle.

"Now I *am* worried about it, because you've brought it up."

"And now you can forget it." He sounded terse, even for him.

"Alright, I will."

"Good."

"*Good.*"

The second hand of Hermione's stopwatch twitched audibly.

"It's only that you live for your swinging bachelorhood," she mumbled.

"Who ever actually said that I'm putting on sex parties at Malfoy Manor?" There was a laugh threaded through his words, but his voice was sharp with agitation. "Does that even seem plausible to you?"

"Seems plausible enough, yes. With the..." she gestured up and down at him, "...suits."

"My *suits*, Granger?"

An apple appeared on the platform in front of Hermione, perfectly round and unbruised.

"Four minutes, thirty-seven seconds." She clicked the button at the top of the stopwatch, and the quill took note.

"Aging?"

She picked up a brass tube with a cut crystal set in one end, like a kaleidoscope, and looked through it at the apple. "Fifty...two seconds."

The quill scratched dutifully away.

"Getting better."

"Markedly so." She moved the apple to a bin on the floor and consulted the figures on the parchment.

An apple seed came flying across the platform next to Hermione and hit her squarely in the arm.

Thirty seconds later, another one came zinging through the air at a steep upward angle, and hit her in the chin.

She spoke without looking up from her work. "You're *such* a spoilt child."

"And you're a bloody-minded know-it-all." Draco wrestled with another budding smirk. "And thus we remain as we have ever been."

Without any warning, a new apple appeared on the platform next to Hermione.

"We've sent one back," said Draco.

Hermione directed the quill to note the time in a different column on the parchment, then picked up the new apple, and repeated the procedure with the brass tube.

"Seven point two."

Draco adjusted a series of knobs on the Dislocator, then they repeated the forwarding experiment with another apple, which aged at a slightly slower rate than the first.

"Shall we do back, now?" he asked.

"I suppose."

Draco tapped the Time Turner in the Dislocator with his wand, and it came to a stop. He adjusted the knobs again, then tapped the Time Turner a second time, and it began to whirl in the opposite direction. He picked up an apple with the tongs, and pushed it across the platform.

It disappeared just as the other two had before it.

"Time?" he asked.

Hermione looked at her stopwatch.

"Six minutes." She tapped her fingertip against her bottom lip. "That's a...point zero two rate of de-aging."

"Excellent."

A brass knob came flying across the platform next to Hermione and hit her in the hip.

"Ow!" she cried out. "*God*, that actually hurt." She rubbed where it had struck. "I've put up with your damned apple seeds, but that's solid brass. How hard must you have thrown that?"

"I have no idea. I haven't done it yet." He looked troubled.

"You'll need to explain yourself in about six minutes." She scowled. "Merlin, that's going to bruise." As she bent over at the waist to pick up the knob, a brass screw flew across the platform and whizzed through the air directly over her head.

“Hermione.” Draco stared with evident concern at Hermione’s end of the bench. “Move away from the destination platform, please.”

Hermione complied with his request without offering him any argument. The moment she stepped away, a shower of shattered brass and glass fragments flew out of the air above the destination platform and through the space where Hermione had recently stood.

As both she and Draco gawked wordlessly at the detritus now covering the floor, an empty paper coffee cup with a hole burned through the bottom shot into the room from above the platform, landed on the floor, and lolled back and forth in a lazy, ever-diminishing arc, until finally it lay still and peaceful, calmly smoking.

“I refuse to believe I’ve chunked all of *that* into the Dislocation field,” said Draco.

“That is a lot, even for you.”

“What’s going on, then?”

Hermione frowned. “I don’t know.”

“I liked it better when you said that before. Now it’s just disconcerting.”

They both looked around the room.

“I suspect,” said Draco, “that we now have about five minutes left before we need to get out of the room.”

Hermione nodded gravely.

“We have to *think*. What’s out of the ordinary?” she asked.

They both looked around.

“The box,” said Draco. “We’ve left it on the Potentiograph lens.”

“Alright. But the Potentiograph is totally dark.” Hermione waved a hand in frustration. “It shouldn’t be able to do anything. I suppose we move the box anyway?”

Draco inched toward the swan-shaped snuff box. As his fingers began to close around it, he let out a loud shout, and jerked his hand back as though he’d been burned.

“It’s zapped me,” he said, shaking his fingers.

“Zapped you?”

“That’s what I said.”

Hermione grabbed the tongs sitting beside the Dislocator, and went to grab the snuff box with them.

“Steady on, Hermione, I’m not sure that’s a good—”

The moment the tongs touched the box's irregular surface, a glowing jet of what looked like chartreuse lightning shot out of the box and nipped at her fingertips.

Hermione shrieked.

“Alright. Zapped is fair. No grabbing,” she concluded. “Spell?”

“I’m not sure adding magic is a solid plan, here. I think we’re better off putting a containment spell around the table, so we can localize the damage. We’ve run the scenarios, your Arithmancy is solid. There’s nothing these machines can do under any circumstances that will impact more than the immediate area.”

Hermione looked devastated.

“What if it doesn’t work? We’ll lose all of it, Draco. Everything we’ve done over the last five years—gone. They’ll shut it all down, over that blasted...*badger!*”

Draco let her taxonomic error slide, and seemed to consider their options.

“Alright. I’m going to try to summon it.”

“What if you you’re *right*, though?” She saw that even in these circumstances he couldn’t stop the beginning of another smirk from sprouting on his face before he squashed it down. “We have *no* idea what adding additional magic directly into this situation will do.”

“Do you have any better ideas?”

Hermione hesitated.

“No, but it doesn’t follow that—”

Before she could finish, Draco pointed his wand at the swan-badger feigning innocence on the Potentiograph platform.

“*Accio* snuff box.”

What happened next seemed to unfold in slow motion. Given the nature of the department it happened in, it may well have.

When the spell hit the snuff box, the lemon-lime neon light that had merely licked in warning at their fingers before exploded from the box in a fan of crackling stripes, the tip of each one snapping at either the Time Turner at the heart of the Potentiograph, or Draco and Hermione themselves.

When two of them struck Hermione in the chest and arm, it felt as though twin holes were being bored straight through her, sending vibrating shocks of pain radiating out to the tips of her fingers and down through the soles of her feet.

She watched as Draco’s moon-pale hair stood on end, and then lit up as though it were made up of the fragile white-hot filaments of a thousand incandescent Muggle light bulbs.

Hermione felt pinned into place by the shock of the curse, and the movements she made toward Draco were as slow and deliberate as wading through freshly poured concrete.

When the jagged yellow tongues of the curse’s energy hit the Time Turner in the Potentiograph, it sparked to life and began to spin, at first slowly, and then with increasing speed, until they could hear its brass rings slicing through the air in a high-pitched, oscillating whine that beat in nauseating waves against the shores of their ear drums.

“Hold on,” shouted Hermione, finding Draco’s fingertips with her own. Wrenching his hand into a firmer grip, she pulled herself toward him, and finally wrapped her arms ferociously around his

torso.

The door was a mere ten feet away. If they moved then, together, they could press against the enormous, crushing pressure building up in the room, and make it there. Each of the laboratories in the Department of Mysteries was warded and spelled beyond comprehension against spreading impacts from any of the projects going on behind the closed and still-mysterious doors.

If they could get out, the explosion—because quite clearly there was about to be an explosion—would happen, and then they could go back in and assess the damage.

Ten feet, now nine...

Hermione's arms clenched viciously around Draco, whose arms were wrapped around her shoulders, tight and possessive. They moved like that, pulling, pushing, and dragging one another through what felt like the lightless lead weight at the bottom of the ocean.

Eight...

Seven...

When Draco and Hermione were six feet from the door, the snuff box disappeared with a theatrical burst of noise, like it wanted nothing more from life than everyone's complete attention.

The Potentiograph exploded.

There was a penetrating rain of brass shrapnel and shards of hot glass. The viewing basin launched itself into the air, held on to its sticky black liquid contents through pure centripetal good fortune as it sailed through the burning brass all around it, then overturned itself and evacuated all over Draco's desk and his expensive designer satchel.

Had they still been in the room, Draco and Hermione would have been shot through with shattered metal traveling through the air at a murderous clip.

It was perhaps for the best that they'd popped out of existence just behind the snuff box.

After the noise was all over, there was a courteous silence while the table that had housed the Potentiograph lightly steamed, as though waiting for a round of applause that never came.

It was black.

Following close on the heels of the black, which was boundlessly, poignantly devoid of all light, there entered into the experience, without warning, a searing green-white-blue strobing stellar explosion that seemed to come from behind the eyeballs and a bit to the left. Next it went black again, and then color wasn't important, because everything was encompassed by a world-bending dizziness and the feeling of being rotated in two directions at once, top to bottom.

Next was the mud.

Hermione opened her eyes, or perhaps her eyes could see after a time where they couldn't. Semantic details retreated into negligibility in the void.

The sky was a cheerfully ignorant dome overhead, forget-me-not blue and dotted with round idiotic poofs of cloud that would have smiled in smug satisfaction with themselves if only they'd known how to do it.

The mud.

The *mud*.

The mud reeked.

It was thick, glorp-ing, heavy stuff, nearly black, and rolling away from Hermione in deep grooves like waves on the surface a solid pitch-dark ocean that smelled like horse manure.

She heard groaning a short distance away, and sat up.

Draco was already sitting vertically, facing away from Hermione, his legs spread in an ungentlemanlike V, and shaking his head abruptly from side to side as though he had water trapped in his ear.

Hermione felt her heart jump up and sprint at the realization that they were, beyond probability, *alive*, and in whatever *this* was, together, sprawled about eight feet apart in the middle of what appeared to be roughly an acre of recently tilled farmland.

Judging by the pornographic squelch made by her left foot, it had recently been raining.

They were *alive*.

They were *together*.

Both of them, under a blue sky, sitting in a field that smelled like horse shit.

Hermione almost howled with relief.

Draco swiveled around to look at her, and there was no masking the look of irrepressible gladness that crossed his face, before it gave way to a shrewd and watchful wariness.

His hair had for several years been trimmed into an undercut, the length at the top forever flopping about over one eyebrow or the other with a maddening look of thoughtless, casual perfection. It was allowed to adopt a tousled nonchalance that made one think "Bed," in a way that caused the loins to wobble a bit, and the void hadn't done it any harm. He was sitting in a field of mud, and yet somehow managed to look shaken and wan in a consumptive, poetical sort of way rather than in a disassembled and muck-smirched way like Hermione was sure she must have done.

Against the black mud, his paleness shone, and his silver-grey eyes reflected the limitless blue of the sky.

For a moment, Hermione almost felt something like positive regard toward him.

Then, like an idiot, he smiled.

That smile.

The audacity of that preposterous, galling, brilliant, *disrespectful* smile.

"You sod," she said quietly. "You reckless, self-important, pompous *prat*. You blew...up...my...*lab*!" She had started at a *piano*, worked her way through a rapid crescendo and

ended in a feral *fortissimo*.

His face dropped.

“*Your* lab? What do you mean *your* lab?” he argued, fatally.

She rose to her knees, then bent down to scoop up a generous handful of that midnight-black, rain-soaked, fecund, yielding, horse shit-smelling mud, and chucked it straight into Draco Malfoy’s beautiful, pale, vainglorious, *idiot* face.

The Wedding

“Malfoy,” said Hermione.

Draco said nothing, only continued to walk across the middle of the plowed field, swiping at his face with the cloth he’d conjured after he’d already used a cleaning spell three times.

“Malfoy,” she said again.

He didn’t so much as twitch a muscle in her direction.

“Malfoy,” she continued, loudly, prodding in the mud with the bare toes of her left foot. “Wait up, my shoe’s come off.”

“To hell with your shoe, and to hell with you,” said Draco without turning around.

“You’re behaving rather sensitively for someone whose home decor has just run us both through the spin cycle of spacetime.”

She pointed her wand in the area where she believed her shoe had been absorbed by the mud.

“*Accio shoe.*”

Something shifted within the muck four feet away, then with a drawn-out, flatulent sucking sound, a soil-encased object shaped something like an elongated flatbread reached escape velocity, flew out of the ground, and slapped Hermione wetly in the chest.

Perched on one leg, she wobbled, tipped, then completely unbalanced and fell hard onto her backside.

“Bollocks!” she shouted as she went down.

At that, Draco finally looked back at her.

“Doesn’t feel very nice, does it.”

“If you’re expecting an apology, you’re going to be very disappointed.” Hermione hauled herself to her feet, mud-filled left shoe in hand, and hobbled after Draco along the length of a furrow, leaving squelching indents as she went.

“An apology, from Hermione Granger?” he marveled. “The prospect beggars the imagination.”

Draco continued ahead, and soon reached the place where the plowed field was limited by a hawthorn hedgerow, broken by a wooden stile under the vast spread of an aged oak tree. He climbed onto the stile's upper step, and looked out over the hedge.

Hermione finally caught up with him. While he surveyed the surrounding area, she cast a *Scourgify* on her clothes and shoes, and put her left shoe back on her foot. Everything was irretrievably stained, and smelled undeniably ripe. She dug in her pocket, and pulled out the leather bag holding her emergency Time Turner and the age-stabilizing potion.

She tipped the contents out into her hand.

Hermione felt a shimmering shockwave pass over her skin.

“Draco?”

He turned around and looked at her, and she held out her palm.

The vial of potion lay intact next to two short brass arcs and the remainder of the Time Turner they ought to have been attached to.

“The Time Turner’s broken.”

“You’re joking.”

“Of course I am,” said Hermione. “I can’t think of anything funnier in this situation than our sole means of time travel being made useless.”

“Maybe we won’t need it.” He lifted up on the balls of his feet and squinted at the distant hills. “We’re obviously still in England. I’d even go so far as to gamble that we’re in Wiltshire. Or Somerset.”

“Alright. But *when* are we in England?”

Draco breathed out a hard sigh, stepped over the stile and jumped down to the other side.

“Let’s find out, shall we?” He hooked a sharp right and strode out of view behind the hedgerow.

Hermione jammed the broken parts of the Time Turner back into the bag, put the bag into her pocket, and hastily climbed the stile after him.

He was tall, and his long legs covered more ground than hers. She soon found herself taking after him at a light jog while they followed along the hedgerow for quite some distance, travelling up a slope towards the crest of a comfortably rounded hill.

She was breathing hard by the time they came to a standstill, and spat softly as wind gusted her curls across her eyes and into her mouth.

There was a loud gurgling noise.

Hermione rotated her head toward Draco like a barn owl, and blinked.

“Was that your stomach?”

“I’m hungry,” he said. “Merlin, I could murder a curry right now.”

“Alright. Let’s just pop round the corner chip shop, shall we?” She gestured around at the greenery. A tiny brown bird hopped about atop the hedgerow and regarded them with its glinting black eye. “If you breakfasted on something more nutritionally sound than chocolate frosted donuts, you wouldn’t be hungry this quickly afterward.”

Draco frowned.

“But I like chocolate frosted donuts,” he said. “If that explosion had killed us both, I would have been completely at peace with my last meal.”

“You can’t eat every meal as though it’s your last. You’re not going to be twenty-four years old and eleven stone soaking wet forever.”

“Is my name Weasley? Is it Potter? Have I been tried and convicted of total incompetence in the

court of Granger, and now stand blindfolded, in the line of fire of your motherly concern?"

"I don't *mother* Ronald and Harry."

"Alright."

"Don't *Alright* me."

"Al-right." He carefully articulated the letter *T*.

Hermione grimaced.

"Could we Apparate back to London, I wonder?" Draco thought out loud.

"I think we're better off in the countryside until we can figure out more about where and when we are," she said. "It could be in the middle of the Great Plague for all we know."

"Hmm. Possibly. But we haven't seemed to suffer significant age-related effects." He searched Hermione's face for a long moment, then looked carefully at the backs of his hands. "I wonder whether we've simply Dislocated."

"It's possible. Hello! Look, down there. There's a building on the other side of those trees." Hermione pointed down the hill, where three or four kilometres off, a grey peaked roof peered through the spaces in the foliage of an elongated copse of ash trees. "We ought to walk. Apparating is risky until we have more information."

Draco had already started loping down the hill, hands jammed into his trouser pockets. Hermione set off after him at a bounding jog, spitting intermittently as the gusting wind continued to play at whipping through her hair.

It was closer to five kilometres.

Hermione was by no means unfit, but running after Draco for nearly half an hour over uneven ground in recently exhumed flats made her tired, and increasingly sympathetic to Draco's vociferating gut.

They closed in on the house with an abundance of caution, like a pair of commandos in the mine-sprung jungles of some distant, muggy war. Their serpentine approach brought them hopping across the rocks in a narrow stream flanked by spindly beech trees, then took them on a long wade through a knee-high sea of bluebells. The light that reverberated off the purple blooms lent the forest air a quality of drugged languor that made her tireder still.

It was still early in the day, but Hermione wondered when and where she would lay her head down for the night.

They pulled up beside an abandoned one room stone hut, slowly being eaten by the creeping edge of the wood, its slate roof patched with moss. As they approached, a starling erupted from an empty window frame, shouting in complaint, and flew out into the trees.

About a hundred meters ahead, at the top of a slight incline from the wood, they could see the back of the house.

It was a stately grey Tudor, old and very large, with a multitude of roof peaks, guarded by stands of ancient oak and ash. Its facade dripped with a hedonistic abundance of pale violet wisteria racemes, like clusters of grapes ready to drip into the mouths of mythical Greeks. Mullioned windows overlooked gardens linked by boxy green hedges and manicured, white-graveled paths.

At the ends of the gravel walks nearest the house, there unfolded a wide, closely cropped, brilliantly green lawn, dotted with a pair of antediluvian elms, spreading out in generous invitation to activity and repose. On this field, verdant as a picture postcard, a crowd engaged in the unmistakable motions of conducting a wedding.

There was a gazebo, stark white with fresh paint and conspicuously new against the weathered maturity of the house at its back. Its posts and roof line were heavily armored with dense flower garlands in shades of pink and purple.

A large crowd gathered on the lawn, mingling in threes and fours. A particularly loud laugh cut all the way across the grounds and reached Draco and Hermione among the trees.

“Early 1800s,” said Hermione, without looking at Draco.

“Mm.”

“Are you disputing me?”

Draco grimaced. “I said ‘Mm,’ I’m not sure how you interpret that as a dispute.”

“I’ve read about this.”

“Of course you have.”

“Look at them.” Hermione pointed at the crowd. “Their clothes are much simpler than they were in previous years; plainer fabrics, fewer adornments. Their class peers in France had lost their heads, and it seemed wise to dial back a bit on the show. For some reason they wanted to emulate classical Greeks, which is what the Empire waists and the skirts are about. I’ll have to look that part up when we get back.”

“Make sure that you do.”

Hermione pressed on. “There was an increased interest in hygiene in this period, and lighter fabrics made more frequent clothes washing easier. There were issues with sheeriness, apparently. Their hair is up and decorated with ribbons—the Greek influence again. I’d say the Regency of Prince George, or just prior to.” She squinted. “And judging from the number of people wearing robes over the lot, and what I think is a House-elf wearing a formal dish towel, this is a Magical household.”

Draco sighed.

“Alright,” he said. “Ten points to Gryffindor. I accept your eighteen oh-something-or-other based on sartorial evidence, and I’ll do you one better. We’re firmly in Wiltshire, and this”—he pointed at the manor—“is the Longbottom estate, Bugg-Buntley Hall. Malfoy Manor is almost exactly six and a half kilometres”—he spun around, and pointed in a line heading diagonally away from the house—“in that direction.”

“Oh!” Hermione stood up taller with excitement. “That’s fascinating! I had no idea there was a Longbottom estate. I thought Neville grew up in a semi-detached in Kensal Rise.”

“He did. I believe there’s a chronically indisposed great uncle sitting in this place back in 2004.”

“Astonishing! I wonder who will inherit? I can’t imagine the upkeep on an estate like this is affordable these days. Those days, I mean. Our days.”

“Magic helps, enormously. As long as you’re keeping on top of repair and maintenance spells, waterproofing and energy loss incantations, you’re saving on the lion’s share of expenses there. But you still need a rather sizable vault and a solid investment portfolio,” said Draco. “Completely remodeling the entire house, and clearing out the stink of Dark—” he cut himself off, glancing down at her arm.

The wounds Bellatrix Lestrange gave her had healed into a series of truncated, abstract silver-white lines. Hermione had done her best, but hadn’t been able to completely remove them by magical or Muggle means.

“It was necessary,” he continued. “But it wasn’t cheap. Not that it ought to have been.”

Absently, he rubbed his forearm.

Hermione was opening her mouth to say something when Draco’s belly made a noise like a rock tumbler buried at the back of a linen closet.

“Alright. We’re inviting ourselves to a wedding.”

“You’re joking,” said Hermione. “We’re both dressed in stained twenty-first century office attire, and we smell like stable hands. Never mind that our theories about the stability of timelines are only that. We simply don’t know enough about interacting with people in the past to do it casually. We’re not getting anywhere near those canapés.”

“But I *want* them.” He sounded remarkably like a very tall five year-old whose voice had dropped to a low tenor. “And if you’ll recall, I’m a spoilt child. If I know how to do anything, it’s get whatever I want, whenever I want it. And I’m right—I’m *sure* of it—that we’d have to at *minimum* murder someone to really cock things up, and this doesn’t seem like that sort of wedding.”

“We could Apparate to London. Go to the Ministry, explain our circumstances. Or perhaps even better, to Mettleworth College at Oxford, and appeal to the aid of one of the dons there,” said Hermione. “Someone is doing work in Time in this period; we can get help. Get the Turner repaired, or even get a new one.”

“Hm. There’s rather a lot to consider there. But now, lunch.”

“You can’t possibly be serious,” said Hermione.

Before she’d finished her sentence, he had Apparated away.

He was gone for something like twenty minutes, if the count Hermione kept in her agitated head was anywhere close to accuracy. When he Apparated back, he was holding a massive armload of clothes.

“Oh for Merlin’s sake, where did you get those? Have you stolen them?”

“I found them in my own home, thank you very much.”

Hermione stared at him in disbelief.

"Don't look at me like that. I was hopeful that the wards on the Manor would accept me, as a Malfoy," he said. "As it turns out, I was able to walk right in."

"Good God, what if the current family had seen you?"

"I'm happy to report my house is currently occupied by a middle aged dowager and her spinster daughter. If you think I survived my adolescence living with a pack of escaped convicts and a venomous snake the length of a tour bus and *didn't* learn how to sneak around my own home without getting caught, you don't understand me in the slightest." He sniffed. "Avoiding the notice of two women embroidering while discussing this morning's rain showers and a handful of House-elves doing the washing up was something a determined toddler would have been able to manage."

"And you used that skill to steal women's clothes," Hermione observed flatly.

"And women's underclothes."

"Yes, of course." She looked at the bundles in his arms. "There were men's things?"

"In one of the bedrooms, yes. I'll need to Transfigure them slightly, depending on how up to the minute my great-times-six grandfather's fashion sensibility was before he died. But here, put this on and let's go see if there's a salmon paté."

He handed her a bundle of fabric, some in a dark, bruise-colored purple, and some in white linen, and began to take off his jacket.

Hermione looked away.

"Fine. Have it your way," she said. "But only because I'm capable of admitting that the experiments we ran with the tinned peaches do seem to support a stable time loop hypothesis. But I draw the line at changing in the middle of the woods in front of you. I'll be in the hut."

Draco rolled his eyes and continued stripping off as she made her way inside the abandoned stone house.

It smelled of dank moss and leaf mould inside, and the air was several degrees cooler than the surrounding wood.

Hermione looked through the tangle of fabric, and determined that there was a long-skirted dress and a variety of under-things packed together in a bundle.

She removed her shirt, then her trousers, leaving on her bra and knickers, and pulled apart the tumble of undergarments.

There was a pair of long stockings, a white chemise, what appeared to be a petticoat, and finally, stays.

She held the stays out in front of herself and stared.

It was short, made from soft material, and it laced up the back. It had substantial shoulder straps, and the front was stiffened down the middle from the neckline to the hem by a single, wide strip of bone.

She had no idea what to do with it.

She slipped the stockings on first. They came up to the middle of her thighs, and drooped like

elephant skin at the top, which Hermione supposed must have been the norm. Next, she pulled the stays on over her head. It drooped morosely at the bosom; it appeared that the Malfoy spinster was a woman with an overflowing cornucopia. She pulled the chemise over her head, and considered the way it clung awkwardly to the Himalayan topography of the sunken stays.

It wouldn't do.

She removed the chemise, and then removed the stays, then pulled the chemise over her head, then pulled the stays on over the top of that. It was still a baggy mess, but a more likely one.

A new problem presented itself: the straps of her bra were hidden, but the tops of the cups soared over the bust line of both the chemise and stays.

"Merlin," she muttered, considering the high water mark of the neckline. "It's a wonder that he didn't grab me a set of sequined pasties."

She unhooked her bra through the layers of fabric. First, she pulled one strap through the chemise's sleeve and down over her arm. Then, she repeated the procedure on the other side. Finally, she yanked the entire bra through the chemise's left armhole and tossed it on her pile of discarded 21st century clothes. It looked better, but everything was still startlingly capacious at the bust. She grabbed her wand and did a quick shrinking spell over the garment, and did her best to pull the string at the back taut. She quickly realized she was going to need another set of hands.

"Malfoy," she called out. "I need help with the string."

There was a beat of silence.

"The string," he repeated from outside the hut.

"Yes, the blasted string. Get in here and yank on it for me."

She walked to the door, and turned around. With her back to the woods, she heard his approach.

He paused, and Hermione heard him sigh.

"What's the problem?" she asked.

A gusting breeze brushed the exposed expanse of her back and made her shudder.

He said nothing. Finally he moved, and her frame jerked lightly as he tugged the laces, snugging her stays to her chest and ribs.

That was better. It still wasn't a perfect fit, but it would do. Critically, her bust line no longer looked like a deflated football.

In fact, as Draco drew the laces tight, the stiff boning up the middle seemed to jam itself between her breasts and shift them up and apart. By the time he was done, they puffed over the chemise's neckline like two round, gleaming baked Chinese barbecue pork buns—the sort Draco sometimes picked up for lunch and ate while leaning over the Potentiograph bowl, which made Hermione shout at him.

"What do I do with the end of it?" Draco asked.

"The string? Give it a good knot, I suppose."

He did.

"Anything else?"

"No, thank you. I'm all sorted."

"Alright."

"Thank you."

She listened as he walked away, then pulled the petticoat over her head, and tied its waist strings herself. It was a bit long, but not so much that it would drag terribly.

Finally, she slipped on the aubergine dress.

Like everything else, it was baggy at the bust and ribs. A bit of wand work brought it more or less into line, though it was no more effective than the under-things at covering the baked goods.

She was about to join Draco outside, when she remembered about her hair.

She spelled a patch of wall into a mirror-like shine, and used every binding and braiding spell she'd learned in the girls' dormitories at Hogwarts to pull her curls into a forcibly contained updo, wrapped with two braids she'd have been proud to show off to Fleur Weasley. She found a grotty cotton string hanging from a nail in the crumbling wooden window frame. Transfigured into a narrow gold ribbon, it looked reasonably well wound around her hair and pinned in place with a sticking spell. Curls still flew loose at her nape and around her face, but it would have to do.

The shoes weren't appropriate to the period, but she didn't know enough about what they ought to look like to alter them. Her hem adequately covered her feet. She'd simply have to avoid big kicks, or playing lacrosse.

She gathered her work clothes and bra into a bundle, vanished all, slipped on her shoes, and went outside to find Draco.

"How did you make out?" she asked, rounding the corner.

She pulled up short.

He was fussing with the ends of a narrow white cloth that wrapped several times around his neck, and stopped when she came into view.

"How do you look like that"—she gestured at him—"and I look like a village bakery window at Christmas?"

His tight, off-white trousers put the muscles he kept honed in the ultra-competitive interoffice Quidditch league on display, and his softly shining black boots came up to his knees.

There was a fussy-looking shirt arrangement with a high neck that Hermione was impressed he'd managed to figure out without any help. His black tail coat pulled in smartly at the waist.

As always, his hair flopped dashingly.

It was all but guaranteed that every one of the loudly laughing aunts at the wedding would refer to him as a "fine figure of a man".

"Alright, then," she said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, I am. You look"—he paused, squinted, and drew in a deliberate breath—"prepared,

Granger.”

“Oh.” She wondered at her disappointment. “Thank you, I suppose. Shall we?”

“Alright.”

Quietly, he cleared his throat.

They Apparated beside the house, away from the eyes of the wedding guests, but close enough to follow a garden path and join the rest of the party without attracting any attention.

“Right,” said Hermione, readying herself. “Follow my lead.”

“In what sense?”

“In the sense of Regency-era decorum. This isn’t a meal at the Ministry lunch counter, where you can kick back with a bacon sarnie and a milky tea and talk about all your *weekend girls* with Blaise. We’ll need to decide—*damn it*, Malfoy!”

Before she finished speaking, Draco rounded the corner without her.

She bustled after him holding up her skirts, then remembered her shoes, and hastily lowered the hem to the ground.

The sun climbed into position overhead and warmed the garden air, thick with the fragrance of wisteria. Draco had found a flute of champagne, and leaned in a corner like one of the lads down at the pub.

“Did you get one of those for me?” she asked.

“Clearly not. Hello there,” he said to a passing House-elf carrying a tray dotted with little basket-shaped pastries with some kind of ham and egg-looking filling. “Yes, thank you. Just stand there for a moment.”

The House-elf did as he was told, and Draco ate five of the baskets before he waved him off.

Suddenly aware of an intense thirst after nearly an hour of running about the countryside, Hermione snagged a champagne flute from a passing tray. She downed the entire glass, and grabbed another one off the same elf.

“That fellow over there has prosciutto rolls.” Draco moved off the wall in pursuit.

Hermione shuffled after him, dragging her hem. Feeling the warmth of the late morning, she finished the second glass of champagne.

“These are delicious, try one.” Draco handed her a rolled packet of ham. “They’re setting up a buffet over there.” He pointed at a long cloth-covered table set close to the house, loaded with stacked plates and a phalanx of covered dishes. “I wonder when they’re going to cut the cake?”

“As I was saying,” said Hermione, “I’d wager that I’ve read far more than you have about this era, and its values and conventions. You ought to let me do the talking.”

“Ought I?” he said, archly. “You know more than I do about expected behavior in the upper circles of Wizarding society?”

“I’m sure you’re the undisputed expert on whatever debauches the elite are getting up to in 2004, but this isn’t then, and you can’t go about here just *being yourself* and not make people suspicious.”

He drained his champagne flute. “Watch me.”

For the next few minutes, they stood silently, eating and drinking whatever happened to walk by. Hermione anxiously nibbled an asparagus spear wrapped in bacon, feeling exposed and turning over possibilities in her head. They needed to come up with a plan: somewhere to stay, a way to eat, *money*—Merlin where would they come up with it if they needed it?—then the space and tools to repair the Time Turner, the calculations for their return...and where had the bloody snuff box gone?

Her mind's wheels were churning away furiously when they were accosted.

“Hullo, hullo, *hullo!*”

Draco startled so badly he nearly dropped his bacon.

The man approaching them was at the same time very small, and very large.

He was no more than five feet three inches tall, and built like a rhinoceros who had taken up long distance running. He was a bizarre mixture of leanness and heft, with heavy, muscular legs and a barrel chest, but everything about him suggested that he had the ability to gambol across the lawn like a gazelle if he wished. His voluminous, curly salt and pepper hair was cropped to resemble a sea of churning waves rising from his smooth forehead. He had a thick beard and mustache, nearly black but shot through with grey, with a thick stripe of white on the right side of his chin, and leonine sideburns framing jocular pink cheeks. There were sprightly, intelligent blue eyes beneath patrician eyebrows, the left of which was bisected by a white band of scar tissue.

He seemed like the sort of person who would survive a solo Antarctic expedition on limited rations, then turn back round for another go.

“Welcome!” he shouted politely. “Have you tried the oysters?”

Hermione couldn't help but notice Draco stand smartly at attention, seemingly shocked into awe. He rallied, and bowed in acknowledgement.

“Indeed,” said Draco. “They’re phenomenal.”

“Quite so!” The man beamed. “Glad you could make it! Please forgive me for taking the liberty, but I don’t believe we’ve been introduced. Sir Thomas Longbottom.” He clicked his heels together and gave them a short, martial nod.

“*Sir* Thomas Longbottom,” repeated Hermione.

“Indeed! And may I ask who the two of you are?”

“Granger,” Hermione said before Draco could speak. “This is Mr. *Granger*,” she continued, gesturing toward Draco.

She looked on as a hot maroon flush climbed from the base of Draco’s neck and up his face like

water filling a tub.

“Splendid! Well done, Mr. Granger,” said Longbottom for no apparent reason.

“Thank you.” Draco wrapped one arm around Hermione’s shoulders and squeezed her with a great deal more pressure than was needed. “And this is my—”

“Sister,” Hermione interjected.

“—wife,” finished Draco.

Draco looked down at Hermione, smiling like a person capable of killing for fun.

“I’m his—” Hermione began.

“Wife.”

“—sister.”

He squeezed her arm again, and she shifted to stand, casually, with her full weight on his left foot.

“This is my—”

“Sister.”

“My sister-wife. She is my sister, who is like a wife to me,” he finished.

She curtsied, right foot hooked behind her left, with a short bob and a dip of the head, in the way that she’d learnt in the one year of ballet class she’d taken aged four. She studiously kept her hem on the ground as she clutched her skirts.

“She’s called Miss *Granger*,” said Draco. “Because Granger is *our* name. Her name, and mine as well.” His smile promised a precise and calculated revenge.

“Wouldn’t there have been so many questions if you had some other name?” Hermione laughed lightly up into his face.

“Well, one can’t be too attached to one’s name, can one?” said Draco. “One might run around forcing it on other people.”

“Ah! The devotion of a sister, keeping her brother's home for him until he's able to marry, well done!” said Longbottom.

Hermione’s mouth dropped open, and Draco pinched her upper arm, hard.

“*Granger*, you say?” Longbottom asked.

Draco gave him a maudlin nod.

Longbottom was suddenly caught up in a fit of excitement. “Ho! Ho! Mr. Martin!” he boomed, turning around swiftly from one side to the next, searching the grounds. “Mr. Martin!” he shouted again, waving at a figure hunched in a chair.

The chair at first glance appeared to be stationary. But at Sir Thomas’s beckoning, it began floating slowly across the lawn, and Hermione realized it was magicked to hover about two inches over the grass. The figure sitting in it clutched a sort of control knob, which he used to maneuver

closer to Sir Thomas, Draco and Hermione.

“Martin, you canny old fool, we have your Granfields right here!” Longbottom bellowed.

Mr. Martin moved closer.

He was impossibly old, and thin, and appeared to be held in a sort of suspended collapse.

Sitting on his wicker floating chair, lined with a snowy sheepskin, he was wrapped in a crisply folded origami packet of Tartan blankets in defiance of the day's warmth. Wisps of white hair escaped from beneath the rolled edge of a knit cap in yellow, red, blue, and olive green stripes, which had a bombastic duplicate-stitch H embroidered in shining gold yarn at the front. He wore spectacles with thick lenses and huge, round tortoiseshell frames that magnified his eyes to a comically large size. An enormous Barbie-pink peony boutonniere was pinned to the outermost layer of his Tartan wrapping.

His eyes were black.

Or rather, they were an indeterminate hazel color, but his pupils were dilated so wide that the irises retreated into a footnote. They were as unclouded and sharp as a youth's. The look in them was at once piercingly attentive and wandering, like someone tracking a single ant going about its business in a colony of millions. There was a quality of shininess to them, not a superficial gloss, but an interior sparkle, as though if you peered into the black of his pupils you'd find the vast starlit stage of the universe and not the dim rear walls of his eyeballs. He was profoundly wrinkled, but his skin had a healthy color and vague translucency that suggested he had stayed out of the sun most of his life, or at least used an effective sunscreen daily. The totality of the impression was of a frail vivacity, a study in contrasts that sat in pleasing complement to Sir Thomas's stout sprightliness.

Hermione could see how they would be friends.

Mr. Martin looked at Hermione and Draco with his penetrating, distracted gaze.

“You were right, Martin, after all! Your cousins *have* come! They're *Grangers*, Martin!” said Longbottom, yelling down Mr. Martin's ear and slapping him on the shoulder gamely. He turned back to Draco and Hermione. “He's been telling us all about the imminent arrival of his cousins, the Granfields, the Greshams, the Granthams, the Greys, even the Griffiths. Welsh! Ho!” He slapped Mr. Martin once more. “We've been putting it down to one of his flights, and now here you are! Grangers!”

Mr. Martin craned his twiggy neck up at Draco and Hermione, and smiled, showing a mouth of healthy, well-kept teeth.

“Granger!” he said. His voice sounded thin and dry, but pleasing, like the rasp of a saw being drawn through the width of a pine board on a summer afternoon. “*Granger*, as you see here!” he said again, this time to Longbottom. He turned back to Draco and Hermione. “What ho!” He smiled, then pinned Draco with his eyes. “A Frenchman,” he whispered, tapping the point of a withered finger against the side of his nose. “I'll drop it in the post,” he concluded, sitting back and closing his eyes.

Draco sipped his third glass of champagne.

“I'll keep an eye out for it,” he said to Mr. Martin, then under his breath to Hermione, “I don't know who this is, but I'm extremely fond of him.”

“Will you be staying with our Mr. Martin at Twiggybroke, or...?” Sir Thomas asked.

“We will absolutely be staying with Mr. Martin at *Twiggybroke*,” said Hermione. She tugged stealthily at the top of one of her baggy stockings. “Unless my brother Mr. Granger has alternative plans.”

Draco looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

“I don’t,” he conceded.

“Splendid! Splendid!” shouted Longbottom. “You’ll dine with us at the Hall. Nightly! Or as often as we may have you. I brook no dissent, excepting that from my good Lady Longbottom, so don’t begin to think of it.”

Draco nodded genteelly and raised his champagne flute at Longbottom.

Hermione had to own that there was a certain quality of manner that Draco possessed that carried him through as though he belonged. Which, give or take two hundred years, she supposed he did. He was elegant, easy, while she was constantly occupied with hiking up her stockings and trying to keep her shoes covered by her hem.

Longbottom ran them round the party and introduced them to everyone.

There was Lady Longbottom, tall, cool, and shockingly beautiful, who seemed distracted by the goings on of the wedding, followed by a series of people with names Hermione knew from Hogwarts: Averys, Notts, and more than a few Parkinsons, plus a set of actual Greshams, a dozen other family names Hermione forgot after her fourth glass of champagne, and a trio of Walters who looked as red and distressed as if they’d never been outside in the sun in their lives.

Longbottom had just married off his eldest child and only son, Tom, a tall youth with cheerful brown curls, attractive thick eyelashes and a sturdy set to his shoulders. The young Mr. Longbottom spent his wedding luncheon wandering about the grounds next to his lovely bride, an olive-skinned girl with black hair and a placid face, looking completely dazed.

They were set, Longbottom told Draco and Hermione, to live in a cottage that Longbottom had recently built on the other side of the woods, and would raise their family there until each one of the Longbottom daughters were married off and sent away to establishments of their own.

There were four of these, increasing in age and size in perfect form like a set of Russian nesting dolls, from the youngest at seventeen to the eldest at twenty. All were built like track runners, trim and pink-cheeked, with great piles of honeyed blonde curls and sparkling laughs. Each had a velveteen alto voice and slightly oversized teeth. They managed to bring to mind horses, in that one was compelled to associate them with glossy coats, excellent health and breathtaking top land speeds. Every last one of them had a surpassingly lovely and substantial set of dinner rolls.

They were extremely beautiful.

Hermione stood beside one of the middle girls, the one with deep brown eyes framed by lush fans of long, dark lashes, and held onto a plate of roast potatoes and roast beef with one hand, and fiddled with the tops of her stockings with the other.

Draco was experiencing bliss.

He had a plate piled high with food, which he’d refilled twice from the dishes on the buffet table, and was holding onto his endless champagne flute. By now he was warm as toast with the latter,

well fed and slightly over-watered, and had transformed into a looser, easier, scandalously flirtatious version of himself.

Hermione despised him.

“So who is it you said you were visiting tomorrow, Miss Cressida?” He lifted an eyebrow and aiming his disarmingly lopsided grin at the witch standing next to Hermione.

“Oh, no one of consequence,” Cressida replied. Her subsequent blush made her look like she’d been doing wind sprints, starting at the gazebo, ending at the abandoned hut at the edge of the woods, and back again.

“Cressy, you liar.” The next youngest sister was a canny-looking eighteen year-old woman. She leveled what seemed to be a perpetually jaded look at Draco and said, “We’re calling on the Averys, because Mr. William Avery is home from Oxford tomorrow morning.” She squinted and looked pointedly between Cressida and Draco. “And Willie Avery is Cressy’s beau.”

“Penelope,” scolded the eldest. “Please.”

This one was called Isadora, slightly taller and more finely built than her sisters. She turned to Draco, and smiled at him in such a mild and genuinely embarrassed way that it made Hermione’s lips twitch with sympathy.

“May we call on you at Twiggybroke Cottage in the morning?” Isadora asked. “We often walk to the Averys’, and we would be exceedingly pleased if you”—she looked to Hermione—“and Miss Granger would join us.”

“We’d be delighted,” said Draco.

He’d ginned up his native toff accent into its plummiest heights. Hermione desperately wanted to stand on his foot again.

“You can help me over the stiles,” said the youngest Longbottom girl, “although I dare say you’ll need to help us all.” She looked around at her pink-cheeked sisters and finished with a sportive laugh.

Hermione swigged the last of her most recent glass of champagne.

“Cassandra.” Isadora *tsked*. “Mr. Granger, please excuse my sisters. It’s been an exciting day for us all.”

“No excuses need to be made, Miss Izzy.” Draco smiled that *damned* smile of his again.

Isadora’s eyes flashed wide, then she demurely turned her head away.

Hermione angrily scratched her stocking cuff. “Will you please excuse me and my brother for a moment?” Then, to Draco, she whispered, “I believe they’re about to cut the cake.”

Draco turned around to look. “Where?”

“Over *there*.” She bored her gaze into his meaningfully and tilted her head toward the side of the house. Then she set down her glass and plate on a nearby cafe table, took his from him, grabbed his elbow, and dragged him around the corner.

“Where’s the cake? You said cake, Granger,” Draco said warningly.

“You cannot seduce a *single* one of Neville Longbottom’s great, great, great, great, great, great aunts,” she hissed, pointing a finger into his smirking face. “I *forbid* it.”

He leaned against the wall with a bit of a drunken crash that he covered well, and shoved his hands in his pockets. Hermione wasn’t sure if early 19th century men’s trousers even had pockets, but his did.

“What makes you think I’m seducing anyone?”

She paused.

“Your—well, your *hair*, for starters. And your *mouth*, Malfoy. You can’t do those things with your mouth.”

“What *can* I do with my mouth?” he asked.

She despised the way his eyes glinted, and hated the way she felt so damned *itchy* when they did. She hitched up her dress a bit and wafted some air up under her petticoat.

“Don’t do *anything* with your mouth,” she fumed, “and *especially* don’t smile with it. Not in the way that you do.”

"What way?"

"That way, just there."

“Why not?” He wobbled on his feet, caught himself, then raised his *blasted* eyebrow.

“Because they’re *teenagers*,” she whisper-shouted, “three quarters of them, anyway, and this is 1804. *Don’t* look at me like that. The fact that they’re all legally able to consent in this era—and I suppose the eldest three in ours as well—but that’s not the point. You can’t marry them, for obvious reasons, and anything else—and I do mean *anything* else—would ruin them. Completely. Irrevocably. I discreetly asked a House-elf a few moments ago, and we are almost exactly two hundred years in the past. You are not debauching a single witch. Not a *single* witch!”

His smile grew suddenly louche and dangerous. Hermione’s breath hitched.

“Not a *single one*?” He spoke quietly and tipped his head back.

"None whatsoever."

“But what if I behave myself? What if I’m very, *very* good?”

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“And what if,” he nearly whispered, “it turns out I can’t help myself?”

Hermione shoved a finger into his chest.

“If you lay a *finger* on one of those Longbottom girls, I swear to you, I will end you in this timeline and any other that I’m able to reach.”

Draco held his hands up in surrender. “Not a finger. Now, may I please have my roast back?”

Hermione stomped away from him. As she rounded the corner, heading back to the rear gardens, she suddenly stopped.

Draco slammed into her from behind.

“What's wrong?” he asked. “Are they out of cake?”

Hermione's voice fell to a whisper. “It’s there. It’s looking at us.”

The gift table stood six or seven meters away at the garden's edge, piled high with boxes and fabric bags dressed in brightly colored ribbons. There, tucked behind several packages, in a place they couldn’t have seen before that moment, was the snuff box.

Its vacant, metal eyes seemed to be staring at them from its indeterminate head.

“Don’t move,” said Hermione.

Draco stood as still as a fairly intoxicated statue. “What do we do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think we can just grab it?” he asked. “There’s not a working Time Turner around to zap us back to 1602.”

“I don’t *know*.” Hermione wrung her hands in her skirt. “We need time to think. We shouldn’t do anything without a plan.”

“It’s on the gift table, is it not?” said Draco. “So it must be going home with Tom and Mrs. Longbottom. Their cottage is nearby, can’t we intercept it there, later?”

Hermione nodded.

“That makes sense.” She scrunched up her eyes in thought. “You handled it without incident until it reached the lab. It stands to reason that it needs a Time Turner to do whatever it is that it does. If it zaps anyone, we’ll certainly hear it.”

Draco's hand circled her hip and lightly gripped it.

"It’s likely that it will be safely taken away with the rest of the gifts," she continued. "And if we're staying on the property, we’ll surely be invited to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. If not, I believe I can, even *should*, call on Mrs. Longbottom in her new home now that we’ve been introduced. I can find out where she keeps it, and then we can decide how to proceed.”

“Alright.”

“Alright.”

They sidled carefully around the corner of the house, holding close and keeping the snuff box firmly in view, until they were well out into the garden.

Cake was being sliced and handed out, and after Draco devoured the remains of his third plate of food and finished off yet another glass of champagne, Hermione pulled him over to stand next to their cousin Mr. Martin and eat slices of a delicate vanilla sponge with a light buttercream and fresh strawberries.

“Whipped!” said Mr. Martin, taking a large bite of his cake and winking his starlight eye at Draco. “Mmm.”

“Indeed, cousin.” Draco patted Mr. Martin’s arm.

The afternoon wore on, happily decadent and soaked in champagne, until guests began to Floo and Apparate home. Draco and Hermione found themselves giving their complements to a pleasantly soused and nap-ready Sir Thomas, his exhausted wife, and their lovely, laughing daughters before weaving behind Mr. Martin's floating chair along a wide path through the forest.

Twiggybroke Cottage was settled at the bottom of an open glen, a sun-dappled, benign place alive with chirping birdsong and fluttering white moths. A clear brook ran beside it, spanned by a little moss-covered wooden bridge, painted robin's egg blue to match the cottage's trim.

The house itself was made of yellowish stone, its roof peaks patchworked in copper and umber-colored slate and crowned by several chimney points. Cultivated vegetables spilled in near-violent productivity from rock-bordered beds in the front garden. There were fruit trees and berry vines as well as twisted, thick-limbed trees growing at its back and sides. Ivy clung like a green mask to its forward faces. It was reached by an arched wooden gate set into a stone wall at the end of the lane, and a mossy flag path led to its blue-painted door.

Someone had built a wooden ramp from the flag path to the entrance. Mr. Martin guided his chair up the ramp, and with a wave of a short applewood wand that he pulled out from the depths of his wrappers, the door opened, and he glided through.

Draco and Hermione followed.

The inside of the cottage was lined almost entirely with books.

There were other details, of course: a low, black-beamed ceiling, deep sofas in jewel-toned blue velvet littered with embroidered cushions, and a fire briskly crackling in the hearth.

But all that Hermione could see was the extensive library contained within the modest walls of Twiggybroke.

"What's this, then?" said a gruff voice.

Hermione broke away from her examination of the nearest shelf. Mr. Martin had guided his chair up to one of two armchairs close to the fire, and was being assisted into it from his floating chair by a House-elf wearing a pair of corduroy breeches, a woven plaid shirt, and a cream-colored cable-knit cardigan. He had a pair of gold-rimmed half-moon spectacles perched on his nose, and an enormous pair of sheepskin slippers on his wide feet.

"Grangers!" said Mr. Martin. He offered Draco and Hermione a wink and a scheming smile, settled himself back into the armchair and closed his eyes.

The House-elf didn't tear his gaze away from Draco and Hermione as he pinched the steering control of Mr. Martin's floating chair and guided it into an out of the way spot in the corner. He tapped it with a finger. The chair lowered to the floor, and seemed to shut down.

He moved back to Mr. Martin, and began to refold the Tartan wraps into their former crisp arrangement.

"He's tired. Did you let him eat too much cake?" the elf asked them. "He's not supposed to have too much cake."

Draco's head rolled back and then jerked forward again as his eyes regained their focus.

"The cake," he said, bending in the breezeless room like a stalk of wheat, "was positively *erotic*."

“Hm,” grunted the elf.

He stood, staring at the two of them, with his hands in his corduroy pockets.

“His *cousins*,” he said, sarcastically, chewing over the word. Hermione could practically see the air quotes he wasn’t making. “I thought you were called Greenwood.”

“So did apparently everyone else,” said Draco. “But we’re Graaangers.” He expanded the A like it explained a whole slew of things.

“Grangers. Alright. You staying here?”

“We are, yes. With our *cousin*, Mr. Martin,” slurred Draco. “So the blondes,” he made a gesture at around Cressida Longbottom’s height, “can visit us in the morning. And then as soon as we can, we’ll fetch the *box*. And *then*”—he swirled both hands around one another in the air in front of himself—“*ppsscheww*.” He lifted an eyebrow as though inviting the elf into a favored conspiracy.

The elf turned to Hermione.

“Martin’s not to be troubled. You trouble Martin, you trouble me.”

“Of course, Mr...?”

“Just Grix. I keep a quiet, orderly house. Understood?” He looked pointedly at Draco.

“Yes, Mr. Grix,” said Hermione.

“I’ll show you to your rooms.” Grix pushed past them, heading down a narrow hallway.

At the end of the hall was a small bathroom, and a pair of bedrooms with neatly made beds. Grix turned right, and opened a narrow door onto a steep flight of unlit stairs. He hauled his thin body upwards, and Hermione and Draco followed him. Using both hands, Draco clung to a wooden rail set into the wall as he climbed.

At the top of the stairs was a very small, dark landing, with two closed doors directly facing one another.

Grix opened the door to the right, and entered.

It was an extremely tidy bedroom, and when Grix crossed the floor and opened the interior shutters, it flooded with light.

It had a four-poster bed made up with clean blue and white striped linens, feather pillows plumped and straight and stacked two high.

“I do the beds in the morning after breakfast, so be out of ‘em,” said Grix. “I’ll do the tea in”—he pulled a pocket watch out of his cardigan pocket—“another two hours, then breakfast is at seven. Prompt. *You*”—he pointed at Draco—“are to behave yourself. I don’t have these great big floppers for no reason.” He slapped at one of his enormous ears.

As he walked out of the room, Draco walked in, and fell face-first onto the bed.

The second door opened from the landing into another bedroom. The light pouring through the window once the shutters were opened was of a warmer quality than the other room. The ceiling was similarly angled, and the bed was alike, wooden and four-postered, but it was made up with linens in washed ivory cotton with pale pink flowers. There was a dressing table set with a basin

and pitcher, a compact desk with a quill and ink pot, a pair of armchairs next to a small hearth, and a bookcase holding a neat little library of its own.

Grix looked at Hermione shrewdly.

“The shoes are wrong,” he said.

Hermione bristled.

“Pardon me?”

“You heard me,” he said. “There’s a girl at the village. I’ll send for her.”

With that, the elf backed out of the room, and pulled the door shut after him.

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed.

A white porcelain vase sat on the window ledge. As she watched, it filled with a clutch of pale pink roses mixed with lavender sprays.

House-elf magic.

Across the landing, on the other side of two closed doors, Draco had begun to snore.

The Walk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In the glen, the sunlight streamed warm and unhurried through the beech trees, and the little brook trickled amiably in its bed.

Draco stood at the bottom of the ramp leading from the cottage's front door, boots shining, holding out his arm.

His mouth quivered at the corner.

“Not a word,” Hermione said through her teeth as she approached him.

“About what?”

“Don’t be obtuse. I think it’s what’s expected. In any case, the wind blows my hair all over the place. I can’t be spitting hair out of my mouth all morning, it’s indelicate.”

“It is,” he agreed.

"Stop smiling," she hissed. "It’s not as though your situation is any better."

She looked meaningfully at his cravat.

“I’m not smiling,” he said.

“I can see you smiling. You’re doing it right now.”

He held his mouth in a straight, tremulous line.

“Say it, then,” Hermione grumbled.

“What’s it to be: say it, or not a word? You can’t have it both ways.”

“I can have it however I want it, Malfoy."

At that, he stopped trying to hide his amusement.

“That may be true with just about anyone else, but I’m rather tricky, aren’t I? I do think you ought to take my arm."

She bristled. “Pardon me, I don’t need to hold onto your arm."

“I’m sure that’s true, but I’m standing here with it out, and it looks odd that you won’t."

“*You* look odd."

“Nice."

“*You’re* nice."

One side of his mouth lifted.

"I certainly could be."

The look Hermione gave him was made of forged steel.

"Granger, I'm not the one that brought it up. Why the bee in your—"

"Don't...you...*dare*."

He continued both smiling and holding out his arm.

With an unnecessary degree of roughness to her grip, she took it.

Earlier that morning, Hermione rose not long after the sun. Before she had a chance to browse beyond the first shelf of books in the bedroom, there was a quiet knock at her door.

"Come in," she said, and a witch entered the room.

She was young, perhaps around eighteen years old, short and very thin, with pale reddish hair pinned up in braids around her head, and a smattering of freckles across her cheeks. She pulled a large trunk behind her, spelled to hover over the ground at waist height.

Once she was inside, the girl maneuvered the trunk into a corner, pulled a wand out of her pocket, and settled the trunk gently on the floor.

"Good morning, ma'am." The girl faced Hermione and bobbed a curtsy. "I've come about the clothes."

"The clothes?"

"Yes, ma'am." She took a breath, and launched herself into a slew of rapid speech. "The greengrocer's lad brought a note round in the evening from Mr. Grix, saying as he'd got a witch staying at the cottage in need of an entire wardrobe, and might I come first thing in the morning with some things to wear, which he supposed correctly we'd have. Ann's been working up at the Parkinsons', and Miss Parkinson is so uncommonly generous with her old gowns, and with Ann having grown so much in the spring, and Katherine not far behind but not ready at present for the ones Ann's just cast off, we've several not currently in use." She turned and opened the trunk, and began rifling through a sea of fabric. "I've brought two morning dresses, and two walking dresses, and a spencer. Mr. Grix mentioned that you were in need of all of the underthings, as well as shoes, as you've lost your luggage, what a pity! He said you were just about Ann's size, before she grew in the spring, only a bit bigger in the bust, which isn't saying much, if I can say as much about my own sister, and he wasn't a bit wrong about that, was he!" She turned, and looked Hermione up and down with a smile. "We none of us know what would become of dear old funny Mr. Martin without Mr. Grix. He knows everything," she concluded.

Hermione didn't doubt that he did.

"Thank you," she said, after she'd absorbed the tsunami of information. "I'm Hermione. *Granger*," she added, in case that was a necessary part of introductions.

The girl curtsied again.

“Miss Granger,” she said. “I’m Margaret McClure, from over in Market Hettlesham. Shall I help you to dress now?”

“Oh! I suppose...well, yes, thank you.”

It had been something of an ordeal dressing the day before. In the evening, she’d kept her aubergine gown on to go down to tea with Grix and Mr. Martin, which Draco had slept right through. When she’d gone up to her bedroom for the evening, she’d been able to remove her dress and petticoat without significant trouble, but had struggled to unknot herself from her stays. She’d ultimately resorted to pointing her wand at her back and slicing through the entire ladder of lacing rather than ask Grix for help, or, Merlin forbid, wake Draco and put herself in the position of asking him to undo her underthings.

She’d slept comfortably in the chemise as a sort of night dress. Around two o’clock in the morning, she’d been grateful to discover that they were past the chamber pot stage of history, at least in Magical households, or at least in this one. Her biggest concern had been bundling herself up and down the steep stairs to the indoor water closet without getting her legs tangled in more skirt than she was used to dealing with.

Hermione now submitted to having her chemise removed, and was quite successful in masking her own look of guilt when Margaret first saw, then openly stared at, her twenty-first century knickers.

They were one of Hermione’s most comfortable pairs, in grey cotton printed with tiny pink hearts and trimmed in pink cotton eyelet.

Hermione had debated with herself, and ultimately determined not to remove them, except when she took them off long enough to carefully and thoroughly *Scourgify* them before putting them back on again the night before.

“What are *those*?” asked Margaret.

Hermione felt herself flush.

“They’re new,” she said. Then she added, dubiously, “They’re French.”

Margaret shrugged, seeming to require no further explanation.

She helped Hermione into a fresh chemise, then fitted her with stays that hugged her ribs and chest snugly before any adjustment. She loosened the bust and brought it into perfect alignment with her figure using the briefest flicks of her wand, and laced her into it with quick, practiced fingers.

Hermione was slightly alarmed to find her breasts rising even more aggressively beyond the bust line of the stays than they had the day before, like two over-leavened balls of dough.

“Is this normal?” She looked meaningfully between Margaret and her décolletage.

Margaret laughed, her eyes pressed shut and her nose wrinkling.

“You look lovely, Miss Granger,” she insisted. “A well-fitting undergarment will do wonders for your natural gifts.”

“It’s done outright miracles with them,” muttered Hermione, pressing gingerly at her soaring flesh in a futile attempt to deflate it.

After the stays had been secured, Margaret helped Hermione into a petticoat, this one with a bodice

and shoulder straps, then held out a pair of stockings. Like the pair she wore the previous day, they were knitted in fine white silk, with delicate lacework at the openings.

Hermione slipped them on, then said, cautiously, “My stockings yesterday felt a bit *loose*. Is there something that might secure them a bit?” She was trying desperately to shroud her ignorance, but she had no idea whatsoever what technology women were using to hold up their socks.

“I’ve brought several sets of ribbons. Would you like my help in getting them on?” said Margaret.

Hermione gratefully accepted. While Margaret retrieved a set of pale pink satin ribbons from the trunk, Hermione sat down on the edge of her bed, and drew her chemise and petticoat skirts to the tops of her thighs.

Margaret kneeled on the floor between Hermione’s knees, and tied one of the ribbons expertly around Hermione’s right thigh, then picked up the second ribbon, and began to wrap it around Hermione’s left.

It was at that moment that her bedroom door burst open.

“Granger, it’s time to—”

Draco was wearing a similar suit to the one he had on the day before, only today his trousers were black. He wore the same shining black boots, grey waistcoat, a white shirt, and cravat, and he’d clearly cleaned himself up with some spellwork. He looked fresh and well rested, which Hermione imagined one must after a solid thirteen or fourteen hours of sleep. His hair flopped about as suggestively as ever.

His gaze was glued to Hermione’s exposed and open thighs, and Margaret kneeling between them.

There was a prolonged silence before he continued speaking.

"It's time to go down," he said, finally.

He looked up at Hermione’s face.

“It’s time to eat,” he tried again.

He cleared his throat, and unclenched his fist from the doorknob.

“Come downstairs,” he said, “for breakfast.”

Hermione looked at him impassively.

For the first time, he seemed to be able to bring his full awareness to the third person in the room.

"You must be Granger's thigh maiden," he said to Margaret. He cleared his throat a second time.

“Granger's garter girl. Hermione's, that is. She’s my sister. Hello.”

Margaret dipped her head.

“This is Miss Margaret McClure,” Hermione said.

“Miss Margaret,” he said, giving her a nod.

"Have you been drinking already?" asked Hermione. "It's not even 7 o'clock."

"No, but I think I'll go and see about starting."

He offered them both a slight bow, turned about smoothly, and jaunted down the stairs.

Hermione made her way after him a short while later.

Margaret had done Hermione's hair up, wrapped with braids and a blue ribbon. Her curls loosely framed her face and tumbled at her nape in a way that looked significantly more intentional than it had the previous day. She was dressed in a white linen gown with a border of white embroidered flowers, and her simple work flats had been replaced with a pair of short lace-up boots with pointed toes. Margaret had done some rapid spellwork on Hermione's face without asking, and Hermione suspected she was rosier in the cheeks and lips than usual.

Draco, sitting at the table in the small dining room, lifted his eyes to watch her enter the room without turning himself from the copy of the *Daily Prophet* he had spread open in front of him. A bowl of what seemed to be porridge sat before him, beside a tall glass of thick, green liquid.

Hermione took an empty seat near the table's opposite end, and tried to fold herself down in a way that minimized the hail-fellow-well-met extroversion of her bosom, while Mr. Martin guided himself to the head of the table in his magical chair.

Bowls of porridge appeared in front of Hermione and Mr. Martin, followed by tall glasses of the green goop.

Finished tidying in the kitchen, Grix joined them at the table.

Hermione lifted the glass to her nose and sniffed. It smelled sweet and tropical.

"Is this a—"

"It is, in fact, a smoothie," said Draco, reabsorbed in his morning paper. "Banana, mango, and coconut, I believe, and then Mr. Grix here has blessed us with some added spinach."

"Oh! I had no idea smoothies were popular in the—" She stopped herself from saying *past*, and looked over at Grix, who was looking right back at her over the top of his spectacles. "In the West Country," she finished.

"I don't know that they are." Draco picked up his cup, took a deep whiff, and set it back down. "This seems like a Twiggybroke Cottage specialty. I'm also entirely certain that the porridge has flax meal in it."

Hermione took a small bite of it, and confirmed a distinctive, nutty-oily flavor. It had also been seasoned with what tasted like cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom. A little dish of chopped walnuts was on offer, as well as shredded coconut and a large bowl of blueberries.

Hermione poured herself a cup of tea from the pot set in the middle of the table. It was a clear, bright green, and smelled grassy and astringent. There was no sugar or milk available.

She doctored her oats up with generous spoonfuls of everything available, and dug in.

At the head of the table, Martin closed his eyes in enjoyment with each spoonful of porridge.

Draco watched them both eat.

"I'm glad the two of you, at least, are satisfied with the morning repast," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Grix," said Hermione, "for seeing about my wardrobe. Miss Margaret was indispensable. It was very thoughtful of you."

"That's alright," said Grix gruffly. "We can't have you running about Wiltshire in the altogether."

Draco lifted his newspaper to cover his face, and Hermione heard him snort.

"No, I suppose that wouldn't do," she said.

Grix stood to pour Martin a cup of green tea, and then returned to his place at the table.

"You're planning an outing this morning, I imagine." He heaped his bowl of oats with walnuts, then took a large handful of blueberries, and began popping them into his mouth one at a time.

Hermione looked at Draco.

"I believe so," she said. "The Longbottom girls said that they'd call this morning, something about taking a walk to the Averys'?"

Grix nodded.

"That'll keep you out of Martin's hair for long enough. He goes out for air himself in the morning, and then he comes in for his reading, and takes his rest while I write up his notes. It's a quiet period, and one I expect you two can keep clear of."

He turned to Martin, and patted his right hand.

"Y'alright, Martin?" he said, loudly.

Mr. Martin looked to Grix with his large, shining owl eyes, then brought his smoothie to his mouth, took a deep drink, and set the glass back down. He had a thin line of green mustache over his lip. "Fiber," he said, and patted Grix's hand back.

"That's right, old chap." Grix leaned over and waved the mustache magically away. "Keep it all moving."

Draco turned the page of his newspaper, and straightened it with a snap.

After breakfast, and before the Longbottom girls arrived, Hermione took a longer look around the bookshelves surrounding the sitting room.

Draco approached, then leaned against a shelf and pretended to take a serious interest in a volume on Chinese aquatic plants. It was written in Chinese, which Hermione knew Draco could not read.

"Where's the Time Turner?" he said quietly, without looking up from his reading. Grix was too busy wrapping up Martin in his complicated packet of blankets to pay them any mind.

She coughed lightly.

“It’s safe.”

“Safe *where*? We need to make a plan for its repair, and we are absolutely not letting it out of our possession. It doesn’t look like you have any pockets in that thing.” He gestured at her gown with his book.

“It’s on my person,” she said. “You don’t need to fret about it.”

“I am definitely fretting about our only means of making it back to our”—he looked over his shoulder at Grix and Mr. Martin and lowered his voice—“to *our time*. I’m not sure that you ought to be trusted with it.”

Hermione turned bright pink with a rapid onset bout of rage.

“You’re not sure that *I*—” she began, hotly, leaning towards him. She stopped, and closed up her mouth. “Pardon me, Malfoy,” she whispered, “but in consideration of the fact that I’m the only time traveler in this blasted century who wasn’t too concerned with the *line of my trousers* to have a Time Turner on my person in an active laboratory, I can’t see how my storage of that object is any of your concern. What you ought to be thinking about is how we’re going to get ahold of the proper tools to fix it.”

He narrowed his eyes, and looked her up and down. His gaze ended where her upthrust globes cheered in bonhomie over the rim of her bodice.

“You’ve got it down there, haven’t you.”

She glanced straight down into the shadowy depths of her cleavage.

“Even if I did, it wouldn’t be any of your business,” she shot at him.

“Oh, it would be my business,” he said. “You’ve made them entirely my business.”

“*Them*? Don’t you mean *it*?”

“No, I don’t believe that I do.”

He took a single step in her direction.

“I’m keeping an eye on you.” He narrowed his eyes at her décolletage.

“Are you speaking to my—”

Before she could finish her thought, the laughter of four women came ringing down the pathway through the trees and entered the cottage at the open front window.

There was a well-traveled footpath that followed the stream's course along the bottom of the wood. Once assembled, the party made its way along it, two abreast.

The four Longbottom sisters had arrived, exchanged the necessary pleasantries with Martin and

Grix, and swiftly moved off with Hermione and Draco as though the pair of them comprised a shiny new plaything that they were eager to show off around the neighborhood.

Hermione made it a priority to break from Draco's arm early in the walk, and she was quickly replaced at his side by the youngest Longbottom sister, Cassandra. Cressida and Penelope walked behind, the former watching Cassandra and Draco with a keen eye, and the latter avoiding damp ground with small, fussy steps. Hermione and the eldest sister, Isadora, took up the rear of the group, and Hermione soon found herself in easy conversation.

"I'm grateful to you and your brother for joining us this morning," said Isadora. "Company can be so invariable in the country, and we've all been anxious to get to know the Grangers. Mr. Martin's famous cousins were highly anticipated yesterday."

Hermione looked away uncomfortably. It was bad enough to be stared down at the breakfast table by the shrewd Mr. Grix, but furthering the deception they'd deployed with the Longbottom family felt like an even deeper immoral act, no matter the validity of their reasons. The Longbottom sisters were kind-hearted, good-natured girls, and even worse, they all appeared to be quite fond of both Hermione and Draco already.

Hermione was determined to make their stay in the nineteenth century brief, and to be impeccable guests while they were there.

"I'm sure we're very happy for the connection." Hermione turned over the speech patterns of every BBC period drama she'd ever watched in her mind.

Isadora took Hermione's arm, and smiled at her.

She was dressed modestly, wrapped in a shawl and wearing a dress that covered her arms and revealed significantly less cleavage than Hermione's. Her loose golden curls were piled on top of her head, and then covered with a deep pink bonnet.

The most significant change from the day prior was the inclusion of a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles that magnified her eyes, which were large to begin with, and framed by dense, dark eyelashes. She had beautifully arched brows, and the strong features shared by all of the Longbottom sisters that gave them a classical quality, as though they had been carved from marble to memorialize the preferred proportions of the Greeks.

Neville Longbottom had been an awkward child, to say the least, but Hermione considered that his maturation into a tall, broad, and undeniably handsome man might have been better predicted.

"I've been entreated by my father to invite you and Mr. Granger to dine with us at the Hall this evening—along with Mr. Martin and Mr. Grix, of course," said Isadora. She tilted her head towards Hermione as though she spoke in strict confidence. "I'm afraid if you decline, you'll have my father at the door of the cottage, demanding an explanation."

Her expression was open and infused with easy warmth.

"Of course! We'd be delighted," said Hermione. "I can't speak for Mr. Martin or Mr. Grix, however." She thought about Grix's apparent concern with the nutrient density and fiber content of his and Mr. Martin's diet. "They may be inclined to dine in the cottage tonight."

"Of course," said Isadora. "My father has tried to tempt Mr. Grix to our table for as long as I can remember, and has yet to succeed."

"You might try a vegan menu," mumbled Hermione.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing. Do you often walk to the Averys’?” asked Hermione.

“Indeed! Nearly every day, in the summer. Cressida especially—” She stopped and looked away, then began again slowly. “We’ve all known William Avery from infancy. He was our constant companion in these woods when we were children barely able to mount brooms. He and Cressida were together in Ravenclaw House.”

Hermione looked at Isadora in surprise.

Of course they’d been at Hogwarts.

“And you, Miss Longbottom? Which House were you Sorted into?” asked Hermione.

The path began to climb and curve to the left.

“Hufflepuff,” said Isadora. “All of us sisters were in different Houses, which irritated Father and Mother to no end. Cressida was in Ravenclaw, my sister Penelope was in Slytherin House, like our mother, and my sister Cassandra is as decided a Gryffindor as I’ve ever known, besides my father.”

Hermione watched as Cassandra beamed up at Draco, and noted the bold, unmasked quality of her expression. She even walked with absolute certainty, giving her steps an energetic, athletic spring that contrasted with Draco’s own, always elegant, movements.

Isadora followed Hermione’s line of sight.

“My sister doesn’t intend to flirt,” she said, frowning. “She’s a good-natured, affectionate girl, not yet eighteen. She hasn’t learned how to guard herself.”

Hermione watched Draco. He was attentive, easy and smiling.

She realized some time after the war that he’d changed, but it had come on gradually, and she’d been too close to it to notice immediately.

They’d been working side by side for two years before she realized that he was no longer constantly scowling. Rather, he began frequently fighting down a half smile, as though she was an unending source of entertainment to him.

It enraged her, which only seemed to make it worse.

But where he was always looking to spar with Hermione—always ready to poke and prod her into irritation—he was uniformly charming with other women.

Hermione watched as Draco tipped his head back in laughter at something Cassandra said, and saw Cassandra clutch his arm in return.

The path curved upward, and then opened out of the forest onto rolling jewel-green fields, boxed in by hedgerows.

They followed its now straight course between the fields, still two abreast, until they came to a

stile barring their path.

Draco offered Cassandra his hand.

As she clutched her skirts, lifting them demurely, he guided her over the two steps on the near side, across the top of the gate, leapt over the fence himself, then helped her down the two steps on the far side, where he lifted her from the waist and set her down. He crossed back again to offer first Penelope, and then Cressida, the same assistance. As he lifted Cressida down, Hermione noticed a distinct flush to her cheeks.

Isadora smiled with something like embarrassment towards Hermione, but submitted to Draco's attention with the same sanguine and gratified acceptance as her sisters, so that Hermione was the last to remain on the stile's near side.

Draco made a quick leap back to Hermione's side of the fence, and as she approached the steps, held out his hand.

Hermione stiffened.

"I think I can get myself over a fence," she said under her breath.

"Can you, though? You have rather a lot of skirt there, and you're more in the habit of wearing those trousers you like so much," he replied quietly, hand still on offer.

"Of course I can manage." She swatted him away and hitched up her skirts. "And this is a perfect example of why trousers are the superior garment, especially ones with some stretch built in. I could run a marathon directly from leaving the Ministry if I had to."

He looked at her doubtfully, then with a shrug, sprang over the steps and stood facing her on the other side.

Hermione doubted what she was about to do was ladylike, but had no intention of putting down roots in the nineteenth century. With no need to preserve her reputation, she hiked up her skirts over her knees, clutched the fabric layers in one hand, and used the other to pull herself to standing on the stile's lowest step.

It was nothing more than a narrow wooden plank, but Hermione wasn't a dismal athlete as long as broomsticks weren't involved. She was able, not without some awkwardness, to advance to the second step, then maneuver over the top of the gate.

On the other side, emboldened by the sight of Draco standing useless below her, she stepped confidently across the tallest step, then moved to drop down to the lower.

But her narrow boots, with their slick soles and shallow heels, failed to cooperate. Her right foot slipped, and her ankle turned sideways. She flung her arms out to counterbalance the tipping caused by the misstep, dropped her skirts, and then lost her balance completely and went tumbling off the bottom step of the stile.

Her gut lurched. She fully expected Draco to let her go arse over teakettle.

Instead, her flailing arms found purchase around his shoulders as he stepped into her fall. He wrapped one arm behind her, and with the other caught the backs of her knees.

She'd listened to enough of the gossip in the Ministry cafeteria. Virtually every witch between the ages of eighteen and one hundred thirty in the office was able to appreciate Draco Malfoy's form—

history as a less-than-enthusiastic Death Eater or no—corded with the rangy musculature of an active recreational Seeker. He'd also taken up long-distance broom racing. Hermione was told the sport was excellent for building strong leg muscles, which could then be shown off in tight trousers. She, on the other hand, remained outside the spell of his figure, which she owed to her annoyance with him in general, and also his ability to—reportedly—maintain defined abdominal muscles whilst subsisting on a diet she knew was composed primarily of cafeteria chips and the Muggle Quality Street chocolates he kept hidden in his bottom desk drawer.

Being held, bridal style, against his undeniably fit choc-built body was an outrage.

"Put me down, you ass," she hissed.

"Is that all the thanks I get for saving you?" he whispered. "In any case, you'll need to let go of me yourself if you want me to put you down."

She released her hands from around his nape, and waited for him to comply.

"I'll scream. I swear on Merlin's book, if you don't put me down right now—"

He dropped her knees, but kept the other arm looped around her upper back, which was helpful as her ankle immediately folded beneath her.

"Oh, damn!" she yelped.

"Are you alright?" He held her tightly, and the genuine concern in his voice was clear.

"I've twisted my ankle on that damned stile, that's all. Help me over to sit."

She wrapped an arm over his shoulders while he supported her under her arms and helped her to sit on the lower step of the stile.

The second Hermione cried out, the four Longbottom sisters had rushed to assist. Cressida crouched at Hermione's feet with her wand out, running a basic diagnostic spell over her ankle.

"It's a mild sprain," Cressida reported. "Easily and directly mended."

She muttered a series of incantations, and Hermione felt warmth spread through her throbbing ankle. When she rolled and twisted it, it felt right as rain.

"You're quite talented," said Hermione. "I cast numerous healing charms on the battlefield—"

Draco shot her a searing look.

"On the *Quidditch* field," she hedged with an unconvincing laugh, "while we are at school, and I'll freely admit it was always a bit inelegant."

"Cressy is the best out of anyone with healing spells," enthused Cassandra. "I keep telling her to apply for the Healer program at St. Mungo's, then she could join the Aurors as a field medic and stop up all sorts of interesting bleeding, but of course they don't allow girls."

"Cassandra," said Isadora softly.

The youngest Longbottom sister snapped her lips shut.

"They don't allow girls?" Hermione looked between Cressida and Cassandra and narrowed her eyes.

“Hermione,” said Draco, putting his hand at her elbow and encouraging her to stand.

“Yes, but—” she continued.

“There’s no ‘but’ here,” he said, meaningfully. “Not *now*.”

Isadora looked apologetic.

“Not at the Ministry,” she said. “But Cressida could do a course at St. Mungo’s in advanced household Healing if she liked, although I daresay she’s already mastered every spell they could teach her.”

“So, you’re a natural, then.” Draco offered Cressida his arm and his warmest, witch-wooing smile. “Thank you for setting my sister to rights.” He looked back to where Hermione was shaking out her skirts and straightening her bodice. “She’s of an independent mind. If she decides she’s going to break something, there’s no stopping her.”

You’re damned right there isn’t, thought Hermione. *Prat.*

There were two more stiles between them and the top of the hill leading down to the Avery estate, and Hermione allowed Draco to help her over both of them.

Cassandra left off her interest in Draco as naturally as it had begun. She’d taken to running sprints between the troupe of walkers and distant markers she chose at random. Hermione couldn’t help but admire such natural, joyful athleticism.

Isadora maintained her place at Hermione’s side, while Penelope swung her reticule indifferently, not troubling herself to hide her boredom.

Cressida walked arm in arm with Draco. He bent his head and softly spoke to her, laughing openly and often, and her eyes kept finding his with something decidedly different than the diffuse and fleeting interest Hermione saw in the other Longbottom girls.

Well aware of Draco’s intelligence, and of the appeal of it to a similarly intelligent woman, Hermione felt a rising sense of alarm.

How much, exactly, could they accidentally interfere with this bit of history, and in what ways, and for how long?

When they arrived at the crest of the hill above the stately gray Avery house, Cassandra ran to Cressida and looped her arm through hers, forcing her to break from Draco and follow her down the hill.

“We’ll wait here.” Isadora sat on a large rock, and gestured for Hermione to do likewise. “The girls will bring William up, and we can introduce you.”

Hermione gnawed on the idea of unnatural limits being placed around Cressida’s strong natural talents. She wondered what other ambitions these vivacious, intelligent Longbottom daughters harbored that were stymied in a world of petticoats and slick-bottomed boots.

“Do you have professional plans, Miss Longbottom?” Hermione looked at Isadora in inquiry as she

gazed placidly at the pastoral scene surrounding them.

“Professional?” asked Isadora. “What on Earth do you mean by that?”

Hermione could see Draco from the corner of her eye, lounging on a boulder and playing with a long blade of grass, but refused to notice the admonishing look he was sending her.

“What you would like to do for a job,” clarified Hermione. “You’ve finished at Hogwarts, presumably you’ve sat for your N.E.W.T.s. What comes next?”

Isadora looked perplexed.

“Marriage, naturally. And then everything that follows.”

An angry heat rose in Hermione’s chest.

“Marriage, and children,” she said, “with a Hogwarts education.”

“How else would you know how to teach your children before they leave for school?” asked Isadora earnestly.

Hermione opened her mouth, and clamped it shut again.

“Hermione,” said Draco.

She turned to look at him.

He wasn’t patronizing, or annoyed, or combative. His face was completely serious and, if she wasn’t mistaken, regretful.

This isn’t your fight, said his look, plain and simple. It made Hermione angrier still, because he was right.

“Come and look at the hills,” he said out loud.

Grudgingly, Hermione followed him to the peak of the rise above the manor house.

He put out his arm, and when she took it without a fight, he visibly relaxed.

“It’s beautiful country, isn’t it?” he asked.

It was.

The Avery estate was a large, dignified and otherwise unremarkable grey box tucked into the base of a low brown and emerald hill, whose sole beauty was its grounds. It was surrounded by glades of oak and ash trees, and fronted onto a placid lake and lush green lawns that Hermione imagined the young William Avery must have flown over on his first broomstick.

The air there, in that time, was impossibly clean: wind-polished and sun-bleached, scented with mowed grass, freshly turned soil, and a distant hint of horse.

“You grew up here,” said Hermione. “You must be very fond.”

“I did. And I am. Although...” He looked down at his blade of grass, rolling it between his palms. “It’s a process. Making the Manor a home I can be proud of.”

Hermione looked at him in surprise.

She knew, of course, that the legal justice process in the postwar period was still ongoing, and likely would be for years to come. From time to time a court hearing would draw him away from work for the day, and when he returned he would be taciturn and difficult. She would fix him a cup of coffee, and gradually, he would return to his usual cocksure self. But what she saw in him in those hours afterward was, clearly, shame.

“Well,” she ventured, “it’s a good job you’re rebranding it as the Wizarding version of the Playboy Mansion. It’s an entirely different image.”

“As what?”

She shook her head. “It’s an antiquated Muggle thing,” she said. “A beautiful swimming pool, sticky carpet, lots of jiggling blondes. I do think you’d look rather smart in a smoking jacket.”

“I have no idea what sort of fever dream you’re on about, Granger, but your interest in jiggling blondes is becoming a concern. Just this morning I caught you with a redhead, and I know all about your predilections there.”

His smirk was, admittedly, a bit charming. Hermione’s belly churned.

“I know that you know how captivating you can be.” She watched his fingers stall mid-fold on the blade of grass. “So please, be careful. About Cressida.” She paused, and looked back over her shoulder at the other two Longbottom sisters. “I’m afraid she may already be well on the way to actually liking you. And there is something between her and William Avery I think we’d best be very careful to leave alone.”

He looked at her for a long moment, face unreadable. Finally, his lips bowed in a rueful smile.

“It wouldn’t have been an issue if you’d agreed to be my wife.”

Hermione stared at him.

“You still would have been a Granger, I’m sorry to tell you,” she said. “And I’m not about to agree to be anyone’s wife, let alone your undoubtedly long-suffering one.”

“Weasley’s. You’re going to be Weasley’s wife.”

“No, I’m not.”

He dropped his blade of grass, and turned his body toward her.

“But you’re engaged,” he said, raising his voice slightly. “You and the Weasel.”

Hermione shook her head, but before she could say anything, they heard the voice of Cassandra Longbottom rising over the top of the hill.

“Hullo! Grangers! I’ve brought you William Avery!”

William Avery was handsome in a medium sort of way. He was of a medium height, with a

medium build, had medium brown hair, and his eyes were medium brown, too. They were also quick and searingly intelligent, and from the very first second of their introduction, followed the way Cressida Longbottom looked at the erstwhile Draco Malfoy with evident interest.

“Hello.” William looked and sounded guarded, offering the Grangers a short, curt bow once Cassandra had introduced them.

“Will you join us for dinner, Willy?” Cassandra grasped William’s arm. “You must. We’re to have the newlyweds, and the lovely Grangers, and I’ve sworn to have Mr. Martin and ask him about his wild adventures at Oxford.” She wiggled her fingers and flashed her eyes.

“His what?” asked Hermione.

“Cassandra,” said Isadora, “if we’re graced with Mr. Martin’s company this evening, you’ll speak to him politely about appropriate topics.” She turned to Hermione. “Your cousin is, I’m sure you are aware, beloved in the neighborhood, but some of the younger people are very fond of his fanciful storytelling about his years in Potions research.”

“Oh, of course,” said Hermione. “I’m also extremely interested in his years in Potions research.”

“What’s it to be?” said Cassandra, “You’ll come, won’t you, Willy? We’ve all missed you dreadfully, but especially Cressy.”

Cressida shot her younger sister a look that promised sororal retribution.

William shifted nervously between his feet.

“I’d be delighted, as always,” he answered. “How do you find Wiltshire, Miss Granger?”

“It’s beautiful,” Hermione said, and meant it. “Your estate is in a lovely setting.”

He offered her a slight nod.

“Allow me to join your party, at least to the woods,” he said. “I’m sure you all could use additional assistance over the stiles.”

He glanced at Cressida, and then at Draco.

“Thank you, William,” said Isadora.

Hermione felt her gut twist as Cressida swiftly moved to Draco’s side. She herself accepted the offered arm of a decidedly put out William Avery.

As they approached the first stile on the path back to Twiggybroke Cottage, William took a long look at Hermione, and for the first time since they'd been introduced, broke into a smile.

"Please allow me, Miss Granger"—he projected his voice rather more than was necessary as he watched Draco hand a rosy-cheeked Cressida over the stile—"to compliment you on your charming bonnet. The blue plays against your complexion uncommonly well."

As Hermione fumed at the ground, Draco's laugh echoed down the path, startling a hedgehog from its covert place in the thorny brush beside the stile.

You can find me on [Tumblr](#).

The Dinner

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Perspicacity Martin."

The words were out of Hermione's mouth before the doorknob finished rebounding off the wall. She struck through the threshold of Draco's bedroom, holding up a thin blue volume and giving it a short, triumphant shake.

Draco looked at her sideways, continuing to wind narrow lengths of white fabric around his neck and cross them over one another. "Please, enter my private bedchamber. There's never any need to knock."

"Thank you."

Hermione pushed the door to, then crossed the room to sit on his bed.

"Mr. Martin," she said. "Cassandra Longbottom mentioned that he was at Oxford, in Potions, and I suddenly recalled having once read about a don who had conducted truly cutting edge, highly controversial experimental potions work."

She tucked her knees under her skirt, and ignored Draco's doubtful look.

"It was absolutely ages and ages ago. I couldn't recall the name, but I sneaked downstairs while Grix was taking Mr. Martin out for his late afternoon air, and had a look at the shelves. Lo and behold, there's a small section over the mantle of books by one Perspicacity Martin of Mettleworth College."

She dropped the book on Draco's coverlet, and gave it two sharp taps.

"Did you know," she said, conspiratorially, "that with the exception of a small handful of very minor papers, all of his work has been lost? And it's here—*right here*—where we can snuggle up under the covers and read it all."

Draco's fingers paused mid-fold.

"You want me to snuggle up under the covers with you?"

"Not together, ass. But there are about eight of them, and if we traded off, we could both read them all within a few days."

"Granger, if you were sitting in a tree that was on fire, and someone handed you a book, I'm afraid you'd perish."

Hermione's eyebrows knitted in thought. "It's possible. Why am I in the tree, and why is it on fire?"

"Your mind: it amazes me. Please, do *try* to recall that we're two hundred years behind schedule," he said, resuming his complicated process with the cravat. "I'm going to have to admit that while I enjoy a good book as much, if not appreciably more than the next man, I'm feeling a bit of a time crunch here. What are you wearing to dinner, by the way?"

Hermione glanced down at herself. She was presently wearing her chemise and stays. "Margaret's bringing by a gown in a moment." She picked up the book, then turned to stretch out on her stomach across the width of the bed, and began leafing through the pages.

After a quiet minute, she gasped. "My God, Malfoy! Our list of tasks be damned, you need to read this. His diagrams alone—"

"Keep any and all diagrams absolutely to yourself. Coming back round to the subject of urgent tasks, do you happen to have the Time Turner on you?"

Hermione pressed her hand over her cleavage, and looked back over her shoulder at him with suspicion.

"It's where it always is."

Draco tilted his head at her and spoke slowly. "Can I look at it?"

"Turn around," she ordered.

Draco didn't move. "I respect that we have long upheld a ban on discussing the details of our personal lives with one another, but I feel safe in violating it far enough to reassure you that I have seen breasts before. Entirely uncovered ones, even. I'm not going to bat an eye at you fetching a bit of broken metal from between yours in that get up." He gestured up and down her frame.

"Yes, but you haven't seen *my* breasts, and they're the relevant pair to this discussion." Hermione sat up on her knees, facing away from him, and tossed the book aside. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but this is a tenuous bit of rigging. If anything flies free of its constraints, I expect you to look away immediately."

Draco's eye twitched.

Carefully, keeping her attention on Draco, she pushed her hand through her cleavage, and began to conduct what felt like an archaeological dig.

"Merlin, how deep does it go?" he asked.

"Things shift."

"Do they? Fell free to tell me more. Be as descriptive as you like."

"Don't be a pervert."

"It's not being a pervert if there's an undressed woman on your bed, rooting around in her own underclothes. It's a natural law, you're welcome to look it up."

Hermione began to tug on an object tucked beneath her left breast. "Hold on, I've got it."

Draco finished his cravat, and sat on the bed.

Hermione pulled the Time Turner in its leather bag from the front of her chemise.

"Here," she said, holding the bag out.

He dumped the contents onto the coverlet.

All the parts of the Time Turner were present and accounted for: the central hourglass, set in its

perforated disc and bolted into the inner ring. The outer ring, however, had separated from the rest, and broken into two pieces.

Draco took a broken arc in each hand, and pushed the two halves together.

"It can't be welded," said Hermione, sitting back on her heels. "Not if it's going to withstand the kind of travel it'll take to get home. We'll have to recast the outer circle."

"Obviously."

"It's not overly complicated, but I don't know where we'll get the tools."

"There's a well-equipped lab at the Manor." He laid the broken halves of the ring next to the rest of the Time Turner. "Depending on what's feasible, I can either do the work there, or try to bring the equipment here."

"I'd prefer you bring it here," said Hermione warily. "It's really a two-person job. We learned that the hard way, didn't we? And I can't go to the Manor with you. What if something went wrong while you were working with it? I wouldn't have any idea."

"Worried about me, Granger?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm worried about never seeing my friends and family again, getting stuck without resources in a century where I can't do my life's work, and tearing the apparently sturdy but not invincible fabric of time with my presence." She lay on her side and sighed in annoyance.

He picked up the small blue book with an attitude of indifference, and opened the front cover.

"I meant what I said before." Hermione stretched out her right arm and put her head down on her shoulder. She considered Draco, silhouetted in profile against the amber late afternoon light filtering through the net curtain.

"You've said rather a lot of things over our long years together," he replied, never lifting his eyes from the book. "You'll need to be more specific."

Hermione frowned. "You really do need to leave off flirting with Cressida. You may even need to actively discourage her. She's rather taken with you."

"Mm."

"Mm? Is that your typical response when a beautiful young woman finds herself pointlessly pining after you?"

"I'm afraid so."

"The way William Avery was looking at you, you're going to find yourself involved in a duel before long."

"I'll take him. Easily." He flipped a page, and then another. "God, Granger, you weren't joking. The diagrams on recombination sequences at the third stage are extraordinary. Have you ever seen anything quite like this?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I certainly haven't. Look at this." He lay the book open between them, and rested on his elbow beside her.

"They're stunning, aren't they?" enthused Hermione. "As I said, there are at least eight of his books

downstairs.” She waved away his look of reproach. “Yes, I realize that fixing the Time Turner and locating that blasted snuff box of yours takes precedence, but I know you, and you can't possibly fail to see that this is an unparalleled opportunity. We've stumbled across an astonishing missing piece of the body of magical knowledge. I absolutely cannot wait to speak to Mr. Martin about it at dinner this evening.”

“Grix decided to let him go, then?” said Draco absently. Then without warning, he clapped his hand over his mouth. “Now what's he gone and done? It looks like he completely disregarded the relationship between temperature scale and stir patterns. That's an elemental rule—part of the absolute earliest intuitive magic that we know of! Bloody hell.”

“I know!” cried Hermione. She balled her fists and drew her knees to her belly in excitement. “And so far as I can tell from the text, he actually *did* those things, and took notes about it. I honestly have no idea how he's still alive.”

“I have no idea how anyone's still alive. On paper this looks like it should incinerate half of London.”

“See? It's beyond fascinating,” she said, jamming her finger hard into his chest. “I told you it was.” She rolled over onto her back, and smiled up at him in satisfaction.

From his place beside her on the bed, he looked up from the book.

She curled her lip. “What?”

He said nothing.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Stop looking at me like that.”

Draco gently closed the book, but his gaze didn't shift in the slightest.

Hermione sighed. “I'm not taking it back. I *did* tell you so. And please, stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I've just eaten the last biscuit in the tin and there will never be another one. Whenever I'm right about something, and I get excited about it, you look at me just like that. As though I've devastated you for life. You're such a child.”

He finally looked away from her.

“Oh, don't pout. You're like a wounded Byronic hero when you do it, and then I don't know what to do with you.” She turned over onto her side again, reached up, and flicked his forelock with a finger. “How do you even do that with your hair? That bit in the front is always so perfectly imperfect.”

He regarded her again. “I'm not telling you. It's my secret weapon. If I reveal how it's done, its power will be lost. Then how would I get the witches I fancy to notice me?”

“They all notice you, and you know it. So you do actually fancy some of them?”

His mouth twitched at the corner, but his eyes didn't smile. “I do.”

“Well. How helpful for you to have your hair to deploy. I still can't get mine to do as it's told.” She

grabbed a coil at her temple. Looking at it intently, she pulled it straight, then let it rebound.

Draco was still watching her. "Your hair is fine." His eyes had made contact with hers, then held on. "It's good."

Her pulse picked up. He wasn't being himself. It made her incredibly nervous. "But?" she prompted. "I'm waiting for your punchline, Malfoy. Please deliver it."

He said nothing at all.

"Alright, your opportunity has passed you by." She gestured between them. "Give me the Time Turner, I need to go finish getting dressed."

Draco fumbled for the pieces of the Time Turner and the leather bag. Once he'd tucked everything back inside, and handed it to Hermione.

"Thanks, Malfoy."

"You're welcome."

Hermione waited for a sneer or a jibe, but none came.

"Are you feeling quite alright?" she asked.

He looked at her evenly. "I'm fine."

"Are you, though? You're not feverish?" She pressed her hand to his forehead. She intended it as a taunt, but he didn't smirk at her, nor bat her hand away. She found herself pausing to feel his skin under her palm.

She'd touched him before, of course. Grudgingly. Accidentally. Working together over five long years in a packed laboratory, it was inevitable: one hand brushing over another inside a broken machine. Grasping an elbow before it accidentally struck home at an eye. Fingertips at the small of her back when Draco moved around her holding a cursed object. Sharing space and being in motion between benches and tables oftentimes had the appearance of amateur ballet. Hermione would have admitted—under duress—that they'd developed a striking, if quarrelsome, professional intimacy. Beyond the physical space that they shared, there was the intellectual thirst they had in common. Not infrequently, it caused their days to bleed into long nights, working at the cusp of a breakthrough. Neither Hermione nor Draco were any good at saying "Quit," so she'd learned spells to conjure a cot, blanket, and pillow in their first month together at the Ministry. She was, for instance, well aware that he snored if he rolled over onto his back in his sleep. None of which had helped things with—

Hermione brought her awareness back to the now. His forehead was warm under her hand. Not *too* warm. Just...warm.

"You said that you weren't going to marry the Weasel." His mouth twitched downward. "Ron. You said it, before. But I'd heard you'd been engaged." Draco spoke neutrally, like he was letting her know that she'd left her umbrella behind at the office the day before.

Hermione drew her hand away from his forehead. "We made an agreement," she said, "not to discuss our personal lives."

"I believe you made a decree."

“You used up your lifetime allowance of criticism aimed at Ron in our first year working together. I already know exactly what you think about him, and our relationship.”

“Are you sure? There might be a few bits I left out.”

“Yes, I'm sure. And you can keep your bits to yourself. If you don't mind, we'll continue as we have. You don't say a single word about Ron, and I don't ask you about the women that come by wondering if you'd like to take a walk to the tea cart. That way we avoid taking turns throttling one another over the workbenches, and temporospatial research peacefully advances.”

Draco sucked in a breath and opened his mouth, but before he could speak, there was a knock at the door across the landing.

“It's Margaret McClure, Miss Granger," said a muffled voice. "I've come with the gown.”

Hermione sat up.

“I'm across the hall.” She looked down at Draco. “With my brother.”

His expression revealed nothing at all.

“I'll be there in a moment,” she said.

As she jumped from the bed she grabbed the Time Turner. Carefully, she pushed it down between her breasts, where it darted back into the murky depths of its habitat.

“Would you like to keep the book?” she asked.

Draco looked down at the volume in his hands like he'd forgotten he was holding it. “I suppose, yes. Thank you.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. “How is it that you know how to tie a cravat, anyway?”

She watched in amazement as a hint of pink stole over the apples of his cheeks.

“I...”

It was so rare that she caught him at a loss for words, that she wanted to sit back down on the bed, grab a snack, and watch him struggle.

“It's a family thing,” he finally said.

She shook her head. “Cravats?”

“Yes.”

“I believe that is the strangest revelation I've been privy to about a family that's been into some really unsettling things.”

As she walked out of his room and across the landing into her own bedroom, she caught him out of the corner of her eye. He fell onto his back on the bed, threw his arm over his eyes, and sighed.

Martin's chair didn't want to make it up a short rise on its own, so Draco was obliged to push it from behind.

"We're going to be late." Hermione lagged behind them with her skirts in her fist. "I'm not sure how these things work. Hopefully they're not all sat down at the table and getting started without us."

Draco leaned forward and gave the chair an enormous push. "Is there something caught under this thing? Can you look for me?"

Hermione crouched. "There is, actually. It's a bloody great rock." She tucked her fingers down her bodice, and pulled out her wand.

Draco, starting to make some headway on a decent sweat under the strain of shifting Martin's chair, looked at her in disbelief. "Now you're just jamming things down there because you like doing it."

"There are no pockets! Margaret has pockets in her gowns, I've seen her use them, but I have no clue whatsoever where the Longbottom girls keep their wands. Magically expanded reticules? I haven't the slightest idea."

She took aim at the obstruction under the chair, and sent a short, hard blast at it that sent it rolling into the undergrowth below a copse of birch trees. Suddenly freed, the chair jerked forward, and Draco stumbled after it.

"Where do people get off leaving boulders in pathways like that?" he grumbled. "Don't they know chairs come through here?"

Hermione stashed her wand and hopped after them again, now moving significantly faster. "I suppose they're not thinking about it."

"When we get back, I'm breaking apart every rock in England."

"That's a proportional response. What's gotten up your nose? You were perfectly agreeable until I came downstairs."

"I'm perfectly agreeable now," he said. "Martin, eyes on your twelve, you're steering into another stone."

They rolled up to the front door of Bugg-Buntley Hall a mere twenty minutes late. Before Hermione could knock, a House-elf wearing a beautifully embroidered length of bed sheet opened the door.

"This way, please." The elf bent in a little bow and swept his arm to the side.

Wooden beams crossed the ceiling in the soaring arched entryway, and oak panels covered the walls bottom to top. A wide wooden staircase spread upwards opposite the door, turning twice towards the floor above. Lingerin summer light poured through an enormous mullioned window overseeing the stairs, and dozens of candles flickered in a chandelier and sconces. Each mellow and golden-hued element formed a kind of energetic resonance, drawing them in with a generous, familial warmth, offering peace and repose.

Sir Thomas' unmistakable bombastic shout blasted from a hallway to the right and ricocheted off the wood paneling. Draco held out his arm, and Hermione took it. They trailed Martin, who followed the elf, traveling over a meandering archipelago of rich red Oriental rugs floating on an

endless parquet sea. As they progressed down the hall, Hermione identified additional voices, most of them female, and was prepared to greet the Longbottom family when the elf delivered them to a large drawing room. Oak paneling yet prevailed, although the ceiling had closed down to a more human scale. Yellow candlelight echoed off the walls and cast the family party in a drowsy glow as the visitors were shown in. It was a genteel, stately and profoundly comfortable home. The Longbottom family, which included the newlywed Thomas Longbottom and his wife, Mrs. Longbottom, as well as a dour-looking William Avery, sat ranged around the room on deep sofas and comfortable armchairs oriented towards a monstrously large fireplace.

“Grangers! Martin!” boomed Sir Thomas, opening his arms in greeting. “We were about to starve to death. We’ve nearly abandoned our manners entirely and begun without you.”

Hermione curtsied while Draco offered a slight nod. “We beg your pardon, Sir Thomas,” she said. “Mr. Martin’s chair was caught up for a while.”

“Ah! Caught everyone up, Martin?” yelled Sir Thomas.

Martin peeped at him through his spectacles. “Only a stone’s throw.” He turned to Draco, stuck a wrinkled hand from his packet of blankets, and patted Draco’s trouser leg. “Here’s our sturdy lad. Quidditch, you know! Girls.”

“And I’m sure you weren’t detained because Miss Granger put an extra effort into her gown and coiffure!” bellowed Sir Thomas. He sent Hermione a cheeky smile and an exaggerated wink. “I have these four girls of my own. I’m no fool. You look an absolute picture, Miss Granger. A picture! You’d better have told her so, young man!”

Sir Thomas looked between Draco and Hermione expectantly, with his mouth hanging slightly, smilingly open, like a Labrador Retriever waiting for its ball to be thrown.

Truth be told, she’d been fussed over by Margaret for much longer than she’d expected to be.

The gown was striking. It was white, like her day dress, but edged in the cautionary red of an Oriental poppy, and embroidered with a riot of midsummer flowers in blues, yellows, reds, and pinks around the bust, sleeves, and border of the skirt. Her hair was pulled up, but loosely, with tendrils trailing down her neck. Margaret had stuck a large white daisy in the hair massed at the back of her head, then rouged her cheeks and lips. She thought that if, on the walk to the Longbottoms’, she were to encounter a Scandinavian fertility ritual that involved skipping with sensual abandon around a suggestive pole, she’d have been well prepared.

Draco nodded politely, and turned to Hermione. He had that pained, biscuit look again. “You look incredibly beautiful.”

Hermione tilted her head and smiled at him angelically, brushing a curl back from her eye. “Overkill,” she muttered through her teeth, moving her mouth as little as possible.

Draco scowled.

“An affectionate brother,” affirmed Sir Thomas. “I approve of you, Granger! I approve. Now, let’s eat!”

The dining room managed to surprise no one at all with its wood paneled walls.

Hermione had little experience with twenty-first century formal dining, which wasn't Ron's cup of tea, and none with obsolete customs of the table. She would likely have catastrophically bungled the protocol had Grix not pulled her aside on her way out the cottage door.

“You’ll sit next to Sir Thomas, at the end of the table with the rest of the women. I expect you’ll be asked to lead them in, and sit at Sir Thomas’ right. Just remain calm, and once you’re seated, watch everyone else before you do anything. Don’t worry about who you can and can’t talk to. The only person in that household who might have cared is Lady Longbottom, and her husband and children have forced her to lower her standards. Don’t shout down the table, and you’ll be fine.”

Hermione stared at him.

“I’m not worried about him,” Grix said, jerking his head in Draco’s direction. “He’s the type to come out alright even if he puts his feet on the table and starts whistling *Rule Britannia!* Just tell him to watch Martin with the wine. He’ll make himself sick, and then you’ll hear no end of it from me. Understood?”

Hermione wanted nothing more than to ask him how he always knew to tell her what to do, but she merely nodded.

“Are you sure you won’t come?”

“I’ll eat my own food, at my own table,” said Grix. “But thank you.”

Hermione felt a rush of affection for him.

He had, unsurprisingly, been correct.

In the drawing room, Sir Thomas held out his arm to Hermione. She took it, and walked with him ahead of the party to the dining room, and successfully navigated to the seat at Sir Thomas’ right hand.

The table was set opulently, with a white cloth, shining candelabras, urns overflowing with June flowers, gilt plates, and spotless gold-rimmed wine goblets. The Longbottoms had spared no effort for their guests, and Hermione flushed with embarrassment as an elf pulled out her chair. Isadora, without her spectacles again, sat down with her characteristic ease and grace between Hermione and an apathetic Penelope. Hermione followed her lead as she removed the cloth serviette from her plate and laid it across her lap.

“Difficulty with the walk, then, Granger?”

Hermione looked up to see who had spoken to her, only to comprehend that the speaker was William Avery, and his question had been directed at Draco. She leaned forward and looked up the table to her right. Draco was at Lady Longbottom’s left hand, and William Avery in the seat immediately beside him. Both men were spreading their serviettes across their laps. Draco’s movements were as they always seemed to be, languid and unconcerned. Hermione realized with rising irritation that he managed to make the process of slowly unfolding a cloth rectangle over his lap look elegant and attractive, thrown into sharp relief as it was by William snapping his serviette loose and laying it with rough displeasure over his thighs.

“Nothing that presented too much trouble,” said Draco. “Although there were some unnecessary obstacles to Mr. Martin’s chair on the pathway between the cottage and here. In the morning, I’m going to walk it and make sure it’s clear. He ought to be able to wander however far he likes

without getting hitched up.”

“I agree, wholeheartedly.” Sitting on the other side of the table from Hermione, Cressida leaned forward and looked up the table with animated interest. “Mr. Martin ought to have no trouble whatsoever going wherever he’d like. I’ve been saying so for ages. Haven’t I, Penny?”

Penelope made a gesture somewhere between a shrug and a nod. “I suppose you’ve mentioned it once.”

Hermione leaned back, and didn’t see Draco’s response, but the pink blooming across Cressida’s skin told Hermione that it was cordial enough.

The food was brought out on serving plates, and in bowls and tureens, and set in an impressively symmetrical pattern over the table’s surface. There was a beautiful chestnut soup, and mackerel with fennel and mint. Hermione watched for cues from the other diners as to how to manage her silverware and not make an ass of herself. She watched Martin carefully, too. He sat to Lady Longbottom’s immediate right, turning his head to and fro, listening to the quiet conversations humming along around him, and occasionally picking up his wine glass and taking a small sip.

“Would you like the fish, Mr. Martin?” asked the younger Thomas Longbottom, on his right.

“Yes! All the butter!” agreed Martin, rapping at the table lightly three times with his knuckles.

Tom opened Martin’s serviette and spread it across his lap, then scooped food onto Martin’s plate, and watched patiently while he took his first bites.

Cassandra leaned around her brother’s right arm, and smiled puckishly. “I told Miss Granger that I’d ask you about your potions, Mr. Martin.” She sat back while a tureen levitated in front of her, then leaned forward again. “What was the worst accident that you ever had in your laboratory at Oxford? Did anyone ever lose an arm? Or at least a finger?”

“Cassandra.” Lady Longbottom was the definition of cool and collected. Even when scolding her morbidly curious youngest child, her voice was soft and detached, and her face remained perfectly serene. Hermione tried to picture her shouting, and couldn’t. She was in her early forties, rangy and graceful, with a startlingly beautiful face. She had pale blue eyes with thick lashes, and masses of gleaming golden curls held up at the back of her head in an aristocratic sweep. Clearly, she was the chief author of her four daughters’ exceptional beauty.

Martin took up his wine goblet. He sipped at it, looking sideways at Cassandra, then raised his eyebrows twice in succession. “No arms lost,” he said. “But a finger!” He flicked his index finger open from its grip on his wine goblet and juttied it out sharply. “We found it again, in good time.” He brought his glass back to his lips and drained it in two gulps.

Hermione leaned forward and looked up the table until she caught Draco’s eye.

He looked unimpressed as she glared at him meaningfully and jerked her head towards Martin.

“The wine,” she mouthed.

He shrugged.

Rolling her eyes, she dropped her hand to the table. First, she made an M with her first three fingers. Then she stuck out her pinkie and thumb and made a drinking gesture.

Martin. The wine.

"It's fine," mouthed Draco.

"No, it isn't," she said silently.

He turned away from her. "Lady Longbottom, are the table arrangements yours, or is this another one of your daughters' talents? They're extraordinary."

The hostess smiled at the compliment, and owned that she'd arranged them herself.

Hermione shifted her attention to Sir Thomas, who she belatedly realized had been speaking to her. "Please excuse me, Sir Thomas, I missed what you just said."

"Cats, Miss Granger!"

Hermione was at a loss. "Cats."

"Yes, indeed. Do you have any?"

"Oh. I...yes, I have one. He's getting on in years, but he's a half Kneazle. His name is Crookshanks."

"Crookshanks!" burst Sir Thomas. "After dinner, I'll introduce you."

"Introduce me?" asked Hermione.

Penelope rolled her head back and lifted her eyes to the ceiling. "Father, you mustn't," she drawled. "Leave it alone."

"Ha!" he answered. "I'll do as I like, my little lemon, and you do as you like, and then we'll both be happy."

Penelope sighed passive aggressively, and went back to poking at her mackerel with a fish fork.

Isadora leaned close to Hermione. "I feel as though I must warn you, Miss Granger, that my father is singularly enthusiastic about his hobby."

"I'm sure it's quite interesting," said Hermione.

Three dry coughs sounded from the table's other end, and Hermione leaned forward to look at Draco.

Without looking back at her, he touched his nose, and then swiftly and subtly made a rectangle with his thumbs and index fingers.

Snuff. Box.

He jerked his head toward Mrs. Thomas Longbottom, the new bride, who sat directly opposite Hermione.

Hermione flicked her hand in dismissal.

Alright, I'm getting to it.

She tried to catch Mrs. Longbottom's eye, but she was staring deliberately into her soup with the demeanor of a student praying to all available deities that the teacher will call on anyone else in the class.

“Congratulations on your nuptials, Mrs. Longbottom,” Hermione finally said. “The reception was lovely. The cake was excellent.”

“Excellent cake!” erupted Martin from the table's opposite end.

Mrs. Longbottom glanced up and nodded complacently. “Mm,” she elaborated, with admirable brevity. She dove straight back into her meditations on the soup.

Hermione sighed. She cleared her throat, and Draco looked at her from the side of his eye.

She touched her lips with her index finger, and projected it forward.

Ask.

Then she stretched her hands out as though she was pulling taffy.

Long.

She paused, considering. At last, she made a low, grabbing sort of gesture with both hands.

Bottom.

Draco choked on his wine, and spent the next half minute coughing into his serviette.

Once he'd recovered, he nodded without looking at Hermione, and leaned back in his chair.

“Lovely weather for the wedding,” he said to Tom. “June can be a bit unpredictable.”

“Yes!” agreed Tom. “It was...well, it was the most beautiful day.” He spoke wistfully, and looked down the table at his wife. She returned his glances, cheeks flushed bright pink, then fixed her attention to her fish with a secretive smile on her lips.

“You couldn't have asked for a more picturesque scene,” added Hermione, “with roses blooming in the garden.”

The young Mrs. Longbottom nodded, and continued to master the art of conversational restraint through her deepening blush.

“Lots of gifts,” said Draco.

Hermione coughed.

Subtle.

“Oh! Well,” said the younger Thomas. “Yes, we were truly blessed in every regard.”

“Have you opened them all?” asked Draco. “Even the little ones?”

Hermione jumped in.

“My brother is a snuff box enthusiast,” she said. “He cares about almost nothing else.” She ignored Draco's snort. “I noticed the most singular snuff box on the gift table at the wedding,” she said. “A little badger, I think?”

Tom and Mrs. Longbottom both looked entirely unsure of what she was talking about.

“A swan, I believe it was, Hermione,” said Draco. “Very elegant. You can't have missed it.”

"We haven't opened all of our presents yet." Tom glanced furtively at his wife. "We've been..." he trailed off, and began to blush fiercely on his own account. "We've been rather busy."

Mrs. Longbottom looked like she was going to spontaneously combust. Hermione jammed her soup spoon into her own mouth and stared at the tablecloth to avoid laughing with sympathetic embarrassment.

"Perfectly understandable, but one doesn't miss a swan-shaped snuff box, does one?" pressed Draco.

"Did you get two snuff boxes, then?" William asked Tom. "There was also the one shaped like a curled up cat that you passed along to my mother when she called on you this morning."

Hermione became legitimately concerned for Mrs. Longbottom, now red as an apple and gulping her wine.

"A cat?" asked Sir Thomas, perking up.

"Not a real cat, Father, a false one," said Penelope.

"Why the blazes would you have a false cat?" boomed Sir Thomas. "Pointless!"

"It isn't a false cat, Daddy," said Cassandra, "it's a snuff box. Tom didn't like it, so he gave it to William's mother."

"What was wrong with the snuff box?" Draco leaned further back in his chair, crossed his arms, and frowned. "And who ever said it was a cat?"

"It wasn't your gift, was it, Mr. Granger?" Tom shifted to the edge of his chair as though he might leap out of it at any moment and run into the garden. "If so, I'm terribly—"

"We didn't bring a gift," said Hermione. She avoided Draco's reproachful stare.

"We arrived not knowing we'd be attending a wedding," Draco explained.

"That's perfectly alright," said Tom. "As far as the box goes"—he lifted his hands in a gesture of helplessness—"I don't use snuff?"

"I'd like to use snuff," said Cassandra.

"Cassandra." Lady Longbottom dabbed her mouth with her serviette.

"The snuff box is at your estate, then?" asked Draco, turning to William.

William nodded, and knocked back the rest of his wine. "It appears so."

"Wonderful." Draco reached across the table and grabbed the wine decanter from Mr. Martin's hand, poured two fingers into Martin's glass, then moved the decanter to his own side of the table.

"It's in the shape of a cat, you say?" asked Sir Thomas, eyes alight.

"It looks like a dyspeptic hedgehog to me," said William. "Mother insists it's a cat."

"Dyspepsia! Easily enough mended. More fiber," added Mr. Martin helpfully. "More wine!"

"No! No more wine," said Draco. "I'll not be thrown out of my bed by a vengeful elf while I'm

trying to read.”

Cressida gazed up the table at Draco with her large, shimmering, bovine eyes. “I love to read while I’m in bed.”

William crossed his arms and huffed out a breath so hard that small circular waves spread over the surface of his soup. “We all like to read in bed, Cressida,” he said.

“I don’t much care for it,” added Penelope.

“You don’t much care for anything, Penny,” said Cassandra cheerfully.

“It’s reading in the bath, for me,” offered Sir Thomas.

“I always drop my books in the bath, and then I get a lecture about respecting the property of the lending library from Izzy,” said Cassandra. “I’ve been reading a Muggle book about a vizier’s daughter who tells wonderful stories. There’s one about a fisherman who finds a chest with a corpse inside, and two men confess to the murder, only one of them is obviously lying—”

“My word, where on Earth did you find a book like *that*?” interrupted Isadora, coloring.

“*Ça suffit*, Cassandra.” Lady Longbottom was unruffled.

“We found the finger in the end,” Martin reminded the table.

Draco shifted the wine still closer to himself.

The House-elves came to clear the table completely, pull back the white tablecloth to reveal a green one underneath, and reset the table. Roasts, potatoes, buttered vegetables, and other hearty dishes appeared, as well as elaborate jellies and pies.

They ate the second course in relative peace. Hermione couldn’t help but notice the stolen looks between Tom and his wife, who had never recovered from her blushes. She remained the color of a vicious sunburn, self-consciously half-smiling.

The course ended, and the table was cleared yet again, the green cloth removed. The bare wooden surface was relaid with the candelabras and flowers, then elves brought out dishes of fresh fruits and candied nuts, which the party picked at in a desultory fashion.

“You were at Hogwarts, then?” William pierced Draco with a look.

Draco brought his wine glass to his lips and sipped slowly.

Hermione watched his mind work.

“I was,” Draco answered. “Before your time. We’re rather older than you. My sister very much so.”

Hermione glowered.

“You were in Ravenclaw, I understand?” Draco asked William.

William nodded. “Yes. I was Sorted in the same year as Cressida.” His eyes darted to the other end of the table, then back. He nodded at the elf who delivered his cup of coffee, then picked up his dessert spoon and twirled it. He turned in his chair and looked down the table toward Isadora. “You were a year ahead of us, Izzy.” He glanced across the table from himself. “And Tom, you

were two years above. Do either of you recall Mr. and Miss Granger from your time at Hogwarts?"

Hermione flipped over a sugared walnut on her dessert plate with the tip of her spoon, and tried not to look at Isadora, with her upright posture and her hands laid genteelly in her lap.

"I don't suppose that I do," Isadora said, "but that isn't much of a surprise. We were rather occupied with our studies in school, weren't we both, Tom?"

Tom nodded.

Isadora gave William a mannerly smile. "I know that I was very focused on learning."

William opened his mouth, then thought better of what he was about to say, and closed it.

Isadora turned her smile on Hermione. "I apologize, Miss Granger." She laid a hand on Hermione's wrist. "We weren't all as conscious of our schoolmates as we ought to have been."

Hermione could have hugged her.

"Draco and I weren't particularly memorable in our years at school," said Hermione. "I'm afraid nothing remarkable happened to us while we were there."

Draco twisted the stem of his wine glass between his fingers, then brought it to his mouth, and drank.

The women retired to the drawing room so the men could continue to drink. Hermione spent an anxious forty-five minutes wondering what William Avery was saying to Draco and vice versa before the gentlemen joined them.

She found a book on the Longbottoms' shelves and sat on one of the sofas reading it. Penelope lounged on another sofa, ignoring the needlework in her lap and looking entirely done with everything. Cressida played a vaguely mournful folk tune on the piano, eyes glinting in the candlelight, while Cassandra, Isadora, Mrs. Longbottom and Lady Longbottom played a card game whose rules Hermione didn't understand in the least.

The men rolled into the room, cheeks redder than they were when dinner ended. Hermione despaired to note that Martin looked decidedly pleased with himself, and needed Draco's help to stop bumping his chair into the walls as they proceeded into the room.

William swiftly crossed to stand beside Cressida and turn her pages for her. Tom perched on a chair just behind his wife, surreptitiously rubbing the skirt of her gown between his fingers while he watched her play.

Draco deposited Martin near the end of Hermione's sofa, then turned off the chair with his wand, dropping it to the floor, so Martin couldn't go careening around the room. Then he sat next to Hermione, and breathed a contented sigh.

"You seem happy with yourself," whispered Hermione.

"I am," he agreed. "I've just eaten a singularly satisfying meal, I've been filled up with my and Mr. Martin's shares of wine, and have just been treated to a generous portion...or two...or three...of the

brandy Sir Thomas holds back for guests.”

“I’m silencing your bedroom tonight, you know.” She flipped the page of a book she wasn’t actually reading.

“An intriguing proposition,” he said. “If you’re worried about my snoring, I’ll have you know that I’m not drunk. Although I did get into a lively discussion with William about the inclusion of powdered spruce resin as a stabilizing agent in high-volatility potions. Mr. Martin used the lapse in supervision to down an unknown number of thimbles-full of brandy. I expect to be flogged mercilessly by that snappy elf of yours when we get back to the cottage.”

“You had one job, you know,” she said reproachfully.

“Two, actually, and I did one of them admirably. We know the snuff box has been rudely regifted to Avery’s mother, and now we get to spend an enchanting morning paying William a social call that he does not in any respect want us to make.”

Sir Thomas, sitting in an armchair near the fire, called a House-elf to his side and whispered to him.

Within a few moments, the elf returned, each hand holding a completely put-out looking cat.

Penelope groaned audibly from her place on the couch.

The elf handed one of the cats to Sir Thomas, who placed it on his lap and began stroking its head.

It was mostly black, with large white patches at its haunches and chest, and white feet and lower legs, as though it wore clean cotton athletic socks. It had small, blunt-tipped ears, but its most striking traits were its enormous green-yellow eyes, round as dinner plates and staring blankly into the room, and a symmetrical white patch underneath its nose in the precise shape of a flourishing and well-groomed moustache with ends curling up like sideways question marks. Its two upper canine teeth hung over its bottom lip, which gave it a decidedly stunned and unintellectual air.

“This, Miss Granger”—he spoke in the softest voice Hermione had yet to hear him use—“is Hugo. Say hello to the Grangers, Hugo.”

Sir Thomas lifted Hugo’s right front paw, and used it to wave stupidly at Hermione and Draco.

Hugo responded by closing and opening his eyes lethargically.

Hermione slapped her hand down on Draco’s thigh, and squeezed it, hard.

“He’s waving the cat at us,” she whispered.

Draco folded his hand over hers, and wrapped her fingers in his.

“I can see that.”

“I don’t know what to do,” she said.

“I think we just watch.”

Sir Thomas handed Hugo back to the elf, and took the second cat—a massive grey tabby—into his lap.

It was extraordinarily handsome in the face, and bore the expression of a sociopath with the tools

and time required to execute an undiscoverable destruction of evidence.

“And this is Edward. He’s just had his bath, haven’t you, Teddy?” Sir Thomas jiggled the cat slightly while it hung its paws over his arm and looked like it was ready to first commit homicide and then shuffle off its own mortal coil with icy efficiency. “He’s my feisty chap, aren’t you? Don’t like your baths, my good fellow? That’s too bad!”

At the piano, Cressida finished her tune, and began another, with a soft, longing sort of melody. This time, she sang while she accompanied herself.

“One evening as I rambled, among the leaves so green...”

William attentively turned her pages, and it wasn’t until Hermione looked up from her book that she noticed Cressida’s eyes had fallen on Draco. She cast him yearning glances as often as her mastery of the notes before her allowed.

“Your beauty so enticed me, I could not pass it by...”

Her eyes were large, and in the candlelight appeared still larger—half-lidded and gleaming wetly like a prize milk cow’s.

She was gazing. Longingly.

“And if by chance you should look for me, perhaps you’ll not me find...”

Draco seemed not to have noticed, but Hermione watched William Avery’s page turning transform from smooth and unobtrusive to crisp and snappish. He followed the line of sight between Cressida and Draco with obvious and rising annoyance.

“Sun and dark she followed him, his teeth did brightly shine...”

“What on Earth is she singing about?” muttered Hermione. She realized that Draco still had his hand over hers. “I’m not sure if you’ve realized, my affectionate brother,” she said, pulling her hand out from under his, “but Miss Cressida Longbottom seems to be serenading you.”

Draco looked away from Lord Thomas as he continued to tempt fate by assertively jostling Edward the cat, and folded his hands in his lap.

“What do you mean, she’s over there with her boyfriend—” he cut himself off as his eyes connected with Cressida’s. “Oh, Merlin.”

For the first time in the entire span of her long memory, Hermione took no pleasure in saying “I told you so,” to Draco Malfoy.

“God damn it all, Granger. What do I do?”

“Ideally, she rediscovers that the fellow over there turning her pages is a very smart catch,” she answered under her breath, “but until then, I think you’re going to need to ignore her as much as possible. You could, I suppose, make up an engagement.”

“To whom?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Lavender Brown? She’s single again, and it’s a common enough surname.”

Draco shuddered.

“Or,” she said, “make something up. She could be called Yolanda.”

He looked at her in astonishment. “Yolanda.”

“Why not?”

“I have no objections to the name, but there would be questions about a betrothed that I’m not prepared to answer. Where does Yolanda live? What are her family connections? How much does she stand to inherit?”

“Are you sure you’ve never read a Jane Austen novel?” asked Hermione.

“I’ve never heard of her. Is she one of those tawdry writers whose work you keep tucked in that atrocious green bag of yours and squirrel away in your lap on your lunch hour?”

“The tawdriest,” agreed Hermione. “She writes the most depraved sort of sex books.”

“We’ll talk more about that later,” Draco said, “but what do I do about Miss Lovelorn over there?”

“*Now* you want my advice?” She scowled at the pleading look of innocence he’d conjured.

“Alright. Go and flirt with her sister.”

“Which one?”

“I don’t think it matters,” she said. “I suppose it ought to be Penelope. She seems unlikely to respond well to it.”

“You actually think that flirting with Cressida’s sister is going to put her off me?”

“I don’t see why not.” Hermione stared at him. “What? What’s that look for?”

“I want to tell you that you don’t understand women in the slightest, but I’d like to keep all of my toes intact for another few years.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nevermind. I’m not flirting either intentionally or unintentionally with another Longbottom sister. It needs to be something else.”

“Have you tried not flirting at all?”

He scrunched up his nose.

“My mother didn’t raise me to be rude to women, Granger. That was all Lucius.”

“You’re rude to me,” she noted.

“Right, but you’re you.”

“Pretend she’s me, then.”

Draco’s mouth twitched downward.

“What?” she asked. “Too much?”

“Yes.” He looked at her for a beat. “Too much.”

“Alright. Then don’t speak at all.”

William snapped the last page of music over, then Cressida finished her song, arms poised elegantly over the keyboard and her eyes lingering on Draco.

Martin began to tap his toes against his chair's footrest, and raised his voice in a surprisingly robust tenor.

“There is a young maiden, she lives all a-lone...”

“Oh, dear,” said Hermione.

“She lives all a-lone on the shore-o!”

“I believe that’s our cue.” Draco stood up, and tapped Martin’s chair into life. “That was a beautiful meal. We’re most gratified, Sir Thomas”—he nodded to Sir Thomas, who now balanced Hugo along the length of one thigh and Edward on the other—“and Lady Longbottom.” He gave the mistress of the house a polite bow, which she returned with a genteel dip of her chin. “Sadly, Mr. Martin ought to return home to Twiggybroke.”

Penelope gave them all a cursory wave, then covered a yawn.

“But I was going to ask Mr. Martin about dissolving potions,” grumbled Cassandra. “They’d be much better for disposing of a corpse than throwing everything in a box and tossing it in a river. There are always fishermen coming along to find it.”

“Cassandra. *Plus de meurtre*,” said Lady Longbottom dispassionately.

Tom Longbottom stood to bow, while stealing glances at his wife. William Avery did his best impression of a man who wanted to punch someone, but not anyone in particular, so that no individual would feel the need to be on their guard.

Cressida stood from the piano bench. “Miss Granger. Mr. Martin.” She curtsied towards Hermione and Martin, then turned to Draco. “Mr. Granger.”

Draco offered her a genteel nod.

Cressida urged slightly forward, then came to an abrupt stop, as though she thought she’d left the stove on, then instantly recalled that she’d turned it off after all. “You’ll read, tonight?” she asked Draco. “Before you go to sleep?”

If Hermione hadn’t been so absolutely horrified by the situation, she would have clapped her hands in glee at the way Draco’s cheeks colored. She didn’t think he had it in him.

“Yes, I suppose,” he answered. “If I’m not hexed into next Saturday before I get the chance.”

“Oh! But you couldn’t be,” said Cressida throatily. “Why would anyone hex *you*?”

Draco gave her one of his damned vulpine smiles. He couldn’t help himself. It was the only possible answer. “I’m afraid you’d have to ask my sister the answer to that.” He looked sidelong at Hermione. “She’s the one keeping track of all my indiscretions.”

As they left the drawing room, Martin had finished his song and looped around to begin it again. They tootled down the path between the Hall and Twiggybroke Cottage, Draco keeping hold of Martin's chair handles to prevent the whole rig from running into the underbrush.

"Me men must be crazy, me men must be mad, me men must be deep in despair-o..." warbled Martin at the top of his voice. His chair weaved to the left and then jerked sharply back to the right, wobbled under the torque, and righted itself by the grace of Draco's grip.

"Despair-o!" agreed Draco, blasting a mid-sized rock nowhere near Martin's chair.

"For to let you away from my cabin so gay, and to paddle your way to the shore, shore, shore..."

"Shore! Shore! Shore! Join in, Granger," said Draco. "It goes 'Shore!' just here."

Hermione held up her skirts and marched headlong up the cottage ramp.

Grix sat at the table, spectacles perched on the tip of his nose. Parchment stacks stood in front of him, beside an ink well and a pile of books. He lay down his quill and shuffled towards the door.

"I deluded your sailors as well as yourself, I'm a maiden again on the shore, shore, shore..."

"Ten points to the maiden!" enthused Draco. "Well played."

"What have you let him do?" Grix moved in close and peered into Martin's wide, glittering eyes. "You daft old man, do you have any idea what you've done to your liver?"

Martin began his song again. *"There is a young maiden, she lives all a-lone, she lives all a-lone on the shore-o..."*

"Shore-o, shore-o, alright," said Grix, patting Martin's hand where it tapped out of rhythm. Grix turned his attention to Draco. "You"—he pointed a finger at Draco's face—"had one job to do."

"Two, actually," said Draco, helpfully. "And I did one of them." He puffed up his chest in pride.

Grix blinked at him. "Right." He looked at Hermione. "Miss Granger, please fetch me the sobriety potion in the washroom cabinet. And to the left of the stove, you'll find a brown crockery jar filled with powder. Mix a teaspoon of that with a glass of water."

Hermione hustled to the washroom, grabbed the neatly labeled vial of sobriety potion from a fully stocked and organized medicine rack, then found the crockery jar. Its contents smelled strongly of oranges, and turned a pleasing tangerine shade when dissolved.

Grix handed the potion to Martin—who scrunched up his nose in displeasure as the potion took away his drive for balladry—then followed Martin's hand anxiously with his own, ready to catch a dropped cup while he tipped back the orange drink.

"What's that then?" Draco leaned against the bookshelves, hands jammed deep in his pockets.

Grix glared back at him.

"It's the best bits of oranges, dried and powdered up. Keeps him healthy as can be. Hopefully he won't be sick as a dog in the morning."

"It's delicious!" Martin tipped his glass at Draco. "Tart."

"Hermione calls me that, too," said Draco.

“I’ve *never*—” Hermione hissed.

Draco frowned. “It’s implied. And unwarranted.”

Grix did not flog Draco, nor did he throw him out of bed.

Draco had already removed his jacket and unfurled and discarded his cravat when Hermione crossed the landing from her room to his, stripped down to her chemise and stays and holding a book she’d forgotten to put down.

She determined that she’d sliced through enough laces. She steeled herself, and knocked on his door.

“I need your help.” She turned her back to him as he opened the door. “I can’t untie this infernal garment, and it seems excessive to have Margaret come dress and undress me four times a day.”

She heard him lean against the door frame.

“You want me to undress you?” he asked.

“Yes, and don’t be a pervert about it.”

He said nothing else, and she felt him begin to work his fingers into the lacing. “Found another book to snuggle under the covers with?” he asked after a moment, peering over her shoulder at the red-bound volume in her hands.

“I did.” She looked at the cover. “It’s another of Martin’s surveys of his research. Merlin, I wish I had the full laboratory papers for these experiments. In this one he appears to make an actual disappearing potion, and one that keeps food indefinitely unspoiled, just until it’s eaten, when it reverts to its usual rate of decay.”

She jostled slightly under his hands at her back.

“Fascinating stuff,” he agreed. “I do like to read in bed, you know.”

“We all like to read in bed.”

He laughed outright, though he tried to stifle it, and she followed, pressing her hand over her mouth.

They grew quiet again while he worked.

"Done," he said, finally.

She turned around, holding her stays up with her arm slung over her chest. “I’ve never called you a tart.” She looked down at Draco’s bare feet. “Or whatever the male equivalent of that term might be.”

In her peripheral vision, she watched him tip his head to one side. “It’s been implied.”

She looked up.

In that moment she felt, under his unwavering gaze, that she *was* the last biscuit in the tin.

She shook her head to clear it.

“As I said.” He stepped back into his room, and put his hand on his door to close it.
“Unwarranted.”

Her brow furrowed. “But I thought—”

“We have an agreement, do we not?”

Hermione bit into her lip. She wanted to shout at him, and tell him where he could put his agreement. Her agreement, if she was being honest.

It had always been hers.

“Goodnight, Hermione,” he said.

He turned and retreated, softly closing his door. She was left standing in the darkness of the landing, alone with a book.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on [Tumblr](#).

Hat tip to Terry Pratchett's Perspicacia Tick, who I think would get along swimmingly with Perspicacity Martin.

Cressida sings an English folk song called *Reynardine*.

Martin sings *Maid on the Shore*.

The Visit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

For a short while in the early part of the morning, it rained.

Hermione lay with the bed linens pulled to her chin, looking out the window at the dripping leaves of an oak.

It was an indecisive and weak-willed sort of rain at the opening of what would be a clear day, and its lack of force or purpose had a melancholic effect. She had been in shock, she realized, and distracted by gowns, soup spoons, and the thrill of unknown books and potions. Now, in the lull of a dreary morning, she began to appreciate the scope of her predicament for the first time.

She felt a sense of loss, and beyond that, if her thoughts turned to the broken metal of the Time Turner, the creeping edge of fear. She'd been shuffled backward in the deck of time, locked in a place she didn't belong, and now relied on the generous natures of people she ultimately could never repay.

She was stuck and uncertain, both of which she hated. And because miserable thoughts always appreciate company, her mind bent relentlessly towards her last morning with Ron.

They'd woken together too early, wrung out and limp from crying, and with near comedic liberality, she began to cry again. Her chin resting on his chest, she watched the light from the bedroom window they would no longer share filter through his eyelashes.

When a pair of her tears dripped arrhythmically onto his skin, he looked down.

"What is it?" He ran his fingertips along her brow.

She swallowed before she spoke, and when she did, her voice was choked and damp. She never cried beautifully.

"Someone else is going to have your children."

His thumb arced across the top of her cheek, once, and then again.

He nodded.

"Don't cry," she said. "We shouldn't both cry."

"But it's sad."

And it was.

Of course, it hadn't happened yet.

Two hundred years prior, someone knocked on her bedroom door.

“Come in.”

Draco entered tentatively and paused in the doorway.

Hermione's head rested in the crook of her bent arm. She didn't turn her face away from the window to look at him.

“I can come back later,” he said, and turned to leave.

“It's alright.” She rolled onto her side, facing him. “What do you need?”

“Are you alright?”

“I'm fine.” She could only hope that she looked and sounded it.

“You don't look fine.”

Blast him.

She sat up. “Thank you. I'll take your opinion on what I look like before I've gotten out of bed under advisement.”

“That's not what I meant, and you know it.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What can I help you with at this early hour?”

He hesitated before he spoke. “I'd like the Time Turner. I'm going to bring it over to the Manor and see if I can't repair the outer ring.”

“We discussed this.” She pressed her lips together when he rolled his eyes. “Don't roll your eyes at me. We've had mixed experiences altering magically impregnated metal. It can and does go smoothly, but there was a real concern that you weren't going to be able to regrow your fingertip that time we reshaped the lens mounting on the Potentiograph. And that was with me standing right there.”

He held up a fully intact hand. “I recall. But as much as I'm loath to admit it, we're spinning our wheels a bit here. I'll be cautious, and if it doesn't seem like it's going to be workable, we'll think of something else.”

She breathed out hard.

“Do *not* blow yourself up. I'll be extremely put out with you if you do.”

“I swear to you that I will do everything within my power to avoid blowing myself up.”

She twisted across her bed and opened her nightstand drawer.

“Here, then,” she said, and held out the leather bag with the Time Turner.

He crossed the room and took it from her.

For a moment, she didn't let go, and gave him a penetrating look.

“If anything happens—” She stopped to search his face. “You'll come back for me, won't you?”

Something fierce sketched itself into the margins of his expression.

"Do you honestly need to ask me that?"

She shook her head and let go of the bag.

He went to leave the room, but glanced back over his shoulder, hand resting on the doorknob.

"We'll make it home," he said. "It may take us a while, but we'll get back." His brow bent in thought, and he fully faced her.

"I know that we're rarely serious, Hermione."

She stiffened.

"But I hope that you know—" He stopped again and studied his shoes. "I should think it was entirely obvious that—"

"Now's not the time to begin being earnest, Malfoy," she said quickly. "Go and make your attempt. Don't lose a limb, though. I couldn't possibly stand the whinging."

He looked back at her and smirked. "I'll try to keep it to a fingertip."

Margaret McClure arrived, and dressed Hermione in a pale pink cotton gown decorated with pink silk rosettes, which she suggested was best for a morning call to the Averys. Again, she assaulted Hermione with cosmetic spells while she was off her guard.

Hermione glimpsed herself in the downstairs hall mirror, and noted with approval that she'd shed whatever ungarded look of unhappiness Draco had seen that morning. Curled and primped and plumped, she looked pink and fresh as an ingenue—a feat of no small genius, as she was, in reality, a lost and bewildered Ministry researcher who'd cocked up catastrophically and was most likely out of a job.

Grix sat at the breakfast table with Martin, serving him from a large crockery bowl.

"Good morning, Mr. Martin. Good morning, Mr. Grix."

She sat and spread her serviette across her lap.

Grix tipped his head to her and passed the bowl, filled with cubes of sweet potato along with a rainbow of cooked vegetables. She dished herself a portion, then poured herself a cup of green tea. They ate in silence while Hermione peered nervously towards the front door.

"He'll be alright, I'm sure," said Grix.

"Who will?" asked Hermione.

"Your brother. He'll be fine, whatever it is he's getting up to. He's like a cat, isn't he? Ends up standing on his feet. Got their own righting reflex, some do."

"I suppose that's true."

"Bonk!" Martin enthused, bapping his forehead lightly with his open hand and smiling at Hermione. "Knock himself silly, won't he?"

"Oh, come off it, you old gaffer," said Grix. "You're off your chump. Don't scare the girl, no one's knocking themselves silly."

Hermione tilted her head and considered the elf. A polished gold pocket watch chain stood out smartly against the tweed vest he wore over a starched white shirt.

"You write, Mr. Grix?"

Grix took a bite of courgette and chewed it thoroughly while looking at her. He swallowed, then dabbed at his mouth with his serviette.

"I do."

"That's wonderful!" Hermione blew across the surface of her tea. "I'd be very interested to hear about it."

"I suspect we'll have time one of these days," he said. "Now, Martin and I are going to finish up our breakfasts and take our constitutional."

"To the stream," said Martin, clapping his hands. "I'm going to find the tadpoles."

"That's right. We'll see about getting you wading this time, old man."

Hermione watched Grix straighten Martin's serviette in his lap and pluck a stray cube of potato from the table.

"How long have you been free, Grix?" she asked.

"Not the least bit curious, are you." He looked at her sidelong, but his voice was congenial—for him, anyway. After a moment, he sat back and absently took out his pocket watch, then put it back.

"I've worked for Martin since February of 1649."

Hermione blinked. "You've what?"

"With wages. I hope that answers you well enough."

She wasn't entirely sure that it did, but before she could ask any clarifying questions, a dull thud upstairs rattled the window frames, and was followed by Draco's unmistakable shout.

"God *damn!*"

Hermione leapt from her seat and threw her serviette down on her plate.

"You'll excuse me, Mr. Grix. Mr. Martin."

Holding up her skirts, she rushed down the hallway, then threw herself breathlessly up the stairs.

She yanked his door open, and when she found his room empty, turned and slammed into her own bedroom.

He lay curled in the fetal position on her floor, hand cupped over his left eye and groaning like he'd been shot.

"Draco! Oh, my God, what's happened to you?"

She fell to the floor beside him, and gripped his wrist.

"I'm alright, Granger. Keep your knickers on." He peered at her with his uncovered eye. "Or don't."

Your call. Merlin, I wish I had exploded. This smarts terribly.”

“What happened?” She squeezed his wrist. “Is there anything broken? Missing? Shall I grab a potions kit? Tell me what I need to do.”

At that, he laughed.

“You can move that,” he said, gesturing generally towards the fireplace. “I came in through your Floo instead of mine for whatever reason, and bashed my foot heartily against that cleverly placed medieval torture device you have there.”

Hermione looked.

“You mean the chair.”

“That’s the one. They don’t make them like that anymore, do they?”

Hermione released his hand and sat back on her heels.

“You stubbed your toes on my chair.”

“I did,” he confirmed. “What? Don’t look at me like that. You’re so judgmental. Tell me anything that hurts as terribly. I’ll wait.”

“Why are you covering your damned eye?”

He uncovered his eye.

“I’ve burned it, that’s why.”

A charcoal strip of ash bisected his cheek and eyelid. His eyebrow was also missing.

“Oh, good Lord. What happened?”

He sat up, and straightened his cravat.

“I’m saying this with alarming frequency these days, but unfortunately you’re right. I made a welding attempt.”

“I told you, we need to recast the circle!”

“Yes, I took that under consideration,” he said irritably, “but I wondered if we might at least try the other option. And yes, we’ll need to melt it down. At least now we know that’s likely to be a bit touch and go.”

She glared at him.

“At some cost to me, I’ve admitted that you were correct, alright?” He lifted up onto his elbow, pulled the bag with the Time Turner from his pocket, and chucked it onto Hermione’s bed. “That device bit me back rather sharply for trying the wrong thing, and now, if my sense of touch isn’t mistaken, I’m short something critical.”

He stood, and gazed at his reflection in the mirror mounted beside Hermione’s door. “Oh, shit! That won’t do if we’re going calling,” he said. “I’m going to trouble Grix for a regrowth potion. I’m sure he has something up that worryingly crafty sleeve of his.”

"You still want to call on the Averys?"

"Of course. We'll snatch the box out from under their noses and come back straight away, then regroup about the Time Turner. I suspect repairing it together may involve an elaborate deception, which I hope you're up for. Setting off all manner of sparks and filling up the place with the smell of caramelized magic is undoubtedly going to put the dietary fiber committee onto us."

"We could just tell them, you know. Martin was a cutting edge academic, I'm sure they won't be too terribly shocked that we've time traveled."

"Of course. And I'm sure they'll not be in the least bit troubled that we've been lying to them about being Martin's cousins."

"Martin must know we're not, though."

Draco squinted. "Have you conversed with Martin, Granger?"

"I have, and he's as sane as either of us."

"Speak for yourself."

"Grix certainly suspects something," she said. "He's been wary of us from the first. It might be liberating just to come clean about the whole deception."

Draco stared at her. "There are times when I get a very clear sense of our House differences, and this is one of them."

Hermione stood and adjusted her skirts.

"I suppose you've at least eliminated the possibility of a simple weld, so thank you for that. I'm sorry you've had to sacrifice one of your eyebrows in the process. I know how proud you are of them."

He watched himself raise and lower the remaining half of the pair in the mirror. "They're one of the finest sets in England, Granger. I have every reason to feel protective." He sighed morosely. "Now let's see about regrowth, and then we'll go and enrage William Avery."

The weather cleared and the day was fine, so they walked.

Hermione allowed Draco to help her over the stiles. She said nothing about his visibly regrowing eyebrow until the final crossing, when they were confronted with a wide patch of soggy ground. Without warning, he grabbed her by the waist rather than her hand and lifted her down off the lower step. She fell forward into his arms with her palms splayed against his chest, and bit back her desire to pummel him long enough for him to carry her the brief distance to the dry portion of the path. The moment he set her down, she pushed him hard to an arm's length away and glowered.

"Rather presumptuous for someone sporting as much over-eye stubble as you are."

He frowned, and touched his brow protectively. "A sacrifice I made in your name, I might add."

"In my name?" she scoffed. "I'm sure I'm not the only one who's quite finished traipsing around

the antiquarian countryside interfering with the romantic lives of the locals. Unless, of course, you're quite comfortable and would like to establish a home here."

As she spoke, they crested the hill above the Avery estate.

The patch of rain had washed the landscape clean, and the lawns rolling from the crisply delineated gardens at the back of the house shone luminous in the morning sun.

Two small figures flew over the grass on brooms, moving at speed directly towards one another.

"Merlin, they're going to collide!" cried Hermione.

"Yes, they are." Draco looked on with clinical detachment.

The figures came together with a natural, correct sort of violence. Both fell to the ground while their mounts raced on without them for several metres before slowing down and hovering patiently in the fashion of children's beginner brooms. The figures, briefly separated in the fall, rolled towards one another over the grass, and then reconnected, flailing their fists at each other's abdomens. Hermione could hear the conviction, if not the content, of their distant shouting. Eventually, they both gave up, rolled apart, and stood. One of the figures looked up the hill, turned to whack their companion in the chest, and pointed at Draco and Hermione.

They waved, then took off running across the lawn and rounded the corner of the house.

"Excellent," said Draco, waving back. "It seems there may be additional Averys. I hope to make them all like me as well as William does."

"Keep stealing the hearts of the girls they're in love with and I'm sure you'll do very well for yourself."

It was a pleasant walk of another ten minutes to the white gravel drive fronting the Avery estate. A carriage waited outside the door, drawn by a pair of placid thestrals in gleaming black leather bridles. As Draco and Hermione approached, the carriage door burst open. The interior was luxurious, upholstered in silks and plush green velvet, and from it tumbled a pair of preposterously filthy little boys. They landed on the gravel, and without further fuss, picked themselves up and seemed prepared to take their leave. But before they could make their way to the location of their next catastrophe, they noticed Hermione and Draco standing in the drive.

Hermione wasn't good at identifying the ages of children, but she supposed they were somewhere in the general area of six or seven.

"Hullo," said the smaller one. "You're the ones we saw on the hill. Charles said you were restless spirits come to snatch me in my bed, but I knew you weren't any such thing."

"No," said Hermione. "Not restless spirits. We've no plans for snatching, either. My name is Hermione Granger, and this is my younger brother Draco."

She ignored Draco's theatrical sigh.

"I'm the younger one, too," said the little boy.

Draco honored him with a solemn bow.

“We’re cousins of Mr. Martin over at Twiggybroke Cottage,” said Hermione. “We’re staying with him just now, and we’ve come to pay a call to your family.”

“Are you here to fetch William away for company?” the larger boy asked.

Hermione deduced this was Charles, the one who made up terrorizing ghost stories.

“Only he promised us broom rides this afternoon,” Charles went on, “and if you take him from us we won’t like you at all.”

“That’ll be the full set, then,” Draco noted.

“I promise we won’t take him from you,” said Hermione. “We’re only here to say hello. What are you two up to?”

The boys turned to one another, seemed to communicate telepathically, then looked back at Hermione and Draco.

“We’ve left off jousting, and now we’re back to playing beetles with the nasty pig,” said Charles.

He lifted something up to show them.

It was the snuff box.

A thin layer of dried dirt was caked into its engraved surfaces. Around the seam, where the two halves came together, blades of green grass stuck out in ragged, lank strands like a chaotic skirt. It looked as though it had come out the other side of a questionably themed collegiate party having played one too many drinking games.

Its circular eyes leered at them in feral challenge.

“Dear God, what have you done with the swan?” Draco looked at the boys sternly.

“What swan?” the smaller boy asked. “Do you mean the dirty pig? Mother says it’s a cat, but it isn’t one at all. It hasn’t got a proper tail, only an ambomibable pointy rump.”

“Abominable,” Hermione corrected. “And I’m still seeing a badger.”

“Mother said he’s a hair loom and we oughtn’t touch him, so we’ve taken him into the woods,” the smaller boy continued. “He’s a wicked pig and we hate him. We’ve been feeding him grass, and Charles found the greenest beetle that’s ever been, so we’re keeping it in his belly.”

He reached over to the box, still in his brother’s hands, flicked open the latch, and lifted the lid.

Hermione half expected it to erupt in uncontrollable fingers of vengeful lemon yellow electrical arcs the moment it was opened. She withdrew towards Draco and pressed herself against his arm. He wrapped it around her, and provided a firm, reassuring squeeze.

Instead of cataclysmic lightning, they were treated to the sight of a shining metallic green beetle twitching heroically on a bed of leaves.

“We’ve named him William, after William,” said Charles. “Only don’t tell Willy we said so. He’s been in such a foul mood.” He wrinkled his brow. “Don’t tell him we said that, either.”

“Could I have a look at your pig?” asked Draco.

Charles looked down at the box, then back at Draco with suspicion.

“You’re not going to give him back to Mother, are you?”

“Why would I give it back to your mother?”

“Well it’s only that we didn’t ask, did we.”

Draco lifted his sparse eyebrow. “I won’t say a word to your mother, if you’ll let me take a look at it.”

The boy hesitated, then held the box out.

Draco had almost grasped it when the front door of the manor house opened and a woman charged out onto the drive.

The boy whisked the snuff box behind his back.

“John. Charles. You’ve been called in for breakfast *several* times,” said the woman.

She was plain and direct-looking, and appeared to be hovering at the brink of forty. She wore a practical, unadorned dark blue gown, and had her brown hair pulled back from her face in a pragmatic fashion. Her attention was fixed intensely on the two little boys, but as she advanced, she woke to the fact that there were strangers standing in her drive. She slowed, and brushed her hands briskly against her skirt.

“Oh dear. Hello.” She gave Hermione and Draco a brief nod, then turned back to the boys. “Have you been troubling our visitors?”

The smaller of the two, who must have been John, hopped from one foot to the other and shook his head.

“We haven’t been troubling anyone. When is Willy going to take us out on his broom, Mother? We’ve been waiting all morning.”

The woman looked around, absorbing the scene before her. "Have you been playing in Miss Parkinson's carriage?"

"No," said Charles, apparently a fluent liar.

Mrs. Avery shook her head, then sighing, turned to Draco and Hermione.

“You’ll excuse me, this is all terribly rude. I’m Mrs. Avery.”

She looked at them both expectantly.

Hermione curtsied. “I’m Hermione Granger, and this is my brother Draco. We’re cousins of Mr. Martin’s.”

“A pleasure, Miss Granger. Mr. Granger,” Mrs. Avery replied. "Any relation of Mr. Martin is always welcome in my home. You’ll excuse my sons. They’ve had a quiet spring here at home recovering from a bout of dragon pox, and they’ve grown unused to having company.”

“They’re no trouble at all, Mrs. Avery,” Hermione insisted. “Charles and John were telling us

about their adventures in the woods collecting beetles.”

Mrs. Avery regarded her sons with stern, exhausted devotion.

“Of course. I'm just sitting down in the drawing room with Miss Parkinson, who I'm sure will be delighted to meet a relation of Mr. Martin's. He's rather a favourite amongst the young people. I'd be very pleased if you would join us." She narrowed her eyes at Charles and John. "And you two. Breakfast. Now.”

“Aww,” groaned Charles. “We’ve told you we’re not hungry.”

"Only the stinky pig is hungry," John concurred.

"The what?" Mrs. Avery gave them the look of the seasoned detective chief inspector.

Charles punched his brother noncommittally in the gut. "Nothing, Mother. We'll be in, we promise."

"Ow! You needn't have done that, you oaf," John fussed as their mother turned and made her way back towards the house.

"Yes, I had," said Charles. "Race you to the elm by the lake."

“Tea?”

Mrs. Avery sat with relaxed propriety beside a polished table in the drawing room.

“Tea would be lovely, thank you.”

Fingers folded in her lap, Hermione perched next to Draco on a silk brocade sofa.

In a chair near the door, a young woman in her early twenties sat in an impressively upright fashion, looking patient and serene. Her hair was so dark as to be nearly black, curled into glossy ringlets. Her clothes looked expensive. This was the visiting Miss Parkinson, dripping with the unruffled assuredness of the stratospherically wealthy.

While clearly fellow members of the upper class, the Averys seemed to possess a slightly more down-to-earth quality.

The Avery home's drawing room was as stately and nondescript as the outside. It all had a quality of perfunctory splendor, as though it were a prefabricated castle that came complete with drapes and furniture for the country gentleman with more money than time.

And while it was as neat and elegant as Hermione supposed it ought to have been, there was an air of strain to its gentility. Hermione would have been hard pressed to identify two less physically similar homes, but the Avery house brought to mind nothing so much as the Burrow.

Both seemed, to varying degrees, subtly unhinged, as though a snitch might come crashing through a window at any moment and no one would flinch.

She considered Charles and John Avery. Currently, they stood outside one of many large drawing

room windows, noses flattened against the glass, watching the gathered party. They were able to do this concurrently with not eating their breakfasts. It seemed likely to Hermione that the presence of completely untamed children added a specific sort of zesty seasoning to any family home regardless of the socioeconomics of the case.

Mrs. Avery rang a hand bell.

She had the same brown hair and eyes, and the same assertively intelligent presence, as her oldest son William. He sat opposite Draco and Hermione, on a sofa identical to theirs, occupying himself by attempting to extinguish Draco through the crushing force of an unadulterated scowl.

Charles and John must have heard the bell through the window panes, because they began to hop up and down in a Pavlovian fashion. In no time at all, an elf wearing a clean white handkerchief tied at a fashionable angle around its waist entered the drawing room. It pushed a trolley weighed down with a delicate floral tea service and a tiered cake stand loaded with finger sandwiches, fresh fruits, and little cakes.

Draco leaned forward in his seat.

The Avery boys cupped their hands around one another's ears, whispering outside the window. Charles firmly pushed the side of his brother's head with an open palm, and they both ran off, disappearing from view.

The elf deposited the tea cart next to Mrs. Avery, who began to fuss with a wooden box sitting next to the tea service. It was revealed to hold the household supply of loose tea leaves. With a silver spoon, Mrs. Avery measured out several heaps into the large teapot, and gave it a stir.

"How long do you and your sister intend to stay in the neighborhood, Mr. Granger?" asked Mrs. Avery.

Draco cleared his throat. "We haven't made that determination, as of yet. We have no timeline."

William's mouth hitched up irritably on one side.

"But surely you have business elsewhere," he said, crossing and recrossing his legs.

"We certainly do," said Hermione.

"It'll keep, though, won't it?" Draco asked rhetorically. "Elsewhere isn't going anywhere. In fact, I'd say we're steadily making our way towards it by the hour."

Mrs. Avery poured the tea with practiced ease, and after dropping in two sugar lumps and topping it up with milk, a cup made its way around to Miss Parkinson. She sipped with well bred delicacy, then primly set the cup in the saucer.

"How do you take your tea, Miss Granger?" asked Mrs. Avery.

"One sugar and just a touch of milk, please." Hermione opted against asking whether they kept soya on hand.

As Mrs. Avery gave another performance worthy of a finishing school practical exam, Hermione thought ruefully of her own habit of smacking her tea bags smartly against the inside of her Turkish earthenware mug while dusting crumbs off her shirt. She tried to keep her biscuit pilfering to a minimum, and if Draco noticed any missing from the stash he kept at the back of his desk drawer, he never mentioned it.

When her cup made its way to her, Hermione brought it to her lips with her pinkie extended.

“Unnecessary,” Draco muttered.

“Leave me alone,” whispered Hermione. “I’ll have you know I’ve recently been shown some things about the management of younger brothers.”

Her cup made no more noise than Miss Parkinson’s had as she set it down in her saucer, and she quietly congratulated herself.

When it was Draco’s turn, he went for broke and admitted to four sugars and a great deal of milk, and drummed his fingers anxiously against his thighs while staring down the cake stand.

Before he’d finished accepting his cup, the door to the drawing room crashed open.

The young Avery boys fumbled in, looking determinedly innocent. Charles held a squirming toddler underneath its arms. The marauding party was trailed by a House-elf wearing what seemed to be the remnants of a net curtain as a dress with a lace doily on her head, so wildly anxious she had gone purple in the face.

“Oh, Merlin.” Mrs. Avery sighed. “Boys, take Jamie out of here at once. This is ridiculous. He’s supposed to have been sleeping. Did you wake him?”

Charles set the little boy down.

He was pink-faced and had a tangle of cornsilk hair swirling about his enormous round head like a model of a heavy element. This was quite clearly a powerful individual, and all eyes were drawn to him as he marched across the room, a minuscule general entering the fray, shoulders tilted towards destiny. He reached his mother, and hauled himself into her lap with his blunt, boneless little fists clenched into her skirts.

“This is beyond even you two,” scolded Mrs. Avery, dropping any sense of decorum. “Please, forgive the intrusion, Miss Granger. Mr. Granger. Miss Parkinson.”

Mrs. Avery had gone faintly red herself. The worried elf, ostensibly the warden of the nursery, stood pulling her ears next to the door.

“This is my youngest son, James,” said Mrs. Avery. “Charles and John will be removing him shortly.”

James popped his thumb into his mouth, took one earlobe in his fist, and made himself comfortable against his mother.

John looked like he was set to burst. Without further adieu, he did.

“Charles wants the cake with the blue flowers, Mother, but I said I’d like to have it first.”

Mrs. Avery drew in a breath, and nailed her middle sons to the floor with a stare.

“Cake,” she said. “Where are both of your manners?”

Charles looked at Draco, and spoke mechanically, as if by rote.

“We’re very happy to have you here today. It’s been most pleasant to meet you.” To his mother, he raised his chin triumphantly. Then he turned back to Draco, and chose to live a life of boldly taken chances. “You don’t want the blue cake, do you?”

“Charles.” Mrs. Avery’s voice rang with the authority of the school bell. Her pupils were not in the least concerned.

“I want the blue cake,” said John.

Charles whacked him across the chest with an open hand.

At last, Mrs. Avery unfurled a tone that communicated it had done with legislative patty cake and was greasing the runners on Madame Guillotine.

“Outside. Both of you. *Immediately.*”

“Aww! But you’ve told us ever so many times to eat this morning,” John whinged.

“I told you to eat *breakfast*,” said Mrs. Avery.

“Alright, you tyrants.” William leaned forward, giving the impression he wasn’t above getting up and hauling little boys out of a room by the back of the britches. “Leave Mother alone while she has visitors or I’m rescinding my offer to take you up on my broom.”

“Aww!” repeated John.

“You’re a spoilsport, d’you know that, Willy?” Charles crossed his arms.

“I’m a spoilsport who can fly a broom. Now go and sail your dinghy or something and leave us alone.”

During this exchange, Draco leaned forward and swiftly palmed the blue cake from the cake stand, then immediately after it, a white one topped with a bundle of red icing flowers.

“That’s an excellent idea, William,” said Mrs. Avery. “It’s a lovely day, and it’s been a while since you’ve taken *The Foul William* out for a sail.”

William pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Once I’m Willy’s age, I’ll eat all the cake I like,” Charles muttered. “You’ll see whether I don’t.”

“You’ll make yourself sick,” his mother replied.

“I’m sure I’ll like to, very much,” said Charles in a flawless retort.

French doors opened onto the rear gardens and the lawns that stretched down to the lake. As the boys grumbled their way towards the exit, they passed the end of the sofa where Draco sat.

Hermione watched with astonishment as Draco passed each boy a cake by way of rather good sleight of hand, favoring the younger with the blue-flowered piece. She thought they might betray the exchange, but while their faces may have ever so slightly brightened, they both took the booty with the unruffled cool of practised pickpockets.

“Good Lord! They’ve been sent from the room for misbehavior,” she muttered under her breath as they walked outside. “You’ll only spoil them.”

“That’s ridiculous,” he said. “They’re growing boys, they need sustenance.”

“Cake is not sustenance.”

“Of course it is.”

As she glared at him, he brought a third cake she hadn't seen him grab to his mouth, and shoved it in at one go.

“Merlin, Malfoy,” she marveled.

“Now, where were we?” Mrs. Avery asked.

Miss Parkinson—who Hermione had entirely forgotten wasn't a piece of carefully polished furniture—finally spoke.

“The invitations are set to go out tomorrow morning”—she spoke in a slow, perfectly formed, shockingly bland tone—“but I'm anxious to announce that we're going to have a ball at Thornwood Abbey on Saturday, July the seventh.” If that was anxious, Hermione was concerned that when Miss Parkinson sounded calm she might be halfway to a coma. “We'd be gratified if you would attend.” She spoke very generally to the room. It seemed as though the handful of words made her bored with hearing herself, and she stopped talking.

“How wonderful!” Mrs. Avery replied. She turned to William. “William, won't that be lovely? It's been some time since you've been at a ball in the neighborhood.”

“Indeed,” said William. His eyes flashed briefly to Draco.

“As Mr. Martin's cousins, you will, of course, be included in the invitation,” Miss Parkinson said to Draco and Hermione.

Hermione sat up straight. “Oh, I'm not sure—”

“We'd be delighted to accept, Miss Parkinson,” said Draco.

William drooped against the back of his sofa and crossed his arms.

For a clear two minutes, everyone sat sipping at their tea and not looking at one another.

“Are you a racing man, Granger?” William asked at last, breaking the silence.

Draco glanced up. Hermione noted that he'd grown surprisingly responsive to someone else's name in a short period of time.

“Broom racing, do you mean?” asked Draco, smoothing an invisible dust mote from his trouser leg. “Of course.”

“I wonder if you might be interested in a little friendly jaunt round the property.” William's look was sharp and calculating. “Say sometime this week.”

“I haven't brought a broom with me, but if you've one available to borrow, I'm game. Name your time and place.”

“Tomorrow.”

Draco shrugged. “If you'd like.”

“What an excellent idea,” said Mrs. Avery. “It's important for you boys to get outside and stay active.”

Hermione didn't doubt it was important to Mrs. Avery that boys frequently went outside and stayed active.

"You ought to see about going round the trail at the Longbottoms'," Mrs. Avery continued. "I'm sure Tom Longbottom could be persuaded to join you, and I suspect you'll have Sir Thomas out on a broom as well. The girls always enjoy spectating."

"Do they not race?" Draco asked. "The girls, I mean."

Mrs. Avery looked perplexed.

William sat forward slightly. "Did you have a little run-in with the shaving spell this morning, by any chance?" he asked Draco. He cocked his left eyebrow and pointed to it.

Draco lifted his fingers to his patchy brow. It had almost entirely filled in, but a thin line of pale skin still bisected it at an angle. Before he could answer, James, the stowaway toddler, lifted his arms stiffly over his head and slid through his mother's grip.

"Jamie," she scolded him, to no effect.

He landed on his bottom, and without pausing, levered himself to standing and piloted himself into a dramatic faceplant on the sofa between Draco and Hermione.

"Oh," Draco observed, pulling away from the child.

James swept his arms across the upholstery as though he were experiencing a euphoric heightening of his tactile sense. After a moment, he turned his face towards Draco.

"Hi," he huffed.

"Hello," remarked Draco flatly.

James sidled along the sofa's edge until he arrived at Draco's left knee. He reached out a podgy hand and patted it experimentally.

"What is it that you want?" asked Draco. "I'm finished dispensing cake."

The child wound his fist into the fabric of Draco's trouser leg, and hoisted himself onto the sofa, where he sat back on his heels and leveled his dictatorial stare at Draco.

"God help us," said Mrs. Avery. "Corby, please come get Jamie and take him back to the nursery."

The elf standing in the doorway moved cautiously around the edge of the room with her hands out to the sides like a wrestler.

James, sensing an early end to his unsanctioned visit to the drawing room, rolled into Draco's lap. There, he assumed his favored position, leaning back into Draco's chest with his thumb in his mouth and his hand at his ear. Now secure, he watched the elf progress around the room with relaxed detachment.

"You'll please excuse me," said Miss Parkinson. "I'm to call at Bugg-Buntley Hall. I understand my sister will be there with her husband this morning."

She rose smoothly from her seat.

Hermione followed Mrs. Avery's lead and stood, offering Miss Parkinson a shallow curtsy.

Draco nodded at her, but sat stock still with his hands on his knees, looking at the back of the head of the boy sitting in his lap.

As Miss Parkinson retreated from the room, the elf continued to advance.

“Mr. James had better come with Corby,” said the elf. “It’s Mr. James’s nap time.”

James yanked his thumb from his mouth. “No.” Having made his point, he resumed his business with the thumb.

“Oh, leave him be,” said Draco. “He’s not troubling anyone.”

Hermione looked at him in disbelief.

“Mr. James needs his rest,” Corby insisted.

“Mr. James needs cake, don’t you Mr. James?” asked Draco.

James nodded.

“You are going to be completely unlivable as a father,” said Hermione.

“I’ll be fine.”

He leaned forward and grabbed a tiny pink-frosted cake from the tray, and handed it to the child. James took it cautiously, squeezed it, and then gave it a lick.

Draco patted his back briskly.

“Go on, enjoy it. You never know when someone might compel you to eat vegetables for breakfast.”

A volley of distant shouts sounded outside, which Mrs. Avery pointedly ignored.

Draco folded his arms underneath the boy’s bottom and stood. James sat atop this structure as though it were the seat of a stiff chair and Draco’s chest was the back. The boy made no fuss, only continued to pull at his ear and lick suspiciously at his cake while Draco walked, with no sense of urgency, towards the windows. They strolled slowly along the room’s length, observing the outdoors and looking every bit the very tall and faithful retainer to an uncommonly little lord.

“Do you see your brothers?” Draco asked the boy softly. “Do you see how they’re sailing very poorly? Their line is slack, and they’re going nowhere. You’ll do better than that, won’t you?” He turned to look at James without a hint of irony.

James nodded gravely.

“Of course you will,” said Draco.

Mrs. Avery watched this bizarre demonstration with infinite affection. William, on the other hand, looked ready to pull the ornamental swords from the coat of arms over the fireplace and run Draco through.

Something finally clicked in Hermione’s mind.

“Miss Parkinson said she was going to Bugg-Buntley Hall to see her sister,” she said to Mrs. Avery. “Are she and the new Mrs. Longbottom related?”

“Yes, indeed. Didn’t you know?” Mrs. Avery sipped her tea.

“No, I wasn’t aware. So, the new Mrs. Longbottom is a Parkinson. That’s fascinating. Did you hear that, Draco?”

He spared half a glance from his saunter. “A Parkinson and a Longbottom? Wonders will never cease.”

"Have you spoken with Pansy recently?" asked Hermione.

Draco considered. "I suppose I haven't. She's mostly out of town and always busy at the weekends. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

He shrugged and turned his attention back to the baby. “Over there, only a few kilometers away, on the other side of the orchards, is Malfoy Manor,” he murmured. “It’s the most majestic home in all of England.” He had been walking back and forth across the room, but stopped to point the boy in a southeasterly direction.

"Do you expect Mr. Martin can be induced to come to the ball?" Mrs. Avery asked Hermione.

Hermione thought. “I’m sure he’ll be more than willing to, provided there's cake, and he has a shot at the punch bowl.”

“I’m quite sure there will be cake,” said Mrs. Avery. “Would you like a piece just now, Miss Granger?”

“Oh, no. Thank you very much.”

Draco had resumed walking and quietly talking, but suddenly he stopped and grew quiet.

Hermione turned to look at him.

He continued holding James, but his brow was wrinkled in thought as he stared hard across the lawn.

“Are they—” He hesitated, then without saying another word, he stepped briskly to Mrs. Avery and put James down in her lap. The moment the boy was safely out of his arms, Draco dashed to the doors leading to the garden, tore them open, and ran outside.

“What on Earth—” Mrs. Avery was interrupted by William, who jumped up, frowning, and trailed swiftly after Draco.

Hermione got up and moved to the windows.

Draco ran hard across the manicured walks, arms pistoning and hair streaming. When he reached the low hedge bordering the garden, he leaped over fluidly and continued at a ferocious pace down the sloping green lawn towards the lake.

The lake.

Hermione peered at the water.

Out in the still center of the lake, a child’s dinghy sat empty.

"Oh, God," she said, breathlessly. "Charles and John."

She hurried through the garden doors after Draco and William, jogged across the garden and found a gap in the hedge rather than trying to leap it in her skirts.

Far ahead, Draco continued to run. As he closed the distance between the house and the lake, he tore off his black suit jacket and threw it to the ground. William sprinted just behind, yanking at his jacket's buttons then casting it aside.

Before either man reached the shore, a movement above the tree line on the lake's far side drew Hermione's attention.

Less than a hundred metres away, a broom rider closed in fast.

As the figure neared, Hermione made out a man, folded flush against the length of his broom. Hermione had seen Harry do the same as Seeker in a move he referred to as a speed descent, dropping at a screaming velocity from the heights of the game towards the grass.

The man covered the distance in seconds, his hair swept back from his face and his focus trained on the lake's surface. He pulled level with the shoreline reeds, arced in a breathtaking 180 degree turn, then flung himself off his broom and tossed it to the ground.

He stripped out of his jacket and cast it blindly aside. Then, without a moment's hesitation, he ran into the water.

Draco was only a short distance behind, and William a few paces after him.

Once thigh-deep in the lake, the man dove in an urgent arc, and was lost below the surface for a long time. Slow seconds ticked by before he surfaced some distance out, and began hauling himself across the water with incredible speed.

Draco arrived at the water's edge and didn't stop. He sprinted through the shallows, and dove like the unknown man before him before setting off in a fluid crawl stroke to the middle of the lake. William arrived at the shore just after, and launched himself into the water, too.

All three men swam tirelessly.

After another minute, Hermione reached the shore herself. There was nothing left to do but watch, palm flattened anxiously over her heart and her fist clutching her skirts. She felt so ornamental and redundant she wanted to scream.

She thought she saw a little hand, accompanied by a little face, break the lake's surface. She might have heard a far away gasp, too, but as quickly as it happened, it was gone.

The unknown man pulled alongside the little dinghy. He spent a moment treading water, searching below the surface. Then he dove.

"What's going on?"

Mrs. Avery drew alongside Hermione, panting for air, her face twisted in unschooled panic.

"I think"—Hermione breathed deep to calm her frantic heart—"the boys are in trouble. It seems they've both gone under."

Mrs. Avery clapped her hand over her mouth. Hermione edged closer to the lake. She watched

uselessly as the man emerged, took an enormous breath, then dove again.

Draco reached the dinghy, and disappeared below the surface as well.

Hermione knew rationally that the time from the beginning of Draco's sprint to that moment couldn't have been more than three or four minutes. Still, the seconds that Draco and the unknown man spent searching the depths felt endless. The water's dark surface remained cruelly empty, save for William's churning form and the forlorn, empty boat.

At last, the unknown man burst upward.

In his arms, he clutched a limp, pale child.

Mrs. Avery cried out and fell to the ground. Hermione's chest flooded with relief and terror at seeing only one of the boys.

Finally, Draco surfaced with the other boy in his arms, the child clasping his neck tightly. Almost immediately, the little boy began to cough and cry.

Both men began the laborious journey back to the shore with their cargo, swimming with their faces turned upward. William reversed course and swam ahead of them.

Mrs. Avery scrambled to her feet and began pacing short arcs along the reeds.

William reached the shore. He walked through the long grass, his clothes dripping, and stood ready to help. When Draco and the man were in water shallow enough to stand, they both ran to the bank with the boys bundled in their arms.

The smaller boy, John, was with Draco. His soaked hair was plastered to his forehead, and water streamed from his clothing as Draco passed him into his mother's arms. He cried pitifully, and his teeth chattered, but he was awake.

Charles, in the arms of the stranger, was silent and still.

"Someone fetch blankets," the man ordered as he stretched Charles out on the grass.

Hermione stood by and watched him draw his wand and cast a warming spell.

Then, he looked up at her.

All at once, for the briefest second, his penetrating blue eyes overwhelmed her with a familiar warmth. She hauled in a shocked breath. Then, as though she'd been doused in frigid lake water, she came to her senses.

She strode with purpose to the prone child, fell to her knees beside him and pulled out her wand. The began casting a basic magical first aid spell. But she'd never actually had to use it before, and her wand shook.

"Steady." The man gently took her hands in his. "You're doing just fine, but try to still yourself. It will work faster."

Hermione didn't look into his face again, but his hands—long-fingered and spattered with tiny freckles—were cool over hers, and she shivered under their touch.

It was a water drawing spell, ancient and stable and relatively easy to cast. It quickly took effect, and water poured from the corner of the boy's mouth and issued from his nostrils.

Next, she cast a quick diagnostic spell she'd learned during the war, which showed the boy's heart was still beating. He simply needed to breathe.

The spell for which was—

She drew a blank.

“Respiros.”

The man whispered the incantation, and cast with a strikingly beautiful efficiency of movement.

Hermione was so caught in admiring it that she almost missed the cry of the little boy on the ground in front of her.

Charles' eyes opened, round and unfocused. They reflected the sun climbing behind a loose and shifting flock of clouds congregated in the wretchedly blue sky. He sucked in great, shuddering breaths. Then, at last, he sobbed; he breathed; he lived.

Mrs. Avery, cradling John in her arms, ran to Charles and collapsed at his side. She drew both children to her, and all three sat, clutching one another with cold, pale hands, and wept.

Hermione stood and quietly stepped back.

“Will, go and fetch Cressida,” said the man. His voice was low and full of soft authority. “Charles and John ought to be looked over, and she'll know what to do.”

William nodded, and with a pop, Apparated away.

A few metres off, Draco shook water from his ear, his white shirt plastered to his torso and his hair dripping into his eyes.

The unknown man rose and pocketed his wand. With a relieved sigh, he looked at Hermione.

He was younger than Hermione by a couple of years, and recklessly handsome. He had one of nature's capriciously beautiful faces, whose collection of imperfect parts ought to have added up to a plain and uninteresting sum. Instead, his features chose to arrange themselves through complex algebra into the sort of loveliness that renders the observer a little senseless. He looked as though he smiled rather a lot—in fact, he was doing it right then—and Hermione wondered if he ought not give off doing so, as she suspected she was smiling right back. His eyes were an unpolluted, crystalline blue, and he had a smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose and over his cheeks that made him look youthful and a bit roguish.

He was tall—as tall as Draco—and long-limbed, but not gangly. He was lean, certainly, but muscular. She knew this because she could see his chest and arms quite clearly under the wet white shirt clinging ruthlessly to his body.

She lifted her eyes.

His smile had broadened, his mouth's corner lifting in a teasing, laughing arc.

He'd not only caught her staring, he was amused.

“Are you quite alright, Miss—” He raised an eyebrow.

“Oh! Yes.” She cleared her throat. “Miss Granger.” She felt herself turning even pinker than Margaret's ridiculous spellwork had already made her.

“Miss Granger.”

The man tossed his soaking hair back from his face. It was auburn, but she supposed, once it was dry, it would be something more like copper.

“I realize the circumstances are shocking,” he said, “but please allow me the liberty of introducing myself.”

Behind her and to the right, Hermione heard the pop of Apparition, immediately followed by the hushed voices of William Avery and Cressida Longbottom.

Hermione didn’t shift her eyes from the stranger for a second.

She waited for him to continue, but before he could, John Avery sat up and stared at his mother.

“Has Miss Parkinson gone, Mummy?” he asked through a hiccup.

“Yes, she has, my darling,” answered Mrs. Avery.

She shifted to make room for Cressida, who began casting intricate medical spells on Charles that Hermione had never seen.

“Oh.” John’s bottom lip began to quiver.

“What’s the matter?” asked Mrs. Avery.

“Promise you won’t be angry with us, Mummy.”

“Of course I won’t be angry with you, my precious one.”

John sighed in relief, but looked at his mother sheepishly.

“It’s just that—” He stalled. “It’s only that we’ve left the nasty pig in her carriage.”

“What the *f*—” Draco cut himself off.

The auburn-haired man leaned down and tugged softly at John’s forelock. “A nasty pig, John? Sounds like trouble. We’d better help you find him, hadn’t we?” He straightened, looked at Hermione, and winked.

“But William’s inside him, Mummy,” John cried before hiccuping again.

“No, my treasure, William’s right here,” Mrs. Avery reassured him, gesturing to her firstborn son.

“Not Willy,” John insisted. “William the beetle. He’s ever so green, we’ll never find another like him.”

William the man closed his eyes and sighed.

The stranger laughed hard, and it was a sound somehow made up of only things that were good and true.

“As I was saying”—he swallowed the last of his laugh and gave her a shallow bow that was both unimpeachably elegant and scandalously flirtatious—“my name is Roland Weasley.”

“What the *fu*—”

Only this time, Draco didn't stop himself.

Chapter End Notes

Heartfelt gratitude to my beta, [dreamsofdramione](#) for her support.

I can be found on [Tumblr](#).

The Race

Hermione's hair was a primordial wilderness of curls, tendrils of it striking out in every direction across her pillowcase.

She pressed her hips down into her mattress and arched her back, tilting her head to the side and stretching open the damp expanse of her throat.

Draco leaned over her and glowered. "Come with me, Granger."

The fabric of her chemise bunched up around her waist and clung to the sweat gathering at the curve of her lower back. Her bed linens were in an equal state of devastation, twisted and untucked.

She groaned.

"I told you, I don't want to."

Draco looked away from her and sighed.

"It's going to be weird if you don't."

"No, it isn't. You're fine on your own. When have you ever worried about whether or not I come with you, anyway?"

"Well I'm worried about it now," he said. "I feel like you should care at least a little bit about how well I perform." He looked genuinely hurt.

"I've been led to understand that you have plenty of other women to care about your speed and stamina. I don't understand why you need me to as well. It's a chore for me."

"But it's generally expected that you come. It will be a poor showing if I go off without you. I don't care to explain to other people why I wasn't able to bring you along."

"No one is going to be bothered in the slightest. Tell them I wasn't in the mood." She shut her eyes tight. "I'm going to lie here and relax while you do whatever it is that you need to do, and no one's going to give it a second thought."

"Why not?"

"Because this race is completely daft. You're going tearing around a forested track on a two hundred year-old broom—"

"The broom isn't two hundred years old at the moment."

Hermione gave him a withering look. "What's the worst broom model you've ever flown in your life?"

"Well..." He leaned away from her and swiped reflexively at the scar bisecting his eyebrow. "We all had to use those ridiculous Shooting Stars for flying lessons first year."

"Oh! How could I have forgotten? It's absolutely true that we rode shoddy brooms for an extremely limited period of time nearly thirteen years ago. I'm sure whatever vintage model they've got for you to borrow over at the Longbottoms' will be a lark." She sat up on her elbows and tugged on the front of her chemise. "Lord, it gets hot up here at night."

“There are spells for that, you know. From the looks of it, you don’t go easy on your bed linens, either.” He plucked at a stray corner of her coverlet. “Doing a bit of calisthenics before you knock off?”

Hermione tugged her sheets straight. “I like to keep limber. What sort of sports costume is that you have on there?”

Draco looked down. “How do you mean?”

“Your trousers are—” She weighed her words. “Well it's just that they don’t leave much to the imagination.”

“I’m going flying, Granger,” he said. “I’m dressed appropriately.”

She fell backwards onto her pillow. “So what is it that you want from me? To come over and cheer you on while you beat William Avery into submission in front of the girl he’d probably be proposing to this summer if it weren’t for you and your thighs?”

“Who ever said anything about beating William Avery?” He considered her. "My thighs? Your level of concern with the fit of other people's trousers is, itself, concerning."

She rose and shoved at him with both hands.

“Get every part of your legs off my bed.”

He got up and walked to the door, looking as sure of himself as ever.

“I’ll meet you downstairs, then?”

Yawning, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and kicked them back and forth while she stretched her arms over her head. “Alright. But only so I can have a laugh at your expense when you go tumbling off into the underbrush and muss your hair.”

“You want to see what my hair looks like after a bit of a tumble?”

His smile was infuriating.

“No! Put your smirk right away.” She bit the insides of her cheeks to prevent any betrayal of amusement. “Leave.”

“I’ll expect all the familial felicitations due to me when I win this race, you know,” he said over his shoulder.

Though it was thrown with both strength and passion, her pillow struck the side of her door rather than the back of his head.

The air over the expansive lawns of Bugg-Buntley Hall smelled heavily of lavender. Great shrubs of it flourished along the gravel walks at the garden's lower edge, their stalks rustling with the activity of scores of tawny butterflies.

Hermione leaned back on a wooden bench shaded in the bower of an aged elm, its branches flush

with summer green. Beside her, Martin dozed in his chair. Capless in the heat, his hair floated around his head colorless and insubstantial as filaments of dandelion seed, and his breath stirred the petals of the fat, scented peony Cassandra Longbottom had tucked into his blanket folds.

His spectacles slid down his nose as he slept, so Hermione had removed them and now held them folded in her lap. She turned a page of her book, ignoring the shouts and high-pitched screams of the Longbottom girls ringing out from the bottom of the lawn.

“I hope that you'll pardon me, Miss Granger.”

She lay a hand in the joint of her book and looked up.

Roland Weasley stood just outside her circle of shade, a quarter of a smile at his mouth and his loose curls shining copper in the mid-morning sun.

“What can I assist you with, Mr. Weasley?”

His smile was highly communicable, and Hermione found she wasn't yet inoculated against it.

“I regard it as the height of ill-breeding to interrupt a woman while she's reading,” he said, stepping towards her.

Hermione's smile pulled a fraction wider.

“But I'm going to take the risk of you believing me an absolute churl,” he continued, “and ask what has so thoroughly captured your attention while the rest of the party has been otherwise occupied.”

Hermione turned the book over in her hands and ran her fingertips across its title—*Entheogenic Potionery and the Alchemy of the Mind*—embossed with gold lettering.

Looking up again, she held her hand over her eyes to shield them from the sun reflecting off the clipped grass. “It's one of Mr. Martin's books.” She shifted towards the end of the bench. “I'll freely admit that I haven't grasped its finer points just yet.”

Roland sat down beside her and regarded the yellow leather cover.

“I understand that his work is fascinating, but to some degree impenetrable,” he said. “May I take a look?”

She handed it to him, and as he took it, he slid his hand between the pages where hers had just been.

Without losing her place, he leafed through the first few pages, his bright blue eyes ticking back and forth over the tiny print. There were numerous densely packed diagrams and complex potions formulas, written in the same shorthand symbols Hermione had learnt at school.

“Merlin, what a mind,” he said.

He passed the book back to her, and as she received it, she slipped her own hand back into her place.

“Would you be so kind as to give me the loan of this while I'm in Wiltshire?” he asked. “Martin's books are available in the library at Oxford, but we're kept rather occupied at our other studies. And, of course, here I have the advantage of the master himself if I'm struck by any burning questions.” He peered around at Martin, peacefully a-snooze and lightly snoring.

Hermione was grateful for Martin's apparent tranquility. He'd been agitated all morning—so much so that Grix very nearly refused to give his blessing for an outing. Grix was only appeased by Hermione's solemn assurances that their cousin would be encouraged to frequently sip cooled water, under no conditions would gain access to wine, and would not be given more than the most conservative morsel of anything sweet, should it be on offer.

Roland seemed to find Martin's relaxed napping equally as pleasing, and his expression, as he turned it towards Hermione, was easiness itself. She flushed with a genial glow down to the tips of her toes inside her flimsy satin shoes.

"I'm sure cousin Martin would be willing to part with a fresh copy if I ask for author's permission to conjure one for you."

"Oh! Have you reproduced texts before? That's a terribly underappreciated Transfiguration skill."

"Grossly underappreciated!" Hermione said passionately, shifting to the edge of her seat. "It's simple enough to make a copy that looks like it ought to on the outside and is full of absolute nonsense, but if you want the text to be fully intact—"

She cut herself off and turned her head, distracted by the distinctive throaty shout of Cassandra Longbottom.

Draco had helped Cassandra up onto his broom, and there she sat: sideways, with her ankles crossed chastely, hovering at waist height. She was clearly agitating to be released, but he held firm to the handle and spoke to her earnestly, gesturing between her and the broom.

"I'm going to be quite shameless and beg you to join the rest of the party on the lawns," said Roland as he rose from the bench. "There's been talk of little else besides Miss Granger all morning with the Longbottom girls. I find I've developed a rather ferocious curiosity to learn about you myself."

Hermione felt terribly self-conscious.

"Are you nearly ready for your race?" she asked, steering the conversation in another direction. She marked her book with a parchment scrap as she rose from the bench, tucked Martin's spectacles into his blanket beside the soft pink bloom, then trailed after Roland.

"More than!" he said over his shoulder.

She studiously avoided staring at his sculptural back end in his tight tan leather trousers, some version of which all the men had worn for the occasion. Like Draco, Roland was dressed in a white shirt, slightly more fitted than she'd seen anyone wear before then, and the fabric configuration at the throat was far less formal. Hermione thought of it, with no small degree of pleasure, as an athletic cravat. He wore sturdy-looking knee-high boots and leather arm guards, and had a pair of leather gloves tucked into the back of his trouser waist.

"Do you play Quidditch, Mr. Weasley?" Hermione asked. She looked back over her shoulder to make sure that Martin still slept.

Roland laughed, and the look that he gave her as he loped over the grass was full of congenial mischief.

"A little, Miss Granger."

"You're being facetious."

“Never!” He laughed again.

A well-kept walk circled the wooded acreage of the Longbottom estate. The spectators faced a break in the treeline that revealed a long, open section of the path.

Isadora and Penelope sat together on a large picnic blanket. It was laid out before a table flanked by two white-painted wrought iron chairs, where Lady Longbottom and Mrs. Longbottom relaxed beneath lace-trimmed umbrellas. Lady Longbottom wafted herself with an elaborately decorated silk fan, while Mrs. Longbottom silently knitted a lace blanket in fine white wool.

On the table, dishes of cold sliced meat, cheeses, bread, green salads, and fruit sat under a cooling charm. There were bottles of a pink liquid, too, all of it ready to be enjoyed while watching men chase after one another on brooms.

"Is your cousin happy, Miss Granger?" Isadora asked Hermione as she approached.

“Our retreat to the shade was a success. He’s sleeping quite peacefully,” said Hermione. “I won’t move him just yet.”

“I wouldn’t disturb him for the world. Can I offer you a drink?” Isadora indicated the table behind her. “It’s uncommonly warm this morning.”

Roland lowered himself to sit on a corner of the picnic blanket. He half reclined with his arm propped over one knee, watching Draco and Cassandra at their flying experiments.

Hermione sat, too, positioning herself so that she could watch Martin for any signs of wakefulness.

“Thank you, Miss Longbottom.” She tucked her book beside her and pressed a palm to her forehead. “It is awfully muggy today.”

Isadora rose to mix a drink, pouring pink liquid from a bottle into a glass, diluting it with cold water from a pitcher, and dropping in several fresh raspberries before handing it to Hermione.

Several yards away, Cassandra laughed unreservedly from her sideways perch on Draco’s broom and tried to goad him into letting her go.

“Release me, Mr. Granger!” she shouted, striving to twist herself to the side and lean forward at the same time. “Or I’m going to fly right round and knock into you like a game of bowls.”

Beside them, Cressida pressed her hands together in front of her chin and laughed almost as heartily as her sister.

“Yes, let her go!” She clapped her hands. “Cassie, make him let you go.”

“I certainly won’t if you’re going to knock into me,” said Draco. “You’re a violent thing, aren’t you?”

Near a stretch of crumbling low stone fence being incrementally swallowed up by the woods, William Avery pulled a pair of Quidditch goggles down on his forehead and watched as Draco finally let go of his broom. Cassandra moved out over the lawn in a wide circle, followed by Cressida at a jog.

“Go faster, Cassie!” shouted Cressida. She looked back over her shoulder, blooming and happy in the sunlight. “Mr. Granger, is she going fast enough for you?”

Draco shook his head. “She can go as fast as she likes. Only—Miss Cassandra! Remember what I told you about holding your balance slightly towards the back of the broom!”

Tom Longbottom finished adjusting the leather strap of his goggles, and slowly pulled on his gloves.

Beside him, Sir Thomas engaged in stretching exercises. In his tight leather trousers, and with his goggles perched atop his head, he rapidly squatted down and swung his arms straight out in front of him, punctuating the movement with a deep-chested “Ho!” Next, he rose explosively to his toes, spreading his arms out to the sides at a forty-five degree angle, and shouted “Ha!” He followed this sequence with several startlingly aggressive waist twists that made Hermione’s spine ache. Then he ran in place, lifting his knees nearly to his barrel chest for eight or ten steps while slapping each thigh with the alternate hand before starting the series anew.

Draco kept his eyes glued to Cassandra, breaking his vigil only to glance occasionally towards the group seated on the picnic blanket.

“You can go up on mine if you’d like, Cressie,” William called, gesturing to his broom.

Cressida was still chasing after her sister, but slowed and looked back at William. She was breathing hard, the color blossoming high in her cheeks, and her golden curls frayed in the humidity.

She glanced at Draco, then Cassandra. She seemed to deliberate, then sighed, gripped the fabric of her skirts in one hand and trudged over the lawn to meet William beside his broom.

“Shall I give you a hand?” he asked.

Hermione recognized something in his voice and in the tilt of his brow. There was something familiar about the lift of Cressida’s chin, too, and the way her eyes narrowed as she allowed William to grip her around the waist and hoist her to sit on his broom.

“Is that alright?” he asked her.

Cressida nodded. As he released her, she gripped the handle tight and looked determinedly forward.

“Miss Granger!” shouted Cassandra, banking into a turn nearby. “Do you fly?”

Hermione shook her head vigorously. “No! I do not.”

“Come on!” Cassandra banked again and circled around in a short horizontal loop. “Let Rolly take you up!”

Hermione tensed and steeled herself against looking at Roland.

“Oh, Merlin. No.” She gripped her book like a talisman. “I don’t fly unless it’s a question of life or death.”

Cassandra pulled to a stop beside Hermione, looking entirely in control of the broom. Her eyes were bright and fierce. “But Rolly’s a genius in the air, Miss Granger. He played Seeker for Gryffindor for ever so many years.”

Roland plucked a grass blade from the lawn and twisted it around his fingertip.

“They really oughtn’t to have let him play so early,” Cassandra went on, “but he was that tremendously good. I can’t tell you on how many occasions I’ve screamed myself hoarse egging him on at the pitch. And you could have played professionally, couldn’t you, Rolly?”

Roland shook his head, but smiled.

“You could have,” Cassandra insisted. “I heard Daddy talking about it to Mr. Avery. Only you had to go and play for moldy old Oxford, which isn’t half as exciting.”

“There’s slightly less Transfiguration research going on in professional Quidditch than we do at Oxford, Miss Cassandra,” said Roland.

Cassandra wrinkled her nose with displeasure. “I rescind your status as Quidditch Captain. Retroactively. It’s removed from the record.” She waved her hand. “We did without a Head Boy that year as well. Hogwarts remembers you not at all.”

He shone his genial fraction of a smile on her. “Shall I not have sat for my N.E.W.T.’s either? They’ll boot me from Oxford, you know.”

Cassandra raised a singular pale brow. Having flown at a respectable clip, her hair was more windswept and untamed than her sister’s. “As to that I have no opinion. And I shan’t talk about N.E.W.T.’s.” With that, she had done with Roland and turned back to Draco. “How do I go faster, Mr. Granger?”

Draco had been standing quietly, watching the party with a hand at the back of his neck.

His mouth twisted with uncertainty. “If I’m being honest, you really need to straddle the broom.”

Cassandra sat up tall and clapped her hands. “Indeed!”

Without a hint of hesitation, she hiked her skirts to her knees and slung one leg over the broom handle. She kicked off and swept up beside Draco.

“Like this?” she asked.

Lady Longbottom's fan stalled mid-sweep. “Cassandra,” she said indolently. *"Vous ne devriez pas mettre de choses entre vos jambes."*

“Merlin, Cassie!” Isadora rose to her knees as if readying herself to march across the lawn and yank Cassandra off the broom. “You can’t sit so, my darling!”

Penelope snorted and bit into a pineapple slice.

Draco and Cassandra ignored all.

He scrutinized her posture. “As a girl, your center of gravity is slightly different than a boy’s. It’s lower. You have—and this is broadly speaking—different considerations of weight and muscle mass. It helps most girls to lean slightly back—”

Cassandra subtly shifted on the broom. To Hermione's eye, the difference seemed entirely inconsequential, but Draco’s face lit up with excitement.

“Yes! Precisely like that, well done. Now if you hold your weight there and press forward from the shoulders—”

Cassandra Longbottom went off like a shot, coursing over the lawns of the Hall so fast that her hair

came untucked strand by strand until it trailed out behind her in a waist-length stream of rippling gold.

Lady Longbottom sat up and pursed her lips, scandalized at last into a facial expression.

Sir Thomas was moved as well, but in an entirely different direction, and watched his youngest child open-mouthed and beaming. As she looped back around and sped past him, ruffling his hair in her wake, he shouted, “Ho! Ho! Cassandra! What’s this? Move on, you girl! That’s it! Move *on!*”

“Well done, indeed!” Roland said. The start of a smile that he seemed always to have at the ready broadened into a grand, uneven grin, and his beautiful laugh arrived close on its heels.

“Bring it in, Cassandra,” Draco called with authority, beckoning her with his hand as she barreled towards him.

She obeyed and brought the broom to a stop with a tight arc a mere foot away from him, her smile incandescent.

“You’re a natural,” Draco said, gripping his broom handle while she climbed down. “You’d have some catching up to do, certainly, but have you considered going out for Quidditch next year?”

Cassandra’s laugh was slight and nervous, out of phase with the look of ferocity that had overtaken her face.

“That’s not a very kind joke, Mr. Granger,” she said, turning from him and heading towards the picnic blanket.

“It isn’t a joke.” He looked to Hermione. “When did girls start to play commonly at Hogwarts?”

Hermione looked at him in disbelief. “Are you aware that you’re speaking at full volume?”

“I’m only saying that by rights, Cassandra ought to play next season,” he said. “I realize even we were nowhere near parity, but—”

“I agree that girls ought to play.” She spoke slowly and deliberately through a clenched jaw. “I’m sure that they will *very soon*.”

He looked perturbed. “Alright, but how is it they’ve been able to hire for the Harpies before now? That’s absolute rubbish.”

“*Draco.*”

Cassandra threw herself down beside Penelope, who sat up and used a wand she’d drawn from Hermione knew not where to begin coiling Cassandra’s hair back on top of her head.

“Oh, Merlin. I need a drink.” Cassandra was still catching her breath. “Are you having a shrub, Miss Granger?” She looked at Hermione’s glass and her eyes grew wide. “That looks fantastic.”

Draco stood his broom on end against a tree and joined the rest of the party.

“Do you mind if I sit, Miss Granger?” he asked, and then he actually winked at her.

Hermione ignored him, but he sat down close to her anyway, stretched out his legs and leaned back on both of his elbows. “It does look good, Hermione,” he said. He peered into her glass. “Oh, look at that. It’s got raspberries in. You’re set for the day.”

Hermione sipped her drink. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"I'm sure that you do."

"I'm sure that I don't." She feigned investment in the progress Cressida was making in her side-saddle meander around the perimeter of the lawns on William's broom.

Draco leaned in until his temple rested against Hermione's upper arm and tilted his eyes up at her.

"Are you seriously going to pretend that you don't recollect your French martini habit?" he whispered.

Annoyed, she bit into a raspberry and looked with a keen and quasi maternal interest towards the sleeping Mr. Martin. "That's only at Christmas."

"I am fully aware that it's only at Christmas," said Draco with a short laugh. "It doesn't make it any less real."

Cressida looped back around to William and stopped. Before she could dismount on her own, he grasped her around the waist and lifted her forward. She leaned into him, her hands gripping him at the shoulders, and Hermione watched as a look passed between them.

It was a silent conversation in two parts. William's face was reproachful, and upon seeing it, Cressida's became imperious, as if denying she'd done anything wrong and becoming affronted at the mere suggestion that she had.

He held her long enough to turn and set her down, and when he did, he didn't immediately let her go. His face was very close to hers, his look still chiding and with a hint of a challenge. Cressida tipped her chin forward, then sucked in a breath and swiftly pulled away. Her fingers flexed in the fabric of his shirt before she turned and ran to join the rest of the family.

"Have a nice ride, Cressie?" asked Roland, peering thoughtfully at the dour-looking William.

"I did." She sat beside Penelope and raised her chin proudly. "On with your race, then?" she asked, dusting off her skirts.

"I suppose we must, eh Granger?" Roland looked for a moment at Hermione, then flashed a grin at Draco that wasn't returned. Without haste he stood, went to fetch his broom and began to pull on his gloves.

Sir Thomas bounded over the lawn with the energy of a hare being chased by a pack of hounds and pulled up beside his elegant wife, leaning down to offer her his cheek. "For luck!"

To Hermione's surprise, Lady Longbottom pressed her lips to her husband's cheek quite tenderly, then stroked her long, delicate fingers over his beard before giving it a playful tug.

"You're only pacing them so they don't cheat, Father. I shouldn't think you'd much need luck for that," said Penelope.

"That may be! Even so, I wish you luck in all things, my pickle!" shouted Longbottom, bending down to smash his lips against the top of Penelope's mountain of curls. She waved her hand to shoo him away, but looked pleased despite herself.

Tom Longbottom approached his wife slowly and casually, then bent down and put a kiss that was neither slow nor casual directly against her mouth. She brought a hand to his jaw and sighed as he

pulled away.

“Who shall kiss William?” asked Cassandra.

She sent a sly glance towards Cressida, whose cheeks flushed hot.

“Well, someone ought to.” Cassandra hopped up, and with her skirts in her hands, ran to the unhappy William, threw her arms around his neck and planted a sisterly kiss on his cheek. “There you go, Willy. Don’t go and smash yourself.”

She turned her attention to Roland next. “You haven’t turned out for the Falcons like you ought to have done, Rolly, but I’ll kiss you for luck all the same.”

He bent down and she pulled up on her toes to give his cheek a peck before returning at nearly a sprint.

Draco sat upright and pulled on one of his leather gloves. He looked at Hermione sidelong. “Wish your younger brother luck?”

Hermione rolled her eyes skyward and shook her head. “Good luck. Be safe.”

Draco paused in the adjustment of his arm guards and then shrugged. While he resumed tightening them down, Hermione took a swallow of her drink and chewed mercilessly at another raspberry.

She came to a decision.

“I’m always safe, I’ll have you know,” Draco began, turning towards her.

At the same time, Hermione leaned in to place a perfunctory kiss on his cheek.

The corner of his mouth where her partially opened lips met his was soft and warm.

He tasted of mint.

They both pulled back as though they’d been singed.

Draco locked eyes with her like a startled fawn for the length of a skipped heartbeat, then leaped to his feet and stalked over the lawn, yanking on his second glove as he went. He retrieved his broom and a set of goggles off the ground and pulled them on without so much as a passing glance back in Hermione’s direction.

Hermione guzzled her drink, then began to cough on a raspberry seed.

The five racers found their places along a line Sir Thomas had marked arbitrarily across the packed dirt of the walk. Roland, William, and Draco were at the front, with Tom Longbottom and Sir Thomas taking up the rear.

Penelope joined them at the starting line with her wand in hand. She cast a spell that caused the line in the dirt to briefly glow, then she drew a white lace-edged handkerchief from a pocket at the side of her dress.

Each of the men lifted his feet from the ground and sat at the ready astride his broom.

“On your mark!” she called, lifting her handkerchief into the air. “Get set!”

William glared briefly at Draco.

Tom gazed at his wife.

Draco glanced sidelong at Roland.

Sir Thomas stared straight ahead.

Roland turned to look across the lawn and waved.

Hermione kept trying to clear the raspberry seed from her throat.

“Go!” Penelope dropped her handkerchief and squeaked in surprise as the draft from the kinetic burst of the brooms taking off swept a dust cloud up her skirts.

It had never occurred to Hermione that it was possible for anything to be more tedious than Quidditch until she spent sixteen minutes and twenty eight seconds doing nothing more than waiting for a handful of men to come through an opening in the forest on their brooms.

Almost as soon as the race had started, the Longbottom women began chattering about the ball at Thornwood Abbey.

They speculated about who in the neighborhood would attend, and who would dance with whom, and opined about which of them looked best in the various usual colors for gowns.

Hermione opened her book again. She was in the middle of a dense passage explaining the potential for a shared state of consciousness between users of a theoretical potion when the robins that had resettled in the ground after the start of the race ceased their scrabbling at the dirt. They lifted their heads, then burst upwards in a whorl of terror as Roland and Draco came flying out of the forest, both nearly flattened against their broom handles.

They appeared perfectly matched, neither one so much as a hair’s breadth in front of the other. Clustered with them and only slightly lagging was William.

Tom Longbottom came through a broom’s length after William, and Sir Thomas trailed all four looking intently focused on his duties as referee.

The Longbottom sisters clapped and whooped, cheering in a scattershot and disloyal fashion for “Rolly!”, “Will!”, and “Mr. Granger!” There was a loud and discourteous “Tom, you lout, shift it!” from Cassandra.

The racers’ passage blew the dust and tiny stones littering the walk out to either side, and left a flurry of desiccated leaves swirling in the air behind them.

And like that, they were gone.

For a brief while, the women talked about the closeness of the race, comparing the riders' posture and intentness, but then their conversation returned to the excitement of the ball, and to the possible table configurations.

Hermione cracked open her book once more, and after watching to make sure a shift in Martin’s position didn’t mean he’d woken up, she resumed her interest in moon-dried bog-myrtle ground widdershins into a powder of medium coarseness, in which the grain ought to remain clearly visible to the naked eye.

The second time the men burst through to the repeated cheers and abuses of their spectators, Hermione barely looked up long enough to register that Draco had pulled ahead, but that his lead

was perhaps enhanced by Roland turning to wave cheerfully at the party as he passed. William maintained his position as well as his grave countenance, while both the Longbottom men hung on to their places at the back.

Martin finally stirred, yawning like a bear in late March and blinking out at the sunny lawns. Hermione went to fetch him.

“Did you sleep well, cousin?” She ducked beneath an arm of the elm to join him in the shade.

“They off?” he asked, still blinking.

Hermione pulled his spectacles from his blankets and tucked them back over his ears.

“They’re off,” she assured him. “Would you like a raspberry?”

By the time she settled him in his chair beside Lady Longbottom, eating happily from a plate of fresh fruit and cheese and drinking a shrub, the men came through once again to head into their last lap around the woods.

Roland had overtaken Draco for the lead, and as they passed, Hermione saw that Draco was frowning deeply and looking back at the head of his broom.

She shielded her eyes and squinted, but before she could determine what might be wrong, Roland, Draco, William, Tom, and Sir Thomas had already sped through and were lost again around the first bend in the track.

“Miss Granger,” said Martin hoarsely. “Miss Granger?”

Hermione crouched down beside him and laid a hand on the arm of his chair. “What is it, Mr. Martin?”

He placed his hand over hers. His massive, owlsh eyes were wide with concern. “Tell him it’s too fast.”

Hermione turned her hand up to grasp his, dry as parchment. “I’ve told him already. He doesn’t listen to me, though, does he?”

Martin shook his head dolefully. “No. He shouldn’t go to France. Tell him to stay.”

Hermione pressed his fingers. “He’ll be just fine. I promise. And I don’t expect that he’ll go to France any time soon.”

He frowned. “I’m going to miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too.” She reached up and brushed a wisp of hair away from his eyes. “But we have a little longer.”

She poured him a glass of cool water and urged him to drink it. Then she made him a sandwich. And then she waited.

The robins had returned, popping about their business beside the path, getting into petty arguments and occasionally lifting their heads and listening intently before resuming their scratching at the grass.

“Does anyone know how long it’s been?” Penelope sat upright, shielding her eyes and peering intently down the dark mouth of the forest trail. “I didn’t take a time because the finish line spell

takes care of that.”

Isadora opened her reticule and pulled a little silver watch from inside. She squinted at it, then took out her spectacles and put them on.

“It’s been nearly an hour from the start,” she said finally. “Just shy, but still...”

Hermione’s stomach turned with anxiety. “Are there any hazards on the trail?”

Penelope shook her head. “Not precisely. I suppose if they were really intent on winning and took one of the sharper corners too quickly it could be a problem, but they’re all skilled flyers. And it’s all for a lark, I can’t imagine any of them is especially concerned with winning.” She looked at Hermione questioningly. “Are they?”

Hermione stood and began to walk towards the trail. “Shall I go and see about them?”

“No!” Cassandra jumped up after her and put a hand at her elbow. “They’re going to come through at an awful pace, and you won’t want to be in their path when they do. Give them a moment. It’s possible there’s been a broom malfunction and everyone’s paused.”

Hermione sat back down and nipped at a fingernail. Irrationally, she begrudged the poor robins, who ought to have been scattered to the four winds with their eyes bulging ten minutes ago.

At last, a hint of motion in the dark recesses of the trail had Hermione and the Longbottom girls on their feet, lifting on their toes to try and get a better look.

When the men came up the trail’s slight rise at last, they were walking.

Sir Thomas and Tom Longbottom headed the party, holding the corners of what Hermione gradually determined was a stretcher. They both had brooms tucked under their arms, but Sir Thomas carried two.

She stuck her thumbnail between her teeth and bit down hard. As the rear of the stretcher came into view, her heart took off at a terrorized sprint, and her chest grew so tight she struggled to breathe.

Roland and William were at the back.

The scene on the lawn took on the warped quality of a dream.

As though it were a film in which she could observe but not act, she watched Cressida take off at an open run to meet the men as they laid Draco down on the grass. He wasn’t moving, and Hermione realized that what she had perceived as a handkerchief tied around his head was his hair, and that it and the top quarter of the stretcher were soaked in red. Cressida had her wand out the moment she arrived. She rapidly Vanished the stains before dropping to her knees and casting spells that threw a row of glowing graphs into the air before her. She looked them over with her sharp eyes and then began to give orders to the men.

“Tom, go and fetch Healer Frederickson from the village,” she said. “Apparate there. Don’t waste any time.” She turned to Sir Thomas. “Father, can you please go into the Hall and have the elves come down and help bring him up to one of the rooms. It’s imperative that he’s not stirred from this position in the smallest degree. Repeat that to them. Make sure they understand.” Sir Thomas Apparated with no more than a sharp crack of empty air.

Cressida bent over Draco again, whispering incantations and floating the tip of her wand over the length of his neck and down the mid-line of his chest with slow, deliberate movements.

"You oughtn't to have moved him at all before I could see to him," she said to no one in particular. "But he's extremely fortunate, and I don't believe you've done any more damage. I've stabilized his spine, and he should be moved indoors as quickly as possible."

She looked up at William, and her beautiful dark eyes pleaded with him plainly and without pride.

"Healer Frederickson isn't going to be enough."

He breathed hard. Hermione noticed for the first time that the front of his shirt was untucked and soaked with red, and that a long strip was torn away at the hem. The men must have used it to transfigure a stretcher. With a look of genuine pain, he nodded. "I'll go to London for Healer Bartholomew. I believe he owes my father a favor, and I'm sure that I can persuade him of the seriousness of the case."

Cressida reached up to him, and he took her hand. "Thank you."

He let her go and Apparated without another word.

"How can I be of service, Miss Cressida?" asked Roland.

Cressida looked around.

"Mr. Martin ought to be taken back to the cottage," she said. "I'm sure that he'll be much more comfortable at home with Mr. Grix. And Mrs. Longbottom I'm sure would like to go home as well."

Lady Longbottom had woken into action herself. She instructed Isadora, Penelope, and Cassandra to gather certain potions and ready a quantity of bandages and fresh linens before approaching Hermione and taking her gently by the arm.

Her expression was soft with care.

"I'm going to take you inside now, Miss Granger," she said, pressing patiently at Hermione's elbow. The low, even tone of her voice had previously seemed detached and uncaring, but now Hermione felt its undercurrent of soothing steadiness and calm. "I'll get you a cup of tea, and you can help us prepare linens if activity is what you need."

"Mr. Martin will need me." Hermione's throat felt as though it were closing down. "I ought to be the one to walk him—"

"Rolly will take Mr. Martin to the cottage, Hermione. Please. Come with me, darling."

Hermione could only stare at Draco's motionless form.

Lady Longbottom squeezed her arm in reassurance. "Sir Thomas will be back with the elves presently to fetch your brother in. We'll do absolutely everything that can be done."

At that exact moment, Sir Thomas Apparated on the lawns alongside a trio of elves, who had the sturdy and calloused look of stable hands or general handymen.

"Up with him, if you please, gents. And as I said, steady as can be. We're headed to the guest room at the near end of the east wing," said Sir Thomas.

They carefully levitated Draco on the stretcher up the slope of the lawn back to the house, with Cressida trailing after.

Roland crouched beside Martin and gripped his shoulder. "Come on, Sir. Let's fetch you back to Mr. Grix."

Martin fidgeted in his chair, his eyes swirling about as though he couldn't make any sense of the visual field in front of him.

"The potion," he said agitatedly. "You'll fetch it down, won't you?"

"Whatever it is that you need, you shall have it," said Roland. "May I push you? Is that alright?" He turned to Hermione. "I'll come back soon," he said. "Can I bring you anything from the cottage?"

Lady Longbottom pulled gently at Hermione's elbow, steering her towards the house.

"No, thank you." Hermione shook her head. "Everything I have in the world is right here."

Hermione's first cup of tea, taken at a small table in the entryway of Bugg-Buntley Hall, went cold and was discarded.

Healer Frederickson—young, with sandy hair and a kind face—arrived with Tom Longbottom through the front door. They climbed the stairs quickly, and a short while later only Tom came back down. Without saying a word, he took Hermione's hand in his and pressed it, then Apparated away.

Half an hour later, she'd moved to a drawing room sofa. An elf had carried the little black and white cat called Hugo in to her on orders from Sir Thomas. Almost immediately, he'd fallen asleep on his back across the depth of the cushion with his forepaws held straight in front of him. He tilted his head back in order to provide Hermione access to his chin, but whether she scratched him or not, he purred to himself. His presence was possibly the wisest measure anyone had ever undertaken to comfort her.

Isadora arrived and sat quietly beside her until she was called away by her mother. She returned twenty minutes later to inform Hermione that Healer Bartholomew had Flooed directly into the bedroom where Draco lay. He had immediately taken charge of Draco's care, and would send down news as soon as there was any to be had.

"They would like us to bring them more bandages," said Isadora gently.

Hermione gripped her hand so tight that her knuckles turned pale.

"Have they said what happened?" she asked.

Isadora shook her head. "Tom's gone home to be with Mrs. Longbottom. She's apparently quite shaken. My father or William will be able to tell you, I'm certain. Would you like a fresh cup of tea?"

Hermione looked down at her second cup, cold and untried in her lap.

"No, thank you." She set the cup and saucer on a table beside the sofa and looked at Isadora imploringly. "I need something to do."

They tore linen into uniform strips with a spell Hermione had never learned, folded them and sent them up to the sick room with an elf who looked at them with pity.

After that, Hermione felt driven to sanitize the kitchen while Isadora made herself busy at a tall chest in the pantry holding the family's medicinal potions stores.

Isadora packed up bundles of potions to reduce swelling and pain, salves for healing shallow wounds, and tinctures to bring on sleep, though Draco hadn't shown any sign of consciousness. She left to bring them upstairs.

Hermione was on her hands and knees disinfecting the tile around the hearth when she heard a familiar gruff cough, and turned to find Roland in the doorway that led out to the kitchen garden. Grix stood beside him, holding a grey tweed Ivy cap in his hands.

Today's dress was a frivolous thing, in blue gauze embroidered with grotesquely cheerful yellow and white flowers. She had tied a sturdy apron over it, and as she sat back on her heels, she wrung the coarse striped fabric hard between her hands.

"I don't know—" She hadn't the slightest idea how she meant to continue, so instead, she covered her face with her hands.

She heard dusty shuffling footsteps, and then felt a hand at her hair, patting her like a little dog.

"It'll come right, Hermione."

She leaned forward to bury her face in the soft flannel of Grix's shirt and began to cry.

"It'll come right," he said again, still patting the back of her hair. "Hey. Come on. Chin up."

Hermione sat back and pressed at her eyes with the handkerchief Roland handed down to her.

"I don't know what to do," she said plaintively. "And I always know what to do."

Grix Vanished the wet stain from his shoulder and pushed his half-moon spectacles up on his nose.

"Live long enough and you'll find that sometimes you don't." He reached into his chest pocket and pulled out a vial of a pearlescent gold liquid. "I've brought one of Martin's brews. You'll want to run this up and get it in him as soon as the Healers slow down and leave him to rest. They won't like it, so you might need to be clever, which I know that you are. But don't dally. Martin reckons he'll need to start it before morning."

Hermione took the vial and rolled it between her fingers. The glass was warm from having been in Grix's pocket. The thin potion inside caught the light and swirled with bright coral and melon orange currents. She sniffed and wiped her nose with the handkerchief.

"What is it?"

"It's for the brain," said Grix. "And with an ounce of luck, the spine as well. I don't believe he's bothered to name this one. Martin's field of research was mostly the mind, as I'm sure you've gathered from the books you've borrowed without asking. But he's got a real grip on how a living thing repairs itself, generally. He insisted I bring this particular one over. Give it to your brother in two doses. Once tonight, and again in the morning." He turned his flat cap in his hands.

Hermione worked hard at holding back another round of tears. "Thank you."

"I'm not promising a favorable change in personality, mind," he added.

Hermione laughed wetly.

"But Martin's older than he has any right to be," he went on, "and sharper than you might be aware, and it's not all down to my nagging."

Hermione thanked Grix again, and then again, warmly and profusely. She rose to walk with him to the garden path, then watched him go, tromping between rows of onions.

She came back to the Hall slowly, letting the sun heat her cheeks and eyelids once she'd pressed them closed. Then she stopped, leaning in the kitchen doorway.

Roland sat back, gripping the edge of the long wooden work table, overhung with drying herb bunches and flower posies. His chin dropped towards his chest, then he lifted his eyes to her. He looked worried, and Hermione wasn't sure whether it was on Draco's behalf or hers.

"What happened?" she asked.

"He was behind me. I didn't see it," said Roland. "But there's a sharp turn on the last quarter of the course that can make the head of your broom want to swing wide. Is he used to a different model, by any chance? Something made by a local craftsman, perhaps? Torque can be surprising."

Hermione nodded. "Yes. His usual broom is very different."

"There's a cluster of large stones just at that turn." He radiated deep sympathy and care as he spoke. "Will's as quick as they come, though. His reflexes are extraordinary, and he threw out a cushioning charm that slowed him down. If he hadn't—" He stopped. "I'm so very sorry, Miss Granger. You and your brother seem very close."

Hermione shook her head. "Oh, we aren't—" She pressed her lips together and swallowed. "I suppose, yes. Yes, we're quite close."

A pair of elves Apparated into the kitchen and seemed surprised to find Roland and Hermione there.

"I'm so sorry," said Hermione, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "We'll get out of your way."

"Walk with me?" Roland indicated the gardens beyond the door.

With gratitude, Hermione took his arm.

Dinner was served in the dining room, but Hermione couldn't think of eating. Instead, she sat on a chair that was placed for her outside Draco's bedroom door.

She heard low voices within, but couldn't make them out, and couldn't bring herself to use magic to listen. She wasn't able to focus on the words in her book, either, though she had exchanged Martin's potions text for a volume of John Donne.

She traced a finger over a line of print.

For God's sake hold thy tongue, and let me love.

She snapped the book shut.

After dinner, Isadora brought her a cordial, which she drank, and then Penelope brought her another, distinctly larger glass of red wine.

Lady Longbottom came and forced her, by way of her own calculated complaisance, to retire to the room across the hall and dress for bed.

She undid Hermione's stays herself, and didn't ask about the leather pouch or the wand that Hermione drew from her bosom. Then she plaited her hair with the long, smooth strokes of a charmed comb.

"Would you like a sleeping draught, my dear?" she asked, pressing her cool hands to Hermione's shoulders.

Hermione declined, and once Lady Longbottom had left, resumed her place beside Draco's door. Wrapped in a white dressing gown, eyes wandering over fields of poetry and seeing nothing, she waited.

She supposed she must have fallen asleep.

When she woke, Cressida was before her, with a hand on Hermione's knee.

"They're going," she said softly. "Would you like to come in?"

Hermione followed her into the room. It was low-lit by candles and steeped in the biting, mentholated smell of an Apothecary.

Healer Frederickson was buttoning his jacket. He picked up a brown leather Healer's bag and walked to the Floo.

"Miss Granger," he said with a mannerly nod. He glanced at another man, quite tall and in early middle age, with a greying beard and mustache. "Healer Bartholomew can fill you in. I'll be back in the morning."

Draco was tucked under a white sheet and coverlet, his arms lying limply at his sides. He slept. His chest rose and fell quickly and unevenly, a neat white bandages swathed his head. Hovering before the wall over his head, a row of charts in amber and bright blue light glowed and shifted. They presented a steady stream of information, only some of which Hermione knew how to read.

She could tell that his heart was beating fast.

Cressida had pulled an apron over the same dress she'd worn at the picnic, and had her wand out, Vanishing used supplies and Scourgifying items on a wooden table beneath the curtained window.

Hermione looked inquiringly at Healer Bartholomew as he packed his bag.

"Your brother is a very fortunate man, Miss Granger," he said. "Fortunate that his fall was blunted by Mr. Avery's quick thinking, fortunate that in moving him, his friends—through sheer dumb luck—avoided a greater catastrophe. He was most fortunate, however, to have chosen to throw himself off a broom at a reckless speed while in the company of Miss Cressida Longbottom."

Cressida didn't look up from her work.

Healer Bartholomew retrieved his coat from the back of a chair and pulled it on.

“We’ve put the necessary repairs in motion, and over the course of several days, the gross insults to his cranium, vertebrae, arms, and ribs will fully heal. But we can’t know the extent of the damage to his ability to use his extremities or whether his cognitive capacities have been compromised until he wakes.”

“So he might be paralyzed,” said Hermione. “And he may not be the same.”

Healer Bartholomew glanced towards Cressida. “Cressida tells me that your brother is a keen intellect. And that he’s an active, athletic man.”

Hermione nodded.

“I have strong hopes that, in time, he will still be both.” He stepped to the Floo. “But you should prepare yourself as best you can for the alternative. Miss Cressida”—he bowed his head genteelly at the tired-looking girl—“your efforts have been extraordinary. Try and get some sleep. Healer's orders. I’ll see you bright and early in the morning.”

With a green Floo light flare, he left them.

Cressida finished cleaning the work table.

“Would you like to keep watch over him tonight, Miss Granger?” She pointed to the luminous charts over his head. “I can show you what to look for. I know that I would find it very hard to leave him, were he my—” She cleared her throat. “I would feel just as you do, were he my brother.”

Hermione followed along as Cressida taught her to read his vital signs and specific measures of his healing progress, should she like to follow them. Cressida straightened Draco's linens, then pulled a chair up beside the bed.

“There’s a chaise just there as well”—she pointed to the corner of the room—“should you need to sleep. If any of his vital signs go awry there will be an alarm. I’ll hear it, and Healer Bartholomew and Healer Frederickson are only on the other side of the Floo.”

She pulled off her apron, folded it, and placed it on the work table.

Hermione sat in the chair.

Cressida returned to the bedside and pressed her fingertips into the pulse point at Draco’s wrist.

“I know I can read it just there,” she said, glancing up at his heart rate on the monitoring spells. “But it's reassuring to feel it for myself from time to time.”

“You’re very fond,” Hermione said. Her heart ached terribly—for Cressida, for William, and for Draco.

“I’ve only just met you and your brother, Miss Granger.” Cressida released Draco's wrist. “One shouldn't get carried away. It's silly.”

“It's hard not to be silly sometimes.”

Cressida’s wide brown eyes shone wet in the candlelight. “It is, isn’t it?” She swiped the back of her hand over her cheeks. “I’ll leave you, then.”

She picked up her skirts in one hand and bustled to the door.

“Please remember,” she said as she gripped the door handle, “pulse, breathing, blood pressure—”

“I understand, Cressida,” said Hermione. “I promise you that I understand.”

With a latch click, and Hermione and Draco were alone.

His respiration was fast and shallow.

Before she could forget, Hermione pulled Martin’s potion from a pocket in her dressing gown and uncapped it. Very gently, she tucked her finger between his teeth and pulled his jaw down. She tipped half the potion along the inside of his cheek, and breathed a sigh of relief as he visibly swallowed.

She capped the potion and pocketed it again, then drew her wand and extinguished the candles around the room. The fire was down to its embers, and they were left bathed in the flickering glow of his vital signs overhead.

She glanced at the door and listened. Hearing no sounds, she leaned forward, pushed her arm beneath his, and took his hand. It was warm and a little damp, and though she wove her fingers between his and folded them against the back of his hand, his grip remained slack.

“I do remember about the raspberries, you know.” Her voice was low and deliberate. “And I do only have them at Christmas. Only *ever* at Christmas.” She tightened her hand around his. “I had them at that first party. We’d been working together for two years, and I got so angry that you still wouldn’t come that I bullied you into it.”

Without letting go of him, she sank to her knees beside the bed.

“You tease me about them every year, but I order them anyway. I always have too many and I always, always will.”

The first tears ran down her cheeks and splattered on the floor at her knees.

Carefully, she rose, and even more carefully, slid into the narrow strip of space between his body and the edge of the bed.

“You’re a cad,” she whispered. Her tears forged new paths from the corners of her eyes and dripped onto the bed linens. She brought her free hand to his mouth. With the lightest touch, she traced the shape of his upper lip. “And of course you taste of mint.”

She brushed the pads of her fingers over the full curve of his lower lip, then let them trail over his cheek and jaw to the space just behind his ear.

“You’re going to wake up tomorrow,” she said. “I’m telling you, and you have to listen to me this time.”

Her voice was nearly swallowed up by the soft pop and whine of charred wood in the fireplace. She lifted their entwined fingers to her mouth and rested her lips against the back of his hand.

“You’re the worst.” Her breath moved over his skin. “You must know that you are.” She stroked his earlobe, once, with a vanishing touch.

“I don’t care where it is,” she whispered. “It could be England, or France, or Argentina.” Her voice

was thick and stilted. “And I don’t care whether you can walk, or talk, or tie your own cravat. But you have to be in the world. I couldn’t possibly stand it if you weren’t.”

She pressed her lips against his hand, and biting back a sob that rose up from the bruising pain settled deep beneath her ribs, she tucked her knees to her belly like a child.

The damp circle on the linens below her cheek spread, and the lights above them brightened and dimmed and brightened again.

She laid her hand over his heart, felt it drumming in his chest, and watched its echo move in the dark.

The official Ministry Christmas party had ended at ten o’ clock, and by twenty past they were parked on worn wooden stools at a laborers’ bar half in and half out of Diagon Alley. An anemic strand of Christmas lights was tacked up unevenly over the long shelves of liquor bottles. It was the type that blinked, and it lit the near-white canvas of Draco’s hair pink, and then blue, and then yellow, before cycling to green and starting over.

“Aren’t you hot, Malfoy?” Hermione shouted.

She tucked a finger beneath the rolled edge of her turtleneck collar, pulled it away from herself, and used her other hand to fan the air of the crowded bar down the front of her dress.

“No,” he said, raising his voice over the increasingly lubricated conversations around them. Somewhere behind him, a man with a clear, resonant tenor began to sing a randy version of “God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen.” “But there are probably two hundred people in this bar and you’re wearing—” He glanced down. “Never mind what you’re wearing. Stop trying to change the subject.”

Hermione was jolted forward as a man in a Santa hat holding a pair of heady pints threaded his way through the crowd and knocked into her shoulder. She caught herself with a hand on Draco’s thigh, then righted herself.

“I’m not changing the subject. I’m *hot*,” she said. She marveled at how loud her voice had become. “It’s a sweater dress. It’s a sweater that’s long enough to be a dress.”

“I can see that, Granger.” Draco laughed as he brought his glass of Ogden’s to his mouth. “It looks cozy.”

“God, you’re the worst.” She propped her elbow against the bar, leaned her head heavily against her hand, and considered him. “The *absolute* worst. I hope you’re aware of that.”

He smirked at her, and her eyes opened wide.

“Oh! There you are, you smirk. I’m going to cover you up.” She lifted her free hand and squinted so that from her perspective it blocked the lower half of his face.

From the way his eyes crinkled at the corners, it seemed to make him smile in full. She huffed a stray coil of hair out of her eyes, sat back up, and began circling a finger around the rim of her cocktail glass. A handful of raspberries bobbed at the surface of a pink drink. She picked up the

glass and drank deeply, then set it back down half on and half off the paper coaster next to her. As it began to tip, Draco put his hand over hers and helped guide the glass back until it was securely situated.

"I don't know why you think the ratios are off," she continued, sucking a drop of liquid from the side of her thumb then letting her forearm rest on the bar. "The preliminaries look perfect, and—"

"The preliminaries are preliminaries," he said, exasperated. "And plants are entirely different on a cellular level to—"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"See! That's exactly what I was talking about a minute ago." He pointed at her. "I thought we'd agreed to no eye rolling about work." He dropped his hand next to hers. "Who's the worst now? It's you." He grasped the tip of her little finger and held it for a moment, then pulled his hand away and took another sip of his drink.

"I could time travel to Byzantium tomorrow with that potion in hand and come back not a day older." She swept her arm in front of herself for emphasis. "Look." She turned to the man sitting on the other side of her and patted his arm. "Stevens? Yes, hello, do you mind?" She indicated the white paper serviette sitting in front of him. "Thank you," she said as he handed it to her. "Do you have a quill, Malfoy?"

Draco produced a slim silver self-inking quill from his suit jacket's interior pocket and handed it to her.

"Thanks. I don't have one on me," she said, looking down and briefly searching at her hips for a nonexistent place to stash a quill.

"I'm shocked you have room for yourself in that dress let alone a writing implement."

"It's well and truly just me in here, believe you me."

His impeccable eyebrows reached for the ceiling.

"You made a very compelling argument about the necessity of the kelp extract," she said, marking down a series of wobbly symbols on the serviette, "and the sustainably harvested—"

"Is it sustainably harvested?"

"Yes, it's *sustainably harvested* uni-oshi—"

"Ushi-oni."

"—*ushi-oni* venom." In spite of herself, she laughed. "Stop it."

He nodded obediently while she scrawled another series of marks.

"We've brewed it, and we're so near to being done reengineering the Time Turners that we can begin to really test it. The potion looks *perfect*." She shoved the serviette in front of him and tossed the quill down beside it. "Show me the flaw in the essential formula. Please." She picked up her glass and drained it in three swallows, then chewed triumphantly on a raspberry.

"I'm not arguing that it isn't possible that it's the right answer to the problem of aging and time travel, Granger," said Draco, picking up the serviette and looking it over.

The bar had grown even louder, and it sounded as though someone had brought over the leftover cupcakes from the official Ministry Christmas party. He listened to the ambient conversation for a moment, then raised his voice and turned more fully towards her. There was very little space to maneuver, and as she pulled closer to hear him, the tips of her knees slid between his parted legs.

He brought the side of his fist to his lips and cleared his throat before beginning again.

“I fully recognize that this”—he waved the serviette—“is an extraordinarily promising, highly creative approach.”

Hermione pursed her lips at him in self-satisfaction. He looked amused as he set down the serviette and grasped his drink.

“I’m just saying that I would *not* join you for brunch in Byzantium tomorrow with a vial of that potion in my pocket. Even if you asked me very nicely. Because the ratios are off.”

Hermione tipped towards him. “You,” she said, slapping her palm against the center of his chest, “are wrong. And the day that I prove it to you will be one that I savor like—”

“Like three stiff French martinis in the space of forty five minutes?”

“—like a *fine wine*.” Her hand slid limply down the front of his shirt and came to rest on his thigh. “It’s been *sixty* minutes at least.” She smacked his leg for emphasis. “And the martinis are delicious. I’m telling you that they’re raspberry *and* pineapple but you refuse to listen. Anyway, you’re supposed to be the cavalier one. Who are you? Where is my lab partner?”

“Judging by how close you are to tumbling off that stool,” he said, nudging her to sit more securely with a hand at her waist, “at least two drinks behind you.”

She was muzzy with vodka and Chambord, and it took her a moment to fully absorb that she’d been looking him directly in the eyes for quite some time. Pale slate blue. Grey, if you weren’t close enough. But she was.

“I’m not drunk.” She wrinkled her nose at him petulantly.

“Of course not. That would be impossible.” He reached up and grabbed the tip of an errant curl at her temple, pulled it down and released it. “Hermione Granger doesn’t get drunk.” The smile that dragged at the corner of his mouth was a small, disconcertingly fragile thing that faded, then disappeared. “She’s perfect.”

She felt that she ought to laugh, but there was no levity in her voice when she spoke.

“I’m not perfect.”

He took in a slow breath and released it, as though he were very tired.

“You’re not?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Are you telling me, *Granger*—”

“That’s me.”

“—yes, that’s very much you. Are you telling me that you’re capable of making mistakes?”

It had grown even hotter in the bar. Hermione tugged at the front of her dress again.

"You're laughing at me," she said.

"Not this time."

The part of her mind that remained dry above the flood of alcohol recognized that there was a socially acceptable limit to eye contact, and that they'd surpassed it.

Not silver, in a dim and dingy bar. Grey blue like the surf on a cloud-sheltered day.

The room felt airless.

And she wanted...

She *wanted*...

In that moment, she was acutely aware of something she carried around inside of herself that was neither an ache nor an itch but somehow both, deep and unreachable and, confusingly, *sad* if she allowed herself to dwell on it. It was an ailment very much of the body, and the unfailing cure was a rapid retreat to the safety of her head.

The muscle of his thigh contracted under her fingers.

"I try," she said, drawing her hand back into her own lap. "I try very hard to not make mistakes."

His gaze wandered over her face. "Well. I certainly wouldn't want to be one."

"One what?"

"One of your mistakes."

A voice vaulted the fence they'd built around themselves.

"Y'alright, Mione?"

Draco drew back his knees, picked up his drink, and turned to face the bar.

Ron squeezed between the backs of two Ministry employees, lifting his half-full pint glass up over their heads, and wound his way towards them. When he arrived, he leaned a hip against the wooden counter behind Hermione, wrapped his arm across the front of her shoulders, and kissed the top of her head.

"Happy Christmas, Ferret."

Draco's eyes were trained on the liquor shelves behind the bar, but he glanced up at Ron and raised his glass. "Happy Christmas, Weasel."

Hermione folded her fingers over Ron's forearm. "Are we still doing *The Wind in the Willows*?"

They ignored her.

"Did you come here with Alisha? From payroll?" Ron asked Draco.

Draco nodded curtly.

"Seamus is showing her some pointers over at the billiards table. It's a rather up close and personal

tutorial. Just a heads up." Ron rubbed Hermione's shoulder with his thumb.

Draco spared a brief glance across the room. "I'll make sure she's not too drunk to go home with him."

"Did the two of you sort out your differences about the—" Ron gestured at the serviette on the bar.

"They're not differences, exactly," said Hermione. "That great horrible smirk over there is just being an intractable pessimist. And intractably wrong."

Draco scoffed and signaled to the bartender for another whiskey.

"How many have you had, Mione?" Ron laughed and squeezed her shoulder. "Has she been bullying you like this all evening, Malfoy?"

"She certainly shouldn't Apparate," said Draco.

"Alright, then." Ron polished off his pint and leaned down to press his lips against the top of Hermione's head again. "I'm ready to go home. Shall I toss you over my shoulder? Or would you like to stay here and take Malfoy down a few more pegs?" He looked at Draco. "Could you get her home for us?"

Draco looked briefly at Hermione and nodded. "Whatever she wants."

She turned her face away from him. Her cheeks felt hot. "I'm fine. I'll come home."

Gathering up her beaded bag, she slipped her feet back into the heels she'd kicked off underneath her bar stool.

"Happy Christmas." She fought back an impulse to lay a hand against Draco's arm. "I'll see you in the New Year, alright?"

The bartender placed his drink in front of him and swept away his empty glass. He looked down and rotated it on its coaster, then gave Hermione and Ron a tight, congenial smile.

"Happy Christmas, Granger. Weasley." He drummed his fingers against the side of his glass. "See you back at the lab."

Ron was tall, strong, and full of an earned confidence after four years as an Auror. He pushed through the press of bodies ahead of him with ease, pulling Hermione behind him. As she gripped his hand and followed, she looked back over her shoulder.

Draco sat at the bar, his hair lit green, and then pink, and then blue. He took a drink of his whiskey, and watched her go.

The Letter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Would you like the yellow or the green, Miss Granger?”

Margaret McClure held up two dresses, one in sage trimmed with coral pink ribbon and the other daffodil yellow with white embroidery at the edges.

Hermione wasn't in the least bothered either way.

“Whichever you think is best, Miss Margaret.”

“I was terribly sorry to hear about your brother.” Margaret folded the yellow dress back down into the trunk she'd arrived with that morning. “I was shocked as anything to hear of it when Mr. Grix told me. Why these young men must go roaring about on their brooms, I'll never understand.”

Hermione lifted her arms as Margaret brought the green dress down over her head. “Nor shall I.”

“Will you sit with him today?” Margaret asked.

“He has a far better nurse in Miss Cressida.” Hermione turned at a press of Margaret's fingers and lifted her hair out of the path of the buttons at the back of the dress. “I'm only in the way when I'm there.”

The night before, lulled by the steady fade and glow of the monitoring spells over Draco's head, Hermione had fallen asleep beside him in his bed. She slept fitfully, and woke in full at the first hint of light leaking around the edges of the heavy curtains. After slipping from his bed, she tucked herself into the chaise and dozed until Cressida, already dressed, knocked softly and peered around the door.

Healer Bartholomew Floored from London shortly after, and Hermione watched them remove the bandages from Draco's head to survey the progress of his visible wounds.

“Oh, Merlin,” Hermione muttered.

Cressida looked up from where her fingers methodically searched the paling purple-red lines of cuts and tears mending themselves across the crown of his head.

“What is it, Miss Granger?”

Hermione gestured at the scant quarter inch of white-blond fuzz covering Draco's scalp. “You shaved him.”

“Yes,” said Cressida. “We needed to access his wounds.”

“Of course.” Hermione frowned. “It's only that he's rather proud of his hair.”

“Naturally.” Cressida resumed her inspection.

She'd placed a small earthenware pot on a tray beside the bed. It contained an oily salve that smelled resinous and acidic, like pine and lemon peel. She dipped the pad of a finger into it, and began applying it to the lines of his scars. “These superficial wounds are healing quickly. I applied

a growth serum to his hair last night before we did our last round of bandages, and I'll do so again today. It will all be back within days." She looked at Hermione. "He'll hardly notice it was missing when he wakes."

If he wakes, Hermione's anxiety offered.

"I assure you your brother will be in full plumage soon enough, Miss Granger." Healer Bartholomew looked up from a parchment and pointed his quill at the monitoring spells over Draco's head. "As I told Miss Cressida, I find his signs highly encouraging. She has agreed to assist me with a novel spell this afternoon that may provide us with additional information."

Dipping her fingertip into the salve pot again, Cressida's lips lifted at the corners in well-earned pride.

Moments later, an Elf entered and alerted Hermione to Margaret's arrival.

"No cosmetic spells today please, Miss Margaret," Hermione had asked, and yet she made her way downstairs looking plump and pulchritudinous as a wood nymph, with coral cheeks to match the ribbon trimming her dress, and a halo of shining dark brown curls. Her visible flesh had the pale and rosy complexion of a prize piglet scrubbed up for the county fair.

Disinterested in the Longbottom girls' ongoing, frivolous chatter about the approaching ball, she left the sitting room and moved through the rest of the morning in self-chosen solitude.

For a full hour, she curled in a chair in the library, then took a slow walk around the grounds. In the ornamental gardens, she pressed her nose into luscious sprays of buttery yellow roses and breathed in their scent, heavy with violet and lemon. She spied a grove of fruit trees situated past the kitchen vegetable beds, and decided she'd strike out after it following the afternoon meal.

For a while she sat again, every bit as needlessly as before, in the corner of Draco's sickroom. Healer Bartholomew had left, and Cressida and Healer Frederickson stood with their heads together over Draco, who remained prone and silent, discussing his graphs and the opinions of Bartholomew and his colleagues at St. Mungo's. Hermione's attention flitted without ever landing between their talk and a stack of books she'd liberated from the library.

At last, in desperate need of motion and industry, she walked to Twiggybroke Cottage alone.

Bugg-Buntley Hall's sun-beaten lawns flushed with midsummer heat. Passing into the shaded woods below, the air grew cooler. Sunlight filtered through the tree canopy, setting each leaf aglow in variegated greens and yellows. A lilac grew to monstrous proportions beside the brook, and as she approached the glen, a breeze sifted through its branches and infused the air with its scent.

She found Grix and Martin sitting in a sunbeam near the brook, chattering away.

"He's a *crow*. I've seen him." Martin adjusted the arm of his spectacles over his ear. "Hopping about in the birch, bold as anything. Naked thievery, I tell you."

"You do tell me. You *keep* telling me." Grix leaned against the back of a wooden bench, its green paint chipped through to past layers of cornflower blue and mustard yellow, and twirled an enormous oak leaf between his fingers. "If you'd eat your strawberries your own self it wouldn't happen."

Upon seeing Hermione coming along the path, Martin broke into a smile.

"Miss Granger!" he called out. "Hermione! My gel!"

Hermione approached, clutching the yellow leather-bound copy of *Entheogenic Potionery and the Alchemy of the Mind* she'd brought to the Hall the day before. "Good morning, Cousin. Mr. Grix."

"How is poor Cousin Malfo?" Martin patted his own head. "Still broken?"

"Draco, Martin," said Grix, twirling his leaf. "What a scholar you are. Here, put on your Oxford cap." He reached to set the leaf atop Martin's head.

"He's still asleep," said Hermione. "This morning, Healer Bartholomew suggested he seemed more active, very likely dreaming, which he took to be an encouraging sign."

Martin fixed Grix with an intent look, and pointed at Hermione. "Give her the potion."

"Keep your hat on." Grix hopped from the bench and beckoned Hermione with a wave. "Come on. Martin's got another round of potions he's cooked up. One of them's purple and smells of cherries. I suspect he's added sugar."

Inside the cottage, Grix lined vials along the table: three filled with the peach-colored potion Hermione administered to Draco the night before and again that morning, and another four containing a thick, sticky-looking potion in garish, greasy violet.

Martin guided his chair to the table's edge. From his blanket folds, he drew a diminutive corked glass globe holding no more than a few inky blue drops.

"Five drops." Martin placed the twilight potion beside the others. "Under the tongue once he wakes."

"That better not be the one that made you parrot the entirety of Thomas Aquinas' sermons at Lent in 1273," grumbled Grix. "It certainly looks like it."

Martin closed his great round eyes in noble equanimity. "For the *memory*."

"The memory of Thomas Aquinas, I don't wonder." Grix crossed into the kitchen. "This is for you, Hermione."

He fetched a woven basket from the counter beside the sink. It was lined with a cloth serviette, which Grix folded over a small, corked glass bottle, a paper-wrapped square packet, and a selection of fruit.

"Blackberry cordial and a nice bit of cake." He set it on the table, then wrapped the potion vials in a cloth and tucked them inside.

Hermione held out the book with the yellow leather cover. "I wondered whether it would be alright for me to make a copy of this for Roland Weasley."

Martin lifted his chin and regarded the book. He was silent for a moment, then erupted.

"Visions!"

"Yes," Hermione agreed. "Mr. Weasley asked about it, and I told him I'd inquire about the possibility of making him a copy of his own."

Martin nodded and smiled. "Do what you like."

Grix watched with circumspection as Hermione laid the book on the kitchen table. She drew her wand, then intoned, "*Apograph Adcurius*," while executing a series of precise wand gestures, her

free hand hovering over the book.

The volume took on the quality of a three dimensional picture seen without polarized glasses. It appeared to split into two overlapping and barely offset copies, one sitting above and slightly beside itself, before resolving into two identical volumes, squarely stacked.

Martin clapped his hands. "Clever cousin!"

Grix grabbed the top copy and flipped to several targeted pages, which he sharply scrutinized before handing the book back to Hermione. "That's quite well done. You've a talent for it."

"Thank you." Hermione slipped both copies into the basket with the potion vials.

She pressed her hand over her bosom where the Time Turner lurked in its leather bag. "Do you know," she began tenuously, "of a metallurgist at Oxford, by any chance? Someone who does magically infused casting, for instance?"

Without warning, and to Hermione's enormous shock, Martin went red in the face, and his eyes widened to alarming dimensions.

"Fukkink!"

Hermione stared. "Pardon?"

"Fukkink." Martin turned an elegant shade of Bordeaux, and his ears appeared to vibrate. "*Jan.*"

Hermione watched him in awe. "Jan?"

"That's gone fifty years ago now. Simmer yourself down." Grix patted Martin's arm and looked at Hermione with an eye roll. "Jan Fukkink is an Oxford don. Of Dutch extraction, I understand. Works in magicked pen knives and monocles that show you what's going on in your own drawing room while you're away at the theatre and so forth. A bit ungenerous with his evaluations of other people's work."

"Parvenu!" shouted Martin. "Young brute. He called me a *liar*."

"He never called you a liar. He said you'd *exaggerated*." Grix fiddled with the fabric folded over Hermione's treat basket.

"I don't exaggerate," said Martin, frowning and crossing his arms.

"Of course not. But Fukkink has half your intellect and twice the clout. It's the way it goes."

"Fancy filigreed footwear," groused Martin. "Fop."

Grix shuffled to the cooker, took a dark brown, fibrous-looking muffin from a pan on the countertop and handed it to Martin. "Forget the boots, old man. That was one battle you were never meant to win."

Martin's left eye twitched as he bit into the muffin and ground away mercilessly with his jaws.

Grix paused while laying a cloth over the muffin pan. "What do you need a metallurgist for, anyway? Pocket watch sprung a cog on you? I could take a look. Elf magic goes rather a long way."

Hermione flushed in shame. Not for the first time, she felt the entirety of her and Draco's story

pressing at the backs of her teeth, and had to swallow it down before she spoke. "It's nothing. I was only curious, really. A passing interest in...sextants."

Grix's eyebrows attempted to meet in the middle. "I see."

"Well!" Hermione hoisted her basket and juggled it carefully, so that the corked bottle and Draco's potions remained secure. "I ought to go back to the Hall. When should I administer the new potions?"

Martin swallowed his muffin. "Knock the Healers back and pour it in! Retrograde incompetents."

"I told you that you'd be in a right foul mood if you skipped your mid-morning bite," Grix said to Martin. "You can't let that crow get at your strawberries anymore. Eat your muffin." To Hermione, he said, "Sneak the purple one in at lunch time. Half the bottle down the side of the cheek if he's not awake. And the peach one just after. Martin says three doses per day of that one is ideal. There are two doses per bottle. Give the memory potion only on waking. You'll need to make sure he's reasonably coherent. Or at least as coherent as he usually is. I can't promise he won't come over liturgical on you."

"He shan't!" Martin patted his own knees, and his eyes sparkled. "It's for if he can't remember his A from his Zed."

"You can't remember your A from your Zed half the time," said Grix. "I ought to give that one with your oats."

Martin closed his eyes and leaned back. "Tastes of cabbage."

Parting ways at the gate, Hermione thanked them both, and watched them tootle back to the brookside bench with a muffin-filled basket and a bottle of spring water.

The walk back to the Hall was brief. As she approached, she suddenly couldn't bear the thought of spending another period sitting like an obstructive ornament in the sickroom.

Instead of entering the house through the back, she recalled the distant orchard, and skirted the garden's edge towards the west end of the grounds. There, the white-graveled formal walk gave way to the tidy, amiable paths of the kitchen garden.

The air was scented with piquant balm, sweet, sun-warmed soil, and the mint and thyme tumbling riotous over the flagstones. Honeybees rustled inside the fluted ocher petals of cucumber flowers, their legs weighted with pollen. Between a strawberry bed and a beetroot patch, a dense honeysuckle spray clung to a wooden arch, a hummingbird hawk moth dipping and rising around the blooms. As Hermione passed a pea trellis, she twisted a pod from its stem, broke it open, and burst the sweet seeds between her teeth while she wandered past the garden's western edge.

She meandered beyond the lavender border, then followed a narrow track through a knee-high field of daisies and knapweed, buttercups and lupine, clusters of pink and white hollyhocks, and bright poppies whose seeds must have been scattered there by hand.

Down an incline, past a pair of unkempt dwarf trees bowing under bunches of glossy burgundy cherries, she discovered a bowl of earth measuring about one half acre. Rows of blueberry bushes

spread out ahead of her, their branches loaded with ripe fruit.

Hermione's boots squelched in the heavy earth, wet and bare excepting uneven patches of straggling grass at the bases of the bushes. She set her basket down and inched her way along the first row, plucking handfuls of berries and listening to the blackbirds' heated debate in the neighboring orchard.

The Time Turner pressed against her sternum.

She'd decided the previous night, in the dark beside Draco's insensate form, that she would go into Oxford or London alone and seek out a metallurgist. She'd get help to repair the Time Turner, and then ...

After that she wasn't sure.

Hermione had no idea whether time travel of any kind was safe with an injury as severe as Draco's, but her impulse was to bring them both back, as quickly as possible, where perhaps he could be better helped to recover.

But the question of the snuff box remained.

Lost in thought, she startled at the sound of a cleared throat.

"Good morning." Roland Weasley emerged from the wildflower meadow and stood at the top of the row. "Or has it gone afternoon already?"

"Still morning, I believe." She regarded her hand, cupping two dozen blueberries the size of the corpulent bumblebees grappling with the lupine in the meadows. "You've come for a visit?"

"I've come to check on the patient." He regarded her. "And his sister. Would you like to be alone?"

She shook her head. "No."

Since Draco's accident she felt that no matter how many other people were near, and no matter how sincere their attention to her, her solitude was consummate and insurmountable.

But where the Longbottom girls and their enthusiasm for silk slippers and Scotch Reels made her feel apart, Roland's proximity was comforting.

Without speaking, he plucked his way down the row towards her, dropping half the berries into his cupped palm and half into his mouth, until he stood beside her.

For a long while, they said nothing, only twisted dusky berries from their stems, dropped them in their hands, and ate while the sun climbed in the cloudless sky.

"You can do this much faster with a wand," he said at last. "But I suspect speed isn't your objective."

"No, it isn't. Although"—she examined an especially stout specimen—"I've had a thought."

"I'm anxious to hear it."

"I'm going to make a pie."

"A pie?"

“Yes. I make remarkable pie. Life-altering, I’ve been told.”

“Indeed? Then I suppose I ought to pick faster if I want to have my life altered by Miss Granger.”

Roland brought out his wand.

“Only by hand.” Hermione gestured towards him with her palm out. “That part’s important.”

But she needn’t have cautioned him. Before she finished speaking, he’d conjured a shallow, finely woven basket and hung it over his elbow.

“I’ll carry.”

He worked beside her silently again, and before long the bottom of the basket was covered from view.

"Is that your pie?" Harry sniffed the air.

Hermione didn’t look up from her parchment. “No, I believe that’s roast chicken. Smith over in Death has a very domestic girlfriend that packs him an elaborate hot lunch every day.”

"Good. It would have been nasty if that’d been the pie." Harry leaned towards the woven cylindrical basket with a wooden lid and long leather handles sitting on Hermione’s desk, and sniffed again. “Did you pick the berries yourself?”

He was younger then, lean and less imposing in his black Auror uniform than he would be only a few years later, and still only flirting with the idea of wearing a beard.

“I did,” Hermione answered. “Don’t touch it.”

“I’m not touching it.”

“You’re thinking about touching it.” She slid the top sheet of parchment from the stack in front of her, blew on the ink, and set it aside. “Don’t.”

“Don’t think about it? How will you know if I do?”

“I’ll know.”

“What’s terrifying is that even without Legilimency, that’s probably true.” Harry reached for the lid of the basket.

Hermione slapped his hand with the end of her quill.

“Leave it. Must you sit on my desk every time you come down here?”

"Sitting on Ron's is getting old." Harry hopped down off the corner. “What time is the move on Saturday? I assume you’ve got it all plotted out to the last soup spoon, but Gin said we’re supposed to help out.”

“I’m moving the heavy things—”

“We’re wizards, Hermione.”

“I’m moving the things that would be heavy without the aid of magic at ten o’clock.”

“*I’m* moving? Not *we’re* moving?”

“Yes, *I’m* moving. It’s my flat. I’ve signed the tenancy agreement and bought all the furniture. Ron’s only staying in it until he finds a suitable place of his own.” She tapped the folded property advertisements from the Daily Prophet sitting on top of her pile of actionable papers. “The selection is quite thin at present in his budget range, but he mentioned something about nearly walking in on his sister *in flagrante delicto* in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. I’ve taken pity on him.”

Harry’s cheeks colored. “Does Ron know he’s not really moving in?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Obviously.”

“God, do you do that to this one?” Harry jerked his head towards the empty desk on the other side of the room. “I’ll bet you do. Do it when he gets here, I want to see.”

“I believe Molly’s bringing lunch round just after,” Hermione said, ignoring him. “Around noon.”

“You’re right. That definitely doesn’t sound like Ron’s moving in for real.” Harry walked with his hands jammed in his pockets to the empty work table in the center of the room and leaned back against it. “How’s it going with Malfoy, anyway? Are you regretting that hiring decision yet?”

Hermione finished filling out the third page of a budget request form and moved on to the fourth. “It wasn’t my hiring decision.”

“You’ve only just turned twenty and they gave you an entire department.”

“A comprehensively ravaged department with no remaining records and no functional equipment, that nobody else wanted. But we have been generously given—” she counted off on her fingers “—parchment we have to ration out like it’s edged in real gold leaf, chipped desks infused with the troubling smell of turpentine, and chairs that squeak no matter how many spells we’ve applied to prevent them from doing so. The power is intoxicating.”

“They did let you hire whoever you wanted.” He scratched at the day-old stubble under his chin. “Malfoy’s the one you actively chose.”

“His N.E.W.T.’s were unmatched, besides my own. And you weren’t at school with us when we went back last year.”

Harry pushed off the table and inched towards Hermione’s desk again. “Gin said he was like a ghost. She hardly knew he was there.”

“He was. It was—” Hermione bit back the word *sad*. “The point is, I believe his contrition is entirely genuine. He’s changed. We all have.”

“I should imagine so. Kingsley said you really staked your reputation advocating for him. Vouched for him not using Time Turners for genocidal purposes and so forth.”

“There’s a bit of a gap between being brought up with odious attitudes about blood purity and actively wanting to murder people, if the number of Slytherins who testified against their own parents postwar gives us anything to go on. Anyway, we don’t have Time Turners.”

Harry picked up an assembly drawing off the end of the work table, held it up and pointed at the neat block print in the upper right corner. It read, "Time Turner".

"We don't have them *yet*," said Hermione.

Just then the lock on the door to the laboratory beeped, and Draco walked in. He wore his daily uniform of a neat black suit with a button up shirt and dark tie, his hair tidily combed, but longer at the top and looser than he wore it at school. He carried a satchel over his shoulder and a coat draped over his arm.

He paused in the doorway and looked between Hermione and Harry as though he were deliberating whether to pull his wand out of his pocket to prepare for a duel, or turn around and go running back towards the lifts.

"Good morning, Malfoy," said Hermione.

Draco's shoulders relaxed marginally. He crossed the room and tossed his coat over the back of his chair and his satchel down on his desk. "Good morning, Granger." His eyes remained trained on Harry. "Potter."

"Malfoy."

Draco sniffed the air. "Has Gemma sent Smith with a roast chicken again?"

"I believe so," said Hermione.

Harry watched Draco settle into his work day, then turned his attention back to the pie carrier. He tucked a fingertip under the lid and began to lift it.

"I said, don't touch my pie." Hermione swiveled her chair towards him.

Harry leaned in close to the carrier and drew in a deep breath. "Smelling is not touching."

"Get out of my lab."

"*Your* lab?" said Harry. "Do you hear that, Malfoy?"

Draco didn't respond. He sat down in his chair, pulled open a drawer, drew out a roll of blueprint and spread it open on his desk.

Harry shrugged. "You coming, Malfoy?"

"Coming to what?" Draco didn't bother looking up.

"The pie contest."

At that, Draco lifted his head from his parchment. He stared back at Harry from his seat as though he'd started shouting at him in Welsh.

"The what?"

"The pie contest," said Hermione.

"The pie contest." Draco narrowed his eyes.

"Yes," said Harry. "It's a contest to see who can say 'pie contest' the most."

Hermione leveled a glare at him. “Why are you still in my lab? Has crime ebbed so substantially that your office no longer requires your services?”

“Sadly, no. I’ll see you at—” Harry looked between Draco and Hermione and waited. “The pie contest.”

“Out. Immediately, or Ron stays and your ability to commit sexual misdeeds on food preparation and eating surfaces in your own home narrows substantially.”

At that, Harry hustled to the door.

Once it had clicked shut behind him, the room was silent except for the scratching of Draco and Hermione’s quills.

After a quarter of an hour, Draco’s chair squealed as he leaned back in it.

He cleared his throat.

“Yes, Malfoy?” Hermione kept her eyes on her writing.

“A pie contest.”

“I believe we’ve firmly established that’s what it is.”

“And you want me to come to it.”

Hermione’s hand stopped moving. She set down her quill, and turned around to look at him.

He was pale as always, and deathly serious, but something in his expression made her feel a bit soft and runny inside, like pie filling.

“I would like you to, yes.” She folded her hands in her lap, and hoped she looked as sincere as she felt. “Very much.”

He looked at the squat basket on Hermione’s desk. “What is that?”

“It’s a pie carrier.”

“A pie carrier,” Draco repeated. “And there’s a pie in it.”

“Yes.”

“That you’ve made.”

“I have made it, yes,” said Hermione.

“What sort?”

“Blueberry. I pick them in August and put them under a freezing charm.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and furrowed his brow.

“And this pie”—he pointed at the basket—“will be competing against other pies.”

“It will. It’s a fundraiser, first and foremost, but we’ve also put it together as a kind of interdepartmental team building, boost-the-spirits event.”

Draco's eyes grew tense with revulsion and he leaned back farther in his chair.

"It's all in good fun," said Hermione. "Rather like . . . baking Quidditch."

The corner of Draco's mouth twitched.

In the ten months Hermione spent at Hogwarts with Draco making up for a ruined seventh year, she had never once seen him smile. And in their three months working together in the Department of Mysteries, he'd smiled once, perhaps twice, and only ever when he thought she wasn't looking.

"Baking Quidditch," he repeated.

"I should think it's rather more interesting than actual Quidditch, but yes. I know you like sweets, and—"

"I don't like sweets." He pushed himself away from her, his chair scraping against the marble floor.

Hermione glanced at the drawer in his desk he kept stocked with foil-wrapped chocolates.

"Alright. But it's only a Galleon, and you get a sample of every pie entered. I'm sure there will be chocolate cream—"

"Every pie?" His chair protested as he shifted his weight forward again.

"That's right."

"And I judge them?"

"You vote, yes."

He steepled his fingers under his chin and considered. "Do I have to vote for yours?"

"Only if you want to. I'd want you to be honest, of course."

"But we're—" he gestured between the two of them "—coworkers. I feel like that would obligate me to you. Influence my decision."

"We're all adults here. Just be honest. You like the pie you like. No one's going to hold it against you—certainly not me."

He looked over at her, direct and earnest and wary all at once.

"It's only pie."

"Yes, Malfoy. It's only pie."

"Do you often make pie when you're in distress, Miss Granger?"

Hermione considered. "I suppose that I do."

"And you roll..."

"Not like that!" Hermione pulled her hands back as she felt the impulse to grab the rolling pin out of Roland Weasley's hands. "That's too hard. The butter's supposed to be suspended in the dough. You're crushing away at it like you're running short on time in a Potions final."

"Why is it so *cold*?" Roland laughed as he flattened the dough with the pin. "I can't feel anything in my fingertips anymore."

"Of course you can, don't be ridiculous. It's the mildest cooling charm imaginable. Here, like this."

Hermione pushed her way between Roland and the work table in the kitchen at Bugg-Buntley Hall, and took up the rolling pin. "Firm and decisive, but you shouldn't be *crushing*."

Roland, a full head and then some taller than Hermione, placed his hand beside the pool of flour dusting the table, and leaned over her shoulder. "Not crushing," he said, sounding not entirely serious. "I see. Firm. Decisive."

Hermione suppressed a laugh. "You look absurd in that apron, you know."

Roland glanced down at himself. When they'd entered the kitchen with a basket weighted down with berries, he'd removed his jacket, rolled up his shirt sleeves, and tied a knee-length apron in striped linen over his trousers and waistcoat.

"This is one of my better suits, and we're rolling here, *quite* firmly, *quite* decisively . . ."

Hermione picked up a pinch of flour in her fingertips and tossed it behind her. It landed in a spray of white over the midnight blue shoulder of his waistcoat.

She bit at her lip to stop the laughter threatening to break loose.

"You did not, Miss Granger."

"I'm afraid that I did."

"I see. You've given me no choice."

"No choice in what—"

Hermione pinched her eyes shut as Roland, fingertip dipped in flour, swiped over the tip of her nose and then her chin. Firmly. Decisively.

"You *absolute*—" she began.

Roland leaned forward and spoke in a low voice. "I'm afraid if you engage in this conflict any further, your butter is going to warm up, Miss Granger."

Hermione wiped at her nose and chin with her wrist, blinking at a curl of hair falling into her eye.

Roland's long, clever, flour-white fingers pushed it back from her forehead and tucked it over her ear.

She rolled the dough.

She swallowed.

Firmly.

Decisively.

They made a pair of pies, sticky purple-black bubbling out of their insides and onto their gleaming golden brown tops. Leaving them to cool on iron trivets on the work table, Roland retired to the drawing room to manage his correspondence while Hermione made her way upstairs again with a copy of *Entheogenic Potionery* tucked under her arm.

She was surprised to find William Avery in the hallway outside of Draco's room, speaking in a low voice to Healer Bartholomew.

"Miss Granger," William said as she approached. "I came to see how your brother is getting on. Healer Bartholomew informs me that his progress is encouraging."

"Is it?" Hermione turned to Bartholomew, her stomach churning with anticipation. "Have there been any changes?"

Bartholomew shook his head. "Not in awareness, but his vital signs have stabilized to an unexpected degree. I've put in place several experimental spells of my own invention that I believe are informative about his internal progress. I remain cautiously optimistic that we can anticipate signs of consciousness."

"I understand that Cressida's been indispensable." William tucked his hands casually in his pockets, but looked at Bartholomew with an interest he wasn't able to fully conceal.

"She has. Would you like to come in and speak to her about it yourself, Mr. Avery?"

William shook his head. "I've only stopped by to inquire. I've promised my brothers each a game of chess this afternoon, and if I don't follow through there will be an uproar."

Hermione smiled, recollecting Charles and John Avery. The idea of them playing at Wizard's Chess with the long-suffering William beggared the imagination. "How are your brothers? Fully recovered, I hope?"

"Incorrigible as always. I believe Mother's put all three of those rogues under permanent buoyancy enchantments."

"Wholly understandable."

He rolled his eyes to the side and muttered, "All four of us, more like. I ought to see if I'm still capable of putting my head under in the bath."

"I've baked a pair of pies with Mr. Weasley. When you've made your way to the drawing room, you ought to have a slice with your tea."

William lifted an eyebrow. "You've made a baker of Rolly, have you? Singular."

"I won't claim to have made him anything more than a novitiate. He does show an admirable ability to mix cinnamon and blueberries in a bowl without tipping too much over the rim."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"I'll head down with you, Mr. Avery," said Healer Bartholomew. "I've missed my tea, and a slice of pie would be most welcome."

Bartholomew led the way down the stairs, and William sprang after him, relaxed and athletic and full of all the life and energy of youth.

In the sickroom, that same energy seemed to have drained away entirely from Draco. He was pale as the sheets he slept under.

Cressida sat at the desk in the corner of the room. When Hermione entered, she hastily folded the rectangle of parchment she was writing on and tucked the document into her pocket.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger." She stood and smoothed her hands over her skirt. Her cheeks were painted with a deep blush. "I was only taking some notes on the patient's progress." She glanced at the door with clear anxiety.

Hermione's brow wrinkled. "Of course."

Cressida nodded.

An overlong silence stretched out between them, during which Cressida shifted from one foot to the other, and seemed to examine the wainscot. She also blinked several times, like she had something stuck in her eye. Hermione half expected her to lift her chin up, open her eyes and ask Hermione if she could see an eyelash floating across her cornea. She did not expect Cressida to burst into tears and cover her face with both hands, and yet, that's what she did.

Hermione stood stock still by the door, looking around for support from other quarters that did not seem to be forthcoming.

"Shall I fetch one of your sisters, Miss Cressida?" Hermione asked, pointing back over her shoulder. "Or your mother?"

"Oh!" Cressida cried even harder. "Not my mother, *please!*"

"Alright." Hermione considered. "Your father, perhaps?"

At that, Cressida actually fell to the floor, her shoulders heaving.

"I've done something terrible, Miss Granger." Her voice was ragged and sopping.

Hermione considered the possibilities. Realizing that puzzling over Cressida's potential transgressions with the detachment of a personal computer wasn't what was called for in the moment, she walked to her and knelt on the floor beside her.

She reached out and patted the crown of the girl's luminous straw-colored hair. "Don't cry." Hermione said it to be kind, and also because she wanted Cressida to stop.

"I'm so very sorry, Miss Granger. I don't know what came over me."

Hermione was flummoxed. "You're sorry? To *me*?"

Cressida lifted her face from her hands, and Hermione was genuinely startled.

Her dark brown eyes were downturned in sorrow, and tears streaked her cheeks, but she looked like

she'd been professionally made up to conduct tragical weeping behind a Vaseline-slicked lens in a golden age Hollywood film.

She was a stunningly beautiful crier.

"Yes, to *you*," Cressida said with a prim hiccup. "To your brother."

With that, she slapped her palms back over her eyes and recommenced the sobbing.

"I'm afraid you'll have to explain." Hermione sat back on her heels and waited.

By way of answer, Cressida reached into her skirt pocket, pulled out the rectangle of paper and thrust it at Hermione.

Hermione unfolded it, and began to read.

There was no date and no name signed to it, either in the place for the recipient or the sender, and only a handful of lines.

You will forgive me—you must forgive me, or forgive whoever writes this letter, for I am not myself!—in my boldness in declaring unequivocally and without reserve that in these mere hours of our acquaintance, I have learned to love you.

The distance that parts us now is so slight that it vanishes, and becomes nothing. Know that you have only to overcome the least barrier, to bound this low and unencumbering wall, and give me but a word—a glance—and I am yours.

Hermione stared at it. She read through it twice, then a third time, flipped it over to see if it continued, then at last looked up at Cressida's lovely, tear-lined face, and understood.

"Oh, Merlin, Cressida. You can't give this to him."

Cressida sobbed noisily. "I *know*."

Hermione bit at a thumbnail and considered. "I don't mean to malign Malf—" Hermione shook her head. "*Draco*, but he's not really suited to you. Not to anyone, as far as I can tell."

Hermione hadn't thought it was possible for Cressida's eyes to look any more pathetic, but they managed it.

"No." Cressida shook her curls. "He's far too intelligent and gentlemanlike."

"Good lord!" Hermione grimaced. "He's not gentlemanlike at all. He's smarmy, and full of himself, and a *ridiculous* flirt. Everyone's in love with him. It's outrageous—oh, *damn*."

Cressida had flopped forward and mashed her dewy starlet face into Hermione's shoulder.

"Here." Hermione pushed Cressida away as gently as she could manage. "Let's destroy this—" she nodded at the letter "—and no one will ever be the wiser. Just don't write anymore declarations. I suppose you have a reputation to consider."

"I know, *I know*," Cressida burbled. "I don't know what's come over me."

“Don’t worry. It seems to come over plenty of witches.”

“It’s only that he’s so *particularly* brilliant, and witty, and oh, Miss Granger, your brother is the most *beautiful*—”

Hermione scowled. “I suppose, but when you take into account the dietary habits, and the general attitude—”

“—and so very, very kind.”

Hermione snorted.

“When I arrived at the Averys’ to help with the little boys, he was . . .” Cressida trailed off and stared into the middle distance as though haunted by a terrible vision. She turned her eyes to Hermione. “He was wet.” Her voice fell to a whisper. “He flipped his hair.”

“No, you have to ignore the hair.”

“His shirt was soaked through. It was clinging to—” Cressida sucked in a staccato breath and was unable to finish.

Hermione nodded. “Please understand that I empathize entirely. I don’t know why they insist on getting themselves wet from time to time. It’s a problem I have no ready solution to.”

“I know it’s inexcusable—it’s wicked and monstrous—and I did try to avert my eyes while Healer Frederickson and I dressed him for bed, but his body, Miss Granger. His *thighs*.” Cressida’s eyes opened wide. “His—”

“Stop right there, Miss Cressida. We’ll speak no more about thighs.”

Hermione stood and held a hand down to help Cressida up.

“I can assure you that my brother and whatever parts you’ve seen of him are not worth another thought.” She hauled Cressida to her feet, then clutched the letter to her own plush dryad’s bosom. “You must resist these feelings. Even if he wasn’t an unapologetic rake, he probably has someone very specific stashed away in that absurd mind of his for whenever he’s ready to stop moistening himself and flopping his hair at innocent women.”

Cressida wound up for another round.

“No! Please, no more crying! I only mean that his parents—” Hermione waved her hand “—*our* parents, his and my parents are the same parents—had quite rigid expectations at one time.”

“Are your and Mr. Granger’s parents deceased?”

“No, they’re—” Hermione thought about Australia and Azkaban. “They’re out of the area at present. But their influence remains, I’m sure.”

Cressida pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at her cheeks. “Please, *please*, Miss Granger, swear to me you won’t tell a soul about this.”

“I won’t. Here.” Hermione pulled her wand from her cleavage. “Let’s destroy the letter, and neither of us need ever breathe another word about it.”

Just at that moment, the door to the bedroom creaked on its hinges.

“Merlin.” Hermione pulled the book from under her arm and slammed the letter beneath its front cover.

“Hello, ladies!” It was Healer Frederickson. “How is our patient?”

Cressida hiccuped, and Hermione moved to block Frederickson’s view of her exquisite, desolate, tear-stained face.

“Do you like pie, Healer Frederickson?” Hermione asked.

“Naturally!” he answered. “Is there some to be had?”

The theme of the rest of the afternoon was tea and slices of Hermione and Roland’s pie.

"It's exquisite, Miss Granger."

The sun was making a long-winded and theatrical descent towards the brow of the soft hill to the west of Bugg-Buntley Hall. On the bench beside her in the garden, Roland's cheek caught the golden and unhurried light.

"It's the blueberries," said Hermione, scraping a slick of ink-dark filling from the dessert plate with her fork.

"Not only the blueberries."

On the lawns below, Isadora, Cassandra and Penelope played at a game of bowls in the torpid heat of the afternoon, while Sir Thomas sat in the grass beside his wife watching his cats cavort after a charmed feather.

Hermione turned away from Roland. Beside the bench, the light flared across the edges of the yellow roses.

"I believe it's your firm and decisive rolling." There was a laugh behind his words. He paused, his fork clinking against the edge of the porcelain plate. "You were entirely correct before."

Hermione turned back to him.

"In what sense?"

The sun set his hair, his brow, the upper curve of his lip aglow.

"It's life-altering."

That night, after Cressida left the sickroom for her own bed, Hermione slid again into the space beside Draco.

She administered the potions she'd been directed to give, then folded her hand into his.

"You ought to wake up so you can see what a mess you've made."

She squeezed his hand hard, and with the fire dying in the grate, she fell asleep.

By the time she woke, the front line of dawn had far advanced, and streaks of pale yellow light cut through the gaps in the curtains.

The fire had gone entirely cold in the night, and the room was commensurately frigid. Lying on the outside of the coverlet, Hermione shivered in her thin chemise. She watched Draco's chest move with his breath, slow and steady, his charts settled into a regular, monotonous hum.

For all its daytime clamor, the Hall slept silently at night. Its earliest risers were Isadora and Sir Thomas, the former quiet and the latter prone to cheerful, off-key whistling and thumping on his heels down the hall. Hermione listened, and hearing nothing, she shifted carefully off the bed, lifted the coverlet, and snuggled herself back underneath. Deliberately, cautiously, she shifted closer to Draco and tucked her feet up into his side.

He was warm, even through the fabric of his nightshirt, and heated to extreme comfort under the bedclothes beside him, Hermione's eyes drifted closed again.

If she slept, she was unaware of it, but she felt as though she were returning from someplace far away when her eyes snapped open at the sensation of a balmy hand slipping over the tops of her feet.

Draco's head lolled to the side.

His eyes were open.

They remained half-lidded, bleary and holding Hermione's face in unstable focus. A hint of the purple and yellow bruising that had bloomed around his eyelids over the course of the first day remained, and the whites of his eyes were tinted with the fading pink of broken blood vessels, but his irises were clear and grey-blue.

He breathed in, and then out—a contented sigh, like he'd woken early on a drowsy Sunday—then said in an insubstantial, sandpaper voice, “Your feet are freezing.”

“*Oh, God.*” She pulled her feet away from his side. “Draco.”

She tried to gather her thoughts—to determine what to say, what to ask, how to ascertain his state of mind, his degree of awareness, his level of recovery. As her mind cycled through the possibilities, Draco rolled fully onto his side, draped his arm around her waist, and pulled her body flush against his.

Hermione's mouth fell open in a gasp of surprise, but before she could say anything, he bent his head down and kissed her.

“This tastes incredible.”

Hermione flushed with pleasure. "Thank you."

"Truly, Granger, what's not to like about this? I don't understand."

"It's alright, Malfoy. Smith's pie won fair and square."

"Gemma's pie, you mean. I don't for a moment buy that git and his blasted roast chickens chopping rhubarb." Draco, sitting cross legged on his own desk, stabbed his fork into the floral patterned ceramic pie dish he held balanced between his knees. He drew up a monumental bite of Hermione's blueberry pie and shoved it petulantly into his mouth.

"Gerald Smith is perfectly capable of making a winning pie," said Hermione.

"I should say so. He has pie hands." Blaise Zabini, stretched out on his back on the work table in the center of the lab, raised his hands in the air and wiggled his immaculately kept fingertips.

Draco swallowed. "Pie hands."

"You know what I mean," said Blaise. "Good for rolling."

"Are we to have half of Slytherin House in the laboratory while we work?" Hermione turned in her chair and frowned while Zabini tucked his arms back behind his head. "Let me know if Pansy's on her way down so I can dress myself to her standards."

Draco pointed his fork at her. "This attitude from the woman who had Harry Potter in here sniffing her pie just this morning."

Blaise rolled over onto his side and lifted up on his arm. "Hold on, what was Potter doing to Granger's pie in here this morning?"

"He was practically buried in it." Draco polished off a third of the last wedge in the pan and forked up the lion's share of the rest. "You'd think it was going out of style."

Blaise peered at him. "He's not the only one."

"Have you tasted Granger's pie, Blaise?"

"No, I'm sorry to say I haven't had the pleasure."

"Well you ought to. I've tasted quite a few pies, and hers is something very special. I'd let you have a go, but I'm afraid I'm rather attached to it now." Draco licked the tines of the fork. "It's life-altering."

"I imagine it's mostly Weasley gets to eat Granger's pie."

Draco scowled and set down his fork.

"Speaking of the Weasel," Blaise continued. "I heard you're setting up to play house together, Granger."

Draco began to cough.

"You alright, mate?" Blaise asked.

"Fine." Draco reached for the teacup on his desk.

Hermione returned to her work and leaned forward in her chair, which made a sharp and prolonged creak in protest. “Where did you hear that, Zabini?”

Blaise sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the work table. “I have my sources. I can’t say I ever imagined you and Weasley beyond one or two of those shags you have with someone just to see what it’s like between the two of you.”

Hermione pursed her lips. She was pushing down harder than she ought with her quill, and it snapped. “Blast it.”

“You’re moving in with him?” Draco asked.

Hermione took a blade from her desk drawer and reshaped the point of her quill. “He’s moving into mine on a temporary basis. Anyway, what difference could it possibly make to either of you?”

The room behind her was silent for so long that Hermione turned around to look.

Draco sat with Hermione’s pie dish still in his lap. He had laid down his fork, and he was staring into the bottom of the pan as though he could divine his future in the crumbs.

Blaise looked between Draco and Hermione.

“What?” she asked.

Neither of them said anything.

“Speak up! I’m all ears. Tell me exactly what’s wrong with me and Ron.”

Draco’s brow furrowed, and he shook his head. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Hermione started to turn back to her desk, but he continued.

“But don’t you think—” He stopped and considered his words. “It’s just that we’re all still very young. And your goals seem quite different—”

Hermione felt her cheeks burn. “No one asked you, Malfoy.”

“You just did!”

“What do you know about my goals? We’ve worked together for *three months*.”

Three months where we’ve talked of almost nothing but our hopes and dreams for this department and, by extension, ourselves, she thought.

Draco’s face turned stony, and he set the pie pan aside, still unfinished. “You’re right. I suppose I don’t have the slightest idea. You have my sincerest apologies.”

From his seat on the work table, Blaise cleared his throat.

“So are we talking literal pie here, or was Potter all up in Granger’s—”

“Who let you in here, Blaise?” Draco cut him off, jumping down from his desk. “Because it certainly wasn’t me.”

"You left the door unlocked." Blaise pointed at the pie dish on Draco's desk. "Are you going to finish that? I wouldn't mind a taste."

The kiss she'd laid against the corner of Draco's mouth the day of the race had been a sisterly gesture, given for luck, much good that it did.

She tried to find something fraternal in the way Draco brushed his tongue against the swell of her lower lip before sucking on it. She'd never had a brother, but no—this wasn't the sort of sickbed greeting she imagined was standard procedure within families.

When he drew his mouth away for a fraction of a second, she laid her palms against his chest and said, "Draco."

He took that as a sign of encouragement. He not only intensified his efforts at the site of their rejoined mouths, he also introduced the idea of his hand smoothing across her belly.

She leaned as far back as she was able, breathing hard. "What's my name?"

He disengaged at last, and raised his eyebrows. "Hello," he said with piqued interest. "You minx. I *knew* you'd want to order me about."

"*What?* I need you to tell me my name, truly, it's not—"

"*Hermione.*"

He said it on a lush and humid breath, his eyes wavering in their already drowsy hold on what was right in front of him. Before she could explain that she hadn't meant for him to say her name with quite that degree of sensual heat, he leaned fully over her, dropped his eyes closed, bunched the side of her chemise in his fist and swept his tongue past her still open lips. He tasted the way the purple potion smelled, like tart cherry and clandestine sugar.

She tilted her head back, desperate for air around his mouth. "You're awake."

"Mmm." He seemed committed to what he was doing. "Good morning."

"Good morning."

Hermione gasped as his mouth left hers, and his parted lips searched over her chin and down to her throat, then further, to the dip at the base of her neck.

"*My God, Hermione.*" He traced his lips over the length of her collarbone, hovering a fraction of a millimetre over her, applying the merest hint of touch against the tips of the fine hairs that rose up from her skin. From there, he shifted up the line of her neck again, until he reached the tender patch of skin under her ear. He placed a soft, slight lick there with the point of his tongue.

Desire boarded Hermione's body like a band of pirates.

"*Draco,*" she said with near-hysterical urgency. "You're brain damaged."

His mouth paused just as it began its diminutive licking at the lowest curve of her earlobe. He lifted his head to look down on her, and frowned. "*That's* rude."

"No." Hermione gripped at his shoulders. "Your brain is damaged. You've struck your head while riding a broom."

His brow knitted, and he shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense. I'm incredible on a broom."

She pushed at him, with an admitted and absolute lack of pressure, to no effect. "It was a very old broom."

Draco blinked as though clearing his eyes. He sat up more completely on his elbow, and peered around the half-lit room. Dawn was wrapping up its opening act for the day, and Draco took in the space, with its velvet curtains, pastoral paintings, woven tapestries and antique furnishings. The furrow between his brows deepened. He looked down at Hermione's night dress. "What in Merlin's name are you wearing?" He looked at his own. "What am *I* wearing? Is this a dress?"

Hermione could only stare.

"It looks like a poor person's dress. From old person times." His nose wrinkled with displeasure. "Am I poor? Am I old?" He rolled over onto his side and ran his hand down his chest and abdomen. "No, I'm not." He blinked again, and looked around the room with greater discernment. "Are we at a Renaissance Faire, Granger?" He looked back at her, and his brow lifted. "I have to say, of the many scenarios I've imagined us landing in bed together, a Renaissance Faire was not one of them."

"We're not at a Renaissance Faire." Hermione could feel her cheeks coloring. "And, Draco—" He'd started to dip his mouth back down to her ear, and she pushed at his shoulder until he sat up again. "We didn't sleep together."

He narrowed his eyes and looked down at Hermione in her chemise. "We're in bed right now." He ran the tip of his finger over the delicate lace edging of her collar. "You've got lace bits on. And I'm not wearing any pants."

"Well—yes, we've *slept* together—"

"How many did you get?" He shut his eyes and shook his head. "No, don't answer that. My performance is far better when I'm sober. I'll show you." Ignited with fresh conviction, he brought his mouth down to her throat and sucked on it with light pressure.

"*Oh, God.*" She clamped a hand over her mouth and closed her eyes tight, trying to gain her composure, but as he worked at her skin with his lips and tongue she heard herself whimper. "We've *slept* together, these last two nights—*oh!*"

"*Two* nights?" he muttered against her skin. "I can accept, however grudgingly, that I've managed to black out on one occasion, but two is ridiculous. Is this nice?"

"Merlin help me, it is—no! That's not what I mean. We *slept*. We've never had sex."

He continued to work his way up her neck, then placed kisses across her jaw and chin until he found her mouth again.

"Mmmf," she said, with meaning.

"We haven't?" he asked between deep, exploratory forays past the borders of her teeth. "Do we not do this? I feel like we do this."

"No, we never do."

"Why not?"

“Because you want to do this with *everyone*.”

He looked taken aback. “Everyone? That seems excessive.”

“I certainly think it is.”

He paused in thought, then finally shrugged, and when he crashed his mouth against hers again, he shifted a hand beneath the sheets until he found the hem of her chemise. Without further ado, he smoothed his palm over the side of her thigh, along her hip and bare waist, then came to rest against her ribs just below her breast. To her horror, she arched her back and made a pettish, whining sound, which served to encourage his hand higher and make him answer her with impatient noises of his own.

“Draco, I’m your sister,” she said, breathing hard as his mouth drew away from hers in a kind of feint before vigorously re-engaging. She was having a hard time keeping her eyes open.

As her words settled in, his hand stopped in its quest for more intimate flesh. He pulled back and regarded her. “No, I don’t think you are.”

“I am.”

He frowned. “But I want to have sex with you.” He resumed kissing her, and his hand squeezed tentatively at the underside of her breast.

“Cressida will be here any minute,” she said, trying another tack.

“What’s a Cressida?” he asked.

“One of the blondes.”

He didn’t release her this time, only shook his head without taking his mouth away from hers. “I prefer spicy little brunettes.”

“But she’ll be joining us any second.”

“No, thank you. I don’t want her to be a part of this. I don’t like that.”

“You have orgies every weekend, I—*oh!*” Hermione cried out softly as his hand made its move. She wanted to slam her hands back over her mouth.

“Orgies?” He drew back yet again, incredulous. “That’s too much work. Too much body. I just want one body.” He looked down at his own hand as it pulled appreciatively at her breast. “I want *this* one.” With that, he dove back into her mouth.

She turned away in an attempt to regain some sense. He reoriented himself to her ear, where he began nipping and sucking at the soft skin of her earlobe.

“It’s because it’s the one that’s right in front of you,” she said, panting hard.

There was an awareness rolling around in the back of the odds and ends drawer of her mind that the way she’d begun pulling at his hair was a singularly ineffective way of communicating that he ought to stop.

“Mmm, it is, isn’t it.” His hand quested across her sternum to pay a visit to the opposite breast. He pinched it.

“*Oh, God*, you’re a sex zombie.” She was breathless and still tugging in wanton bursts at the sides of his hair.

He looked up at her and wrinkled his nose. “I don’t think those words should be next to one another.”

Pulling out of Hermione’s grip, he slid down her body mouth-first, leaving a trail of wet marks along the center of her chemise. “Merlin, I want to go down on you. Scratch that, I’m going to live down here. I’m moving in right now. Have all my owls forwarded to *between Granger’s thighs*.”

His mouth slid over the curve of her abdomen below her navel, and her entire body lit up like a Christmas tree.

“You smell...” he mumbled hungrily. “You smell...” He stopped. “Why can’t I smell you?” He pressed his face against her belly, breathed in, then did the same in the space between her hip bone and her thigh, then he moved up and crushed his nose straight into her armpit. He huffed, twice. “What the hell, Granger?”

Finally, he pulled his hand out from underneath Hermione’s chemise and brought it to his forehead. “God *damn*, my head hurts.”

Hermione’s chest heaved. Through the haze of shock and incendiary lust, she heard footsteps in the carpeted length of the hall.

“Malfoy! Someone’s coming.”

Before he could react, she pulled out of his arms. She made a hard, fast military roll off the edge of bed. Once she was on the floor, she tugged her chemise back down over her waist.

Simultaneously, she blessed and cursed her woefully frayed knickers.

“No!” he whined, reaching one of his long arms after her. “Come back up here, you saucepot. It doesn’t matter that you don’t have any smell whatsoever. I won’t hold it against you.”

“You’re my brother,” Hermione said urgently, crawling towards the chaise. “I don’t care if you believe me or not.”

“I don’t.”

Hermione found her dressing gown tossed over the side of the chaise, and drew it around herself. “Alright, don’t believe me. But you have to say you are to the people who are about to walk in. Draco, *please*. It’s terribly important.”

“If I say I’m your brother, will you come back to bed so we can have sex?”

“No,” Hermione hissed. “Absolutely not. We work together, and you’re a *very loose man*—”

“I don’t feel loose. I feel unloose. The opposite of loose.”

“Women are all over you, Malfoy. And a fair few men. It’s ridiculous. You wear these trousers—”

“Aha!” Draco sat up in the bed. “*That* I do know about.” He pointed at her. “You like my trousers.”

Hermione flushed scarlet. “No, I do not.”

“And my hair. You like my hair. You love it, actually.” He pulled his hand through the disheveled two inches of hair he had sprouted overnight, and frowned again. “Sweet merciful mother of— what’s been done to it?”

“You’ve been asleep for two—”

At that moment, someone knocked at the door, and then opened it.

Cressida carried the pot of salve on its little tray, and she rounded the edge of the door to find Draco sitting up in his bed.

He leaned back and folded his hands over his lap.

“Hello. You must be the blonde.”

Cressida dropped the tray to the floor. “Mr. Granger!” Salve went spraying in unctuous globs up into the air and splattered over the back of the door. As the room took on the sharp smell of sap and citrus, Cressida rushed into action.

She was by Draco's bedside in a flash, taking his pulse by hand. She looked over his monitoring spells with a keen eye, and then went to the Floo. Within moments, Healer Bartholomew emerged through the hearth, bag in hand, fastening the buttons on his waistcoat.

Hermione grabbed her book from the chaise and withdrew from the room while Bartholomew and Cressida fussed over an amused and perplexed Draco. She’d left the memory potion in a drawer in the bureau in her room, and tossing her book on her bed, she slipped the bottle into the pocket of her dressing gown and rushed back across the hall.

Back in Draco's room, she found an unobtrusive position at the edge of a chair by the window.

Bartholomew shined a light from the tip of his wand into Draco’s eye. “Can you tell me your name?”

Draco lifted his brow with imperious confidence. "Draco Malfoy."

Bartholomew flicked a glance at Cressida, then looked over his shoulder at Hermione. “Are you connected with that family, Miss Granger?”

Hermione clutched at the skirt of her chemise. “Not at all.”

“That’s a bold faced lie, Granger,” said Draco. “You’ve known me since—”

“Is he going to be alright, Healer Bartholomew?” Hermione interrupted, shifting further forward in her chair.

Bartholomew frowned in thought. “I’m going to ask you a few more questions, Draco. Can you tell me what year it is?”

“Two thousand—”

In her chair, Hermione played at a desperate and rapid motion game of charades.

She swiped the edge of her hand across her throat, and when Draco stopped and looked, she flashed ten fingers, and then eight.

“Ten...eight,” said Draco. "It's ten eight."

Hermione shook her head.

“No, that’s not right.” Draco’s eyes narrowed while he considered her frantic gestures. “Eighteen?”

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, and flashed four fingers.

“Four?” said Draco. “Eighteen four?”

Hermione made an O with her fingers and thumb, then held up four fingers again.

“Oh! Eighteen oh-four.” Draco’s smug smile was short-lived, replaced almost immediately with a horrified grimace. “1804? I don’t like hearing that.”

Bartholomew looked grave. “Can you tell me who I am?”

Draco looked him over. “You look like someone I saw in *A Complete History of Wizarding Britain, Volume Three* once. Only you were in black and white and your mustache was much larger.”

“Can you tell me who that is?” Bartholomew indicated Hermione.

Draco smiled again, just as smug as before. “That’s my *sister*.” He winked at Hermione. “She likes to boss me around, but I think we ought to take turns.”

“Good,” said Bartholomew. “We’re going to run some spells in a moment, but I can tell you that this is extraordinary progress. Unprecedented, even. Miss Cressida, can you help me with the runes for the brain imaging spell, please?”

While Bartholomew and Cressida set about working a multi-phased spell over a large square of parchment on the table by the window, Hermione hurried to sit beside Draco on the bed. He immediately laid his hand over the upper part of her thigh.

“You need to take this,” she whispered, drawing the glass globe from her pocket and pushing it towards him. “Five drops, under the tongue. Quick, *please*. I’m not supposed to be giving you these potions.”

“Always such a rule breaker, Granger. As soon as it’s my turn, I’m going to take you over my—”

“No! There’s no time for that.”

“I would *absolutely* like us to make time for that.”

Hermione looked over her shoulder, then yanked the tiny cork from the bottle. “Open your mouth.”

Draco looked warily at the bottle. “What’s it going to do?”

“Just open your mouth, you wretched man.”

She expected more fight, but he rolled his eyes, dropped his jaw and lifted his tongue. Checking to ensure Bartholomew and Cressida were still engaged in their work, Hermione let five drops fall into Draco's mouth.

It did in fact have a powerful odor of cabbage, but Draco seemed not to notice it. He clapped his mouth shut, looked speculative for a moment, then his eyes squeezed tightly closed. He laid a hand over his forehead and slumped over on his elbow.

Hermione corked the bottle and secreted it away in her pocket before moving back to her chair in

the corner.

“We’re ready, Mr. Granger,” said Bartholomew.

“Mr. Granger?” Draco bit out. “What the blazes do you mean by—”

His face scrunched up even tighter as a wave of tension appeared to move through him.

"Draco?" Hermione dug at the heels of her palms with her fingernails.

"I believe we can expect some continued headaches," said Bartholomew.

Just as abruptly as Draco's discomfort had begun, he relaxed. He opened his eyes and looked around the room, first at Bartholomew, and then at Cressida, and at last, at Hermione. He was already pale, but any hint of color drained immediately from his face. He looked pointedly at her body in her thin chemise, then down at his own, then back to her again.

“What have I done?”

Hermione stood. Her body throbbed at the recollection of his hand below her chemise, and then burned with the shame of her own unambiguous desire. “Nothing to trouble yourself over. We’ve all fallen off our brooms at one time or another.”

His eyes grew round with horror. “I would never have—”

“Of course you wouldn’t. It’s alright. I’m going to dress now.”

"Hermione, I—"

"Please, don't worry. We don't ever have to mention it again."

Before he could say anything more, she passed through the door, leaving Draco in the capable hands of Cressida Longbottom.

She was unequal to the rank humiliation of remaining in Draco's presence for the rest of the day. She'd done nothing wrong, but in putting her cold feet against Draco's side, she'd thrown open a Pandora's box.

Her body ached after him.

They would return, no doubt, to the cottage once Draco was deemed well enough to be moved, but until then she could take refuge in the singular loveliness of the grounds of Bugg-Buntley Hall. The bower of the elm standing in the lawns beckoned, and she hid herself away there, leaning against the arm of the bench with her book unopened in her lap.

“May I disrupt you for just a moment, Miss Granger?” It was Roland again, sweeping away a branch with one hand.

“Please do.” Hermione sat up on the bench.

“I shan’t bother you for long.” He took a seat beside her. “I’ve only stopped by to say goodbye. I

leave for Devonshire presently.”

Hermione leaned forward in surprise. “Leaving? Will you come back?”

“I will. Before you even know that I’m gone.”

“I’m very glad to hear it.” Without warning, a yawn overtook her, and she laid her hand over her book.

“Miss Granger,” Roland began. He paused, and squinted through the branches. When he looked at her again, his eyes were searching and serious. He laid his hand over hers. “I’m more grateful to hear of your brother’s recovery than I can say.”

His hand was soft. It felt exotic and unknown and entirely familiar.

She turned her hand over, curled her fingers around his, and pressed. “Thank you. Will you return in time for the ball?”

“Of course.”

Hermione suddenly recollected the book. “Oh! I have something for you.” She pulled her hand from his, and held out the volume of *Entheogenic Potionery and the Alchemy of the Mind* that had been resting in her lap. “I made you a copy yesterday. I’d entirely forgotten about it until just now.”

“Indeed!” Roland took the book from her and stroked his hand over the cover. “Thank you, Miss Granger.”

“I’ve been struggling to understand its contents, but I believe the meaning is there for those who care to find it.”

“I shall endeavor to grasp any knowledge Miss Granger deems worthy of mastery.”

Hermione smiled. “Shall we discuss your conclusions when you’ve returned? At the ball?”

Roland rose from the bench, and held out his hand. Hermione hesitated, then laid her fingers across his.

Bending low, he pressed his lips to the back of her hand. He looked up at her through his dark lashes with an expression of unreserved interest. “At the ball.” His lips brushed against her skin as he spoke.

He dropped her hand and walked away backwards, his smile crooked and without artifice of any kind.

Hermione folded her hands in her lap. “You’re a flirt, Mr. Weasley.”

He laughed. “That implies a lack of fastidiousness, Miss Granger.” He lifted his brow. “Save me the first dance?”

Hermione nodded. “I shall.”

“Til then!”

“Til then.”

He bowed and turned away, whistling past the branches of the bower and into the sunlight, his book clutched in his hand.

Hot and tired, Hermione returned to the hall. It was, for the moment, quiet while the family stitched, read and, in Sir Thomas' case, softly snored on the chaise in the drawing room. She went upstairs, and as she passed by Draco's room, heard the low voices of Cressida and Healer Frederickson. Hermione's heart hitched in her chest at the sound of Draco himself, his voice amiable, helpful, and without a hint of agitation. She didn't pause to listen.

The windows of her own room faced north, and the space was dark, cool and soundless. She yanked at the edge of the white lawn fichu Margaret had tucked around her shoulders that morning, and sat down hard on her bed. Reaching between her traitorous, libidinous breasts, she pulled out the leather bag, tipped the Time Turner into her palm, and sifted through its parts. She set the pieces on the night table, beside the original copy of *Entheogenic Potionery and the Alchemy of the Mind*. She sighed, and flopped backwards on the bed.

Something tickled at the back of her memory.

An ill-conceived letter.

A silly girl aggrieved by the near-destruction of her own virtue.

The shelter of an obliging book.

She sat up.

Her skin prickled as she picked up the volume beside the bed and opened the front cover. The title page stared at her, plain and crisp.

There was nothing whatsoever inside.

Chapter End Notes

I can be found on [Tumblr](#).

The Ball

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Do I need clarity?"

Ron shrugged. "I'm probably not the right person to ask."

Hermione drummed her close-bitten fingernails against the clear glass top of the jewelry display case. It glowed with downlights whose purpose was to demonstrate exactly that: clarity. A lack of interior complications tucked so deep inside they need a keen eye aided by a jeweler's loupe to find them.

"I'm not convinced that outside of the lighting conditions in a jewelry case it's all that important," she said.

"It ought to be nice, though, Mione." Ron, leaning his hard-muscled frame against the glass, glanced up at the shop clerk, a young woman as lustrous as the plain gold wedding band they'd already priced for him. "We can afford clarity, Claire."

"If it's a question of budget, I will always advise a better quality, smaller—" Claire began, pushing at the sleeve of her black blazer above the coil key ring around her wrist.

"Our budget is 1,260 Galleons." Hermione pointed at a round-cut solitaire diamond in a four-pronged setting on a basic gold band. "That one seems a bit more practical than some of the others."

Claire reached into the case, pulled the ring from its cushion and checked its price tag before placing it on a black velvet mat on the counter. "This one is 775 Galleons. It has a point seven five carat stone, excellent cut, with the VVS1 rating we discussed. Pardon me." She sneezed into the crook of her arm, and her lacquered chignon didn't shift a millimetre.

"We can do 1,300 Galleons, though," said Ron.

"1,260," Hermione corrected.

"You're going to wear it for the rest of your life. It ought to be something you really fancy." He tapped the glass. "Get one like this, with the smaller diamonds at the side. It's a bit more flash."

"Have you set the date?" Claire looked between them with pleasant, professional interest.

"We're not engaged," said Hermione.

Claire shifted away from them by a degree. "Oh?"

"This is just the pre-shopping for the rings before the real shopping for the rings." Ron picked up the solitaire ring and slipped it over the tip of his little finger.

Sensing a sale wasn't in the cards, Claire's face, with its flawless ten-step-skincare complexion and jewel-case glow, fell. "I'll give you both a moment to look at this one, shall I?"

She slid along the counter and became absorbed in making microscopic rotations of the display stands of rings and bracelets inside a jewel case.

"She doesn't know about Phase Three of the five-year plan," Ron said out of Claire's earshot. "Now that we've successfully completed a full year of pre-engagement relationship counseling and done the ring budgeting, we're allowed to do the pre-shopping, then after this we'll do the shopping, and perhaps the post-shopping—"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"—and then," he continued, "I may propose at any time of my choosing between September and Christmas."

"You're not *allowed* anything, Ronald," she whispered.

"You know," he said, mouth pulling up at the corner, "that's just what I was saying to Sandra in our appointment the other day—"

She pushed at his shoulder. "You know what I mean."

He laid his hand over hers and pressed it.

A bell above the shop door chimed.

"Welcome to Wilcox and Abernathy." Claire broke off her rote greeting, and her perpetual half-smile became something more interested, bright, and hungry. "Miss Parkinson!"

Hermione watched Claire cross the shop to kiss the air next to Pansy Parkinson's genetic lottery-winning cheekbones.

Pansy wore a pair of black cigarette trousers and an over-sized menswear-style button-up shirt—which, on second glance, appeared to be an actual man's shirt. She looked immaculate, rendered at the same level of scrupulously carefree detail as the women in Hermione's fashion magazines.

Claire appeared to be on the same terms with Pansy as any clerk with a customer who comes in regularly and spends a great deal of money. She gripped Pansy's hand with limp upper class affection, then let it go. "Tea?"

Pansy lifted her enormous black sunglasses from her eyes and settled them atop of her head. "God, yes. I wasn't permitted a wink last night—" She stopped talking when she noticed Ron and Hermione.

"Hey, Pans." Ron waved at her half-heartedly.

Hermione turned to him. "'Pans'?" she mouthed.

"Yeah. What? She's been at lads' night for the past two months."

"*Pansy Parkinson* has been at lads' night." Hermione blinked. "Why do you even bother calling it lads' night?"

"It's for any sort of lad. Tall lads, short lads, lads who are ladies. Do you want to come?"

"No. Of course not."

Ron shrugged.

Hermione watched out of the corner of her eye as Claire brought Pansy a cup and saucer.

"What are we after today?" she asked, apparently prepared to get to work spending Pansy's money.

Pansy glanced at Ron and Hermione. "I'll take the earrings I had you hold back last week. Both pairs." Her eyes narrowed in thought, then she said, "And I need a watch."

"For yourself, or—?"

Pansy swallowed a sip of tea and shook her head. "Not for me."

While Claire began pulling specimens from the watch case, Ron leaned in close and kissed Hermione's shoulder.

"What was that for?" Hermione peered into the jewelry case.

"You know what we could do instead of all this?" he said quietly.

"What?"

"You could forget to take your potion for a day, or two, or ten"—he looked up through his eyelashes with calculated, waggish charm—"and I could go ahead and knock you up on accident like everyone else does with their first and third kids. We could take one of the ghastly family rings Mum's got her heart set on us using, and have a quick Ministry ceremony. Then we can spend some of the wedding money on two weeks of shagging and overpriced room service in the south of France." He kissed her shoulder again. "Our preventive couples therapy could be preventive *family* therapy."

"I can't take off for two whole weeks. Malfoy would blow up my lab and probably spread his Italian loafer curse all over the Ministry." Hermione frowned. "And good *Lord* you're broody."

"I am."

"We've discussed this. We don't even get to preconception steps until year nine of the ten-year—"

"No. I know." Ron shifted away and stood up to his full height. "I was only joking."

"It needs to be able to withstand getting wet." At the other end of the shop, Pansy turned a gold watch over and examined it.

"Will the gentleman be diving, or . . .?" Claire asked.

"I'm sure there will be an occasional complete soaking"—Pansy set the watch aside with an air of dismissal—"but it's more of an ongoing, high humidity situation."

"We can easily apply additional layers of waterproofing charms for an active lifestyle to any timepiece." Claire held out another watch, this one in white gold. "We also offer charms to protect against grit, dirt, and dust, if that applies."

"All of that applies in the extreme." Pansy picked up her tea cup, and turned towards Hermione and Ron. She glanced at the ring case where they stood, then gave them a thin, charm school smile that didn't meet her eyes.

"It seems that congratulations are in order."

Hermione shook her head, opening her mouth to protest, but Ron spoke first.

"Thanks very much." He pulled the solitaire ring off his pinkie, and took Hermione's left hand in

his. With care, he slipped the ring onto her finger.

"Look at that." He smiled at her. "First one you've tried on, and it's just your size."

Hermione twisted the ring from side to side.

"I'm concerned I'll get hung up on something in the lab. We have a lot going on in there."

"You could take it off for work, I suppose. Malfoy will probably only give you grief over it anyway. It's beautiful, but not exactly a priceless artifact from the vaults."

She snorted. "I'd love to see what Malfoy would come up with for an engagement. It would probably have a gem the size of a quail egg and involve a solid week of curse breaking."

Her skin pulled tight as she worked the ring back over her knuckle. She set it on the black velvet cushion in front of her.

"It's lovely." She sighed. "I do like it. Quite a lot."

"But?" asked Ron.

Hermione rubbed at her finger where the ring had chafed. "I'm just not sure that it's the right fit."

~~Dear Mr. Weasley,~~

~~Dear Roland,~~

~~Rolly,~~

~~I hope this doesn't disappoint you, but I didn't write that letter.~~

~~You're extremely handsome, and intelligent, and funny, and you seem very kind, but this could never have worked. I'm from the future.~~

~~I regret to inform you that you're the great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather of a man I've been to bed with.~~

"Oh, *God*."

Hermione cast an aggravated Vanishing spell at the parchment in front of her.

Tossing her quill down in frustration, she rose from the small desk in the corner of her room, and

made her way downstairs to breakfast.

Grix hovered in front of the stove, scooping oat bran porridge into bowls. At the dining table, Martin wrote in a small paperbound journal with a trembling hand.

"Sleep well back in your own bed, such as it is?" Grix set a bowl before Hermione, then pushed a dish of deep red strawberries closer to her. "Eat these up. The Hall grows the best strawberries in England, and I don't say that to blow smoke up Sir Thomas' backend. You've been under a lot of stress, and they'll keep you healthy."

Hermione dropped a berry into her mouth and bit down.

"Oh, *Merlin*, these are glorious." She grabbed a handful. "I did sleep well, thank you."

"Has our lad got his sniffer back up to snuff yet?" Martin asked, sipping at his green tea.

"I don't know. I was hoping he'd join us for breakfast, at least, but I knocked twice this morning and he didn't answer."

Grix frowned as he sat down at the table and spread his serviette across his lap. "That's two days of missed meals. I'll make you another tray to bring up and see if he does any better with it."

"Thank you very much."

Hermione polished off her strawberries in silence and made her way through half a bowl of oats before setting her spoon down. She tapped the thin handle of her teacup.

"What's on your mind, then?" asked Grix. He poured a spoonful of bee pollen granules onto his oats.

"I'm having trouble...expressing something."

"Are you, now?" Grix chuckled. "I find that surprising. But alright."

"I need to tell someone something, but I can't come right out with the truth of the matter."

"Do it allegorically. Loaves and fishes!" Martin waved his arm and sloshed a mouthful of tea over the rim of his cup. "Tell them you've fed five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, and four thousand with seven loaves and two fishes, and baked ten loaves with four score and seven fishes. They'll catch your meaning."

"Stick a fork in your fish loaves." Grix cleaned away the spill with a wave of his hand.

"I need to be clear enough to prevent things from going further than they already have. At the same time, I can't come right out and say what I really mean." Hermione huffed in frustration. "There are reputations, and feelings, and potential ill will. I can't say too much, but can I say enough to get the point across?"

Grix looked at Martin, then back at Hermione. He jerked his thumb towards Martin. "You're making about as much sense as this one."

"I know." Hermione groaned and rubbed her eyes. "I suppose what I ought to say, and be very simple about it, is that there's been a mistake. And that I'm very sorry to have misled anyone."

Martin nodded. "Apologize! And then be honest. He'll forgive you eventually."

"Here here. There's some sensible-sounding prognostication for you at last." Grix got up from the table, dropped his bowl in the sink, and began to gather breakfast things on a tray. He climbed onto a stepping stool, and pulled a paper-wrapped rectangle from a high cupboard. "Would your brother fancy a bit of chocolate?"

Martin craned his neck around to look. "Oh ho! I see you there!"

"No, you don't," said Grix. He held the packet up and looked at Hermione in inquiry.

"Thank you very much." She rose from the table. "I can certainly try."

"Draco?"

Hermione rapped three times at the bedroom door, and called his name for the second time in as many minutes.

At last, he answered.

"Come in."

She pushed through the doorway with the breakfast tray balanced on her hip.

The linens on Draco's bed had been straightened with care. He sat, fully dressed, on top of them, leaning against the headboard with a book propped open on his knees. As Hermione entered, he picked up a length of pink ribbon from the table beside his bed, laid it between the pages, and closed the book.

"I've brought breakfast." She set the tray on the bed and, careful to avoid jostling a full cup at its edge, slid it closer to him.

He glanced at it. "I can't taste anything."

"I know. I'm so sorry. Martin is convinced he remembers having invented a potion that will bring back your sense of smell. So far it makes everything smell of bacon grease and wet wool, but he'll get there. In the meantime, you still need to eat."

He thought for a moment, then sat up at the edge of the bed. "Alright. Thank you."

She hesitated. She knew she ought to leave him alone to eat what he could, but of their own accord, her feet carried her around the end of the bed and to his side.

He looked up when the mattress beside him sank under her weight, then stared, stony and impassive, at the wainscot.

His hair had regrown, approaching its former glory. At some point over the two days since they'd returned to the cottage, he'd trimmed the back and sides. A pale scar still cut through his eyebrow, but otherwise he was his stoical and coolly handsome self.

Except that he wasn't himself at all.

Hermione would have thought it impossible, but he was paler than before. His scrapes and bruises were healed, but dark circles bloomed beneath his eyes, and his eyelids were red-rimmed and swollen.

"Good book?" she asked, nodding towards the thick volume he'd set aside. There was no title on its spine or cover.

"The book?" He sounded absent, and touched its corner reflexively. "It's alright. Muggle. There's a girl, who's lovely. The stepmother is terrible. Strong anti-French sentiment."

"Have you been sleeping?" she asked.

"Not really."

"You need to sleep. Your progress has been remarkable, but Healer Bartholomew has repeatedly stressed that you need adequate rest."

His hands lay limp over his knees. When she reached over and lay a hand over his, he twitched bodily, as if he'd received a static shock.

"Draco?" She squeezed his fingers. "Please talk to me."

He flashed her an incredulous glance. "Talk?" Dry and without joy, he laughed, pulling his hand out of her grip. "I don't know how you're even able to look at me."

"I'm sorry." Hermione drew her hand back. "I don't understand."

He looked at her fully for the first time since she'd entered the room.

His eyes were great damp pools of remorse.

"How am I ever going to make this right?"

"I understand that things are...well, they're awkward," she admitted. "There's no denying it. They don't need to continue to be, but I can't help if I don't know what's the matter."

"That morning..." His shoulders rose, and he shivered. "You couldn't have *possibly* wanted—"

He stopped to swallow, his jaw clenched hard.

She slid closer and took his hands in hers.

"If you've been feeling guilty, please leave off immediately. I was tremendously happy when you woke up."

He kept staring at the wall.

"I was deathly afraid that you wouldn't," she went on, "and then you *did*. All I remember from that morning is feeling overjoyed that you had come back. Nothing more. Please, you mustn't feel like you've done anything wrong."

He pulled his hands away and crossed his arms over his abdomen as though fighting back a wave of nausea.

"Hermione." He tightened his grip around himself. "I *touched* you."

Her heart rate picked up. She recalled Draco's hand under her chemise. The weight of him between her legs. His fingertips pinching hard at her—

"Yes, I suppose you did," she said, disrupting thoughts of hands and breasts and the feel of his hair

between her fingers. Her mouth twitched in an involuntary half-smile, and she puffed out a breathy laugh. "But you certainly weren't the only one."

"I haven't been able to leave off thinking about your autonomy," he said, voice heavy with disgust. "Your privacy." The corners of his mouth trembled downward. "And then your *engagement*. God help me." He covered his eyes with a hand. "I'll explain everything to Ron when we get back, if you think it would be better coming from me."

His hand fell to his lap again, and he looked ahead, hard and determined.

After a stretch of silence, his brow contracted in thought.

"What do you mean, I wasn't the only one?"

Hermione searched for a way to rewind and rephrase what she'd said. "When I say touch, I don't mean—"

He turned to her with a contemplative look.

"You had your hands in my hair."

"What?" Hermione drew herself up into the rigid posture she'd carried along with her trunk on her first train to Hogwarts. "Yes. Yes, it was the spirit of the moment, wasn't it? A great deal of excitement, all around."

"It's just that..." His focus fell to the neckline of her dressing gown. "I touched your—"

"You're not the first."

"No, naturally."

"There's no harm done by it. We can move right on as though it never happened."

"But..." He trailed off, confusion writ large across his face. "I've thought over and over again about what might have happened if Cressida hadn't come along."

A sudden rush of heat blossomed between Hermione's thighs, and her chest heaved. "As have I, but I think it's best not to dwell on it."

"Of course," he said. But his frown remained in place while his eyes tracked from side to side.

He rotated towards her, and his knee pressed against hers. "You're saying that you didn't *mind*—"

"I've been considering the dance steps we may be expected to perform at the ball."

Her fingers dove into her décolletage. She drew out a slip of paper and held it out in front of him.

"The what?"

"The steps. For dancing," she said, unfolding the paper. "*Chassé* and *assemblé* we were all taught at school, for better or for worse, as well as the *allemande* and the *bouree*. Lavender assured me that my *demi-jeté* was quite good, and I've been doing a bit of practicing in my room." Her voice sounded dry and rushed, even to herself. "I was able to wheedle some names of other steps from Martin yesterday while he was supposed to be taking his rest. He mentioned the Strathspey Travelling Step, the Merlin's Muddle and the *pas du cheval affamé*, none of which I'm familiar with at all. I think he's made the last two up."

The warm, solid weight of Draco's knee pulled doggedly at her awareness.

He waved his hand as though he wished to dismiss the discussion of dance steps.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but I need to be entirely clear about this. That morning, you must realize, I was well on my way to—"

"I propose that we adopt the strategy of engaging ourselves for no more than two or three dances that we can perform with reasonable confidence. Perhaps right at the beginning, for the look of the thing, and keeping to the bottom of the sets so we can watch and copy. I can dance with Martin at least twice. I think you can safely dance with any of the Longbottom girls save Cressida. Afterwards, we can slip away and begin an organized search of the lower rooms, followed by the upper."

His eyes flicked to the skirt of her chemise. "I might have spent *ages*, truly, going down on you, and afterwards—"

"Ages?" The paper slipped from her fingers and landed in her lap. She picked it back up and began absently rolling it into a tube.

His legs, she considered, were notably firm.

"I suppose if that's what you're used to doing," she said, "there would be an automaticity to heading down there."

He jolted as if affronted. "It's a critical part of the repertoire. I'm sure you'll agree, you can't simply barge on ahead without properly—"

"Yes, of course!" She tugged the edges of her dressing gown together. "You'll get no argument from me."

"Especially when it's all new, before you've learned the idiosyncrasies of a woman's—"

"I imagine that they're all quite different."

"*So* different."

"It's perfectly reasonable that without being fully conscious—" Hermione stopped. She'd tilted forward from the waist until she was angled well into Draco's personal space.

Immediately, she pulled back, but he shifted towards her at the same time, so that the net result was continued upper body proximity.

"I truly thought, in that moment," he said, "that we'd already—"

"We hadn't."

"No. I knew that straight away once I'd taken the potion. It's only that until then I thought we'd woken up...the morning *after*, you know?"

"Yes, I know it."

"In that context it seemed reasonable to assume that there could be *more*."

"Perfectly reasonable. There is so often more in those circumstances."

"You sleep, and then you wake up, and if things went well, and everyone is amenable, you go back in for another round of—"

"You do! Just"—with her hand, she pantomimed a swimmer leaping from a diving board—"in you go again."

"And in the morning...well, there's an appetite for it, really."

"It's strange how that is, isn't it?" she agreed, with dispassionate clinical interest. "But undoubtedly it's when you *most* want—"

Draco looked down between them, and she followed his gaze.

Her hand was splayed over his thigh.

She withdrew it, then shifted sideways on the bed and nudged her mangled list of dances between her breasts.

"Without the benefit of a floor plan," she said, folding her hands primly in her lap, "I believe we'll need to begin individual searches for the snuff box on opposite ends of the house, and work towards the center."

Draco stared hard at her breasts.

"So you were..." he trailed off and waved a hand at her bosom. "Fine. With it."

"No problem at all."

"I see." He sat silently for a quarter of a minute. "Would you—" Stopping again, he looked at her sidelong. "Would you go so far as to say that you—"

"I didn't take it personally in the least," she said hurriedly, "as often as you must find yourself in similar circumstances."

"*Often?*"

"These are the most beautiful strawberries." Hermione gestured to the tray.

"Are you saying that because of—"

Her pulse jumped. "Please don't."

He opened his mouth, and for a moment it seemed as though he meant to continue, but he closed it again, looked over at the tray, and nodded.

"Strawberries," he said, finally.

"Yes. They're *very* good."

"They look it. Have you made me a coffee?"

"I have."

Without facing her, Draco took her hand in his and strummed his thumb over her knuckles. Then he gave it a pulse, and let it go.

The sun was a straw-colored coin in the west.

Hermione sat at a chair beside the desk in her room, pushing at the silk bodice of her gown.

"Merlin, my nipples are only just there."

"Oh, come now, Miss Granger. It's lovely."

Margaret McClure knelt on the floor between Hermione's open thighs, tying black ribbons around the tops of her stockings.

"No, I can see the edge of the left one peeking out." Hermione threaded a fingertip under the neckline. "I know my own nipples."

Margaret neatened the second bow and stood, gesturing for Hermione to turn so she could begin on her hair.

"Mr. Fernberry dresses every one of London's smartest witches, Miss Granger. You have nothing to worry about. Mr. Martin's instructions, written in his own hand, were to fetch you a gown, and I quote, 'in the very latest style, and spare no expense,' which is just what I've done. This came straight from Mr. Fernberry himself, by Floo. He's so *very* neatly dressed, Miss Granger, I never did see a man with so many ruffles and ribbons, only it never looked overdone. He kohls his eyes, can you believe it? And his *hair!* So thick and shiny at his age. Mr. Granger's pales in comparison if I may say so, which of course it must do, as Mr. Fernberry's is ever so dark. He brought this gown by, wrapped in lovely pale pink paper that our Ann kept back, if you don't mind, to use in the ladies' diaries she covers with pretty bits of paper she collects. She sells them at the witches' market on a Saturday." Margaret took a breath. "Mr. Fernberry offered his highest compliments to any friend of Lady Longbottom. He's given Mr. Martin a discount, undoubtedly. I couldn't get half this much of this quality silk in Market Hettlesham for love or money, but I understand that Mr. Martin was a friend of Mr. Fernberry's great-grandfather. We sat him to tea, Ann and I, and we were told quite a tale about Mr. Martin and the elder Mr. Fernberry, rest him," Margaret traced the shape of a pentacle over the center of her chest with her right hand, "in their cups and the altogether at the top of Magdalen Tower with the Dean of Transfiguration's daughters, both also in the raw, back when they were young men."

Hermione opened her mouth, then shut it again.

"The girls at the shop were of a unanimous mind that your dress is extraordinary, Miss Granger. Not even Miss Parkinson could be dressed more elegantly tonight."

"Mr. Fernberry must enjoy a good burlesque show," Hermione muttered.

She leaned out of the tug of Margaret's comb, grabbed the Time Turner pouch off the desk, and attempted to secret it away between her breasts.

Tap and tamp as she might, the top of the bag and the drawstrings peeked over her sheer silk neckline.

While Margaret worked on her hair, Hermione jiggled her foot in agitation.

"I thought, given the gown, we'd add some sparkle to your hair tonight, Miss Granger."

Before Hermione could confirm or deny the wisdom of sparkle anywhere on her person, Margaret

summoned an ornate gold comb from her trunk. Its shape was suggestive of bacchanalian pleasures, with gold leaves twining around garnet-colored berries and ivory flower petals. Nested like a crown in the burnished mass of Hermione's curls, it lent a Hellenistic air to the ringlets framing her face and trailing down her nape.

"There you go, Miss Granger." Margaret took Hermione's hand and gave it a pair of affable pats. "You look exquisitely beautiful." She wrinkled her freckled nose. "But can I do your cheeks, at least?"

Hermione thought that acres of the sheerest possible silk, nipples like disquisitive meerkats, and the crown of a Greek fertility goddess were ample decoration. But she sighed, closed her eyes, and lifted her chin.

Hermione stepped gingerly down the stairs, clutching the handrail and holding up the fabric of her skirts.

Standing below, Draco watched her come down.

He wore a black tail coat and breeches, a black waistcoat and a white shirt; his hand rested in his trouser pocket and his book was clenched under his arm.

Hermione reached the bottom of the stairs. When she drew closer, she noted a pin in his cravat, decorated with a gilded M.

"Where did that come from?" she asked.

"What?" He looked down at his cravat. "Oh. Yes. I nicked it from the Manor when I went after a set of formal dress. Remind me to tell you something rather important about that later. Interestingly enough, this is something that's been handed down to me back at home. I often wear it on formal occasions—on a contemporary tie, obviously."

"Yes! I suppose I've seen it after all." Hermione touched the pin. "M? Won't someone ask?"

Draco looked unconcerned, but with a quick swipe of his wand, the letter morphed into a swirling silver G. "Happy now, dear sister?"

"I am."

"Are you just going to carry your wand about like that?"

She was holding onto her wand, a slip of parchment, and the bag with the Time Turner.

"I think I have to," she said. "It's not going to fit."

"What's not going to fit where?"

Hermione gestured at her bustline. "Look at this."

Draco looked. "To be completely honest, it's quite difficult not to."

"I'm being serious."

"So am I."

"Stop joking and look down my gown."

Draco didn't move.

"I mean it," she said. "Right down there. Really look."

"I'd like you to be extremely clear with me about what's going on right now."

"This is what's going on."

She jumped up and down half a dozen times and looked down, watching the half-globes of her bosom heave nearly over the side of the proverbial boat.

"For starters," she said, "this absurd garment leaves nothing to the imagination."

"I don't know about that."

"And there's isn't room for my wand or the Time Turner down the front."

"Ah."

"Can you see my nipples?" she asked.

"I—" Draco fidgeted with his tie pin. "Do you want me to?"

"Yes, I'd like you to try to find them."

Draco looked. Then looked some more.

"Do you see them?"

"No," he said. "Unless . . ."

He tucked a fingertip into the edge of her neckline, and tugged it down.

Hermione swatted his hand away. "No one's going to be doing that. I suppose as long as you can't see them from your vantage point and they don't come tumbling out when I dance, it'll have to be alright. I had Margaret try to bring the neckline up, but the damned thing is spelled against alteration. Some designer concoction fit to my exact measurements."

"I can see that, yes."

"It wouldn't be quite so awful if my knickers hadn't finally given up the ghost. It seems there's a limit to the number of Scourgifies one can apply to cotton pants before they disintegrate. Anyway, here." Hermione slapped the bag with the Time Turner against his chest. "You get your wish. You'll have to keep it in your pocket tonight."

He lay his hand over the bag.

"Alright."

"Thanks." Hermione looked up from the front of her dress. "You look sweaty. Are you feeling well enough to do this?"

"Do what?"

"Dance. Prowl around Thornwood Abbey like a pair of cat burglars."

"Yes, I'm fine." His focus landed on the parchment in Hermione's hand. "Note for someone?"

On impulse, Hermione ducked it behind her back.

"It's nothing. How's the stepmother?"

"The what?"

"In your book," she said. "You're holding it right there. Malfoy, you truly don't seem well."

He held up the book, flipped it open indifferently, then snapped it shut again.

"I'm fine," he said. "The book is fine. It's good. I'm invested. I look forward to finding out what happens at the end."

"Good."

He nodded.

"You look—" Hermione ran her fingers over Draco's jacket sleeve.

His attention snapped to her.

"—quite smart," she finished. "Black looks smart on you. I suppose it always has."

"Thank you." Draco's eyes wandered over all of her then, from the comb perched her hair down to her silk slippers, dyed to match her gown.

"Red is...Granger, you're always so—"

Hermione patted the buttons of Draco's waistcoat.

"Quite smart, Malfoy."

She breathed in.

He smelled as he had each day for as long as Hermione had been accustomed to being close enough to him to tell. There were the idiosyncratic organic notes of his body, interwoven with the lavender and patchouli fragrance of the soap they'd been sharing in the cottage bath. He smelled of freshly aired wool, too, leather and parchment, and always under everything hovered a clean, sharp touch of mint.

She reached for the lock of hair hanging over his forehead.

"And your hair is—"

He moved quick and unexpected, startling her. His book thudded loud and heavy as it fell, but the thin clack of her wand hitting the floorboards sounded almost outside of her awareness.

His mouth was warm and sweet.

His hands cradled her jaw as though she might drop and break if he didn't hold her with sufficient care. Between strokes of his tongue, his lips moved against hers, gentle and reverent as he spoke.

"I'm sorry." His fingertips pressed into her jawline. "I'm sorry."

Just as abruptly as he'd approached, he pushed himself away.

"Oh, my God." He wiped the back of his hand across his flushed lips. "I'm so sorry."

She watched him: the visible pulse at the side of his neck. The rise and fall of his chest under the buttons of his waistcoat. His widened eyes, with traces of red where she knew to look past the charms disguising the evidence that he couldn't sleep.

"I know you don't—" he began. "I'm so very sorry."

Hermione stepped towards him, wrapped her hand around the back of his neck, and drew herself up onto her toes.

He gasped.

Without further preamble, he pushed her through three backwards steps to the wall.

The little bristling strands of short hair at his nape were soft under her fingers, just as she'd imagined they would be.

"Do you want this?" he asked.

There was unmistakable disbelief in his voice.

Slowly, he drew up the fabric of her skirts—the silk of her dress, the linen of her chemise. His palm stroked the ribbons tied over her stockings, then above that, the uncovered backs of her thighs. His touch was nearly nothing, arriving and then vanishing like a compunctious ghost.

"Please want this." He spoke quietly into the fugitive space between their mouths. "Please, Hermione."

When he drew his mouth away, she chased after it.

It was not an answer, but he accepted it all the same. She shivered as his fingertips traced—soft, sweet, slow—over the naked skin of her backside.

"I want to hear you," he whispered. "I want to taste you."

Hermione wanted...time.

The part of her aware of anything beyond the thoughtless sensations of *him* and *close* knew that Grix and Martin were by the front door. A short distance beyond was the family waiting at the Hall. A step past that, a Floo connection to a ball and a task that would bring them closer to the solution of the problem at hand:

There was no time.

There was too much of it.

It stretched away in front of them, the years and decades lined up like a shelf of unopened books.

At the end of the line were the volumes they had lived. Hermione could pull one down, open it, and read the history of the future that was their past.

Both of them had made decisions, hadn't they?

In that moment, she wanted to revise, to recant, to modify the story so that it read something like this:

A girl met a boy. They were good to one another from the first. They lived that way, and were happy, ever after.

The desire she felt for him—ever-present, despised, and disavowed—grew urgent and brittle between her legs and in her chest.

She wanted to see into unknown volumes.

If she could open tonight, and look inside, she might find: *she said yes, and he took her to bed.*

If she finished the paragraph, turned the page and read through to the early morning, it might end: *and he ruined her.*

He was waiting for her, kissing her mouth and her cheeks and, once, the shuttered lids of her eyes.

A nod or a sigh might be enough. He might want a look, or a word.

She slid her lips down his chin, and along his jaw, mouthing at his skin there, senseless and unthinking. He made a sound near her ear like discontent and gratitude all at once.

She turned the leaves of her book past tonight, and tomorrow, and flipped forward two hundred years, where she found, scribbled in the margins of what would one day be her present again: *If he took her to bed, would it ruin everything?*

"Farewell and adieu to you, Spanish ladies! Farewell and adieu to you, ladies of Spain!"

Martin's voice rang out loud from the drawing room.

"That was never a nip of madeira, you old deceiver," Grix grumbled. "They're going to be rolling you home snoring an operetta."

Hermione flattened her hands against Draco's chest and pushed.

I want this, she might have said. *I have wanted this. I have written this question in the margin of each day for longer than I will tell.*

His fingertips slid over her skin, and away.

"They're going to come asking after us." She shook her skirts down, and flattened her palms over the fabric.

He was pink-cheeked and his hair was wild. She reached up to straighten it, and he caught her hand.

"Hermione."

"There's no time," she said.

She dragged her hand away and bent down, her skirts pooling on the floor around her, and picked up his book, her letter, and her wand.

"Here." She handed him the book, which he accepted in a limp hand.

She pulled herself up tall, a gold-crowned Athena, armored in silk.

"Let's go to the ball."

"Shall we go to the ball? I think we shall! I think we shall!"

The cat gave its mustache a doleful twitch.

"The cat is in evening dress," said Draco through the side of his mouth.

"Yes! Little breeches."

Hermione mashed her face into Draco's sleeve and clutched at his arm, and once the wave of laughter had passed, let him go.

At the vast Floo in the drawing room at Bugg-Buntley Hall, the Longbottom family were gathered in their finery.

"Let the cat put on his pajamas, Father," said Penelope, luscious and lustrous in a pale green gown and already bored. "Or better yet, be in the state the gods intended for him. He's not going to come along and lead a minuet."

"The Wiltshire Gentlemen's Cat Fanciers Society does not agree with you, and neither does Hugo!" Sir Thomas, holding the black and white cat under its armpits, gave it a brief jiggle. "Hugo likes his new suit, don't you my fine, fine fellow!"

Penelope turned away from her father and his cat in a cravat, and then from her sisters, each vibrating on a plane of anticipation Hermione wasn't sure she'd ever visited.

"Would you like to borrow a reticule?" Penelope asked, gesturing at Hermione's wand and note, still held in her hand. "That looks awkward."

"I suppose that would be helpful." Hermione patted at the sides of the skirt of her dress. "Honestly it would be nice to have pockets."

"Pockets?" Penelope perked up and drew her wand out of her own right dress pocket. "Would you like them? It's easily done."

Hermione watched in awe as Penelope traced her wand in a recursive series of loops over one of the side seams of Hermione's dress, muttering *Fitchet Compario*.

Hermione looked down.

"Was that a pocket-making spell?"

"It is. Iris—Mrs. Longbottom I suppose I ought to say—came up with it when we were at school. It's Old English and Latin language and intentionality. Most of the wandwork we learned during a cultural exchange luncheon with a delegation of Han wizards." There was an unpleasant tearing sound as her wand finished its final pass. "*That's* not right. Has your gown been warded against alteration?" Penelope jammed her hand into the new hole in the left side of Hermione's dress and frowned.

Hermione tested it herself, and found that her hand only went as deep as her second knuckle before her fingertips bumped up against a fold of fabric.

"Merlin, it's the same as those pointless pockets in Muggle women's trousers," Hermione said. "It's like being short-sheeted by H&M every morning."

"Pointless pockets in what?" Penelope looked at Hermione with her eyes narrowed. "Do Muggle women wear trousers?"

Hermione laughed, nervous and self-conscious. "You don't miss a beat, do you Miss Penelope?"

Penelope shook her head of glossy blonde curls, woven through with tiny opalescent beads. "No, I don't." She considered Hermione's gown. "I despise these haute couture confections. What a bunch of indefensible snobbery. Mother loves it, of course." She slid her wand over Hermione's seams once more, one after the other, only it appeared that she combined the pocket spell with a series of assaults on the anti-alteration wards.

After a pause, there was a tremendous tearing sound that attracted the attention of half the people in the room.

Penelope jammed her hand into Hermione's new left pocket.

"There!" she said with evident satisfaction. "Try that."

Hermione tested her right pocket. Its bottom was now so deep that it took her a moment to locate it, but find its corner she did, halfway down her thigh.

She stored her wand in her right pocket and the note to Roland Weasley inside the left.

"Thank you very much, Miss Penelope."

"You could probably fit one of my father's cats in either one," said Penelope. "Hugo in the left and Teddy in the right, hissing at your dance partners."

Cassandra, face pink and beaming, bounded towards Hermione and looped their arms together. "Izzy's finished with Cressida's hem, so we're all ready to go." She smiled broadly at Draco. "I shan't allow you to give Cressy all your time, Mr. Granger. I'm owed a reel."

Martin, wearing what appeared to be a formal suit from a previous century, in peacock blue velvet with a fountain of tea-colored lace at the front, pushed his spectacles back on his nose.

Cassandra reached over and patted his shoulder so hard he tipped and had to right himself, evidently pleased. "You're needed for a reel as well, Mr. Martin!"

"Scotch and reels!" Martin said.

Hermione looked up at Draco. "Are you ready?"

For a moment, he studied her face.

She'd inspected herself in the mirror in her bedroom. Her dress was, though revealing, spectacularly beautiful, a vibrant red with a sheer silk overlay of the same color and sleeves falling suggestively from her shoulders. Margaret had piled her curls into something only half-tamed, pinked her cheeks and made her lips appear stained, as though she'd been sitting in the sun and eating handfuls of overripe strawberries. Her eyelashes were even thicker than usual, and there was a faint gleam to

her skin all over.

"We need to stay focused, Hermione," he answered.

"Why wouldn't we?"

He opened his mouth, and shut it again.

Hermione took his arm, and he laid a protective hand on the back of Martin's chair.

Sir Thomas passed his cat to a waiting elf, and Lady Longbottom, in the palest cool blue, threaded her arm through his.

The Floo flared green, and they stepped through it.

"Your intentions, sir! My quarrel is with your *intentions*!"

William Avery, his suit jacket dangling from a camellia bush, broke free from Sir Thomas and Tom Longbottom and raced across the unlit lawn with his dark hair streaming.

"Bloody well let me *go*, Weasel!" Before Draco could pull either of his arms free from Roland Weasley's grip, his left temple connected with William's right fist.

"No!" Cressida's voice throbbed, the tears streaming down her cheeks forming irregular wet patches on the white fabric at her bust.

Hermione clutched at the letter in her left pocket and the wand in her right. "You idiotic . . . ludicrous . . . senseless . . . brainless . . . *peacocks*!"

Her stomach lurched.

She hiccuped.

It happened because of the nipples.

"Have you tasted them yet?"

Hermione, plucking at the damp bustline of her gown, half careened into Draco's ready arms.

"No, I haven't," he said, steadying her with his hands at her hip bones.

"Why not? Oh! Because of the—" Hermione pushed her finger against the cartilage of her own nose. "Merlin, I'm so sorry." She stroked his cravat, then gave it a conciliatory pat. "You can't, can you?"

"Unfortunately not."

"They're *really* lovely."

"I'm sure they are."

"We'll have to do them up for you later, when everything's been put to rights. I'll make sure they're very pretty."

Draco gave a noncommittal shrug and swiveled his doleful gaze back over his shoulder at the chocolate truffles.

The truffles were a tragedy.

They posed together lewdly on their formal service platter, taunting Draco with their frank culinary eroticism. Their spherical, shiny chocolate shells covered soft ganache insides made with what tasted like a type of mellow nut and a healthy dollop of brandy, and each of them was capped with a little ball of white marzipan. They looked like nothing so much as tiny brown breasts with diminutive cream-colored nipples.

"Poor nose. You adore chocolate." Hermione pinched the tip of Draco's nose. "Lord, I'm sweating. How are you not sweating? Where's my punch?"

"Here." Draco, easy and composed in his black suit jacket in spite of having made at least one more trip down the line of the dance than Hermione had done, passed her a fresh cup of punch from the table behind him.

Two thirds of the cup went down with gusto, and she flattened her hand over her forehead. "That's cold!" She winced and peered into the bottom of the glass. "I think there's brandy in this."

"There is."

She laughed, bright and buoyant. "I've been drinking it like water."

"I know."

He'd been standing in an elegant slump against the wainscot at the side of the supper room, but drew up straight at the tell-tale shriek of a lady having her toes run over by a magical power chair.

"Truffle, truffle, truffle . . ." Martin emerged at the doorway to the ballroom from between two women, ruffled by their sudden displacement, and floated across the room, clapping the fingertips of his left hand together like a pair of pincers.

Draco shifted his body so that it disrupted Martin's line of sight to the plate of truffles.

"No more truffles, cousin Martin," said Hermione, "or you'll do yourself in for good, and we'll have to spend the night under the trees."

Draco's hand slid over Hermione's hip and came to rest against her back as she turned away from him. "Sounds promising." He stroked his palm up her spine. "Let's find you some water."

"I don't need water, I'm fine."

"No, you're not. Oh, come on, Hermione! No more dancing."

She felt the tug of his hand at the back of her dress as Roland Weasley came through the door.

He'd been the driving force behind a very great deal of nail-chewing for some days, and the subject

of a dozen drafts of a letter Hermione didn't wish to write, and wanted even less to give. She'd grown more than a little anxious at the thought of seeing him, but in the end, her worry had been for naught. He rounded the corner from the ballroom in Martin's wake, his auburn hair disheveled from dancing, and his face as inviting and agreeable as ever. Earlier, in his black breeches and a white waistcoat, he had shared smiles with her over the pleasing correspondence of her dress with the scarlet silk lining of his black tailcoat.

He had been told by a letter conveyed in a book that with only the slightest application, he might help himself to the delights of her person. She'd been terrified he would alter: become over-interested, inappropriate and lecherous. But in the ballroom of Thornwood Abbey—of truly magnificent proportions, the parquet glossy and its walls hung with long mirrors reflecting hundreds of floating candle flames softly flaring and guttering at their wicks—he had taken her hand, bowed like a gentleman, and smiled like nothing had changed. For a moment, Hermione was annoyed at the possibility that he hadn't so much as cracked open the cover of the book she'd given him, but by increments, with each genteel pass he made through her orbit as the Grangers were introduced about the ball, the weight of the rejection letter lurking at the bottom of the left pocket of her dress lifted.

There has been a mistake, and feelings have been communicated to you that I did not intend. Please accept that our friendship can never be more than that. I deeply regret any hurt that my miscommunication may have caused you, but know that I will forever hold you in the highest regard. - H

"Miss Granger! They're forming another set." Roland's cheeks were kindled with a happy glow as he leaned against the door frame with a hand in his pocket. "I promise that I'll continue to not hold your gross deficiencies in dancing against you."

Hermione laughed. "One more."

She rotated under Draco's hands again and craned her face up to his, which was now blank and unreadable. "One more."

He frowned, then whispered, "While you're perfecting your chassé with Ye Olde Weasel, I'm going to finish looking through the ground floor rooms." His focus shifted between her eyes as she stared. "What?"

Hermione tilted forward until her chest lay flush against his ribs.

His hand smoothed across her belly.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?"

"That you can't taste the truffles."

"That's not the prob—hold on there, Martin! You only just said you were feeling sick on those ten minutes ago."

Martin had edged closer to the table, and reached an arm around Draco's hip.

Draco handed him a chocolate. "Here. Now go and run over everyone's toes some more."

Martin popped the truffle into his mouth at one go.

"Hm hm *hmm!*"

He flicked the steering toggle of his chair and was off.

Hermione had been misled by every film adaptation she'd ever seen of dancing in a nineteenth century English ballroom.

Once it was your turn, you didn't walk or politely shuffle down the line; you danced, well and truly, and thanked the muses for their divine intervention when your teacakes, so to speak, didn't go flying out of the display.

Roland leaned down and spoke into her ear. "Very good, Miss Granger."

"I'm doing well?"

Roland's palm met hers in the center of a formation of three couples. He shook his head and laughed. "No."

They parted, and then returned.

"But you're only the second worst dancer in the room."

Hermione passed under the arm of William Avery, dancing crosswise to her, then stood in front of Roland again. "Who's the worst?"

He smiled, crooked and teasing. "It would be impolite of me to say."

"There's no one worse, is there?"

Roland's mouth twitched, then he burst into another laugh. "No. There isn't."

In spite of Roland's vote of no confidence, she finished the dance convinced of her steady improvement, and breathless, pinched a cup of iced punch from a passing tray.

"Pardon me"—she crouched down until her eyes were level with the elf holding the drinks tray over his shoulder—"but might I have the recipe for the chocolate truffles on the sideboard in the supper room? I'd like to pass it along to a friend."

After receiving grudging confirmation from the elf, Hermione lifted onto her toes and searched the room. "Have you seen my brother, by any chance?" she asked William Avery as he wandered into her sphere, holding a cup of raspberry ice in each hand.

"No. Have you seen Cressida? We were supposed to have had ices."

"I haven't. I suppose she might be in the ladies' room." Hermione gulped at her punch.

Cassandra, hauling on Isadora's arm, and the latter with a steadying hand on the back of Martin's chair, moved through the dense crowd in the ballroom. "They're starting another set in twenty minutes," she said. "Will, dance with Miss Granger, and then we'll sit down to some supper."

"I'll eat beef and *cake!*" Martin flicked the steering toggle on his chair, and Isadora jumped out of the way of the footrest. "Rum."

"Merlin, cousin," said Hermione. "You truly are only still alive because of Grix—*oh!*"

The elf with the drinks service had returned and tapped the back of her knee. "Your recipe." He held out a piece of parchment.

Hermione unfolded it. There was, written in a straightforward hand, a recipe for *Capezzoli di Venere*.

"Chestnuts!" Hermione waved the parchment in triumph, then folded it again and stored it in her right pocket. "I'm afraid you'll have to find another partner, Mr. Avery. I need to find my brother. Perhaps Miss Longbottom might dance with you?"

Isadora smiled as though she had a secret she'd prefer to keep. "I've been engaged to dance with Mr. Weasley."

"Penelope then?"

Penelope, hands in her pockets and shoulder blades pressed against the mirrored wall nearby, shook her head in the negative. "No."

"You'll have to find Cressida, or any of the other dozens of beautiful young women here I suppose."

William studied his twin dishes of ice cream with a dour look.

"You'll excuse me." Hermione lay a sympathetic hand on his jacket sleeve. "I'm going to look for my brother."

She downed the rest of her punch, discarded the glass on a passing empty tray, and made a circuit of each of the rooms open to guests.

Silk was everywhere.

It rasped and whispered as the women wearing it stood and sat and walked and swayed. There was silk on bodies and silk in hair, wrapped over and around curls, natural and made with magic, in black and brown and blonde and auburn. If not wound up in silk, every woman's hair glinted with hints of gold and gems and polished pearls.

There were sharp elbows in wool jacket sleeves, too, shining leather shoes and clean white stockings. Raucous laughter rebounded off the walls from time to time, and shouts of both triumph and dismay preceded drifts of cigar smoke from the card room.

She searched for Draco's pale head above the din, and found it nowhere.

In the ladies' dressing room, smelling of musk and lavender, violet and vanilla, crowded with women adjusting the ribbons of their stockings and clearing away the gathered sweat in their décolletage with freshening spells, Hermione found a little desk with a quill and ink. She pulled the recipe from her pocket and dashed a short and cheeky note to Draco across the top.

One of a host of ecstasies that await you. -H

She restored the recipe to her right pocket, and pushed her way through the haze of sweat and ambergris to the ballroom.

"I think he's creeping about in the hall," said Penelope from her place at the wall as Hermione

passed. "Is he looking for something?"

Hermione bristled. "Not at all. I believe he spent some time at Thornwood Abbey in his youth and wanted to—"

Roland appeared again, slipping sideways between the backs of two gentlemen, half a head taller than both.

"Miss Penelope," he said, then with more enthusiasm, "Miss Granger."

Penelope had no time to be offended, as her attention was pulled away by Mrs. Avery, asking after the origins of a bracelet.

Roland gave his focus over to Hermione. "I've engaged to dance with Miss Longbottom for the upcoming set," he said, "but wondered if you might be available for the following?"

On reflex, Hermione plunged her hand deep into her left pocket, and traced the edge of the parchment there.

"I'm very sorry. I need to find my brother."

"Yes, of course." He paused, and seeing that Penelope and Mrs. Avery had become engrossed in a discussion of silver scrollwork, leaned into Hermione's space by a degree. "I also wondered," he said, hushed and apprehensive, "if I might have a word this evening?"

Hermione took a half step back, but knocking into a burly gentleman, moved close to Roland again. "A word?"

Roland glanced around them. "It's a subject of some delicacy, but I should very much like to discuss entheogenic potionery and its"—his gaze searched across Hermione's face and his voice fell even further—"implications."

His eyebrows lifted and arched towards one another, amused and also inquiring and uncertain. In the light from the candles overhead and their thousand points of reflection at the mirrors on the walls, his warm blue eyes shone.

Hermione's skin felt like it was burning. "Yes. Yes, I . ." She trailed off, fidgeting with the edge of the note in her pocket, and looked around in vain for Draco.

"Please, don't be distressed." His voice had fallen almost out of even her hearing. "I have no intention of compromising your virtue."

"That's true. You couldn't possibly compromise my virtue."

"Miss Granger." He took a step closer, then stopped. "*Hermione.*"

"Mr. Weasley, please." She snaked her hand deeper into her left pocket and crushed the paper there. "Here." Before she could talk herself out of it, she pulled the paper from her pocket, and in a swift, covert movement, smuggled it into Roland's hand.

His eyes opened in surprise, and he glanced down.

"You must excuse me." Hermione offered him an awkward curtsy, not knowing whether it was appropriate in the least. "It's of vital importance that I find my brother."

Then she swept away in a swirl of silk.

Draco was in the smoking room having a Scotch.

"Did you find it?" she asked. She kept her voice low and a paranoid watch on the guests that passed them in the hall.

"Of course I didn't."

"What do you mean, 'of course'?"

"There are dozens of rooms in this house, Hermione. It's going to take a while."

"It would help if we knew the layout. I've tried to estimate, but don't have much to go on."

Draco rattled the ice around in his drink. "It's fine. I have a handle on it. I've been in every room in this house at least twice."

"Have you?" She gave him a curious smile. "How did that come about?"

Draco turned his face away for a moment, then said, at the rim of his glass, "You'll recall that this is Pansy's house."

"She gave you the formal tour two times, then?" Hermione laughed.

Draco swallowed his Scotch. "Something like that."

"Here's my pantry, here's a broom cupboard," Hermione said in mocking imitation, "now let's have a look in the laundry room, now back to the pantry ... oh!" Hermione's skin grew warm.

Draco looked up at the ceiling.

"I suppose that's—" Hermione blinked. "Every single one? This house is enormous."

"We were teenagers. It was much easier to be here than at the Manor."

"I suppose it must have been." Hermione's throat felt unaccountably dry, and she swallowed. "How recently were you two..." She pinched her eyes shut. "Nevermind. Shall we go upstairs?"

Draco took her hand in his and guided her down the hallway and then, checking for observers in both directions, through a nondescript door that opened onto a narrow set of service stairs.

"I believe there are about thirty rooms on the first floor—"

"Good Lord, Malfoy. The *entire house*? How long did that take you?"

Draco drew in a resigned breath. "Not as long as it probably ought to have done, the first time round."

Hermione bumped against his back as he paused at the top of the stairs.

He gripped her hand tight. "Don't fall."

Scanning the hallways for watchful elves, they searched each room of the first floor of the east wing with as much care and discernment as possible.

"Shall we head up to the second floor?" In the hallway outside of a bedroom made up with blue

linens, housing feminine trinkets and precisely zero snuff boxes, Hermione blew a stray curl away from her mouth and crossed her arms behind her back. "Another thirty?"

Draco nodded.

Hermione leaped towards him and clutched at his arm as a door creaked open down the hall.

William Avery looked around its edge. "Oh!" His expression morphed from what looked like alarm and anger to alarm and embarrassment. He seemed ready to retreat, then pushed forward instead, and drew himself up tall. "Are you looking for something?"

Hermione brushed her palms over her skirts. "There's a balcony for the musicians. We wondered whether we might listen more closely."

Draco, arm around her waist, squeezed her hip.

William pointed back over his shoulder. "I believe there's a stairway in the northeast corner of the ballroom."

Their search of the first floor, and then the second, turned up nothing, so they danced.

"Do you think it might be in the elves' quarters?" Hermione asked, admiring the bend of Draco's wrist as his hand curved around hers.

They each regained their partners for a skipping turn, then met in the middle again.

"It's possible," he said. "It could be in the stables for all we know."

"A silver snuff box in the stables seems—oh, blast."

Hermione returned to William Avery, and standing side by side, clasped both of his hands, their arms crossed one over the other, and made a series of bouncing steps down the line of the dance.

"Miss Granger." Roland bowed to Hermione in their new formation. She curtsied, and as she rose, jolted when he touched her hand.

He pushed a folded slip of paper into her palm, then moved back to Isadora.

Hermione's next turn in the dance was with Martin, who held up his palm and, as she scrambled to slide the note from Roland into her left pocket, orbited her once in his chair. His movements were shockingly deft, given that he was thoroughly soused on fortified wine, approximately three pounds of beef soaked in herbed butter and twice as much chocolate.

"Look sharp, you cousin!" he crowed. "I'll have your toes!"

Draco came down the dance arm in arm with Cressida, then stood beside Hermione. "What's that, then?" He tipped his chin towards her pocket.

"What?" Hermione curtsied across the center of the row, and rose again.

"Your note from the Weasel," he said, keeping his voice low. "I'm no great reader of Jane Austen, but accepting notes from men you're not related to strikes me as a bit of an anachronism. What are you on about?"

"*Nothing*," she said through clenched teeth. "It's nothing at all."

"Hermione," he began, and she was taken aback by his tone, not at all amused and with a hint of warning. "Please tell me that you're not—"

The dance drew her away and restored her to William, who, watching Cressida and Draco hold hands once more, stepped on Hermione's left foot.

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Granger."

"It's quite alright."

Later, sitting at a supper table, where the beef fully drowned in butter, and the cake was delicious, she slipped the note from Roland out of the edge of her pocket and read:

Believe that I am moved beyond what might be expressed within the bounds of propriety, but please, tell me where we might meet alone, and allow me only a word.

Hermione folded the note and smashed it down into the bottom of her left pocket.

"Hermione." From his seat beside her, Draco tilted towards her and laid his warm palm over the back of her elbow. "You *cannot* be serious. I recognize that your Weasley is by far the inferior model, but—"

She turned on him. "Don't you *dare*."

He scanned the crowd of guests around them. "This isn't what we're here for," he said, pressing her elbow. "Unless you're keen to stay and raise a family with this Weasel rather than the other one." He frowned and shook his head as though loosing himself from an ambushing cobweb. "I didn't consider the implications there until just this moment." He shook his head again and said no more.

"Here." Hermione dug into her right-hand pocket, and pulled out the folded parchment with the recipe. "I've asked after the recipe for the chocolate truffles for you."

Draco took it, still irritated with her, and without opening it, put it in his inner right suit pocket. "Thanks."

"Mr. Granger, Miss Granger!"

Sir Thomas bounded across the supper room, his entire person alight with the frenetic energy of an extreme extrovert in a large gathering of people with whom they are not all familiar. "I've caught you both sitting at last. Our neighbors have been wanting to be introduced!"

He stepped aside, and waved forward a pair of women.

One was some years into middle age—not above fifty, but wearing a dowdy dowager's gown made from heavy, forest green velvet that covered her unseasonably from chin to toes.

The other was youngish, evidently below thirty, but dressed with similar concern for propriety in starkly conservative dark plum velvet. Her gown had a lower neck than her mother's, but any skin that may have been revealed was covered by an opaque linen chemisette that even Hermione could tell was *démodé* for a ball.

Both had blonde hair so desaturated as to be nearly white, and pallid sea-grey eyes.

"Lady Malfoy, Miss Malfoy," said Sir Thomas, bouncing on the balls of his feet, "please allow me to introduce our young neighbors and cousins to Mr. Martin. Miss Granger—"

Hermione stood from her chair and curtsied.

"And her brother, Mr. Granger."

Draco followed Hermione to his feet, bowed, then stood at a sharp, perpendicular angle to the floor, vision locked on some distant object just beyond the tops of his grandmothers' heads.

"Lady Malfoy, Miss Malfoy. What a pleasure it is to meet you." Hermione looped her arm through Draco's.

Miss Malfoy laughed and smiled, displaying a row of small, white upper teeth.

Her laugh was short and twittering and laced with anxiety, and caused her mother to shoot her a hard sideways glance.

"Lady and Miss Malfoy were just now relating a tale of mystery, Grangers!" rumbled Sir Thomas, waggling both his eyebrows and his fingers. "It seems they've a ghost at the Manor!"

Miss Malfoy laughed her weird laugh again, and continued to smile.

"Not a ghost!" The oblong vowels of Received Pronunciation poured from her pink lips. "It's a man. Hiddy's quite certain of it."

Lady Malfoy closed her eyes in a patrician fashion in acknowledgement of the same.

"He's been prowling about the Manor in the dark, stealing poor Father's clothes." Miss Malfoy smiled wider at Draco. "Hiddy waited behind the curtains in Father's room and struck him in the leg with a fire iron just last night, and he went away."

Hermione looked up at Draco, whose stolid stare hadn't shifted an iota.

She tipped up on her toes, dragged at his arm until he bent his ear to her lips, and asked, "Which leg?"

"The left," he said under his breath and out of the side of his mouth.

"Are you alright?"

"Mostly."

Lady Malfoy gave her daughter a weak shove at the side of the arm, and nodded towards the Grangers.

"We're to give a picnic at Malfoy Manor," said Miss Malfoy. She was flustered and twittering again, and seemed to be reciting a prepared speech. "Saturday next. For all the young people in the neighborhood. We'd be delighted if you could come, Miss Granger." Her eyes flared at her many-times-great grandson. "Mr. Granger."

Draco bowed. "If we're still in the neighborhood, we'd be delighted."

"Are you intending to leave us, Grangers?" asked Sir Thomas.

"Leave us?" Cassandra entered the room, arm in arm with Cressida and sweating visibly across her

brow and at the gold curls fraying at her temples. She pulled up beside her father, wrapped her arms around his shoulders and rested the side of her face against his. "Father, tell the Grangers they're not allowed to leave us."

Cressida, an ethereal Venus in fluid white, her curls trailing over one shoulder, looked at Draco and Hermione with her dark, dewy eyes opened wide.

"You're going? So soon?" Her satin alto voice quavered.

"I'm afraid so," said Draco with a bow. "We hope to return to London within a fortnight. Perhaps a week. Here." He reached behind himself. "Have a truffle, they're delicious."

Cressida took the truffle from Draco, and while looking at him intently, bit into it in a fashion Hermione wasn't sure she could replicate if she tried.

Hermione didn't eat chocolates often, but when she did, it was generally done while lying under a quilt on her sofa in her quiet studio flat two blocks off Diagon Alley, watching Muggle real estate television shows with Crookshanks on her lap. The occasional puff of powdered chocolate on the worn men's undershirt she wore around the flat was easy enough to clear away with a spell.

They tasted especially nice with a fresh cup of coffee.

To Cressida's credit it appeared unstudied, but her natural elegance dictated a small, sensual nibble, followed by an effeminate moan.

"Oh, Mr. Granger," she said.

Hermione half hoped to find chocolate between Cressida's teeth as she spoke, but she appeared immune to those sorts of prosaic humiliations.

"Here." Draco pulled the recipe from his pocket and handed it to Cressida. "For you."

Hermione shot him a glare, and he rolled his shoulders in dismissal.

"What?" he whispered. "She likes the truffles. We don't often get what we want in this life."

Cressida opened the recipe. As she read it, her eyes widened. In one swift movement, she crammed the note into the pocket of her dress, and stared at the wainscot, a red tint spreading across her face.

"Capezzoli di Venere!" said Sir Thomas with a wink. "Lady Longbottom and I indulged ourselves in Florence on our honeymoon tour. Did we not, my Lady? The truffles at the Pensione Bertolini!" he bawled over his shoulder at his wife.

Lady Longbottom stood tall, her elegance global and unimpeachable, in nearby conversation with a group of equally lovely matrons, and turned away from her husband with an enigmatic smile.

Miss Malfoy covered her mouth and twittered. "Capezzoli! *Ouch!*" She rubbed at the place where her mother had pinched her arm.

Hermione tipped her mouth to Draco's ear. "Do you know any Italian? What does that mean?"

"What? Capezzoli di Venere?" He sighed. "Nipples of Venus."

"Oh, of course!" Hermione looked at the platter. "They're just like little breasts, aren't they?"

He threaded his hand around the curve of her waist. "They are."

Thirty rooms to a floor and three floors later, their search had come up empty.

"I think it's gone three in the morning." Hermione leaned over in her chair at the side of the ballroom, slipped a hand into her shoe, and rubbed the arch of her foot. "How is it you know how to dance so well, anyway, Malfoy?"

Draco, suit jacket hung over the back of his chair, reclined and sipped at his Scotch.

"You honestly want to know?"

She restored her shoe, and curled herself into Draco's side.

He hooked an arm across her shoulders. "We have a Christmas ball at the Manor every year." He clinked the ice in his glass. "Or, we did. Lots of quite stodgy traditions." His fingertips stroked over the bare skin of her upper arm as he swallowed the last of his drink.

"And you wore a cravat at them, didn't you?" she said, gazing up into his face, bleary through another three rounds of punch.

He nodded. "It was expected, yes."

She reached over and brushed at the fine and still-crisp silk bunched around his tie pin. "You do it well." Slumping like a wet sack of rice into his ribs, she closed her eyes. "You do everything so well."

"Except find a blasted snuff box. I think we're going to need to come out and ask for it."

"Mm hm."

"Mr. Granger. Miss Granger."

Hermione opened her eyes.

Roland Weasley gave them both a bow. To Hermione's surprise, he spoke to Draco. "Might I have a word, Mr. Granger?"

"A word?" Draco sat up, in no hurry, and drew his suit jacket back on. "Certainly."

Hermione got up and dragged herself past the bustling line of the dance, the music unflagging but the dancers a bit frayed and unhinged, and stood by one of the open doors to the balcony running the length of the ballroom.

Her skin, tacky with sweat, rose into gooseflesh in the cold predawn air. She rubbed at her arms with her palms.

"Miss Granger."

Hermione turned around at the throb of Cressida Longbottom's voice.

"Hello, Cressida." She embraced herself and shivered. "Have you been having a wonderful time?"

Cressida nodded, the molten gold tendrils of her curls shimmering with the movement. "I have, Miss Granger."

She stepped closer, near enough that when she laid her hand over Hermione's arm and whispered, Hermione didn't need to strain herself to hear.

"I can't—" Cressida stopped, and took a deep pull of the cool early air. "I can't give this to him myself, Miss Granger. But *please*—" She urged a folded slip of paper against Hermione's hand where she clutched her own arm.

Hermione took the paper.

"I should like, very much, just once, to ... " Cressida's velvet voice trailed away with her gaze, staring unfocused into the dark gardens below. She returned her attention to Hermione, and spoke, still barely within hearing. "I should like him to kiss me."

Hermione began to unfold the paper.

"No, please." Cressida, adamant, shook her head. "You may read it, only, let me go before you do." She gripped Hermione's arm with urgent affection, then stepped back.

"If he asks, there's a camellia. Below the balcony on the east end of the gardens."

In the half light, her eyes were glossy and so dark as to seem colorless.

She walked away, and Hermione opened her note.

I'll wait for you in the garden.

Hermione sighed, and pushed the note into her right pocket.

She found Draco in the billiards room, pouring another Scotch.

"Are we giving up, then?" She went to slide into his side, still exhausted, but instead of opening his arm to her, he stepped away.

She looked at him, a quizzical bend to her brow. "What's the matter?"

Draco scoffed, and said nothing.

"*What?*"

"Weasleys in all timelines, Granger. Your tastes remain constant."

Hermione's stomach clenched. "What are you talking about?"

The sharp clack of ivory against ivory sounded behind them, and Draco stared into the bottom of his glass. "Weasley"—he scoffed again—"this Weasley, asked after your father." He drank, and smirked without humor into his glass.

"What?"

"He asked after your father, Hermione. And when informed no such person was available, asked me, as your presumptive guardian, whether he might pay us a call and speak with me about matters of some delicacy."

Hermione was unequal to speech.

"It seems that feelings have been communicated," he went on, "of a serious nature. And to his credit, Mr. Weasley is anxious to legitimize your *amour*, as is appropriate to the time period. So," he said, on another bleak half laugh, "let me be the first to wish you joy."

He refilled his glass from the decanter on the sideboard, hoisted it in a salute, and drank.

Hermione, half chilled and half overheated, skin sticky with layers of dried sweat over fresh, blinked.

"I gave him no indication ... " she began. Unthinking, she stomped her foot like a child. "I wrote him a letter, Malfoy—"

"So I understand."

"Don't you dare look at me like that," she raged at a whisper. "Here." She pulled the folded note from Cressida from the bottom of her right pocket, and slapped it against Draco's lapel. "If you want a note, read that."

Draco set his glass down, and looking at the note with a sneer at his lip, unfolded it.

Hermione watched his eyes trace what was there.

He went over it again, and again, and as he did, his face wilted.

"How's that for a note? I'm not the only one who's cocked up here, Malfoy."

He folded the note, and then balled it in his fist on his way to putting it in his pocket.

"Yes," he said, his tone dry and detached. He looked back at the drink on the sideboard as though it were a foreign object, and nodded. "Yes, of course."

Without saying anything further, he pushed past Hermione and left the room.

"I'd like to go home now."

On a small balcony overlooking the shadowed gardens, Hermione sank onto a bench beside Martin, and leaned her head against his shoulder.

Martin lifted his hand to her cheek, and gave it a trio of soft pats. "There, there, my gel. Dancing will take it out of you."

She closed her eyes.

"Might I join you, Miss Granger?"

Lifting her head was beyond her capacities, but with some effort, she forced her eyelids ajar.

Roland Weasley, sans jacket, stood nearby with his hands in his pockets.

She acquiesced with a tip of her head.

"Truffle time," said Martin. Before he hovered away, he patted her cheek once more, and with a warmhearted shove, lifted her head from his shoulder.

Hermione, required to hold herself up again, folded half into herself beside Roland.

He took her hand in his.

Hermione—drunk, hollow, and wretched—was too bone-weary to draw it away.

"I spoke with your brother." His voice was soft and beseeching. "And he said I might come to call at the cottage." He pressed her hand. "That I might meet with you alone."

She shook her head, and swallowed around the lump in her throat. "Did you not read my note?"

For some reason, he tensed, and without releasing her hand, slid further away on the bench.

He remained quiet for a long time.

"There are too many who maintain," he began, his words tentative and slow, "that a woman who hears the demands of her physical self, who honors them and ranks them alongside the demands of her mind—of her *heart*—is an unnatural creature, of dissipated values. But Hermione"—he pressed her hand to the warm center of his chest—"I accept no such censures and limitations for your sex. The thought of a wife who does not simply accept, but eagerly *anticipates* the ecstasies that you've hinted at with such sweetly coquettish candor—"

"Anticipates the *what*?"

Hermione sat up tall, and finally pulled her hand away.

"This is neither the time nor the place," he continued, "but know that once we have an understanding, I will most warmly welcome the open flow of such sentiments between us."

Hermione stood up, wobbled, and pushed her hands down into the depths of her pockets.

There was nothing in the right, where she'd taken out the note from Cressida and given it to Draco.

She drew the slip of paper from her left.

Eyes shut, with the floor spinning below her, she thought back across the night.

There had been four.

One, a rejection: *There has been a mistake ...*

Two, a recipe: *... a host of ecstasies that await ...*

Three, a request: *Believe that I am moved ...*

And four, a declaration: *I'll wait for you in the garden.*

What ought to have been in her left-hand pocket was the note from Roland.

What Hermione unfurled was written in Cressida's hand—a simple, foolish plea in hopes of a virginal kiss.

"What did I give you before?" She turned on Roland, pushing the paper back down in her pocket. "When I handed you the note."

He sat up, and rubbed the back of his neck. "A recipe, and also *not*, of course—your cleverness,

Miss Granger, is—"

Hermione turned her brandy-soaked mind over as quickly as it would go.

Draco, passing a note to Cressida, whose blushes were immediate.

Tell me where we might meet alone, and allow me only a word.

Passing yet another to Draco herself in the billiards room:

Please accept that our friendship can never be more than that.

Hermione jammed her hands down as far as she could reach in her pockets.

She felt past the crumpled note from Cressida, past her wand, tracing the distant corners and then inward, until she felt the fingertips of her right hand connect with those of her left.

"God help me." She tugged her hands from her pockets and braced herself on the balcony rail, and thought for a moment she might lean over it and be sick. "It's one pocket."

Roland stood, and laid a hand on her elbow.

"There's just the one pocket," she repeated, breathing through her nostrils. "It's like a hoodie."

"A what?"

Before Hermione could be pressed to explain, a storm of shouts erupted from the garden below.

"If you've laid a *finger* on her, Granger, I swear to you—"

"I've done no such thing, you pillock! Shove off and go take a jump in your lake, you—"

There was a dull, organic sound, and then a woman's throbbing cry.

"Willy, *no!*"

Roland was up and over the rail before Hermione had a chance to open her mouth.

Then, before she'd located the stone flight of stairs leading down to the level of the garden, Tom Longbottom and Sir Thomas streamed past from the ballroom and leapt down after him.

It was dark in the gardens, but beside the camellia bush, it was clear that William had landed a punch.

Where his face was visible under William's left arm, Hermione could see that Draco's upper lip was swollen and bleeding, and as he jabbed at William's knee and brought them both to the ground, he took an elbow to the eye.

Cressida stood, both hands over her mouth, sobbing like death was waiting in the wings of the masculine drama playing out in front of her.

There was a loud ripping sound as William, bested by Draco on the ground, grasped at Draco's suit jacket as he attempted to stand, and tore the seam of his pocket.

"God *damn* you, that was my grandfather's best jacket, you inebriated blockhead!" Draco shouted.

As he fussed over the pocket, William got up to his feet and charged him headlong. He was stopped by a running tackle from Sir Thomas, who had him on the ground with his elbow bent back, crying out in anger.

"You're a cad, Granger! Of the worst sort, leading an innocent girl into—"

"A fellow doesn't exactly expect a woman to jump out of a shrub while he's getting some air, Avery," Draco said, brushing at his sleeves. "I was just as surprised as you were to find me there."

Cressida was bawling now, and covering her face.

"Between you and your sister, the flirt—" William roiled like an eel between Sir Thomas' knees, loosed his arms, slipped along the ground out from under him, then jumped up and began to dodge Tom Longbottom with a weaving, back and forth run around the edge of the garden.

He tore his jacket off, and pitched it into the camellia bush.

"A *flirt*? Really, Avery?" Draco stopped fussing with his jacket. "Don't you dare drag my sister into it, you Chauvinist ass."

William, sensing he'd successfully located a sore spot, doubled down.

"She's certainly captured Rolly's attention easily enough!" William darted just out of Tom Longbottom's reach.

Draco took off at a run towards William, and after cannonballing the top of his head into William's chest, landed a series of blows at his side before Roland grasped his elbows and hauled him backwards.

"Stop, please!" cried Cressida.

"What is your *deal*, Avery?" Draco shouted, kicking at William as the latter approached. "The girl doesn't want you! Just accept it and move on as best you can like the rest of us!"

While William attempted to reach around Draco's flailing right leg and hit him in the ribs, Sir Thomas and Tom Longbottom made a successful play for his elbows, and dragged him across the lawn.

"My own feelings have nothing to do with it! Your intentions, sir!" William contorted and writhed. "My quarrel is with your *intentions*!"

He made a series of twists, then held his arms up straight and dropped vertically in the fashion of toddlers in all worlds and across all timelines, and burst forth from knee level with a rush of power.

"Bloody well let me *go*, Weasel!" Draco tugged at Roland's grip, but before he could free himself, William landed a solid punch against his temple.

"Ow! *Fuck*!"

"No!" wailed Cressida, clutching—or was that what *rending* meant?—at her bosom.

Casting while rat-arsed was dubious at best—getting potted and casting at moving targets even more so—but it wouldn't be the first time Hermione had done it.

"You idiotic"—Hermione dug around in her kangaroo pocket for her wand—"ludicrous"—she hauled it out—"senseless"—gave it a tap against her palm, and watched it spark—"brainless"—she

took aim at William, bobbing and weaving away from Tom Longbottom—"peacocks!"

Her stomach cramped, and as she hiccupped, her wand jumped.

William bounded through the air over Sir Thomas, who was surging across the lawn in a leaping tackle.

Hermione rolled her eyes, and steadied her wand hand with her left.

"*Stupefy!*"

"Daddy, darling, you have a clump of ..." Cassandra picked at the collar of her father's jacket, and held up a green bundle. "You had more grass, just there."

The party waiting for their turn at the Floo was positively funereal.

Draco stood far from Hermione, holding a bundle of ice wrapped in a handkerchief to his brow, while the young Mrs. Longbottom cooed to her husband and brushed her fingertips over imaginary scrapes on his jaw.

Lady Longbottom, ever the model of grace and propriety, had her arm looped through Cressida's, and from time to time offered her daughter's arm a comforting, if ephemeral, stroke.

"'Twas a *ball!*" Martin bopped appreciatively in his chair. "What say you, Longbottom?"

"A ball to remember!" Sir Thomas shouted, still smiling and at the ready as dawn bled through the enormous windows at the front of the hall. "No Michaelmas of '97, of course—we're all leaving with all our teeth. Unless ... "

He peered hopefully back over his shoulder at Draco, who closed his eyes and shook his head in the negative.

"Still!" Sir Thomas pronounced. "A snorter!"

"Thank you all for coming." Miss Parkinson, in her vacuous fashion, not a hair out of place, curtsied and swallowed a yawn.

"There's our girl!" bawled Sir Thomas. "Home we go at last!"

Penelope hustled from the hall just beyond, with a furtive glance behind her.

"Alright, yes, let's go everyone," she said in a rush.

The Floo flared green, and the party began to step through.

"Here." As Hermione stepped forward, Penelope began to shove her hand into Hermione's left pocket.

"What are—"

"*Shh,*" she hissed. "Just take it."

Penelope withdrew her hand, and the left side of Hermione's dress slumped under the drag of a significant weight.

"It was in the head House elf's quarters, being used as a soap dish."

"Penelope, what on Earth—"

Penelope slapped her finger over her own lips and shot Hermione a hard look.

"Play *Jenny Tie the Bonnet!*" Martin shouted back over his shoulder towards the musicians, droning through a final set on the balcony on the far side of the ballroom.

A tiny sob escaped from Cressida.

"Oop! Did I get your toes, my gel?"

They left Thornwood Abbey with a renewal of steady weeping.

"You lot haven't done it by halves, then, have you?"

Grix, in a linen nightdress, blue plaid flannel robe and his lambskin slippers, pushed at the steering toggle on Martin's chair and guided the snoring professor into the cottage.

"You want a poultice for any of that?" he asked, pointing at Draco's face.

"It's fine." said Draco, diction muddy around the purple-red swell of his upper lip.

Grix laughed.

"Looks it, my lad. Got all your teeth?"

Half an hour later, Hermione stood at the upstairs landing in her corset and chemise, listening while Grix hauled Martin into his bed.

"What'd you have to eat an' all, gaffer?"

"Chocolate nipples!" said Martin, spent and jovial.

"Sounds lovely. Arms up. No, both of 'em. *No*, leave the brandy, I'd like to be in my own bed just now thank you very much."

Hermione knocked at Draco's door.

"Come in."

He was splayed out on his back on his bed, his waistcoat unbuttoned and a poultice over his eye.

His mattress dipped as she sat down beside him.

"Had their toes! One after the other!" Martin warbled from downstairs.

Hermione sighed. "It's not *fine*, you know. Any of it."

Draco's jaw clenched. "It's *fine*, Granger. We all had a bit too much and things got out of hand, that's all."

"I wrote that letter—"

"Save it, please." He rolled over onto his side, facing away from her. "I'm tired."

Hermione reached into the individual, clearly defined pocket she'd made in her chemise, and withdrew a hard object, about the size of a fist, wrapped in a handkerchief embroidered with the letter *P*.

She placed it in the middle of the bed.

Draco turned back over, and looked down at it with one eye.

The silence between them hummed.

"That's not—"

Hermione nodded. "It is."

She reached over, and unwrapped the bundle.

The snuff box crouched in the center of Draco's bed, staring at them both with its maniacal, circular eyes.

Draco pushed back from it so hard he had to grip the coverlet to avoid falling off the side of the bed.

Hermione drew the gold comb out of her hair, set it on Draco's bedside, then began the laborious process of removing the pinning spells Margaret had placed.

"Should we ..." Draco sat up. "I'm afraid to touch it."

Pulling her fingers through sweat-tangled loops of hair, Hermione shrugged. "It's been in my pocket for over an hour. I think it's alright."

Draco blinked, perplexed. "How did you come across it?"

"Penelope."

"That explains nothing. How did—"

"Four sisters. Four houses. She's the Slytherin."

Draco spread out his hands in mute disbelief.

"If it helps, I think she thought you were after it because of an intense personal interest in snuff boxes."

"Alright." He swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Should we run tests, do some initial ..." He glared at the squatting figure sidelong. "Perhaps indirect magic?"

"Not tonight. Can you untie my stays, please?" She turned her back to Draco.

He moved across the bed, avoiding contact with the box, and sitting on his knees, began to undo the back of her corset.

"It probably shouldn't spend the night in the same room as the Time Turner, though." She worked through a tangle at the end of a curl.

His fingers stopped.

"What?" she asked.

He remained silent and motionless behind her.

"What, Malfoy?" She turned around and looked at him.

He was always white, but just then he looked like bleached paper.

Without saying a word, he rose from the bed, crossed the room in three strides and snatched his suit jacket from the back of the chair at his desk.

He pushed his hands, first the left, then the right, as though one would find what the other could not, into the interior pockets, then the single intact pocket remaining on the outside.

Tenderly, almost reverently, he lifted the flap of the torn pocket, as if he moved with precisely the right intention he could make it whole again without magic.

He stopped, stared at the wall, then looked at her.

"It's gone," she said frankly, and dropped her hands from where she'd been holding her stays in place.

Draco closed his eyes and nodded.

"I can see your ..." Without opening his eyes, he waved his hand towards her. "On the left."

Hermione looked down.

"Oh!" She breathed in, and tugged up her chemise by a centimetre. "Has it been like that all night?"

"No. Just now."

She breathed out. "That's good. Thanks."

"Not a problem."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to my beta [dreamsofdramione](#) for her incredible skill and generosity, and for being an all-around wonderful human. Any remaining mistakes are my own.

I can be found on [Tumblr](#) and [Instagram](#).

The Box

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hermione stretched out from corner to corner in her bed, her arms and legs spread like a starfish. She'd long been a connoisseur of the decadence of sleeping entirely alone, but found the pleasure spoiled by the engine of anxiety sparking in her stomach.

Dawn had progressed into daylight proper before she made her way to her room and collapsed against the sheets, cool and taut under the military sharpness of Grix's corner tucks.

Her exhaustion was as much of the mind as it was of the body, and in spite of the light streaming past the open shutters, she sank into a gloom as tangible as the water in a lukewarm bath.

While she settled her head one way and then another—bunching and rebunching her pillow, rotating and flipping it, and then herself—barbs of distress pricked at her heart, each one a reminder of a mistake she had made the night before through blindness and distraction.

The deceiving pocket; the misdelivered notes; the faultless people misled.

She imagined the Time Turner sitting in its drawstring bag beneath a camellia bush. Then she recollected herself, in a moment of sexual abandon, tugging away at years' worth of carefully tightened restraints in the same fashion that Draco, dutiful brother that he was, loosened her stays.

Her mind set it all before her as though it were a play. Once it had rehearsed the scene of the ball to its own satisfaction, it tackled the errors of the previous week, then tracked backwards to her separation from Ron, forwards through the weeks that followed, and then on.

By way of a climax, the past six years of her life stood shoulder to shoulder across the proscenium line of the stage like Roman sagittarii, knocked their bows with irreparable regrets, and pierced her with a volley of self-reproach.

She was cold, but too tired to rouse herself and find a solution. Instead, she pressed her eyes closed harder than was helpful, and passed the morning kicking her linens away in convulsions of deferred embarrassment. Shivering, she pulled them back again, the minutes drawing themselves out in a cunning deception so that they each went on ten times as long as they ought to have done.

The early July day getting on with its business outside her window was offensively exquisite.

A clematis grew against the south face of the cottage, stretching its arms up weather-grey lattices. It curled in curiosity around Hermione's window, walked its fingertips across the sill and steeped the room in the almondine scent of its star-shaped blooms. In the oak just beyond, a pair of red squirrels with orange coats and tufted ears scrambled over and around the heavy branches, insulting one another and scratching audibly at the bark as they ran, taunting her with their wakefulness and good cheer.

She resented them all: the churlish squirrels, the fragrant flowers on the vine, the fresh jar of yellow roses in the windowsill, and the depressing brightness of the indifferent sun.

Spent and numb, she had left the snuff box behind in Draco's room, abandoned like an appalling paperweight on the little table beside his bed.

She wasn't afraid of it then. But on the opposite side of the landing, eyelids closed, she watched it flicker into life and snatch him away from her with its arms of inexplicable fire, toss him through the gaps in the universe into fertile and unidentified fields, and lose him there forever.

If that happened, she'd be forced to go and fetch him.

A series of unsuccessful readjustments brought the cool side of her pillow up, and then the warm, and then the cool again. Finally, urged on by her nervous discomfort, and in the interest of not spending the remainder of her life tethered to a Time Turner in the search for him, she rose from the terrible disappointment that her bed had become, and drew her dressing gown around her shoulders.

In his room, far darker than hers, the shutters were closed and latched.

The bed frame creaked as Hermione sat down. He lay on his side, facing away from the door, and beyond his shallow and steady breath, he didn't move. She slid closer to him, and stroked the bare skin of his shoulder.

"Are you still awake?"

He shifted beneath his linens and sighed, a prolonged exhalation of pure fatigue, but didn't turn to look at her. "Unfortunately."

"Oh. I was—"

She drew up short at the sight of the snuff box, wallowing on the shadowed nightstand like a malignant toad.

It faced her head-on, shameless and vulgar. The dark obscured the finer details, but she picked out the circles of its eyes, simultaneously leering to either side and trained straight forward. It watched her, unblinking, as she slid across the bed and drew herself so close to Draco that her knees jostled the backs of his thighs.

After the ball, she'd been assaulted by a pungent pine and lemon smell the moment she pulled the snuff box from her pocket, and its traces permeated the air over Draco's bed. Brown globs of gelatinous soap crowded its orifices, and a fine film coated its entire surface, giving it the look of a creature wrapped in dirty cobwebs, with wet, rheumy eyes and a mouth full of rabid, pond-colored froth.

The gears of the nervous motor inside Hermione tightened, and the machine picked up speed.

"I was wondering—" She flushed with unanticipated self-consciousness, and spread her hand over the center of her chest. Recollecting that her dressing gown covered her admirably, she let it fall.

"Wondering what, Granger?" He turned to look at her, then shuffled his arm from beneath the bedclothes and scratched the back of his ear. "It's late. No—*God*. Early."

"Could we sleep together?"

Draco blinked.

"I don't mean in the sex way," she whispered.

"I didn't think you meant it in the sex way."

“It’s only that you’re in here with the—” She gestured at the snuff box, glowering at them with its mucousy eyes.

“Are you nervous about it all of a sudden?” he asked. “You seemed to think it was safe enough when you were marching about with it in your pocket.”

“Yes, but that was *me*.”

He leaned up higher and scowled. “Are you worried I’m going to run off with it?”

“No,” she said. “I’m worried it’s going to run off with *you*.”

She pinched the striped coverlet draped over Draco’s hip between her fingers, then drew her hand away.

“You’re worried it’s going to run off with me?”

“Yes. And if something set it off while you were alone, and it *took* you—”

Another wave of mortification swept over her. She wrapped her arms around her middle, and fixed her gaze on the snuff box.

“I’d manage,” said Draco. He poked at the box with a finger. “God, what a miserable object. It’s seen some action, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s horrid. I’ve been telling you as much since you first introduced it, but, Draco—if you *weren’t* alright. If I couldn’t *find* you straight away.”

He narrowed his eyes at her and brushed his fingertips together to rid them of whatever pollution the snuff box might have soiled him with. “You’re really worried.”

Her face must have explained to him that she was, because after studying it for a while, he rolled out from underneath his linens without another word.

“Are those—” Hermione began.

“Are what?” He neatened the sheets and quilt, tucking them up as though making his bed for the day.

“You’re wearing boxer shorts.”

“I am.”

“Are those the ones you had on when we arrived here?”

“No,” he said. “I transfigured them. I’m not especially keen on wearing an ankle length dress to bed.”

“Understandable. Neither am I, really.” She sat back on her heels and watched him.

The rumor mill had been correct; he did have defined abdominals.

She would never admit that she’d attempted to Transfigure a new pair of knickers for herself out of a handkerchief, nor that she’d given up after repeatedly producing a fuchsia lace thong with a cheeky black velvet bow at the back.

Once the bedding was smoothed down, Draco lay back down on top of the lot. "Alright then." He pushed at Hermione's hip, then when she moved away from him, tugged the bedclothes out from under her and held them open. "Get in."

"What are you doing?"

"Welcoming you into my bed. Get in so I can go back to sleep. I'm exhausted, and the two of us have rather a lot to think about tomorrow."

"But you'll be cold—in just your pants, on top of the bedclothes like that."

He fumbled for his wand at the side table, pointed it at himself, and cast a warming charm. "There. Are you less concerned?"

She supposed that she was, and said so.

As she slid between his sheets, he turned away from her and faced the wall again. He didn't move, and Hermione thought he must have been asleep.

For long minutes she lay on her back, tracing the webbed cracks in the ceiling plaster and worrying at a loose stub of thread at the edge of the coverlet.

Then quickly, before she could think better of it, she rolled towards him.

She slipped an arm around his waist, and as best as she could while pinched beneath the layers of his linens, nested her body into his from his shoulders to his hips, the tops of her feet tucked over his bum and her knees bunched into the center of his back.

"What are you doing?" He sounded perfectly awake.

Hermione flattened her hand against his chest, fingers splayed open, and rested her forehead at his nape.

She breathed in.

Pine and lemon, lavender and linen, tired flesh and the sweat of her own contrition.

The hot, frantic machinery inside her cooled, and then slowed, and as it stopped, a debilitating need for sleep began to take hold.

His heart marched briskly beneath her palm.

"If that blasted vole goes off again," she murmured, "it can take us together."

He didn't say anything at all to that.

She wondered whether he'd fallen asleep at last, until his hand closed over hers.

"I never meant that letter for you," she said. Her voice had slipped out of focus.

He took a very long time to answer her.

"Who was it meant for?"

"Ronald." She yawned, and began to drift away in earnest.

“Roland,” he said.

“That's him.”

There was another stretch of silence.

“What have you been up to, Hermione?”

“Nothing.”

“It's not nothing.” He tightened his hand over hers.

“It can't be anything,” she mumbled. “The timing is all wrong.”

He fell quiet again, and her mind sauntered down the path to sleep, unhurried and unconcerned.

He spoke once more, scarcely audible.

"It's a *swan*."

She might have laughed, or only dreamed that she did. Her thoughts, spent from racing from one end of her mind to the next, had grown scattered, and then dispersed, and the distinction no longer mattered.

She slept like the most thoroughly extinguished of the dead, and by the time she woke, the shadows sprouted from west to east across the floor.

Draco sat against the headboard with his open book, by appearances entirely indifferent to Hermione's legs twined around his thigh.

She lifted her head from his chest and wiped at her mouth with the back of her wrist.

“Have I been drooling?” Her throat was dry, but there was a damp patch on his skin where her mouth had been.

He turned a page. “Only a little. The snoring was of greater concern.”

“I always snore when I'm overtired.”

“I know.”

She settled her arm around his waist again, and enjoyed a gaping, feline yawn. “You're a furnace.”

“All to the good, because your feet are freezing. You should consider seeing someone about your circulation.”

“My circulation is extremely robust.” She huddled up against the radiant heat of his skin. “When did you get under the covers?”

“At the point that you stole the coverlet out from underneath me, kicked me in the back end and said ‘Stop pinching me.’”

"I don't recall doing that."

"Doesn't mean that it didn't happen."

"Why were you pinching me?"

"I wasn't. I believe it was a complaint about not being able to steal the sheets as well."

"Mm." She yawned once more, scrubbed the soles of her feet along his calves and arched her back. "I don't think I've slept properly even once since we arrived here."

"And how did you fare on this side of the landing?" He raised his scarred eyebrow, but didn't shift his attention from his book.

"I've drooled on you, haven't I?" She ran the pad of her thumb over his bruised and swollen lip. "Look at you, broken man. Does it hurt?"

"Only when you touch it."

"You ought to have Grix see to it."

He allowed her to trace her fingers over the cuts and bruises on his face, fading fast but still evident. "He brought a tray up earlier."

"Did he?"

"He did."

Hermione pushed aside the notion of Grix finding her asleep and slobbering on Draco's sternum, and admired the breakfast tray at the side of the bed. It remained untouched except for a missing teacup, which had migrated to the bedside next to Draco's elbow.

"I think he's taken pity on us. It's proper breakfast tea with milk and sugar." He brought his cup to his lips, blew on it, and took a drink. "I have no idea how it tastes, but the idea of it shores one up all the same. I haven't the courage to inquire after donuts."

She shifted up in the bed, poured herself a cup, then joined Draco in leaning against the headboard.

She didn't want to say it, but it needed saying.

"We're going to have to test it." She sipped her tea, and regarded the gruesome snuff box with contempt.

"God," he sneered, eyeing it sidelong. "I suppose we must."

"Breakfast first."

With her lips at the gilt rim of one of Martin's charming cups, Hermione discovered how dearly she missed a proper milky tea in the morning.

Grix's black tea was excellent, steeped strong and held piping hot in its silver pot.

She was astonished to also learn that sitting up in Draco's bed, stalling whatever doom the snuff box had in store, blowing across the surface of the tea to cool it before each swallow, she felt ...

... happy.

She rifled through her proverbial warm, dark, inside cupboards, searching for the middle-grade anxiety she always kept on hand, and found it quite unaccounted for.

She slid further down the bed and leaned into his arm, and when he lifted it over her shoulder and pulled her near, morning sweat-smelling boy that he was, she was happier still.

Her body suggested that it wouldn't be overly inconvenienced if she were to lie with him in his bed in the sex way rather than the not-sex way—that it was, in fact, standing entirely at the ready to do so—but the train of thought was swiftly retired from the line and broken down for scrap.

Barring that particular form of morning exercise, all they wanted for was—

Hermione sniffed, and glanced inquiringly at the tray. "Has Grix given us sausages?"

"He has."

She grumbled her carnivorous contentment.

"It's funny," she began some minutes later, belly lined with glorious grease and caged again at his side with her hot cup of tea, "but it feels out of time entirely, doesn't it? Like..."

"Like an overstimulating holiday," he offered.

"Exactly."

"I know. It's the strangest thing."

"When you think about it, isn't this what we've dreamed of doing all along?" She peered up at him.

"You mean sitting abed with you in my pants, enjoying a cup of tea, after a party where no one's lost any teeth? That's the dream, yes."

"You know what I mean. Studying the past in person. That's the entire thrust of the ten-year plan for the department."

"The ten-year plan I drew up."

"Why are you the worst?" Hermione stroked her cheek against his chest. "I suppose it's a very good ten-year plan, as ten-year plans go."

"Have you ever come up with a better one?"

"No. Mine have all been disastrous."

"I'll own my plan projected a bit more intentionality to the time travel and significantly less hand-to-hand combat, but it has occurred to me that this is a perverse sort of professional success. Assuming we haven't upset the apple cart so thoroughly we come back to find we were never born."

Hermione huffed out a dry, snorting laugh.

"What? he asked.

"Nothing. Only I just thought how funny it would be to never find it."

"The Time Turner?"

She turned her face towards his chest and surreptitiously smelled him. "Mm hm. You could become a fisherman. Grow a beard."

Draco's ribs twitched with a soundless snicker. "I don't know if I have a beard in me. But I would try, if that's what you wanted."

Tentatively, Hermione took his hand in hers.

He made no protest.

"I'll learn to knit jumpers and do you up a closet full of cable knit pullovers." She threaded their fingers together.

"Thank you very much. Patch my Mac as well."

"Darn your socks. Gut all the fishes. Make fish soup. I'll be a literal fishwife."

"Figurative one, too."

"Shut it." She closed her eyes and sighed, then felt him squeeze her hand.

"Not a fish sister?"

"We can't be fish siblings," she said emphatically. "Because clearly we'll have to have fish children. In order to continue the fish line."

"How many?"

"Fish or children?"

"Of these fish children of yours."

"Eighteen."

"Perfect." He nodded his approval. "Bossy little Granger girls, all of them."

"In cable knit jumpers."

"Especially the infants."

"The infants cabled right up."

"Great tempestuous masses of curls."

"The babies as well?"

"Naturally," he said. "We'll need to get started soon if we're going to fit in—"

He stopped speaking.

Then he pulled his hand away from hers, and became deeply absorbed in the work of drinking his tea.

"Ron would be devastated." With no forewarning, he poured the words over Hermione like a bucket of ice water.

Flushing with embarrassment, she moved away from him. She threw back a swallow of tea, drew a

sharp draft of air over her burned tongue, and set her cup on the breakfast tray with an unsteady hand.

"As will your mother, and Harry, and a whole lot of other people if we don't make it back."

Without ceremony, she leaned across his lap and grabbed the soapy wombat from the nightstand.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking it with me while I get dressed."

"No, you're not!" His tea sloshed over the rim of his cup as he set it aside, then he captured her hips in his hands before she could haul herself out of his bed.

"Let me go, Malfoy." She twisted her back end about, but he didn't release her. "I'm not leaving it in here alone with you."

He hauled her back to himself. "And I'm supposed to be alright with you walking off with it by yourself?"

"I'll be fine."

"What an astonishing hypocrite you are!" he said. "Neither of us has the faintest idea what that thing might do, and I have absolutely no interest in being in another room when it happens."

"You were willing to sleep with it."

"I'm willing to sleep with just about anything, remember?"

She gave up trying to free herself from the hold he'd secured around her middle, and sat back on her heels. "It's nearly gone two o'clock. I need to dress."

"As do I," he muttered into her neck.

"We have a problem then, don't we?"

They struck a compromise.

Hermione crossed the landing's cool floorboards, bare-footed and snuff box in hand. Draco trailed behind, with only the slight tug at her back suggesting he'd taken hold of her chemise.

"Help me into my stays," she said behind her closed door.

"Be nice."

She lifted up her hair and cast a glance at him. "*Please* help me into my stays."

He'd learned, and learned well, over several mornings of practice. His hands moved with confidence, cinching her quickly and giving the laces a final tug before looping them closed. He tied her petticoat, too, then gathered her white linen skirts in his hands.

“Arms up.” He hooked the dress over her head and let the skirts fall, then fastened the buttons up the back with swift fingers while she slipped her stockings on and tied her hair into a passable bun.

“You’d think there would be spells for all this nonsense,” he said, reclining on her bed while she floundered with her garter ribbons.

“I wasn’t aware of any spells for exactly this when we arrived, and I don’t have access to an adequate library. I tried the shoe-lacing spell, and let me advise you that a boot and a corset are not the same thing. If we had another month here I’d devise an improvement, but we don’t.”

He stretched himself out fully across her bed, crossed his arms behind his head, and chose to wear his most insufferable, smarmy look. “Are you sure it’s not because you like it when I dress and undress you, Hermione?”

She glowered at him. “I’m *quite* sure.”

Draco smuggled a handful of her skirts in his fist as they returned to his room, and the heat beneath her indignation rose and began to simmer.

As they met his threshold, she twisted around and collided with the barrier of his chest.

“We’re going to have to separate at some point, you know,” she said, looking into his unreadable face. “We can’t go on clinging to one another in perpetuity.” He didn’t respond, so she lifted up the badger and pointed its nose at him. “It wasn’t instantaneous before. We had *some* warning.”

“You’re not to leave the room with it unless I’m with you.” His fingers dug into the flesh of her hip.

"*That* is not nice.”

He rolled his eyes. “*Please*, Miss Granger, kindly do not walk off with the catastrophe swan by yourself.”

“What if I need the loo?”

“I’ll wait outside the door.”

She looked at him skeptically. “Then the same applies to you.”

“Where’s it going to sleep tonight?” he asked.

“In my bedroom.”

“Then I’m sleeping in your bed.”

“Fine.”

“*Good.*”

She slipped out of his grasp before he could tighten it again, tossed herself across his bed and curled up in the center, face politely averted while he pulled on his trousers and shirt.

Only a moment ago, she thought she wanted to slap at Draco’s anxious and patronizingly helpful hands, but she was forced to swallow her pride when he parted from her to dress.

She immediately felt ill at ease.

Within the last few hours, six feet away had become too far.

She'd never experienced anything like it in all their years of work, despite one or two lost fingertips and the time she accidentally dislocated a substantial hank of her hair.

They'd both thoroughly lost their minds.

"Do you think we've been affected?" she asked. "By the time travel I mean."

"In what sense?"

His trousers rustled as he pulled them on, and she fixed her attention to the snuff box sitting on the bed beside her.

"You know—impacted. Mentally. By being thrown about through spacetime. Or if there's a curse attached to this ghastly creature, which I suppose there must be. It might have altered our personalities, don't you think? Maybe we're addled."

"I'm not addled."

She fought hard against the urge to turn over and watch him settle his trousers on his hips. "*I* must be," she muttered to the snuff box.

She prodded at its latch with a fingertip, then flipped it open, revealing nothing inside beyond a soggy blob of soft brown soap.

She drew her wand from her pocket. "We ought to try a spell. Something very simple."

"We could summon it," he suggested, muffled inside his shirt. "It's what got us into this mess. If it doesn't react, it may have spent its curse."

"Something simpler." Hermione tipped the box closed again with her wand, and struck it once soundly on the nose.

"What are you—" Draco crossed the room with three heavy footfalls and took her ankle in his hand.

"What are *you*?" Hermione asked, pistoning her foot.

His hold was both soft and uncompromising.

"You're messing with it!" he said sharply. "It's terrifying!"

"So you're going to grab onto my foot in case anything happens?"

"Yes."

She tossed her wand aside, flipped onto her back and held up her empty hands. "Look. I'm not an idiot, Draco. I wasn't going to perform any spell work until you were done dressing. Now let go of me."

Draco, shirt still unbuttoned, did no such thing. He kept looking down at her with fear and annoyance, like she'd been preoccupied with a book and wandered into a minefield.

"You just about gave me a bloody heart attack."

“We’re both being *extremely silly*,” she said.

“It’s not going to seem *extremely silly* if you find yourself sitting on Hadrian’s wall being stared down by a Roman cavalry unit.”

“We’ve never been afraid of our own research, Malfoy. I’m ashamed of us this morning. It’s high time we take the badger by the horns—”

Draco covered his eyes with his available hand. “God help me.”

“—and do what we need to do to get ourselves home.”

“How would you like it if I was across the room from you, prodding it with my wand just for fun?”

“We’re not discussing your recreational prodding habits.” She pointed at the small mirror on his bureau. “Go and look at yourself. You’ve broken your head, you can’t smell anything, you’ve permanently bisected your eyebrow, and now you’re going about pugilizing your face against other men’s fists.”

“That’s not how boxing works.”

“It seems that’s how *you* work.” She raised her free leg and flattened her stockinged foot against his chest. “And we cannot spend night after night huddled up together in our pants—”

“You haven’t got any pants.”

“—out of a probably baseless fear that one of us is going to get chucked back in time and hauled off by horsemen. Or eaten by pteranodons.” She pumped her captured leg again, but his grip didn’t ease. “It’s untenable and absurd. It’s—” Hermione’s eyes searched for the clock on Draco’s bureau—just after two o’clock. The sooner we can prove this dreadful thing is harmless, the sooner we can stop trailing after one another like a pair of motherless ducklings.”

“Stop poking the badger, Hermione.”

“Don’t tell me what to do! I’ll poke all the badgers. Watch me do it.” She reached over her head, felt around on the bed, and once she’d found the snuff box, she flipped its latch.

“How many pteranodons do you think you can take on by yourself?” he asked.

"Do I have my wand?"

"What?"

“If I have my wand, twelve. At least.”

He shifted his hands to the undersides of her calves and yanked her to the edge of the bed, away from the snuff box.

“You’ve lost your mind.”

“That is *exactly* my point.” She looked down at her knees, in their white silk stockings, bracketing Draco’s hips.

A half dozen centimetres of skirt and chemise stood between her modesty and providing Draco with a front row seat to a rather exceptional show. She quickly shoved her skirts down and flattened her hand over her chest.

He had evidently experienced the same revelation, evaluating her stocking ribbons and her open thighs before looking back at her face. He looked like he'd just been informed he won the lottery and had five minutes to decide between an annuity and a lump sum payment.

"You've messed up my hair." Even to her own ear it sounded childlike and peevish.

It was the wrong thing to have said.

Quick as a curse he folded into her, pelvis snuggled between her thighs, her legs wrapped around his waist.

Neither of them said anything. Their sole mutual concern was joining their mouths in a fit of damp supplication and keeping them like that, sighing at the relief of it and the taste of tea and strawberries between them.

They kissed, and nothing more, for a very long time.

If he'd moved a hand to a breast, or worse yet, to where she lacked even the feeble defense of a pair of cheap-looking pink kickers, it would have been over. She'd have slid her hand into his trouser front and embarked on the data collection phase of the research into how, exactly, mingling their anatomy in that particular way would alter them.

But his hands had settled on either side of her head, tangled in her hair, and remained there.

It became manifest that the decision lay with her: whether to stop, or to continue as they were, or to induct him into the highly selective secret society of men who'd been permitted to fumble around beneath her skirts.

She would have done the latter. It had the finality of a rain shower that had already begun.

She needed to tell him something—before it happened, not after. It was terribly important.

She didn't know what it was.

She pushed at his chest and they parted, both of them gasping for breath.

His eyes were wide and wild, but he waited, watching her, his gleaming lower lip agape.

Before she could say anything, something red and round, like a small rubber ball, shot through the open window, impacted Draco's temple, then rebounded onto the bed.

"What the *fuck*?" He jerked back reflexively, brought a hand to the side of his face, and stared out the window in shock.

Hermione froze, then felt above her head.

Something cool and small and soft lay on the coverlet.

She folded it into her hand, brought it between them, and held it up.

"It's a strawberry." She thrust it towards him.

Draco gawped.

"Why are there strawberries flying through my window?"

The hoarse and rattling call of a crow carried over the windowsill.

“Oh! It’s Martin’s crow.”

Draco’s face twisted under the strain of an effort to comprehend. “Martin has a crow?”

“He does. It’s a thief.”

“What does it steal?”

“Strawberries.”

“And it throws them?”

“I suppose—well it would seem so. Maybe it was a squirrel?”

Draco closed his eyes and let his head fall towards his chest. “Either way.”

The moment was broken.

He rolled away from her, dropped his arm over his eyes and lay prone on his back.

“You’re right,” he said. “I’m addled.”

Hermione pushed her skirt and petticoat back down her thighs. “I told you we were.”

“Fuck that crow.”

“Agreed.”

“And fuck my life.”

She turned towards him. “*Your* life? What about *my* life? Having strawberries thrown at you by crows may not be your usual reason for coitus-interruptus—”

“That is not what just happened.”

“—but you’ve had enough weekend shags that you must be used to awkward Monday morning lift rides by now. I’m certainly not.”

He shook his head, arm still resting over his eyes. “You never get used to them.”

“I shouldn’t think so. And I refuse to have an uncomfortable lift ride with you, of all people. Only angry ones.”

“No. I don’t want one either.”

“We’ve made plans, Draco. They’re important to me. I thought they were important to *you*.” She reached over her head and picked up the muskrat. “But we’ve been losing our minds over your idiotic heirloom and its time travelling sex curse for days. It’s completely unprofessional.”

He moved his arm and looked at her, eyes wide and morose. “Hermione, please stop manhandling the swan. It’s repulsive. And I really don’t think either of us is properly equipped for dinosaur fighting.” He sighed hard, then rotated onto his side. “And how could you even suggest that our work isn’t important to me?”

His shirt fell open, and Hermione found herself contemplating the smooth, pale skin over his right

pectoral muscle.

"Is it?" she asked. "Sometimes it seems like it's all a joke to you."

"Would I have spent the last five years of my life being forced to enjoy coffee and being told off by you if it wasn't?"

"Being offered excellent coffee and being forced to enjoy it are not the same thing."

"Aren't they?"

They lay there, side by side, breathing hard.

He rubbed his fingertips over his eyes. "What do you want to do?"

She wanted to lick his nipple.

"I want to test the box," she said.

"Alright." He dropped his hand to the bed and stared at her mouth.

She wanted to shove him further away, but only succeeded in reaching out and laying her hand over his heart. "No more kissing."

"I'm sorry about the kissing."

"You don't need to be sorry," she said. "It's not your fault. There's something wrong with both of us. But no more of it. And no sex, either."

"Can I sleep in your bed?"

"Yes, but not in the sex way."

"I shouldn't think that will be an issue if there's not going to be any kissing."

She curled her fingertips into his skin.

His eyes wandered over her, from her massacred hair to the hem of her dress, still tugged up to her thighs.

He sighed hard.

"We're going to need to change it."

"Change what?"

"The ten year plan."

"Why?"

"It's only a detour, I hope."

"We've only been gone for a week, Draco, it's hardly a detour."

"Are you serious? It's only been a week?"

"When am I ever not serious?"

“All the time. Do you remember when you made the spikey crown out of leftover brass strips and wrapped your cardigan around yourself like a scarf—”

“It was my stola.”

“—and told me you were Lady Liberty? That crown's still hanging up next to the small wrenches on the wall behind the Dislocator by the way. You could put it on again.”

“That was two years ago, and we'd been working on the Potentiograph for thirty six hours without a break. I'm talking about *right now*.”

Draco laid his fingers against Hermione's cheek, and swiped his thumb across her bottom lip. “Right now?”

A hard knot formed in Hermione's throat. “Yes. Right now.”

His hand fell away. “It would be funny if we stayed, wouldn't it?”

Hermione nodded, hot beads of tears taking shape in the corners of her eyes. "Hilarious."

“But right now,” he said quietly, “you seem like you very much want to go home.”

“*Acci—*”

“*No!*”

The snuff box ogled them from the center of Draco's neatly made bed, where it luxuriated in a band of bright afternoon sunlight.

In the full light of day it looked haggard and pathetic.

It was ugly to begin with, but its misadventures had turned it into suitable fuel for nightmares. Standing beside Draco on the other side of the room, she nearly felt sorry for it.

She angled her body into his side as best she could without causing his wand arm to wobble.

“Something simple.”

“It doesn't get much simpler than *Accio*,” he said, arm tensed under her crushing hands.

“Simpler than that.”

Her instincts for both fighting and escape were sharply honed, and her feet tensed and lifted, ready to gallop off in any direction.

He dropped his wand to his side.

“Do you actually want to do this? We can hold off. Take another approach.”

“No.” She tightened her jaw and straightened her spine. “We need to get some kind of reassurance that it's not going to explode in our faces and send us back to the Upper Paleolithic.”

"That sounds tremendously boring."

"I don't know about that."

He regarded her with some curiosity. "Is that what was going on in that romance novel you read the other week?"

"Yes. But I am not letting you fill me with your increase in some lightly inhabited jungle, Malfoy."

Draco stared at the snuff box, then back at her.

"What was the title again? I'm going to ask Theo to put it on hold for me at the library."

"*In the Caverns of Her Desire*. It's the second book of a pentalogy." She waved her hand at the bed. "Do a *Wingardium Leviosa*. Simple."

Draco rolled his head in a half circle one direction, then back the other way. "Fine. Are you actually ready for this, Granger?"

"Yes."

"Wing—"

As his hand moved in the air, Hermione shifted behind him, still squeezing his right arm.

"You're going to need to be still, you know. If I cock up the spell I'm throwing at it we may be well on our way to realizing your caveman fantasies. Are you *biting* me?"

Hermione pulled her mouth from the back of Draco's right arm.

"Do it. Quickly."

Draco shook his head, then lifted his wand again.

"*Wingardium L*—oh *come on*, Hermione. This is *exactly* what you insisted we do today."

She'd moved around behind him, and rising up onto her toes, made a futile effort to look over his shoulder.

"Go on then," he said.

He angled his elbows back, and Hermione used them as leverage to jump up and string her arms around his shoulders, clamp her thighs around his middle and cross her ankles tightly over his navel.

"Now."

She pointed over his shoulder at the snuff box on the bed and swished and flicked her imaginary wand.

"Are we feeling secure enough?" he asked.

"Yes. Do it."

Bent slightly forward to adjust for her weight on his back, Draco lifted his wand once more.

"*Wingardium* "—he flinched as Hermione bit softly into his shoulder—" *Leviosa*. "

She eased her teeth from the fabric of his shirt, and the two of them watched in silence as the snuff box rose into the air, hovered a meter over the bed, and began turning idly on a horizontal axis like a chicken roasting on a spit.

“*Oh*,” said Hermione.

“*Oh* indeed.” He hooked his elbows under her knees and anchored her tighter to his back. “You really ought to warn a man that you bite.”

“I don’t bite hard. And only when I’m *really* worked up.”

“I’ll remember that when I’m hauling you over my shoulder back to my cave. It’s not doing anything weird.”

“It isn’t, is it?” Hermione breathed out, pulled her wand from her pocket, then kicked her heels into Draco’s haunches. “Walk me over there. I’m going to *Scourgify* it. It’s disgusting.”

In the nappish hour between three and four o’clock in the afternoon, Draco and Hermione emerged from Draco’s bedroom and made their way downstairs.

A fire hissed and sparked cheerfully in the fireplace, and the smell of baking bread flooded the room. Margaret McClure sat by the hearth, chattering away, while Martin shouted back at her from his packet of Tartan wraps about his enthusiasm for butter and colliding with a lively dance partner.

“The young people, Miss Margaret!” Martin gestured, knocking his hand against the side of his teacup. “They like a break from the monotony, and they shall get it from me! A little *piétinement de la mule heureuse*, a little *to* when one is expecting a *fro*, keeps things interesting!”

“I should imagine it does, Mr. Martin!” said Margaret. “I was told there were an extraordinary number of couples, and there were so many guests that Miss Parkinson had to have extra chairs Transfigured in the dining room. I can’t but wonder how hot it must have been. It’s a miracle there weren’t more than two rows in the garden!”

“There were two?” asked Draco, lowering himself down against a sofa cushion. He sounded disappointed. “Who had the other one?”

“Oh! Mr. Granger, you do look a fright,” said Margaret. “Shall I go and fetch some of Mr. Grix’s wonder ointment from the cabinet?”

“I suppose a little wonder ointment won’t hurt.” Draco draped his arm along the back of the sofa as Hermione sat beside him.

“Your crow’s been throwing strawberries at my head,” he said to Martin.

Martin’s white-crowned head jolted to attention. “Has he?”

“He has.” Draco pointed at his temple. “Got me right here at an extremely inopportune moment.”

“What a bastard!” Martin’s eyes glinted.

“We could not be more in agreement,” said Draco.

“We’ll show him who’s king of the strawberries tomorrow.”

“Where’s Grix this afternoon?” Hermione asked.

She settled herself on the sofa beside Draco, and perched the snuff box at her knees, where it sat facing out into the room like a teacup terrier.

“Gone to Tobermory!” shouted Martin. “Back tomorrow! Time to eat the kraut!”

“I’m on the very strictest orders to keep you out of Mr. Grix’s crocks,” said Margaret, bustling back into the room with a tiny ceramic pot in her hand. She paused in front of Draco and held it up. “Shall I, or...?”

Draco took the ointment from her, lifted the lid, sniffed at the contents, and frowned.

“Oh, Draco. Give it here,” said Hermione. She set the snuff box aside and took the jar from him, and sniffed it herself. Its odor was pungent and antiseptic, but pleasant. “It smells of tea tree oil.” She dipped a finger into the pale yellow ointment inside, and began to daub it on the cuts and bruising at his lips.

Margaret regained her chair by the fire, and picked up a folded page.

“Mr. Grix has taken up an urgent errand, and gone to his brother on the Isle of Mull. He had no notice, and expressed his regret that he wasn’t able to give you any. He sent for me this morning and asked whether I might come and assist Mr. Martin while he was away, and as I’m beforehand with the dresses for the Fitzswilliams’s wedding, I said I’d be delighted. Mr. Martin’s been showing me the proper way to perform a—how is it that you said it, Mr. Martin?”

“*Ciseaux!*” Martin offered.

“That’s the one, and it sounds like a lovely step, very bold for a ball, but he nearly had one of Mr. Grix’s crocks on the floor along with all of that lovely cabbage he’s put up, so we’ve decided to have a sit. Mr. Martin has had a swallow of port, and now we’re very calm, and snug as toast, and conversing like we always do.”

Draco flinched as Hermione swiped the ointment on his chin.

“It’s only the tiniest scratch,” she whispered.

“But it hurts.” Draco mooned at her with his great silver-grey eyes and plumped out his lower lip.

“Be strong,” she murmured.

“I am *so* strong, Granger. You have no idea how strong I am.”

Hermione shook her head as she patted the pad of her finger around a circular bruise on Draco’s jaw, then put the lid back on the pot and set it aside.

“We’re about to read a letter from a very old friend at Oxford, aren’t we Mr. Martin?” Margaret held up her sheet of letter paper, and then jolted in her chair. “Oh! I’m very sorry. You’ve had two owls as well this morning, Miss Granger. Only you and Mr. Granger have been abed, and I wasn’t going to disturb you.” She lifted a book from the table beside her and produced two envelopes, one sealed with silver wax, and the other with red.

“Who are they from?” Hermione asked as she took the envelopes from Margaret.

The first was stamped with the Malfoy seal, and contained a letter formally inviting everyone at Twiggybroke Cottage to a picnic at Malfoy Manor the following week.

The other was sealed with a plain, hasty stamp in the wax.

Her name appeared on the outside of the envelope in a strong and flowing hand, and when she opened the seal and unfurled the letter, she recognized the sender before she’d taken in what it said.

Dear Miss Granger,

An urgent letter from home has brought me back into Devonshire sooner than expected. I had intended to call on you and your brother as early as this afternoon, but I cannot anticipate a return to Wiltshire and your company until, at the earliest, the picnic at Malfoy Manor Saturday next.

Until then, only know that were it possible, I would say more, and if it is your wish, I am—

Yours most faithfully,

Roland Weasley

“Who’s writing to you, Hermione?” Draco peered sidelong at her while she read.

“No one.” Hermione folded the letter and returned it to its envelope, then secreted both pieces of correspondence away in the depths of a pocket and adjusted her skirts at her knees.

“Mr. Martin,” she said, grabbing the snuff box and thrusting it towards him, “my brother and I have come across this object, and it strikes us both as being potentially cursed.”

Martin’s vast nocturnal eyes fixed on the box and widened to luminous discs behind his spectacles.

As their fear had eased and their confidence grown, Hermione and Draco had cleaned and polished it to a level of shine it probably hadn’t had since the time of its obscure and diabolical manufacture. They repaired its failing hinges, and straightened its clasp. It looked whole again, approaching a self-referential sort of artistic coherence, with the russet glow of the fire in the hearth reflecting in the discomfiting circles of its eyes and blazing against its foul fur.

“Ha!” Martin folded forward in his chair to get a closer look. “What a delight!”

Draco drew up in interest. “You think it’s handsome?”

“It’s hideous!” Martin answered.

“Oh, come *on*. ” Draco flattened himself back against the sofa, and his knee began to bounce irritably.

“Well, *well* done, the both of you!” Martin continued. He pointed a knobbly finger at the box. “What an extraordinary accomplishment!”

Hermione, torn between her desire to not take false credit for the production of the object and her wish to be agreeable, merely said, “Thank you.”

“Hermione and I have run all of the diagnostic spells within our combined reach,” Draco said, “and nothing has turned up out of the ordinary.”

Half an hour before, perched on Draco’s back and throttling his waist with her thighs, Hermione had performed half the spells, and he’d managed the other.

“It’s possible that it’s only an ordinary snuff box, but we thought that in order to be able to get a good night’s rest, a second opinion was warranted.” Hermione held up the box again, gleaming and dimly malign. “Could you take a look, and tell us if you notice anything unusual?”

“Besides its being awful to look at?” Martin asked with a smile fixed to his face.

Draco hoisted his chin in show of stoicism. “What we mean to ask is, does it appear to have any kind of spell, or curse, or really any magic attached to it at all, as far as you can tell?”

“Beyond what you've done to it?”

“We’ve only cleaned it today,” said Draco. “I think we've done an admirable job.”

Martin nodded, and considered it for a while, then drew his spry applewood wand from his blankets and waved his hand in a relaxed arc. Hermione tensed as the box rose into the air, drifted across the center of the room and hovered in front of Martin’s chair.

He whispered a slew of unintelligible incantations, and a spray of vivid light burst from its surfaces in oval arms, like a thousand petals of a spherical flower, each one a different color and pulsing with a haze of its own luminescence. Some petals flared bright and dense, and others were wan and translucent.

Hermione had scoured more volumes in the libraries at Hogwarts and at the Ministry than anyone of her personal acquaintance, and never seen anything exactly like it.

Draco’s hand slid across Hermione’s knee, and when it found hers, she let him take it to his own lap, and keep it there.

The snuff box rolled slowly within the starburst of magic, first horizontally and then vertically, and then drawing the spell along as it moved, it settled down into Martin's hand, lighting the old man’s face in shades of electric origin. Shifting lines reflected from the lenses of his spectacles like streaks of neon lights passing through the window of a car on a rainy night. He scrutinized the box, flipped it over, opened it, and shut it again. Then he lifted it to his nostrils and took a wary sniff.

“Smells like soap,” he observed.

“Yes,” said Draco. “It’s been recently used in that capacity.”

Martin blinked in approval. “I like lemon.”

He whispered to the box again, and the flower wilted and disappeared. He muttered to it a final time, and it rose from his palm, then floated back across the space between him and Hermione, and seated itself in her lap.

“What do you think?” Hermione asked.

“Tremendous amount of magical residue,” said Martin, tucking his wand away and steeping his fingers beneath his chin. “I couldn’t tell you how it was done.”

“Do you have any idea what sort of curse it was?” Hermione asked.

“No idea.” Martin bundled himself down in his blankets. “It’s all gone now. We can all curse it again later if you want.” He smiled at Margaret. “Let’s have this letter.”

While Margaret sipped her tea and picked up Martin’s correspondence, Hermione turned the snuff box over in her hands.

There had been something, and now it was gone. What was it?

She handed it to Draco, who took it from her with a resigned lack of haste.

“It’s yours, I suppose,” she said. “Another curse dispelled from a family heirloom. I promise I won’t put it back on.”

“Fantastic.” Draco set it on the low table beside the sofa, where it twinkled its incivility at everyone in the room. “I’ll just tuck it in my pocket when it’s time to go, shall I?”

“My dearest friend,” Margaret began, “I hope this letter finds you in excellent health, and that you are continuing to enjoy your retirement.”

Martin sat up taller in his chair. “Fukkink!”

Draco stilled.

Margaret read down to the bottom of the page, and found the signature. “That’s exactly right!”

Confusion evolved on every feature of Draco’s face.

“Fucking?” he asked.

“Fukkink at Oxford,” Hermione clarified.

Draco looked at her with suspicion. “Who’s fucking at Oxford?”

“Nobody’s fucking at Oxford,” she said. “It’s only the metallurgy don.”

“Why is it only the metallurgy don gets to fuck?”

“Fukkink the metallurgist, ha!” Martin erupted. “Fukkink the scoundrel!”

“That seems ill-advised,” said Draco, “but alright.”

“Fukkink the sheep!”

Draco recoiled. “What?”

“Fukkink the circus clown!”

“No.”

“Nobody’s copulating with a clown, Malfoy,” said Hermione.

“Fukkink can go and boil his—” Martin began.

“I’m writing to you today with extraordinary news,” Margaret continued. “And will trust in your natural discretion and in the enduring integrity of our friendship to maintain this secret between us

until I'm ready to publish the discovery. Early this morning I received an object via express owl that has been for some time a subject of great mutual interest. It came to me from sources unknown—I can only assume a black market collector stumbled upon something that he believed to be of value, but wasn't able to identify, and therefore was not able to sell. It appears to be broken, or adulterated in some fashion, but I believe it to be, my old friend, none other than a time travel device."

Hermione's pulse tore off at a gallop.

"The fucking metallurgist has the Time Turner," Draco said out loud.

Margaret read on. "My most ardent wish is that you will come to Oxford, at your very earliest convenience, to examine this object and give me your opinion, which I have always held in such high esteem."

Hermione leaned into Draco's side and brought her mouth to his ear. "We have to get to Fukkink as soon as possible," she whispered. "It's desperate."

Draco went rigid. "Spell this word for me."

"I should like to see you again, my old friend and convivial contender," read Margaret. "It's been a great too many years, and I have much to ask you, and much to share. My trust in your guardedness in this matter is unswerving. I await your prompt response, yours, etc. etc." Margaret looked up at her audience and smiled again. "Jan Fukkink."

Draco spoke close to Hermione's ear. "It's his *name*?"

"Yes. He's a Dutchman."

"That explains nothing."

"Draco." Hermione snatched a fistful of his shirt front and looked him straight on. "It's Fukkink: F-U-K-K-I-N-K. The *point* is that he's got it, at Mettleworth College." She twisted her hand harder into his shirt. "We know where it is. All we have to do is go there and steal it from him."

She felt her eyes blazing, and realized she'd gone a quarter of the way to straddling him in her frenzy.

Draco pushed at her waist to shift her off of his left thigh. "One thing I really appreciate about you is that you're all in when there's an opportunity to do something unlawful."

"My chair, please, Miss Margaret!" Martin wriggled loose from his wraps and set to work hauling himself out of his chair and onto his legs. "Bring me my cap! Write to Fukkink! Tell him I'm coming for him!"

Draco jumped up from the sofa, and crossed to Martin, crouching to slide an arm around his back.

"No one's going to Oxford tonight, cousin," he said. "Let's sit you back down wherever you want to be for the moment. Dinner isn't too far off, and I have a vague impression that the room smells like bread."

Margaret had shot to her feet as well, and tucked the letter inside the book beside Martin's chair.

"You won't say anything?" Hermione asked, leveling a look of concern at Margaret. "About the letter, and what Mr. Martin's friend has told him about?"

Margaret laughed, warm and sincere, as she worked to straighten the books and papers around her and Martin's chairs. "I have more secrets than I have stories to tell, and you know I've no shortage of them." She plumped the small pillow that supported Martin's back while he sat. "There is bread, which is almost done now," she said, "And stew with dumplings, and our Katherine has sent over a sponge."

"Cake!" Martin clapped his hands and rubbed them together as Draco helped to reinstall him into his chair.

"You and me both, cousin. Shall we come with you to Oxford tomorrow?" Draco set to work replicating the folds and tucks of Martin's customary sandwich wrap of blankets. When he was finished, he pressed Martin's shoulder with a degree of affection that caused Hermione's heart to tumble over itself and come close to losing its balance.

"Yes! You and Hermione both must come. We'll let Fukkink know what we think about his broken object, won't we?"

"Show that crow what we think of his strawberries, too."

Martin took Draco's hand between his, and patted it. "He's a bastard."

"You have no idea."

They ate their cake first, and then their mutton and potatoes, with Margaret's soft and savory dumplings and bottles of hard cider that made Hermione's stomach fizz.

Just before bed, Hermione had a bath—very long, and very hot—and sang cider-fizzy songs from Muggle pop radio to herself while the ghastly snuff box leered at her from the edge of the tub.

She washed with lavender bar soap, and then washed some more, listening to Margaret chatter away while she put Martin to bed, and to the rustle of each page of Draco's book as he turned them from his seat outside the bathroom door.

She declined to relay the snuff box to Draco as she passed him in the hall, only told him over her shoulder as she walked up the stairs that she'd left him a clean towel on the side of the bath.

Between her and Draco's and Martin's spells, and in the absence of a Time Turner, the snuff box had lost its terror for her.

In the general mood of ease that arose in their detente with the box, loathing and revulsion had made way for pity. It was a homely object that no one wanted, cursed through no fault of its own, and now that it was impotent, it seemed sad.

She gave it pride of place beside the clutch of yellow roses in the jar in her windowsill. It looked well there, for such a contemptible thing, but no closer to attaining the shape of a swan.

She turned it away, averting its obnoxious eyes while she dried her body in her room, then back again once she'd slipped on a clean chemise.

There were times she left her hair to dry without a spell, and she allowed it to tonight, water falling every now and then from the tips of her curls in lavender-scented drops that felt cool and pleasing on her back.

Margaret had lit a fire in her little hearth, though the night was warm, and Hermione lay on her stomach on her bed with the window open, drawing her fingers through the strands of her hair as it dried, and reading one of Martin's books.

She and Draco were just as lost as they were that morning, she thought, perhaps even more so than she'd realized then, but a sense of ease had begun to grow in her belly and spread outward through her limbs.

The clematis no longer cloyed, and the quip and warble of an argumentative owl were welcome adjuncts to the snap of the fire in the hearth.

A trio of soft raps called her away from her book and to the door.

She eased it open to find Draco leaning in her door frame, hair damp from his bath, smelling of soap and mint.

His boxer shorts sat on his hips, but tonight he'd put on a white cotton t-shirt as well.

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm doing very well, thank you." She indicated his shirt, crisp white and fitted. "Did you Transfigure this?"

He glanced down at himself. "I did."

She was good at Transfiguration. Extraordinary, actually. The first task she would undertake upon their return, once she was herself again, was perfecting the transmutation of a handkerchief into a pair of sensible but attractive cotton pants.

He looked over her shoulder, at the snuff box in her window.

"I can take it to my room tonight if you'd like," he offered. "I promise I won't let it run off with me."

"You can make no such promise."

"Can't I?"

"No, you can't."

"Then how can you guarantee that it's not going to snatch you away in the night?" he asked.

"I suppose I can't." She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned her hip against the door frame. "But I feel quite confident all the same."

He stood for a long while, looking at her freshly scrubbed face, and at her hair, still dripping onto her shoulders at rare intervals.

"Am I not allowed to feel secure around my own heirlooms now that they've been proven

harmless?"

"No. Not around your appalling shrew, anyway. You're welcome to put on those loafers as soon as we're back at the Ministry."

His voice lowered. "Are you concerned about me?"

"No." She slid one foot over the other to soothe her nerves. "Yes."

"Then how is it that I'm not allowed to be concerned about you?"

When Hermione tipped her head in acknowledgement, he took the fabric of her chemise between his fingertips.

"I liked sleeping with you last night, Hermione Granger. Very much. In the not-sex way." His mouth pulled up at one corner, though the sentiment didn't reach his eyes. "Even though you steal the sheets. And you kick." He gave her chemise a subtle tug. "And you bite." He paused, seemingly lost in thought. "But I don't want you to be in a position where you have to worry about explaining anything. I wouldn't want you to have any regrets about anything that happens while we're here."

Hermione turned her face upwards, and took him in.

There was something so artless and pure in his expression that Hermione felt like he had been made new, just for her, washed clean in the bath of something more than the prosaic corporeal film left behind by the goings on of a day and a night.

"Is this your way of telling me you don't want to sleep in my bed?" she asked.

"No." His answer came fast. "I'm telling you that if you want me to, I will. If you'd feel more secure."

"Would you? Feel more secure in my bed?"

His eyes were impossible. She didn't know why they needed to be so sincere.

"I would," he said. "And I promise I won't kiss you again while I'm in it."

She couldn't stand to look at him anymore, so she examined the floorboards beneath her, worn and clean, solid as the trees they came from. "No awkward lift rides."

A long silence opened between them, and into its spaces flowed the hypnotic tick of the grandfather clock in the cottage below, the tidal breath of a breeze in the oak, and the far off science fictional churr of a nightjar.

"No," he said finally. "That won't happen."

The breeze curled across the windowsill, and Hermione's candle guttered.

"Alright," she said.

"Alright?"

Hermione stepped aside, and made room for Draco to come in.

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The Duel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Voldemort died, Harry lived, and the magical world developed a sudden interest in institutional transparency.

The Ministry never asked what got done on Level Nine, nor who did it. Yet month after month, payroll cut handsome checks and slid them under the door.

The first round of audits revealed the Department of Mysteries was a swizz.

Records consisted of anarchically organized, fraudulent time slips and drawers full of tea-stained, half-legible reports. What little research could be verified was conducted on sensitive topics with virtually no guiding principles, no essential criteria, and no safeguards.

Anonymity had precluded accountability, and the *Prophet* had a field day: the Unspeakables were a bunch of clock watchers who sat around their offices drinking cheap sherry, playing table Quidditch, and making shit up.

Which is how the Department of Mysteries had been reborn, and Hermione Granger—scientific method and office management best practices in hand—had come to head the brand-new Department of Temporospatial Research and Development the moment she left Hogwarts.

She binned the extraneous clocks, stopped a dozen time loop charms set about the room for show, and polished the work table. At twenty years old, the department was hers, and hers alone.

Or Draco's.

It depended on who you asked.

Either way, the two-person TRD—

"DTRD, Granger. Pronounced *detoured*. If we use your acronym everyone's going to call it something else."

"I'll show you a detour."

—the two-person Department of Temporospatial Research and Development hit the ground running, and within three years, had engineered a new and improved version of the Time Turner.

Which needed to be tested.

The risks involved with the initial experiment were enormous.

Or not.

That also depended on who you asked.

Hermione told Harry what she and Draco were getting up to, in the event they imploded and someone had to break it to Ron.

"So"—Harry's face clouded with consideration—"to test your Time Turner, which you and Malfoy

have cooked up from scratch, the two of you are going to leave your lab, have a coffee, walk back half an hour later, and immediately send yourselves back in time by five minutes?"

"Ten minutes," she said.

"Ten minutes. Then you'll hide in the closet to watch yourselves walk into the lab and jump back in time by ten minutes."

"Yes. We'll collect any relevant observational data, then once we've watched ourselves disappear, we can leave the closet having completed a loop. Absolutely no need to worry about running into ourselves."

Which is how, later that day, she'd ended up in the dark, crushed against her research partner, jangling with one too many coffees and the unparalleled exhilaration of conquering time.

"I thought being stuck in a closet at this moment would feel anticlimactic," said Draco, "but it doesn't."

"I know!" In her enthusiasm, Hermione half hissed at him. "It doesn't at all!"

"Why are you whispering? I cast the silencing charm twice. We clearly can't hear us. And it's not like we don't know we're in here."

Calling it a closet was overgenerous. Shivering in a cold adrenaline sweat, Hermione went to scratch her clammy forearm, and her elbow caught Draco in the ribs.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Not a problem."

She peered through the louvered door slats into the lab.

They'd choreographed the experiment with care, and right on time, watched themselves walk through the laboratory door.

"You look like you're about to be sick," said Hermione-in-the-closet.

"I'm not the only one."

He wasn't wrong; they both appeared a bit worse for wear. Draco's hair was disarrayed from compulsively pulling his hand through it. He'd removed his suit coat hours before. By the time they'd ordered in Sichuan from the place Hermione liked and been too wound up to eat it, his shirtsleeves were shoved more than rolled past his elbows, and his tie lay spooled on his desk. He normally relied on a vision charm, but he'd let it lapse and put on his spectacles. He looked the part of the rumpled scientist, which was precisely what he was.

Hermione started her day in a smart blue dress. Her nerves had rattled like a jar of loose change while she zipped it, but she looked polished and presentable in anticipation of the biggest day of her professional life so far.

And then they'd taken turns delaying the jump with double, triple, and quadruple checks of everything from the angles of the engraved runes, to the mounting pin tension, to the chain link soldering.

At a quarter to eleven, they'd finally mustered the will to follow through with the initial test. She'd

popped home, given Ron a lingering kiss, and changed into leggings and a jumper.

"Is my hair really that big?" she asked, angling towards Draco as much as was practicable in a hastily emptied coat closet.

"It is, yes."

"Look at you out there. You're actually trembling."

She watched her future self fidget with the Time Turner. Future Draco stared at her, his expression half feral.

"Ten minutes?" Future Hermione sounded uncertain.

They'd finalized a ten minute jump verbally and in writing months ago.

Without saying anything, Future Draco stepped into Future Hermione's space.

Hermione watched herself check the Time Turner's settings for the fiftieth time. Finally, she looped its long gold chain over her own disconcerting volume of hair, then Draco's head when he dipped it towards her.

"Are you sure you're ready?" Future Draco asked.

Hermione recalled she'd been incapable of opening her mouth, and saw herself respond with a shallow nod.

In the closet, still thrilling with shock, she watched the other Draco fold his arms around her. Then he bunched his fists into the sides of her jumper and tugged her to himself so tightly his knuckles paled.

Her future self held up the Time Turner between them.

"Hermione," said Future Draco.

"It's going to be fine," said Hermione-of-ten-minutes-hence. Even to her own ear, the reassurance sounded less than convincing.

"This is what we've wanted," she listened to herself say.

"If it doesn't—" He enveloped her with such ferocity he practically lifted her off the floor.

"Do you trust me?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Do you trust my calculations? My design? Do you trust my *work*?"

"Yes," he said. "Completely."

"And I trust yours."

In the closet, Hermione cleared her throat. It seemed impossible for her future self to push any further into Draco's hold, but she somehow managed it.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Granger—"

Hermione recalled the singular intensity of his focus.

Sealed letters of goodbye addressed to their loved ones sat on their desks.

"If we end up at the Battle of Agincourt," he said, "or a vegetable market in Cuzco, or floating in an interdimensional void, I swear to you that I will get you ba—"

Hermione watched herself twist the Time Turner, and then they vanished.

"I don't know why you have to cut people off like that all the time," said Draco.

She rotated in the closet and flattened her hands against his chest.

"It may be pitch black in here, but I can still see you smiling," he said. "You look deranged."

"*It works,*" she whispered.

"I really don't understand why you're whispering."

"We did it." With a short hop, she wrapped her arms around his neck and smothered her face in his shoulder. "You're the worst—"

"Thank you. You're crushing my larynx."

"—and you're brilliant and truly, you are the actual worst, and I *know* you would have fetched me back from absolutely anywhere and *we did it.*"

Her feet kicked back and forth in an effervescent frenzy.

"I keep telling you, I silenced us." As he spoke, his breath sifted through the hair behind her ear. "Anyway, we're not even here anymore."

Harnessing time was nearly as impressive as sleeping soundly in Hermione's bed without kissing.

By morning, she felt they ought to have been given an award.

Nevermind that without a moment's hesitation, Draco slid into her sheets and wrapped his arms around her from behind. Neither was it of any consequence that she felt most at ease with his long legs threaded through hers, like fortunate lovers who'd retained their ardency after years of companionate sleep. If she had ached for further contact; had spent long minutes considering how easy it would be to grasp his hip and urge him to close the gap; had woken in an indeterminate hour twisted in her heated sheets and cursed him for being a gentleman; it meant nothing.

They'd comported themselves admirably. In a matter of days, they'd be home, and could scratch their nonspecific carnal itches with the appropriate partners of their choice.

Before heading down to breakfast, they formulated a plan.

"Which of us is better at sleight of hand?" she asked.

She had rolled halfway out of his arms, lost momentum, and lay with her cheek flattened against the inside of his elbow.

"I am," he said.

"Agreed. So—what? We'll be in Fukkink's office. He'll have brought the Time Turner out, Martin will have said or done something unexpected, and then we'll all get ready to leave. Do I create a diversion?"

"You do." He brought one of her curls to his nose and breathed in. "Then I swipe the Time Turner, Transfigure a decoy, and the three of us can dash out of Oxford and Apparate back here."

"I'm not sure whether we'll be able to dash with Martin. Not to mention my skirts."

"You have very good legs for dashing." Draco smoothed his hand along the outside of her thigh.

"Let me wear the trousers and you can try running in a petticoat."

"Hm. I'm all for anyone wearing whatever they like, but it's not really my look. Why are you all the way over there?"

She shimmed towards him and nestled back into his armpit.

"I could carry you," he said. "Faint, then I'll scoop you up and run out the door. Very feminine, very distracting, easy to do in a petticoat."

"Get out of my bed."

She pushed both knees into his ribs, but before she could shove him onto the floor, he grabbed one leg and pulled it across his hips.

"That's my leg," she said.

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law."

He rubbed his thumb into her calf muscle, and her eyes rolled back in her head.

"Keep it then," she grumbled. "I don't even want it anymore."

"You can have it back once we've decided on an actual diversion."

"The diversion is: a woman in trousers, running very swiftly."

"You could wear your ballgown and hop around the room asking him to find your nipples," he said.

"You were the only person I trusted to give me an honest answer. Was it distracting?"

"It didn't distract me, no. I don't care about your nipples. But they might work on Fukkink."

"I suppose I could faint," she conceded. "Women were always fainting in the Victorian era. They called it 'hysteria.'"

"Did they?"

"Yes. There were whole rooms for it. Special sofas. The woman would pass out, then supposedly

the doctor would come and give her an orgasm for her nerves."

"I refuse to listen to any more of your criticisms about the magical community."

"That's probably fair." Her leg spasmed. "No! That tickles."

He stopped stroking behind her knee.

"This fainting idea is solid," he said. "It's summer, you're in a corset."

Hermione leaned up on her elbow, stretched her arm overhead and yawned.

"They're stays, not a corset. And they're actually quite comfortable." She reclaimed her leg and began rolling away from him, intending to get out of bed.

"No"—he hooked an arm around her side and spread his hand over her belly—"come back."

She tumbled towards him again and dug her chin into his chest.

"What?"

"Who's going to carry the snuff box?" he asked.

"I am."

"Between your bosoms?"

"No, in my pocket."

"You should bring that ball gown with you when we go back."

"Why? So I can keep tools in the treacherous pocket and fiddle around under the Potentiograph with my bosoms hanging out?"

Draco raised his broken eyebrow.

"You're an awful man," she said.

"It's a beautiful dress."

Hermione gathered a hank of her own hair and stretched it out below his nose.

"Here," she said. "You have to wear a mustache so everyone knows you're a villain."

"I prefer 'scoundrel.' Does it look well on me?"

"Yes, it's very glossy. What do you use on it?"

"When I'm not stuck in 1804, I wash it every other day with something that smells like baking gingerbread in a pine forest," he said. "You get a hint of it whenever I snoop over your shoulder while you're working."

"Do I?"

"You do."

"Do I like it?" she asked.

"The snooping or the shampoo?"

"Both."

"Yes."

"Good. Your mustache matches your scoundrelous eyebrows."

"This fixation you have on facial hair is quite the surprise. Had I known, I would have—"

"Silence, please." Hermione folded her palm over his mouth.

"Is it facial hair in general," he mused into her hand, "or a pirate thing, or...?"

Hermione's cheeks burned, and Draco's eyebrows sprinted towards his hairline.

"*Pirates? Really?*" he mumbled. "That's *very* good inf—"

"Shh. We ought to get out of bed, it's nearly gone seven. Oh!" She drew her hand away and wiped it on his t-shirt. "No licking."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Boring." His lustrous mustachios wobbled as he sighed. "But alright."

Oxford.

Hermione drew a fortifying breath through her nose.

Time Turner.

She jammed the snuff box inside the perfectly predictable dimensions of her overdress pocket.

Home.

She'd spent her morning rounding up every straggling thought about boxer shorts, warm, solid bellies, broom-calloused hands, and half-cocked waking smiles crinkling drowsy eyes. Then she'd shoved them in a box and slammed the lid.

A stable incantation replaced them:

Oxford.

Time Turner.

Home.

Uninvited sensual obsessions and snuff box both secured, she clipped down the ramp at Twiggybroke Cottage with as much determination as she could muster in a pair of frivolous boots.

Draco and Martin waited in the garden.

In lieu of his usual wraps, Martin was swaddled in full academic dress. His *sub-fusc* black suit, white shirt, and tie fit him loosely, but he nearly drowned in his voluminous scarlet and grey wool robes and hood. His mortarboard was tipped back on his head, and a dense black tassel dangled behind his ear, jiggling like a hyperactive octopus with every movement.

"Ready?" Draco asked.

Hermione sprang across the garden flags, skirting Grix's nasturtiums, and curled her hand through Draco's offered elbow.

"As I'll ever be," she said.

"Just a moment." Martin dug around in his robes, searching for something.

While they waited, Hermione slipped her gloved hand into her pocket and gave the badger's rump a protective pat.

"I'm actually looking forward to visiting Oxford again." She waved off a drifting cloud of gnats. "Are you ever sorry that we both gave it up?"

When Draco didn't answer, she looked up to find him scrutinizing her.

"Draco?"

"What? I'm sorry. I'm trying to pay attention to you, but this"—he pinched the enormous, stiff pink satin bow securing Hermione's straw bonnet under her chin—"is incredibly distracting."

She pursed her lips and fussed with her overdress skirt, cream-colored and embroidered with massive pink and red roses. "I look very well."

"You look fucking adorable."

"I asked, have you ever been sorry about coming along to the Ministry rather than studying at Oxford?"

He looked at her for a moment, and the corner of his mouth hitched up minutely.

"Once or twice."

"I can say with reasonable confidence that you wouldn't have had reliable access to women in bonnets."

"That's very true. And in light of that, I retract. I have no regrets whatsoever about following you to the Ministry."

"Ha!" shouted Martin. "There we have it."

With a flourish, he withdrew a vial from his robes.

A spring green potion filled it right to the cork. It was translucent and watery, dotted with aquamarine specks flickering on and off like glow-worms.

"What's that?" Hermione asked.

Martin chuckled, uncorked the vial and tipped half the potion into his mouth. He recorked it and tapped the side of his nose. "I'll sniff him out if he's telling stories, won't I?"

Draco took the vial from him and held it up to the light.

"What on Earth have you got here?"

"Truth potion!" Martin said.

"Like Veritaserum?"

"No." Martin shook his head. "That's rubbish."

Draco narrowed his eyes at the bottle, then uncorked it and sniffed. Before Hermione clocked what he was doing, he tipped the remainder into his mouth, swished it around for a moment, then swallowed.

Her jaw fell.

"What in the name of all that is holy have you just done?" she asked.

Draco's mouth worked as though savoring an aged Merlot.

"I could have sworn I smelled something. Like a wisp of caramel apple. Or maybe it was toffee." He frowned. "But, no. Doesn't half fizz up your sinuses, though."

"I think you truly want to stay here," she said. "I cannot believe you just did that."

"Neither can I, frankly." He adjusted the edge of his cravat. "Shall we head on?"

Of the purported thirty-nine autonomous, self-governing colleges that constitute the University of Oxford, the oldest are Merton, Balliol and University College, established in unknown order between 1249 and 1264.

Only there are forty colleges at Oxford.

Of these, Mettleworth College (in full: the House of Magical Scholars of Mettleworth in the University of Oxford) is the decisive eldest, founded by Lord Algar Mettleworth in the year 1222.

A segment of Oxford's 13th-century city wall separates Merton College at its southern border from a flat, green, tree-studded park called Merton Field.

In the wall, there is a gate.

Eyes closed, Hermione fixed her mind on a wooden bench in Merton College Fellows' Garden, and gave in to the tug of Apparition.

The coolness of the cottage glen was succeeded by unfiltered sun blaring against a gravel walk.

She opened her eyes, and all was green: the emerald lawn, the summer-flush trees, the shrubs and vines climbing the facades and tumbling over the city wall.

She was only alone for a moment.

With sharp twin cracks, Draco and Martin Apparated on the garden's opposite end.

"Here we are, here we are," said Martin cheerfully. He pointed at Hermione. "Look at you, my gel! All the way over there!"

Draco swiveled his head about, absorbing his surroundings, then caught sight of Hermione and waved at her.

"Shall we run?" he asked.

Martin assented, and Draco gripped the chair's handles, ran it along the walk, jostled it down a flight of shallow steps, and joined Hermione beside the bench.

"Hello."

His cheeks glowed with whorls of happy exertion, and his soft pink mouth bent in a smarmy little bow of amusement.

"Idiots," said Hermione. "Both of you."

"Do you really think I'm an idiot?" Draco asked. He sounded unusually sincere.

"Yes."

For some reason, that invoked peals of boyish laughter from both Draco and Martin. Each made obvious efforts to tamp it down, but whatever had set them off didn't fully let up for an irritating minute.

"What on Earth is that?" said Draco at last, pointing at Hermione's head.

"Ha ha!" said Martin.

"What?" Hermione glared between the two of them.

"It's sort of a"—Draco pinched his index finger and thumb close together and peered through the gap—"tiny blue potato with wings and very small, black eyes. It's almost exactly the size of a Bertie Bott's bean."

"*What* is like a tiny blue potato with wings?" asked Hermione.

The annoyance simmering in her stomach started searing its way up her throat.

"It's gone now, but it showed up just there"—Draco pointed to the empty air beside Hermione's left ear—"when you said you thought I was an idiot."

"I do think you're being an idiot."

"There!" Martin clapped his hands. "See, my lad? *Are* we idiots? No! Are we *being* idiots, yes!"

"No miniature potatoes that time?" Hermione tilted her head and tightened her jaw.

"No." Draco looked inquiringly at Martin. "They only show up when someone's told a lie? And make fine distinctions like that?"

"Just so!" Martin rasped. "It was meant to be a cataract potion."

"It's certainly eye-opening," said Draco.

"No idea what they are or where they come from, but they can't resist the smell of a fib!" Martin jammed his steering toggle forward and went zipping along the walk towards the iron gate at a fearsome clip. "Come on! I'll show you a potato man!"

Draco, bemused, loped after him with his hands in his pockets. Hermione hustled to catch up.

The black wrought iron gate—embellished with curlicues and spear-tipped along its upper edge—was set in a sandstone archway of minimal architectural interest.

But for those able to see them, weathered block letters carved over the pointed arch read:
MAGICA SE REVELET.

Magic will reveal itself.

Martin realigned his cap at the back of his head, then pointed his wand at the gate and said, "Erit videatur."

It shall be seen.

On its own, the gate swung open towards Merton Field. Martin thrashed his steering toggle forward, and burst through the gateway with a jolt just as Hermione caught up to Draco.

She took his elbow, and together they stepped forward. One moment, they occupied the space between Merton College and the open gate to Merton Field. The next, the field was gone. Instead of trimmed grass under an open sky, Hermione strode into a heavily shaded park. Grey gothic buildings hemmed a cool, mossy lawn, where the gnarled arms of thousand year-old oaks arced to the ground. Narrow purple and gold Mettleworth flags hung from the facades, quiet in the absence of any breeze.

Summer term was in session, and young men in black robes and dark *sub-fusc* sat under the trees, books open on their knees.

Martin hadn't paused. Eyes forward, he went shooting around the herringbone brick walk bordering the grass, his chair's hovering spell whirring at a frantic pitch and his mortarboard tassel flailing behind him.

Draco slowed, taking in grounds that would change in no appreciable way over the next two hundred years.

"No time for tourism," said Hermione. "Come on."

She grabbed his elbow and hauled him forward, only for him to capture her waist and sweep her along at his own tall-person pace. Hermione jogged beside him on the balls of her feet, and they caught up to Martin just as he rounded the corner into a covered passageway.

A young man who looked barely old enough to shave stopped and regarded Martin as he flew by, then seemed to brighten with recognition.

"Doctor Martin!" he called after him. "Doctor Perspicacity Martin! Hello there, Sir!"

Martin released the toggle. His chair drifted to a halt, then he cranked the toggle hard right and

spun himself 180 degrees.

"Fukkink!" shouted Martin.

"Ah!" said the boy. "I won't hold you up, then. Only—" The boy rose on his toes and looked towards the shaded park they'd just come from. "Gable!" he shouted, pointing at Martin. "Gable, it's your Doctor Martin!"

A boy with wavy black hair lay prone in the grass reading a book. He jumped up and bounded towards them, calling, "Doctor Martin! Is that you, Sir? What an honor this is!"

He had an Edinburgh accent and an exceptionally charming, open expression.

"Hello, my lad!" said Martin. He stretched out a bony hand.

"Hello, Sir! Jeremy Gable, Sir," said the boy. He observed Martin's hand clasped in his own, lifting and falling, as though he couldn't believe what was happening. "Are you here for..." He looked at them all in cheerful inquiry.

"He's here to see Fukkink," said the first boy.

"Bastard," said Martin.

"Marvelous!" Jeremy offered them all a bright-eyed and genuine smile. "I'm taking my Doctorate of Magicology in Potions, Sir. I hope to write my dissertation on regenerative elixirs. Entirely because of your work, actually."

"Brilliant!" said Martin. "Brew 'em up, lad!"

"Just last night Gable was going on about how astonished he is that you've never had a John Dee Prize," said the first boy. "The rest of us just want to know how you managed to avoid sublimating Mettleworth Quad into vapour, but he's a disciple."

Jeremy blushed.

"The Dee Prize committee grossly misevaluated your work in at least '17 and '54," he said, "but also—"

"Just a statue, lad," said Martin. He tapped his temple. "Best to keep your mind on the work."

"Or on lunch," suggested Draco. "Do you think Fukkink might offer us something to eat?"

"Lunch!" Martin agreed.

"I wonder if you might—it's just that I've attempted your acumen potion several times, Sir," said Jeremy, "and can't get past the simmering stage without it coagulating. Do you have any advice?"

"Are you stirring enough?" Martin peered at him suspiciously. "If you have lumps, you're in trouble."

"Should I strain it?" Jeremy asked.

Martin's fist shot into the air, and he shouted, "Whisk!"

"Yes, of course! Copper, silver, or—"

"Not metal, you'll blast off your bum. Bamboo for this one."

"Could I—could I possibly write to you, Doctor?" Jeremy asked. "With questions? Observations?"

"I'm surprised he hasn't asked him to sign his personal copy of *On Potions and Portents*," said Draco under his breath. "For a friend."

"Hush. He's intellectually smitten, it's adorable." Hermione looked up at Draco. "Did you read that one? I haven't gotten to it yet."

"No, it's next in my pile."

"Best to write before I'm dead," said Martin to Jeremy. "That way you'll get an answer."

Jeremy listened while Martin gave him the owling address for Twiggybroke Cottage, and repeated it back twice. After shaking Martin's hand again for a moment too long, he strolled back to his book, hands in pockets and whistling happily into the trees.

Martin had already swirled himself back around and blasted off at his previous pace. Hermione and Draco took off after him.

"What a lovely boy," she said, huffing as she jogged.

Draco glared straight ahead.

"Not a fan of the friendly ones."

"Good Lord," said Hermione. "Are you actually jealous of that sweet young man?"

"I imagine certain things in life come easier to that type," sniffed Draco.

"Your life is plenty easy," said Hermione. "Name one thing that genuinely plagues you."

"For starters, you've never once in your life called me a lovely boy."

Hermione socked him in the bicep.

The passageway led to an irregular quad where four medieval buildings framed a lawn clipped into a checkerboard pattern. Each building was slightly different, as though at least four architects had dueled in brick and mortar. But regardless of their size or placement, every arched, mullioned window reflected a slice of vivid blue sky.

Three scarlet and grey-robed men with silver hair conversed in a corner. Not one of them flinched when a high window shattered outward.

A gleaming immobilization spell chased a hundred triangles of broken glass, suspending them in mid-air as bilious indigo smoke poured from the window frame.

"Draw it down, Jenkins!" An authoritative male voice sliced through the haze. "You'll have the quad smelling like burning rubber for weeks!"

"What does it look like I'm doing, Sogoba?" said a second speaker.

As suddenly as it arrived, the smoke whooshed back through the window, and the glass reassembled in the frame with a pleasing crackle.

Draco ignored the episode entirely and alternated between a scowl—apparently still put out by the existence of congenial college boys—and the weird beatific look he kept aiming at Hermione, completely unprovoked.

"Has that potion made you giddy?" she grumbled. "You look it."

"I'm experiencing slight euphoria, yes." He pulled her into his side. "But it shouldn't prevent me stealing anything we need or catching you when you faint."

"Have you seen any more hovering Bertie Bott's?" she asked.

"No. I don't think he's joking that they show up when someone lies."

"That's ridiculous. Why would there be invisible blue jelly beans that take an interest in falsehoods?"

"Who knows?" he asked. "But there they are. I feel like I ought to send Luna Lovegood a letter of apology as soon as we get back. Lie to me, Granger."

"You're my favorite brother."

Draco looked perplexed. "That was less heavily attended than I'd expect. Is it my congenial nature? Am I a lovely boy after all?"

"You're hallucinating."

"Probably."

Martin used his wand to send a heavy exterior door thwacking open on its hinges, then zipped through.

Draco's hand meandered south until he drew Hermione along by a patch of disputed territory that was officially hip but could arguably be called bum. Still almost running, they followed Martin down a wood-paneled hall until he jerked to a halt before a closed mahogany door.

He rapped on it three times, then called out, "Fukkink! I've come!"

They waited half a minute before the door opened, and an aromatherapeutic bloom of sharp citrus, clove and peppermint rolled over the threshold.

The man in the doorway was trim and compact. He wore a don's scarlet and grey robes, smartly tailored and open to reveal a dark blue suit, a violet waistcoat, and an elaborate cravat wound right up under his chin. Laughter lines radiated from the corners of his eyes, and two thick, snow-colored plaits hung well past his shoulders.

Delicate necklaces and bracelets looped his throat and wrists, supporting charms of all kinds: bright gems and carved stone pendants, little locketts and discs etched with runes. An amber teardrop dangled from a single silver earring in his left ear, and no fewer than three chains were strung between his waistcoat pocket and a button hole. It was all a great deal to take in, but none of it more so than his stunning boots. The black leather was embossed with flowers, and the silver tips and heels worked in complex filigree and studded with pearls.

"Hello, old man!" he cried, spreading his arms. His English was glazed with Dutch pronunciations: his O's ellipsoid, the word "old" concluding with a soft T. A smile folded up his glacial blue eyes at the corners.

"Show us your time device, fabulist!" barked Martin.

Ignoring Fukkink's open arms, he rolled over his toes and into the room beyond.

Fukkink considered Draco and Hermione.

"And who are these young people?" he called over his shoulder. "Where's your Mr. Grunks this morning?"

"Grangers!" shouted Martin, then, irritably, "Grix, you *Arschgeige*."

Fukkink tipped his head back and roared with laughter, white teeth shining in a grimace of joy.

"Sweet Circe, you old iconoclast, Oxford hasn't been the same without you!"

Hermione jutted her hand out.

She'd crossed *Oxford* off her list, and was impatient to get to *Time Turner*, then, as soon as physically possible, *home*.

"I'm Hermione Granger, and this is my brother Draco."

Draco stared at the space around her head.

"Oh, shit," he said softly.

"What?" Hermione asked from the side of her mouth.

"We're done for."

Fukkink gripped Hermione's hand and squeezed once before letting go. "A very great pleasure, Miss Granger! Mr. Granger." He tipped his head towards Draco, then swept his arm to the side. "Please, come in!"

The room had a Haight-Ashbury-cum-ivory tower ambience. Carnelian-red Bukhara rugs padded the floors, and pea-colored velvet curtains bracketed windows looking onto the quad. A sofa and chairs ringed a coffee table beside Fukkink's paper-cluttered desk. It had precisely the snug, dark-paneled academic character one expected from a set of Oxford rooms, with an incense-forward bouquet.

Hermione might have felt a pang of professional envy if she'd paused to compare the comfortable luxury of Fukkink's rooms to her and Draco's government dungeon. But she was swiftly seduced by a line of wanton floor-to-ceiling bookcases, gaping their shelves for her perusal.

Each case was profanely stuffed from corner to corner—not only with leather-bound books, but also sacred and magical objects of almost every description. There were pin-mounted golden scarabs inside a frame, hammered copper cauldrons, jewel-stoppered vials, and a set of miniature Chinese *bianzhong* bells ringing themselves almost inaudibly. Crystals spanning the color spectrum clustered around censers puffing out scented steam and bronze sculptures of Muggle deities. A massive, flawless clear quartz pyramid buzzed with a power-amplifying charm; beauty-enhancing rubies and pink sapphires set in rings were displayed on a brass hand; a mirror showed the room but none of the people in it.

Hermione examined a working magical model of the Milky Way. A sparkling disc hovered over a gold stand, countless glittering pinpoints of light swirling around a dense, brilliant center.

"Tea?" asked Fukkink.

He plucked a singing bowl from the coffee table and set it on his flattened palm. While Martin parked himself beside the sofa, bashing its corner three times with his chair, Fukkink struck the bowl with a wooden mallet. An elf wearing a smocked terry cloth hand towel entered from an adjoining room wheeling a samovar on a tea cart. He settled it beside the coffee table and began dispensing steaming black tea into glass cups.

"Well, Fukkink?" Martin craned his neck forward. "What have you got?"

"It's been too long, my friend!" Fukkink clapped Martin on the shoulder.

Hermione walked along the shelves, trying to take in the overwhelming crowd of magical objects. Three identical brass trophies stood in a row behind glass cabinet doors, each shaped like a raven perched on a black elder branch. Their upward-angled wings supported open books, the pages slowly turning to reveal fresh strings of etched runes. The three ravens cocked their heads and swiveled their glinting brass eyes to inspect her.

Hermione had seen identical trophies before, but only in books. She squinted at the engraved plates nailed to their ebony-wood bases: *Doctor Jan Fukkink, Charms*, and the years 1754, 1761 and 1798.

"You have *three* John Dee Prizes?" she asked, entirely failing to hide her disbelief.

It was the highest honor a wizard could achieve in their lifetime in the Western world—akin to a Muggle Nobel Prize.

Hermione turned around to find Fukkink lounging back in a chair, arms splayed and one knee crossed over the other. He waved a dismissive, ring-filled hand at her.

"Just trinkets, Miss Granger," he said. "I never give them a thought."

Draco, leaning against the shelves, narrowed his eyes at Fukkink, then snorted.

"Ha!" Martin beamed triumphantly at Draco and pointed at Fukkink. "You see there, my lad?"

"I do," said Draco.

"Perhaps your—pardon, what relation are these young people to you, my dear Doctor?" asked Fukkink.

"Cousins!" said Martin. "Oh! Hello!" His vast round eyes widened behind his spectacles as he looked with great befuddlement around his own head.

Draco laid his hand over his mouth.

"That's exactly right," he said. "We're your cousins."

Martin's eyes sparkled.

"You're sprouting away, my boy! Who's telling stories now? You and me both!"

Hermione sidled towards Draco, then lifted on her toes and spoke into his ear.

"Stop it," she whispered. "Do you want to blow everything?"

"I think nearly everything is well and truly blown at this point, Hermione." He hooked a finger into her overdress pocket. "You look like a tea cup in this dress. Little Miss Muffin."

"Muffet. Is that potion also making you verbalize every thought that crosses your mind?"

"Not all of them. I was also thinking I'd very much like to go back to bed. I'd bet absolutely anything you smell like roses."

"I do n—" Hermione grimaced.

Margaret had spritzed her with a rose absolute that morning, to match the dress, so yes, technically, she did.

"I wonder if your cousins would like to briefly adjourn to my personal sitting room while we discuss confidential matters." Fukkink laid a finger alongside his nose.

"No!" Hermione panicked—why hadn't they considered being dismissed from the room? "I mean, would it be alright if we stayed? My brother and I have a very particular interest in time travel devices. We're both uniquely qualified to contribute to an examination of your object."

The moment she said "Brother," Martin coughed out another laugh.

"Naughty Grangers!"

Draco snickered and turned his attention to an object hanging from a stand on the shelf next to his head.

"Well *that's* exceptional," he said.

Hermione followed his line of sight.

"What on God's good green Earth is—" She cut herself off abruptly and felt her cheeks flush.

She'd seen something similar before, on a rainy day visit to the British Museum. It was a Roman tintinnabulum—wind chimes for warding off the evil eye—in the shape of a thick, upward-curving penis. It had wings and four stumpy legs like a Welsh Corgi, and a half dozen bells hung from its toes, wingtips and a loop soldered to its authentically rendered frenulum.

Draco pinged one of the bells with a fingertip.

"I should put bells on mine," he said.

"As an enticement or a warning?" Hermione muttered.

"Can you be discreet?" asked Fukkink.

"Of course we can," said Hermione. "We keep all kinds of secrets."

"You would not believe all the secrets we've been keeping," said Draco. Still mesmerized by the chimes, he pinched the glans and shook the entire instrument until every bell tinkled.

"Anyone welcomed into the trust of our inimitable Doctor Martin has my complete confidence," said Fukkink. "You always knew how to pick the best research assistants back in our heyday, didn't you, my friend?"

"Yes. And you stole them all," groused Martin.

Fukkink laughed as he leaned forward and slapped Martin's knee.

"He's not lying," Draco said to Hermione, hunching his shoulders to peer at a glass display case shelved beneath the tintinnabulum.

Behind its latched glass door, secured on blue velvet, were three dozen coins in all sizes and types of metal, each one with different markings.

The elf had gone and returned carrying a tray of tiny sandwiches cut into triangles. Draco crossed the room in a few long strides, snatched up three, then resumed his examination of the coin case while eating egg and cress.

Fukkink went to his desk, drew his wand, and muttered a passcode incantation at a drawer. There was a soft click, and Fukkink pulled out a carved wooden box roughly the size of a grapefruit.

Hermione stood at complete attention, eyes trained on the box as Fukkink brought it to the coffee table. Abandoning the distracting shelves, she seated herself on the sofa, where the elf pressed tea and a plate of sandwiches on her. She nibbled a cucumber corner.

Draco, less delicate, dispatched his egg and cress in two bites and started in on smoked salmon. Still examining the coins, he leaned in and unlatched the glass door to get a better look.

"Take care, young Mr. Granger!" said Fukkink. "Those are all Portkeys. You don't want to pop up in Chittagong and have an elephant stumble over your toes."

Draco hopped backwards. From a full arm's length away, he latched the case, then came to sit beside Hermione looking chastised.

"I'm pulling your leg," said Fukkink. "They're all activated by spell passcodes. Don't point any unusual incantations at them and you'll stay put." He unlatched the wooden box. "I received this by owl. No explanation whatsoever."

As he lifted the lid, Draco and Hermione leaned forward.

With a ceremonious gesture, Fukkink drew out a glinting metal object and laid it on the table.

"What," he said, conspiratorial and entirely pleased with himself, "do you say to that?"

Draco visibly untensed, slumped back against the sofa, and said, "Fuck."

It was definitely a Time Turner.

It just wasn't *their* Time Turner.

But it was a beautiful artifact all the same.

The backs of two thick, silver-metal arcs—perfect C-curves, encrusted with green and aquamarine gems and heavily etched with script—connected to a glass-sided rectangular silver box. Wire coiled densely around the terminal points of each C and stretched across the gaps. Tiny parallel lines, evenly spaced, were etched into the box's solid silver rear wall, and a wee metal spike poked up from its floor. Hinges were affixed to the opening with pins, but the door was detached.

Fukkink drew a silver-framed glass rectangle from the wooden box and lay it beside the rest of the device.

"Well?" he said reverently. "I immediately noticed the beautiful *jia gu wen zi* oracle script, which

tells us that it's almost certainly an object of Qin origin."

"Yes," said Martin. "Owl it back to them."

"You're the maestro," Fukkink went on, "but even I can tell the silver has been, at one point or another, infused with a time charm."

Martin angled forward from the hips. His pupils dilated to wide-mouthed, ink-black wells, glittering from inside with that special invisible light Hermione had sensed, if not physically seen, the moment she'd met him.

He touched his right thumb to his ring finger and swerved his hand through the air. The device on the table glowed soft pink, then faint lemon yellow, and then went out.

He leaned back, rested his arms on his chair, and closed his eyes.

"Half-baked rubbish."

Fukkink guffawed.

"Oh, come now, Martin! I'm relying on you here. That was never rubbish," he said, pointing at the device. "You're not still punishing me for '54 are you?"

"That...potion...works." Eyes still closed, Martin jabbed the arm of his chair with each word.

"No one could replicate your results! And it wasn't for lack of trying!"

"You said that I *amplified my data*." Martin ejected his last three words like a cannonball broadside.

"Your results were skewed by your own genius, you obstinate fellow!" Fukkink countered, laughing. "If I'd ever been on the Dee committee, you'd have a dozen of the damn things by now. Hell, take mine if you like!"

"I don't give a toss about your hardware," said Martin.

Draco sipped his tea and stared at the airspace around Martin's head.

"He really doesn't."

Hermione considered the device on the table.

It was, without any doubt, an early Qing dynasty transitional model of a Chinese Time Turner. She'd seen one during a temporospatial research symposium she and Draco attended in Beijing in June of 2001.

It was obsolete technology—already one hundred fifty years old in 1804—but every magical government in the world was tight about its research, regardless of how dated it was. Merlin knew who'd sent the thing to Fukkink.

Hermione was aware that in the mid-19th century, Chinese time engineers would work out the universal necessity of constantly rotating outer rings (thirty-five years before British Unspeakables built their first working devices and promptly lost the plans), but this model's charm amplifiers were still static.

The box at its center was a candle clock, glass door broken and missing its minuscule candle. Any

wizard hoping to time-hop would have to affix a dollhouse-sized taper to the spike inside the box, light it, close and latch the door. The candle diameter would have to be precise. If a person used the wrong size, they'd stand back and watch nothing happen. With the correct candle installed, they'd be broiled by magic arcing off the open silver amplification wires.

Chinese wizards eventually opted to forgo the wax mess and borrow Muggle mechanical timekeeping technology for their device's centers. Hermione's understanding was that in the 21st century, China's half dozen carefully guarded Time Turners were encapsulated in glass, strapped to the wrist like watches, and used extensively in the support of Transfiguration research.

Of course, none of that had any bearing at all on her and Draco getting home.

Without a prelude, she jumped up from the sofa.

"Could my brother and I adjourn to another room for a moment?" she asked.

Fukkink, surprised, smiled and said, "Yes! Yes, of course, Miss Granger!"

The elf showed Draco and Hermione into a personal sitting room adjacent to the office, and pulled the door closed behind himself as he left.

Hermione slumped back against the door. She was suddenly tired and ached all over, like she was coming down with a cold.

Draco paced in front of Fukkink's hearth, staring at his feet and biting his thumbnail.

"That"—Hermione pointed back over her shoulder—"is a bloody mid-17th century Qing dynasty Time Turner."

"Yes." Draco didn't look up. "I know what it is."

"And it's not even ours."

"No," he agreed. "Never has been."

"I suppose the only good news here is that no one needs to faint," she said. "What the hell are we going to do?"

"Obviously I have to go rooting around under the shrubbery at Thornwood Abbey." Draco snatched an embroidered throw pillow from Fukkink's gold velvet sofa, crushed it in his fists, and tossed it back down. "*Fuck!*"

"Even if we did steal this Time Turner," said Hermione, "it's useless to us."

Draco flopped his head back and closed his eyes.

"A fascinating object, obviously. But for our purposes, yes. Pointless.

"Considering the retrofitting it would require," she said, "we'd do just as well staying at the cottage for the next three years and building a new Turner from scratch."

"It would work if you got the candle thickness just right and didn't need ring rotation to reduce charm instability." He paused and looked at her. "Why are you still thinking about theft?"

Hermione ignored his question. "If you didn't need ring rotation, you could turn Fukkink's penis chimes into a Time Turner."

"We're definitely not hitching a ride home on Fukkink's cock chimes. Bollocks!"

Bollocks just about covered it.

"It's just one disaster after another, isn't it?" Hermione banged the side of her fist against the door. "While I am extremely fond of each and every Longbottom, and all the Averys—especially the little one with the big head—and I would very much like to make it all the way through Martin's home library, I am so tired of"—she waved her hands in the air as her tone rose—"bonnets, and unsecured cleavage, and being courted by the wrong people, and not having any knickers, and kissing you, and I *really* miss my cat, and—"

Hermione stopped.

Draco was staring at her. His mouth hovered half open and his eyes were wide with surprise, searching the empty space around her head.

He closed his mouth.

"What?" she asked.

"You're not."

A jolt of adrenaline crackled outward from Hermione's gut.

"I'm not what?"

"You're not tired of kissing me."

He said it quietly. Calmly. As though it were a fact.

Hermione's breathing picked up.

In the other room, Fukkink and Martin both roared with laughter.

"Glass of port, old man?" asked Fukkink, voice muffled by the door.

"If you're going to twist my arm," said Martin.

By the sound of it, they'd made up.

Hermione fumed.

If she'd been able to see them, she would have knocked every last tattling spud back into whatever dimension it came from so fast its neckless head would spin.

"Why wouldn't I be tired of kissing you?" she asked, hoisting her chin.

"You tell me."

She narrowed her eyes and clamped her mouth shut.

He didn't move, only studied her with obnoxious patience. Finally, he tipped his head to one side.

"What are you not telling me?" he asked.

"You're a scoundrel."

It felt true.

"Alright." He watched the bean demons buzz around her head. "I can see you genuinely believe that." He drew up his shoulders then dropped them in defeat. "And maybe it's objectively true. But that doesn't answer the question as to what, exactly, you're lying about."

"I'm not lying about anything."

His eyes widened once more.

"What?" she shot out, both piqued and humiliated.

"There are—there are probably two dozen of them now, Hermione. They're *glowing*."

The awe in his voice filled her with irrational intellectual envy.

"I didn't realize they did that," he added.

Hermione had the uncomfortable feeling that his disbelief was directed at her just as much as it was at the fairies.

"You're not telling me something," he said. "I know you."

"You do *not* know me. And I am not—"

"Whether I want it to be true or not," he interrupted, and she heard an echo of the commanding, spoiled boy he once was, "and in spite of your arbitrary boundaries around discussing our personal lives in even the most casual terms, I know you like I know the back of my own *fucking* hand, Hermione. You have been avoiding telling me...something. For quite some time. I haven't a clue what it could be." His mouth ticked up in a mirthless, transitory smirk. "Did you and the Weasel elope or something?"

"No." It was the hard truth, and she hoped that it knocked a half dozen demons silly. "If we go to the Parkinsons' tomorrow to pay a call, we can probably excuse ourselves, or engineer a moment away—"

"Merlin." He stared at the floor again and shook his head.

"I have plans, Malfoy," she said. "*You* have plans. *We both have plans*, and this whole bollocksed situation is ruining every last one of them."

"Plans, yes. I am extremely fucking aware that you have *plans*!"

He pierced her with a look so cruelly crystalline and precise she wished she could pass by osmosis through the door.

He was still thinking. He was always bloody *thinking*. Only, just then, he didn't bother to hide it, and left his intellectual struggle out for public viewing, legible as the guidelines in a child's primer.

Finally, he sighed. Hands shoved in his pockets, he took unhurried, almost lazy steps towards her.

"Alright," he said as he neared. "Because your *plans* are of such cardinal importance to you, I'm only going to ask you one thing." He was slouching, for him, his posture barely correct; easy and unconcerned. "And because I've made the startling decision to imbibe Martin's readily available hallucinogens, you're going to have to tell me the truth."

Two more steps, and he was so close the vellus hair on her arms picked up the eddies of his exhale.

"The truth about what?" she asked.

She couldn't tell him about Ron. She'd do it as soon as they got back. She'd have to. He almost certainly would have found out about it the day they were time-snatched.

But she couldn't possibly tell him here.

Not *now*.

He leaned in close to her ear.

"*Do* you smell like roses?" he asked.

The wrenching tension behind her shoulder blades eased.

"Are you seriously asking me that?"

"I am seriously asking you that, yes," he said.

She rolled her eyes.

"If you lie," he said. "I'm going to know."

"Yes. I smell like roses."

He nodded with a satisfied finality.

"I *knew* it."

"*God*, You're the worst," she said.

He pulled back from her so sharply that the movement made her jump, and stood blinking at the air around them both.

"Oh," he said, soft as breathing. "Oh, *wow*."

Amusement—no, delight—no, *wonder, dear God*, pure and childlike—washed over his face. He had the audacity to look at her with his eyes like a rough grey sea gone mirror-calm after a squall, mild and half-dazed.

His lips parted.

He was going to ask her something—only there was a real possibility it wasn't going to be some snarky, stupid bit of teasing nonsense.

She couldn't lie, and an evasion would be equally damning. In her present circumstances—unable to run away to her flat at the end of the work day, giant pink bow tied underneath her chin—she was not going to be caught out about *anything*, let alone the somewhat recent dissolution of the only serious relationship she'd ever had in her life.

Hermione loved plans, and thankfully she had one tucked away in her aggressively normal pocket.

She pushed her shoulders hard against the door, reached behind herself, cranked the handle down, and stumbled backwards into Fukkink's office.

"Oh," she said, voice low and throbbing, "I feel..."

Fukkink and Martin looked up from their glasses of port and watched in mute stupefaction as she slapped the back of her hand against her forehead and swerved in a sea-sick circle between Fukkink's desk and the sofa. She'd never actually fainted, and wasn't quite sure how it was done. Heaving her bosoms forward, she gazed with half-lidded eyes at the coffered ceiling, let her arms go limp behind her, and fell backwards into nothing.

Draco didn't bother casting a Feather-light Charm as he scooped her up and held her, one arm flailed outward and her bonneted head lolling back, to his chest.

Eyes closed, she could hear what went on in the room but couldn't see it.

"Oh, dear!" said Fukkink. "Martin! Your cousin is hysterical! Shall I call the Healer?"

"No!" shouted Draco. He cleared his throat. "That is to say, no, thank you. I'm terribly sorry, Martin. I'd like to take her home immediately so I can calm her nerves myself."

"You can put me down now," said Hermione.

They were nearly to the gate leading back to Merton College, but she was still in Draco's arms.

"Nothing you could possibly say is going to make me set you down in front of all these agreeable youths," he said. "What if one of them rushes up and tries to bring you to climax?"

Martin veered along the walk ahead of them, mortarboard askew and softly cackling to himself.

"You're teasing me," said Hermione.

"Of course I'm not. I'm deeply concerned some lovely boy is going to try to give you period-typical medical attention."

She rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

"Then it's a good thing my hero is a scoundrel."

They passed through the gate to Merton College, and without pausing, Apparated back to the cottage garden.

It was early afternoon, and the sun fell from straight overhead, warming the air and drawing out a strong allium scent from the garden beds.

"I think I'm safe from any rogue pelvic massages here," said Hermione. But she made no move to withdraw her clasped hands from Draco's nape, and neither did he shift to set her down.

Martin fumbled around in his robes, turning out a startling number of interior pockets, until, at last, he produced something small and glinting.

"Success!" he roared.

He was holding up Fukkink's Qin Time Turner.

"You stole the Time Turner?" asked Draco flatly.

"Too right I did," said Martin. He tucked it back into his robes. "While our poor girl was in hysterics. I'm owling it to the Jiaqing Emperor in the morning. Bloody colonial thievery."

"Do you want me to put you down?" Draco asked Hermione.

She opened her mouth to tell him no, then swiftly pressed her lips closed and glowered at him.

"What?" he asked. "It's a simple question."

She absolutely refused to speak to him.

He raised his damned eyebrow at her again.

"How are your nerves holding up?" he murmured.

She was about to tell him who exactly was getting on her last nerve when the snap of Apparition sounded in the woods beyond the cottage gate.

William Avery stood on the other side of the fence, jacketless, hair askew and wand drawn.

He'd appeared facing the path through the wood, but wobbled in a half-circle until he was looking at the cottage.

"You." He pointed a finger at—Hermione couldn't tell who.

Draco set Hermione on her feet, then stepped in front of her and pushed a hand into his wand pocket.

"It's fine, Draco," she said. "It's obvious from here he's drunk as a lord."

William, his liver pickling in a brine of spirits, moved forward with swift, wobbly purpose. Unfortunately he overlooked the solid fact of the garden gate, and nearly toppled over it head first. Having narrowly avoided impaling himself on the blunt pickets, he moved his wand to his left hand and fiddled with the gate latch. After several excruciating attempts, Martin hovered across the flagstone walk and flicked the latch open for him.

"You have to push inward as you lift, lad," he said, scooting out of the way as William marched past.

William thundered into the middle of the front walk, then stopped and wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve.

Hermione perceived his bloodshot eyes and reddened lids from where she stood. His face was blotchy and swollen, and he had a full day's worth of stubble. He looked shaggy, greasy and exhausted, like he needed to follow up a shower and a shave with two aspirin tablets and a nice long nap.

"I have tried very hard to be civil," said William, wand concerningly restored to his dominant hand and aimed in Draco's approximate direction, "but you do not belong here."

"What are you blathering on about, Avery?" said Draco.

Hermione winced. He had brought out the puffed-up aristocratic tone that made even her want to belt him.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," said William. "You *fuck*."

He listed sideways, but rescued himself at the last moment with a hand on Martin's chair, which had conveniently tootled up beside him.

Martin surreptitiously reached for William's wand, but William straightened himself and snatched it out of reach.

"No you don't, my fine Doctor," he said. "Your genius fails you for once."

He squeezed his eyes tight, then opened them again.

"The pair of you may have fooled our blameless Mister Doctor Martin here, and—actually, I'm almost certain Grix is on to you. But!" He pointed a finger at them. "You've pulled the wool over the eyes of every last member of the Longbottom family, and my family, and fucking"—he spread his arms open wide—"Wiltshire, but you haven't fooled me for one *fucking* minute."

He leaned against Martin's chair and crossed one ankle over the other like he'd been stopped on a potential drunk and disorderly violation and was trying to act casual.

"You've been drinking, William." Hermione stepped around Draco and wrapped her hand around her wand inside her pocket.

One quick Stupefy and she'd have him home to his harried mother and a hot bath in half a minute.

Draco looped his arm around her waist with surprising force and pulled her back into himself.

"I'm aware I've been drinking." William scoffed and waved a hand in dismissal. "I've been drinking *a very great deal*. But I don't need to be sober to tell you that if there is one thing I hate, it is fucking bullshit. And you"—he pointed at Hermione—"and especially you"—he pointed with greater intensity at Draco—"are *bullshit*."

"Avery, if this is about Cressida, get the fuck over it," said Draco. "This is the last sort of thing that's going to make a girl want you."

William's face reddened, and he teetered forward.

Martin caught him by the back of one pant leg and hauled him to plumb.

"That is not *at all* what this is about," William said emphatically.

Draco's hand tightened against Hermione's belly.

"What?" She looked up at him.

He was studying William with an expression both curious and confused.

"He's not lying." There was a frayed edge of disbelief to his voice.

"It's no secret that I'm in love with Cressida," said William, tilting forward on his feet with his knees locked while hanging onto Martin's chair. "I've been in love with her since we were children. Do you know what that's like?" He laughed, but it was dry and humorless. "Loving someone? Caring about them more than you care about yourself? I can't imagine you do."

Draco remained silent.

"If Cressida wanted you, and you were even the most basic class of honest man, with good intentions, I would be devastated," William's voice thickened and then cracked with emotion. "I would also step out of your way, and wish you great *fucking* joy."

Draco swallowed.

"But you"—William jabbed his wand forward—"are a charlatan, a liar, the very worst sort of callous seducer, and I'm almost certain you're a thief. You have somehow blinded Sir Thomas, and Tom, and any other man who could prevent you from destroying the prospects of an inexperienced girl. So it's down to me. I challenge you—"

"Oh, good God," said Hermione.

"—to a duel. Because you have insulted Cressida and the entire Longbottom family beyond endurance, and preyed on the good natures of Mr. Martin and Grix—"

"Would you like a scone, my lad?" asked Martin. "Soak all that gin right up."

"—and because you are *so*"—William waved his hand at Draco and scrunched his face in disgust—" *fucking* smug."

"I'm not dueling you, Avery," said Draco.

"Do you or do you not intend to marry Cressida?"

"I'm not going to fucking *marry* Cressida. She's all yours, if you can convince her you're worth having. Now go home and stick your head under a faucet."

"So you're a coward as well as a cad," said William. "Your sister must be very proud."

Draco nearly threw Hermione behind himself, then pulled his wand from his pocket.

"One more word about my sister. One more. Please."

Hermione's eyes rolled so far back in her head she could practically watch the irritation travel between her own synapses.

"Draco, leave it," she said, as though he were a dog gnawing on a shoe. "He just needs to go home and sleep it off. He's going to feel an absolute pillock tomorrow morning."

"I don't know what your angle is," said William. "But the pair of you are so *profoundly* full of shit. Both Cressida and Rolly deserve far better than either of you could possibly—"

Draco was impressively swift with an *Expelliarmus*. But despite being well and truly rattled, William dodged left and shot off his counter spell so fast Hermione didn't see him perform the movements.

Draco blocked it, sending it rebounding past his ear and pinging off a roof slate. It cracked, then slid off the roof and finished shattering against a flagstone.

"Take Martin and go inside," said Draco, pushing Hermione hard away from himself.

"I'm not going anywhere." She drew her wand and adopted her dueling stance.

"Under no circumstances am I fighting your sister." William raised his hands. "Just you. And if I disarm you, you're going to pack up and take whatever gift you're working somewhere else."

"Alright," said Draco.

Hermione whirled to face him.

"You cannot just agree to leave the Longbottom estate on my behalf."

"Wonderful," Draco said to William. "Now you've made my sister angry with me, which I try very hard to avoid unless I'm in the mood to fight with her."

"He has not made me angry with you," said Hermione. "You've made me angry all on your own."

"How about this: if you disarm me," said Draco, ignoring her, "I'll explain why I'd very much like to leave Wiltshire, and why I very much can't do that just yet. And if I disarm you, you'll go home and jump in your fucking lake to cool off. But before you do that, you're going to offer my sister a sincere apology."

Hermione stared at him. "You're seriously going to do this."

"Alright," said William.

He started rolling up a shirt sleeve. To Hermione's horror, Draco yanked away his cravat, then his jacket. He threw both over the edge of a tomato cage, and began rolling his own sleeves into neat cuffs.

Hermione stomped over to Martin, then steered him towards a garden corner, where a wrought iron bench sat under a plum tree.

"Disarming only. No injury. Oh, shit." William stumbled two steps backwards after his heel caught a stone-bordered bed of marigolds, arugula, and cress.

Martin alternated tapping his index and ring finger first against the tip of his thumb, then its side before drawing a series of sigils in the air. Their garden view shimmered, then went vaguely sepia toned.

"Old Gallic shielding charm," he explained. "Not in the mood to lose a finger."

Draco and William, in the state of half-dress they'd mutually and wordlessly determined was appropriate for a duel, squared up between the peas and the blossoming courgettes.

Hermione leaned forward and rested her chin in her palm.

"If you ruin any part of Grix's garden you'll both have rather more than injury-free disarmament to concern yourselves with," she called out.

"On the count of three," said William. He rested his weight back into his left foot, and raised his wand. "One."

Draco settled into his dueling stance.

"Two," said William.

Hermione refused to acknowledge that Draco's dueling posture showed not only his legs, but his naked forearms, lean abdomen and flopping hair—which, as if on cue, he tossed out of his face—to best advantage.

Oxford was a bust. Scratch that one off the incantation.

Time Turner.

Home.

"Three."

Both men moved at once.

William swung his wand through the air with so much speed and precision that for a moment Hermione almost wanted to cheer him on.

Draco, fully sober, almost had him on both measures, but not quite. It was extraordinary.

"Roland said William had incredible reflexes," Hermione said to Martin. "He was absolutely underselling it."

"My dear, could I ask you to go and get me that raspberry just there?" Martin gestured at a row of wire-trained vines near the fence. "The big fat fellow at the very top."

Hermione got up and strolled to the berry trellis, astonished to find the shield charm following along, and plucked a handful of ripe red raspberries.

Draco shoulder rolled across the clover lawn, putting the ramp between himself and a *Stupefy*, then shot an *Incarcerous* that blew under William's left armpit and decapitated an entire peony clutch.

Hermione and Martin sifted through the berries she held out in her cupped palm and followed the rising action.

Both men became visibly frustrated. Draco's temper had unraveled quicker than Hermione had ever known it to, outside of the Auror's practice duels he and Harry occasionally engaged in for reasons unknown to all but themselves.

William shot a *Bombarda* at the pea trellis Draco was using for cover, but Hermione sat up and blocked it with a defensive spell before the peas became casualties.

"No vegetables!" she called out.

Draco and William's shirts both grew sheer with sweat as they ducked, rolled, and jumped around one another's magic in the front garden.

When Draco took a *Stinging Jinx* to the earlobe, the tenor changed entirely.

Spells blasted through the air so fast Hermione couldn't track them, occasionally clashing against one another and showering Grix's garden with sparks.

Stupefy.

Levicorpus.

Expelliarmus.

Another *Bombarda* that prematurely ended a melon's life.

Incarcerous.

Expelliarmus.

Expelliarmus.

The air reeked with the smell of clashing incantations, like the thermite combustion of a Muggle sparkler burning along the length of its wire.

Facing one another head on, William blasted a *Levicorpus* past Draco's shoulder that crashed into Martin and Hermione's shield and made it wobble like gelatin. Then, he crouched low and aimed upwards just as Draco took a running leap at a small boulder whose top Grix had carved out as a bird bath.

Draco pushed off the boulder hard and leapt sideways through the air, wand curling in a loop, mouth open in the first syllables of a *Stupefy*.

Which is where he stopped: hovering in mid-air, still and silent, with his eyes and mouth wide open.

William had frozen with a look of narrow-eyed shrewdness, kneeling on one knee, fingers steepled to support himself against a flagstone, his wand directed precisely where Draco's face would be in half a second.

Grix stood on the front porch, wearing his Ivy cap and a sleeveless wool sweater with a row of white sheep stitched across the chest. Dark-tipped lettuces bloomed over the top of a net bag hanging from his shoulder.

Hermione must have missed the sound of him Apparating over the relentless sizzle and snap of colliding spells.

He strolled down the ramp with his hands in his pockets, his face drawn into a deeply unimpressed frown.

"Ho ho!" called Martin. "You, there!" He started digging through his robe pockets.

Grix walked around William, frowning, then underneath Draco, looking up and still frowning. Then he made his way wordlessly to the bench beneath the plum.

"Look!" said Martin.

He waved his hand, and the shield charm popped in a shimmering incandescent fall like a bursting bubble. He drew the Chinese Time Turner from an enigmatic pocket and held it up.

"I've stolen Fukkink's treasure!" he said. "I'm going to owl it to Beijing."

Grix ground his jaw and considered the pilfered device.

Then he narrowed his eyes at Hermione, who, popping another raspberry into her mouth, was promptly bestowed by the grand and mysterious blessing of the sort of completely perfect idea that comes along only when a person least expects it to.

"Oh!" She sat up straight and jammed her hand into her pocket. "He put a—" She reached over and slapped Martin's thigh with her free hand. "He put a *spell passcode* on the blooming Portkeys to activate them. If stability and precision didn't matter, and if you had, *or made*, a particular kind of coordinates, it could be *anything*. It could be a damned jingling Roman cock."

Grix's jaw ground faster.

"I've been gone for *two days*," he said.

He dug his hand into the pocket of his tweed trousers, and drew out a leather drawstring bag.

He handed it to Hermione.

"Much as I hate to say it," he said, "the pair of you had best be moving along sooner rather than later."

Fingers trembling, Hermione pulled the drawstring open.

Then she tipped the Time Turner—the proper Time Turner, with its tiny maker's mark in the shape of an interwoven D and H stamped on the disc's outer edge, its rings both attached, whole, and complete—into her palm.

Chapter End Notes

Gratitude to my beta [dreamsofdramione](#) for all of her help.

The Key

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hermione's first act of office decoration was to hang a clock over her desk. For nearly five years, its red second hand ticked through its revolutions, slicing her days into tidy portions suitable for human digestion.

By the time she returned from the women's lavatory, hands wettish, it read 8:27.

Which was neither here nor there, since time, as a sequential, unidirectional phenomenon, was entirely made-up.

A magical researcher of time and space was equal parts aggrandized watchmaker, physicist, and wizard. She knew her way around a welding joint, was fluent in Muggle mathematics, and understood how natural laws were predicated on, expanded by, and often subverted according to the rules of matter under magic.

On paper, whichever way you looked at it, everything came down to perception.

Just as apparently singular physical bodies were mere close atomic agreements, the experience of time as a forward-flowing narrative was nothing more than a neuronal quirk.

Saturdays: a cognitive construct.

No less Sundays.

Weekends altogether: an alluring fantasy.

But theory wasn't the same as practice; time in an equation wasn't equivalent to time in the flesh.

No formula yet deduced could save Hermione from the immovable fact of a Monday.

She reentered the laboratory to find the closely allied cellular matter referring to itself as Draco Malfoy sitting at the molecular concord he thought of as his desk.

He'd only just arrived.

Had she cared to observe him (and she did not), she would have found him tinged with exhaustion, pale and drawn. Signs lurked under his impeccable personal presentation indicating he'd been up a night or two.

She trusted it had been worth it.

"Good morning," she said as she passed.

She sat in her chair: a creaking consortium of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, and nitrogen. Behind her, matter in motion disturbed the air, and sound reached her ears: his chair squalling as if to answer hers; his desk drawer scraping on its runners; a wet ink drop blip; his quill point scritch against parchment.

The clock's reliable red hand made one full revolution around its face.

“Good morning,” he said at last.

“Did you enjoy yourself this weekend?”

Weekends, weekdays, weeks in general being demonstrably fake, his answer didn’t particularly matter to her.

She tapped her wand against a Ministry memo, and it unfurled on her desk.

The second hand plinked fourteen times.

“I did,” he said. “Thank you for asking.”

Two more ticks.

Plus five.

Multiply the sum by eight.

“How was your weekend?” His voice was dry, cool, detached.

Hermione scrawled her signature over the time slip covering the last two weeks of May.

Seventy salaried hours—two hundred fifty-two thousand ticks of a second hand, each a fever dream—plus thirty-eight delusional hours of voluntary overtime, unpaid.

Tomorrow would be June: a beguiling long-form fiction.

“Good,” she said.

His chair groaned as he leaned forward, seven octillion insupportable atoms taking a short jaunt through space, radiating too-familiar molecules of vetiver soap and lavender-scented laundry detergent.

“I’m gratified to hear it,” he said.

Eighteen ticks.

Hermione picked up her half-empty coffee mug, and found it had grown cold.

The grandfather clock in the Twiggybroke Cottage sitting room was a fairytale thing—massive, dark, and polished, with the sort of ornately carved door a person might slip through and enter another world.

As the light beyond the cottage window grew soporific and yellow, the clock chimed a pleasingly detuned Westminster Quarters, then executed four resonant bongs.

Sitting by the fire, legs propped on a tufted velvet footstool, Martin played with the Time Turner.

He held it close to his eye, squinted at it, rotated it, read and reread the inscribed runes, and occasionally probed it with his magic.

The smell of sautéing onion, carrot and celery bloomed in the kitchen. Grix sat at the table, his back to the sitting room, tearing lettuces and tossing bite-sized pieces into a wooden bowl. A charmed knife diced tomatoes and chopped mushrooms against a cutting board, and on the stove, a wooden spoon continuously scraped the bottom of a sizzling cast iron pan.

Hermione knelt by one of the hearthside chairs, warmed by a banked fire, and watched Draco stretch himself awake.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“It's just gone four,” she said quietly. “How are you feeling?”

“Merlin’s balls.” He grimaced, bending his head one way then the other. “What have you done to me, Granger?”

“Hurts, doesn’t it?” William, laid out on the sofa, pressed a hand over the cold compress covering his eyes. “If you can get Grix to speak to you, he has a potion that works a treat for the stiffness.”

“Good to know,” said Draco. “Why am I this stiff to begin with? I feel like I’ve taken a bludger to every quadrant.”

“I’ll go and fetch the potion,” said Hermione.

She stood to go, but Draco snagged her skirts and tugged her back.

“No more potions today,” he said. “Come down here. I have a question.”

“What do you mean, come down there?”

He glanced meaningfully at his lap, then looked up through his lashes with appalling contrived innocence.

She rolled her eyes, but contentment flooded her limbs as she perched on his knee.

“What?” she asked.

“I meant come down *here* .”

She curled sideways across his lap to bring their heads level.

“What?”

“Hello,” he whispered.

“No.”

“Is Martin about to run off and lead a Viking raid with our Time Turner or someone else’s?”

“Ours.”

“And it's not broken?”

“No. There's a new safety mechanism on the crown, too. You have to unscrew it before it will rotate the hourglass—no, cousin Martin, please don’t unscrew that! I wish we’d thought of it.”

“Alright,” said Draco. “Also, why am I sitting by the fire and not landing a *Stupefy* between Avery’s eyes?”

William scoffed.

“And why,” asked Draco, “does everything hurt?”

“I’m sure *everything* doesn’t hurt,” said Hermione.

“Absolutely everything hurts,” he insisted.

“Even your spirit?”

“Especially my spirit.”

She drew Grix’s wonder ointment from her pocket.

“Shall I apply it to your bruised ego?”

Draco made beseeching calf eyes at her.

“My ear hurts.”

“Your ear?”

“Yes, my ear. Do you see?” He tilted his head to the side and pointed at his earlobe.

She peered at it. “I suppose it is a touch pinker than usual.”

“Of course it is. That’s where Avery grazed me with his unsportsmanlike overpowered Stinging Jinx.”

“Do you really want me to put ointment on it?” Hermione asked.

“I do.”

She gathered a bead of balm onto her fingertip, then took Draco’s earlobe between her finger and thumb and massaged it in slow circles.

His head lolled back and his eyes fell closed.

“There,” she said. “Feel any better?”

“Slightly. Do it more.”

“Is being stroked and petted like this actually going to heal you, or are you only asking me to do it because it feels nice?”

“I refuse to place artificial limits on my own pleasure.”

“Scratch anything I’ve mentioned previously. Your feline hedonism is the worst thing I’ve learned about you in the last six years. Besides your wearing a cravat in the Malfoy family Christmas musicale.”

“That is not what I said we did at Christmas.”

“You’re far worse than Crookshanks,” she said. “I mean that sincerely.”

“I’m *stiff*, Granger. And I *sting*. There’s *notable discomfort*.”

She sighed, then pursed her lips and blew a stream of breath across his ear.

His whole body convulsed and his mouth fell slightly open.

“How’s that?” She stroked his earlobe again. “Any less stiff? More? About the same?”

“More. Keep going.”

William cleared his throat.

“So—you’re *not* his sister, then?”

Hermione abruptly released Draco’s ear.

“No,” she said. “I’m not his sister.”

William shifted the compress to his temple.

“You’re his wife?” He sounded hopeful.

Draco hooked an arm over Hermione’s legs and rested his hand on her hip.

"That’s what I suggested," he said, "but she wanted to make things weird."

“I am *not* his wife,” said Hermione. “Draco and I are—”

“Friends,” said Draco.

“—coworkers,” Hermione finished.

He squeezed her hip.

“We’re—” she began again.

“ We’re *friends*. ”

“—friendly coworkers."

"Friends who are coworkers," he said.

Hermione glared at him, but he made damp round eyes like an infant harp seal at her until she wilted in defeat.

“We’re friends,” she said. “And we work together.”

“Is that normal where you're from?” William indicated their arrangement in the chair. “Between friends who work together?”

“I suppose not,” Hermione admitted. “Although—perhaps, under the circumstances...we’ve experienced an enormous amount of stress in a very short period of time, and it’s very reassuring to ___”

“Perfectly normal.” Draco’s thumb stroked at her hip. “Everyone in the future behaves this way with their friends and colleagues.”

William frowned.

“Where do you work?” he asked.

“We’re both employed by the Ministry of Magic,” Hermione said. “We’re magicotemporospatialists.”

“Temporonauts,” Draco whispered.

“No, you know I hate that,” she said. “Anyway, that’s how we came to be here.” Overcome with a wave of stress-induced tiredness, she lay her cheek on Draco’s shoulder and yawned. “How we came to be *now*, I mean.”

“No better time than the present!” shouted Martin.

“I thought you were a gentleman,” William said to Draco. “I mean that in the sense of owning property, not your behavior.”

“I am a gentleman,” said Draco, “in every sense. I also enjoy my job.”

“Congenially conducting time research.” William laughed—Hermione thought rather uncharitably—which made him wince and push the heel of his hand against his temple.

“Can I get you another draught?” asked Hermione. “Grix said you could have a headache remedy half an hour after your sobriety potion.”

“He’s fine to have it now,” said Grix without looking up. “It’s been thirty-five minutes.”

At the moment he arrived that afternoon, Grix was exceptionally put out. Hours later, he remained that way.

After freezing both men mid-duel under his magic, he’d pried their wands from their hands, then levitated them into the cottage. He’d perched William’s crouched, petrified body on the floor beside the sofa, and leaned Draco awkwardly against the chair.

Hermione didn’t dare ask Grix more than half a dozen questions over the two hours he left them that way. Cowed by her own contributions to the past week’s bedlam, she curled on the sofa with a book. Grix helped Martin out of his academic dress, tidied the cottage, washed his lettuces, and started dinner. Finally, after assisting a fully sober and freshly-dressed Martin into his chair, with the Time Turner and a bowl of what looked like kale chips, he’d lined draughts for pain, sobriety, and calm on the coffee table and released the petrification spell.

It took ten minutes for them to slump from their hard postures, William dozy and Draco outright asleep as Hermione carefully repositioned their slackening bodies.

Once awake, reclined on the sofa and sore from prolonged petrification, William seemed uninterested in renewed aggression. He merely observed Hermione fussing over Draco, watched Martin examine the Time Turner, and cast dubious glances at the snuff box goggling him from the coffee table. After peaceably swallowing the sobriety potion and muscle relaxant Hermione offered him, he asked her a few simple questions, then lay back with the cold compress over his eyes until Draco woke up.

William now lifted onto his elbows. “A headache potion would be very welcome, thank you.”

“Stay put,” said Hermione. “I’ll be right back.”

She wriggled off Draco’s lap and bustled to the washroom. There, she selected a vial labeled *Head*

Ache from the potions cabinet.

Remedy tucked in her pocket, she emerged to discover Draco leaning in the shadowed hallway, stretching his neck.

She intended to brush past without giving him any notice, but when he made no attempt to either stop or provoke her, she stepped back and propped herself against the wall beside him.

“What do you want?” She bristled at his visible amusement. “Stop smirking.”

“You just asked me what I want, and what I want is to smirk at you.”

“I don’t want to know what you want. It probably involves two sets of identical twins and a tub of vanilla icing.”

“Is that enough icing for five people?”

“Stop it.”

“You stop it first.”

“Did you follow me back here to accost me?” she asked.

He said nothing and didn't move.

She'd miscalculated, and moved too close to the siren song his body endlessly hummed at her. Compelled, she threw herself into his insufferable sea, tucking her fingertip under his folded cuff and stroking the inside of his elbow.

With an unconscionably smug sigh of satisfaction, he circled his arm around her waist and pulled her into himself.

“I was waiting for you to do the accosting,” he said, “and you’ve come through admirably. While you’re at it, I actually came back here to ask you why our cousin Martin has the Time Turner. Last I remember we were eminently screwed on that front, and I was about to best Avery in magical combat.”

“No, you weren’t.” She strummed her thumb over his reddened earlobe.

“I definitely was. I’d ask Grix about his role in all of this, but he isn’t speaking to me as such.”

Hermione’s skin burned with self-consciousness. Draco drew back and studied her.

“You’re embarrassed,” he said. “Why? You didn't find the Time Turner buried under one of your breasts, did you?”

“Grix found it here, at the cottage.” Jittering with nerves, she laid her hands over his biceps and briskly patted them. “At the bottom of the stairs.”

Draco blinked in disbelief. “When?”

“Does it matter?”

“Very much so.”

“While we were at the ball.”

“That makes no sense. My pocket wasn’t torn until the evening was almost over. And it seems unlikely that it would have fallen out immediately after I’d put it—”

Hermione nurtured a fledgling passion for the tiny pink roses and purple forget-me-nots printed on the wallpaper.

In her peripheral vision, Draco's eyes widened.

“It never made it into my pocket,” he said.

“That would seem to be the case.”

“I dropped it. While we were...”

Hermione counted the leaves on a half dozen minuscule roses.

“While we were standing at the bottom of the stairs, yes.” She omitted *pushing our mouths together*, as it was implicit. “It seems he was tidying up after we’d all gone, and found the pouch on the floor. He thought it was one of Martin’s secret potions caches, so he tipped it out to look.” A frill of anxiety trimmed every word. “The instant he told me, I recalled that you’d dropped your book, and I’d dropped my wand, and you must have dropped the Time Turner as well, and”—she took one short, galvanizing breath—“it appears that I may have, in actual fact, distracted you with my nipples.”

She finished talking and made furtive eye contact.

His expression was far-off and abstracted, but under her hands his body felt primed for motion.

“You’re thinking,” she said.

“Yes.”

“About what?”

“What do you think I’m thinking about?”

“Imagining my breasts is a thoughtcrime.”

“If a law is unjust, we’re obligated to break it. Do you remember that physics lecture we went to about memory as a mental toolkit for constructing potential future scenarios?”

“Yes. Why?”

“No reason.”

“Grix indicated that he’s known all along,” she said. “Or rather, he suspected. Apparently we’re not particularly convincing siblings.”

She tilted her jaw out of the way as Draco nuzzled into the space behind her ear.

“We aren’t?” he asked.

“No. I don’t know why.”

“Maybe we should fight more.”

Hermione could feel his mouth moving against her skin while he spoke. She stroked her hands up his nape and into his hair.

“I’m always trying to fight with you.”

He pulled back, lips hovering along her jaw and over her chin, then paused millimetres from her mouth.

“Try harder.”

She stared at the welcoming obtuse angle of his cupid’s bow.

“You’re beyond provoking.”

“It’s what you deserve.” As his slightly parted lips made a return journey to her ear, he brushed his fingertips in wide circles between her shoulder blades. “How can it feel this good to touch you? It’s fucking narcotic.”

“It’s the truth potion.”

“Unfortunately not.”

“Martin mentioned mildly heightened affective touch as a potential short-term side effect after the visions have stopped. He says it’s something to do with the tincture of— *oh*. That’s—”

He nipped softly at her earlobe without using his teeth.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Nothing.” He quit her ear to trail down her neck. “Making memories. Committing crimes.”

“Stuffing your mental filing drawer with irresponsible source material?”

“I’m an irresponsible man, Hermione.”

“You’re never allowed to be my brother again.” Her palms flowed, first one and then the other, along his backbone. “Never, ever.”

His mouth traveled a lazy, meandering path back to her ear. “What can I be?”

“My friend.”

“So I’m right?”

“Of course you are.”

He growled something unintelligible, then bit her earlobe properly. She pressed her tongue to the backs of her teeth to stop herself from muttering any of the regretful rubbish whining to be let out.

“And that’s all,” he said. “Friends who sometimes get carried away.”

“You’re also my partner.”

“That’s a very nice, very flexible word.”

“And my colleague.”

“True. We are noted for our collegial behavior.”

Hermione’s executive capacities were shutting down, exposing her to the whims of instinct and automaticity.

“If I admit that I have *technically* slept with you—”

“Verb tense.”

“—*am sleeping* with you, will it make you happy?”

“Ecstatic. But it would make me happier still to understand what you actually want from me, Hermione.” He rubbed his cheek against her temple. “Whether that’s fighting, flirting, or...something else.”

Hermione’s eyes rolled back as his breath eddied in her ear.

“If I wanted *something else*...”

“You’d only have to ask. Not even nicely. But you do have to ask.”

“You’d still fight with me?”

“Forever.”

“Flirt with me?”

“Every day.”

“Would you forget?”

“No.” His lashes brushed her skin as he closed his eyes. “That’s the only thing I can’t offer you.”

“But I thought it was easy for you.” Hermione’s pulse throbbed along her jaw.

“What’s easy for me?”

“Pretending it never happened. Isn’t that why you prefer women not stay in your bed after?”

It was a mistake—too personal; too specific.

Hermione bit down on her tongue until it hurt.

Draco stilled entirely, then drew back and looked at her.

“*What?*”

His disbelief traveled hand in hand with a minute, incredulous laugh.

Hermione’s restraint was at naught. She knew what she must look like: the blush of arousal across her skin; hips canted hard into his thigh; breath coming hot from her half-open mouth. If he had stopped at a place of legitimate confusion and been able to go no further, she would have led him upstairs, drawn up her skirts, and invited him to take his fill of her. But he went on.

“Who told—”

Then he did stop, sealing up the mouth she’d become so startlingly accustomed to—soft, warm,

inviting further dependency every time she encountered it.

He had every right to be offended; Hermione would have been. But he looked wounded, some interior hurt drawing his brows together and pulling down the corners of his mouth.

She'd fucked up—Ron's phrase of choice whenever he was in the wrong. She had, in fact, for a very long time, been fucking up all over the place.

Hermione was perfectly aware of the bedrock of stubbornness underlying every thought she had; every decision she made; every action she took.

Impelled by a frank and startling desperation to repair what she'd done, she drilled through it.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was incredibly invasive. Your personal life is none of my business."

His body was abandoning her. She draped her hand over his wrist and gave it a pleading pulse that did nothing to prevent him from going.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "I'm so sorry I said that."

By way of entreaty, she made two long and affectionate strokes down his arms, but he pushed away from her and leaned against the opposite wall.

"Don't be sorry." He tucked his hands into his pockets and shrugged. "It's true."

Hermione felt an impact in the center of her chest, like the dull, closed, catastrophic connection of a fist trained to follow through.

"That doesn't mean—I still shouldn't have said it. You have every right to whatever boundaries you want, and to privacy about them. You've done nothing wrong. By all accounts, you're very upfront about—"

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Fucking don't, Hermione."

Not knowing what else to do with herself, she pulled her fingers through her hair, half-tumbled from its lazy chignon.

He opened his eyes halfway and looked at her.

"Can you honestly say that nothing has changed for you since we came here?" he asked. "I won't be able to see whether or not you're telling the truth anymore. But I promise I'll believe you."

Hermione's breathing was superficial and uneven. A faint ringing rose and then fell in both ears.

"No." She shook her head. "Nothing's changed for me."

He'd said he would believe her, but he read her expression like he was looking for a lie.

"It's not the same for me," she said. "I can't just throw my whole life into turmoil for a night or two of casual sex."

His face contracted as though he was in physical pain.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I suppose it's all to the good that we're going home as soon as we've charmed the snuff box."

His focus had dulled; he clicked his lids shut again, then opened them in an apparent attempt to restore it.

“As soon as we’ve *what?*”

Hermione had cinched her morning routine around herself like a Titanic passenger fastening her life preserver.

Her life might have been taking on water fast, splitting apart, and capsizing in the dark, but the start of each day, at 5:30 on the dot, was well under control, one of few points in the illusory flow of time she could wrap her hands around and throttle into submission.

Wake. Coffee. Make bed. Yoga. Journal. Shower. Dress. Breakfast. Clean teeth. Feed cat.

With almost no conscious involvement on her part, the wondrous everyday magic of routine pushed her through the Floo in her flat and into the Ministry Atrium between 7:42 and 7:46 each morning.

Ron’s schedule in the Auror’s office varied widely. Even when they were together, they’d almost never Floored to work at the same time.

Which wasn’t to say she usually walked across the Atrium alone.

On Monday, head throbbing, she paused by the Floos and watched the Atrium clock. At 7:48, she hitched her bag higher on her shoulder, then crossed to the lifts.

7:49. 7:51. 7:53.

She let two lifts come and go, stepping aside for other Ministry employees and glancing over her shoulder at the Floos.

When the doors opened a third time, she stepped inside.

In the course of their work, she and her colleague had timed loads of events, taken their averages, and developed an extensive temporal map of the Ministry.

Without stops, the lifts slid from the Atrium to the ninth floor in sixteen seconds. From the instant the doors opened, twenty-four seconds delivered her to the laboratory door.

They both preferred a tidy workspace, and their desks sat empty.

Hermione removed her jacket and hung her bag on her chair. Then she went straight to the sink and fetched the pour-over coffee maker from the shelves overhead.

Two mugs dangled below. Hermione unhooked the antique Turkish ceramic piece bought in Istanbul, exquisitely painted with aquamarine flowers. Its purchaser refused to reveal its price, yet pouted for an entire morning when Hermione suggested it was too dear for her daily use. The brown 1970s vintage mug that said *Damn I’m Good* was one of Hermione’s cheeky charity shop finds, typically used below an apt expression.

Hermione ground beans for just one cup. Once the kettle heated, she tamped the grounds into the

filter, then poured hot water over the top.

And then she waited.

The clock ticked on the wall.

7:57.

7:59.

She ignored the heavily sweetened vanilla creamer in the fridge, added a splash of soya milk to her cup, and took her seat at her desk.

8:00.

8:03.

Hermione lived and died by the planners she purchased each year at the stationer. She retrieved her current copy from her bag and opened it on her blotter.

Across its pages, divided into regular geometric tables, line after line of neat print segmented and defined her days.

Today was primarily given over to writing and research.

From eight o'clock to eight thirty, she would catch up on memos and drink her coffee.

Between eight thirty and nine, she'd turn on the machines and calibrate them for the day.

Nine to ten was for working on a journal article.

From ten until eleven, she would attend a full departmental meeting in Conference Room 1.

From eleven until noon, she and her lab partner would examine cursed objects for DMLE, and send their results upstairs.

She'd take forty minutes for lunch.

An hour for routine equipment maintenance.

A twenty minute coffee break.

An hour and a half in the Ministry library.

Another ninety minutes in the archives.

Then she'd go home.

Her day was planned to the hour.

Every week was planned to the day.

Every month.

Every year.

All in pursuit of goals and aspirations she'd crafted years earlier.

She flipped back one page in her planner. And then another. And then another.

Day after day, week after week, her days were scratched out and amended.

On a Tuesday, they'd become absorbed in complex readings taken from a cursed emerald ring out of Theodore Nott's vaults, and spent two hours with the Potentiograph rather than one.

Twenty minutes into equipment maintenance, her associate had managed to break their bespoke, magically reinforced Bristol spline screwdriver, and they'd spent an hour and fifteen minutes fabricating a new matching pair.

Lunch was moved from noon to two o'clock. Coffee from three o'clock to four.

On page after page, beside five o'clock, a shy black line bisected the word HOME.

Days often ended at six o'clock.

6:45.

Seven o'clock.

Eight.

The clock over her desk read 8:07.

He was never late.

8:08.

8:10.

8:15.

When Hermione picked up her mug, her elbow caught the edge of her desk.

Hot milky coffee sloshed over her lap, seeping through her trouser placket and down to her knickers.

She jumped up and blotted the stain with a hastily produced work rag, but it was no use. She dried off her chair, then hustled to the ladies' room across the hall.

Inside a stall, she triaged.

A wide, wet circle wicked across her black trousers, and tan blotches stained the pale sea green blouse she'd picked up while popping into Marks & Spencer for new towels. She untucked her shirt and unzipped her trousers.

As she cleared the coffee stain from her knickers, the bathroom door swung open.

"So?" A woman's voice, hushed and expectant.

"So what?" Another woman, coy.

Through the bottom of the stall door, Hermione saw their shoes: one set of vertiginous tiger-striped heels with red soles, and a slightly lower pair in acorn brown nude.

Emma from Affective Studies and Beatrice, the archivist.

Hermione quickly *Scourgified* her trousers.

“I’m dying, Bea. Right here, right now, actively dying.”

The tiger heels entered the stall next to Hermione’s, and the nude pair the next one over.

“Aren’t we all dying, though, when you really think about it?” said Beatrice.

“You sound like poor Lawrence. I should never have helped him get on in Thanatology, he’s become *so* oppressively maudlin.” Emma’s tights rustled as she pulled them down. “Obviously you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.” She sat. “But you actually slept over? Two nights in a row?”

“That”—Beatrice’s voice bounced off the marble walls and floor—“is not any of your business.”

“I’m your flatmate,” said Emma. “I was worried. Right up until your Floo of shame at the crack of dawn this morning. Anyway, I’m a love researcher. It is literally my business.”

One by one, Hermione cleared the stains from her shirt.

Snapping elastic, whooshing flushes, and both pairs of heels moved to the sinks.

“Nobody’s said a word about love.” Beatrice scrubbed her hands.

“It’s highly uncommon for him to have anyone sleep over,” said Emma. “To the best of my knowledge, twice is unprecedented.”

“You’re *such* a terrible gossip.”

“You forget people have been crawling to me, weeping, like my office is an Amortentia dispensary for half a decade. If I actually cared to gossip, you’d know it. Anyway, that’s very telling.”

“I think he only felt bad about how wasted he was on Saturday night.”

“Did you not use a sobriety potion? Are my awareness campaigns doing absolutely nothing?” Emma sighed and turned off the water. “Then it was an issue of subpar performance, I suppose. Wanted a do-over.”

Beatrice laughed. “Absolutely not the problem. And yes, *Commander Consent*, we both sobered up a bit before anything serious happened. His idea, not mine.”

As Hermione tucked in her shirt, her hands felt very cool and distant, like they belonged to someone else.

“Well. My ears are wide open should you choose to share with the class,” said Emma.

Beatrice shut down the faucet and muttered a drying spell. “Honestly it was sort of”—she paused in thought. “It wasn’t in the least bit rough or inconsiderate, I don’t mean that. But the first time, on Saturday night, it was...really intense.”

“And he wasn’t in a hurry to show you to the door after?”

“No. He was lovely, actually. He ordered in breakfast yesterday. We hung out, reading or whatever. I don’t know. It’s such a huge house, I suppose he must have wanted to have someone around for a bit. I got a decent hug off him this morning, although I think he’d have preferred a handshake.” She laughed again. “Lift ride was awkward as hell, unfortunately.”

“Pillock.”

“No, he was just weirdly formal. I’m twenty-six years old. When a man makes it clear beforehand he’s after a one-off shag, I’m not going home heartbroken when I don’t get a marriage proposal.”

Hermione zipped up her trousers. Her whole body had taken on a quality of separateness, like she was watching its movements from behind and slightly above.

Emma’s purse rattled as she dug through it. “Contents of tin are as labeled. The entire Ministry could use a seminar on this topic. When a person says they don’t do feelings, they’re not throwing down a challenge.”

“Right?” said Beatrice. “I don’t know why so many women think they’re going to be the one to crack the safe. Anyway, it’s a bit pointless when the proverbial jewels have—”

Hermione stepped out of the stall.

She hustled to the sink and washed her hands too quickly in ice cold water, feeling both women’s eyes on her: Emma—petite, cheerful, tube of glossy pink lipstick paused halfway to her mouth, and Beatrice—doe-eyes framed by flawless winged liner, tall, sharp-witted and congenial.

"Morning!" Beatrice sounded bright, cordial, genuine. “That color is fantastic on you.”

“Hello,” said Hermione. “Thanks.”

Hermione shook her hands over the sink. There was a spell for drying, something very simple, that she used every day.

She couldn’t recall it.

“You alright, love?” asked Emma. “You have a nice weekend?”

“Fine. Thank you.”

Eight seconds from the women’s lav to the laboratory door, walking fast, out of body, hands damp.

8:27.

Draco had arrived and sat in his chair, already absorbed in his work.

“Good morning,” said Hermione.

She wiped her hands on her trouser legs as she passed.

The Time Turner, the snuff box, and two vials of age-stabilizing potion sat in the middle of the kitchen table.

If it was the beginning of a joke, Hermione couldn’t possibly anticipate the punchline.

All laid out, the collection was so motley and unassuming it was difficult to believe it had caused as much trouble as it had.

William leaned back in his chair, arms folded, and frowned.

“All this over two objects?”

Sitting at the head of the table, Hermione turned her face away out of embarrassment.

“Two profoundly magical objects.” She sniffed. “We would certainly appreciate your help with them, but you don’t need to stay.”

William jerked his chin towards the snuff box. “Once you’ve worked out what to do with the hedgehog, you’ll be able to leave?”

Hermione glanced at Draco. Lounging in his chair beside William, motionless and stone-faced, he offered no indication he’d heard William refer to his bird as a mammal, nor that he noticed Hermione looking at him. He only stared with detachment at the collection on the table.

“As soon as the snuff box is sorted we’ll be on our way,” said Hermione.

William splayed his hands before himself. “Then I’m here to help.”

“Thank you.” She steepled her fingers on the table. “I believe everyone here has been made aware of my and Draco’s provenance, and has a clear understanding of our actual relationship to our cousin Martin and to one another.”

“I don’t know that I’d use the word ‘clear,’” said William, “but alright.”

Grix fussed around the open oven, prodding the contents of a cast iron Dutch oven with a wooden spoon. He sniffed. Apparently satisfied, he closed the door, hung his oven mitt from its hook, and joined them at the table.

Martin watched him sidelong. The second Grix’s attention was elsewhere, Martin nabbed one of the potion vials and ducked it under the table.

“Draco and I were brought here by a spell attached to this snuff box,” said Hermione, “which has since been either exhausted or removed.”

Grix adjusted his spectacles and peered down his nose at the box. He began to reach for it, then hesitated and looked at Hermione.

“Do you mind?”

“Go right ahead,” she said.

Grix picked up the box, and began methodically examining it.

“Draco and I have, at various points in our journey, lost both our Time Turner and the box. And we’ve been laboring under the notion that once both objects were in our possession and repaired, we could immediately go back to our time of origin.”

Draco gave no sign of acknowledgment.

“We recently retrieved the snuff box,” Hermione continued. “Thanks to Grix and his brother, our Time Turner has been repaired. I would argue it’s now in better condition than it was before it was broken.”

“Then perhaps you should just”—William shooed a hand forward—“go?”

Draco glanced at William, then went back to staring at the table.

“Up until this afternoon, my answer to that would have been an unequivocal yes,” said Hermione. “Cousin Martin, can we see the Time Turner you stole from Fukkink?”

Martin drew the Chinese Time Turner from his wrappers and handed it to Hermione. Then he furtively uncorked the potion he’d grabbed, and sniffed it.

“Now you’re stealing from Professor Fukkink?” asked William. “Merlin, save us from our own descendants.”

“He’s only stolen what Fukkink shouldn’t have had in the first place.” Hermione set the Chinese Time Turner in front of herself. “If I were to properly calibrate and set this, and it didn’t electrocute me to death, it would be capable of sending me through time, but not space. Whereas a Portkey—”

“Sends a person through space, and not time,” said William.

“Exactly.” Hermione patted the table. “Neither Draco nor I have personally made a Portkey, but the underlying charm structure is something we’ve begun working with in our laboratory.”

“I’ve made dozens of Portkeys,” said William.

Neither Hermione nor Draco hid their surprise.

“What?” William laughed ironically. “I’m taking my Doctorate in Charms. You never asked.”

Martin’s eyes closed down to dubious apertures. He sniffed the potion again. Then he poked his finger inside, drew it out, and licked it.

“My brother and I—” said Hermione.

William laughed, then folded his hand over his mouth. “I’m sorry. No, please. Continue.” His lips quivered behind his palm. “It’s only that it now sounds tremendously awkward when you call him that.”

Hermione breathed out hard and looked at the ceiling.

“Draco and I have started experimenting with combined temporal and spatial travel on a very small scale,” she said.

“Doctor who?” Martin slapped the table.

“I’m working a bit with Fukkink, but primarily with Doctor Lockaby,” said William. “He’s brilliant.”

Martin blinked, then held up the vial.

“You intend to consume this?”

“We do,” said Hermione. “We need it to prevent any age-related side effects of time travel.”

“For a second there I thought our cousin was outing himself as a Whovian,” said Draco.

“Is there something wrong with it?” Hermione asked Martin.

Martin tapped the vial’s side.

"Your ratios are off."

Then he pulled his arm back and threw the vial towards the fire.

Hermione could only watch in mute stupefaction as it soared through a shallow, powerless, vaguely hearthward trajectory, remaining aloft for a scant two meters before dropping to the floor. On impact, its cork fell out and rolled limply aside.

The potion formed a dull pink puddle on the rug.

Draco sat up, attentive at last, and pointed at the spreading pool.

"The ratios," he said, "are off!"

Hermione's face scrunched up in apoplexy.

Grix flipped the snuff box latch and gingerly lifted the lid. Deep in thought, he began to probe at the smooth, shiny interior with a finger.

Martin snatched the second vial off the table and chucked it, too.

It landed directly on top of the first, which skittered across the floor and disappeared under an armchair. The second vial popped its cork and spun on its side, dribbling out a ring of potion.

"Ha!" Martin clapped his hands. "Got it in one!"

Hermione's cheeks felt incandescent with wrath as she turned to face Draco.

"The ratios were not off!"

Draco's smugness soared beyond the loftiest heights Hermione had ever dared imagine.

"You should write out the formula and see what our cousin has to say about it," he crowed. "I'll go and find you a serviette."

"That formula"—Hermione pointed at the last five years of her life, seeping into the rug's low wool pile—"was perfect on paper."

Draco barked out a short, hard, legitimate laugh.

"It *wasn't* perfect on paper, but even if it was, since when has being perfect had anything whatsoever to do with real life, Granger? If you hadn't noticed, it's kind of a mess. Speaking of which." He grimaced at the soggy carpet.

"It should have worked! But we'll never know now, will we?"

Martin backed his chair away from the table, and went buzzing towards the back of the house.

"I've got just the thing," he said.

Hermione wanted to hit something.

"What do you know about Doctor Who, anyway, Malfoy?"

Still reeling from the loss of the potion, she said it with a great deal of vitriol, and was at the same time cognizant of how absurd it sounded.

William perked up. “Hold on, you’re a Malfoy?”

“Theo’s a *huge* fan,” said Draco. “*Huge*. Someone left a VHS player at his house a few years back and he and Paul got really into it. Which you’d know if I was allowed to talk in a serious way about *literally* anything that wasn’t directly related to work.”

“But I don’t *want* to know what you do outside of work.”

Hermione’s throat felt unbearably tight.

Draco looked at the wall.

"Can we please bring the discussion back to your hedgehog and whatever it has to do with Portkeys?" asked William.

“Yes,” said Hermione tersely. “By all means.”

She waited a long time for Draco to look at her again.

When he finally did, she aimed a finger at the snuff box.

"It was a *Timekey*,” she said. “Spell passcoded.”

Draco’s expression shifted. It slowly lost its edge of pain, rising by increments from confusion to comprehension.

At length, he said, “*Accio* was the passcode.”

Hermione nodded. “*Accio* was the passcode.”

They held one another’s gaze with great intensity.

It was like that, sometimes, in the laboratory—often, actually—when they achieved a breakthrough. She would feel, as she felt now, that without saying a word, they might pass great, near-cosmic realizations back and forth between themselves, and also the most banal, trivial thoughts.

It’ll come right. She pushed the thought forward across the space separating them. *Grix said so, once. Whatever’s gone wrong between us, it’ll come right.*

At the back of the cottage, past the kitchen, a cluttered workroom housed Martin’s home potions laboratory. The sound of glass clinking against glass and Martin’s self-delighted blather trickled around the corner.

“A Timekey?” said William. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“There isn’t such a thing,” said Hermione. “Or at least there wasn’t. It would be a dangerous, stupid, pointless object.”

“Without stabilizing rings, it would be profoundly volatile.” Draco’s gaze didn’t waver. “And almost certainly reactive with any nearby time instruments.”

“Wildly inaccurate,” she said. “For both temporal and spatial targets.”

Draco’s mouth twitched at the corner.

"It might drop you in a field somewhere."

A sort of manic delight began to bubble up inside Hermione. She felt her face mirror Draco's own tremulous mirth, as though they were a pair of besotted school kids, their estrangement temporarily forgotten.

"You wouldn't even need to touch it," she said. "Without external rings, the time travel charm wouldn't be constrained. If you designed the spells correctly—incorrectly, really—you could make it latch onto whoever cast the passcode spell. It would just sort of—"

"Reach out and grab them. And probably anyone physically connected to them." Draco shook his head. "It's ridiculous. We would never in a million years build something that reckless."

"It would need an internal timekeeping device," said Hermione. "That's essential. And the one part I don't understand."

"This is all deeply fascinating, but what kind of idiot would make something like that?" asked William. "Am I understanding correctly that you're talking about a shoddy, potentially lethal, time traveling Portkey?"

Grix drew a small folding knife from his trouser pocket, and slipped its tip along the interior edge of the snuff box. He made numerous careful passes, then finally dug down and twisted, revealing an almost invisible seam. Slowly, he prised the snuff box's floor upwards. It came out as a concave metal oval, like a dish, which he set on the table.

For half a minute, he looked into the bottom of the snuff box. Then he set it down, reached inside, and withdrew a crackling strip of discolored paper, folded in half.

From where she stood, Hermione could see what looked like the inner workings of a watch mounted to the snuff box's true floor.

Grix held the paper away from himself and read it. Then he glanced at William, and read it again. He frowned, and passed the paper across the table.

Face clouded with concern, William read it. Then he flipped it over and stared at the blank back side. Then he turned it over and read it again.

He folded it in half, and handed the paper to Draco. Once Draco had finished, he gave it to Hermione.

She unfolded it, puckered with water damage, brown and brittle.

In a small, articulate hand, it read:

Timekey

Completed this Day, July the 10th in the Year 1804

Twiggybroke Cottage, Wiltshire, England

By Messrs. William C. Avery and Draco L. Malfoy

Note to self: Add a line for heat reduction between the second and third stanzas of the final incantation, or they'll cook. -W.C.A.

Crockery clattered in the back room, followed by a delicate shattering, then a triumphant shout.

“Ah ha!”

Martin hovered around the corner holding up a tiny, spherical vial half-filled with mustard-brown liquid.

“The good news is, I have the one you want,” he said. “Bad news is there’s not enough for you both. Four, five days to brew and we’ll set you right up.”

He drew up beside Grix, round eyes glinting, and pointed at the snuff box.

“Time to curse the ladybird, I see!”

He patted Grix’s arm with a great deal of affection and looked around the table at everyone.

Nobody said a word.

“Mm!” Still gently bapping Grix’s arm, Martin sniffed the air. “Is our stew ready yet, my friend? Smells delightful.”

Correlation is not causation, and the party wasn’t responsible for the hangover.

A question not-entirely-sober Hermione couldn’t stop herself from asking was: if you stumble bleary-eyed through the Floo at 12:17 a.m., is it early Sunday morning, or late Saturday night?

One was right, but felt a bit wrong. The other was wrong, but felt utterly right.

Which matters more: intent or impact?

Which direction does the honest lie flow?

Feeling oppressed by too much liquor, and the fact that her own semantic fixations could follow her even unto a drunken hour, Hermione had solved the problem by lobbing her absurd dress over the clock beside her bed.

Crookshanks loafed legless on the duvet, eyes two judgmental fissures tracking her sloppy movements: turning off the lamp beside the door, kicking her shoes into the closet, chucking her ridiculous, pointless knickers into the hamper. For a full twenty minutes, she let a too-hot shower swirl the smell of booze she hadn’t enjoyed and cigarettes she hadn’t smoked down the drain.

Wrapped in one of the lofty grey towels she’d treated herself to at Marks & Sparks the previous week, she rubbed the side of her fist across the fogged bathroom mirror and revealed a surrealist portrait: swollen, red-rimmed eyes, silver glitter eyeshadow, black eyeliner and black mascara flowing down her cheeks, her mouth a raw, berry-pink blur, everything streaked and melted like she’d been left too long in the sun.

She scrubbed her skin with a washcloth until it flamed tender and red.

At 5:30 a.m. Sunday morning she woke, not at all hung-over and eyelids aching anyway.

The beautiful thing about being a single person living on her own was having to answer to no one.

If she felt like walking to the bakery at six o'clock in the morning looking like she'd been crying for two days straight, purchasing a coffee and two croissants and eating them both herself, it was between her and her gods.

If she wished to spend the remainder of her Sunday wrapped up in an enormous pink fleece blanket watching *The West Wing* DVDs, eating cherry pie, and drinking so much chamomile-mint tea she nearly peed her pajama shorts on two separate occasions, only the cat could possibly have cared.

And if she was hungover when the alarm went off at 5:30 on Monday morning, not a soul needed to be informed that it was because, while she sat on her floor sifting through photographs and placing the ones with her and Ron together in a manila envelope, she'd gone swimming in a dry Cabernet.

For the first time in her career, she considered owling in sick.

But what she put off today would be waiting for her tomorrow, smirking with satisfaction into its brown vintage coffee cup.

She tugged on practical black trousers with a bit of stretch, the sea green cotton lawn blouse she'd found at M&S, and her timeless black ballet flats.

Less than a single scoop of coffee beans rattled around the canister in her kitchen.

She Floored into the Atrium at 7:46—hatching a headache, under-caFFEinated, palms sweating with anxiety, possibly starting to dissociate—still desperate for a cup.

“Can’t make myself a respectable pair of knickers,” Hermione muttered, “but all the accoutrements for coffee, no problem.”

She fitted one of the filters she'd Transfigured from a parchment square into the pour-over coffee maker she'd made from a ceramic cup, and dumped in two scoops of grounds.

“*The ratios are off.*” She kept her exaggeratedly low, sarcastic grumbling well beneath anyone else's hearing. “If anything's off it's you, so-called Draco Malfoy with your silly spectacles, and not my bloody ratios.”

The grandfather clock bonged seven as the sun slouched behind the western ridge.

William and Draco sat straight-backed, side by side at the kitchen table beneath two bright candelabra. Both men were still stripped down to their waistcoats, shirts unbuttoned past their collarbones like laborers soaking up pints at the end of a long day. Heads bent together, they'd filled growing parchment stacks with copious notes.

Poised atop a tower of books in the table's center, the snuff box ruled over both men and a half dozen open texts.

“We'll want the Agosti-Barabash equilibration”—Draco lay down his quill, slid a book towards

William and tapped his finger on a passage—"instead of the Morgan."

"Why?" William tucked his quill behind his ear and picked up the book. "Morgan was specifically developed as a response to Agosti-Barabash's inefficiency."

Shortly after dinner, without saying anything to Hermione, Draco had left the room and returned a few minutes later wearing Transfigured spectacles exactly like the ones he kept in his drawer at work.

A bone-deep exhaustion radiated off him.

He removed his glasses, buffed a lens with his shirt, then put them back on.

"Yes. And Morgan is preferable in virtually every circumstance," said Draco, "but it's too good. Far too tight. When we engineered our Time Turners, Hermione figured out that the four extraneous anchoring knots in Agosti-Barabash provide a perfect neutral space to nest in amplifiers."

"So you have enough power going into the temporal disruption," William concluded.

"Exactly."

William scrawled a note. "How much amplification?"

Grix had placed a small table between the hearthside chairs. There, he and Hermione had disassembled the snuff box's inner watch parts and laid them out in neat ranks. They'd spent the following hours examining each piece carefully with magical diagnostics and magnifying glasses, inspecting each gear and coil, repairing the parts that the spell's chaotic discharge had damaged, and buffing intact components with a soft cloth.

"In a Time Turner," said Draco, "we need a gain of four hundred twenty-five. I assume the same holds true here."

William scoffed.

"And the shrew is just going to shoot all that magical energy straight into your body?"

"Yes," said Draco. "Straight into me, straight into my partner, straight into every piece of equipment in my laboratory."

"*Your* laboratory," Hermione groused to the coffee cup.

"God." William lay his hands over his face. "This is the most asinine bit of magic I've ever done, and I was research lead for the Rapsallions."

"What are the Rapsallions?" Draco asked.

"Ravenclaw's high-brow pranks club." Hermione had found a packet of sugar lumps at the back of a cupboard. She dropped four into the cup, stirred, then topped it off with a long pour of cream.

"They were around, but fully eclipsed by the Weasley twins in our day."

"It's extremely stupid magic, and yet, I'm doing it." William picked up the note they'd pulled from the snuff box's secret compartment, glared at it, then tossed it back on the table. "And I'm doing it because apparently I've already done it. Does free will exist, or not?"

Hermione set the mug in front of Draco.

He wrapped both hands around it. "Thank you very much."

"I'm going to go and test the Time Turner," she said.

As she headed towards the door, a chair scraped against the floorboards.

"Hermione, wait."

She was outside and halfway down the front ramp before Draco caught her elbow.

She didn't realize she fully expected him to pull her into his arms until she turned around, and he took a step back instead.

The air had cooled. Hermione wrapped her arms around her middle.

"What?" she asked.

"You shouldn't do this on your own," he said. "If you'll wait a minute, I'll run the tests with you. In case there's an issue."

"It'll be fine." Hermione looped the Time Turner's chain over her head.

"Hermione—"

She held the Turner up between them. "You forget I once nearly gave myself a nervous breakdown using one of these on a daily basis in school."

He frowned. "That's less comforting than I think you intended it to be."

"It's Grix's work. I wouldn't hesitate to jump out of an airplane if I knew he'd been the one to pack the parachutes."

Draco untensed by a degree. "Fair enough."

"I'm just going to pop round the corner and do a five minute jump. You can have a go after me, if you'd like."

Before Draco could respond, Hermione turned on her heel.

A plane tree grew at the corner of the cottage, its black limbs arcing over the roofline. Hermione ducked around it out of sight.

She pressed her back to its trunk and took a fortifying breath.

Manually turning the hourglass for jumps longer or shorter than an even hour was inaccurate and inefficient. She unscrewed the newly threaded crown, pulled it outward, then muttered the spell she and Draco had developed to specify a desired jump length.

On its own, the hourglass rotated minutely, then stopped.

When she pushed the crown back in, the hourglass spun. The air around her subtly twisted and shimmered before settling again.

Voices drifted through the cottage's open front windows.

"It's extremely stupid magic, and yet, I'm doing it." It was William, exasperated. "And I'm doing it

because apparently I've already done it."

Hermione had always found accounts of time travel other than her own highly suspect. Even as a child, she'd been secretly skeptical of the dire warnings she'd been given about traveling further back than a few hours.

If it was ever possible for a time traveler to alter events in the past, why should it make any difference whether she jaunted back to murder someone's great-uncle three hours ago or traveled back two years and did it then?

Everything she'd witnessed on her own and with Harry at school suggested that time formed stable loops.

But despite her resume, Draco was the more sanguine on this account. Early in their shared working lives, she'd related her experiences to him in full. He was immediately convinced that one was free to travel back in time and murder as many people as they could manage, and it would have no impact whatsoever on the timeline. In all likelihood, unless the person had, in fact, been murdered already, something would crop up and prevent the killing altogether.

In Draco's view, time was perfectly capable of defending its own integrity, and didn't need Albus bloody Dumbledore or anyone else sticking their long, manipulative noses in its business.

Hermione, in the face of contradictory narratives and the limited extent of her own data, wasn't so sure.

Inside the cottage, she heard Draco say, "Thank you very much."

Then, herself announcing, "I'm going to go and test the Time Turner."

Footfalls, and then chair legs dragging across the floor.

"Hermione, wait."

The cottage's front door whined on its hinges, and footfalls sounded on the ramp.

Hermione needed to travel forward by five minutes, right then, to avoid any risk of being seen by herself. She drew the crown out, began her incantation, then halted.

"What?" she heard herself ask.

"You shouldn't do this on your own," said Draco. "If you'll wait a minute, I'll run the tests with you. In case there's an issue."

"It'll be fine."

Hermione listened to her own footsteps fast approaching.

Draco called out, "Hermione—"

As she muttered the rest of the incantation at the Turner, she heard her boots shushing quietly through the grass.

She pushed the crown back in, and the world turned.

Peering around the corner, she was relieved to not see herself approaching.

Draco leaned against the cottage ramp, hands in his pockets, staring gravely at the plane tree.

She wanted to make another jump for good measure. Fifteen minutes would do, really: back that far to avoid herself at five minutes, then hop forward again to just past now. She pressed her back to the tree, pinched the crown between her fingers and considered.

Fifteen minutes wasn't all that much. They'd worked up to quite a bit more than that in the laboratory. The storage closet had become like a second home.

She might as well do an hour. But they'd need to jump two hundred years in a day or so. Maybe two hours right now would provide further reassurance about the Turner's robustness. Four? Ten?

She split the difference, and directed the hourglass to set itself for a five-hour jump.

She re-engaged the crown, and the air around her altered appreciably, as though the surrounding molecules swarmed and jittered in their haste to have nothing to do with time as it twisted and bent.

When the scene around her settled again, the sun hung only a few degrees west of its apex.

A combustive spellfire stink saturated the air around the cottage.

"No vegetables!" Hermione heard herself shout.

A blue jet of magic hit the canopy overhead, showering Hermione with a green confetti of shredded leaves.

"Oh, shit," she said.

One full day prior ought to do nicely.

A pull of the button, a quick incantation, and the Time Turner rotated twenty-four times.

She pressed the crown in again, and the Turner began rapidly whirring.

Hours fled by, the air growing lighter, paler, darker, then lighter again.

It stopped.

One day to the hour before the duel, the sun was in the same place overhead.

Soft scratching drew Hermione's attention to the plane tree's branches. A bright-eyed crow stood directly above, peering down on her with interest.

"Oh, hello. I haven't got any strawberries, I'm afraid," Hermione said quietly.

It opened its black beak and rasped its reproach.

Voices carried from the cottage.

"Oh! No, Mr. Martin, please do watch Mr. Grix's crocks! He'll be frightfully sore with the both of us if you have them on the floor!"

Hermione risked a peek around the corner.

Translucent white curtains puffed outward like sails at the open front windows. Past them, two figures moved inside.

“Next, you move up! Sprightly and quick!”

The light differential between the cottage’s interior and the brilliant afternoon reduced Martin to an outline. His seated profile zipped from the kitchen to the dining room, passing near the window closest to Hermione.

He jolted to a stop, then swirled in a frantic circle before swinging backwards on a collision course with the small shape of Margaret McClure.

“You’re going to have all your lovely fruit on the floor!” said Margaret.

As Martin shot forward again, Margaret reached over his shoulder and snatched a bowl from his lap.

“Then sidelong, mincingly! *Ciseaux! Ciseaux!*” Martin cried.

His chair moved sideways, sending Margaret leaping out of his way. He whirled through a 540 degree turn, tossed one arm straight overhead, and his chair tipped backwards.

Hermione hadn’t been aware he could do that.

“Come now, Mr. Martin.” Margaret rushed around behind him, hurriedly setting the bowl on the windowsill. She caught his chair handles, and bent over almost double to push it upright again. “Come sit and have a bit of port, Mr. Martin, then we can read your letters.”

Just then, Hermione heard her own voice overhead.

“We’re going to have to separate at some point, you know.”

She sounded irritable and a bit breathless.

The crow hopped down two branches, eye angled at the bowl on the windowsill.

“We can’t go on clinging to one another in perpetuity,” Hermione heard herself say, voice attenuated on the other side of Draco’s bedroom window.

Down in the garden, she glanced at the Time Turner, and then up at the roof.

Curiosity rushed over the high tideline of her good sense like a sneaker wave.

Hermione could admit, from the safety of her hiding place behind the trunk of a convenient tree, that both the Novikov self-consistency principle and the Draco Malfoy murder conjecture were probably correct.

At the very least, she was at low to no risk of confronting herself with the Time Turner in hand.

What could it possibly hurt?

“It wasn’t instantaneous before,” she heard herself say. “We had some warning.”

At the base of the tree, Hermione dropped the Time Turner down her bodice and cast a Disillusionment charm over herself. It was no Cloak of Invisibility, but unless someone went looking for her specifically, it would do. She circled around the tree to the lowest branch, jumped four times before finally hooking her hands over it, then walked her feet up the trunk.

From there, it was a short, easy climb to a heavy limb growing right past Draco’s bedroom

window.

She flattened herself belly-down on the branch, and scooted forward until she and Draco came into view, standing in his bedroom doorway.

Her back was to the window, and Draco faced her, hands clutching her hips.

More like her arse.

“Where’s it going to sleep tonight?” Draco asked, looking down between them.

“In my bedroom,” Hermione answered.

“Then I’m sleeping in your bed.”

Hermione didn’t recall having angled her body against his in that way, but there she went, doing it.

“Fine,” her previous self said.

“Good,” said Draco.

Indoor-Hermione rotated out of Draco’s grip and threw herself down on his bed like an exasperated teenager.

The crow flapped up to join her on the branch, eyes blinking and twitching thoughtfully. It twisted its head to stare at her, then it looked meaningfully downward, like a dog trying to draw her attention to the treats jar.

Hermione glanced at the bowl in the window below.

It was full of strawberries.

“I’m certainly not going to be able to stop you,” she whispered to the crow. “If you’re expecting me to act as produce police, I’m sorry to disappoint.”

Draco moved to the corner of his bedroom, facing away from Hermione-on-the-bed and leaving Hermione-in-the-tree with a three-quarter rear view.

Without glancing back over his shoulder to make sure her past self wasn’t looking, he eased his boxer shorts down his hips.

Hermione gasped.

He paused, still entirely nude, and looked out the window. He focused on the branch just ahead of where she lay motionless, hardly breathing. After a beat, he reached for his trousers, folded over the back of a chair in the corner.

She hadn’t meant to look, but once she’d started, she couldn’t make herself stop.

She’d already learned that his torso was exquisite: flawless skin, narrow waist, the musculature of his chest, back, belly, and shoulders beautifully articulated.

His strong, rangey legs were not news.

But apparently his bum was glorious.

Without seeming to be in a hurry, he hunched to pull on his trousers.

Hermione lamented her voyeurism, but even more so the fact that Draco had an arse like a marble Hercules, and she was never going to be able to forget it.

“Do you think we’ve been affected?” Hermione asked from the bed. “By the time travel, I mean.”

“In what sense?”

Draco yanked his trousers over his hips, buttoned the fall, then grabbed his shirt.

Hermione went on yammering at him, fiddling with the snuff box.

He drew his shirt over his head, then peered over his shoulder at her.

As soon as he saw her tapping the snuff box with her wand, he darted across the room, shirt mostly untucked and halfway unbuttoned, and grabbed Hermione’s ankle.

From her station outside, she watched them argue. She wriggled around on the bed like a hooked fish, pumping her leg trying to yank it out of his grip. He pinned her with a stormy glare, his arm tensed as he held onto her.

“Now *let go of me*, ” she demanded.

“You just about gave me a bloody heart attack.”

She looked so childish, petulant and wild lying on her back, that Hermione, clutching her arms and legs around the tree, thought perhaps she’d seen enough, and began sliding backwards along the branch.

“We cannot spend night after night huddled together in our pants,” Hermione said in the bedroom.

“You haven’t got any pants.”

The crow cawed. Hermione froze, then laid her finger over her lips and scowled at it.

The crow blinked, then sounded off again.

“How many pteranodons do you think you can take on by yourself?” Draco asked.

“Do I have my wand?”

Hermione winced at how extraordinarily pettish she sounded.

“What?” Draco asked.

“If I have my wand”—Hermione glowered at him from below—“twelve. At least.”

Draco grabbed her calves and yanked her across the bed, friction forcing her skirts up her thighs.

Outside, she remained stalled in the tree mid-creep. Beside the unruly crow, she watched Draco and herself discover her parted legs, skin exposed above white stockings tied with ribbons.

Then, cheeks flushed and knees bracketing Draco’s hips, she whined.

“You’ve messed up my hair.”

In Hermione’s memory, Draco had simply bent over and started kissing her.

He did crash downward. That part was unambiguous. But as he did, she observed herself lift up—breasts burgeoning at her neckline—grasp the back of his neck, and pull his mouth to hers.

Hermione looked at the crow in disbelief, then back through the window.

Eyes half-lidded, she and Draco moaned audibly into one another's mouths.

His hands threaded in Hermione's hair, thumbs stroking across her temples and into her curls.

And she was—

She burned with embarrassment as she watched herself clutch Draco's waist between her thighs and press her stockinged feet into his lower back.

The effort he was making to not simply rut into her was visible. His forearms tensed as he held himself off her while her hands roved over his back, his sides, into his hair.

All her sighs sounded an awful lot like pleading. Draco answered every begging breath in kind.

It went on, and on, and *on*.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the crow, and pointed at the strawberries.

"You're on in a moment," she mouthed.

The crow took an inquisitive skip closer.

"Don't look at me like that," she whispered. "Go and get your missile."

"Please."

Her gaze shot back to the scene on the bed.

There was absolutely no way she'd said what she just heard herself say. She had no recollection whatsoever of having done such a thing.

She'd pushed him away without a word, hadn't she?

But horrified, she watched Draco pry himself off her and hold himself at arm's-length. They were both breathless, their mouths half open, lips red and gleaming wet.

Hermione flattened her hands against his chest. Then her fingers curled in his shirt, and clearly, indisputably, she *pulled*.

From the cool removal of her vantage point, she could see how ravaged he looked: chest half-bared, cheeks ruddy, hair mussed, brows drawn together in obvious confusion.

It was time. But the crow just stood there, berry-less and dumb.

"Hurry up!" she shouted softly. "Or he's going to fuck me!"

On the bed, Hermione's back arched, her breasts heaved, and her hips churned with the unmistakable restless discomfort of desire.

Her legs tensed, drawing him in.

And then she *whimpered*.

Draco sucked in a sharp breath.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Hermione pulled her wand from her pocket. *“Accio strawberry!”*

A glossy deep red berry flew from the bowl below. Hermione sat up, thighs gripping the branch, and caught the strawberry in her fist. She muttered an accuracy charm she’d learned Second Year, and chucked the berry as hard as she could through the open window.

Swiftly, she flattened herself against the branch.

“What the fuck?” Draco cried.

Searing with humiliation and self-reproach, Hermione worked to keep her skirts tucked between her legs while scuttling backwards as fast as possible along the limb. Branch by branch, she dropped down, until at last she was bent on her stomach over the lowest.

As she dropped, a strong arm caught her around the waist. She squeaked, and a cool, pale hand covered her mouth.

“Shh! They’ll hear you.” Draco set her down and released her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Hermione whirled around. She took in his partially unbuttoned shirt, his spectacles, and the Time Turner in his hand, then grabbed the front of his waistcoat and yanked him behind the tree.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered.

Draco held up the Turner. “I used your last time stamp. You said five minutes. For some reason I believed you.”

She looked furtively at the thick branch in front of Draco’s window.

“Did you—” Of course he’d seen her.

Draco tilted his head to the side. “A crow that throws things, Granger?”

Hermione lifted her chin. “I couldn’t have known at the time, could I?”

Draco watched her draw the Time Turner from her cleavage. She unscrewed the crown, pulled it, and quickly muttered the incantation to set a forward jump: one day, five hours and five minutes.

She pressed the crown inward. Draco blinked out of view, and everything distorted: the cottage, the tree and garden, the day progressing through afternoon, evening, twilight, dark, dawn, morning, and afternoon again.

He was waiting for her on the ramp when she emerged from behind the tree.

“Here.” She balled the Time Turner in her fist and drew the chain over her head. As she passed him on the way up the ramp, she let the Turner fall from her hand, dangling from the chain. “Your turn.”

He took it from her with an inquiring look, but she kept walking.

Without saying a word, she went straight past Grix and William in the sitting room, down the hall, up the stairs and into her room, where she curled up in the middle of her bed and drew her knees to her chest.

She pressed her face into her coverlet and breathed.

Her bed clothes smelled like him. Of course they would.

Five minutes later, someone knocked on her open door.

“Granger, I—” said Draco. “Hermione.”

She buried her face in her skirts and gripped her shins to still her shoulders’ convulsions.

“Ever since that moment, just before the ball, it’s seemed like—” He paused. “But I can see that I’ve totally misread the situation. I sincerely apologize.”

Minutes ago, she’d witnessed firsthand how astute a reader he was.

She’d been nakedly desperate for him. She saw that now.

Shamelessly, repeatedly—at the slightest provocation—she’d flung herself at him.

Followed him around the ball like a lost puppy. Begged to sleep in his bed, even knowing how much he disliked it.

Kissed. Clutched. Touched. Bit. Licked. Stroked.

Pleaded.

There was no difference between her and the most transparent woman crowding their laboratory door in a tight blouse and fresh lipstick.

Mortification throbbed inside her from toes to crown.

It was only sex. Draco may not have known she was free to have it with whoever she liked, but she was. Everyone else around her seemed perfectly capable of doing it on a casual basis without losing their minds. Yet all it took was a week and a half of black tailcoats and shining knee-high boots for her to make a total fool of herself.

She spent a long time swallowing back the feeling of thickness crowding her throat until she felt she could speak.

“I’m the one who needs to apologize,” she said. “I’ve been sending very mixed signals.” Only they weren’t mixed in the least, she thought. “I haven’t been thinking.”

“Hermione, I’m—” The floorboards creaked as he shifted his weight. “I was going to wait to tell you until after we’d made it back, but now seems like as good a time as any.”

Hermione squeezed the fabric of her skirts so tight her knuckles went white.

“I’m going to France,” he said. “At the end of next month. So you don’t need to worry about any of this continuing once we get back.”

Outside her open window, the light was falling towards dusk.

Downstairs, Grix and William talked, though their words were unclear.

“On a trip?” Hermione asked.

“No. I’ve accepted a one-year appointment as Potions professor at Beauxbatons. I’ll be coaching Quidditch as well.”

Hermione sat up and twisted towards him.

He’d been leaning in her door frame, hands in his pockets, glasses still on, waistcoat slightly rumpled where she’d grabbed it.

He looked impossibly tired.

But as worn down as he seemed to be, she thought that, in all the years she’d spent not hating him, he’d never looked more real to her.

He was beautiful.

When he saw her face, his eyes grew wide. He started forward, drawing his hands from his pockets. Then he shifted back and folded his arms over his chest.

Hermione wiped her cheeks with the back of her wrist.

She felt numb, thin, buoyant, and apart, like her body was falling away from her and leaving her spirit anchorless and adrift.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“It means I’m going to live and work in France next year. But I hope to come back.”

“When did you make this decision?”

“Last month. I’ve been informally offered the position several times, but I owed to tell them I’d accept it the first week of June. I completed the paperwork almost two weeks ago.”

She couldn’t breathe.

“But, our *work*,” she said. “Our *life*, our—”

“Please don’t insinuate that we have anything like a life together.”

“Don’t you dare stand there with a straight face and tell me that what you and I have behind that office door is a *job*.”

Draco frowned.

“How am I meant to get on without you?” she asked.

When her voice cracked, Draco laid an unsteady hand across his mouth.

A long stretch of silence passed.

“You could hire an intern,” he said at last. “I know a tremendous number of people would drop everything for a chance to work with you. I spoke with Shackbolt the day before we had our accident. He can help you find someone appropriate.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Hermione couldn’t understand why all he did was shake his head.

“We have goals,” she said. “*Aspirations* that we’ve shared since—”

“You don’t need me, specifically, for your plans.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then you can make new ones. That’s not impossible, is it? And if I come back—”

If.

Hermione clapped both hands over her mouth.

Draco took one step into the room, then stopped.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“*Why?*”

“I think”—he stared out her window—“that when a person keeps doing the same thing for long enough, year in and year out, knowing that nothing is ever going to change—”

“Our work changes all the time. Look!” She threw her hands to the sides, gesturing at the room around them. “How is this not different? How is it not new? I know that you crave novelty—”

“Do I?”

“What could possibly be more novel than what’s happened to us in the last week and a half?”

“It’s a set change, Hermione. Same stage. Same actors.” He rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses. “Same script.”

“You can’t do this,” she said.

He fixed his gaze on the floor.

“I have to.”

“You have to go all the way to France just to make a *change*?”

“It appears I do.” The corner of his mouth quivered. “Who knows. Maybe I’ll make my mother happy and finally meet someone.”

Hermione swung her legs over the side of the bed. “I suppose the fun has to end eventually if you want that heir. Probably loads of lovely Pureblood women abroad.”

He scoffed.

“Merlin, would you listen to yourself? How many times did I apologize to you before you asked me to stop doing it? And how many times did I do it after that?”

Hermione looked down at her hands, thumbnail digging into the thin skin between her opposite thumb and index finger.

“It’s been years,” he said. “My father’s been in prison for more than half a decade. I write him one letter a year, on his birthday, and am grateful he never answers it. My mother thinks I can do no wrong, and only cares whether I’m happy. No one our age—no one I ever talk to anyway—”

believes that shit anymore.”

Hermione stood up, swiping her cheeks hard with her palms, and marched towards the door.

As she passed him, he hooked an arm around her middle.

“Hermione.”

“I’m sorry that what we do bores you.” She brushed the endlessly renewing damp from her cheeks.

“That *I* bore you.”

She felt bitter inside as dandelion sap.

Even so, she allowed him to take her waist in his hands and turn her towards himself. She made no protest as he pulled her body hard against his. When he pushed a hand into her hair, she only sighed.

He spoke low at her ear.

“You do not bore me.”

“You’re the worst.” It was nothing more than a half-choked whisper.

“I know.”

“Of all people, why did *you* have to be the worst?”

“I don’t know.” He pressed his nose to her neck and breathed in deep. “Of all the times for you to smell like roses, why did it have to be now?”

As Ginny Weasley ducked under the mantel, Hermione read the clock beside the bed, visible from her blanket nest on the sofa.

9:47 p.m.

“I see you’ve been informed.” Standing by the hearth, arms folded, Ginny indicated the plate perched on Hermione’s knees. “What kind?”

Hermione dragged the tines of her fork through a red puddle. “Cherry.”

“You alright?” Ginny asked.

“I’ve moved well past bargaining and am firmly ensconced in depression.” Hermione licked the gleaming filling off the fork. “Hence the pie.” She took in Ginny’s black wrap dress and strappy heels. “Where did you just come from? You smell like cigarettes and shandy.”

“Do I?” Ginny sniffed her own shoulder, then wandered into the kitchen, leaned against the counter, and prodded the pie server’s tip around the dish. “Did he owl you?”

Hermione threw the blanket off her legs, stood from the sofa, and arched her back, lifting the empty plate and fork overhead as she stretched. “No. We had breakfast this morning. They’ve only

just started seeing each other, but he didn't want me to hear about it from someone else."

"Did you cry in front of him?"

"No. I waited until I got home."

"Good call. The two of you are being shockingly decent about all this."

"It's him that's being decent."

"Peter Pan's become a real boy."

"That's not—" Hermione let it go.

Ginny fished a cherry from the pie dish and popped it in her mouth. "I suppose an amicable break-up is a pretty decent payoff for all that couples counseling. You're going to start telling people you've split up, right?"

Padding through the kitchen towards the sink, Hermione shuddered.

"God, no. *The Prophet's* going to be all over it. I'm no more keen than he is to deal with all that. And it's still early days for them. They deserve some privacy while they can still get it."

"Hm. And when do you think you might next *deserve some privacy?*" Ginny licked her fingers as she headed towards Hermione's closet.

"I bought new towels last week," said Hermione. "My every possible desire has been fulfilled. Do you need to borrow something?"

Ginny hauled open the doors and scanned the rack. She shoved aside the long row of work blouses, flipped through a handful of dresses, then pulled one out and tossed it over Hermione's bed.

"No," said Ginny. "I'm bringing you back with me."

"It's already past my bedtime. I have never once worn that dress outside of my flat, you know. It's so tight you can see my belly button."

"Take care with the knickers, then. Got it."

Ginny opened Hermione's lingerie drawer, pushed aside the cotton pants, and dug around at the back until she found a strappy scrap of black lace that had the audacity to call itself knickers. She glanced at the dress—silver lamé with spaghetti straps and a low cowl neck—then regarded Hermione's breasts under the white men's undershirt she'd been wearing while she ate pie.

"No need for a bra."

Hermione bristled. "Where exactly do you think you're taking me?"

Ginny seemed to think she could take Hermione to Theo Nott's birthday party.

Nothing about Blackshoals—the ancient, sea-scraped Nott family seat, perched atop a windward cliff on a lonely island off Dorset's Atlantic coast—should have been warm. But when Hermione tripped through the Floo behind Ginny's firm handhold, the entry was boiling with body heat.

Hermione wasn't so closed off to the goings on around her that she didn't know Theo lived in a flat south of the Thames in Dulwich.

He famously visited Blackshoals exactly once per year on or around his birthday, dropping every ward for an open-invitation, no-holds-barred bacchanal. It was common knowledge that it had been conceived and was now perpetuated as a someone's-puked-in-the-pool, hurry-up-and-finish-fucking-I-need-the-bathroom, nevermind-I'll-piss-in-the-potted-ficus, oh-look-Seamus-built-a-bonfire-in-the-topiary-garden *fuck you* to his cold, demanding, bigot of a father.

Theo not being an especially social animal, Hermione suspected his secret hope was that one year, the mob would burn it all down.

Hermione yanked her hand from Ginny's.

"I can't be here." She had to shout over the ticking backbeat and thick, loose rocksteady bass line blaring from somewhere deep in the house.

And she couldn't be there—not if she was going to walk around trussed up in lace bits, tottering on her single pair of *fuck me* heels, baring her naked thighs, breasts au naturel and eyelashes flaring under three coats of mascara.

Ginny backtracked to wrap her arms around Hermione's middle and rest her cheek on her shoulder. "You're hot fire, Hermione. If you weren't the sister of my heart and I didn't have the Chosen Cock waiting impatiently in my bed, you'd be in for a wily seduction."

"It's not *your* wiles I'm concerned about," Hermione muttered.

Arm around her waist, Ginny guided Hermione through a warren of packed rooms, dark-paneled walls and rugs the color of deep seawater lit by a low, nebulous, incandescent glow.

On the far side of a high-ceilinged ballroom, Lavender Brown looped her arm around Dean Thomas's shoulders as he queued up another record at a DJ station flanked by large black speakers. When she lifted on her toes and whispered in his ear, he laughed, then swigged from a beer bottle.

Desmond Dekker lamented his *Isrealites* over the loudspeakers. Ginny turned and wrapped her arms around Hermione's waist, then danced them in a sinuous path across the parquet floor, thronged with bodies sweating vodka fumes under a thin haze of tobacco and something stickier.

What was probably once a sitting room lay beyond, now converted into an ersatz speakeasy. It was dim and plush, velvet sofas ranged around the curtain-lined perimeter. A back-lit liquor display climbed to the ceiling behind an antique wooden bar spanning the rear wall.

In button-up shirts with no ties, Theo and Blaise played barkeeps.

"Go and get a drink." Ginny shepherded Hermione halfway across the room, then laid a hand between her shoulder blades and pushed her forward. "When I left to fetch you, Luna was showing Cormac McLaggen all the spells she can do using just her tongue. I should probably check up."

Hermione threaded herself sideways between two broad, slightly damp backs, drew her spine tall, and tossed her hair behind her. Laying her palms on the bar, she considered the wisdom of letting either Theodore Nott or Blaise Zabini mix her a drink.

"What the *fuck*?"

Hermione jumped.

She hadn't seen Pansy Parkinson standing beside Theo, but there she was, with her perfect French bob and flawless red lips, one hand tucked in the pocket of her short, twee black dress, wearing dizzying silver heels and an unvarnished expression of alarm.

"Why are *you* here?" Pansy slammed her lowball glass on the counter behind her, ice clattering around her drink.

Hermione thought Pansy must have been speaking to someone else, and searched along the bar for the culprit.

But then Blaise, upending a shaker, and Theo, occupied with a coil of lemon zest, looked up.

"Oh, shit," said Blaise.

For a glancing second, Theo looked stricken, but then recovered.

"You are so *fucking* rude, Pans," he said. "Very bad form."

Pansy's stare was inexplicably hard.

"Let's try that again, shall we? Welcome to Blackshoals," said Theo. "You look like you're made out of"—he circled his open hand in the air—"sex."

Hermione's cheeks heated.

"Please feel free to sit your swotty Muggleborn arse in every one of my father's dearest antique chairs, all the better to make my ancestors spin in their graves like racist chickens on a spit." Theo made a faulty sign of the cross, then, for no discernable purpose, kissed the end of his thumb.

"Can we get you a drink, Granger?" Blaise strained a pink cocktail into a glass, garnished it with a lime curl, and passed it to a woman waiting at the bar. "What do you like? Champagne cosmo? Bellini? Harvey Wallbanger?" The corner of his mouth twitched. "You really do look like unadulterated sex, by the way. Utterly *mad* dress."

"I suppose I'll have a G&T. Thank you."

To save time during the ten minutes Hermione had taken to put on make-up, Ginny sorted her hair, coaxing it to behave while it was down.

It was soft against her bare back and pleasingly shiny.

She drew the entire mass of it forward and covertly attempted to fan it out across her cleavage.

"Is Malfoy here, by any chance?" She shifted her weight to the balls of her feet, swiveled her heels inward, then back out, watching her fingers tap an offbeat on the bar.

When she glanced at Theo, she found his eyes minutely narrowed.

"He *is*." Blaise spoke slowly. "Only, he's a bit—"

"He's obliterated," said Theo.

Blaise nodded. "Yeah. That just about covers it."

"Should've taken a page from our Pans and stuck with what I believe"—Theo peered sidelong at Pansy's glass on the counter—"is ginger ale."

Pansy looked up from her watch, then pushed away from the counter.

"*Fuck* you, Theo."

Theo shrugged. "It *is* my birthday. But I suspect someone out there, whose night shift schedule you're definitely not minding with that watch of yours, would take issue."

Pansy seemed to not know who deserved her ire the most. In the end, she settled it on Hermione.

"Leave...Draco... *alone* tonight."

Having ground that out, she squared her shoulders and walked off, letting the bar flap drop behind her with a bang.

Theo and Blaise watched her go, then Theo turned to Blaise.

"See what I'm saying?" He gestured at the bar flap. "That's really fucking cranky, even for her."

Blaise pulled a bottle of gin from the liquor shelves overhead.

"Pans tells us congratulations are in order." He scooped ice into a highball glass.

Hermione's stomach lurched. "What?"

After adding a long pour of gin, Blaise topped off the glass with tonic.

"Your engagement," said Theo. "Pans is losing her edge for reasons unknown, and let it slip earlier tonight that she ran across you and Weasel Six at her jeweler back in March." He plucked a lime wedge from a dish, leaned sideways, and tucked it over the rim of Hermione's G&T. "Sorry, is it still under wraps? I don't know how war hero PR works."

The room grew unbearably warm.

Blaise tossed a coaster in front of her, and set down her drink.

"In honesty, congratulations." Blaise glanced towards the door. "From all of us. Pans is just—"

Theo had retrieved his own lowball glass from behind the counter. Its rim hid a smirk. "Hormonal."

Blaise folded a hand over his mouth.

Hermione picked up the drink, tanked it in five swallows, and set it back down harder than she'd meant to.

"Oh, shit." Theo's eyebrows rose. "Shots, then?"

The bar was too warm. So was the hallway. The dance floor was sweltering.

Hermione herself was warmest of all. Right inside her belly.

She'd made three and a half circuits of the house. At least she thought she had. Blackshoals wasn't a straightforward, honest sort of place. It was very old, mostly low-ceilinged, narrow and poorly lit, neglected and tainted with a darkness Theo Nott was clearly doing his best to dispel with

occasional infusions of unapologetic life. Just then, it was stuffed with bodies haloed in sweat and perfume, laughing and shouting over a patient, placid bass and syncopated rhythm guitar.

The second she stepped foot in the entryway, anxiety had lassoed Hermione's gut. Now it lashed itself down every time she scanned a room.

She was looking for Ginny. But she was distracted: by heads that rose over most of the others; strong shoulders under button-up shirts; faces she didn't know under light-colored hair. Every tug of false recognition cinched the rope inside her, twisting and tightening the impatient loop.

Down a long passageway that ended in a room with a piano and an enormous harp pushed against the wall, she found Cormac McLaggen with his arm around a young woman who looked fresh out of Hogwarts.

"Have you seen Ginny?" Hermione asked.

Cormac raked his eyes over her, then settled his gaze on her breasts.

"Last I saw she was playing pool." He took a long pull from a beer bottle, then pointed its neck at her. "Very, *very* nice, Granger. Ron's a lucky man."

Ginny wasn't in the billiards room. The redhead with the bloke's hand up her skirt in the conservatory wasn't her, either.

Hermione swayed down a hall she didn't recognize, somehow more crowded than all the others, and realized she'd found the line for the bathrooms.

Tony Tribe sang about red, red wine over the speakers while Hermione slipped sideways back the way she'd come, bumped and jostled between hips and arses and elbows until she rounded the corner to a passage she wasn't sure she'd been down yet.

It was less occupied than the gauntlet she'd just fought her way through. Everyone looked settled in and easy, leaning against the walls with drinks in their hands, half-shouting over the music.

He was there, halfway down the hall.

It was obvious that he'd been drinking. His face was slightly flushed, and he seemed to need the wall in order to stand.

His hair was mussed, too, but the woman standing between his parted legs was fixing it for him. Or maybe she was the one who'd mussed it.

Either way, she was still doing it, stroking her fingers through the longer part in front, pushing it towards the back.

It was Beatrice, from the Archives—a lovely woman, quite tall, with very large, striking dark eyes. Extremely knowledgeable. Always friendly.

She was being very friendly now.

He'd tilted his head back, and his Adam's apple rose and dipped with a swallow.

Hermione wondered why that should be appealing to watch. She honestly couldn't say.

Beatrice's hair was black and looked very soft. He slipped his fingers into it, just behind her ears, then leaned forward to kiss her mouth.

Hermione reserved a small and carefully guarded cupboard in her heart for the way she felt when he removed his tie and cuffed his shirtsleeves.

She kept it closed, now.

She locked it up.

Briefly, but visible to anyone, he touched the friendly, knowledgeable woman with soft hair from Archives over her dress like he wanted her.

After he did it, she pulled him close with her hands at his nape, so she could say words close to his ear.

When his face turned towards her, Hermione could see that he was very drunk. His vision was glassy, dull, and objectless until it discovered Hermione standing at the end of the hall.

An interlude passed when it seemed as though he didn't recognize her.

Then his eyes opened wide.

He saw her there, clearly. In her heels and her silly little dress. And for what felt like minutes, he looked at her.

He was a terrible thing to want.

It wasn't a twittering in the gut, or the adamant weight of lust sitting low in her body.

It was like the call of the void when standing in a high place—the discomfiting urge to jump in front of a train, or throw oneself from a cliff into the sea.

Over the years, she'd watched women leap.

There had always been a moment of elation when each of them thought they could fly. When they were younger, that moment had lasted for a few days; a few times, for weeks. Lately, it was more like hours.

Hermione had tracked every trajectory, from the first lift to the slow and irreversible descent, dropping in lockstep with the steep slope of his falling interest until it landed on the rocks.

She'd had a guardrail before, but that was gone.

Just once, he looked her up and down.

But mostly he stared at her face.

His expression was one she'd never seen on him before. She couldn't read it.

The closest she could come was *horror*. Hermione wondered how bizarre it would be if she laughed out loud.

She'd convinced herself, from time to time, that they could share the most ordinary, insignificant thoughts without speaking.

She listened, and all she could hear was static.

Beatrice leaned in and spoke at his ear—private words, for the two of them.

Hermione pulled her hair over her shoulder and walked away.

Theo's too-hot house smelled like spilled beer, stale sweat, and cheap cologne.

Still looking for Ginny, Hermione found her way back to the bar.

It couldn't have been very long, but both Blaise and Theo were sloppier than they had been when she'd last seen them.

Theo was hiding it better.

"...he got her up there, she just went to town and *rode*. It was fucking incredible." Blaise had opened another shirt button, and was drinking out of a highball glass.

Hermione nearly collided with the bar. "Have you seen Ginny?"

"She's been through here a couple times," said Theo. "I think she's looking for you as well." He turned back to Blaise. "So she liked it?"

"Loved it. He got her off pretty easily, too."

Hermione felt the color drain from her face.

"Oh, shit." Theo looked at Hermione, fingers pressed over his lips. "Granger, you look like someone just died."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

Leaning against the back counter, Blaise tilted his head to the side and regarded her.

"Just these get-togethers we've been having at the Manor. You should come round," he said. "You can watch if you'd like. You certainly wouldn't have to participate."

Theo's mouth tensed with effort.

"What?" Hermione wasn't warm any more. Her skin felt clammy.

"Obviously Draco would love it if you did want to join in," said Blaise.

Theo snorted.

"I don't understand," said Hermione.

"We're talking about the girls Draco has over to the Manor at the weekend," said Blaise.

"Women. They're women. Really, really important to put that out there." Theo folded his hand over his mouth. "And fucking stop. If he finds out you've been saying this shit to her, he's going to kick your arse."

"It might be a bit much for you, though. Draco's is on the larger side, but once women get the feel of it, they can't get enough."

"You're cut off, mate." Theo's shoulders shook.

"You do have to wait for your turn," said Blaise. "He doesn't play favorites."

Pansy ducked under the bar flap. "What are you degenerates laughing about now?"

“Our favorite group activity.” Blaise’s eyebrows rose.

Pansy looked between Hermione, Blaise, and Theo, who had doubled over.

“The two of you are *fucking* arseholes. I hope you know that.”

Hermione pushed away from the bar.

“If Ginny comes through here again,” she said, “could you please tell her I went home?”

“Lighten up Granger,” Theo called after her. “We’re just having a bit of fun.”

They could do whatever they liked for fun. It had nothing to do with her.

Too cold in a tiny dress, she made her way back through the ballroom. Time stretched and folded, grew and shrank. The walk that seemed to take five minutes when she’d first arrived now felt like it took twenty.

She only became lost once before finding the Floo in the entryway, now less crowded and cooler.

She shivered as she stepped through to her flat.

Crookshanks watched her stumble around her silent room on too-high heels. The digital clock next to her bed said 12:17 a.m.

She started the shower, hand under the spray feeling for the right, near-painful degree of heat.

Was it too early? Or was she late?

While the water began steaming the bathroom, she peeled off her dress and threw it over the face of the clock.

Chapter End Notes

Endless love to my alphabet, [dreamsofdramione](http://dreamsofdramione.com).

The Picnic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

An ear-drum needling, dog-whistle whine emanated from the center of the kitchen table. Hermione's ears throbbed.

"Steady on, lads!" Martin punched the steering toggle of his powered-down chair with a closed fist, like he meant to burst forward at top speed. "Hold the course! You're doing real magic now, you boys!"

Stray energy churned through the room, causing every object in the cottage to ripple and wobble as though it was underwater. Books shivered in their clothbound hides, Hermione's teeth hummed unpleasantly, and the chalk lines Draco and William etched over the surface of the table that morning quivered into woolliness.

Grix ground his teeth. "They're going to blow the windows out."

Hermione hated paired incantations. She wasn't musical, but imagined it was rather like playing an instrument alongside another person, in one of its punishingly precise forms: a piano four hands divertissement rather than an all-comers drum circle in a municipal park. It meant relying on one's partner to hit all their notes on time while missing none oneself.

It made her extremely cross.

The only person she'd ever actually enjoyed duetting beside was Draco: equally exact, equally sharp, and, for all his affected apathy, equally practised.

He and William stood at opposite ends of the kitchen table, wreathed in neon-yellow hoops of fizzling, improvident magic. Watching them, Hermione almost felt a pang of envy.

William more than held his own. Sweat beaded his brow and his exposed arms beneath sleeves cuffed high on his biceps, his open shirt translucent from exertion as he swiped his wand through the prickling air.

One-third through the spell, every candle in the cottage had blown itself out in a fit of melodrama. In the evening dark, the snuff box sat in the innermost chalk ring centered on the table, glowing like a bioluminescent deep-ocean predator.

Hermione had proofread their work, and knew they were coming up on the end. She chewed her lip as citrine streaks of unmoored energy flickered from Draco's wand tip, down his hand, and up his arm, grounding themselves between his ribs. Perspiration saturated his hair and formed a sheen across his skin, pouring forth from sustained effort and the heat building inside the cottage.

Grix and Hermione flanked Martin beside the door, bubbled in Martin's protective shield. Draco and William had drummed up a month's supply of magic, tamped it down inside the wretched snuff box, and now moved to seal it in. William started, drawing firework-bright runes into the air before him with his wand tip, then Draco joined. They circumnavigated the table deliberately, fencing in the magic, condensing it inward and down, then clamping it shut until some poor mark came along and tried to summon it with a well-meaning *Accio*.

The squealing became so intolerable that Hermione flattened her hands over her ears.

William and Draco's faces tensed, but they pressed on, making one last lap around the table's edge before the final stanza.

The snuff box protested, popping about on its stumpy folded legs, eyes two brimming bowls of incendiary rage, unable to escape its chalk circle but giving it maximum effort. It grew red hot, then white, and began to spin like a top, fountaining sparks from its nostrils so that the table below it blackened and singed, and a smoke plume curled up to the ceiling.

Grix's teeth creaked.

The table wasn't the first of Grix's heavy losses. Hermione's meticulous reassembly effort had revealed subtle damage to the Timekey's watchworks. After many hours and two Floo conversations with Grix's brother in Scotland, she'd been forced to concede that the machinery couldn't be adequately repaired. Without hesitation, Grix drew out his beautiful gold pocket watch. Its innards were removed, then soldered inside the burning box now hysterically dancing and spitting fire inside its chalk prison.

The whine oscillated higher, lower, then higher still, until Hermione thought she might be sick.

Back at their table-end stations, William and Draco raised their wands, then shouted alternating lines of a sealing incantation that Hermione could no longer hear above the noise. Both men dropped their arms, immediately validating Grix's prediction about the windows.

The magical tension snapped like a rubber band. Every unit of extraneous energy fled outward in a blast wave, sending Draco and William stumbling, launching throw pillows off the sofa, shattering several jars on the kitchen shelves, and blowing the cottage's front windows out in a rain of slivered glass.

William scrubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and coughed. Draco wheezed into his fist, crouched down, and peered at the snuff box through smoke-smearred spectacles as the grandfather clock chimed midnight.

William groaned, and flicked open his pocket watch. "Wonderful."

They'd stayed awake for over forty hours to do it, but on 10th July, 1804, bang on schedule as set forth in William's own hand, the inhabitants of Twiggysbroke Cottage and Mr. William Avery had made a Timekey. Crammed to the gills with a greedy energetic feast, it looked pleased with itself.

Martin's eyes glinted. He released the protective spell, turned his chair on, then lurched forward and socked William's elbow.

"Splendid!" He prodded the snuff box with his wand tip, then laughed when a last burst of sparks erupted from its rump. "Poot! Ho ho! What a folly you've made, you lads!"

"That's it, then?" William, breathless, drew a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face and neck. "Your monstrous mole all finished?"

"I should hope so. Cheers, Will," said Draco. "You're going?"

William had already fetched his jacket from the sofa. "I'm afraid so." He sounded legitimately regretful. "As delightful as this has been, I have business to attend to in London."

"Oh?" said Draco. "More duels to instigate?"

"Something more pleasant than that, I hope." William considered the snuff box and frowned.

“What I still don’t understand is how, if you’ve compelled me to make your Timekey—”

Draco paused in the middle of tucking his shirt back in. “No one’s compelled you to do anything.”

“Not in the sense of physical force,” said William, “but there’s an undeniable element of deterministic coercion here.”

Grix fetched tongs from a kitchen drawer, and sidled up to the Timekey as though it was a wounded animal. In a darting movement, he clamped it, lifted it gingerly, then scratched a blunt thumbnail over the blackened circle in the middle of the table.

“Time is a series of stable loops, yes?” William asked.

“Apparently,” said Draco.

“So if this Timekey brings you here”—William gestured at the snuff box—“but your presence is required to make it in the first place, how did the original key come about?”

Frigid night air flowed through the cottage’s empty window frames, and Hermione shivered in her thin muslin.

“There are a number of theories,” she said, briskly rubbing her arms. “One, which my colleague and I favor, is that time is self-healing. Perhaps, at one point, the Timekey was created by some other means. Something akin to the Qin Time Turner may have found its way to us, for example. Once here, we may have created this Timekey by accident, or *you* did—”

William’s mouth fell open, and a short, blunt laugh escaped. “My sincerest apologies, Miss Granger, but under no circumstances did I ever create that object without prompting.”

“No one’s bound and gagged you, Avery,” said Draco.

“Yes, someone has.” William pointed at the box, with his own freshly penned note folded inside. “Remarkably, it was me.”

“I was considering your brothers, actually.” Hermione wafted a drift of smoke from her eyes. “When they were...in the lake. There were three of you—Will, Draco, and Rolly—but just the two little boys. It’s the only point in our misadventures, beyond Draco’s accident, where anyone’s life was in danger.”

“I’m redundant,” said Draco.

“Exactly—wait, no!” Hermione bristled, and looked at him imploringly. “I didn’t say that.”

“The guiding hand of fate,” said William. “It’s all been laid out for us.” He shrugged into his jacket. “Why bother making any decisions at all?”

“When you really think about it,” said Draco, stifling a yawn, “you haven’t the slightest degree of control over being born or dying, so is it really all that great a loss if next Tuesday’s trousers have already been picked out for you? Lie back and enjoy the flow of the proverbial river, I suppose.”

“That’s well enough,” said William, “but don’t we deserve to fight for what we want?”

“I’m a profoundly privileged man, Avery”—Draco drew a handkerchief from his pocket and buffed his spectacles—“and would much prefer that the things I want fight for me.”

William glanced at Hermione, then held out his hand to Draco. “I sincerely hope that they may. It’s

been an unaccountable pleasure, Granger.”

Draco took it. “Likewise.”

William said his goodbyes to Martin and Grix, laid a gentlemanlike kiss against Hermione’s knuckles, then whistled as he strode out the door, across the garden, and through the gate. A great deal clammier, more sober, and, if Hermione wasn’t mistaken, exponentially happier than he’d been on arrival, he Apparated away.

The moment he left, exhaustion rushed to fill the spaces vacated by adrenaline.

As Grix and Martin trundled down the hall, Martin extemporized on time travel, ladybirds, and whether or not his chair might be converted into a vehicle for temporal as well as spatial transportation. By the time Hermione straightened the picture frames and Draco had undertaken to repair the windows, Martin snored evenly in his bed.

Unwilling to pause long enough to cast a warming charm or summon a shawl, Hermione moved into the kitchen to seal fissures in crocks, mop up honey pools, and sweep whorls of scattered grain. Crouching to Vanish a gathered dust pile, she shivered as a stream of cold air flowed over her bare neck and arms. She stood, and bit back a gasp when Draco’s palm pressed between her shoulder blades. A comfortable heat flooded her body as his spell took hold.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Not a problem.”

As noiselessly as he approached, he went away, attending to the cracked glass upper door of the clock.

Only a day earlier, he’d announced his intention to leave the Ministry and London. Following their subsequent argument, she’d pushed out of his arms and fled downstairs, excluding him from her awareness like a chilling draft as she focused on the job at hand. It had scarcely been more than twenty-four hours, but she had no idea until that moment how desperately she missed his touch.

The discovery came as something of a shock. But as a child with over-large teeth and saggy knee-high socks, she’d bested lethal opponents. At four and twenty, she ought to have been a match for her own libido. She redirected her distress to the blackened circle in the center of the table, scrubbing with a vengeance.

His euphoric schoolboy smile in the muddy field had been the gunshot at the starting line of an obvious and straightforward contextual crisis. The problem, without a doubt, was their cursed, unnatural position in time and space. Day and night, the air itself was sweet with all of summer’s ripe temptations. Trapped like an ant in a honey jar, she was fattened on the too-rich sustenance of his unbroken company, happily drowning. Whether it was the effects of acute time travel, an insidious variety of undocumented Wiltshire sex pollen, or the way buckskin clung to a delineated quadricep, she remained off balance and reckless. The deeper she barricaded herself inside her rational mind, the worse it became.

The black mark refused to budge under either magical or mechanical efforts. Hermione left it for the morning. Instead, she scrubbed the chalk lines from the table surface, picked up the now cooled snuff box, and curled up on the sofa. There she yawned, gaping and indiscreet, and allowed her head to droop of its own accord onto a throw pillow.

Draco paused with the clock door hanging half open, and gestured at the box. “Shall I take it

tonight?”

With some effort, Hermione managed to open her eyes, astonished to discover she'd shut them in the first place.

“Take it?” She didn't understand. What did he mean, *take* —

Draco tilted his head as if in pity or gentle reproach, and her heart stuttered. She flicked the snuff box latch open and pretended to study the empty interior.

“You mean, to keep it with you tonight,” she said. “In your room.”

As opposed to with *them* . In *her* room.

Draco nodded.

Through all the previous day's strife, it had never once occurred to her that he'd already spent his last night in her bed. Her throat felt tight, and before she spoke, she bit the inside of her lower lip so hard her eyes watered.

“No.” She rested her cheek on the pillow and let her eyes close again. “I'll keep it.”

In the beat of silence that followed, she thought perhaps he meant to say something else. Before he did, Grix emerged from the hall. With one eye half-cocked, Hermione watched him examine Draco's window repairs and approve them with a grunt. Next, he frowned over the lost quantities of honey in his crocks, and finally leveled a baleful look at the snuff box in her lap as though it had just committed an unpardonable breach of the Twiggybroke Cottage code of conduct.

“It's an awful thing.” Hermione stroked the top of its head like a Pomeranian. ”But it's artfully done.”

“Mm.” Grix scowled at her, then Draco, then the box. “I suppose if you're right about time loops, and it didn't incinerate you both on the way here, the job's been done well enough.”

He was *worried* about them. Hermione's heart filled to the brim with fondness.

“Everything but our Time Turner made the trip in one piece.” She yawned again, circling her arms around the snuff box and snuggling it close.

A moment later, she woke to the sound of her own snoring. She was halfway up the stairs, swayed by steady footsteps, face burrowed into Draco's chest and mouth gaping.

“Unhand me, fiend,” she muttered.

“Fiend?” Draco's grip flexed under her knees and back. ”That's new.”

“You could've woken me up.” She swiped a fingertip over the Sickie-sized saliva patch on his shirt.

“Bold of you to assume I didn't try.”

As he turned her through the doorway, she glimpsed the previous day's rose-patterned dress and the bonnet, with its happy pink ribbons hanging over the back of her hearthside chair. Gregarious flowers had been her costume for scenes whose memory flooded her body with fevered want, and ones that hollowed her out. She looked away, and pressed her face into his shirt again.

“Thank God, we're nearly home.”

He laid her on her bed, then sat beside her. Hermione rolled towards the window, dragged a pillow that still smelled like him under her head, and curled around the snuff box. Without further effort, her consciousness dwindled.

“Do you need me?”

Though more than halfway to sleep, her body responded to his question with intimate, affirmative heat.

Did she *need* him?

As far as her brain was concerned, he might as well run off to Antarctica and jump into the sea once he got there. Her mouth sided with the rest of her.

“I always need you.”

He said nothing, but nimbly and without hesitation, found the tiny buttons dotting the back of her dress. One by one, he slipped them loose. Once unfastened, he drew the dress down her shoulders and hips, slid it past her ankles, and set it aside. Limp and acquiescent, she let him roll her stockings down. Once he'd discarded them, she turned onto her stomach. He opened the laces of her stays, then propped her up with a hand and pulled them over her head. A nudge to her hip, and Hermione faced him. He first tugged her sheets out from under her, then drew them over her, and finally tucked them all around.

The bed frame sighed, and she opened her eyes to find him standing in the dim light of a single candle, looking down on her. She freed an arm, laid her hand on the pillow, then closed her eyes again. At length, he touched her so lightly she thought he meant to make her laugh.

Was that how cads performed a seduction? Chastely undressing people, tucking them into bed, and tracing the lines on their palms to lower their inhibitions?

And if not?

He drew his hand away. Her body protested with a deep, inflammatory ache in the center of her chest, while her thoughts illuminated intricate and novel humiliations.

Do you need me?

He'd been asking whether she required help with her stays.

She rolled over to face the open window. “Thanks, Malfoy.”

“Any time, Granger. Good night.”

With a soft latch click, he was gone.

Only two tasks remained. The sooner they were finished, the sooner everything—mercifully—would be over.

They first needed to sneak the snuff box onto its shelf in Malfoy Manor's second best drawing room, where Draco would find it two hundred years later.

Hermione pressed for its swift placement. If Draco could steal items from his own house, he could leave them there, too. But he refused, claiming that he was unequal to the task, owing to a hostile elf who guarded every Floo and had studied his movements.

"You make it sound like this elf has developed tactical advantages," Hermione groused.

"He's like a Spartan, Granger. Born to warfare." Draco conspicuously rubbed his calf. "I believe he conducts daily drills with the fire poker."

A social call to the Manor was suggested. William generously offered to undertake it himself, but Draco countered that spontaneously visiting a house two days before one was meant to be there on invitation was social suicide. Hermione expressed the opinion that one's social standing was irrelevant when one meant to leave a place and never return. Draco brought out the term *ugly tourist*. Martin put his thumb on the scales in Draco's favor, voicing a keen desire for his cousins to accompany him to the Malfoy Manor picnic on the approaching Saturday. Hermione was wholly unable to counter his appeal.

The second task was entirely out of her control.

"Do you feel like he's *stalling*?"

After lunch on Thursday, she looked over the brook from a window seat in the kitchen corner, knees tucked under her chin and a small, perfect peach in her fist.

Grix pared a crescent of peeled peach into a bowl, then wiped his hand on his apron. "Who—Martin?" he asked. "Or the lad?"

Hermione rubbed the peach down against her lips.

"I meant my cousin."

"They both are," said Grix.

Martin brewed his aging preventative at a glacial crawl.

After completing the Timekey on Tuesday night, everyone save Grix slept late Wednesday morning. Hermione came downstairs in her dressing gown, expecting Draco would assist Martin in his Potions laboratory as soon as they'd breakfasted. Instead, she found Martin and Grix enjoying their porridge alone. She didn't see Draco until half past nine, when he stepped through the cottage door breathing hard, wearing Transfigured trainers, joggers and a t-shirt, a deep V of perspiration wicked between his shoulder blades.

She looked him up and down. "Have you been running?"

"Yes."

"And you've entirely given up on avoiding glaring anachronism?"

He shook his head, and disappeared into the washroom. After a long bath, he'd gone upstairs and closed his door.

Frustrated and unaccountably lonely, she joined Martin in his lab herself.

He ostensibly worked, but his accomplishments appeared confined to misremembering the lyrics to suggestive Irish drinking songs, chatting to a superannuated mortar and pestle as though it was a very dear old friend, gagging on the fumes of a glittering green powder he lit on fire without first opening a window, and cackling to himself while squeezing half a dozen lemons into a beaker. He'd funneled the lemon juice and a clear liquid into a test tube, streamed in a quantity of a pale powder he obtained from a canister under his workbench, corked the tube, then rocked it rhythmically to and fro like a percussion shaker.

"What purpose do the lemons serve in the formula?" Hermione's quill hovered over her parchment, where she'd been taking notes.

Martin winked, uncorked the tube, and threw back a swig.

"Did you just make lemonade?" she cried.

He held out the tube. "It's very tart. Would you like some?"

On Thursday, he didn't set foot in his lab at all.

"He's making himself lemonade back there, you know." Hermione watched Grix slice into another skinned peach. "I'm starting to think this potion doesn't really take four days."

Grix shook his head, and slipped a peach wedge into his mouth. "Probably not."

She turned back to the window and sighed, then scrubbed the side of her fist against the fresh bloom of condensation she'd made.

The brook ran idly some ten or twelve metres from the cottage. She watched as Martin, jostling slowly over rocky moss, drew up to the bank and brought his chair to rest. Draco trailed just behind, and when Martin stopped, circled to the front of the chair. Nothing could be heard through the latched window, but Draco kneeled, nodding along to Martin's chatter. He drew off Martin's shoes and socks and folded them, then sat beside the chair to remove his own boots and stockings and roll his trousers over his knees. He rose, and offered Martin both his hands. Steadying himself against Draco's upturned palms, Martin stood from his seat and stepped into the stream on bony, sunless legs. The water must have been quite cold, because Martin's mouth and eyes dilated with surprise, then he laughed down at the brook. Draco walked backwards, water parting around his ankles and then his calves, and Martin followed, until both men stood midstream inside an angled shaft of dappled, golden hour sun. Draco spoke, listened to Martin's response, then withdrew his hands, slipping loose from Martin's hold until only their fingertips provided the balance. Martin tilted his face upwards, eyes closed and mouth bowed in contentment. Draco's chest rose and fell with a long breath, and then he lifted his chin and shut his eyes. Hermione marked the moment his jaw relaxed, and his expression eased into tranquility.

Forehead against the windowpane, she sank her teeth into her peach, then sucked up the juices dripping down her wrist. With a fingertip, she tapped the small, receded figures of Draco and Martin atop their gilded heads.

"But why would they *both* stall?" she muttered.

When Grix didn't answer, she turned to find him regarding her over his spectacle rims.

"What?" she asked.

"You're a very bright woman."

“Thank you.”

“You know this about yourself.”

She nodded. “I do.”

His brows rose, and when she said nothing more, he breathed a world-weary sigh. “Come and do the crust.”

That evening, they levitated the permanently singed kitchen table into the garden, laid it with linen, and feasted: leek and new potato soup, summer salad, and warm brown bread followed by lattice-topped peach pie and the best sweet cream gelato Hermione had ever tasted.

“Is there any chance the potion will be ready by Saturday?” she asked, scraping her spoon through the bottom of her dish.

Martin’s eyes flared with secret knowledge, but he only tapped the side of his nose, and continued halving a peach slice with his spoon. He scooped up a chunk, drew the bowl of the spoon back with a finger, then launched it into the clover lawn, where it was set upon by a familiar crow.

Draco had been relaxing in his chair. The moment Hermione spoke, he jumped up, drew his wand, and began hurriedly gathering the dishes and sending them drifting through the open cottage door.

“Care for a walk, cousin?” he asked.

“Yes, Malfo!” Martin reloaded his spoon and aimed. “Batten your hatches, you devil! Fire in the hole!” He shot the second half of the peach at the crow, who swallowed it in one piece.

So the week had gone, and so it continued. Wednesday and Thursday were entirely unproductive, and just after breakfast on Friday, Draco and Martin called on Sir Thomas without mentioning anything to Hermione before they left. They returned at four in the afternoon, sun-pink, beer-drunk, and trading newly minted inside jokes. Between them, they hauled a brace of fat brown trout, a mold-crusting boot sprouting a sunflower, and a bag of young onions.

It was obvious to Hermione that she and Draco would be stranded in the past until Martin took an active interest in helping them leave it. Worst of all, no one but Hermione seemed concerned.

Simmering with irritation, the scent of baked trout with garlic and lemon crowding her nostrils, she ducked into Martin’s lab and attempted to spy on his notes.

“You’ll have very little luck,” called Grix from the kitchen. “I’m not even convinced he can read ‘em.”

She had no luck whatsoever. Martin's shorthand looked like it had been scrawled in Cyrillic cursive by a sleep-deprived raccoon. When she went to help with the washing up instead, Grix shooed her away. After nestling the sunflower boot in a patch of sun beside the gatepost, she sat beneath the plum tree and tried to read. Even that time-honored pursuit failed her. Under Martin’s dubious direction, heedless of how distracting he was in a t-shirt, Draco stood atop a ladder and repaired roof tiles felled in the duel. As though sensing her distress, Grix emerged, wordlessly hung a basket from her elbow, and handed her a list. She browsed the vegetable beds, lost in a mental labyrinth of her own devilish design as she harvested the evening salad.

For three nights, they ate outdoors, accompanied by trickling water and the hoarse conversation of a greedy, amiable crow.

For three nights, efficiently and without comment, Draco helped Hermione undress, then returned to his bed without her.

On Saturday morning, Martin buzzed into the kitchen from his potions laboratory waving a vial.

“Here we are, here we are!”

Hermione stood before the hall mirror, fussing with the gauzy white fichu Margaret had draped over her décolletage when Hermione suggested she might prefer to display a *soupçon* of flesh rather than a heaped platter. She dashed into the sitting room, heart jumping.

“It’s finished?” she asked. “Professor Martin, you brilliant, wonderful man!”

Sitting on the sofa, dressed in smart tan breeches and black tail coat, Draco looked up from *The Prophet* with widened eyes.

“All finished!” Martin pulled up beside the sofa. “Give it a try, my lad!” He shook the vial violently, then tossed it into Draco’s lap.

Draco picked it up and turned it end over end. A dull mahogany potion roiled around the vial’s insides. “The whole thing?” He looked sidelong at Martin, who smiled and made a guzzling gesture with his thumb and little finger.

Hermione reached out, as if to stall his hand. “*Don’t—*”

Before she uttered another syllable, he uncorked the vial and poured its contents down his throat.

He immediately began to wheeze and gag, then sprang from the sofa and crashed down the hall.

Hermione nearly stumbled over her skirts in her haste to follow. She found him in the washroom, eyes streaming, water gushing from his wand tip, over his tongue, and into the sink.

“Are you alright?” Without thinking, pulse thundering, she laid her hand on his back.

He nodded. After a full minute, he spat several times, then stood tall.

“Was it”—Hermione moved to brush a drop of water from his chin, but yanked her hand away—“bitter, or ...”

He drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. “It was *unbelievably* hot.”

“Oh!” Hermione swayed a step closer. “I’m so sorry. I suppose it’s best to be prepared for that when we leave this afternoon.”

Draco sniffed, nostrils flaring. “*Oh.*” He sniffed again. “That’s—” He brought his wrist to his nose and huffed, glancing at the soap on the sink ledge. “Lavender soap, yes?”

“That’s right.”

His lips briefly bowed in appreciation as he drew another deep breath.

“You’re able to *smell*? ” she asked.

“Yes, I believe I can. Things have certainly taken a leap in the right direction.”

Hermione’s concern abruptly morphed into indignation. “He’s been working on a potion for your *sense of smell*? ”

Draco picked up the soap and held it to his nose. “It would seem so. This is lovely. Bergamot as well, I think.”

Hermione’s entire face burned. “*I cannot believe—*” She turned on her heel, but as she surged towards the hall, Draco caught her hips. If Harry had laid hands on her, he’d have found an elbow lodged in his solar plexus. But all her acidity was neutralized on contact as Draco scooped her back into himself and lowered his chin over the crown of her head.

“Please recall that cousin Martin has been the kindest and best of friends,” he said quietly. “And not to call up events unpleasant to us both, but he did save my life.”

Sense memories of fear and despair crackled along Hermione’s limbs, and she melted completely into his hold.

He spoke in a low voice close to her ear. “I realize you can’t get home soon enough, but before you go out there and verbally eviscerate our cousin for making me an effective bespoke potion, please consider taking a moment to calm down.”

“Don’t you *dare* tell me to calm down.” On principle, she thrashed like a trout in his grip. “We’re never going to get home if all he makes back there is lemonade and... *hot sauce* . I’m absolutely certain he’s making fortified mulberry wine— *are you smelling my hair*? ”

Draco continued sucking breaths inward with his nose crushed deep in Hermione’s curls. “That’s what you smell like.”

“What?”

“Sweet, like berries. And...lilac. Or maybe that’s coming from outside. Have you been nosing around our cousin’s laboratory?”

“Obviously.” She whirled in his hands. “Cousin Martin isn’t taking this seriously in the slightest! He’s stalling in the *worst* way. And so are you.”

“I’m not stalling.”

“You’re not helping, though, are you? Wading. Trout fishing. Visiting the Market Hettlesham lending library with Tom Longbottom—don’t you dare hang that innocent look on your face, you brought back three novels! You grabbed *pints*!” She glared at the cravat ends blooming in decorative folds over his chest. “I thought you were in a hurry to get to France.”

“We’re talking about France, now?”

“*No.* ”

“I’m not in a hurry to go anywhere.”

“It certainly feels like you are.” The tissue-thin fichu did nothing to disguise either her flesh or her rapid breathing. She wanted to rip all it off—fichu, dress, stockings, bosomy undergarments—

though she recognized the counterproductivity of the impulse. “Anyway, I don’t see why you need to go at all.”

Draco tensed.

“I know you’re *bored*,” she said. “Which I hope you realize is itself tremendously boring. It’s *so* predictable, isn’t it? It’s exactly what everyone expected you to do after the war: leave the country. Pluck some insipid, thoroughbred snob from a nearby branch of the family tree and marry her. Honestly, it’s *so* banal, Malfoy. It’s just so, *so*”—she watched her fingers dance through his gathered cravat—“*prosaic*. Keep to the outline, no matter how the story wants to go.”

"Hermione."

Looking up, she found his eyes fixed on hers. She'd worked herself into a lather, and without actually wanting to provoke him, she'd gone far out of bounds to do it. But he wasn't angry.

“I’ve been thinking a great deal about hiring.” She had, in fact, felt physically ill at the thought of replacing him, but rattled on all the same. “I’ll need someone markedly talented in Charms, as well as Arithmancy and Potions. For preference, they won’t go around smirking all over the place, and —”

" *Hermione*. "

" *What?* "

His expression was so open, his eyes so softly downturned, it pained her to look at him.

"I need to go," he said, "so that I can come back to you as your friend."

Her fingernails bit into his waistcoat. "You *are* my friend."

"Not a very good one."

His voice was measured and quiet, as though she was a tantruming child, or a skittish horse readying to bolt. It traveled in an auditory stroke of reassurance down her spine, and her grip slackened with gratitude and despair.

“Stop talking to me like you know how I’m best managed.”

He laughed outright. “Anyone who thinks they can manage you is a fool.”

But he’d done it, and was doing it still. Humbled by the exquisite vulnerability of being known, she allowed herself to acknowledge the esteem that, for years, had flourished like wildflowers in her heart.

“We were always equals, you know.”

The corners of Draco’s mouth twitched downward. “I respectfully disagree.”

“We *were*. All along. Do you recall the day we met—I mean the day we *properly* met?”

“Of course I do.”

“You’ve been a very good friend to me since then. Even if you are the very worst sort of person.” Her throat tightened. “Even if I haven’t always been a friend to you.”

“Hermione.” He brushed the backs of his fingers across her cheek. “You have offered me more kindness than I ever deserved.”

She’d been an unpardonable fool for ever allowing herself to touch him. Her right reward for that folly was an endless craving to be properly held in his arms. It was the work of an instant to give in, pressing herself against his ribs.

He tightened his hold.

"I don't want to fight with you." Hermione laid her ear over his heart, and listened to its reassuring flow. "Not like this."

"Then don't."

In relief, she dug her fingertips into the small of his back. "Still friends, then?"

"Still friends." He burrowed his face into the curls piled on the crown of her head. "Nothing will ever change that."

She recalled the catastrophe: the first time his hands roamed over her bare skin; the heedless curiosity of their mouths; all the beautiful damage that had followed.

"Nothing?" she asked.

"I shouldn't think so."

He'd successfully stroked and petted the fight right out of her. She wanted to hate him for all his pointless knowing, if only for a minute or two, but only felt agitated and giddy, like something utterly thrilling and more than a little frightening lurked around a nearby corner. It occurred to her that if the two of them simply stood entirely still for the rest of their lives, she could enjoy his vexing proximity without ever having to confront any further complications.

As never moving again was both an inane and impracticable solution, she drew a fortifying breath, battled back the weird, spasmodic smile seizing her mouth, and cleared her throat.

“Shall we go, then?” With no small regret, she pulled away. “Now that you’re able to fully enjoy the hospitality of your own home.”

Draco seemed afflicted with a similar, mortifying spiritual infirmity, and breathed a syllable of nervous laughter.

“Ready whenever you are.”

Camouflaged behind a lace fan that bore more than a passing resemblance to novelty bridal lingerie, Hermione considered Miss Lucretia Malfoy.

It wasn't every day one had the opportunity to observe Draco Malfoy's great-great-great-great-great-great grandmother clutching a plate of sandwiches cut to military precision, nubby miniature gherkins, and a mound of tremulous gelatin. From her mother, squinting beside her in silent judgment over the assembled party, she'd inherited grey eyes, an aquiline nose, and the chin whose shape Harry Potter would—mostly out of loyalty to his friends—describe two hundred years later

as "pointy." But where Lady Malfoy was sour and imperious, the daughter was awkwardly solicitous. With the sun blazing overhead, the poor thing looked like a vampire forced out of bed midday. A wide umbrella shaded her milk-white skin, wrapped in unseasonable silk, all but her face and hands hidden behind a chin-high chemisette, puffed sleeve caps and ruffled cuffs circling her wrists like scrunchies. She reminded Hermione of one of Boticelli's graces if a women's moral reform society member snuck into the Uffizi Gallery and painted her over for modesty.

In counterpoint to their self-conscious hostess, the Longbottom girls lolled in chairs and atop blankets spread over the grass, a cadre of bare-armed nymphets cool and easy in white lawn and lace.

"I trust your journey here was easy." Seated at the central table, Lady Malfoy dabbed her pursed lips with a serviette. "The roads are not difficult."

Hermione's fan whirled double time.

She'd anticipated Floo travel. But she arrived at Bugg-Buntley Hall beside Draco and Martin to find the family loading into carriages with tall, sharp-eyed elves in the driver's seats. A pair of saddled horses stood by.

"What-ho, you Martin! You Grangers! Make haste! The Quidditch lawn awaits!" Sir Thomas walloped the nearest carriage door as they approached. "Miss Granger and our good professor shall ride in Martha-Four-Wheels here. Poor old Nelly-carriage's suspension is shot."

"No, Daddy!" Cassandra poked her head out of the rear carriage. "My sisters and I have determined to squash Miss Granger right up with us. We'll all get knocked about and strengthen our constitutions. Is that agreeable to you, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, of course!" said Hermione.

Sir Thomas handed Martin into the carriage and settled him opposite Lady Longbottom, while Hermione drew her wand and shrank Martin's chair to fit in the footwell. Then she counted seats: she and the four Longbottom sisters crammed in one carriage, Lady Longbottom, Martin, plus Martin's chair taking up the other, and Tom and Mrs. Longbottom mooning over one another in a two-person phaeton. One horse must have been saddled for Sir Thomas, and the other—

"Oh, no." Hermione spun around. "Draco, I think you're you meant to—"

He'd figured it out. Still speaking with a groomsman, he had one foot jammed in the taller horse's stirrup, while the other swung casually over its back. Hermione shielded her eyes and gazed up at him as he guided the mare towards her.

"You know how to ride a horse?" she whispered, incredulous.

When she reached out, the animal pushed its cashmere snout into her palm and lipped inquiringly at her lace glove.

"What my sister doesn't know about me could fill volumes." Draco took the mare's ear in his fist and massaged it with his thumb. "What a good girl you are."

Hermione was speechless. There was no denying his easy, upright posture in the saddle, or his confident grip on the reins. As she took him in—stately black topper, tailcoat spread behind him, polished boots resting along the horse's ribs—he had the gall to dust off his smirk.

"Shall I tell you about my horses?"

“You do not own horses!”

“I’m afraid that I do.” He jutted his chin towards the carriages. “You’d best hinge your jaw back up, they’re all waiting on you.”

Hand out, Sir Thomas beamed at her from the rear carriage’s open door. “Come on, my good girl, let’s not let the day go to waste!”

Hermione glared at Draco. “Are you going to try showing off while you’re up there, or not?”

“That depends.” His broken eyebrow rose. “Who’ll be watching me?”

“*No one.*”

“Then I’ll fight temptation. Now go along”—Draco winked—“like a good girl.”

“I’ve just now determined to poison you,” said Hermione. “Slowly. You take your coffee like treacle. You’ll never know.”

He laughed. “Killed softly by Hermione Granger: a death to look forward to.” He shifted his weight in the saddle, and the horse turned. “Walk on.”

Once she was seated in the carriage, rumbling down the Longbottoms’ drive, Hermione waited for a swell of anxiety that never came. Six years after Voldemort’s end, people still conspicuously avoided mentioning Malfoy Manor within Hermione’s earshot. If anyone had bothered to consult her feelings, they’d have found her more curious than avoidant. Working beside its current owner day in and day out, she often wondered what the great house was like when it wasn’t occupied by a self-pollinating dynasty of bigots and pompous bootlickers cosplaying as the Addams family. She wasn’t above eavesdropping on the topic. Through Draco’s conversations with Theo at the Ministry, she’d learned about his ongoing work decommissioning dark artifacts, the years of extensive renovations, and the numbing price tag attached to them. She knew, for instance, that he’d begun by gutting his ground floor drawing room to the stone.

But whatever the Manor looked like under Draco’s care, nothing prepared Hermione for a carriage approach on a flawless mid-July day.

She’d always assumed the family’s gloom-chic aesthetic came as part of the estate. But as they turned from the road, they encountered no twisted hedges bristling with blood-thirsty thorns. No gnarled trees with bulbous trunks and bare, swollen limbs hemmed them in. For several kilometres, a tree-lined drive curved between fields dotted with sheep and ruminating cattle. It passed through a mile of dense, drowsy woodland, then skirted a duck pond and ran beneath a triumphal arch, its gatehouse staffed by a bored-looking youth in dark green livery. Ambling past storybook oaks, the road hooked around a final bend to unveil a vista of the house.

It was a soaring Elizabethan pile, symmetrical and regally proportioned at three stories, its tips and turrets frosted with prickly Catholic flare. The party approached from the north, while the gardens and a tantalizing shimmer of water beckoned beyond. Hermione’s mouth fell open in disbelief. Massive mullioned windows crowded cheek by jowl on every side. Condemning the interior to lightless murk in Draco’s youth was an accomplishment.

Cassandra pressed her nose to the carriage window. “Whoever gets Miss Malfoy in the end is in for a tidy prize.”

“I’d marry her myself for 60,000 acres and half that amount in clear income,” said Penelope. “And that’s not including investments, plus both our dowries.”

Hermione nearly choked on her own saliva. "60,000 acres?"

"Make her an offer, Penny." Cassandra pounded her knee with her fist. "You'd be an excellent husband. Wouldn't she, Izzy?"

"The very best, my darling," said Isadora.

"I, myself," Cassandra continued, "should rather die than marry. I'm going on a sea voyage. Look, Cressy"—she tapped the window—"doesn't Mr. Granger have an uncommonly handsome seat on a horse? I'm going to tell him."

Cassandra reached for the window latch, but Isadora jolted forward and stilled her hand.

"My sweet, you cannot tell Mr. Granger how well he looks on a horse."

Cressida was silent throughout the journey, watching the scenery pass. Without turning to look, she stiffened at Draco's name. "Perhaps," she said quietly, "I'll join you at sea."

With half an eye on Cassandra and the window, Isadora took Cressida's hand and gave it a maternal pulse.

"Pack for both hot and cold weather," said Cassandra. "We're starting with the A's: Anatolia, Antipodes and Antarctica. Would you want to go to America, Cressy? Seems a ghastly place, but they have alligators *and* vipers. I wonder how many slavers we could turn into harvest mice before getting caught?"

"I'll follow wherever you lead, dearest," said Cressida.

"Mind you don't get envenomated," advised Penelope. "Mother and Daddy would be very disappointed." As the carriage drew close to the house, she squinted at a lone figure standing within the portico. "Merlin, what's the Dowager Countess put poor Lucretia in now? She looks like a hyperthermic sea cucumber. I hope she's set herself a cooling charm under that gown."

Miss Malfoy showed them through to the garden. A handful of tables and heavy Tartan blankets were arranged on the uppermost lawn of an Italianate terrace garden, framed in a low balustrade and dotted with blunt-topped topiaries. Stairs led down through a series of formally landscaped terraces towards a capacious green, and beyond that a vast oblong natural lake shaded by willows.

A central table bravely supported enough food for fifty people, and for the first hour, everyone tucked in, muttering their approval over stuffed olives, beautiful cheeses, and oil-brined capsciums.

"We had no trouble whatsoever. Your drive is well maintained, My Lady," said Draco in answer to the Countess. Having personally demolished a wedge of soft-ripened goat's cheese, he leaned back in his chair like a monarch surveying his peaceable kingdom, gaze skipping past the gurgling fountain, over the boxwood maze, to the lake and the meadows and woods beyond. "And Artemis is a perfect dream. Sir Thomas has an exceptional eye for horses."

"His are always such pretty, amiable animals." Miss Malfoy brought a serviette to her upper lip and discreetly patted away tiny beads of perspiration. "Can I interest you in a shrub, Mr. Granger?"

"Is it raspberry, Miss Malfoy?"

He winked at Hermione for the second time that day. Hermione accordingly brought her poisoning scheme forward on her calendar.

"I'm afraid it's cherry," said Miss Malfoy, "but I can ask Hiddy—"

"By no means trouble yourself." Draco rose from his seat. "If I'm not mistaken, Sir Thomas wants one more for Quidditch."

He waved towards a level field east of the house where Sir Thomas, Tom, and Cassandra had meandered after lunch. They sifted through a floating broom rack while Martin sat nearby, tossing a Quaffle overhead.

"Ho there, Granger!" Sir Thomas's voice echoed. "We need a fourth, my lad!" He pointed at Martin, who nearly took the Quaffle to the forehead. "Our good professor would prefer to keep score!"

"There you have it," said Draco. He tossed his topper on the table and flung his jacket aside.

Hermione bolted upright and snapped her fan closed. "You're getting on a broom?"

"Only so our cousin won't," he called as he strode away.

"You need to be careful!"

"I always am!"

"You never are!"

By way of an answer, she received a lazy backwards wave. She bit back a growl. Not only did he have an exceptionally irritating head to protect, they had a job to do, both of which he seemed to have forgotten. If they were to get shut of the snuff box before they both turned thirty, she'd have to do it herself.

"Your brother is a very gentlemanlike sort of person, Miss Granger." The Dowager Countess drummed her gloved fingers on her chair arm. "Who are your parents?"

Oh good God, thought Hermione, *here we go*. She straightened her spine and took a breath. "Moirra and Robert Granger, My Lady. They're in Australia. If you'll please excuse me, I need to use the ___"

"In *Australia*," the Countess interrupted. "What cause, pray tell, is there for your parents to be in *Australia*?"

Penelope sat on a blanket, plate balanced on her knees. She pulled the top off a sandwich and frowned at a tomato slice. "Wrestling alligators, if we're all to meet Cassandra's expectations."

Lady Malfoy flicked her hand at Penelope. "What a cheek you are, gel. Lady Longbottom, your daughter is a cheek."

Lady Longbottom, patently unbothered, condescended to acknowledge the Countess with a shallow nod.

"Mr. and Miss Granger's parents are by no means tattooed strongmen grappling with crocodilians," said the Countess. "Who," she asked Hermione, "are your *parents*' parents? Who do you *come from*?"

Hermione snatched her shrub off the table in irritation. "My mother's parents are Afton and Catherine Lewis. My father's father was Kenneth Granger. And my grandmother's name is Dot."

“Dot,” Lady Malfoy repeated.

“Yes. Or Dotty.”

“Of?” the Countess asked.

“Of...Tufnell Park.”

“Tufnell Park?” The Dowager Countess’s brows rose. “Is it a very large estate?”

Hermione could have kicked herself. Tufnell Park had certainly been the property of some gentry member or other before it became a terraced London suburb.

“The apartments are very comfortable, My Lady.” Her grandmother’s flat was, anyway.

“I see.” Apparently mollified, the Countess settled back in her chair and folded her hands over her arm rests.

A cacophony erupted on the provisional Quidditch pitch as a Quaffle-only two-on-two match got underway. Tom Longbottom and his father shouted directions to one another, Draco groaned in protest, and Cassandra made a sound that was half bellow, half laugh, and entirely zoological.

“Mr. Granger and I will have you for that, Daddy!” she shouted. “Tom, you’re offsidess! Yes, you *can* be offsidess with four! The boundary is the elm—no, Tommy, you wretch, the big elm! I laid my boot just there in the grass!”

“I can only imagine how they’ll be once Will gets here.” Hermione fished a cherry from her glass, and bit it in half.

Cressida sat at an outermost table, remote and distracted. She’d hardly breathed a syllable all afternoon, and spent the last ten minutes prodding a bowl of chilled, sliced plums with a silver cocktail pick. Her eyes darted to Hermione, round as saucers.

“ *Will?* ”

Hermione gagged on a cherry. *Shite*. Unrelated early 19th century English men and women didn’t call one another by their first names unless they were very close indeed. She attempted to plaster it over. “I wonder where Mr. Avery could be? I’ve been looking forward to seeing him this afternoon.”

“I understand that he’s gone to London,” said Cressida. “I suppose he might not come at all today.”

“I’m certain he’ll be here,” said Hermione. “He made it quite clear on Monday evening that he meant to accept the invitation.”

The color drained from Cressida’s face. “He paid you a call? On Monday?”

Hermione had stumbled into another mistake, only she wasn’t sure what it was. “Yes,” she said cautiously. “He was...in the area. And stayed for dinner.”

“Cressy and I called on the Averys Monday afternoon,” said Penelope. “William’s mother said he was ill in bed.” She glanced back at Lady Malfoy and her mother, then made a subtle drinking gesture.

Sitting beside Penelope, Isadora studied Cressida with great compassion. “We all need rest and fresh air from time to time.”

“Yes, of course! He was out getting some fresh air, and happened to walk by the cottage.” Hermione shifted to the edge of her seat. “You know, I think I’ll pop inside and—”

“We went again Tuesday morning,” Penelope went on. “Mrs. Avery said William was out.” She lowered her voice. “It was clear in the subtext that he was *still* out. From the night before. Cressy made us wait a full hour, but he never came back.”

“I suppose he did call Monday and Tuesday, now that I think of it.” Hermione rattled her glass. “Two totally separate days of normal-length visits.”

“On Wednesday,” Penelope continued, “Cressy insisted we bring Mrs. Avery a bottle of Mother’s once-a-day vitality potion for the little boys, but as far as I’m concerned, the last thing those children need is greater vi—”

“Penny, my love,” said Isadora softly.

“Two days!” exclaimed Cressida. “How marvelous of William to be so attentive to his neighbors.”

Penelope dusted her fingertips over her plate and set it aside. “You didn’t think it was marvelous at the time.”

Snuff box weighing heavily in her pocket, more than ready to dash into the house and place it, Hermione paused and regarded Cressida.

The girl’s face had gone sheet-white, and unspilled tears filled her eyes. Hermione thought back across that morning. She hadn’t once seen Cressida flutter her velvet lashes at Draco. To the best of Hermione’s knowledge, she’d hardly taken notice of him: not when he arrived at the Hall looking achingly eligible, nor while he rode alongside their carriage, firm in the saddle, hands light on the reins. When he handed each young woman out of the carriage, Cressida, following Isadora’s ever-appropriate example, averted her eyes and thanked him with detachment.

For a creature whose bodily temple was built on an enviable foundation of radiant health and beauty, she looked wretched: her skin colorless, under-eyes dark, and posture slack. Hermione recognized grief when she saw it, and her heart panged in sympathy.

The poor thing had loved William after all, and loved him still. Draco was nothing more than a fortnight’s infatuation with a beautiful new face, a disease whose course was, while symptomatically acute, of short duration. Whether it was a natural exorcism, or the contrast, laid bare at the ball, between William’s loyalty and Draco’s indifference, the fever had broken. Hermione discerned that by grasping at a gaudy, paste gem crown, Cressida feared she had let go of something priceless, long worn close to her heart.

Hermione, however, had been privy to both convincingly daft demonstrations of William’s devotion, and the open flow of his frank confessions. He was a proud man, clear-eyed and pragmatic, but his love was the durable sort: deep-rooted, supple, able to bend in a squall without breaking.

“I’m sure he’ll come,” said Hermione. “He wouldn’t miss an opportunity to smash my brother with a Quaffle. We have that in common.” She stood, and felt the reassuring heft of the snuff box in her pocket. “Please excuse me.”

The Quidditch battle continued to produce worrisome background noise as Hermione skirted a menacing row of phallic topiary on her way into the house.

The Manor was a gilded place, more than a bit silly in the Baroque way. Magical painted alicorns

and podgy winged infant *putti* fluttered across the soaring ceilings, the babies' wriggling, rosy bottoms peeking through puffs of pink and yellow cloud. She crossed the marble floor as noiselessly as possible, moved through a candlelit passage, and found her way to the front hall.

Draco had mentioned that the second best drawing room was up the main stairway and through a door on the right.

Or was it on the left?

Except for the voices of the assembled guests outside, the great house was soundless. Trotting up the marble stairs on her slick boots, Hermione stumbled forward and caught herself before she met the steps chin-first. The instant she arrived home, she would put on joggers and a pair of trainers and do nothing for a week but run up staircases and leap over stiles.

The upstairs hall was cool and silent, lined by yards of exquisite, deep green Persian carpeting. Hermione looked left, then right. She and Draco had planned to place the box together, out of an excess of caution around the spectre of Draco's Spartan nemesis. She'd secretly believed his accounts of this elf to be embellished, even mythological. Alone in the quiet interior, she grew unsure.

As a test, she darted to the right, and grabbed the nearest door handle. It opened into a lemon-smelling utility closet housing brooms, buckets and feather dusters. No one leaped from the shadows to strike her legs. The next door led to a staircase with another door at the top, and the third door revealed a wood-paneled water closet reeking of hyacinth. Hermione returned to the center of the hall, and considered an oversized door facing the stairs. She looked and listened, and certain she was unobserved, slowly opened it. A loam and honey cigar scent rolled across the threshold as she took in a vast, high-ceilinged room lined with swagged velvet. A palatial gold and crystal chandelier over-hung rows of elegant-limbed chairs, and half a dozen sofas faced a titanic fireplace. Drawing rooms were cozy family spaces. She hadn't the slightest idea what this room was called, but it looked large enough to accommodate even the most heavily-attended sex parties. As she stepped backwards, pulling the door closed, she heard the crack of Apparition behind her.

"Can I help you, Miss?"

Hermione turned slowly on one heel.

An elf stood in the center of the hallway. He was younger than Grix, in early middle age, hale and stocky, wearing what looked like a length of black tablecloth. A hole had been cut in the middle, neatly hemmed, then the cloth draped over his head and tied about the waist with a silver braided cord. Its hem ended just above his knees, not at all unlike a Greek chiton. Hermione wouldn't have been half surprised if he drew a sword on her.

"Hello!" Hermione slid a hand into her pocket. "I'm looking for the toilet."

The elf's eyes narrowed. "Regrettably, the saloon does not offer those amenities."

"Oh, it's a *saloon*? Extraordinary."

"Indeed, Miss," said the elf dryly. He spoke in exaggerated Received Pronunciation, his voice deep and resonant. "The most convenient facilities for today's guests are located at both the east and west ends of the ground floor portrait gallery. If Miss will allow me to escort her there, I'm certain she will find them satisfactory."

"They're *downstairs*?" She squeezed the snuff box's bottom in frustration. "How silly of me."

Thank you very much, Mister . . .?”

The elf bowed his head. “Hiddy, Miss.”

So this was the fellow with the fire poker. He looked capable of clobbering a werewolf into submission; he’d have her and Draco knocked out in a trice. No wonder Draco hadn’t been in a hurry to pull off a reverse heist.

“I believe I can find my way there myself.” Hermione waited for the elf to Apparate away. But he remained, and they both stood in place, staring at one another.

“Well.” Hermione coughed. “I’ll jog along downstairs then, shall I?”

“As it pleases you, Miss.”

It looked like it would please Hiddy to chuck her back into the garden via the nearest window.

Hermione didn’t dare turn her back to him. His gaze trailed her as she scuttled sideways across the hall. He watched her mount the stairs, then attempt to appear natural while descending sidelong with her back to the elaborate marble bannister.

Down in the foyer, she gave him a limp parade wave.

She wandered the lower floor until she found an echoing portrait gallery filled with scores of constipated-looking, silver-haired Malfoys, and off this, a small washroom. Hand-painted cherubs flocked across the walls, only these *putti* were also little *puerī mingentēs*, the urinating boys of classical art, each smiling babe continuously peeing while it fluttered from wall to ceiling and back again as if to inspire houseguests’ shy bladders. Hermione estimated three minutes—ignoring a particularly friendly little fellow that fluttered incontinently beside her shoulder, smiling and waving a doughy hand—then made a show of casting her washing charms and exited the toilet.

Voices rose outside, Cassandra and Sir Thomas’s foremost among them, as though the Quidditch players had abandoned their game and carried their disputes off the field.

“Hiddy,” Hermione heard Miss Malfoy say, “Mr. Granger prefers a raspberry shrub. Please procure one for him.”

She’d provided the perfect distraction. Hiddy would be at his task, and Hermione could have another go at the upstairs drawing room. Best to move with caution where she might be perceived, then strike fast. She crept past the doors leading to the gardens, then broke into a tip-toed gallop across the foyer and threw herself headlong up the stairs.

She turned left down the hall, then began with the doors to her right. She discovered a reading room soaked in bright midday light from stately windows looking onto the garden. Next she found a coat closet, and had her hand on a third doorknob when the crack of displaced air made her jump halfway across the hall. She knew perfectly well what she would discover when she turned around, but the sight of Hiddy standing behind her—holding a frosty glass balanced on a small silver serving tray, three raspberries speared on a cocktail pick laid across the rim—made her jump a second time.

“If Miss finds herself in need of the water closet again,” he said, “perhaps I may offer my assistance, and walk her to the door.”

Hermione had never in her life heard such disdain blended with such perfect gentility.

“How did you even know I was up here?” she demanded.

“If I may be permitted”—Hiddy waited until Hermione shrugged in acquiescence—“Miss moves through the house like a war elephant equipped for an Alpine crossing.”

Hermione considered running evasive maneuvers around him, kicking down every door until she located the one she needed. She tried another tack.

“I’ve been led to understand, Mr. Hiddy, that the family has a very beautiful collection of *objet d’art* in the upstairs drawing room.”

Hiddy’s already ramrod posture straightened further. Hermione had struck an area of interest.

“They do *indeed*, Miss. The household possesses some of the world’s finest examples of 17th century pipe tampers, as well as numerous *étuis* of no small interest to the serious collector.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “One will find, on the far right end of the third shelf, some of the earliest known examples of Roman ear scoops, among which is the very scoop used by the wife of —” The elf stopped abruptly. “If Miss finds it convenient to return to the garden, it will be in my Mistress’s power to enlighten her as to the character of any additional areas of the house.”

She wasn’t sure whether she could even do it properly, or what impact, if any, it might have on this particular elf, but she tried making puppy eyes at him.

“I can’t imagine—which is to say, I shouldn’t dream of being so lucky as to find any here today...” She looked away and bit her lower lip, then swiveled her head back towards Hiddy and bent her brow in what she hoped was a pleading fashion. “It’s only that...I do so *passionately* adore a snuff box.”

The crown of Hiddy’s head soared to the noblest heights, and his heels snapped together with an audible click. Hermione glanced down. Lengths of woven twine strapped his feet to two well-oiled wooden spoon rests, his heels resting in the bowls.

“Miss.” His voice dropped to a grave and deferential hush. “My late Master possessed no fewer than *two hundred seventy eight* snuff boxes of great historical and artistic import. It may please you to hear that on his last visit before my late Master’s passing—may his soul rest in eternal peace—the Minister of Magic himself declared them to be *nonpareil*. ”

Hermione flattened her hand over her heart. “*No*.”

“Yes!” Hiddy countered, thrusting the tray into the air.

“Of course, my very favorite boxes are in the style of amusing animals,” said Hermione. “But I can’t imagine your Master had any of that sort.”

Hiddy swished the tray emphatically, splashing shrub over the side of the glass. “He most certainly did! His is the largest individual collection of zoological figures by Mistery Popper-Chawpley & Rosbottom.”

Hermione choked on her own in-breath. “The”—she had no idea what either a Popper-Chawpley or a Rosbottom was, and hazarded a guess—“silversmiths?”

“The very same! Lord Malfoy’s collection includes the only known example of a snuff box by that maker in the shape of a porpoise.” The elf pursed his lips and adjusted the raspberry spear. “It’s depicted smiling broadly in *mid-breach*. ”

“Oh! How *extraordinary*, ” gushed Hermione. “I should cherish the opportunity to see it!”

The elf studied her. Hermione supposed he was weighing whether to beat her shins and Floo the Auror Office or dazzle her with the invaluable grinning porpoise.

“Miss takes a particular interest in the family’s collections,” he said, rotating the cocktail pick with an air of menace.

As Hermione’s mouth opened and closed like a goldfish, Hiddy took a step closer. A carriage clattered in the drive, breaking the tension. Hiddy glanced at the front door. He adopted an expression of formal neutrality, then angled his elbow away from his body.

“If Miss would care to return to the garden, several varieties of seasonal ices will shortly be served.”

Hermione ran through her options, and found they'd dwindled down to nothing. At last, she sighed in defeat, and hooked her hand through Hiddy’s elbow. In an instant, he Apparated her from the cool, shaded hall and into the sun-warmed garden at a discreet remove from the tables.

The Quidditch players had returned, each of them sweaty save Martin, who hovered beside the elaborate food display goring a sandwich pyramid with a lethal two-pronged serving fork.

Hermione flopped disconsolately into her seat, picked up her drink and rattled the ice about. Sir Thomas and Tom reclined beside their wives, plainly exhausted, while Cassandra lay prone between Penelope and Isadora, breathing hard. On a blanket near Hermione’s feet, mopping his neck with a handkerchief, Draco leaned back on his elbows and peered up at her.

“Where have you been?” he asked.

“Nowhere.”

“I somehow don’t believe that—oh, shit.”

Without warning, Hiddy had cracked into being at Draco’s side, and bending forward at the waist, offered the raspberry shrub.

Draco reluctantly took it from the platter. “Thank you.”

Hiddy tucked the tray under his arm and bowed low, and when he rose, a look passed between him and Draco that communicated full and complete mutual knowledge that one of them was a criminal, and the other would, without hesitation, put the other in St. Mungo’s. Draco sniffed the glass. With eyes locked on Hiddy’s, he drank, long and slow, then swiped the back of his hand over his upper lip.

“Is it to my Lord’s liking?” Hiddy asked.

“*My Lord?* ” Hermione whispered.

“Yes, if you want to get technical about it,” Draco said under his breath. “Thank you.” He raised his glass to Hiddy. “I’m able to taste it.”

“I am most gratified to hear it, my Lord.”

It happened in a blink. In the instant before he Apparated away, Hiddy pointed two fingers at his own eyes, then turned them around and juttied them towards Draco. The next moment, he was

gone.

Draco shuddered, then nudged Hermione's boot with his elbow. "What have you been up to?"

"Nothing."

He rolled onto his side, plucked a loose thread from Hermione's hem, and flicked it into the grass.

"Did anything of interest happen while you were nowhere, doing nothing?"

"Nothing of interest to you, I'm sure. How was your Quidditch match? Had a lot of fun out there, I hope?"

"We left off at a draw," he said. "Cassandra may be inexperienced, but she's a clear and present bodily threat with a piece of sporting equipment. You'd never know Sir Thomas or poor Tom were blood relations the way she was chucking the Quaffle past their heads."

"I'm glad at least one of us was successful," said Hermione.

Draco frowned. "You didn't try to place the box on your own, did you? I'm telling you, that elf—"

A woman's voice sounded near the house.

"Charles! John! No shoving in company."

Sir Thomas, hair standing on end in post-athletic shock, twisted in his chair. "Here they are!"

Hermione followed his gaze. Charles and John Avery trotted shoulder to shoulder along the garden path. Each wore a pale blue linen suit with enormous buttons, waistbands up to their armpits, and frilly white collars spreading over their shoulders. Charles pinched a kite under his arm, and John carried a toy sailboat. As they bounced along, John inadvertently jostled into Charles, Charles jabbed John with an elbow, then both boys slapped one another's backs. Behind them, a frowning Mrs. Avery hauled James, dressed in a lace-trimmed frock, on her hip. Charles scratched beneath his collar as his mother, now half-jogging to keep up, snatched his free hand. She steered the boy in front of Lady and Miss Malfoy, set James on his feet, and directed John away from the lunch display and back to her side with a hard look.

"Lady Malfoy." Mrs. Avery curtsied. "Miss Malfoy."

"Welcome, imps!" Cassandra sat up on her knees and clapped. "You've brought a seaworthy vessel! Follow me!" She jumped to her feet and held out both hands.

"Boys." Mrs. Avery nudged John, who bowed. Once his brother submitted, Charles let his own head drop to his chest. Formalities over, they looked inquiringly at their mother. She nodded. They tore away, grabbed hold of Cassandra's hands, and whipped her down the steps at a gallop, sending strands of her hair flying loose.

"Oh, do be careful!" called Mrs. Avery.

"You've arrived on your own schedule, I suppose," said Lady Malfoy tartly.

Mrs. Avery blinked. "The extension of your invitation to the children was exceedingly generous, My Lady. I'm afraid when a person is six or seven years of age, situating one's feet in one's shoes is not without its complications."

Sucking on his fingers, James gripped his mother's dress and considered the assembled adults. One

after the other, he valued them each at naught, until at last he spied Draco. His face split in a half-moon grin, then he drew his mother's skirts about himself head to toe, and chortled invisibly.

"Don't think I can't see you there," said Draco. "Your feet are poking out."

The boy revealed his face, gave a choked shriek, and sank back inside. Muffled in the linen gown, he laughed some more. He spent some seconds twisting about and collecting himself before emerging quite serious and determined, and stomped towards Draco's blanket.

"Hello," Draco said as the baby drew near. "It's been a while."

James turned, flumped to his bottom, and leaned his head back into the crook of Draco's shoulder. Crossing his legs at the ankle like a tiny gentleman, he observed the party with his fingers in his mouth.

"What a presumptuous little person you are." Draco stroked a hand through the boy's cornsilk hair.

"Is Mr. William Avery able to join us today?" asked Miss Malfoy.

"Yes, the boys are seeing to the horses. Ah!" Mrs. Avery waved towards the house. "Here they come."

Cressida sat up, paler than she'd been yet, while Hermione tensed and began fiddling with her fichu.

Draco watched Hermione worry at her gown, then sighed and addressed the baby. "Shall we go down to the water and show them how to steer a craft?" When James assented, Draco gathered him in his arms, stood, and settled him on his hip.

Hermione gawped.

"What?" Draco asked, smoothing the baby's hair over its head. "Stop staring at me like I've just shown up to a Ministry function wearing jorts."

The baby settled his head on Draco's shoulder, a thin string of drool curling down his wrist, and considered Hermione.

"I'm not staring at you." Her mouth felt very dry, and she swigged the remainder of her drink. "Do you often hold children?"

"Why?" he asked. "Do I look like I do?"

Without answering, she chomped rapidly on an ice cube and examined a French knot on her gown. William Avery and Roland Weasley arrived, and each paid their respects to their hostesses, then greeted the rest of the party with easy warmth.

"Granger." William shook Draco's hand. "It's good to see you." He indicated James. "I gather you've been hand selected as vassal to our lord and master."

Cressida witnessed the exchange with evident confusion.

"It would seem so." Draco eyed Roland sidelong, then addressed William again. "Easy ride, I hope?"

"Yes," said William. "Father's roan enjoys making things difficult for the rest of us, but naturally Rolly's a great favorite." He tugged the hem of a glove. "Was your ride comfortable, Miss

Penelope?"

William didn't once look at Cressida, while Cressida's dark, sad eyes never strayed from William's face.

Penelope, seemingly aware she'd been dragged between them, grimaced. "Nelly-carriage is in a state. But I wasn't sick this time."

"Might I sit, Miss Granger?" Roland indicated the empty chair at Hermione's table.

Hermione dragged her attention from her skirt's fascinating white-on-white floral motifs and met his eyes. Their welcoming blue had lost none of its sweet familiarity.

"Of course," she said.

Roland removed his topper and sat, offering Hermione a smile both broad and intimate. With his long legs folded before him and hat dangling easily from a fingertip, he looked at home in himself without an ounce of arrogance. "I'm very pleased to see you again, Miss Granger."

"I'm pleased to see you as well, Mr. Weasley."

Draco shifted towards the stairs. "Is it alright if I take this chap down to the water?"

"Yes, of course," said Mrs. Avery. "I refreshed everyone's buoyancy charms this morning."

"You did," agreed William.

"Excellent. Though you're not to fall in, infant." He grimaced when James hooked a fingertip into his lower lip and probed his bottom teeth. "Thank you," he slurred, then tugged the toddler's hand from his mouth and waved it at Martin. "Make yourself useful and get Martin's attention. Ho there, cousin!"

Martin hoisted his spear, tipped with a chicken sandwich. "Malfo!"

"Care to join us lakeside?" When James clapped his hand over Draco's mouth, Draco drew back and pretended to gnaw on his fist like an apple, which made the child throw his head back and laugh from deep in his belly. "Can you cast a wind spell?"

"Can I?" Martin tossed the fork and sandwich onto the table, drew his wand, and zoomed after them. "I'll blow their man down!"

As Draco and James retreated down the steps and Martin closed the distance, William joined Cressida's table at the party's far edge. "You should go with them," he said to her. "You were always especially handy with a steering spell."

Cressida's chin trembled. "I'd like to stay."

"Oh, look!" said Miss Malfoy. "Hiddy's bringing out the ices."

Roland leaned close to Hermione. "Which flavor can I bring you?"

"Chocolate for me," said a man behind them. Healer Bartholomew stepped into view holding his jacket over his arm, then approached the Dowager Countess and Miss Malfoy and kissed their hands. "What a fine and pleasant day for a party with two such fine and pleasant ladies."

"Indeed!" Miss Malfoy agreed. "Which is to say, the day is very fine." She twittered anxiously and

indicated the seat nearest herself. "Please, Mr. Bartholomew, come and sit with Mother and me."

Bartholomew obliged, taking his seat with a lack of ceremony and accepting the cold drink an elf pressed into his hand.

"It is a very fine day," echoed William. "I think I'll go for a walk." He got up, leaving his jacket and hat behind, and crossed the garden in long strides.

"Care for company, Avery?" called Tom Longbottom. "If you'll only wait a moment, I'd be pleased to join you."

William looked back, casting the briefest glance at Cressida. "By no account would I take you from your wife." Within seconds, he reached the bottom of the terrace, and stalked towards the eastern woods.

The food had all disappeared, and been replaced with painted porcelain cups and chilled bowls of ice cream in different flavors. Hiddy presided over two elves standing at attention, armed with silver scoops.

"Well, I'm certainly not waiting on anyone." Penelope hopped up to peruse the spread.

"I'm pleased to see you again," Hermione said to Bartholomew. "I didn't realize you knew the family."

Lady Malfoy accepted a cup from an elf and regarded its contents with suspicion. "Bartholomew is personal Healer to both Lucretia and myself, and provided the same service for my dear late husband. He is, without a doubt, the greatest practitioner in the country."

"Thank you, this looks delicious," said Bartholomew as an elf handed him a cup. "While there are other talents equal to and greater than my own, My Lady's compliments will always be acceptable to an old man of nine and forty like myself."

"No false modesty here, Bartholomew." Sir Thomas approached the dessert table and hooked an arm around Penelope's waist. "You cleared Professor Stroud's arterial congestion mid-crisis on the Wizengamot floor, and rescued the Minister from an intractable malaise." He squinted at a placard. "Penny, my dove of peace, they've got orange cream. We're set."

"You have a blossoming Healing talent in your own household," said Bartholomew. He tilted his head and smiled at Cressida, who fixated on her teacup. Savoring a spoonful of his dessert, he considered her with ongoing amusement, then set his cup aside and fetched a letter from his jacket pocket. "I have something here which I believe will be of no small interest to you, Miss Cressida."

"What nonsense is this?" asked Lady Malfoy.

Bartholomew held out the letter until Cressida rose and retrieved it. She stood before the Countess and Miss Malfoy's table looking to her mother and then her father for approval.

Sir Thomas shooed a hand at her. "Go on, then."

Cressida sat on the blanket beside Isadora, unsealed the letter and began to read.

"Do you know what's going on?" Hermione whispered to Roland.

"I haven't the foggiest," he said.

As Cressida's eyes traveled over the letter, her expression shifted from perplexion to profound shock. She reached the end, examined the blank back side, then flipped it over and read it again. Once she'd finished, the letter fell from her fingers, then she clapped her hands over her mouth and began to cry.

Bartholomew beamed.

"My darling, what is it?" asked Isadora. "Might I look at it?" Upon Cressida's assent, she read the letter and gasped. After reading it once more, she took Cressida in her arms, crushing the parchment between them.

Penelope crossed to her sisters, drew the letter from Isadora's hand, and read it for herself. She faced Bartholomew and held the parchment up. "Is this your doing?"

"I'm afraid the decision wasn't down to me," he said. "I only had a hand in it."

"Someone will inform me as to what's happening," commanded Lady Malfoy.

Hermione felt fit to burst from curiosity herself.

Penelope handed the letter to her father. "I could kiss you," she said to Bartholomew, then laid her hands on his shoulders and did just that.

"Let's have a look at what all the fuss is about, you silly gels." Sir Thomas held the letter at arm's length and cleared his throat. "Dear Miss Cressida Longbottom—that's you, piglet!" He waved the letter at Cressida before he went on. "On behalf of the St. Mungo's College of Healing Arts, I am pleased to offer you a place in the Healer Training Program, a four-year course. St. Mungo's College is world renowned—" Sir Thomas looked up from the paper. "Cressy! Come here immediately!"

Cressida left her sister's arms and flew into her father's, showering his cheeks with kisses before swirling away into Tom's happy embrace, and at last her mother's.

"You should have told us, *mon biquet*," said Lady Longbottom, stroking her daughter's hair.

"I didn't know." Cressida hiccuped. "I swear, I hadn't the slightest notion of any such thing."

"Did you not make an application?" asked Sir Thomas. "Bartholomew! Explain!"

Red-faced in the wake of Penelope's display of gratitude, Bartholomew removed his spectacles, wiped his brow, then replaced them. "Will you accept, Miss Cressida?"

"With all my heart," said Cressida. "If my father permits—"

"I permit all!" cried Sir Thomas. "Go and have a great heap of ices, you brilliant little fool."

"I'm sorry to own that I was not the chief author of this development," said Bartholomew. "I received a visitor in my London offices on Thursday, on business he insisted was urgent."

"*Oh*." Roland laid a hand over his mouth, hiding a smile that cut across his entire face. "Good man."

"I had, of course, witnessed firsthand your extraordinary skill in Mr. Granger's sickroom," Bartholomew continued. "I'm ashamed to admit it never entered my mind that you might wish to pursue formal education in the discipline. It wasn't until Mr. William Avery demanded I hear him

out on the matter that I became enlightened.”

Cressida shook her head as if to deny what he'd said, then laid her hand over her heart and burst into a fresh round of sobs.

“He offered a prolonged and impassioned defense of your special genius,” said Bartholomew.

“Afterward, he forcefully—and I dare say without necessity, in my case—championed the cause of your entire sex. The universal application of his principles is admirable.”

Mrs. Avery glowed with pride.

“Those little boys ought to be much nicer to their brother,” muttered Hermione.

Roland laughed. “They really should.”

“He ended his appeal by reminding me that I owe his father a great favor, which he meant to call in on your behalf. Any implicit threat to my person or the board was, I'm sure, unintentional. I reassured him he needn't go so far. I made application to the board on Friday, citing your formidable N.E.W.T.'s and my own observations of your talents. I'm now honored to be the bearer of the offer you have in hand.”

“Mr. Bartholomew, am I to understand that Miss Cressida Longbottom has been admitted to the Healer's College?” asked the Countess.

“Yes, Mother. That's exactly what's happened,” said Miss Malfoy. “Hiddy, please bring Mother's salts, she looks unwell.” She dabbed her sweaty lip with her serviette, then angled her ice cream cup towards the nearest elf. “I'd like to try the honey lavender next.”

Hermione made short work of a scoop of the same, and Roland had three helpings of cherry vanilla. Afterwards, Roland took Tom up on his offer of Wizard Chess. He accepted Penelope's open interference over her brother's shoulder with equanimity until they relieved his army of a knight.

"Come and help me, Miss Izzy," he said.

Isadora demurred. "You're a master, Mr. Weasley. You have no need of my assistance."

"I should like it all the same." Roland disarmed her with a coaxing smile. "Your brother can't be the only player enjoying unfair advantage."

Visibly flustered, Isadora put on her spectacles and drew a chair beside him. After studying the board, she said, "Queen to B4."

"Why?" Rolly frowned at the pieces.

"Look at—" Isadora cupped a hand around his ear and whispered, then drew away. "Just there, do you see?"

"Oh, indeed. If he—" Roland spoke into her ear.

Isadora nodded, blushing furiously.

Rolly reached for his queen. " *Very* clever."

Penelope rested her head on her brother's shoulder and sighed. "That's us done for, Tommy."

As the rest of the party dissolved to tour the gardens and admire the family portraits, Hermione studied the upper story windows, running her hand in agitation over the outside of her pocket. She was sure she only imagined the twitch of a heavy curtain overhead, but there was nothing for it. Left with little to accomplish except leisure, she slipped quietly down the terrace and walked along the green, following the curve of the lake.

She picked out Draco, Martin, Cassandra and the little boys in silhouette against the water's glare. Cassandra sat shoulder deep in the lakeside grass with her wand out, working wildflowers and greenery into a thick rope. The toy boat bobbed at anchor, and the kite hovered aloft, its string pinned to the ground with a spell. Draco held James against his chest, facing out, his wand clutched in the boy's fist and showering sparks in a shifting fountain of colors. They chased after Charles and John, standing crowded together on the runnerboard behind Martin's chair. The boys clung white-knuckled to the handles while the professor whipped them through serpentine evasions, the chair leaning precariously around each turn, Martin blasting puffs of sulphurous yellow smoke from his wand with tiny booms like miniature cannon fire.

Hermione paused at the edge of the wood and watched the battle unfold. It appeared evenly matched, until Draco's foot tangled in the kite string. The boys issued barbaric yawps, leaped from Martin's chair, and rushed Draco before he could free himself, grappling with his legs then hanging from his arms until he fell to the ground with a theatrical wail. In the jaws of defeat, James went turncoat and assisted his brothers by repeatedly sitting on Draco's chest, pounding him into obedience with his rump. John snatched Draco's wand from James and ran it to Martin, who pointed it skyward, pouring golden sparks of victory over all of them while Cassandra guffawed and soundly applauded.

Hermione knew she ought to collect Draco and force him to take action with the snuff box. But so rare was his throaty laugh, reverberating over the green, she couldn't bear the thought of being the one to make it stop. They had nothing but time: scores and heaps and acres of it, hours, weeks, or even years if it came to it; as much as they could ever want and more. Their future awaited them, forever patient.

Coming over lightheaded, she stepped out of the sun and into the shaded wood. For some time, she walked a groomed forest path parallel to the shoreline. Where the lake bottlenecked into a narrow channel, she crossed a stone bridge, then passed a white-columned temple folly on a mound overlooking the water. Beyond it, the walk constricted and then branched promiscuously and without apparent purpose. The wild, thready trail she followed up the side of a low ridge was certainly more for deer than people. Short of breath and abominably sweaty after scrambling to the crest, she sat on an obliging log and snapped her fan open. Just ahead, a tangle of shrubs and honeysuckle bordered a sloping wildflower meadow awash in jewel-bright, waist-high tides of asters, poppies, cornflowers and coreopsis. Beyond the waves lay a panorama of patchworked farmland rolling towards the horizon under a cloud-stippled Aegean sky. Had she been alone, Hermione would have waded out to drown in that heady, sun-drunk proliferation. But at the meadow's horizon, swallowed to the hip in the blooming surf, dark hair raked by a breeze, William looked out over the landscape. Hermione considered whether to announce herself, and had just determined to do so when a white-draped figure emerged from the woods along the meadow's opposite side.

It was Cressida. Hermione froze. She knew she ought to go, but in the sluggish atmosphere, scented with honeysuckle and dry summer grass, she was slow to rise. Cressida looked easy and luminous, her cheeks warmed by the climb. Her bonnet dangled from her fingers by its ribbons, and the great weight of her hair sat loosely gathered at the back of her head. As though deliberating, she lingered for a great while before wading through the rippling flower sea in tentative steps. In the center of the meadow, she hesitated once more, her anxiety betrayed by the

rapid rise and fall of her chest. Before she could turn away, William glanced over his shoulder.

They might have exchanged any number of words: apologies; explanations; denials; declarations.

But they remained silent amidst the roiling splendor, that primordial fountainhead pouring its living water over the edge of the world. Hermione had never seen Cressida more radiant. She wasn't a breathless, apprehensive girl, but a divine spirit birthed from the foam to steal a terrestrial hour, her lips half parted, her face upturned, catching the generous summer light and reflecting it back with the whole and astonishing wonder of love. William drew his hands from his pockets and stalked through the flowers. He came to her as a doubtless lover, sweeping her into his arms, and without apology or hesitation, he kissed her.

Cressida slackened in his hold as though she'd succumbed in a swoon, then all at once, she came to life and cleaved to him, threading her hands through his hair and answering his fervency with her own. William lifted her from the ground and spun her across the meadow, kissing her on her mouth; her cheeks; her long, laughing throat.

In her covert bower, Hermione turned her face away in respect of their privacy, and for reasons she scarcely understood, she wept. Tears clouded her retreat down the deer path, and fogged her vision as she retraced her irregular path back to the folly by the lake. In no fit state to rejoin the picnic, she sat on the folly's mildewed steps and tried to collect herself. There was no reason to cry. She considered that she ought to feel overjoyed. The landscape hummed with fecundity. Youth and beauty stood triumphant astride the world. Love was possible—probable, even—wherever its seeds took purchase in fertile hearts. Every tangible thing seemed to rise in a universal affirmation of hope and renewal. It was in that spirit that she drew the snuff box from her pocket, perched it on her knees, and joined it in gazing out over the distorted, shimmering lake and the blurred, shifting, sliding green line of the forest beyond.

On the third day of spring, unusually fine for March, the Weasley Sunday dinner was held early and outside, on a pair of weather-grey wooden tables placed end to end in the garden.

Following the meal, Hermione stood outside the rusted steel gate in the rose hedge, balling her fists inside the sleeves of Ron's hooded sweatshirt, DMLE printed in block letters across the chest. Behind her, crockery and silverware clattered as Fleur, Harry and Percy cleared the tables and brought the dishes inside. She inhaled and made for the glittering band of the river, shining copper in the waning afternoon. The knee-high grass rasped against her jeans as she walked, but if Ron heard her approach, he didn't acknowledge it. She joined him on a bench at the riverbank, knees folded up and legs covered with the jumper, and watched him flick rocks across the surface of the water.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

Ron opened his hand and examined a cluster of flat rocks in his palm before selecting one, reeling his arm back, and hurtling it towards the middle of the river.

"I didn't—" Hermione tucked her chin over her knees, rocked on her bum, and laid her hand on his back. At her touch, his shoulders jolted. Hermione bit her lip so she wouldn't cry. "I just panic sometimes. You know that."

“Yeah.” His voice was congested and uneven. “I know that.”

“It wasn’t anything to do with us.”

“I wish you’d been able to see the look on your face.” He sniffed, and rubbed his nose with the back of his wrist.

Hermione pressed her face into his arm, breathed him in, and began tracing circles between his shoulder blades with the pads of her fingers. She tried, knowing it would fail, to laugh it off.

“Your parents were married in 1969. I’m sorry to say it, but your mother’s veil is a bit startling.”

“You looked *ill*.”

“I just wasn’t expecting it.” Even as she wrapped her arms around his waist, she felt as if the warm, beautiful body she knew almost as well as her own was slipping away from her. She waited for the reciprocal loop of his arm around her shoulders, but it never came. “And then everyone wanted me to try it on, and—”

“I want four kids, Mione.”

Hermione’s skin prickled with adrenaline. “What?”

“I want four children.”

“You’ve always said you want three. I want one. Two is the compromise.”

“Yeah.” He wiped his palms across his cheeks, and they came away visibly wet. “But I actually want three. When I’m young.” His jaw muscles tensed. “So they can grow up with their cousins.”

The earth shifted, and a network of fault lines spread across Hermione’s heart.

“And then I want to have a fourth,” he went on. “On accident, once the others are mostly grown. When we’re a bit old for it.” He leaned forward and laced his fingers behind his neck. Face hidden between his arms, he began to cry out loud.

“We should go home.” Her mind began to drift away from her body, and she let it. While her voice remained level and cool, she couldn’t do anything to stop the steady flow of tears coursing down her cheeks and darkening Ron’s jumper in irregular patches. “So we can talk about this some more.”

Neither of them moved. The sun followed the sky’s downward curve, the tired daylight stuttering upstream as the river poured westward. The wind picked up. Hermione watched the grass on the opposite bank dip and rise, and rubbed half-conscious circles into Ron’s back.

“I grew up with you, Hermione.” He curled into himself, a nautilus of self-protection, and let out a soft, exclamatory gasp. “I grew up *for* you.” After that, he couldn’t speak, and instead, wracked with spasms, he sobbed.

She held him tight, like he might go skipping out over the river and be carried away from her by a current towards the sea.

After long minutes, his breathing slowed and became more regular.

“Let’s go home,” she said.

He rubbed his sleeve over his eyes. "I want to be spontaneous sometimes. Even about important things."

Back at the Burrow, George and Harry laughed hard, and Hermione turned to look. They had both doubled over beside the unvarnished tables in the gnome-infested garden, George's hand resting on Harry's shoulder. In a few short weeks, the rose bushes would bud and flower. There would be Quidditch matches in the paddock. George would let Bill's children test his fireworks. Sunday dinners would always be outside. Whatever spells stitched the house together would be reset, that summer and the next, and the next after that. There would be more children, too—George and Angelina's, Harry and Ginny's, Percy's and maybe even Charlie's, and one day, hers and Ron's, a family baled together with magic and wishful thinking, just like the house. And she was part of it.

"We're spontaneous," she whispered.

"I want plans that change when we change. I want *some* degree of risk."

"I want those things, too."

Ron nodded, his focus wandering in the fields on the other side of the river. "But you don't want them here. You don't want them with me."

Hermione had the unaccountable sensation that she'd tumbled over the edge of a great height and was falling. Though she felt the breeze against her face, and saw it filter through the grass, there was no air for her to breathe. The voice that left her wasn't her own. It was a nearly soundless, meaningless exhalation. It was nothing.

"Please stop."

"You want them there." He looked at her at last. Even red-rimmed and swollen, tensed with pain and conviction, his eyes—blue and warm—felt like the welcoming threshold of home. "You want them with him."

Hermione found Draco, Martin and the little boys on the manor's lower terrace. Draco lounged in the grass eating a plum, crowned with a dense wreath of yellow primroses, ferns, and soft purple Nigella. He looked positively Bacchanalian, hair a windblown tangle and his clothes rumpled. Charles and John lay on their bellies beside him staring into an enormous glass jar stuffed with sticks and leaves. Martin tootled along the gravel walk, wispy white hair fluttering underneath a flower crown of his own, with James on his knee. The boy steered the chair in jerking movements, with occasional surreptitious corrections from the professor to slow sudden accelerations and prevent them from ramming into the balustrade.

"Alright, Granger?" Draco shielded his eyes as she approached. "Merlin, you're not." He leaped up, hurled the half-eaten plum beneath a topiary bush, and barred her way on the gravel walk.

"If you'll excuse me." Hermione tried to push past him, but he cupped her elbow.

"You look really unwell," he insisted. "Do you feel hot? Have you been drinking enough water? Hold on, are you—" He curled a finger under her chin and studied her face. "Have you been crying?"

"Of course I haven't." She turned to the little boys. "Who do you have in there?"

Charles rummaged deep in the jar and fetched out a nobbly grey-brown toad. "This is William Wartwilliam, 6th Earl Bufonidus, Toadmaster General," he said. "We found him warting around in the grass, and the professor conjured us a jar."

"We want to take him home with us," said John, "but Mr. Granger is going to make us put him back because of conversation."

"Conservation," said Draco.

"And we're not to touch him 'cause he's got glands." John reached across his brother to stroke the toad's toes. "I think his glands are splendid. Look, Charles, he's winking at us again."

When they became absorbed in the toad's eye movements, Hermione pushed Draco's hands away and glanced around the terrace. Confident they were unobserved, she drew the snuff box from her pocket and shoved it into his chest. "I've tried twice. I have no idea where your God forsaken drawing room is, and Hiddy clearly has wards laid over the entire house." She dragged her palms down her cheeks in frustration. "All I've learned is that your great- *ad infinitum* grandfather had a thing for ear scoops."

"Ear scoops." Drao recoiled. "Oh, good God, is that what those are? That's disgusting."

"I'm told he has an exceptionally rare porpoise up there as well. It's cavorting."

Draco stared at her, jaw clenching as the gears turned in his mind. "I'm sorry," he said finally. "Obviously I wasn't thinking." He tested the weight of the snuff box in his palm. Still pondering, his gaze jumped from the house, to the gardens, to the distant tables on the lawn where the Dowager Countess held court. His eyes traveled between Martin and the little boys, who'd begun arguing over the stick arrangement in their makeshift terrarium, and his expression shifted.

"Why didn't I think of that before?" He tossed the snuff box and snapped it out of the air overhand before sliding it into his trouser pocket, where it disappeared without a trace.

Hermione stared at his hips. "Expansion spell?"

"Yes, of course."

"Your emergency Time Turner was going to ruin the lines of your suit, was it?"

Draco scowled at her. "We moved on from that weeks ago, Granger. Aveyrs!" He waved the boys over, drawing his wand and crouching as they approached.

The children squatted beside him in a three-way confabulation.

"You must not tremble or otherwise show your fear," he began, voice low, "but cast your eyes aft and observe." He glanced back over his shoulder at Martin and James. "A sloop approaches, flying the Jolly Roger."

"Pirates!" gasped John, so stimulated by the news he hopped forward once like a frog. "Are they bloodthirsty?"

"All pirates are bloodthirsty," said Draco. "On account of their mustaches."

Deep within Hermione, a thousand butterflies took flight.

Charles was skeptical. “How thirsty are these *particular* pirates?”

“They're parched.” Draco screwed up his face and drew his thumb across his neck. The brutal mimicry was only somewhat spoiled by the abundance of primroses still circling his head. “The HMS Warty William is under threat, and it's up to you to defend her.”

“And you're our captain?” Charles asked warily.

“No, Captain!” Draco shook his head. “You are, Captain.”

“I'm boatswain,” said John. “What are you?”

“Ordinary seaman. But I have it on good authority that our armory is well stocked.”

Martin tootled up, jerking to a halt just before his chair slammed into Draco's backside. James slid off his lap, crouched beside Draco, and began sifting handfuls of gravel through his fists.

"Shh." Draco pressed a finger to his lips. "They're close."

“Who's close?” Martin whispered.

“You. You're a pirate,” Draco informed him.

“Ah.” Martin shut one eye and sneered. “Hands off me booty!”

“Do I get a wand?” John asked.

“Far better,” said Draco. “You get a sword.”

Hermione crossed her arms. “I don't know what you think you're doing, but if you're going to tangle yourself up in more nonsense, give me back the box. I'll do it myself.” She held out her hand.

Draco squinted at her. “The Commodore expects loyalty, you swabs. Any man who abandons his post is for the gallows.”

James taste-tested a fistful of gravel and bobbed his bottom gamely.

“I don't support capital punishment,” said Hermione. “Anyway, one of the primary drivers of imperial expansion is the very nationalism and militarism which—”

“Before the gallows,” Draco interrupted, “it's thumbscrews and spoiled rations. Listen very carefully.” He drew his wand, and used it to sketch a rectangle in the gravel. He tapped its center, then swept his arm back, indicating the manor house. “You see our ship before you.”

Martin craned over Draco's shoulder, scrabbling at his flower crown when it fell over his eyes. “She's a three-mast schooner. Man the rigging! Powder the keg hole!”

“Up the foyer stairway”—Draco zigzagged his wand tip through the rectangle—“through the service stairs to the second story, and down the hall to the right. Behind the fourth door on the left, here”—he drew an X on his diagram and tapped it—“you'll find our cutlasses.”

“Have we any horses?” asked John.

“Naturally,” said Draco. “Our weapons are kept in a crate near the hearth. Right beside the horses.”

“And then we’ll kill every pirate that’s ever lived,” said Charles.

“Thrust and parry,” Martin offered.

Draco tucked his wand away. “At least the wicked ones.” He aimed a puckish look at Hermione. “Now pay your respects to the Commodore.”

John jumped to his feet and saluted her, then Charles followed suit. Draco raised his brow at her expectantly.

Hermione huffed and rolled her eyes, then pointed at the house. “Gentlemen! Tally-ho!” Her arm slackened. “Do sailors say *tally-ho* ?”

It didn’t matter. Whether in pursuit of foxes or pirates, the boys charged up the terrace steps at full speed. Martin shot after them, pausing at each flight of stairs to angle his chair back and levitate up them with a bumpy, laborious lack of haste.

“Now that you’re finished with your little romanticised conflict scenario,” said Hermione, “I hope you’ll be able to focus on an actual plan.”

“Here, hold this.” Draco had hoisted James by the armpits, and settled him in Hermione’s arms. Before she could say a word, he grasped her hand, and dragged her towards the house at a jog.

“Where are we going?” she asked breathlessly.

"To plant a badger," he answered. When they caught up with Martin, he let go of her hand. "Shall I push you, cousin?"

Martin released his steering toggle, and the chair began to slide backwards. "Fly me to the moon, my boy!"

Draco ran Martin’s chair up the final rise, then returned to Hermione, clutched her hand, and drew her after him. On the house level terrace, he took James from Hermione and plunked him in Martin’s lap. A cacophony of boyish shrieks and disconcerting thumps issued from the manor’s open windows, rising and falling in pitch in a doppler effect as the noise moved from one end of the house to the other.

Cassandra sat behind Penelope, weaving wildflowers through her sister’s hair to match the ones threaded through her own. “Where are you all off to?”

“Can I interest you in a sea battle, Miss Cassandra?” Draco asked.

Cassandra settled a poppy behind Penelope’s ear, bundled her skirts in her fists and went trotting towards the house. “Who’s the aggressor?”

“Pirates,” said Draco. “Especially murderous ones.”

“Heave ho and bring a spring upon ‘er, lass!” With James reclining against him, Martin zipped towards the French doors standing open to the terrace. “No prey, no pay!”

The Countess’s teacup clattered in its saucer. "All afternoon I’ve heard of nothing but subduing crocodiles, women performing unlicensed surgical interventions, and recruiting innocent children into piracy." She picked up her cup, paused it just before her lips, and clanked it down again. “It’s quite shocking.”

“Are you having new robes made for Miss Parkinson's wedding, My Lady?” asked Mrs. Avery. “I saw the most tantalizing bolt of wine-colored velvet in Fernberry’s when Mr. Avery and I were in London last week.”

Lady Malfoy blinked wetly like the Countess Bufonidus. “I never wear red.” She rotated her teacup minutely. “I find one rather resembles a tomato.”

Mrs. Avery took a long draught of her own tea, and, catching Hermione’s eye, sent a maternal wink over the rim.

Draco tugged Hermione into the house after Cassandra and Martin disappeared through the doors. Hermione meant to head straight through to the foyer, but Draco stopped abruptly and yanked her behind a potted orange tree. He tugged her tight against his chest and laid a finger across his lips.

“Shh.”

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Just listen.”

For a moment, Hermione only heard the irregular patter of small, incautious feet along the upper floors. Then from the foyer, a roar of ferocious intensity.

“Aaarrrrgggghh!” rumbled Cassandra.

Two high, shrill screams followed, and more thumps.

“Run a shot across the bow, gunner!” Cassandra yelled. “Let these sons of biscuit eaters know they’re about to be plundered!”

One of Martin’s miniature cannon booms ricocheted off the marble.

“Is this your plan?” Hermione asked. “Sack your own house?”

“You know what’s funny, is that there’s still an orange tree right here. I wonder if it’s the same one.” Draco examined the tree’s glossy foliage. “And no, ye of no faith whatsoever, that is *part* of my plan. I’ve told the little boys the wrong room. They’ll be looking for the nursery, but it should take them a while.”

“Your family keeps swords in the nursery, does it?”

“That’s a standard piece of child-rearing equipment, yes.” Draco’s brow furrowed. “I thought the Weasleys had one or two of them running about as examples.”

Martin’s voice reverberated in the entry. “Hoist me up the mizzen, lassie! Set fire to the poop deck!”

“Come on.” Taking her hand again, Draco slipped through a narrow door in the corner, then whipped her through a series of low-ceilinged, labyrinthine service passages, finally emerging beside the front stairs. He took her in his arms and flattened them both in the corner, where they had a side view of the staircase.

With Cassandra’s muscle behind him, Martin bumped to the top of the stairs and jetted out of view, issuing a salvo of blasts from his wand.

“Why don’t we Disillusion ourselves?” Hermione asked.

“I tried during one of my burglaries, and the elf saw right through it.” At the sound of Apparition overhead, Draco’s arm tensed around her waist, crushing the snuff box between them. “We can’t Apparate, either. That’s the surest way to get shinned. We’ll have to run it. Are you game? I could do it alone.”

“Of course I’m game,” said Hermione. “I’ve already tried it twice, haven’t I?”

The cries and hollers above increased for a moment, then dampened. Hermione clenched her fists in Draco’s waistcoat. Together, they counted silently, only their lips moving.

One, two, three...

...eight, nine, ten.

“Now,” Hermione whispered.

She pushed out of his grip and ran as quietly as she was able, swinging around the gaudy marble newel post and hurtling herself up the stairs. Draco ran close behind, his hand brushing hers on the banister.

At the top of the stairs, Draco hooked an arm around her middle and bundled her along the hall, keeping close to the walls and continually scanning the passageways before and behind them.

A heavy boom on the floor above made the walls rattle, then there was a series of solid clatters near at hand. Behind a door to their right, someone shouted, “Bollocks!”

Draco backtracked, threw open the nearest door, pulled Hermione inside, and slammed it shut.

Hermione hardly had time to register that they were standing in the dark inside what felt like a coat closet when the hallway filled with quick, tromping footfalls, and Cassandra and Martin’s conspiratorial muttering.

“Is your eye alright?” she asked.

“Fireproof lenses, lass! Oh, dear, they’re coming.”

More steps, and a door swung open, then clicked shut. As soon as it had closed, sudden small marching strides arrived, pounding in one direction down the hall, then the other.

Hermione’s eyes adjusted, and in the thin band of light leaking under the door, the space around her came into focus. She examined the racks to either side, filled entirely with same-length black wool robes, then lifted up on her toes and spoke in Draco’s ear. “How many sets of dress robes does one person need?”

Draco fingered a sleeve hanging beside him, then pressed his mouth to her earlobe. “Need is subjective. On the other hand, my wants feel perfectly objective.”

Heat arced from Hermione’s sternum and down into her pelvis.

“I’m sure they do.”

The little footsteps stopped just beyond their door.

“They’ve got to be close,” said Charles. “I can smell a pirate.”

“So can I,” agreed John. “Cabbage and bilge water.” He gasped. “He’s coming!”

“If the young Masters Avery would please remove themselves to the garden and into their mother's care, they will find a fresh supply of cakes on the terrace.”

Hermione's pulse spiked, and she mouthed *Hiddy*.

“Whot ho, bucko!” Charles shouted. “This is no place for the cook! Below decks and tie down the crockery!”

“What kind of cake?” John asked.

“The young Master will, without doubt, be enticed by lemon, spice, and a confection in cocoa, as well as French *macarons* and a renewed selection of fresh fruits.”

“Why've you hidden a stoker behind your back?” John asked.

“To what does the young Master refer?” asked Hiddy.

“I can see it,” John insisted. “Poking right out of your nice Roman dress.”

“Ah, yes. I had quite forgotten,” said Hiddy. “One of the fires in the downstairs drawing room requires tending.”

“You're not going to wallop the professor with it, are you?” asked Charles. “He doesn't have a sword yet, so it wouldn't be right.”

Down the hall, the sound of James' laughter bubbled in muted waves, like it was happening behind several closed doors. Then all at once, the hall exploded in a maelstrom of booms, screams, and violent exclamations both threatening and delighted.

“If Miss and the Professor would please make their way back down the stairs—Miss! Miss, your skirts are aflame! *Exstinguo!*” Whatever Hiddy said next was overpowered by the sound of Martin coughing and James laughing at the top of his lungs. “If the Professor would be pleased to slow to an appropriate speed for indoor travel, I should be most gratified to—Professor! Should the child be holding a wand?”

Hermione clapped both hands over her mouth to stifle her own laughter as the pandemonium moved down the hall and gradually diminished.

They waited for a long time, listening to the ongoing bluster one or two floors above, then Hermione gripped the door handle behind her.

“On ten,” she whispered.

One, two, three...

...eight, nine, ten.

She twisted the knob, and they both stumbled into the hallway. Draco snagged her hand and guided her down the hall. They hooked left around a corner, ran to the end of the next passage, then turned right, jogging lightly along a vast corridor.

“Just here,” Draco said quietly over his shoulder. “On the right.”

He indicated a set of closed double doors almost within arm's reach, so close Hermione already felt the rush of a job well done. They stuttered to a halt, and Draco reached for the handle, nearly closing his fingers around it when both doors swung open with a whoosh of air.

Primed by her earlier weeping, hot tears of frustration stung Hermione's eyes. Miss Malfoy stood before them, in all aspects a harmless, genial sort of person, smiling her obliging smile, cheeks round and pink and shining.

Hermione could have throttled her.

"Miss Granger!" Miss Malfoy exclaimed. "Mr. Granger! Hello." She clutched a leather-bound book to her chest. "I left my novel here this morning, and just came up to fetch it."

Hermione had escaped uncomfortable social situations and found a corner to read many times in her life; she spotted the lie from leagues away.

The room beyond Miss Malfoy was large, but inviting, with all the accoutrements of quiet leisure: cozy fireplace, chess board between wingback chairs, tall shelves lined with books, baskets brimming with needlework lying beside comfortable-looking sofas. Along one wall, sundry small, interesting objects were organized along narrow shelves. Hermione knew a snuff box when she saw one. An entire battalion of them waited in tantalizing proximity, if only she could get there.

Draco considered the box in his hand. It hunkered on his palm facing Miss Malfoy, its beseeching eyes angled up at her.

"*Oh.*" Miss Malfoy reached out, hand hovering midair, and her lips parted.

Hermione goggled between Miss Malfoy, Draco, and the snuff box in disbelief.

She'd said it herself: time was self-healing. Or, perhaps, it was a stream carving out its own pathways, digging channels through any and all obstructions as it flowed towards its inevitable reunion with the sea. Draco glanced at Hermione, then adopted his most genteel tone, the one he used both for getting what he wanted and wheedling himself out of things he didn't.

"Just a token, Miss Malfoy," he said, "of our gratitude for your generous hospitality on such a beautiful day."

"Oh, Mr. Granger!" Overwhelmed, Miss Malfoy fluttered her lashes and twittered. "Miss Granger. You're entirely too generous!"

Draco juttied the snuff box closer to her impatiently, and Miss Malfoy took it from him. With great reverence, she laid it on her own small palm, and stroked a finger between the box's eyes. At least, Hermione had been accustomed to thinking of them as eyes, until Miss Malfoy turned the box one way then another in her hand, and declared that it was—

"Such a beautiful depiction of a swan and her cygnet."

"And her what?" asked Hermione.

"Her baby, Miss Granger!" Miss Malfoy touched one of the snuff box's horrible round eyes, then the next. "Curled sleeping on its mother's back. How utterly *enchanting.*"

Hermione stared at the snuff box. She crossed and uncrossed her eyes on purpose. She shut her left eye, then her right. She willed herself to see the shapes of a curled swan and its child. But only a badger's rump stared back. At best, the figure had the back end of a duck, a menacing wombat's head and four greasy toad feet. Draco, on the other hand, looked like he'd simultaneously solved the problem of quantum gravity and won a lifetime's supply of Venus's chocolate nipples.

"Hermione and I agreed that a swan has so much elegance. Badger, hedgehog, cat, shrew—" He

broke off and frowned in disapproval.

“I know just the place for it.” Miss Malfoy bustled across the room, and rearranged a cluster of silver boxes on a shelf at her eye level until she’d made a small space for the swan-pig. She laid it gently in place, made minor adjustments to its position, then folded her hands before herself in pride and satisfaction. “ *There.* ”

Draco gawked after her, mesmerized, then looked down at Hermione.

“There,” he said.

Hermione knew he meant: *There. That's where I found it. And: There. We've ended our long days of confusion; solved almost every riddle; hurdled nearly every obstacle, and overcome the worst of our own foolishness. And also: There. We're practically home.*

Draco held out his hand, and Hermione took it.

They walked hand in hand behind Miss Malfoy through the house, and encountered a ferocious battle raging along the stairs. John, Charles, and Cassandra advanced and retreated along the balustrade, blunt-tipped wooden swords clattering, John awkwardly astride a black leather hobby horse with startled needlework eyes. James reclined sideways across Martin’s lap at the top of the stairs. His eyelids drooped, then shot wide open, then fell closed, fingers in his mouth and sword curled in one arm.

Hiddy overlooked all with the fire poker tucked in his belt. When Hermione and Draco emerged around the corner, his fingers flew to the handle and poised over it, twitching.

“Look sharp, Mr. Granger!” Cassandra drew a second sword from under her arm, and tossed it to Draco as he approached. Accordingly, he let go of Hermione’s hand, flew forward and twisted in the air to catch the sword handle, then jumped onto the banister and slid down, meeting blades with Cassandra as he flew by.

“Such fun!” Miss Malfoy clapped her hands as she trotted down the staircase, beaming at her guests.

Later, in the garden, Hermione reclined between Isadora and Penelope on the grass. After he drifted off, Hermione had helped Draco transfer James into Isadora’s arms, where he now cherubically nursed in his sleep, filament hair sticking to his sweaty forehead. Supported between Draco and Sir Thomas, Martin walked in slow, meticulous steps around the walk and nattered about the impact of squid ink procurement methods on its potions properties.

“You don’t *extract*, you see.” He paused to sniff an especially rubicund rose dangling beside the path. “You *request*. ”

With William Wartwilliam seated in his terrarium beside him, John steered Martin’s chair around an obstacle course of tea cups Roland had settled around the lawn. Just beyond, stubby play swords in hand, Roland and Tom demonstrated elegant fencing postures for Charles. The boy copied them, arms up, scuttling sideways and thrusting his sword tip into one of Lady Malfoy’s topiaries.

“Here they are!” Mrs. Avery squinted towards the lake and waved.

Hermione shielded her eyes, and saw William striding across the green, drawing Cressida behind him by the hand. As they hurried up the stairs, William looked back at her again and again, as though seconds were too long to go without seeing her face. They arrived on the uppermost terrace windblown and out of breath, cheeks and lips flushed, clothes disheveled. Cressida’s hair had fallen

entirely loose, curling down her back and over her shoulders to her waist. She folded herself into William's side, and before the entire assembly, he pressed his lips to her forehead.

"Mother," he said. "Sir Thomas. Lady Longbottom. Cressida has accepted my offer. We're engaged to be married."

The news was received with general celebration. Sir Thomas galloped across the lawn and pumped William's hand almost violently, beaming at everyone as if to invite them all into a confederacy of joy before yanking William down into a fatherly embrace.

After, Mrs. Avery kissed her son, then took Cressida by her hands and expressed her happiness in the warmest terms before asking, "What about your education, my darling? I love my son, but surely the opportunity before you at St. Mungo's has singular merits."

"We're going to wait," William answered. "I won't be finished at Oxford for another four years at least."

After tumbling through a long wave of kisses, embraces and congratulations from her loved ones, Cressida returned to William and cinched her arms about him. "There are Floos and letters. Winters and summers at home. We'll both be very busy, but hardly separated."

"To such wise children as these!" Bartholomew raised his glass of port in cheers. "Absence does make the heart grow fonder."

"Yes, my love, well done," said Penelope as Cressida dropped to the blanket and tackled her. "Just please don't be *fond* anywhere I'm likely to stumble across the two of you."

Draco had evicted John from Martin's chair and assisted Martin back into it, tucking his blankets around him with near Grix-like precision. When William approached, he clasped the young man's hand before drawing him in for a masculine mutual back-slapping.

"My deepest congratulations," said Draco. "I hope you're not too bothered by the trousers the universe chose for you this morning."

William laughed. "Not in the least, no."

Isadora rocked James from side to side, stroking his temple as he stirred in the onrush of noise and excitement.

"And there are still more happy announcements to come." Isadora studied Hermione with eyes that were impossibly soft, full of love, and, in the almost imperceptible instant she glanced across the terrace at Roland, an unmistakable note of longing.

Why, thought Hermione, must love act independently of human will? It eroded the material of the heart like an obstinate creature tracing and retracing its chosen path between two points. Again and again, regardless of any tidy pathways a person laid out, it voiced an irrefutable argument with its steps. Try what you will, it said, but this is the way I have determined to go, and my journey will not be altered.

"You're mistaken," said Hermione. "There will be no announcement from me."

"There will." Isadora laid her hand over Hermione's, seeming to believe Hermione craved reassurance. "Without a doubt."

Thankfully, Roland made no offer while the picnic progressed, nor when it concluded. They parted

ways with the Dowager Countess and Miss Malfoy in the dwindling afternoon, the edges of the clouds tinted butter-yellow behind the manor's roofline. But as William handed the Longbottom sisters into the carriage, Roland approached Hermione, topper under his arm.

"I should like to pay you a call at the cottage tomorrow, Miss Granger," he said.

Hermione turned away from him. She watched William settle Isadora into the carriage, then help Cressida through the door with more hands-on support than was strictly necessary.

"I don't expect—" Hermione began. She caught Draco's eye as he adjusted his saddle straps and murmured to his horse. Feeling scrutinized and found in error, her cheeks heated, and she looked away. "I don't believe we're remaining in the country, Mr. Weasley. My brother and I have long neglected our business in London."

Roland appeared astonished by the news, but swiftly recovered. "I must say, I'm grieved to hear it. But please allow me to call. I couldn't bear the thought of your leaving Wiltshire without properly saying goodbye."

"Alright." Hermione dipped her head. "Tomorrow, then. To say goodbye."

Roland mounted his horse, and while he awaited William, Draco led his mare along the drive, and drew up beside Hermione.

"I told him we're leaving," said Hermione, tugging irritably on her gloves to avoid eye contact. "I've behaved thoughtlessly towards him—*abominably*—and broken poor Isadora's heart for good measure." She smoothed her bonnet ribbons over her bodice. "We're a pair, the two of us."

The mare snorted, and Draco absently rubbed her nose. "It's a shame to cut him loose. I could really use him for the clinic."

"What clinic?"

"Are you being—" Draco scoffed. "The Quidditch clinic, Hermione. Katie Bell's been running it with Cho for the past six months. They put up flyers for it all over the place."

If Hermione didn't know it was impossible, she'd have believed her blood stopped its course and reversed, so whole was her internal confusion. She walked herself through her day at the Ministry, past the lifts, the cafeteria, and to the community notice board in the hallway between Accounting and Human Resources.

"The women's Quidditch clinic," she said.

"Yes. It's part of the Ministry initiative to increase athletic participation among girls and women. It's meant to give adult women who may not have had youth and adolescent access to Quidditch an opportunity to experience the sport in a low-stress, supportive—" He shook his head. "You're *seriously* telling me you had no idea I was doing this?"

"What do you mean, *you're* doing it?"

"Merlin." Draco grimaced as he cursorily checked the bridle buckles, then moved the reins to one hand and grabbed the pommel of his saddle. "It's held at the Manor, isn't it? On the western green. Every weekend." He swung his leg up over the saddle, and after adjusting his seat, steered the horse towards the lane. "Fuck my life. Walk on!"

"Miss Granger." William stood beside the carriage, holding out a hand. "We're all ready for you."

She passed the ride back to Bugg-Buntley Hall in a daze, wholly insensible to the Longbottom girls' easy, excited chatter, and requiring two or three direct appeals by name to catch her attention. She murmured her thanks to Sir Thomas as she stepped out of the carriage, and plastered a contrived smile on her face when it was time to go.

Plainly exhausted, still crowned in flowers, Martin hummed peaceably to himself as he traveled the forest path back to the cottage. Draco walked beside him and Hermione trailed behind, both silent.

Martin admitted himself through the garden gate, opened the door with his wand as he buzzed up the ramp and into the cottage, then let it close behind him. The glen was cool, and through the windows, a fire could be seen burning in the hearth. Grix sat at the kitchen table, quill and parchment before him.

Draco went ahead of her, both flower crown and hat in his hands, and jacket over his arm, tugging his cravat loose as he walked.

Hermione stalled at the gate. "Draco."

He turned around, unwinding the last of the cloth and spooling it into his palm as he looked back at her, cool and expectant.

"I'm so very sorry," she said. Her throat was so tight she felt like she was choking.

"For what?"

"I thought—it was only because of what Blaise said. At Theo's birthday party."

Draco stilled, and his voice had an edge Hermione hadn't heard in many years. "What did Blaise say?"

"A bunch of nonsense about you and the girls you have over at the weekend." Hermione pursed her lips and blew out two long, tremulous breaths. "I was drunk, and quite upset, and the language they used made it sound as though you were—" She threw her hands up helplessly.

"Having group sex." Even in the waning light, he'd gone very pale.

"Yes. I should never, *ever* have poked you about it like I did, consenting adults and privacy and all that, but—you make me *so stupid*, Malfoy! Why am I so stupid about you?" She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, God, I can't breathe."

When she finally looked at him, Draco stood with his head back and eyes closed, taking measured breaths. "I thought you were joking," he said. "All along. I feel like I'm going to be sick."

"I'm sorry," Hermione repeated. "I'm so sorry."

His shoulders relaxed, and he took one final, deep breath before meeting her eyes. "Why were you upset?"

"What?"

"At Theo's. You just said you were upset."

Inside the cottage, Grix fussed around Martin, settling him into the chair beside the hearth.

"Lots of reasons." She could hear her pulse. She'd run out of places to hide, and stood wide-eyed and trembling like a panicked rabbit. "Katie and Ron had just started seeing each other, which, in

hindsight, is blindingly ironic.”

Draco looked dumbfounded. “He’s *cheating* on you? No wonder you—”

“No!” Hermione cried. “No, of course not.” The last resort of cornered prey was to go still, and allow the inevitable to unfold as quickly as possible. Hermione laid her gloved hand atop the open garden gate, and abstractedly swung it. “We separated.”

Draco let the information sink in. “When?”

“In March.”

“So you’re not—” He focused on the ground in front of his feet. “Are you marrying him?”

“No.” Over two months on, the truth of it still felt like someone had taken hold of her heart and was tightening their fist around it. “I’m not.” She let go of the gate, and watched a nameless little brown bird puff to twice its size on a branch in the plum tree. “He moved out. We made the final decision in April. He started seeing Katie at the end of May.”

When she finally allowed herself to look at him, Draco was openly staring at her.

“Please say something.”

“I—” He swallowed, then pointed back at the cottage. “I have laid in that bed for days, hating myself for touching you. Because you had made promises to someone, and I induced you to break them. Over and *over* again.”

She started to cry again, caught up in a swell of sadness and shame, want and confusion, overturned and overwhelmed by the intensity of her desire to close the short distance between them and take shelter in his arms.

“I never wanted anyone to get hurt,” she said.

“I’m hurt.”

“I know.”

“*Two months?*”

Her chin trembled. “Yes.”

He stalked away from her across the garden, tossing his jacket and hat down in the grass, then returned. “I sat across from you in that office for two months, and you never once thought to mention—of course you didn’t.” He rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. “So in May, at Theo’s—fuck! *Oh, fuck!*”

Grix peered out the cottage window, frowning.

“You wore that dress,” Draco went on. “I thought I was actually going to die. It felt like—” He wrenched his hand in his waistcoat over his heart and twisted.

“I’ve been so foolish,” Hermione whispered.

“You’re fucking brilliant, Hermione!” he shouted. “And good, and so, *so—*”

He gripped the hair at the sides of his head, then let go. For a moment, he appeared to consider,

then to finally arrive at some conclusion. He crossed the garden in half a dozen strides, wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist, pulled her hard against him, and then he kissed her.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to [dreamsofdramione](#) for beta support, and to Scullymurphy and [granger_danger](#) for their encouragement. I love you all, my friends!

I'm on [Tumblr](#) and [Twitter](#).

The Return

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As though her mind was a photographic lens held close to its subject, Hermione's frame of awareness filled from corner to corner with the press of Draco's lips to her own. With her capacity for organized thought sharply limited, she allowed him to monopolize her breath. Her omissions had caused him pain, and his touch revealed traces of frustration. Though his hands held her face gently, his kiss was unrestrained, almost harsh. The heat and intensity behind it overthrew her equilibrium and reorganized it into euphoric anarchy. For the first time, she understood how comprehensively she would give herself over to him if he asked.

After a while, his posture eased, and his lips grew gentle. He sighed once, low in his throat, then drew away and looked at her with astonishment. "I'm sorry," he said. "I ought to have asked."

It was a minor break in their communion—only a blink—but it provided a fissure for the world to seep through. He stroked her nape, and before he could kiss her again, Hermione stepped back.

"Did you not want me to?" he asked.

"I—" Hermione glanced at the cottage; mercifully, Grix had moved away from the window. She touched her fingers to her lips. "I need—" She took another step, and held her hand out. "Just...five minutes."

With no explanation to give him, she offered none. She hurried through the garden gate, and after considering the forest path running to either side, chose to walk straight ahead, along a narrow track leading into the woods.

Draco called after her. "Hermione?"

"Five minutes." She gathered her skirts and took the brambly trail at an awkward gallop. Twice, thorns snagged her dress, forcing her to disentangle it before jogging on.

"Hermione!"

"Five minutes!" she repeated. Of their own accord, her hands moved to her bodice and drew out the Time Turner.

"Hermione!"

She loosed the crown, and as she ducked beneath a branch, spoke the first measure of time that came to mind.

"Hermione!" he shouted. "*Don't—!*"

She never heard the rest.

The Turner spun, and the air around her shivered.

The sun stuttered to a halt overhead, then reversed course, slipping below the eastern horizon and leaving her in the dark before rising once more in the west. Gathering speed, it flashed through one day, then two, then five, then slowed and resettled in its late afternoon position.

She'd stumbled into a sheltered clearing. The brook trickled nearby, nurturing a ring of young oak, ash and dogwood whose canopy formed a high-ceilinged cathedral. Exploiting the dappled sun, honeysuckle in full flower wound into the treetops, where butterflies the size of an adult's palm glided in lazy arcs. Below, foxglove and demure herbaceous shrubs with tiny pink blooms ringed a bed of moss. Where an altar would be stood the cleric of the woods, an ancient oak of colossal circumference, coarse and black, with great, pendulous arms sleeved in moss and tufted fern. It was one of nature's self-glorifying tabernacles, warm and still, with an air of prehistoric consecration. Standing within its nave like a hunted criminal breathlessly invoking the right of asylum, Hermione covered her face and took several meditative draughts of clean, sweet, unerotic forest air.

"Hermione."

She swore under her breath and spun around as Draco, still in his picnic day finery, ducked under a branch and entered the clearing.

"How are you here?" she cried.

Concern clouded his face. "You told me to follow you."

"I never did!"

"Merlin, Granger, you said five minutes, not five *days*. Are you— *dammit*, Hermione!"

She'd already whirled away from him, snatched up the Time Turner, and uttered her next destination.

Days careened overhead—one, two, five, and on, until the sun slowed on the fourteenth day, and stilled.

"Hello, there!" said Martin.

Hermione gasped.

In the center of the clearing, illuminated in mote-speckled bands of sunlight, sat Martin in his chair. Despite the fine weather, he was swaddled in his Tartan blankets, wearing the same knit cap he'd sported at Tom Longbottom's wedding. His hands lay palm-up in his lap in a gesture of welcome to the drifting butterflies. They flocked around him, their black and white wings briefly beating the air before coasting in elegant arcs. He remained stone still as they landed on his hat, shoulders, and outstretched fingers. Neither Grix nor any other chaperone could be seen.

"Hello, cousin," said Hermione.

He squinted through his spectacles. "You've appeared!"

A hand closed around Hermione's elbow, and she bit back an angry exclamation.

Draco, having arrived behind her, looked desperate. " *Stop*, Hermione. You're going to harm us both."

"Shh!" said Martin. "Quiet time."

"Apologies." Draco lowered his voice, and spoke to Hermione again. "Have I made another mistake? Should I not have kissed you?"

As she considered how to answer, Draco acknowledged Martin.

"Good afternoon, cousin. Taking some air on your own?"

"Cousins!" Martin blinked as a butterfly glided past his nose. "What fine good cousins are these?"

Draco looked bereft. "You don't remember us?"

"Oh, my God," Hermione whispered. "This is"—she quickly calculated—"almost twenty days ago. We haven't met him yet."

She faced the professor to properly greet him, and Draco wrapped an arm around her waist, as though she'd disappear again if he didn't keep hold of her. It was, she supposed, not an unreasonable precaution.

"I'm Hermione Granger." She shuffled out of Draco's grip. "And this is"—she winced at the ever-increasing grotesquery of the conceit—"my brother."

"Draco Malfo..." Draco hung on the *o* for a beat. "Shit. It's Granger. We're your Grangers, cousin."

"Cousins, are we? You lay a twist in the final act, sir! A twist! I will shake hands with you, dear Malfo!" Martin wafted a butterfly away from his steering toggle, then bumped over the mossy ground to grasp Draco's hand. He blinked up at Hermione. "*Mal foi*, Miss Granwood!" He tapped the side of his nose. "From the French."

"Granger, sir," Hermione replied. For a few blissful moments, she'd forgotten that France existed. Her chest constricted in a bruising ache.

"I've read some of your work, Professor," said Draco, eyeing Hermione with evident anxiety. "It's extraordinary."

"It is," Hermione agreed. "Unparalleled."

She could only think of how Draco had kissed her, and that if she let him do it again, they would progress to a great deal more. Bedroom things. Under-the-chemise things. Things she'd only ever done with Ron.

Her abdomen tensed.

It didn't bear thinking about. In any case, in a day, or a week, or maybe a month, he'd have had enough of her, as he had of every other woman for as long as Hermione had known him. Then off he'd go to France, like it never happened. She folded her hand over her heart.

"We had to come all this way to read your works," she said to Martin. "Unfortunately, there are no copies available in any of the libraries where we're from. It's criminal, frankly."

Martin blinked owlishly, leaned back and bapped his hand against his armrest. "I shall post them to you directly."

"That would be splendid, cousin." Draco continued to monitor Hermione as she walked around the clearing. "Hermione?"

"Is everything alright, my gel?" asked Martin. "You look quite unwell."

"I'm perfectly well!" A twig caught in her hair, and she spent several seconds loosening it. "It's warm. And it's been a long day. I'm very tired."

"Hermione," said Draco. "I'm struggling here. I'd like to understand."

Hermione fervently wished to understand as well.

She wanted to tell him how, as a little girl, she liked to sit in the front passenger seat of her father's powder blue sedan and control the radio dial. She liked the music, but found the gaps between stations displeasing, when the stereo produced jumbly static and bursts of disjointed signal from neighboring broadcast frequencies. She wanted to explain that for a very long time, her thoughts had been every bit as disorganized and unintelligible as a detuned radio. But because she was sensible and pragmatic, and not the sort of person who went hopping about forests and the historical timeline for reasons she couldn't articulate, she rolled her shoulders back in a posture meant to communicate certainty.

"I don't want any of this to make you feel obligated. France is a great opportunity for you."

Draco's expression twisted with disbelief. "*What?*"

Martin sandwiched Draco's hand between his own and peered up at him. "Leaving us for France? But you've only just arrived!"

"He is!" Hermione hoped to communicate cheer and enthusiasm, but to her own ear sounded thirty seconds from a full spectrum meltdown. "To teach Potions. And Quidditch! He has experience coaching girls and women. I'm sure he'll be indispensable."

"No, my lad!" Martin cried. "You see how my poor cousin is unhappy? Your Quidditch girls will muddle along tolerably without you."

"You want me to go?" Draco asked Hermione.

"If you'd like to, then yes, of course. I acted inexcusably before. I'm truly sorry."

Draco seemed bewildered. "And that's what you think I want?"

Hermione's internal static ratcheted up so loud it seemed impossible no one else was aware of it. She felt her teeth would start buzzing at any moment.

"I have no idea what you want." It was the truth. She spoke to Martin again. "We'll see you again very soon, at Tom Longbottom's wedding." She stepped around a butterfly resting on the ground, and kissed Martin's cheek, which set him to hooting in delight.

"Hermione." Draco squeezed Martin's hand and released it. "Don't you *dare* —"

She dodged a cluster of butterflies in flight, and took up her Time Turner.

"You as well, Miss Granger?" Martin studied her with interest. "Look what you have there!"

"It's called a Time Turner, Professor," said Draco. "You have my word that we'll tell you all about it, only"—he clasped Martin's shoulder—"our exploits are something of a secret."

"That they are," said Martin.

"When we see you again, perhaps pretend we haven't met."

Martin shot Draco a caricatured wink. "Our bamboozlements filed right away."

Draco stalked towards Hermione and drew a Time Turner of his own from his shirt front. As Hermione yanked the crown loose and rushed out her desired interval, she heard someone calling in the distance.

“Gaffer! Where’ve you gone now?”

She knew Draco would follow the Turner’s time stamps wherever she went. But she traveled back two days, and jumped forward again by nineteen hours and twenty-seven minutes for spite. Instantly, he appeared alongside her.

After several jumps, she felt subtly out of phase, as though she’d woken up late for work and fallen behind by a critical quarter hour. It must have been sometime around noon, but heavy grey clouds covered the sky beyond the tree canopy, and rain streamed through the cathedral roof. The pink blooms of campion and herb-Robert ducked their heads and hid their faces, and neither Martin nor the butterflies were anywhere to be seen.

Hermione faced Draco, Time Turner clenched in her fist. “You skipped that last one!”

He held his own Turner out like a weapon, his eyes trained on her closed fist. “I have a record of where you’ve gone. You don’t.”

“You’re the worst!”

His gaze never faltered. “So you’ve said.”

“Are you going to stop following me or not?”

“Not.”

“Fine.” She slammed the crown into its locked position, drew the chain over her head, and shoved the Turner in her pocket. “I’ve stopped.”

He slowly relaxed and glanced around the clearing. “When are we?”

“I’ve lost track. I think midday, maybe a day or two before Tom’s wedding.”

"You couldn't have picked better weather?"

Hermione glowered at him.

Draco slipped the chain over his neck, and secured the Time Turner in his pocket. Then he dragged both hands down his face. “I never thought I’d hate these devices as much as I do right now.”

The adrenaline of their farcical chase exhausted, Hermione felt chastened and thoroughly embarrassed.

“I did want you to,” she said.

“You wanted me to—what?” He looked at her sharply. “Follow you?”

“No, I did *not* want you to follow me. I don’t know why I would have told you to do that.”

“Then what?”

“I wanted you to kiss me.”

Draco’s brows rose.

“All the times you did,” she went on, “I wanted you to. I can’t stand you thinking that I didn’t.”

The rain had already soaked patches of his shirt over his shoulders. "But?" he said. "There's clearly a caveat."

But—

While Hermione tried to discover what she ought to say next, his eyes remained fixed on hers. The clarity behind them stung her with envy. He knew precisely what he wanted. Was it the chase? Women chased him, never the other way around. Was it the conquest? Who had he ever bothered to conquer?

"It's just that I think I need a minute," she said, "if we're going to...continue. I haven't—" She chafed her hands anxiously against her skirt. "There's only ever been Ron. For everything, really—except Krum, I suppose, in the margins."

"You've been with Viktor Krum?"

"Not to bed. I only kissed him."

"When?"

"That's *wildly* irrelevant. The point is, if I'm going to start sleeping with new people, I think I need a moment to get up to speed on the motorway, so to speak."

"You're going to start sleeping with new people," he said flatly.

"I suppose. It's inevitable, isn't it? Get back in the saddle. Lord, that's a crass idiom."

"I love you."

Hermione's lips parted, and for an interval, she became acutely attuned to sound. Rain plipped on the leaves overhead. A woodpecker drummed incessantly. Bird calls sounded everywhere—some reserved and civil, some boisterous and confrontational—like overlapping conversations in a crowded concert hall. Somewhere very distant, a church bell rang the quarter hour.

At last, his words penetrated her awareness, and passed through her like a string of detonations. She searched his face for the lie.

"No, you don't," she said.

"Yes, I do. Rather desperately."

Snippets of signal crackled in and out of Hermione's mental noise.

"You don't."

He stretched his arms to either side, then let them drop.

"You don't fall in love." A hysterical edge crept into her voice. "You take women home, and politely manage their expectations."

"I'm not a saint, Hermione. I have tried. To move past this."

Both distressed at the thought of him with other women and ashamed of her extraordinary unfairness, she rubbed the heel of her palm against her sternum. "I don't believe in saints."

"Just rumor and innuendo."

"You never corrected me!"

"What was I supposed to say? I realize I appear to be a libertine, but it seems I'm incapable of being in love with more than one person at a time, and it's still your turn? You had a partner, Hermione. I'm selfish, not delusional. I wasn't about to interrupt you at the altar."

Hermione stared at the ground. "You're not selfish."

"If I've failed to adequately demonstrate my capacity for self-indulgence, please allow me to remedy the situation."

"You weren't the only one indulging." Her skin prickled with heat. "But does it follow that—"

Draco shut his eyes. "Fuck."

"I know you think I'm ridiculous!" she cried. "It's only that I—" She spread her hands helplessly before her. "I wonder if we don't often confuse base physical desire with something more. Lust can be so bewitching, can't it? Bodily craving, and that specific hunger for carnal actualization—"

"Specific hunger."

"Yes! Or thirst, if you prefer—it's such a persuasive condition! It's entirely possible that a person could mistake that sort of persistent animal yearning for—"

"I miss you." Rainwater dripped from his hair and collected in his lashes. "All the time."

Hermione's throat tightened. "What?"

"I miss you, Hermione. On weekends. Nights. When I read a passage in a book I think you'd like. When there's some irrelevant, inconsequential thought I feel compelled to say out loud, and you're not right there. I swear, it's the most trivial things. I had an atrocious coffee in Soho a few weeks ago, and you were all I could think about for hours."

She drew deliberate breaths, trying to control the tide of emotion swelling inside her.

"I miss you when I'm with other women," he went on. "Every time. Can you imagine? I promise you can't."

The floodline of feeling inched higher, and she lifted her chin, as though holding her mouth above water.

"I miss you when we're in the same room," he said. "I miss you when you're so close I can smell your hair."

Overwhelmed, Hermione began to cry. "Why didn't you try not to?"

"I tried," he said. "Of *course* I tried. And please, don't mistake me. If hunger was adequate proof of love, I would starve at your altar. But you're here." Draco flattened his hand over his heart. "You're always here. I'm always waiting for you."

Hermione stood gaping under the downpour until at length, she realized he was waiting for her to speak.

"Nothing's changed for me," she said.

His expression wilted. "So you've said. But here— *now* —there was a moment." He pinched his

fingers together. "An instant. In the way you looked at me. I let myself think that it had."

"You don't understand."

The static inside her increased to deafening proportions. A great many parts made up the noise. There was longing for Ron, who she had greatly loved, and still loved, and always would. The persistent sense that she'd let down Harry, who loved both Ron and her, even when she didn't love Ron the way she hoped to. She yearned for Molly and Arthur, the only mother and father who remembered her, and every Weasley brother and sister she'd been able to call her own. There was pride, too, so dense and immovable it could easily be mistaken for obstinacy; honor and loyalty. There was old anger, and constant fear, razor-edged shards of it everywhere. Blazing over it all, like a shameless and unquenchable firework, there was desire.

But all of that, she silently acknowledged, was the noise. The signal hovered just beyond, forever waiting for her to receive it.

"Nothing's changed for me," she repeated.

Draco's eyes fell closed, and he lifted his face to the rain.

"I had every reason to think it would stop," she said plaintively. "It should have. There are natural limits to these things. It's very well documented. I kept waiting. I truly believed it would stop."

His brow furrowed, and he blinked at the sky.

"It happens all the time," she continued. "I've read the research. It's perfectly normal in a long term, monogamous relationship. And it's predictable, isn't it? Two people of similar age, with a shared passion, working in close quarters. It would almost be more surprising if there wasn't a transitory attraction."

He looked at her again, eyes open wide.

"You have to understand that I never stopped caring for him," she said. "Never once. I loved him."

Draco nodded. "Of course."

"Only—" She laid her hand over her mouth, collecting herself before moving on. "It wasn't the right sort of feeling, was it? Our interests were so different. The things we wanted—the timing for when we wanted them—never properly lined up. I've owned that I worked too much." She swiped the damp from her cheeks, only for it to immediately renew itself. "But it was never an affair."

"What are you talking about?"

"We had firm boundaries. Always. We never spoke about our personal lives. It was *always* about our work. We didn't rely on one another for emotional support of any kind."

"Oh, my God."

"And now we're here," she said, "and nothing's changed. I don't feel any differently. So I don't understand why you're too far away when you're not in my bed." She laid her hands over her face, and for a long time, wept into her palms.

"Hermione."

"I'm so tired," she said hoarsely.

He drew near, and with great care took her in his arms. Quietly, he spoke into the crown of her soaked head. “Tired of what?”

“Of not being in love with you.” As he cradled her, whatever shred of composure she’d maintained dissolved, and she cried without restraint. “It’s very hard.”

“Do you think it might be easier, then?”

“What?”

“To just be in love?”

Her eyes fell closed. Worn to the bone from trying to outthink her own body, she laid her ear against Draco’s chest and listened.

She and Ron had outgrown their romance like a child who wakes one morning to find its toes cramped inside a beloved pair of boots. Her cold consolation was an unremitting ache for a man whose body was within reach and whose heart was secured in a vault alongside his other liquid assets. The exchange was unwanted, and her grief at having unwittingly made it starkly physical—a relentless downward force weighting her limbs.

But she'd been mistaken.

Shining the light of his declaration on their disastrous recent days, she saw the fingerprints of his devotion everywhere. She recalled him splayed in a reeking field, his face aglow with unmasked joy at discovering her safe and unbroken. Wrapped around her in a bed of fresh linens, yellow roses on the windowsill, his breathing slowed like he'd attained a hard-earned peace. In a crowded ballroom, she swirled past every unfamiliar set of arms until she found his, held open to receive her.

And there was the truth of it: nothing had changed.

She tumbled backwards two centuries to discover his heart where it always had been, beating hard beneath his ribs. He’d never hidden it, hadn’t held it back, but plainly, and without pride, left it out for her to find. Day after day, he’d endured the erratic overtures of her want, never presuming, never demanding, always gentle, always patient, always, she could scarcely bring herself to believe, waiting for her to arrive.

Would it be easier to love him?

Alone, in the soft and secret center of her heart, she'd defended her integrity the best she could. But her sword and shield had served their purposes. Hermione laid them down.

“It would be the easiest thing in the world,” she said.

Draco drew back and framed her face with his hands. “Tell me I’m the worst.”

“You’re the worst.”

“Say it again.”

“You’re everything.”

“Again,” he demanded.

“You’re the worst.”

“Again.”

“I love you.”

He kissed her, and for a long while, they said nothing else. Reluctantly, Hermione pried herself from his arms and stepped away. She fetched the Time Turner from her pocket, looped the chain over her head, and loosened the crown.

Drenched to the skin, his complexion feverish, Draco watched with concern as she articulated a spell. Time stamps appeared in clear gold print mid-air before her. She selected her time of origin after the picnic, and set the jump to return shortly after.

She locked eyes with Draco. “You’ll follow me?”

“Anywhere.”

She depressed the crown, and sixteen days and several hours progressed around her. The sun settled in the west behind the dark-limbed oak, slipping fingers of light through the green cathedral like the hand of creation. Skin rain-dappled, gown heavy with water, she picked her way along the overgrown path to the cottage.

Draco waited beside the gate, still bone dry, his face pale with worry. “What’s happened to you?” he asked. “Are you alright?”

The version of him standing before her had neither made his confession, nor heard hers. Hermione ached with compassion for them both.

“Hermione?” he said urgently. “Have you been hurt? Has someone—”

She slid the Time Turner over her head and held it out to him. As he took it, she gestured towards the clearing. “Go follow me.” She stepped through the gate and crossed the garden. He would leave, and when he came back to her, he’d be at once the same, and totally altered.

“Hermione?”

Halfway up the ramp, she looked back. “Just keep following me.”

When she entered the cottage door with her hair sopping wet, Grix paused mid-stir over the soup pot. “You alright, my gel? You look chilled to the bone.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Perfect, actually. And tired. I think I’ll go upstairs and have a rest.”

Beside the fire, Martin awoke with a snort. “Caught in a squall, old salt? Reef the mainsail and secure for heavy weather!”

“I’ve been to see the butterflies, cousin!” She crossed the sitting room and kissed Martin's temple.

“Ah ha! *Limenitis camilla*. A friend.” Martin settled back in his chair and closed his eyes. “Fine good cousins.”

Hermione hurried down the hallway, and started up the stairs in time to hear Draco burst through the front door.

“Mr. Grix,” he said. “Cousin.”

“You’re wet as a duck’s undercarriage,” Grix said irritably. “What nonsense have you been up to?”

“Only good things,” Draco replied. “You have my word.”

Hermione followed the sound of his footsteps down the hall until he careened around the stairwell corner, wet hair pushed back from his forehead and shirt soaked through. Midway up the stairs, he captured her in his arms.

"Say it again," he demanded.

"I love you."

He made a coarse, possessive sound low in his throat, and without another word, caught her up and carried her to the top of the stairs. He crashed through her door, and after shoving it closed behind them, rushed through half a dozen privacy spells. The moment Hermione's feet touched the floor, she and Draco began the desperate, tedious work of undoing their clothes. He shed his cravat, waistcoat and shirt with alacrity, and turned his efforts on the long row of fabric-covered buttons down the back of her dress.

“These are—” He glowered over her shoulder. “Fuck!” Catching her eye with evident guilt, he rent the placket apart, sending buttons skittering across the floor and under the furniture. With some awkwardness, he compelled the wet dress down her shoulders and hips.

“Margaret’s going to ask difficult questions,” said Hermione.

She exclaimed in surprise as he spun her around, and darted her hands forward to steady herself against the door.

“I’ll be happy to answer them.” He stripped her fichu away and ran his lips along her neck while he tore at the lacing on her stays. Once he'd cast them aside, he lifted her off her feet, hauled her across the room like a sack of dry goods, and none too gently tossed her on the bed. He muttered oaths while he unfastened her boots and flung them towards the hearth. Finally, as though evaluating a work in progress, he paused at the bedside and considered her sprawled figure.

Hours of molten daylight remained. Translucent with rainwater, her chemise clung to her skin. A breeze flowed through the open window, and she folded her hands over her chest and shivered.

Draco’s expression softened, and for a long while he seemed dazed, tracing the lines of her body absently. Finally, he shut his eyes and breathed several times before opening them again.

“We don’t need to...we can slow down,” he said. “Or stop, obviously. If you need more time, I could just hold—”

Hermione’s heart tremored like a hunted rabbit. She rose to her knees on the bed, and before she could reconsider, drew her chemise over her head. With that, the work was done; she knelt before him in nothing but her stockings, still held in place with pale pink ribbons.

Draco neither moved nor spoke.

“Shall I?” She reached for his trouser placket.

He pulled away and sat at the edge of the bed. Not knowing what else to do, Hermione reclined on the coverlet, arms covering her breasts in virginal inhibition as he kicked off his boots and shucked his trousers. After retrieving his wand from his pocket, he cast overdue drying and warming charms on them both, then a carefully worded contraceptive spell on himself.

He stretched out beside her, and took her face in his hands.

In contrast to the violence he deployed in making her bare, he kissed her with tremendous consideration. Apart from the soft friction of their bodies on the bed, the room was quiet. Hermione traced his features with her fingers, making a slow study of his lips, his bisected brow, the perfect, symmetrical line of his nose, his incongruous dark lashes, trimmed with gold in the afternoon light.

Over and over again, carefully skirting her breast, Draco ran a hand down her side, and pressed his lips to the hollow of her throat.

“Don't stop kissing me,” she said.

He arched his brow. “I thought I was kissing you.”

“Not there.”

He stroked his finger along her collar bone. “Not *here*? Hm.” He embarked on a reconnaissance, mouthing tauntingly at each of her joints: her shoulders, inner elbows, and the insides of her wrists.

He moved down the bed, and as his lips approached the boundary between her thigh and pelvis, she clenched her legs together in a rush of anxiety. “Are you going to—?”

“In a moment.”

He slowly sampled her knees through her stockings, and at last, he kissed her ankles.

Inventory complete, he took her knees in his hands and parted them.

Like a novitiate suffering the first exhilarating humiliations of intimacy, Hermione covered her face. He struggled with no similar reserve.

“Hermione.”

“What?”

“Look at me.”

She peeked through her fingers.

“What's the matter?” he asked.

“Why are you *looking*? ”

“Because you're beautiful.”

Hermione sighed irritably.

“I want to put my mouth on you.” He laid a reassuring palm below her navel. “Tell me I can.”

She dropped her hands to her sides and bunched the coverlet in her fists. “If you *really* want to.”

He must have done, because without further prelude, he hooked her knees pragmatically over his shoulders and began fulfilling his earlier promises.

She lingered on individual facets of sensation: the firm heat of his hands holding her hips in place; his ribs under the soles of her feet; the vibration of his groans against her pelvis. The vocalizations she curbed by sinking her teeth into her bottom lip expressed want, held too long at bay, that

approached a kind of pain. His cure was worse than the affliction. Angling her body however he liked, he brought her to the cusp of resolution again and again, then let her regress. The ache became unbearable. While she writhed and whined, soft-eyed tormentor that he was, he laughed at her.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she complained, lying captive on her side.

He flipped her onto her back again. “I’m sorry.”

Her brow furrowed. “Are you?”

He pushed her knees open, appraised his handiwork, then kissed her navel. “No.”

Having apparently accomplished his objective, he traveled up her body, grazing her hip bones, her abdomen, her sensitive sides with his lips. He lingered on her breasts, applying his ineffectual curative to each alert and tender part of her, evidently delighted by the way she tried to direct his attention everywhere all at once.

When he finally settled his hips between her parted thighs, she was forced to remind herself she was a grown woman who’d lived a multifaceted adult life. The impropriety of feeling him between her legs for the first time was only tempered by the total privacy of an act which belonged to them, and them alone.

It occurred to her that without anyone ever knowing she’d done it, she might take him in her hand if she liked.

And she did.

“You’re so soft,” she murmured.

“Granger, I have never in my entire life been this—oh, *God*. ”

Mesmerized by the feel of him, gratified by the anguish in his exhalations, she pulled him in lazy, experimental strokes, taking up an unhurried rhythm while she slid her lips along his jaw.

“I’m losing my mind,” he gasped.

She took pity on him, and coaxed him to the locus of her suffering.

He held back. “Is this what you want?”

By Hermione's count, they'd performed at least three acts of sexual congress already. That he felt the need to make her wait another instant for this particular one was nothing short of capricious, phallocentric cruelty.

“ *Obviously*. ” Hermione arched her hips, disorganized and fairly frantic.

Replacing her hand with his, he pressed his lips against her forehead as he entered her.

Hermione’s gaze fell between their bodies, eyes open in astonishment as she reached down to feel him with her fingertips.

“Is this good?” he asked.

Distracted and overwhelmed, she answered him through a fog of confusion. “Is it?”

He laughed, and rested his forehead against hers. "It's *you*."

Though his movements were fluid, his rhythm easy, his fingers shook as he stroked her hair. "Will you talk to me?" he asked. "Tell me what you like."

Hermione didn't know what to say.

She'd hardly allowed herself to picture what it might be like between them. But never in a hundred years of illicit daydreams could she have imagined how correct it would feel to lie underneath him. "Stay inside me." Her fingertips dug into his hips, and her heels into the backs of his thighs. "Don't leave."

He urged forward reflexively. "I won't. Anything else?"

"No." She tried to draw him further inward, though it was an impossibility. "Why aren't you kissing me?"

He laughed at her again, and kissed her.

Hermione expected she'd be anxious with any new lover, and she'd been correct. But lust washed away timidity as efficiently as alcohol. In the heat between them, every thought evaporated as soon as it materialized. Mindless with want, already exposed to him with near total comprehensiveness, carried along by his steady determination, her shyness fell away. There was a quality of Edenic innocence in being naked together for the first time, as though no one else was alive in the world, or ever had been. It felt right and good to fit together, every change in timing and position guileless and instinctual, an expression of curiosity and uninhibited affection.

Kindled with yellow light in her rumpled bed, his body was exquisite: hard in every pleasing way, muscles steeled with restraint as he moved.

"You're beautiful." Flat on her back with her eyes half shut, her knee folded to her chest and held firmly in place, she trailed a hand up and down his belly, dipping low to feel his fingers as they scribed dilatory circles between her legs. "You're so beautiful."

He ruled her in her own bed with a benevolent despotism, directing her actions towards their common good, and by way of compensation for her easy compliance, poured his devotion over her like water. He called her his beloved, his perfectly adored, his brilliant fool, always—because Hermione was right, and he was actually, terribly spoilt—in the possessive. When his pace grew mercenary, he clutched her breast, and called her *mine*. Like she'd been waiting on that one ridiculous word, she arched her back and trembled all over, crying out a string of mindless affirmations. Her climax precipitated his. Hands tensed in her hair, honoring his promise to stay inside, he told her that he loved her.

"Did you know?" she asked, some minutes later.

Head resting on her stomach, he contemplated her right breast through barely parted eyelids, and indolently stroked her nipple. "Did I know what?"

She brushed her knuckles across his cheek, and shifted her bottom against the clammy mattress. "That it would be like this."

He rolled partway over and mouthed at her belly. "Honestly?"

"Honestly," she said, and pinched his earlobe.

“I couldn’t possibly have imagined.”

“If you tried?”

“No.” He shifted to free his other arm, and as his mouth slid wetly towards her navel, he pulled the end of one pink garter ribbon until the bow fell loose. “I absolutely tried.”

He nudged her knee open and moved to resettle between her legs. When he slipped his hand into the top of her stocking and began pushing it down her thigh, her lips parted to scold him, then closed again. She only sighed, and blushed, and twirled her fingers through his unruly, tousled, infuriating, lovely hair.

The following morning, Hermione woke to full sun pouring past the open curtains, pooling at the end of her bed and warming her bare feet.

She arched her back, and rubbed her cheek against Draco’s chest like a cat.

“What time is it?” she asked.

He buried his face in her hair and kissed the top of her head. “Just past seven o’clock.”

After scrubbing the sleep from her eyes, she took notice of a tea tray beside the bed.

They’d made an honest attempt at leaving her room for dinner. In the end, Draco escaped only long enough to make half-baked excuses to Martin and Grix, and affirm the silencing charm he placed was doing its job. He returned, and spent the following hours with Hermione in total dissipation, hedonically spiraling through the sexual response cycle until long after sunset, when they finally both fell asleep. At some point in the night, he’d put on a pair of boxer shorts, but Hermione remained bare.

By the light of day, she considered her nakedness, the devastated condition of the bed linens, and the presence of the tray.

“Grix brought that up?” she asked.

“Don’t worry.” Draco retrieved his teacup from the bedside. “I made sure you were fully covered when he brought it in. You’ve shifted quite a bit since then.”

The full comprehension of what she’d said and done over the previous hours arrived like an unexpected bill for services. Hermione slipped out from under his arm and rolled to the empty side of the bed. She tugged the sheet to cover her breasts, folded her hands over her stomach, and lay blinking at the ceiling like an invalid. Both principal and interest on her borrowed disinhibition came due at once. Her entire body tingled with embarrassment, and, to her deeper mortification, a strong physical drive to do it all again.

Draco’s teacup clinked in its saucer. “Hermione?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to be very honest with you right now.”

She braced for impact. He'd thoroughly scratched the erotic itch, and must have discovered, probably with no small regret, that he'd overestimated his attachment. Next, he would bring her expectations into alignment with his intentions going forward. With great maturity and equanimity, she accepted that when he did, she was going to be violently ill.

"Alright," she said.

Tentatively, he reached across the bed and hooked his index finger around hers. "I see you've moved all the way over there, and I'm suddenly feeling terrified this was the wrong thing to have done."

She winced at an intrusive memory from the night before. Her bedroom had been awash in white moonlight, the open window drawing in the scent of clematis, her hair tied out of the way, her breasts rebounding in a tawdry fashion. Sometime during his first refractory period, he'd reversed his provisional policy vis-à-vis Hermione and sexual climax. In their subsequent trials, rather than deny her, he brought her to orgasm like he intended to put her average per encounter on his resume. On that particular occasion, his thumb circling menacingly around her critical anatomy, she rode him like an Irish Sport Horse through three successive crises, vocally blaming him for her incapacitation with the vocabulary of a back of house restaurant worker.

As she processed that vision, he threaded his fingers through hers.

"*Was* this the wrong thing to have done?" he asked.

She cast him an anxious, sidelong glance. "If you think it was—I mean, if you're not interested in doing it anymore, I'm positive we can both be adults about—"

Before she finished, he rolled over and covered her body with his.

"Merlin, you genuinely had me worried." He kissed her with dubious intent. "Stop trying to make this awkward, Granger. It's not in the cards for you."

She felt enormous relief at being crushed by him as his mouth trailed down her throat.

"So you *would* like to do more of this?" she asked.

He pondered his hand, now folded over her breast. "I want to do more of this, yes."

"Even after we go back?"

"Even then," he said.

"Just with me, or...?"

He laughed into her shoulder.

"Stop laughing at me!" she cried. "I'm perfectly serious!" She attempted to roll out from under him, but he settled his weight onto her definitively, then turned them both over so she was stretched out on top of him.

"The shocking truth of it all is that you"—he kissed the tip of her nose—"are the *actual* worst." Wearing a tranquil, beatific expression, like a randy Renaissance Madonna, he swept his thumb across her brow, and touched his forehead to hers. "And I take back everything I said yesterday. I'm not in love with you."

“You’re not?”

“No. You were right; this is obviously a sex curse.”

At the feel of his assertive interest, Hermione wriggled her hips. “Why are you like this?”

He chastely touched his lips to hers. “Because we’re naked. And cursed, probably.”

“I’m the only naked person present.”

“Easily mended.” He hooked his thumbs under the waistband of his boxers and pushed them down.

“Haven’t you had enough for the moment?” she asked.

“No. Have you?”

“No, but—”

“Good. Sit up.” Nudging her to rise to her knees, he took himself in hand. “Wait.” He grabbed her thigh to stop her. “Do *you* want to do this with other people?”

Already, the thought was harrowing. “Not in the slightest.”

His hand relaxed. “Then yes, to all of the above. I’ve spent my entire life not being inside you, and frankly, I’m over it.” He indicated she ought to proceed with next steps. “I would like to do a disquieting amount of this, absolutely only ever with you, and if at all possible, I’d like to be there to see Potter’s face when he finds out about it.”

“We can’t stay up here all day. We need to”—Hermione’s eyes rolled back in her head—“go down.”

He exhaled appreciatively as she settled. “*Do* we?”

“Yes.”

“What for?”

“To eat.” A shudder passed through her from crown to toes. “Why are you laughing now?”

An hour later, once Hermione had been cinched into fresh stays and buttoned into a coral-colored gown, and after Draco spent a dilatory interval kissing the swell of her breasts burgeoning over her bodice, they made their way downstairs.

Hermione intended to leave their fledgling intimacy behind them in the bedroom, but in the hall, he reached back and took her hand. In his breeches and dark waistcoat, he strode into the sitting room tall as a bridegroom. Hermione couldn’t take her eyes off him.

“Your breakfasts are there.” Grix indicated two covered plates sitting on the kitchen table. A folded letter sat between them. “And a note from the Hall. They’d like to have you and the old man up for tea before you go.”

“Malfo, at last!” Martin shouted from his laboratory. There was a blunt explosion, and a puff of purple smoke drifted around the corner. “Time’s wasting, lad!”

“I’ll be there shortly, cousin!” Draco answered. “I’m famished.” He drew Hermione’s chair out for her, ignoring her dubious look, and they sat down to a lovely fry up.

Hermione breathed in the steam rising from her plate, and discovered she was positively starving. "Thank you very much, Mr. Grix. This is beautiful."

Draco smiled enigmatically at his egg and tomato.

"What are you smirking about?" Hermione asked.

"Honestly? I have no idea." The corners of his mouth quivered. "But I can't stop."

"*God.*" She stabbed a sausage. "We're worse than teenagers. Maybe we should stay here."

Draco leaned over and pressed his lips to the soft place just below her ear. "You want to go home, so, let's get you home."

She and Draco made short work of their breakfasts. He washed their dishes and disappeared around the corner as Martin shouted, "Malfo! Get you here! It's fizzing!"

Covered by a practical canvas apron, Grix busied himself emptying the book shelves one by one. He cast specialty cleaning charms over each book as they drifted into stacks on the rug, and scrubbing and polishing spells on the bare shelves. The room smelled pleasantly of lemon.

"I suppose I'm not needed back there," said Hermione dolefully. "Shall I help you, Mr. Grix?"

"If you'd like." Grix snagged a brown leather book from mid-air, and rubbed at its cover with his thumb before letting it sail onto an upper shelf by the door. "I won't turn down an extra set of hands."

Hermione threw an apron over her dress and started on the shelves in the opposite corner, resisting the temptation to snatch several books out of the stream and curl up on the sofa.

In the laboratory, Martin and Draco nattered to one another, producing every manner of gongings, bubblings, and other esoteric clangour, occasional indefinable odors and, once, a round of blistering swearing from Draco.

Near lunch time, an owl sailed through the kitchen window carrying a parcel and letter.

Grix fed the owl a treat from a jar near the stove, then blinked through his spectacles at the addressee's name on the envelope. "What's this, then?" Sitting at the kitchen table, he broke the wax seal on the letter. As he unfolded the parchment, a second, sealed letter fell onto the table. Grix read its address, then read the open letter several times. He glanced at Hermione with a strange expression. After setting both letters aside, he loosed the brown paper wrapping, opened the box, and removed a lacquered wooden case. It was the size of Hermione's hand, intricately worked with dark and light wood. Grix flicked open the hinge, lifted the lid, and paused.

Curiosity overwhelmed her manners, and Hermione tried to peer into the box's velvet interior from across the room. "What is it?"

Grix drew out a shining gold pocket watch, dangling from a polished fob. He examined it minutely, running a calloused fingertip over the etched case before opening it.

"Oh, how beautiful, Mr. Grix," said Hermione. "Did your brother send it?"

"No." Grix blinked several times, as though something was irritating his eyes, and began the prosaic work of attaching the fob to his waistcoat buttonhole and stowing the watch in his pocket.

He stashed both the opened and unopened letters inside a secretary desk in the sitting room corner, and resumed his dusting, saying nothing more. More than once, from the corner of her eye, Hermione spied him removing the watch from his pocket, opening the case, and stroking the bezel with evident pleasure.

Around noon, they paused their project and assembled a sandwich picnic in the front garden. Hermione went to call Draco and Martin to lunch, and found them conferring over a steaming cauldron.

Draco took no notice of her as she rounded the corner. "You're not worried about the separation happening here?" he asked Martin, indicating oily orange rivulets on the surface of a bubbling pea-colored concoction. He consulted a neatly arranged row of notes on the workbench.

"No," said Martin. "Some separation at this stage is expected. If there's a great deal, you simply add more...?" He winked at Hermione and pointed hintingly at a jar of brilliant orange powder.

Draco searched one parchment, then examined another. "Powdered shachihoko scales."

Hermione approached. Without looking up from the formula, Draco slid his hand around her waist, pulled her between himself and the bench, and continued to read over her shoulder.

"What are you like?" she scolded.

"Professor," he said, massaging her hip, "I'm noticing there's no direction here for reducing temperature after adding the crushed citrine."

"It's in the footnotes," said Martin, "there below."

"Ah," said Draco. "I see it now—citrine...low boil, but if you needed the asphodel earlier...high simmer." His hand roamed to Hermione's backside.

She fiddled with his top waistcoat button. "Lunch is on the lawn."

"Ten minutes." Still intent on Martin's illegible scribbles, he kissed her absently, in what Hermione had begun to comprehend was his favorite place, just beneath her ear. "We're *very* close."

"Are you sure you haven't just been making refreshing beverages back here?"

He looked at her at last, still wearing the abominable soft-eyed expression he'd had all morning. "It's nearly finished, actually. Despite appearances, it seems the professor was extremely productive this week. This dress is my third favorite, by the way."

Hermione's pulse throbbed at their proximity. She wondered when she'd be able to stand close to him without feeling like the world was tilting. Possibly, she never would.

"Can you actually read his notes?" she asked.

"Mm hm." Draco kissed her on the mouth. "It should be ready shortly after dinner."

"And we'll simply—leave," she said.

"If you want." His gaze wandered over her face. "Unless you'd actually like to look into fishmongering. You'll need to learn how to knit cables soon if you plan to cover two and a half Quidditch teams worth of little girls in Aran pullovers."

Hermione felt warm and liquid all over.

Once Draco and Martin reached a passive stage in their brewing, they propped Martin regally with enormous Transfigured velvet pillows on a blanket in the garden. After they'd eaten their sandwiches, Hermione gathered raspberries under the supervision of the crow, hopping along the fence.

"You're just like him." She handed the crow a raspberry. With a look, she indicated Draco, visible through the cottage's front windows, tidying up the dishes. When the crow tilted its head in inquiry, she held out another berry. "Charming everybody into giving you what you want."

She returned to the blanket, and overtaken with a wave of tiredness, curled up against a pair of pillows and watched Grix wander between his garden beds. He fussed generically, here and there: training pea vines, plucking away dead buds, and squeezing ripening apricots. Settled into his own pillow nest, perhaps taking Hermione's cue, Martin began to snooze. Draco emerged from the cottage and tucked a blanket around Martin, set the professor's spectacles safely out of the way, and with a book in hand, sat beside Hermione.

"Is it alright if I sit here, Miss Granger?" he asked.

She arched her back and yawned. "Are your intentions honorable?"

"They neither have been, nor ever will be." He ran a hand along her calf.

"Mr. Granger," she whispered, "if anyone were to see us, my reputation would be in tatters."

"Then I suppose it's pistols at dawn with Potter, or a trip to the altar." He cleared his throat, and opened his book.

As he read, he continued stroking her leg, and Hermione drifted in and out of wakefulness.

She startled at a muttered oath and the swift withdrawal of Draco's hand from beneath her hem.

"Fuck," said Draco under his breath, then louder, "Weasley."

Hermione sat up as Roland Weasley approached along the forest path.

"Granger!" Roland called cheerfully. "Miss Granger."

Hermione quickly stood, stifling a yawn as she straightened her skirts. "Hello, Mr. Weasley. It's a pleasure to see you."

Sunday smart in a fine blue coat and lustrous topper, Roland halted before the garden gate. He regarded Martin, still asleep on the blanket, and Draco, sitting beside him. "I'm heartily grieved to have disrupted your leisure. I'm returning to Devonshire this afternoon, and had hoped to see you before dinner." He drew a generous, immaculate bouquet from behind his back: roses, dahlias, sunflowers and hollyhocks in a riot of summer color, tied with a red silk ribbon.

Hermione looked down at Draco, who watched Roland with an unreadable expression.

"Will you walk with me, Miss Granger?" Roland asked.

"I—yes, of course," she agreed. "Only...I shouldn't go far."

Hermione received the flowers and brought them inside. Summoning a vase from atop the kitchen cabinetry, she quickly arranged the flowers on the kitchen table before fetching her bonnet and a shawl.

Wrapped in the soft armor of propriety, she passed through the gate and took Roland's arm. Casting an anxious glance at the man who'd spent the previous night in her bed, now conspicuously absorbed in his book, she let Roland guide her down the path towards the brook.

On the little bridge spanning the stream, he removed his hat, and laid it on the railing.

"Miss Granger." Nearly everything about him was formal and correct—his dress, posture, the tone of his voice—but his eyes were aglow with fervency. "Hermione. I have no wish to delay."

The sun struck from directly above, setting apart every gold and bronze filament of his hair and lashes. Hermione knew, with the certainty of fact, he'd have children, who would themselves have children, and one day, in some small part because Hermione had hurt him in the sunlight on the bridge over the brook, there would be Ron.

Ron. His name still felt like pressing a bruise, and maybe always would.

Like Hermione, Ron was heartbroken. And like Hermione, he was happy. She'd met him for coffee weeks before, and with tremendous kindness and civility, he'd told her he was seeing someone new. He insisted it had been, like everything seemed to be, an accident. He'd meant to wait a bit longer; to take time for himself. But through his body language, the spaces between his words, he revealed to Hermione without meaning to that he was stumbling into love—that he was, she thought, rapidly falling.

"I don't wish to delay either," she said. "So I'm going to be extremely forward. I believe that if I didn't stop you, you might have asked me to marry you."

Roland's brow furrowed. "I won't conceal that was the whole of my purpose in coming here."

"Then I'm very grateful you didn't," said Hermione, "because I'd have been obligated to disappoint you."

Roland's expression shifted, passing through confusion, comprehension, and despair.

"I would have had a great many explanations to give you for my refusal," she said. "None of which would have had anything to do with how perfectly lovely and disastrously eligible you are. The most important would have been this: I'm in no way suited to being your wife."

Roland's lips parted.

"Please, let me finish." Hermione wanted to take his hand in hers, but knew it would be cruel. "If I'm vague, you'll think I'm being self-deprecating, or coquettish or something, so I'm going to be honest. I have no idea whether that's the correct course of action, but I've recently come to understand that in every moment, all any of us can do is the best we can with the information we have available. Even when we're doing our absolute best, we're going to make mistakes. We're going to cause accidents. And it would be very nice to drop every event and its outcomes into an equation, and have it spit out either a positive or negative solution. Then we'd know when we'd done the right thing. But I'm beginning to believe we're all part of a larger and more complex problem than we can imagine. Its solution could be infinite, or non-existent, but we can't know, because we can't see either end. It just goes on, back in one direction, forward in the other, and we're here, balanced on the equals sign, with all our best intentions falling to either side. It's distressing, really—all the not-knowing we're obliged to do. And how maddening that it's impossible to make all the right decisions. But what a relief, too. What a terrible responsibility that would be."

She glanced back to the cottage behind them. No one was visible in the windows or over the garden fence. The Time Turner hung beneath her bodice; she drew it out, and held it forward in her palm.

"I know this is going to sound preposterous, so if you need confirmation, you can ask William. He knows everything."

"Will?"

"He became involved entirely by accident. Or design. Anyway, what I'm trying to get around to telling you is that my—" She gagged on the word *brother*. "Draco and I are both from another time, quite a long way off from this one. And absolutely under no circumstances are we genetically, legally, or effectually related."

"Genetically?"

"Nevermind that part. The material point is, he's not my brother."

"You're from another *time*, " Roland repeated.

"We're time researchers at the Ministry. We had an accident in our laboratory, and were blown off course for a while." She lifted the Time Turner. "This is the instrument we use."

"But you're Martin's cousins."

"I deeply wish that were true," said Hermione. "And maybe we are his family, in the ways that matter. But that was an accident, too—although a very happy one. We never meant to deceive or hurt anyone. Everything that's happened here has been some sort of mishap." She could tell every time her words landed an unmeaning blow. "Or serendipity."

Roland was an enormously intelligent man, who'd grown up knowing magic was real. It took him all of a minute to determine she was telling the truth. He touched the Time Turner in her hand. "So—you're going back. And you won't return."

"I believe the past is a country we can visit...and also that we shouldn't stay." Her stomach twisted with longing for a place she hadn't left yet. "We still have a lot to figure out, but if we could be certain we wouldn't unduly influence anything—"

He held her gaze. "You don't intend to come back. I won't see you again."

"No." Hermione tucked the Turner back in her bodice. "I don't think so. Certainly not long enough for what you had hoped."

"So, your letter," Roland said. "In the book. And your note. Those were—what?" His gaze lost all exterior focus as he puzzled his way through the events of the previous weeks. To Hermione's eternal wonderment and admiration, he said, with conviction, "You wouldn't make sport like that." He silently deliberated, and at last, guessed the shape of the missing pieces. "They weren't for me, were they? Only...accidents."

"Yes. I'm so terribly sorry."

He watched the brook flow below them. "The flowers are from my estate, Wrayburn Hill. I should very much have liked you to see it. It's not the largest, but if I may repeat the claim myself, the most enchanting house and gardens in Devonshire."

“I have no doubt. The flowers are extraordinary. I thank you with all my heart.” She had a thought, and weighed it in her mind before forging ahead. “You have a family in the time I’m from. Descendents.”

Roland jolted. “You know them?”

“Quite well. They look a lot like you, actually. Every bit as handsome.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “And they’re happy? They’re well?”

She thought about Molly, Arthur, George and Percy, Bill, Charlie, and Ginny. Last of all, she thought about Ron. “They are all happy, yes. All quite well. I love them very much.”

His brow rose. “Do you?”

“Dearly. I would say they’re like family to me, but they’re not. They are family.”

“I see.” The weather on his face changed again, and the clouds parted. “So, you’re going to go, and an undisclosed number of years from now, you’ll love, and be loved, by people who wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for me.”

“That’s exactly right.” Hermione took his hand. Both its strength and warmth passed through his glove.

His eyes were still kind and blue, still laughing and clever, and also reflected how profoundly he’d been disappointed. “Then my kin are fortunate, indeed. I’m glad for them.”

Hermione squeezed his hand. “You will make someone the happiest of women, Mr. Weasley. I hope that whoever you choose, she deserves you.”

“I assure you, Miss Granger, you deserve the world.” As he mulled over a thought, his joyful spirit—never fully repressible, Hermione suspected—reasserted itself. “And for myself, I must learn to be content to consider that under different circumstances”—he lifted her hand to his lips—“I would have very much enjoyed being taught how to make you happy.”

At the cottage gate, Hermione shook hands with Roland, and found Draco in the sitting room perusing the shelves.

She hung her bonnet and shawl by the door, and without a word, wrapped her arms around him from behind. As she settled into the curve of his back, she felt his entire frame ease. She waited for a joke or snide remark, but instead, he turned and wrapped his arms around her.

“Are you alright?” he asked. “That couldn’t have been easy.”

“I don’t especially enjoy jilting earnest young men I’ve strung along by accident, no.”

“He looked like he took it about as well as could be expected.”

“I told him we’re time travelers,” Hermione admitted.

“*Did* you?”

“Yes. He wasn’t as shocked as he ought to have been.” She held tight to him. “I was worried you were annoyed.”

“I’m the one going to bed with you tonight.”

“Are you sure about that?” she asked.

“I’ll pout.”

“Of course you will.”

“By the way, Margaret’s upstairs rifling through your clothes.”

“Oh, Lord.”

Hermione’s cheeks burned as she hustled down the hall and bounded up the stairs.

The borrowed dresses lay organized by color and degree of formality along the bed. Margaret stood beside the hearth, examining a gown. “Hello, Miss Granger!” she said cheerfully. “I’ve come to fetch the clothes away. You’ve had an adventure in this one.” She lifted the torn dress from the night before in one hand, and in the other, a palm full of loose buttons.

Draco crested the stairs and leaned in the doorframe. “We engaged in some exciting activities yesterday.”

“Indeed!” Margaret laughed. “Impatient to get to bed, I imagine.”

“Desperate, actually,” said Draco.

Hermione stared daggers at him.

Margaret indicated a brown paper parcel on the bed. “I’ve wrapped your ball gown for your journey, along with all the underthings and the jewels for your hair. The bottle of rose absolute is tucked inside as well, like you asked, Mr. Granger.”

“That’ll all be fun,” said Draco.

“Would you like to keep the one you’re wearing for your journey, Miss Granger, or something else?” asked Margaret.

Hermione considered her gown. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Where’s the one with the roses?” Draco asked.

“That one makes me sad,” said Hermione.

“Then we’ll have to make you very happy in it,” Draco countered.

“Here we are!” Margaret whipped the gown from the trunk with a flourish. “And the bonnet as well, Miss Granger.”

After helping Margaret pack and submitting to being dressed a final time, Hermione found Draco in the garden. She’d checked herself in the mirror, and there’d been nothing for it. Rosy and voluptuous, unable to shed her expression of earthy fulfillment, she’d blossomed into the picture of a woman who’d been bent over every piece of furniture in the boudoir and comprehensively satisfied.

“Are we ready?” she asked, swinging her bonnet primly from its ribbons.

Draco locked an artful gaze on her and held out his hand. “Let’s take a walk.”

“Where to?” Hermione asked.

“Places,” he replied.

“Is there time?”

“We’re not expected at the Hall for another half an hour.”

“I thought they wanted us at three o’clock,” said Hermione, hooking her hand through his. “That’s in fifteen minutes.”

Draco kissed her below her ear. “We can make that work.”

He drew her through the garden gate, then along the thorny path, picking up his pace until her heart quickened.

“What’s the hurry?” she cried.

He answered her with a puckish look, swiping brambles out of her way as he took his long strides. Breathless, smiling, she ducked after him under a branch into the entry of the green cathedral. The day was fine, the air warm and heavy, almost cloying with the scent of honeysuckle. Butterflies flocked in the canopy, and across the clearing floor, the little pink flowers stretched open in the filtered sunlight.

Draco released her hand and meandered across the clearing to the clerical oak.

“Why are you all the way over there?” Hermione asked.

He hooked his hands over a low-arching branch and tilted his head. “Maybe I’m waiting for you to come over here.”

“We’ll be late to tea.”

“Oh, no.”

She walked the length of the sun-patched nave, arriving at a cluster of round, half-buried stones which might have marked the boundary of the cathedral's chancel. The mounded moss could be taken for the altar, and behind it, smirking diabolically, leaning with unconcern against the limbs of the primordial priest, her iniquitous redeemer.

She tossed her bonnet aside. “You shouldn’t look at people like that.”

“I don’t look at people like this.”

“Only me?”

“Only you.” Like a predator licking a recent meal from its paws, his posture conveyed a relaxed awareness of her potential to meet his needs. He crooked a finger at her and beckoned.

“You think I’m just going to come whenever you call?” she asked.

“If I’m good? Yes.”

With no desire to pretend she didn't want to, Hermione drew near. "Are you going to be good?" She tucked her hands underneath the hem of his waistcoat.

"I'm *quite* certain I already have been."

"You're horrible."

"I thought we were talking about how good I am."

She pulled back and met his eyes. "I did know. That you wanted me."

"Everyone knew, Hermione."

Her body flared with hunger and humiliation. "I was terrified that if we slept together, I'd lose you."

"Quite the opposite." He still didn't put his hands on her. "I hope that's alright."

She rose onto her toes and kissed his chin. "I thought you brought me here to accost me."

"I'm shocked you would suggest such a thing Miss Granger. I'm a gentleman."

Her hands trailed lower, and she began undoing his trouser fastenings.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

She tugged on his arm. "Touch me."

"Is this how a lady behaves?"

"I'm not a lady," she grumbled.

"I see." He watched her hands go about their work. "In that case."

She'd turned out sweet as a spring lamb in roses and cream. Leaning close and taking in the perfumed scent of her, his lupine lethality uncoiled in slow motion. His hands first went behind her head, drawing her mouth to his, then dropped to her thighs. He didn't bother to undress her. Gathering up her skirts, hiking her legs around his waist, he took her against the oak like she charged by the hour.

How distressing not to know, Hermione thought, panting against his shoulder. How maddening the mystery could be. And what a relief it was, in the end, to fall into the unknown. What a pleasure it was to give in.

After, utterly debauched, bonnet ribbons looped around her wrist and scraps of lichen in her hair, she took his hand and led the way back, laughing and reprimanding him every dozen steps when he drew her back into his arms and kissed her. Faces flushed, smiling like fools, they found Martin and Grix waiting for them in the garden.

Grix clicked his pocket watch shut. "See to it Martin makes it back for the decanting step. I understand if you miss the window, you'll have to start from scratch."

Draco looked at Hermione sidelong.

"No, I am not knitting you a jumper," she said.

He acquiesced with a roll of his shoulders. "That's a shame."

Draco, tidied up into the shape of a respectable gentleman, and Hermione, dignified on his arm, followed the professor's chair up the rise to Bugg-Buntley Hall.

The family served tea on the lawn, a silver service laid atop a swaying white tablecloth, elves at relaxed attention minding overflowing platters of fruit. Only Sir Thomas, Lady Longbottom and Mrs. Longbottom sat at the tables. All four Longbottom girls, their elder brother, and William Avery cavorted over the lawn, batting a shuttlecock between them with small rackets.

"It's mine!" Cressida shouted, rushing forward, but William intercepted her. He snatched her up by the waist, whipped her away to the side, and smacked the shuttlecock towards Penelope while Cressida laughed from her belly and ground out her disapproval.

"Willy, you cheater, come here!" Cassandra cried. "I'll show you a smack!"

"How can I have cheated?" William called back, now holding a struggling Cressida in both arms. "You Longbottoms are too slow! Except you, Penny!"

"Thank you." Penelope bapped the shuttlecock neatly towards Isadora, who knocked it along to Tom.

"Circe smite you in the head, Tommy!" howled Cassandra. "Stop looking at your wife!"

Indeed, a distracted Tom sent the shuttlecock astray. It arced past the tip of Isadora's outstretched racket, sailed before Lord and Lady Longbottom's unsurprised faces, and splashed down in Sir Thomas's teacup.

"Ah ha!" Sir Thomas slapped his hands against his knees. "Fifty points to our Tom!"

Lady Longbottom withdrew an elegant limewood wand from her skirts and set the table to rights.

"No, Daddy, fifty points is far too many. Oh, it's my good Professor! Hello, there, Mr. Martin!" Cassandra waved as the Twiggybroke party approached. "Mr. Granger! Come and play!"

Draco laid his hand over Hermione's and gave it a pulse, then trundled along with Martin to join the fray.

"Miss Granger!" As Hermione approached, Sir Thomas leapt from his seat and took up the silver teapot himself. "As you well know, we here at the Hall don't traffic in the art of formality." He swept his arm towards the scene of his grown children running around the lawn, shoulders jostling, leaping out of the way of Martin's careening chair and swishing racket. "We've set you quite a scene for your farewell!"

Hermione accepted the teacup he offered. "It's perfect, Sir Thomas."

And indeed, the Hall had never felt more vivid nor less capable of possessing any fault.

Hermione sat beside Mrs. Longbottom. Rolling a mouthful of full-bodied tea over her tongue, breathing the scent of cut grass and roses in sensual flush, Hermione rested in the sweetness of a singularly flawless summer afternoon.

Save the gangling Tom, Draco was the tallest in the field of contenders. They played with no net. Hermione deduced the objective was to keep the shuttlecock from hitting the ground as long as possible, a goal the Longbottoms and William appeared disinterested in achieving. They all chased one another about, sabotaging every swipe with legs and elbows, while Draco dashed behind Martin's chair, backstopping his missed attempts.

Hermione practically leapt out of her skin when Mrs. Longbottom laid her cup in its saucer and spoke in her timorous voice.

"You and your brother will be sorely missed, Miss Granger." The young bride laid her gloved hand over Hermione's and squeezed it. "You'll come again soon, won't you?"

"I—" Without warning, tears pooled in Hermione's eyes. She looked towards the woods, wicked them away with her glove, and faced Mrs. Longbottom again cheerfully. "I would like that very much."

Mrs. Longbottom set her cup aside and picked up her knitting, now an elongated rectangle of delicate white lace. "It all came right in the end, didn't it?"

Hermione drew back. "How do you mean?"

"With Mr. Granger."

"I—" Hermione's mouth fell open.

"He seems entirely himself." Mrs. Longbottom gently touched her forehead.

"You mean his injury!" said Hermione. "Yes. He's every bit the person he always has been."

"You're fortunate to have an affectionate brother." Mrs. Longbottom looked towards the players on the lawn. "He loves you very much."

The game was paused. Through an unwitnessed miracle, two rackets had become trapped high in the elm. Martin sat below them, one eye closed, wand aimed at his targets, gearing up for something more interesting than a simple *Accio*. His own racket pinched under his arm, Draco kicked the shuttlecock back and forth with Cassandra, but again and again, looked towards the tables, mouth wrenched in a half smile, eyes alight with—

Love.

It arced off him in waves, like energetic particles radiating across the heated July air, striking Hermione's awareness in a tidal wash of colored light, warm, staggering, and unsubtle.

"Does he always look at me like that?" Hermione asked.

Mrs. Longbottom laughed. "Indeed, he does! He reminds me of Tom, sometimes." She peered at her husband, predictably staring at her with unconcealed ardour. With deft movements, never looking at her hands, her needles clicked. "His affection perfectly matches your own."

"What?"

"My brothers dangled me out the window as a child," said Mrs. Longbottom.

So that's where that comes from, thought Hermione, throwing back an over-large mouthful of tea.

A short blast preceded two hollow *tocks*. Martin whirled around in his chair, rubbing the top of his

head, and held up both rackets.

“Granger!” bellowed Sir Thomas. “Come here, my lad!”

Draco approached, wiping the back of his neck with a handkerchief. “Yes, sir.”

Sir Thomas summoned an elf, holding a pair of wooden boxes. He presented the first to Draco, and watched with a raised brow as he opened it.

“Oh.” Draco removed a fist-sized object.

“What say you to that, my lad?” boomed Sir Thomas.

It was an enameled metal box in an uncanny likeness of Sir Thomas’s grey cat Edward, down to the chilling lack of empathy in the narrowed eyes.

Sir Thomas handed Hermione the second present, from which she predictably drew a box made to look like the little black and white cat, Hugo. It had two wide-open, deeply unintelligent yellow enamel eyes, a white enamel mustache, and two pointy enamel teeth hanging over its lower lip.

Sir Thomas roared with laughter. “Snuff cats for you both, my good Grangers!”

Draco held his cat next to Hermione’s. “How extraordinary, Sir Thomas,” he said. “They’re exquisite.”

Hermione rotated hers to and fro. “I don’t know what to say.”

“This is really elaborate enamelwork,” Draco said quietly. “They must have cost a small fortune.”

“Yes, Daddy, you’re quite the comedian,” said Penelope. “Are we finished playing? I’d like to sit down.”

The family and their guests sat, ate, and laughed; drank and talked; walked the garden paths and along into the orchard.

Midsummer had passed, but the parched and spent weeks of late July and August still lay ahead. The world hung from the branch in perfect ripeness. Perched at the season’s pinnacle, Hermione observed her surroundings with an acute awareness of the fugitive present. Each moment hung before her like a prism, pure and crystalline, tangible and changeable as water. The chilled soft skins of strawberries glistening in a bowl; William, reclining in the grass, hand surreptitiously cupping Cressida’s ankle; the ladybirds creeping in the hearts of the yellow roses; Isadora adjusting her spectacles, slipping down her nose in the heat: one after another, instances collapsed continuously out of existence to make way for what came next, like tumbling liquid holographic cinematography, time as a projection within a waterfall, image after three dimensional image viewed sequentially, forming the flickering, churning, kinetic, inevitable narrative of life. Hermione wished to hold out a bottle and capture a measure of it, seal it up and preserve it like wine, draw it out in old age and taste the halcyon sweetness of love in youth, warm as a strawberry fresh off the stem. But she could only attend to the conversation, revel in the sun searing her skin in its overhead race, and now and again, catch Draco watching her, still brazen, but finally perceived; still himself, and finally known.

“You’ll come again,” said Lady Longbottom, embracing Hermione when it was time to go.

“We’ll try,” said Hermione, a lie she told mostly to herself.

William and Draco clasped one another as friends, and Hermione allowed herself to sink into the hold of each Longbottom sister in turn.

“I see you prevaricating! You *will* come and see us,” Sir Thomas insisted as he yanked Hermione into his fatherly grasp. “Next summer, at the latest! There may well be more of us!”

Mrs. Longbottom blushed fiercely.

“Malfo will come again,” Martin declared, “when I’m dead.”

“Keep your maudlin prognostications to yourself, old man!” said Sir Thomas. “You Cassandras are all alike!”

“I’m macabre in an entirely different way, Daddy,” said Cassandra. “Anyway, the professor refuses to tell me when I’m supposed to die.”

Isadora presented Hermione with a potted strawberry plant.

“Mr. Weasley,” Hermione said carefully, “may need a good friend. I believe he has one in you, Izzy.”

“I see.” Isadora anxiously adjusted her sleeve. “Do you think—should we write to him? My sisters and I?”

“Undoubtedly.”

William briefly shook hands with Hermione, thought better of it, and drew her into a fraternal clutch. “Will you—if you find a way, that is—send word that you’re alright? I don’t trust your *friend* here to do it.”

“Of course,” Hermione promised.

Each goodbye begat another, until at length Martin took it upon himself to bump down the lawns alone, drawing Draco and Hermione after him.

“Do you actually know when you’re going to die, cousin?” asked Hermione on their walk.

“February 29th, 1808, round about four o’clock in the morning,” said Martin. “Leap year!”

“And what makes you think you know this?” she asked.

“Ah ha!” Cresting the final rise before descending into the glen, Martin bashed his steering toggle forward and raced down the decline, now free of every stone and pebble.

As they approached the glen, Draco took Hermione’s hand.

Nested in the flourishing garden, moss greening its storybook peaks, the yellow-stone cottage dozed. As the sun faded westward, a smoke plume curled from the chimney.

Far ahead, Martin passed through the arched gate and through the blue door.

Hermione’s breath caught in her throat. “I can hardly stand it.”

“I know,” said Draco.

“It’s awful enough to be far away from people, but when we go back—they’ll have all gone, long

before.”

He only squeezed her hand.

“What do you suppose happens next?” she asked.

“We go home.” Draco pulled her hand through the crook of his arm. “Assess the damage in the lab. Determine how to hide its extent from Shackbolt for as long as possible, and then—have I ever told you about the bath in the Manor master suite?”

“I keep thinking I’d like another day. But then I’d want one more. Isn’t that how it goes? All the way along?”

As he opened the gate and held it, suit jacket hung from a fingertip over his shoulder, Hermione paused.

“What?” He tilted his head in inquiry.

“Nothing.”

“Something, Granger. Come on. We actually talk to one another now.”

Hermione swayed closer to him as though magnetized. “We do lots of things now.”

“We do.”

“I can’t stop looking at you,” she muttered, blushing beneath her bonnet.

He leaned in close, and kissed her below the ear. “Now you know how it feels.” Taking her hand again, he led the way into the cottage.

A basket sat beside the door, neatly packed with Hermione’s clothing parcel, Roland’s flowers wrapped in brown paper, a jar of honey, a net bag bursting with peas, salad greens, and courgettes, a bag of plums, a crate of raspberries, and several wrapped packets, possibly sandwiches. All prepared in Grix’s language of affection, seeing them safely on their travels.

His papers lay organized on the table, and he sat before them with a quill and ink pot, peering down his nose through his spectacles. “All well, I gather?” he said without looking up. “Your potion’s got another ten minutes. I’ve gathered your things there.”

Hermione hung her bonnet on the pegs by the door. “This is the last bonnet I’m ever wearing.” She withdrew the enameled cat boxes and the strawberry plant from a net bag slung over her arm, and stooped to tuck them into the travel basket.

Hanging his coat by the door, Draco frowned. “You pierce me.”

“Come, my gel, you’ll see how it is.” Beside the hearth, Martin yanked a thin volume covered in blue leather from the shelf over the fireplace, knocking an unmarked pink clothbound book onto the floor. He handed the blue book to Hermione.

“*On Potions and Portents.*” Hermione flipped the cover back and read the table of contents. “*A potion for seeing into the future.* You did *not* make that work, cousin.”

“Ha!” Cackling, Martin zipped around the sofa and kitchen table towards his laboratory. “Takes it right out of you. Down for the better part of a week. You ready, my boy?”

Draco followed, deftly cuffing his sleeves. Buzzing with disbelief and envy, Hermione flicked through Martin's book. Predictably impenetrable, the entire text appeared to lay out a theoretical and practical groundwork for a formula that would allow its user to peer across time. "Absurd," she muttered, several times. At length, she shelved the book, retrieved the fallen volume from the floor, and idly opened it.

Her hands stilled. "Draco!"

"What's wrong?" he called from the back of the house.

"What was the name of the novel you read last week? You said it had, what—a stepmother? And it wasn't Cinderella?"

"No. I do know that one, though."

"What was it called?" she cried.

"Merlin, Granger, what's the problem? It was called *Wives and Daughters*. I quite enjoyed it. Why?"

Hermione's pulse accelerated. She tucked the book under her arm, and scanned the shelves until she found another volume with a plain, unmarked spine. Unshelving it, she flipped its cover open.

"How are these—" She tossed both books onto the sofa. Anxiety rising, she located two more and turned to Grix. "The unmarked books. Where is the professor getting them?"

Grix shuffled his pages into one pile, and folded his hands on the table. "I suspect they've come from someone particularly good at textual Transfiguration."

Novel in hand, Hermione raced into Martin's laboratory.

Clad in an apron, Martin observed Draco ladle their potion into a sieve hung over a funnel emptying into a series of additional filters. Nearly all the potion had been filtered and collected in glass beakers on the worktop.

"Where did you get this book?" Hermione demanded.

Martin held his finger against his lips. "Steady on. Last thing you want to do is spill the lot."

"Cousin, please!" said Hermione.

Without wavering from his task, Draco glanced up. "What's going on?"

"*Wives and Daughters* wasn't published until the 1860s," said Hermione.

"Oh," said Draco. "I thought you were angry at me for using one of your garter ribbons as a bookmark."

"Why would I—hold on, you stole one of my garter ribbons?"

"How have you gotten ahold of forbidden books, cousin?" Draco waited until the level inside the sieve lowered, then scooped in the last few ladelful.

"Keep ladeling, lad! Once all the solids are out, dose it out and cork it up!" Martin tossed his apron aside, then steered around Hermione and through the kitchen.

In the sitting room, he drew his wand, and mumbling, carved swift, fluid patterns into the air. Luminous blue outlines appeared around every book. One after another, several dozen unmarked books slipped from their places, flocked to the center of the room, and fanned out in a tidy grid, covers facing Hermione as she approached.

She practically vibrated with anticipation, and underneath her discomposure, scolded herself for incuriosity. How astonishing, she thought, that she hadn't bothered to open a single untitled book; she'd hardly even noticed them. What sort of rabid reader was she? One by one, she folded back their covers.

She first opened *Catch-22*. Then *Beloved*. *As I Lay Dying*. A translated edition of *The Master and Margarita*. All three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Inside each book, plain on the outside, was only a simple title page and text. There was no publishing information or further details about the author. Hermione detected magic. Pulling her wand from her pocket, she revealed sturdy, straightforward confounding spells directed specifically at Muggles, designed to ensure non-magical eyes would perceive blank pages.

Handwritten messages were inked on their titled pages.

A favorite.

Like poetry.

I expect you'll enjoy this one particularly.

Hermione angled the title page of the pink clothbound book towards Martin. "Who gave you *A Room With a View*?"

"It was given to *me*," Grix corrected. He pushed back from the table, and with a handwave, sent the books back to their places. *A Room With a View* tugged curtly out of Hermione's hands and drifted away.

Wiping his hands on a cloth, Draco entered the room. "What's all this?"

"Who gave them to you?" Hermione asked again.

"I couldn't have told you that definitively until this morning," Grix answered.

Hermione waved her hands in exasperation. "Is this something to do with Martin's potions? Peering into the future?"

"Parlor tricks!" said the professor. "Not much use when no one wants to know what happens next."

"You can't go 'round telling people when you've seen their demise," said Grix.

"Poor Malfo!" Martin slapped his forehead. "Bonged himself right up!"

"The professor's mostly used it in the drawing room at the Hall," said Grix. "He sees visions of some kind of storytelling light box installed a couple hundred years from now. I'm surprised the family still invites him up."

Mostly through his nose, kazoo-like, Martin hummed the theme from *Doctor Who*.

"No," said Grix. "Do not try to explain it to me again."

Draco took an unmarked book back down off the shelf and examined its title page. “This is your handwriting, Granger. God, now that I’m looking at it, this is probably your *copywork*.”

“How did I send you books?” Hermione pleaded with Grix.

Grix removed his spectacles, then put them back on. “Anonymous owls. Just about the time the old man goes adventuring.”

“*Adventuring?*” Hermione repeated. “What do you mean by that?”

“That trireme was junk,” said Martin. “Monsters in the Hellespont, make no mistake!”

“Who have you been adventuring with, cousin?” Hermione cried.

The room fell silent.

Hermione and Grix looked at Draco, pale as chalk beside Martin’s chair.

The professor peered up at him, and gently took his hand. “Now I’m old and you’re young. Turned the tables on you, haven’t I, my friend?”

“What have you done?” whispered Hermione.

“I haven’t done anything yet,” said Draco.

Grix dipped his quill in the inkwell. “Every few years since—” He looked at Draco and Hermione shrewdly. “Since *long enough*, the good professor goes away. Just for a blink. Usually, I don’t even notice he’s done it until I round the corner and find him yammering about mastodons or the ritual baths at Mohenjo-daro. He’s extremely secretive about it.”

“Cousins in the end!” Martin declared.

“It’s always been around then,” said Grix, “that my mystery correspondent posts me something.”

“Just once more after this for me.” Martin patted Draco’s hand. “We’ve had a grand time, you and I.”

Hermione folded her hand over the Time Turner beneath her bodice. “Am I meant to understand that for—what, *decades?*”

Grix blinked his acknowledgement.

“You two have been cavorting through the timeline like it’s lads’ night?” Hermione exclaimed.

“I suppose,” Draco said carefully, “if we have an effective potion to suspend aging, and it seems we’re unlikely or unable to cause any splintering or other catastrophic deviations, we could probably do whatever we want. And that’s a very judgmental tone from someone who’s posting people illegally made copies of books that haven’t been written yet.”

“I’ve never once done such a thing!” Hermione clenched her fists. “Even if I had, there’s a vast difference between sending a friend a book—”

“Dozens of books,” said Draco.

“—and jeopardizing the Indus Valley civilization.”

Draco lifted a brow. "Is there, though?"

"I especially enjoyed the Jerome K. Jerome," said Grix. "Thank you for sending it on."

"*Oh! Three Men in a Boat?*" Forgetting her shock and agitation, Hermione beamed. "If you like that..."

"I'd emphasize that I haven't done any of this yet," Draco pointed out, "so you're not allowed to be annoyed with me."

"I told the priest, 'I won't be dunking my head today, my good sir,' and wouldn't you know, he dunked my head anyway," Martin contributed. "I'd like to go back and dunk *his* head, even if he is a holy man."

The grandfather clock chimed six; tightly wound, Hermione jumped in surprise. Grix snapped open his pocket watch to confirm the time. As though he'd been waiting on that cue, he fetched the unopened letter from the secretary desk and handed it to Hermione.

Its address read: Hermione, 6 o'clock.

"What is this?" she asked.

Grix folded his arms over his chest. "I'm as curious as anyone."

Breaking the envelope's wax seal, she drew out a note folded around a photograph. Holding the picture to the side, she read.

Hermione,

Given such an opportunity, you'll understand the temptation to offer copious advice. But that would spoil the better part of the story; you'll want to discover it on your own.

I'll indulge myself this far: nearly all your plans don't go to plan. Fortunately, you learn to hold on to them more lightly.

Hermione examined the photograph.

The image began with an extreme close-up of a man's pale whiskers, coming in and out of focus, and the beautiful arch of Draco Malfoy's upper lip. Finishing some adjustment to the camera, he stepped back, revealing himself in boots, cuffed dungarees and a cable knit jumper, wearing a full beard and a watch cap, hair evidently tied back underneath. He sat on a log beside Hermione, also in a jumper. Two sets of clunky, old-fashioned skis and poles sprouted in the snow behind them. As Draco hooked both arms around Hermione's waist, a line of dark figures entered from the left in the frame's far distance.

Hermione squinted at the image, and picked out what looked like men on horseback, wearing silly-looking arched hats. "Is that—that isn't Napoleon's army! I absolutely refuse!"

Her rejection phased neither Photograph Draco nor Photograph Hermione in the least. She turned her face to his, and kissed him in a way Hermione felt wasn't entirely appropriate for the outdoors, nor a photograph, nor a man with a full beard. She went on kissing him like that, as if no one was watching, let alone a camera; let alone a doomed imperial army advancing in the snow.

Hermione returned to the letter.

Please expect to spend half a lifetime in the past, and a very full one in the present. You will, I'm afraid, trade any hope of equanimity for a great deal of wonder. From my vantage point, the equation appears to balance.

Yours, as ever,

H

P.S. Cables aren't as difficult as they look. You've done both the jumpers here, and they've held up beautifully.

P.P.S. You have a lot of tidying up ahead of you when you get home.

In different handwriting, a third postscript read:

I love you, Worst. Please remind me to enjoy myself. I know I will. —D

Hands trembling, Hermione refolded the letter around the photograph.

“What is it?” asked Draco. “Are you alright?”

Hermione tucked the letter inside the pocket of her dress, and folded her hands in front of her. “Is the potion ready, then?”

“Are you *alright*?” Draco asked more forcefully.

“Quite well.” Hermione pressed her hands to her cheeks. “What’s not to be well about? You’re only jumping around the outdoor bath with over-enthusiastic priests, and probably riding Bactrian camels across the Alps, and who knows what else, or *when* else. And I’m set to send Mr. Grix my favorite books. Several hours ago I was somewhere else in 1804 posting myself correspondence and a watch.”

Seated again, focused intensely on his manuscript, Grix’s lips formed a straight line as he scribed. His gleaming gold watch fob dangled from his pocket.

“Oh, God.” Hermione’s insides went all to jelly. “Do you like it?”

“It’s exquisite.” Grix dotted the end of a line. “Thank you.”

“Of course. I hope it’s a fair replacement. It’s the least I could do since we ruined yours for the Timekey folly.”

Grix patted his pocket. “This one’s a great deal nicer.”

Draco came near, and cupped her elbow. “It’s all going to be alright.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “So everyone keeps telling me.”

She couldn’t bear to look at him; between his present waistcoat and fitted trousers, and his infuriating, rugged Shackleton aesthetic in the photograph, desire had been roaring through her for the past few minutes like water loosed over the spillway of a dam.

“Is there something I should know about in that letter?” he asked softly.

She lifted her chin. “Nothing anyone should know about.”

“I’m going to go decant the potion now.”

“Thank you.”

“And then I’m taking you home,” he continued. “And putting you in the bath.”

“Maybe I’m taking myself home.”

“However you like it,” he said patiently.

“That’s just it, isn’t it?” she said. “How exactly is anyone supposed to do what they like? Maybe I’d like to take up sheep farming in Tasmania. No one’s asked!”

“I’m sorry, Granger. I know you like picking out your own trousers.”

“I do like it when they have a bit of stretch,” said Hermione. “I thought at least a person should get to pick out their own—”

He was distractingly tall, and standing quite close, looking at her like a man who’d thoroughly defiled her twice that day, both morning and afternoon, and wanted an unnecessary retake to improve his grade.

“Your own what?” Draco asked.

Hermione blushed. “Who goes cross country skiing in Siberia in the middle of an imperial invasion?”

“I trust that will be explained to me at some point. For now, I’m going to bottle some potion.”

After he’d rounded the corner, Hermione sat at the table and took very normal, unagitated breaths, in through her nose and out through her mouth, while she watched Grix’s hand move over the page.

“What are you writing?” she asked.

Grix engaged in a prolonged bout of internal wrestling, then slid a page along the table. Hermione angled it towards herself and read in Grix’s small, unfailingly tidy script: *A True Narrative of Events in the Life of a Free Elf*.

“You’re writing a memoir,” said Hermione.

“Mm.”

“You’ve enjoyed them?” she asked. “The books.”

“And recipes. Informative articles trimmed from periodicals.”

“Really? Nutrition, I imagine?”

“A lot of that,” said Grix.

“It’s an interest of mine as well.”

“I know.”

Hermione reached along the table and took Grix’s hand. “But I didn’t come and snatch you along to monitor working conditions at the construction of Khufu’s pyramid?”

“Thankfully not.”

“You know that I would take you anywhere you wanted to go.”

Still writing, Grix gave her hand a pulse. “I’m perfectly comfortable in my own time. But thank you.” He glanced at her. “I gather you’re headed for adventures of your own. Only I imagine yours generally have an itinerary.” Grix appraised the boxes Draco had nested in the travel basket.

“What’s Sir Thomas given you?”

“A pair of very silly snuff boxes.”

“The lad’ll be chuffed.”

“Quite chuffed.” Draco trailed Martin into the kitchen, a half dozen corked glass vials in hand, each filled with a thin, translucent orange potion. “They’re not swans, but they’ll do. You ready?”

Hermione wasn’t ready. Not to help Grix package up the spare vials of potion, nor to rise from the burned kitchen table, nor to mechanically scoop their basket from beside the door, nor to take one last cup of grass-green tea sitting beside Martin on the bench beneath the plum.

“Notes are all in order.” Martin drew a folded packet of parchment sheets from his Tartan wraps, and passed them to Hermione.

Hermione unfolded them, and squinted at the wobbly nonsense within. “You’re sure you can decode this?” she called out to Draco.

Draco situated himself by the garden gate, and stared up into the trees overhanging the house, assessing potential hazards in the future physical environment. “Not a problem. These will have come down, I imagine. Lime. Oak.”

“I’m more comfortable with our theory on physical displacement than possibly anything else,” said Hermione.

Draco’s mouth curved in a smirk. “As sure as you were about the potion ratios?”

Hermione hopped up from the bench and shoved the potion notes deep inside her bodice.

As she drew close, Draco tucked his finger into her bodice front and peered inside. “Everything I’ll ever need is down here.”

“You’re the worst.” She withdrew the Time Turner.

“Here you go, my gel.” Martin whirled near in his chair. “You’ll want this.” He held up the straw bonnet with pink ribbons.

“I do not want it,” said Hermione.

Draco took it from Martin, settled it on her head, and began tying the bow under her chin.

“*Why?*” Hermione asked.

He fluffed up the bow loops, then tapped the tip of her nose. “Why does a man want anything he wants? There’s an old stile or two on the Manor grounds.”

“Shall we play Maiden in Distress?” she asked.

“Please note, I’m not laughing.”

“Here you are.” Grix held out the basket, and Hermione hooked it over her arm.

Draco pulled two vials of the orange potion from his jacket pocket. It moved like it was full of minuscule sea life, sparkling red and gold particles forming and reforming clusters and strands, bubbles flitting from base to cork and clinging to the inside walls of the vial.

“Lights your sinuses up,” said the professor.

“Ready to say goodbye?” Draco asked.

Martin sat beside the ramp, and Grix stood beside him, both wearing serious, watchful expressions.

Hermione threw down her basket and hurried forward. “I’ll see you again.” Tears sprang from nowhere and flowed freely down her cheeks, coming faster than she could swipe them away. “I’ll see you again soon.”

She first bent low to embrace Martin, the professor’s reedy arms circling her, his clever, deceptively brittle hands patting her hair fondly, like a pleasing little dog. “Yes, yes. Take this when you’re back,” he said, fishing a tiny vial of a dark potion from his blankets. “You’ll have a headache.”

“Thank you, cousin.” She turned to Grix.

He snapped his pocket watch open and glowered at its face. “It’s going on six forty five.”

But Hermione was on her knees, holding out her hand, tears hopelessly cascading. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Come on, then.” Grix waved her close, and as he squeezed his arms around her shoulders, said, quietly, “It was my great pleasure, my gel.”

“Cousin,” said Draco stoutly, clasping and slapping the professor in masculine fondness, then he shook Grix’s hand.

Grix’s eyes narrowed. “You think good and hard about where you take him,” he said. “No guns. No horseback riding. No shooting guns *while* horseback riding.”

Martin made a pair of finger guns and fired them into the air. “Pshww! Pshww!”

Standing on the ledge beside Draco’s open bedroom window, the crowd watched them inquisitively as Draco and Hermione stood face to face before the garden gate. He bent his head, and she looped the Time Turner’s chain around his neck. Draco uncorked a vial of Martin’s potion, tossed it back and bunched his nose. Hermione did the same.

A wash of pleasant, tingling heat started from her belly, spread up through her chest, down through her pelvis and out through her limbs, and finally warmed her to the crown of her head.

“Tastes like carbonated gelatin,” she said.

“It’s quite good, actually. I might have some more when we get back.”

“Of course you’d say that. Oh!” she cried. “Hold on.” She tipped the dregs of her potion into the soil beneath the potted strawberry. “Hope that holds him.” Taking the Time Turner in hand, she twisted its crown free. She articulated an incantation, and an array of spell diagnostics in silver,

gold and blue spread across the air before her. A limiting spell—a pie-shaped segment of glyphs—glowed bright red, and after she'd spoken a simple three-line negation, blinked green. She dismissed the grid, and Draco drew his wand.

“I still can't sell you on fishwifery?” he asked.

“I'll compromise,” she said, “and learn to knit cables.”

In front of Martin, Grix, and the crow, he kissed her.

“You're not going to get *everything* you want that way,” she said.

“Half of what I want will be plenty.” Draco focused intently on the destination. “On the hour? Close to it?”

“Just before,” she said. “We'll need to change out of these clothes before we go back to the Ministry.”

“You're a coward, Granger.”

“I certainly can be.”

Draco set the jump.

Hermione leaned her head on his shoulder, and looked back at Martin and Grix.

“Please take care of him,” she said.

Martin nodded.

Draco kissed her below the ear. “It's time.”

Hermione straightened up, and held the Time Turner between them.

He'd been tossed about, thrown in the mud, blown up, broken, beaten and bruised, and managed to escape with nothing more than a thin white line through his perfect, insufferable left brow. It only served to throw into the sharpest relief the beauty of his pale, self-satisfied, insupportable, familiar, beloved face.

“You really did blow up my lab,” she said.

“*Our lab.*”

“Our lab,” she agreed.

“I did. And I'd do it again tomorrow.”

Hermione pushed the crown into place, and he brought his mouth to hers.

The Time Turner whirled. The dark shapes of Martin and Grix blurred, then disappeared. Day progressed to night and back to day again. The forest changed. Green bled away to gold and red, then withered to thin black fingers twitching against the sky. The yellow cottage and its blue door remained, only flickered behind the branches stuttering around its shoulders. The Turner sang in metallic resonance, its speed doubling, then doubling again. The blue door became grey, the black trees fell away, birds shivered from the branches like falling leaves, moths churned in clouds like dust. The young trees passed through midlife and old age, endless saplings like unfurling snakes

raised their heads, the writhing wood rising, falling, shrinking, breathing around the constant yellow walls and the crumbling slates, the silent chimney, and the gap with no grey door. The sun hurtled across the sky, light to dark to light again, one sun, then two, then four, faster and faster, until the blurred suns condensed into one and traced a single, magnificent arc from one horizon to the next.

He held her close in the late afternoon, and they kissed for two hundred years.

The End

Chapter End Notes

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