

# A wild ride

Von viv-heart

The cold, autumn sun is shining through the dirty window of the old bus. Draco doesn't mind. He stares through it absentmindedly, not really looking at the people hurrying around it, as they put in their luggage and get on. Frankly, he doesn't care.

He is hungover and tired and just wants to go home – wherever that is. It's certainly not the Manor, even though it is the final destination of this tiresome journey.

Sure, he could have apparated or used the floo but he has discovered sometime in the past three years that he actually likes muggle transportation.

He knows that he might be the single person on the whole planet who does, as everyone else he's met so far is just bitching about it, but he doesn't care. For him, it is fascinating and weirdly calming.

When he travels, he stands still and moves through great lengths at the same time – both literally and metaphorically. He thinks best when he rides the bus or goes by train.

Sometimes he can't believe it himself, that he is spending hours in such close proximity to muggles and is feeling relaxed - but he does and he is proud of himself that he has come so far. He has learned from his mistakes, or that's what he likes to believe.

He knows very well that the Wizarding society doesn't always think that and yet they buy his products like crazy, while trashtalking him behind his back. Deep down it stings and he cares more than he would ever admit.

When somebody sits down next to him, Draco doesn't turn around to look at them. Why should he? He is completely content to just stare out of his window for the next five or six hours – depending traffic – the bus needs to get from whatever French city they are in to England.

"Excuse me, do you have a phone charger with you? Mine is in my suitcase," the woman – he guesses by the voice – next to him asks and he has to suppress a groan.

He really hopes she has forgotten her phone charger in her trunk and isn't just the chatty type or, god forbid, hitting on him. That had happened exactly once and it had been so bad he had seriously considered apparating right from the bus, trouble with the Ministry from it be damned.

"What kind of phone do you have? Not every model has the same-," he turns around and his words die in his throat.

Next to him is sitting a very tired looking Hermione Granger, who is now looking at him with comically wide eyes.

No wonder – he is wearing his favourite black beanie, as it is freezing outside,

effectively making himself unrecognizable from the back.

"Fancy meeting you here," he drawls as soon as his ability to speak returns, trying to hide just how off-guard she has caught him. In all the years – nine at this point, since he has taken up this weird hobby shortly after the war – he hadn't run into a single other wizard he knew and he knew a lot of them.

"I didn't recognize you," Granger says with a small voice, so unlike what he is used from hearing at Ministry functions and during official business, it renders him speechless.

He clears his throat and his eyes fall on the phone in her hand. Draco had expected to see a Nokia or a Samsung but instead, it is an older model produced by his very own company. He doesn't know how to feel about it and decides to ignore it for the moment. There is no use in wondering if she is one of those people who enjoy the technology he had introduced to the Wizarding world while badmouthing him at the same time.

"Ah right, the charger," he says instead and Granger looks at him blankly for a second. "Oh yes," she says when she realizes what he is talking about, "the charger."

He hands it to her wordlessly and she thanks him and suddenly there is this heavy silence between them and Draco wants to change his seat but the bus is full so he only takes a deep breath to calm himself down.

He had developed severe panic attacks during the war and haven't managed to get them completely under control since, even though it has gotten way better with the help of his psychologist. Unfortunately, he can't explain the war to the tiny lady as she wouldn't understand and he really doesn't want to spend another night in the psych ward – one has been more than enough, thank you very much – so he has to suffer through it.

A paper bag or any bag, really, would help with the hyperventilation but he isn't going to give Hermione Miss Perfect Granger the pleasure to witness just how much his former idiocy has cost him and take pity on him, or some other crap like that.

She had pulled that with some of his friends, accidentally bringing Pansy and Potter out of all people together in the wake of it. It is a match made in hell but Pansy is as happy as she has ever been and he would be damned if he tried to destroy that. She deserves the best, in his opinion, after everything she has been through, some of it partially his fault, and if the best is Saint Potter, he can deal with that.

"Are you alright?" Granger whispers and Draco's head snaps into her direction.

"What?" he asks, hoping that his face doesn't betray anything as he feels the panic rise up again.

"You are clutching the armrest," Granger says and Draco looks at his hands.

His fingers are digging into the armrest just as Granger said and he hasn't even realized it. Considering his veins are shining almost neon blue through his skin he has gotten even paler than usual, even though she has thankfully not pointed it out.

"Is it because this is a muggle bus full of muggles?" Granger asks again when he doesn't say anything.

"I sell muggle technology, I learn from muggles which I employ," he says and his fingers are digging into the armrest from anger this time. He has half a mind to hope he doesn't break the thing as it is made from nothing but cheap plastic, if his guess is correct.

"It is me then." It isn't a question and while she says it in her most neutral tone, the tone she uses to talk about catastrophes, any sort of injustice and generally about things that upset her greatly and Draco knows that.

He hates that he knows that. He wishes he didn't, because if he didn't he wouldn't want to scream but he never gets what he wants. Even worse, he knows exactly why he knows and for a brief moment he hates Potter again, even though he makes Pansy so damn happy.

"You are jumping to conclusions," Draco says, going with his most neutral tone, but her expression tells him that she knows that this tone is reserved for catastrophes too.

Draco pulls his beanie from his head and runs a hand through his hair. He hates it when it is flat against his head.

"You caught me off guard. That's all," he says, staring at the seat in front of him. Somebody had tried to cave in something with his key but had failed miserably. It doesn't work that well with this kind of plastic. Or they were caught by the driver. Either way, Draco doesn't care.

"Still jumpy?" Granger asks and somehow it isn't the voice anymore. Somehow it sounds as if she actually cares.

"Can we skip to the part where you make fun of me because of it?" Draco snaps, feeling very uncomfortable out of the sudden. Well, he has been uncomfortable since he realized who sat down next to him but it had gotten progressively worse. "I really don't care to have a little heart to heart with you right now."

Granger frowns. "Excuse me?" Her voice is sharp around the edges, but quiet as to not draw attention and accidentally out the whole Wizarding world. "Make fun of you? What are you even talking about? Why should I make fun of you about that?"

Draco looks away and shrugs. He wishes he had just ignored her when she had asked for the charger.

"Do people make fun of you because you have PTSD?" she continues and Draco groans.

This is even worse than the woman who had wanted to get into his pants and there is still way too much time till they get to their final destination and even if he leaves now, this is Hermione Granger and he knows for a fact that she will track him down and force him to talk. That's how she became friends with Theo after Zacharias Smith dumped him.

"Why are you so surprised about it?" Draco asks. "The war is over for an eternity now. I had more than enough time to grow up and get my shit together. It's my fault I haven't."

The words leave a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Are you kidding me?" Granger shrieks and Draco turns around to show her just how displeased he is with the volume of her voice by glaring at her, but she looks positively outraged, her wild hair enhancing the effect even more.

"No," he says.

"I can't believe it!"

She lowers her voice, thankfully and the few heads that had turned to look at them turn away again, but Draco is painfully reminded of the speeches on behalf of the house elf project with the terrible name when she starts to lecture him about people who haven't fought not understanding and PTSD is normal for veterans.

"If it is so normal, why am I the only one who has it?" Draco cuts in somewhere in the middle of her unnecessary attempt to explain to him what a psychologist is, as if he didn't have one for the past five years. She has always been pretentious.

"You aren't the only one," she says simply and Draco crosses his arms.

"Who else?"

"Harry obviously – that's why he quit the auror job and went back to Hogwarts to teach. Made him bonkers the same way Moody was. Constant vigilance and all that." Draco shudders at the mention of that name despite knowing that the person responsible for the ferret incident had been an imposter.

"Of course Moody himself, Ron, George, Ginny and Percy... All the Weasleys to some degree actually, Pansy, Theo and even your parents," she is counting on her fingers, "Your father suffers it since the First War if I am not wrong. Sirius, Lupin and Snape..." She lets her hands fall into her lap. "Just let's say a lot of people." She sounds defeated.

"You seem to think about it a lot," Draco mutters. "Why?" He doesn't really expect an answer, and when he sees the look on her face he doesn't need one. He understands.

"What's your issue?" he asks and Granger hugs herself, but speaks to his surprise.

"A lot. Nightmares for example. And being touched when I don't expect it. Especially from behind."

Draco nods. He can even pinpoint the exact moments when she has gotten those issues and his stomach turns at the thought. It is awful.

"I feel like I can't breathe," he says without thinking and Granger reaches out to where his hand is clutching the armrest again.

Her hand hovers over his and pulls it back when he glares at her.

"I am sorry nobody bothered to talk to you about it." She is feeling guilty.

Draco knows that she has been talking with both Theo and Pansy about different things a lot, obviously about this too, and they have probably told her that they never talk about this kind of stuff. That simply isn't how their friendship works and Draco prefers it that way.

"It's fine. I have a psychologist." Draco doesn't know why he is trying to make her feel better but he is and it sucks.

"You do?" She is smiling despite the initial surprise.

He shrugs again and they fall silent.

"Look, I think we should start anew," she says after a while, startling Draco who had returned to his favourite pastime of staring out of the window in the meanwhile.

"What are you talking about?" He knows he won't like the answer even before she opens her mouth.

"I think we have done each other a lot of injustice in the past, letting ourselves get blinded by our misguided beliefs."

Draco snorts. She gives him an outraged look.

"What? It's true! You've been a terrible blood purist and I've treated you like a Death Eater!"

"I was a Death Eater. Still am if you ask some," he says, pulling up the sleeve of his black jumper to remind her of the harsh reality. His interest in muggle things can't erase his past mistakes. He knows it and she should too, but then again, she has always been a little bit too idealistic.

"I am not going to have the 'you were a child discussion' with you now," she says.

Draco grunts in acknowledgement. He isn't happy that the Dark Mark burned into his flesh hasn't been enough to shut her up. He doesn't have much else and she probably knows it.

"But think about it. Pansy and Harry are married and are trying for a child. We should get along for their sake, if for nothing else and getting rid of past prejudices would help that immensely."

Draco scoffs. "We are not trying to kill each other, that's enough. They can't expect

more."

Granger purses her lips in displeasure.

"I don't think you have realized what I said. They are trying for a baby. We will probably become the god-parents! We have to get along."

Draco glares at her. "And what exactly do you want from me?" he snaps. He isn't sure how they have gotten from phone chargers and PTSD to Pansy and Potter trying for a brat, but he doesn't like it. He hates it. "Do you want to become best friends and make friendship bracelets together and crap like that? Or even better, date? Yeah, that's it. If you want to get to grow closer why not get on a damn date together? Wouldn't that be just damn perfect? I bet everyone would love it!"

Granger stares at him with wide eyes, her mouth hanging slightly open and only then does Draco realize what he has just said.

He clenches his jaw and looks out of the window defiantly, ignoring the feeling of Granger's eyes on him as good as he can.

Minutes or hours - he can't tell - pass in silence as she studies him and he does his best to not acknowledge it.

"I will never understand you," Granger says, destroying his hopes that she would come to the conclusion that this isn't worth it. It was a very naive hope, he knows, as it would be way out of character for her.

"I don't expect or want you to," Draco replies, still not looking at her.

"You need to talk to somebody!"

Draco rolls his eyes, not sure if she can see it in the reflection of the glass. He hopes she does. "I talk to enough people. For example, we talk right now."

She leans closer and he can see that she pursed her lips as she prepares to give him a piece of her mind. He is glad he is wearing his jumper or her hair would tickle him.

"You know exactly what I mean! You don't open up to anybody! Everyone is worried! Even Harry thinks that!"

Draco turns around and their noses are mere inches from each other. "Why should I care what Potter thinks? Or anybody else? I am fine and even if I wasn't, why do you, of all people care? Least I remember, we were nothing but acquaintances who have to play nice for the sake of Potter and Pansy!"

"Pansy asked me to," she says calmly and Draco wants to scream yet once again.

The whole conversation stopped being remotely funny a long time ago, even before it began, really, and reached peak high right now.

"If Pansy is worried about me she can talk to me herself, even though I really don't know why she is worried in the first place," he spits out. "Why the fuck are you actually here? Tell me you haven't planned this!"

He knows that she had looked genuinely surprised when she saw him, but he isn't sure just how good of an actor she is. He assumes she can't be that bad as she had convinced Weasley she liked sleeping with him back when they were together. He knows that thanks to Weasley bragging about it quite a lot. He also knows he hadn't be that good since the one ladies' night Pansy had convinced him to attend after he had been celibate for so long that he had ascended to another realm and had surpassed social constructs like gender. Pansy's words, not his. It had been fun but he had gathered some information he would really like to forget.

Granger snorts. "You are giving yourself too much credit. As if I would spend several hours in an uncomfortable bus just for you."

Her tone is biting and Draco relaxes immediately. He always prefers confrontations to anything involving feelings and this is something he and Granger are really good at.

"Why are you here then?" he asks, curious for once.

"I wanted to go on holiday in peace," she shrugs, "The worst part about being a war heroine and working as the Ministry's spokesman is that I am a public figure and can't do anything without fearing it will end up in the Prophet, Witch Weekly or even the internet. Thanks for introducing that to wizards by the way." The last sentence is dripping with sarcasm.

Draco has expected that she would like the introduction of modern technologies to the wizarding community and the comment catches him off-guard. But then again, he understands. Being a public person isn't always easy and he really can't blame her for being sick of it.

"Why are you here?" she asks and Draco runs a hand over his face.

"I like to travel like this," he says truthfully, but she doesn't really look like she believes him. He doesn't care.

They fall silent again and Draco really, really hopes it is for good, but he knows better than to really believe it. And he isn't disappointed.

"You really need to talk to someone," she says half an hour later.

"About what exactly?" he drawls. "I already have a therapist."

"A therapist you can't talk to about the war."

"There is no one who would understand how the war was for me," he says without thinking, tired and annoyed as he is, and regrets it immediately. He didn't mean to say that.

Granger stares at him for a long while and her shoulders slump. "So this is what it is about."

Draco grits his teeth and waits for her to continue.

"I can't say anything to make you forgive yourself, can I?" she asks weakly, looking at him out of the corner of her eye.

"You can't."

She nods.

Draco isn't sure she really understands what this is about but judging by the fact that she doesn't press the issue any further and starts to chatter about nothing and everything. He is grateful for that even if he doesn't say it.

He hates to talk about it because he knows there's no one who could help him – after all there isn't a power that could bring back the dead. He isn't even talking about Dumbledore, no, Potter has told him all about the curse on the old man long ago. He means all the others – the professors and muggles, his classmates and innocent children, who died in his house or the school because of what he did or didn't do. It's a guilt that won't go away, no matter what he does. He had tried to learn how to live with it, made amends but it is never enough and he doubts it will ever be.

"Is there something you feel guilty about?" he asks and Granger stops talking about Merlin knows what and stares at him.

She wets her lips, dragging the lower lip between her teeth before she speaks. "Of course. Everybody has those. I feel guilty for a lot of things."

"For example?" Draco asks impatiently, crossing his arms over his chest. He doesn't know why he asked, but he really wants to know the answer now.

"Not offering you help back in sixth year," she says and looks him straight into the eyes, catching him by surprise with the boldness of the statement.

He gulps. He certainly hasn't expected that to be something she felt guilty about.

"You hated me," he says. "And not without reason."

"You want another?" Granger crosses her arms. "I feel guilty about the way I treated

Lavender Brown. For the death of quite a few people, for being too slow, too bad, too weak. And guess what? I am not the only one."

Draco is shaking at that point but she isn't fazed by it, as she continues to fire the shots at him, forcing him to face everything head on.

"We were children and yet we were forced to be more responsible than the adults. I learned everything I could and yet it wasn't enough. We weren't enough because we were bloody children soldiers in a war older than our parents. And now we have to live with everything while those who are responsible, Dumbledore and Grindelwald and even Riddle are long dead. I feel guilty because I am supposed to be the best of our generation and I still can't do anything about it!"

Tears are streaming down her face and Draco is rendered speechless. He doesn't understand why she is telling him all this and why here. Something tells him that she wouldn't have in any other setting and she hasn't talked to anybody else about it. Then again, why should she? Potter had already given everything that was his to give and even more, so he wouldn't understand. Things were strained between her and Weasley even since he had abandoned them in that woods – something Draco shouldn't know but Pansy had needed to let out when she first found out and had ranted to him.

And the rest? The rest has never been in the centre of it all the way he had been, even though he was on the opposite end of it.

"I feel personally responsible for every death at the Manor and Hogwarts," he says and she blinks.

She nods and he reaches out to wipe the tears away. Her skin is warm against his fingers.

Draco has seen himself and Potter as two sides of the same coin in the years after the war, but the more time passed, the more he had thought that was wrong. In this very moment, he knows he had really been wrong.

His counterpart isn't Potter, it's Hermione Granger. Too gifted, too smart and ambitious and feeling responsible too much – but everything else clashes. Be it flying, cats, fashion, books – they always have opposite opinions, but even then, they understand each other in a weird way and it's a realization Draco wants to take back, lock away somewhere in the back of his head and never consider again. But he won't be able to, because she knows it too and Granger isn't one to let go of such things.

"What now?" he asks and pulls his hand back, suddenly feeling really uncomfortable.

"I don't know," she says.

Draco wants to say something but nothing comes out so he opens his mouth and closes it again a few times, probably looking like a fish. He doesn't care.

"Dinner tomorrow?" he asks finally and they are both stunned and he questions his sanity. He said a lot of things he didn't mean to say during the ride and it makes him doubt himself. It's uncommon for him to lose control in such a way. Maybe she is right and he simply needed to talk about this and this is his subconsciousness forcing him to as it is long overdue. He doesn't know.

He hopes that he has fallen asleep and this is just a very weird dream but at the same time he hopes he hasn't.

"I don't think dinner is a good idea," Granger says and Draco's heart sinks. He definitely wishes now that this is a dream.

"Why not?" he asks, crossing his arms and hoping she doesn't see how disappointed he is. She has forced him to open up and now that he is willing to, she doesn't want to spend time with him?

Granger runs a hand through her wild locks. "It would be awkward - too awkward. How about something else? More casual?" she offers, looking at him uncertainly.

"What do you have in mind?" Draco tilts his head, trying to play it cool. He is giddy inside and he really doesn't want her to notice. He feels like a teenager asking out his crush for the first time which is absolutely ridiculous as he doesn't have a crush on Granger. Merlin, he couldn't even really stand her a few hours earlier.

"How about drinks and a movie?" she asks after a brief pause. "Preferably somewhere private. I hate running from paparazzi."

"Sure," Draco says and can't suppress the smile that spreads over his face.

They spend the remainder of the ride talking about nothing and everything, getting worked up about the question of importance of organized preschool education so much that the driver threatens to kick them out if they don't shut up..

When they finally arrive in London, she pulls him into an awkward hug and while he wants to run away, he forces himself to return it.

When she pulls away, he musters all the courage he has and kisses her cheek. She slaps him and immediately starts to apologize.

"You've warned me about not touching you without your consent," he shrugs, rubbing his cheek. They have a lot of issues they need to work out, but Draco is positive that they can with the help of the other.