

Better Off Forgotten

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/4719266) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/4719266>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Rape/Non-Con
Categories:	F/M , Gen
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy , Cho Chang/Theodore Nott , Katie Bell/Marcus Flint , Dean Thomas/Ginny Weasley
Characters:	Hermione Granger , Minerva McGonagall , Dolores Umbridge , Draco Malfoy , Lucius Malfoy , Narcissa Black Malfoy , Kingsley Shacklebolt , Astoria Greengrass , Ginny Weasley , Dean Thomas , Marcus Flint , Theodore Nott , Arthur Weasley , Filius Flitwick , Mundungus Fletcher , Angelina Johnson , George Weasley , Bill Weasley , Fleur Delacour , Ron Weasley , Lavender Brown , Monica Wilkins , Katie Bell , Justin Finch-Fletchley , Pansy Parkinson , Blaise Zabini , Wendell Wilkins , Dennis Creevey , Rita Skeeter
Additional Tags:	Memory Loss , Memory Alteration , Obliviation , Ministry of Magic , Death Eaters , Dark Magic , Infertility , Manipulative Relationship , Order of the Phoenix (Harry Potter) , Infidelity , Dubious Consent Due To Memory Loss & Identity Issues
Language:	English
Collections:	stuff i've read , Amazing Dramione Series , BIS Dramione , LongformDramioneTBR , Dramione Best Fics ❤️
Stats:	Published: 2015-09-03 Completed: 2016-01-20 Words: 227,936 Chapters: 50/50

Better Off Forgotten

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Summary

The Light side won the battle but lost the war. By Ministry decree, all Mudbloods have been Obliviated and "repatriated" to the Muggle world. When Draco Malfoy seeks out Hermione Granger, he wants only one thing . . . but gets far more.

Notes

This story has been written as a transformative work for fun rather than profit. All recognizable characters belong to JKR.

This is a cross-post of a recently completed story posted on the fanfiction website.

The Last Muggleborn Witch

June 1999

Hermione Granger walked through the grey, institutional corridors of the Ministry of Magic for the last time, accompanied by a grim-faced Minerva McGonagall. It was only fitting that the witch who had welcomed her to the wizarding world as a wide-eyed child would witness her exit as a young woman.

A sidelong glance showed that her former teacher's stride was typically brisk and her posture unrelentingly straight, but the lines of worry and grief carved into Professor McGonagall's face had only grown deeper in the thirteen months since the supposedly Last Battle. They had all been so naive, trusting that Harry's defeat of Voldemort would inevitably result in a storybook ending, with the defeated Death Eaters incarcerated in Azkaban and Kingsley Shacklebolt leading the Ministry into an enlightened era of tolerance.

Instead, the Death Eaters had quickly regrouped. Unlike the Order, which had been devastated at the Battle of Hogwarts and before by the deaths of senior leaders and strategists like Remus Lupin, Alastor Moody, and Dumbledore himself, the Death Eaters were objectively better off without a megalomaniac like Voldemort and his partner in insanity, Bellatrix.

Under the leadership of Lucius Malfoy, those bearing the Dark Mark not only managed to avoid Azkaban but also solidified the political power of the old pureblood families. The Death Eaters had begun mere weeks after the final battle with a seemingly innocuous public relations campaign to convince the wizarding world that they should not be held liable for crimes committed under duress or while under the Imperius curse.

Hermione had nearly gagged on her morning pumpkin juice when she opened the *Daily Prophet* on a warm summer morning to a sycophantic full-page article, written by Rita Skeeter, detailing the pressures imposed on Draco Malfoy by the Dark Lord. The smirking photo above the fold completed the process of putting Hermione off her breakfast, even though Harry confirmed the *Prophet* had - for once - accurately recounted the facts. The next month, *Witch Weekly*, in addition to a rumor that the newlywed Ginny Potter was pregnant with the Chosen One's child, featured a sympathetic interview with Narcissa Malfoy. Hermione could not help but notice how both articles highlighted Voldemort's Muggle father, while ironically describing Harry, the son of a wizard and a witch, as the pureblood savior of the wizarding world.

As she and Minerva made their way to a conference room tucked between Muggle Affairs and the Obliviation department, Hermione reflected, with a deep and bitter sadness, that Harry would have made a difference, standing up and fighting against darkness and prejudice as he had done for his entire short life. Harry, however, collapsed just after his eighteenth birthday, and it soon became evident that the two killing curses he sustained had a belated effect equivalent to widespread, incurable cancer throughout his body.

Harry lingered through Hermione's nineteenth birthday, celebrated in a muted fashion at his room in Saint Mungo's. It was there, with his emerald eyes dulled to jade by pain and potions, that her best friend asked her to be the godmother to the son he would never meet and extracted a promise. "I don't like what's going on at the Ministry, with that hag Umbridge reinstated and the Wizengamot handing out pardons to Death Eaters like candy. If they start going after Muggleborns again, don't stick around. Maybe go and join your parents in Australia, but I need to know you'll keep yourself safe." Hermione had promised, soothingly, and Harry drifted off to sleep on that reassurance.

Harry was right to be worried. Thuggish Death Eaters like MacNair and Rowle remained at large and had stepped up their attacks on Muggleborns and members of the Order of the Phoenix. Just the week before, Cho Chang had been snatched leaving her shift at St. Mungo's and dumped three days later - naked, battered, and Obliviated - at the base of Knockturn Alley.

On the political front, well-connected Death Eaters pushed their lobbying efforts within the Ministry of Magic. A new law codified the pureblood status of the offspring of a wizard and witch, a measure that was tremendously popular with the half-blooded majority and made this critical swing group increasingly indifferent to discrimination against those who were Muggleborn.

Within days of Harry's magnificent funeral, the elder Theodore Nott, a prominent solicitor, brought a formal petition seeking the "repatriation" of Muggleborns before the Wizengamot. The Nott petition contended that the removal of the group that had twice been the catalyst for Voldemort's violence would safeguard wizarding Britain and prevent the rise of another Dark Lord.

Progressive members of the Wizengamot and sympathetic Ministry officials like Arthur Weasley fiercely opposed this last measure. For months, there was a stalemate at the Ministry, even as Kingsley Shacklebolt came under increasing pressure due to terrorist attacks carried out by Death Eaters who remained at large. As the attacks became more frequent and deadly, public opinion increasingly favored Lucius Malfoy's offer to broker a treaty whereby all former Death Eaters would take a wizarding oath to keep the peace in exchange for full pardons and the Obliviation and exile of all Muggleborn witches and wizards.

At Yuletide, on the heels of a magical bombing in Diagon Alley that left eleven dead, Kingsley agreed to come to the bargaining table with the Death Eaters. Hermione, furious at the Minister's capitulation, had fumed to her former head of house that Kingsley was not exhibiting the courage one would expect of a Gryffindor. Minerva's tart response shocked her at the time. "He was in Slytherin, Miss Granger, and you should be glad of it. He'll negotiate better terms than you or I could." Now, six months after that heated conversation, Hermione could grudgingly admit her professor had been correct.

Instead of a wizarding oath, which could be easily circumvented and might not apply in the Muggle world, Shacklebolt had insisted on an Unbreakable Vow from every person branded with the Dark Mark, making each a guarantor for the safety of an exiled witch or wizard. It was a clever move, giving each of the Death Eaters, all of whom had a demonstrable talent

for self-preservation, a vested interest in the well-being of at least one Muggleborn. And while Voldemort's followers would have preferred to dump the Obliviated exiles into Muggle society, homeless, wandless, and with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, the Minister extracted reparations of 1000 galleons per year lived in the magical world, payable by the Death Eaters. Lucius had readily consented to the Ministry's offer, stipulating only that the Death Eaters select the one or two Mudbloods each would be responsible for.

Hermione, who was being kept apprised of the negotiations by Kingsley, thought it was a sad commentary on wizarding Britain that the number of Muggleborns was only slightly greater than the number of Death Eaters, but was not especially surprised. Muggleborn witches and wizards were rare (she, Dean Thomas and Justin Finch-Fletchley had been the only three in their year at Hogwarts) and had been targeted for extermination in two wars, after all.

What did surprise her was eagerness of most Muggleborns to give up their magic for safety and a few thousand Galleons. When Hermione researched further, she was shocked to realize why. Only a few of the adults were employed by the Ministry of Magic, generally considered the most prestigious employer, and all of those were working in a clerical or menial capacity. Most Muggleborns eked out a living working for more liberal half-bloods - as a seamstress for Madame Malkin, a shop assistant at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, a cook at the Three Broomsticks, and the like. Many had been captured by Snatchers and subjected to a stint in Azkaban for "stealing" a wand. Any prominent, successful Muggleborns from the older generations - Dirk Cresswell, Lily Evans, Ted Tonks - were dead. As much as Hermione hated to admit it, the survivors' willingness to take a Death Eater-sponsored buyout made a horrible sort of sense.

The Wizengamot ratified the treaty as its first order of business in 1999. Two days later, Lucius presented Shackbolt with a list of forty-two Muggleborns matched with three dozen Death Eaters. Predictably, Hermione's name headed the list, paired with Draco Malfoy. Everyone knew that Malfoys demanded nothing but the best, and there was no better Mudblood than the Gryffindor princess.

Kingsley braced himself for Hermione's Howler, an official protest lodged with the Wizengamot, or even for an angry young witch storming his office and refusing to entrust her life to any member of a family whose very name was a byword for bad faith. However, he received nothing other than the Ministry's form, executed by Hermione, and a brief note requesting that her Obliviation be scheduled for early summer to allow her to attend the christening of the Potter baby.

Hermione's uncharacteristic acquiescence had everything to do with a letter delivered to her by a self-important eagle owl the same day that Shackbolt received the list. The letter itself was a short but polite note from Narcissa Malfoy stating that her son, unlike any other Death Eater, would be willing to extend the Ministry-approved protective Unbreakable Vow (one that Hermione, Professor McGonagall and ghostly Professor Binns had painstakingly crafted to eliminate any loopholes) to Hermione's blood relations. Narcissa concluded her letter with a graceful sentence expressing her belief in the importance of family, one that she had every expectation Hermione shared. The clincher was the enclosed clipping from a weekly paper serving the northern suburbs of Brisbane, advertising Wilkins Dentistry LLC.

Having made the necessary arrangements with Narcissa, Hermione put her remaining months in the wizarding world to good use. She studied and sat for her NEWTs, despite Ron's certainty that she was mental. She liked to think that her exam results would serve as a two-fingered salute to those who preached pureblood supremacy.

Hermione also meticulously planned for life as a Muggle. Kingsley had pledged the Ministry's resources to create Muggle identities and histories for exiled witches and wizards, so Hermione found her OWLs magically transformed into A levels and admission to the university of her choice assured. With her own arrangements finalized, Hermione found herself acting as an informal consultant to Kingsley, helping to create cover stories for other Muggleborns. The middle-aged and older witches and wizards would be enjoying an early retirement in pleasant locations scattered throughout the United Kingdom, with the Death Eaters' payments explained away as lottery winnings, employer buyouts, or an inheritance from a long-lost relative. Hermione's Muggleborn classmates would be attending university or enrolled in vocational training, with the youngest of the exiles returning to secondary school. She had done her best to give everyone the credentials they would have had if their Hogwarts owls had never arrived. Despite her disapproval of the repatriation policy, Hermione knew she had done a much better job easing the transition than any Ministry employee.

Still, she was taken aback in February when Katie Bell asked Hermione to Obliviate her. The Muggleborns had the right to select their Bonder and who would Obliviate them, but the Ministry's professionals were the obvious choice. Obliviation was tricky, dangerous magic, but Katie was insistent. "I trust you much more than anyone who works for the Ministry. Besides, you're brilliant at it. You Know Who himself couldn't break your memory charms." Hermione couldn't imagine how Katie had come by that classified information, but she reluctantly agreed. Katie had been anxious to the point of nausea and Marcus Flint had glowered at Hermione the entire time (presumably the side effect of a Vow that would kill him if he allowed any harm to come to Katie), but the Obliviation had gone smoothly.

After that, Hermione agreed to Obliviate Dennis Creevey, a little brunette Gryffindor third-year she knew only by sight, a Muggleborn couple in their fifties, and Dean Thomas. Dean, however, had been able to stay in the wizarding world after her research proved he was a half-blood whose wizard father had been killed during the First Wizarding War. As for the rest, she hoped they were all doing well in the Muggle world, but had no way of knowing other than that their Death Eaters hadn't yet dropped dead.

Between February and May, forty witches and wizards had been "repatriated" into the Muggle world, stripped of all memories of their magic. Hermione was now the last Muggleborn witch in Britain.

As they reached the conference room, Hermione hesitated. If all went according to plan, in a few short hours she would be found on the verge of a country lane in Wiltshire with a mangled bicycle a few feet away, the apparent victim of a hit-and-run driver. Hermione wasn't afraid of what came after that - she had spent the majority of her life as a Muggle, after all. What frightened her was the prospect of being Apparated away from the Ministry, unconscious and completely helpless, to Malfoy Manor, in order for someone (probably a house elf) to arrange the accident scene just beyond the Manor's boundary wards. She didn't

trust any of the Malfoys and could only hope they hadn't found a way to slither around the Vow.

Hermione took deep breath to compose herself, but let it out softly when she caught Professor McGonagall's sympathetic eyes. Her teacher placed a detaining hand on her arm as Hermione reached for the doorknob. Professor McGonagall's brogue was thick in an effort to choke back her emotions. "In nearly fifty years of teaching, I have never been more proud of a student. I planned to offer you an apprenticeship at Hogwarts, but the Ministry's current policy" She stopped and shook her head. "I will miss you, my dear, and our world's loss is the Muggle world's gain."

Hermione smiled at her favorite professor as they both blinked back tears. "I'm ready," she told her, and was proud that her voice did not waver. She opened the door and began to walk through, but stopped abruptly at the threshold at the unexpected and unwelcome face inside.

The Vow

"*Hem-hem!* How pleasant to see you both again, and on such a *delightful* occasion!" A gloating grin split Dolores Umbridge's toad-like face.

Professor McGonagall looked down her nose at the gushing, pink-clad witch. "'Delightful' is not the term I would choose. 'Distasteful' or 'despicable' both strike me as more appropriate. May I ask what you are doing here, Dolores?" she asked, nostrils flaring.

"I am here, Minerva, in my role as head of the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission to witness Miss Granger's departure. Such a momentous occasion, as we finally rid ourselves of the last usurper of magic!"

Umbridge turned to Hermione and addressed her with poisonous sweetness. "You must be so looking forward to being reunited with your Muggle parents. Such a pity that the Ministry was unable to approve your request for an international Portkey to visit them in Australia."

"It is indeed a pity," Hermione stated flatly, meeting the other witch's eyes and hoping that her loathing was apparent. Even if Bellatrix had survived the Final Battle, Umbridge still might have won a contest as the witch Hermione hated most. Prohibiting Hermione from retrieving her parents and restoring their memories, horrible as it was, did not even rank among her worst offenses. Hermione viciously regretted that Dumbledore had rescued Umbridge from the centaur herd in the Forbidden Forest.

She looked past the odious woman to the four individuals already seated at the conference table. Lucius Malfoy paid her no heed, too busy watching the ongoing verbal sparring match between Umbridge and Professor McGonagall with a characteristic, calculating expression. Draco's bright blond head was angled towards a young, dark-haired witch as they engaged in a whispered conversation. Hermione vaguely recognized Astoria Greengrass from Hogwarts and more recent press coverage of the so-called "wedding of the year," which Narcissa Malfoy had pulled together in a tellingly short period of time. Narcissa was the only one to acknowledge her, with an infinitesimal nod; Hermione wondered if the elegant blonde had second thoughts about their bargain.

That subtle movement of his mother's head caught the younger Malfoy's attention and he raised an eyebrow in Hermione's direction. "Granger," he drawled, in the supercilious tone that never failed to annoy. "I expected you to arrive with a full entourage of impoverished gingers. Where are they? Didn't the Weasel King want to get in one last sloppy kiss?"

With an effort, and a reminder to herself that her dentist parents would be horrified, Hermione refrained from gritting her teeth. She had known that undertaking an Unbreakable Vow would require some level of interaction with the blond Ferret, but she had forgotten just how obnoxious he could be.

"We all said our good-byes privately at the Burrow last night," she informed Malfoy in an even tone.

"Ron and I saw no need to make a public spectacle of our relationship," Hermione continued, with a pointed glance at Astoria clinging to Malfoy's arm. She would be damned before she would admit to him that she and Ron had been on the outs since the Nott petition became law. Ron had been her first love, and it still stung that he had so quickly and adamantly rejected her suggestion that he could join her in the Muggle world.

Astoria glared at Hermione, dark eyes flashing. "Draco, I don't feel well," she whined, burrowing her head against his shoulder. "There's a smell in this room that's making me sick."

Hermione rolled her eyes at the immaturity of pureblood insults. Before she could retort, Narcissa intervened with the practiced skill of a society hostess.

"Please forgive my daughter-in-law, Miss Granger. Astoria is expecting an interesting event early next year, and she is particularly sensitive to perfumes and other scents at the moment," she informed Hermione. "I myself do not smell anything offensive."

"I see," Hermione said, hiding her amusement at the older witch's Victorian description of pregnancy. "Congratulations," she offered with as much politeness as she could muster. Personally, she found the custom of pureblood witches marrying and having babies while still in their teens to be appalling.

Malfoy gave her a small, self-satisfied grin as he absently stroked his wife's hair. "Thanks, Granger."

Astoria gave a soft moan that sounded fake to Hermione's ears. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Your sentiment is much appreciated, Miss Granger," Narcissa said with a gracious smile. She turned her chilly attention to her daughter-in-law. "Astoria, darling, I knew you shouldn't have come this morning in your delicate condition. I'll escort you back to the Manor and have the house elves make you a tisane. Come along." Hermione felt a flicker of sympathy for Astoria as she obediently followed her formidable mother-in-law out of the room.

"As head of the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission, I have every right - "

"Madam Undersecretary, Headmistress, perhaps we could begin?" Lucius smoothly interrupted Umbridge in the midst of her shrill tirade.

"I'm afraid not, Lucius," Hermione said. "My Bonder hasn't yet arrived."

Lucius regarded her with cold amusement. "My dear girl, I hope you don't expect me to wait on Arthur Weasley or accept him as a Bonder when my son's life is at stake. I'm afraid I must insist on an unbiased, senior Ministry official, so I naturally thought of Dolores."

Umbridge simpered at the praise. Hermione wondered if Astoria's morning sickness might somehow be contagious, given the nauseated expressions on Professor McGonagall's face, not to mention her own.

Hermione faced Lucius squarely. She had helped Harry fight him and other Death Eaters at the Ministry when she was only sixteen, and she refused to be intimidated now.

"I have never had any expectations where you or your family are concerned, Lucius. You'll be pleased to know that I've selected a Bonder who is not a Weasley and who is senior to Undersecretary Umbridge."

Punctuating her words, a silvery lynx raced into the room. Its jaws opened and it spoke in Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep voice. "Be there in a moment, Hermione."

"Surely, Lucius, you have no objection to the Minister of Magic serving as our Bonder?"

It was a petty triumph, but Hermione enjoyed the brief flash of anger that crossed the elder Malfoy's face before Lucius resumed his typical urbane mask. "No one could object to our esteemed Minister as a Bonder, especially given his role as an architect of the Muggleborn repatriation program."

Hermione compressed her lips. Shacklebolt's acquiescence in furthering the Death Eaters' agenda of bigotry still rankled.

"You flatter me, Lucius. I am merely a cog in the great machine that governs us all," Kingsley stated as he entered the room.

He surveyed the room, nodding and greeting those present. "Minerva, thank you for bringing Miss Granger. While you are here, perhaps you and Lucius should like to confer? Now that he has been reinstated as head of the Hogwarts' Board of Governors, I know he wishes to discuss the upcoming school year with you, specifically the treatment of any incoming students from Muggle families."

"There are none, Minister, as I've previously informed you," Professor McGonagall answered in a tart voice.

Hermione looked down at the floor, wary of any potential Legilemency by Umbridge or either of the Malfoys. One of the concessions she had been able to wring from Kingsley due to his guilty conscience was a promise that all Muggleborns would be diverted from Hogwarts - and the Ministry's official notice - so long as Obliviation and "repatriation" remained the official policy.

"I should be greatly shocked if the Hogwarts scroll continues to identify thieves with dirty blood as candidates for admission!" Umbridge interjected. "As you know, Minister, the Department of Mysteries has confirmed that magic can only be passed to the next generation when wizards and witches reproduce. Now that all of the noxious weeds have been plucked, beautiful flowers - our magical children - shall be free to bloom!" She bestowed a saccharine smile on Malfoy, who looked as revolted as Hermione felt.

"Nonetheless, you and Lucius should work with Headmistress McGonagall to develop a plan should that unlikely contingency arise," Kingsley reiterated in his deep, mellow voice.

"It shan't, Minister," the Headmistress grimly reassured him. That was because the new mission of the Order of the Phoenix was to seek out Muggleborn children and persuade their parents to send them to Beauxbatons, which Madame Maxime had pledged would admit any Muggleborn student from the British Isles, or accept tutoring from one or more Order

members. It was a small comfort to Hermione to know that twenty or so years in the future, when her hypothetical future children were of school age, she would meet again with a red-haired Weasley or one of her former professors - even if she wouldn't remember them.

"Kingsley, may we get started?" Hermione asked abruptly. Right now, she was disgusted enough with the vile beliefs of those like Umbridge to *want* to leave, though she would still have preferred to depart on her own terms.

(x) (x) (x)

Shacklebolt had truly come into his own as a political animal, Draco thought with no little admiration. The Auror was sharp and subtle as a serpent, particularly when compared to Cornelius Fudge, who had been a bumbling, blustering fixture at the Manor's social events during Draco's early adolescence. Fudge would have been flummoxed by the strong personalities currently occupying the conference room; Shacklebolt had neatly herded his father, McGonagall, and that hag Umbridge into a corner to hash out Hogwarts-related policy, freeing himself to Bond the Unbreakable Vow without distraction.

"Face each other and kneel, please," the Minister directed.

Draco gracefully sank to the floor and smirked when Hermione stumbled slightly. "I take it Weaselbee wasn't able to persuade you to spend much time in that position?"

Granger flushed at the innuendo but quickly shot back. "You seem very comfortable on your knees, Malfoy. Is that the type of service Voldemort demanded from his followers?"

Draco scowled. His interaction with Granger since the Final Battle had been minimal, and he had forgotten what a sharp-tongued bitch she could be.

Shacklebolt interrupted before he could insult Granger again, or be insulted in turn. "Mr. Malfoy, take Miss Granger's wand hand with your own." Draco did as instructed, his left hand gripping her right wrist more firmly than strictly necessary. The witch refused to give him the satisfaction of wincing.

"Not so hard, Mr. Malfoy," the Minister told him with a sardonic smile. "I promise Miss Granger is enough of a Gryffindor that she won't run away."

As he loosened his grip, Draco was close enough to hear Granger's tiny sigh of relief. That soft, deliciously feminine sound reminded him of inappropriate thoughts he had entertained about her over the years. He forced himself to focus on the present task, since breaking the promises he was about to make would kill him.

As soon as Shacklebolt placed the tip of his wand on their linked hands, Granger began, in a low but clear voice.

"Will you, Draco Malfoy, do your best to watch over me in the Muggle world?"

"I will."

It was disturbingly intimate, pledging himself while holding her hand, reminiscent of the vows he had taken with Astoria just a month before. At Draco's words, a thin stream of fire issued from Shacklebolt's wand and wound around their wrists.

"Will you, to the best of your ability, protect me from harm?" Granger asked.

"I will."

It was ironic, Draco thought as a second fiery line wrapped around them, that the first two terms echoed the Vow his mother had undertaken with Snape to protect him. At least the third term of *this* Vow did not require him to commit murder, or indeed do anything at all:

"Will you refrain from taking any action, in either the Muggle or magical world, that would hurt me?"

"I will."

Granger's eyes bored intently into his as a third cord of flame bound them together. They were unexpectedly pretty, Draco realized, flecked with gold and amber and not at all mud-like.

"Will you extend these vows to my blood relatives in the first degree?"

In this respect, their Unbreakable Vow differed from the other forty. Draco's mother had been insistent that he be paired with Granger, and rightfully worried that she would refuse, given that he had tormented her at school and stood by while she was tortured in his home. It had been Narcissa's idea that he offer to protect Granger's parents, too, to ensure her acceptance.

"I will."

"So mote it be," Shacklebolt announced, as a fourth line glowed briefly before fading along with the others, leaving a bracelet-like welt on both of their wrists. As soon as Draco released her hand, Granger rubbed a finger along the pinkish mark.

"It looks like rope burn," she observed, speaking to the Minister rather than to him. "Do you know how quickly it will fade? It could give rise to questions at a Muggle hospital."

"It will disappear within the hour," Shacklebolt promised.

After a few moments of awkward silence, Draco held out his hand, palm up.

"Your wand, Granger." His tense posture belied his casual command.

It was incredibly difficult for a witch or wizard to relinquish their wand. If she was ever going to hex him, it would be now. He had heard from Pansy that Justin Finch-Fletchley had attacked her father and had to be restrained with an Incarcerous before he could be Obliviated. Draco wouldn't have thought the Hufflepuff had it in him, unlike Granger, who hadn't hesitated to slap him in the past and now was a powerful enough witch to do real damage.

She hesitated. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that his father and Umbridge both had their wands out, with Umbridge looking gleeful at the prospect of cursing Granger.

His left wrist began to sting, and Draco realized the Vow was fully operational. "Granger, please give me your wand," he coaxed.

With a pained look, she placed the length of dark wood in his hand. He pocketed it quickly, thankful that she had been using his aunt's walnut wand rather than the vinewood wand that had chosen Granger at age eleven. She never would have surrendered that wand without a fight.

Fortunately, Granger's original wand was residing safely in a desk drawer in his study. He had bought it off a Snatcher for ten Galleons, thinking that it might do for a secondary wand. Much as he hated to admit it, he and the Mudblood had a similar spell-casting style and equally high level of magical ability. But the vinewood wand was as stubborn as its rightful owner and had never given its allegiance to Draco. He was guaranteed to bollocks up even the simplest spells when trying to use it.

Professor McGonagall approached them, wand out. She was the one who would be Obliviating Granger. "Are you ready to begin, Hermione?"

Draco had never known the old termagant to speak so kindly, but Granger always had been one of her Gryffindor pets.

Granger straightened her shoulders. "I am ready, Minerva, but I've changed my mind. I would like Malfoy to Oblivate me."

(x) (x) (x)

Malfoy had objected, of course. Indeed, his first reaction had been a point-blank refusal. Lucius and Umbridge had backed him up, hissing insults at Hermione until Kingsley pounded the table and restored order.

Professor McGonagall looked hurt, and tried to convince Hermione to revert to the original plan, but she was adamant.

"It's my right to choose who Obliviates me, and I want Malfoy," Hermione insisted. "I know he can do it. He altered the memories of any number of Ministry officials on Voldemort's orders, and he has every incentive to get it right with me."

She had looked directly at the Malfoys, son and father. "I know your preference is to rely on minions," she said, with a twist of her lips, "but if you want something done right, you need to do it yourself. Should anything go wrong with Professor McGonagall, the consequences would be on your head."

The two men had exchanged a long look, and then both nodded, slowly. It was bitterly ironic, thought Hermione, that she could now trust a Malfoy more than her favorite teacher.

Now she was sitting at the conference room table, across from a still-sullen Malfoy. Kingsley had ushered the others out into the hallway, overruling all demands to stay by pointing out that a memory charm required intense concentration. Also, as Kingsley accurately observed, she couldn't overpower Malfoy without her wand and he couldn't possibly harm her, given the terms of the Vow.

Malfoy raised his wand and Hermione braced herself for the almost-soothing pale green light that accompanied an Oblivate. There was a certain karmic justice in that she had taken and altered her parents' memories without their consent and now would have the same done to her. She closed her eyes, but opened them in a startled reflex when she felt the tip of Malfoy's wand lifting her chin. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Something I think I'll enjoy," was the disconcerting reply.

Cold silver eyes stared into hers, and Hermione reminded herself that he couldn't hurt her.

Malfoy spoke the incantation softly, his voice almost a caress. "*Oblivate.*"

Astoria's Quidditch Team

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter contains discussion of infidelity and fertility problems, including miscarriage. It also takes place more than four years after the events in the first two chapters.

July 31, 2003

So far as Draco was concerned, nothing good had ever happened on Harry Potter's birthday, now a holiday throughout wizarding Britain in honor of the Boy Who Died.

He had joined his parents in serving a very public penance, sitting their arses all morning long in a prominent place on the uncomfortable, temporary stands set up along Diagon Alley. Minister Shacklebolt had given a mercifully brief speech, highlighting post-War reconstruction efforts and entirely avoiding blood-based politics. That was one of several reasons his approval ratings remained high more than five years after taking office.

Draco then had to suffer watching every wanker who had ever shaken Scarhead's hand strut by during the parade, pretending to be a War hero. As the cherry on top, a heavily pregnant Ginny Potter-Thomas had queened it over the crowd lining the Alley as her magically levitated float passed by with the Chosen One's four-year-old son waving shyly. The She-Weasel made it a point to give Draco and Lucius her nastiest look, whispering intensely to her new husband, Dean Thomas. The dark-skinned wizard had glared as well, clearly still holding a grudge over his time in the Manor's dungeons.

Despite the insult to his family, Astoria had joined the majority of witches present in *ooing* and *aahing* over Potter's brat. She whispered excitedly to Draco that Ginny was expecting twin girls, and, according to *Witch Weekly*, she planned to name them Mione and Minerva. "You know, Draco," she cooed, "our little baby will be in the same year at Hogwarts."

He patted her hand uneasily. His wife's sunny optimism was the polar opposite of his own cold cynicism. "Merlin willing, Astoria. Though I doubt they'll be friends."

Now he and his wife were spending their afternoon at St. Mungo's, waiting interminably in an examination room with chairs that were nearly as hard and unforgiving as the parade stands. Draco was increasingly concerned that his pessimism would be borne out yet again. In his experience, the medical profession always took longer to deliver bad news. The professional, practiced expression of sympathy on the face of the young St. Mungo's medi-witch when she walked into the examination room confirmed that Harry Potter's birthday was not about to become Draco's lucky day, at least not this year.

"Mrs. Malfoy, Mr. Malfoy. I'm so sorry, but our testing shows the pregnancy isn't viable. It appears that fetal development ceased shortly after implantation."

Both of the Malfoys' faces displayed nothing more than a well-bred stoicism. When Astoria had miscarried little Scorpius at seventeen weeks, they had clung to each other and sobbed in the consultation room for hours. Five miscarriages later, Draco had effectively disassociated his wife's pregnancies from the possibility of a healthy baby, numbing himself to the eventual losses. He wasn't certain how Astoria coped.

"Very well," said Astoria, gathering her handbag and rising to her feet. "I shall schedule a follow-up appointment for early autumn."

Draco put a lightly detaining hand on her wrist. "Stay just a moment." As she sat back down, he turned his attention to the medi-witch. "Would use of a donor's sperm increase the chances of a successful outcome?" His voice was even, not reflecting that he felt utterly emasculated at the thought of relying on some other man to sire the next Malfoy heir.

The Healer's eyes strayed briefly to his left arm, but she shook her head. "Your wife's fertility also seems to have been compromised as a consequence of use of Dark magic. It's unfortunately all too common with witches and wizards of our generation."

Draco wasn't surprised. During the Carrows' tenure at Hogwarts, Astoria had positively relished using Unforgivables against her classmates. "Use of a different donor's sperm likely won't change anything," the medi-witch concluded.

Although they weren't touching, Astoria was sitting close enough that Draco felt her stiffen at the Healer's answer and the damning adjective.

"May I see the chart?" he requested with disarming mildness. Healer Clearwater, who he vaguely remembered as a pretty Head Girl when he was thirteen and just beginning to notice witches, passed it over without protest.

Draco read quickly, skimming past medical jargon and data. "Ah," he said, "It seems that my wife relied on a *private* service to find her sperm donor rather than coming to St. Mungo's." Most likely Astoria had been serviced in an expensive hotel room, some evening while he was working late. "Might that have made a difference?"

The medi-witch shrugged. "I doubt it. Mrs. Malfoy did become pregnant, so the insemination clearly was effective."

With cold fury, Draco imagined his naked wife assuming various sexual positions with another wizard to ensure her adultery was "effective."

"Are there any other options available to us?" It was obvious to Draco that Astoria's inquiry was an attempt to postpone the inevitable confrontation over her infidelity. She already knew the answer to her question: over the last four years, they had discussed every fertility treatment known to wizards and Muggles with the experts at St. Mungo's, and tried most of them.

But Healer Clearwater wasn't their regular medi-witch; she was merely a junior member of the staff who had been stuck working on a public holiday, so she saw nothing unusual about the question. "You can try a Muggle technique called IVF next, but it requires magic-suppressing potions that sharply increase the likelihood that any child born will be a Squib."

Neither of the Malfoys reacted; they were glaring at each other with an intensity that made the Healer swallow uneasily. "Well, I'll just leave you now, unless there's anything further. You can let us know how you would like to proceed at your next visit, Mrs. Malfoy."

Astoria didn't seem to register that she had spoken, but Draco gave her a quick nod of dismissal.

As soon as the door closed behind Healer Clearwater, he grabbed his wife's wrist again, this time digging hard fingers into the delicate tendons. It was a grip meant to hurt without bruising, and he found Astoria's sharp cry of pain to be disturbingly gratifying.

"I'll ask this once, and I'll use simple words so there is no chance of misunderstanding. *Who did you cheat with?*" He hissed the question at her, his eyes arctic with rage.

Astoria, stupid as she was, began blurting out names. Bletchley. Harper. Bole. Pucey. Montague. Urquhart.

Draco was dumbfounded. If you had asked him this morning, he would have answered that he and Astoria had a reasonably good marriage, notwithstanding that she had trapped him into it before he was nineteen with a deliberately botched contraceptive charm. Now he discovered she had been fucking practically an entire Quidditch team behind his back.

"Is there anyone else?" he demanded.

The minute hesitation before the dark-haired witch shook her head was telling. Draco snarled and pulled his wand, pointing it directly at her now-pale face. "*Legilemens*."

As he suspected, Astoria had been unfaithful to him in a well-appointed Muggle hotel room. In her memories, she was artfully arranged against the white duvet to display the expensive black lingerie she favored. A short blond wizard wearing a three-piece Muggle suit that couldn't quite conceal his slight paunch walked into the room, holding a bouquet of flowers. "Astoria, how delightful to see you," he stated pompously.

Draco broke off the connection to his wife's mind. "You cheated with Macmillan?" he asked incredulously, a vein throbbing dangerously in his forehead. "A fucking limp dick Hufflepuff?"

"He got me pregnant with that limp dick when you couldn't," Astoria sneered.

He punched the wall next to her head.

She flinched and began to cry.

"Try my patience any further and I won't answer for the consequences," Draco warned his unfaithful tart of a wife. "How many times has another man gotten you pregnant?"

Astoria folded in the face of his threat. "I don't know," she sniffed. "I never bothered to use any charms or potions after we lost Scorpius. I just want a baby so badly, Draco."

He stared at her, incredulous. "And any man's baby will do for you?"

She nodded eagerly, oblivious to his bitter sarcasm. "Yes, exactly!"

Hurt battled with anger, and the latter won. He clenched his fists. "How the fuck were you planning to pass off some brown-haired little bastard as a Malfoy?"

Astoria looked at him, eyes swimming with tears. "Well, Ernie's blond, and so is Miles. As for the others, I didn't think you or your parents would care, so long as you got the heir you needed. Your mother told me she doesn't care about blood, so long as any child is raised as a Malfoy."

Draco carefully unclenched his fists at the mention of his mother. Narcissa had drilled it into him that a wizard should never hit a witch. Even if the fucking irresponsible slag richly deserved it. Taking a deep breath, he focused on reining in his temper and restoring the cold Malfoy facade.

"Irrespective of what my mother may have said," and he highly doubted that she would have encouraged Astoria to cuckold him, "you are married to me. Not her. And I will not tolerate infidelity." Malfoys might be notorious for their bad faith, but never towards one another.

"Draco," Astoria pouted at him, "I don't think you're being fair. You told that medi-witch you didn't care if another wizard got me pregnant."

His response was glacial. "Even you should be intelligent enough to appreciate the difference between a fertility treatment and spreading your legs for every wizard of my acquaintance."

He studied his teary-eyed wife impassively. "I think you should take a holiday for the month of August. Any of the Malfoy properties abroad will do." That should give him sufficient time to consult with his solicitor and decide how to proceed.

She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off. "That's an order, not a suggestion. I don't give a flying fuck about your social calendar or whatever charity event you're organizing. I don't want to see your face anywhere in England until September. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," Astoria whimpered through her tears.

He stood up and walked towards the exit. In the doorway, he paused and spoke, looking over her head. "I won't be back at the Manor until late. Make sure you're gone when I get back."

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Draco left the hospital through a discreet side exit and wandered aimlessly down the shabby street where the seemingly abandoned Purge & Dowse building was located. Still reeling from Astoria's betrayal, he soon found himself hopelessly lost in Muggle London. The anonymity was refreshing, although his light-weight summer robes drew the occasional odd

look. After walking a bit further without seeing any landmarks he recognized, he ducked into an alley and Apparated to Diagon Alley.

Looking at his watch, Draco was dismayed to see less than an hour had passed since he'd left Astoria at St. Mungo's. She would need at least two hours to pack, even with the help of the house elves. In his current mood, he didn't trust himself to return to the Manor until she was sure to have left. He wasn't certain the training of a lifetime would hold against another of her flippant little remarks.

The earlier throng of parade goers in the Alley had thinned out with the approach of the dinner hour. Draco pasted a forbidding scowl on his face as he walked in the direction of Quality Quidditch Supplies, not wishing to be accosted by anyone he knew. At the Quidditch shop, he could easily while away an hour browsing for a new racing broom.

The shop was mercifully quiet, with the clerk occupied in helping the sole customer. Draco made his way towards the Nimbus display, overhearing snatches of their conversation.

"Is there a brighter pink? Yeah, that's brilliant!"

"Can you do a design with baby unicorns, too? Have those little golden buggers chasing after their mums?"

"What about ribbons? Can you add painted ribbons around their necks and braided in their tails? Alright, I want those in emerald green and purple. With sparkles."

Draco couldn't help but grin at the request for the most garish broom design he'd ever heard off, especially since he now recognized the customer's voice. Marcus Flint was the former Quidditch captain of the Slytherin House team, retired Chaser for the Montrose Magpies, and current employee of Malfoy Enterprises, where he was among their most successful salespeople, selling potions and ingredients to companies and institutions throughout western Europe.

Draco sauntered towards the counter, looking forward to taking the piss out of his friend. "Why not tie pink and green ribbons onto the bristles while you're at it, Flint?"

"Malfoy!" Flint clapped him on the back in an exuberant greeting. "I'd do it, my man, if ribbons wouldn't fucking ruin the aerodynamics!"

Draco peered over Flint's beefy shoulder at the rendering of the broom. "Please tell me this is for your wife. You may be a top producer, but my father will not hesitate to fire you if you call on customers while riding *that*."

Flint snorted. "It's not for me, but it's also not for my wife. They don't make a broom big enough for that she-beast. It's a kid's broom, for a little girl." He smiled, slyly. Flint was far from book smart - indeed, he'd had to repeat his last year at Hogwarts - but he was as shrewd and cunning as any Slytherin could hope to be.

"Really?" Draco asked casually. "And here I thought you were having it commissioned for Potter's son."

Flint chuckled appreciatively as he counted out the Galleons to pay for the petite broomstick, while the shop assistant looked carefully blank at the political humor. Underneath his snark, Draco was thinking fast. Flint's marriage was childless as well as miserable, like far too many pure-blood marriages. "So is this for your goddaughter?" he asked carefully.

"Something like that," Flint smugly agreed.

"I see," Draco said. And he was indeed beginning to see, though some things remained murky. "It's been far too long since we caught up over a pint, Marcus."

"We definitely need to catch up, Drake. In fact," Flint glanced at the clock on the shop's wall, "I'm due to meet Nott at the Black Cat in Knockturn Alley. Care to join us?"

Now Draco was wholly intrigued. Bookish Theodore Nott had nothing in common with Flint beyond the purity of their blood and an affiliation with Slytherin house. A meeting between those two smacked of conspiracy rather than a meeting between friends. Not only did plotting suit Draco's natural inclinations, it would provide a welcome distraction from Astoria's whorish behavior. "I'm in. Let's go."

Marcus Flint's Best Day Ever

July 31, 2003

The Black Cat was an upmarket establishment for Knockturn Alley, which meant Draco would be willing to go there even without a burly friend like Marcus Flint. He also would consent to drink from the pub's glasses. Particularly Firewhiskey, which was strong enough to be a natural disinfectant.

Theodore Nott was already seated, waiting for them at a shadowy corner table. He unfolded his tall, lanky body from his seat, standing briefly to shake their hands. "Flint, nice to see you. Malfoy, it's been a while."

Draco nodded in cool greeting. Theo had always been a lone wolf, on occasion deigning to be an ally. He had known Nott his entire life, as far back as he could remember, but they had never been friends. For a period of time, they had even been brothers-in-law, after a fashion, because Nott had been married to Astoria's elder sister, Daphne. Their not-very-amicable divorce had been finalized a few months before; Draco had not seen Nott since.

Draco knew that Nott had trained after Hogwarts as a solicitor, like his father, but had not known Theo had hung up his own shingle until Flint told him, on their walk over from Quality Quiddith Supplies. The younger Nott was Flint's solicitor, which partially explained why those two would be meeting - but not why the meeting was taking place in a dodgy pub on a public holiday.

The three men kept the conversation on a casual level as they placed their order.

"How's business?" Theo asked.

"Bloody excellent," Flint reported, with a cheeky grin towards Draco. "I plan to ask my boss for a raise, but he's a tight-fisted bastard."

"Lucius is like that with me as well," Draco rejoined dryly. "Didn't I just send you to Provence for a week? That's not exactly hardship duty."

"Yeah, and while I was there I added a couple of new accounts," Marcus bragged.

"Beauxbatons also increased their order. Madame Maxime told me their enrollment has been up by about ten percent for the last few years."

"Interesting." Draco made a mental note to tell his father. Lucius, in his capacity as a Hogwarts governor, was constantly lamenting the school's declining enrollment and recently relaxed standards for admission. "Good work, Flint."

As soon as their glasses and bottle of Firewhiskey arrived, Theo cast a *Muffliato*. Professor Snape had taught that spell, along with the importance of discretion, to every student who belonged to his House.

Nott then pinned Draco with an intent look from his unusually light blue eyes, staring through his eyeglasses. "Ordinarily, I don't discuss any client's business in front of a third party, but Marcus wants you to hear this. I'll need your wand oath that nothing said at this table from this point forward goes beyond the three of us."

"I'm willing to give you my oath," Draco said coolly to the dark-haired wizard, "but I want the same in return."

Nott and Flint nodded and the three men briefly touched the tips of their wands together.

"Marcus, you requested an urgent meeting. What's going on?" Nott spoke bluntly.

Flint smiled widely, fully displaying his crooked teeth. "This has been the best fucking day of my life, Nott. Bar none." He was not being sarcastic.

"Oh?" Nott cocked an inquiring brow.

Flint was clearly in an expansive mood, immediately launching into his story. "So at three o'clock in the fucking morning, Katie starts screeching like Salazar's pet banshee."

"That strikes me as a natural reaction by any woman waking up next to you," Draco drawled. "Though I thought your wife's name was Brunhilda?"

"So it is," Flint agreed affably. "Don't tell me you've never strayed, Malfoy."

In point of fact, he had been faithful to his marriage vows, although he planned to rectify that error in the near future. He had already begun compiling a list of the wives and girlfriends of the wizards Astoria had fucked, ranked in order of attractiveness.

Flint continued without waiting for an answer. "Anyways, I go running down the hall, wand out, expecting to see Aurors or at least a burglar. Instead, Isabelle's in her cot, giggling, with her toy unicorn prancing around the room in mid-air, while Katie's screaming some shite about poltergeists."

He stopped, expectantly waiting for their reaction.

"Accidental magic," Nott breathed. "That's excellent!" Suddenly he sobered. "How did you explain it to Katie?"

Flint looked guilty. "I had to Confound her. I was worried she'd hurt herself or the baby. Then I got her back to bed and told her it was just a crazy pregnancy dream."

"Congratulations on your daughter's magic," Nott said formally. "I expect you want me to revise your will and trust documents accordingly, to acknowledge that she is a witch?"

"Yeah, whatever you have to do. Just make sure everything's confidential so my wife doesn't find out. Or those interfering buggers at the Ministry."

"Of course," Nott acknowledged.

Draco narrowed his eyes, less interested in the legalities than in figuring out this cast of characters. "So Isabelle's your daughter?" he asked. "That's who you were buying the broomstick with unicorns for?"

Flint nodded proudly. "My little witch. The broom's a present for her fourth birthday next month. She's going to Chase for Slytherin, mark my words."

"Or perhaps for Gryffindor," Nott pointed out with legalistic precision. "As did her mother."

"Katie Bell?" Draco asked, not entirely surprised at the identity of Flint's mistress. He remembered the dark-haired Chaser from Gryffindor he had accidentally cursed when trying to carry out his mission to kill Dumbledore. Flint always had singled her out in his pep talks about beating the Golden Lions.

"Yeah, our little girl 'is a Bell.' Get it?" Flint chortled. "Pretty kid, she got her mum's looks, thank Merlin, but she's cunning like me. I'll eat the damned Sorting Hat if it doesn't put her in Slytherin."

"Wait, isn't Bell a Mudblood?" Draco asked.

"Yeah, what about it?" Flint answered belligerently. "Nott told me Isabelle counts as a pureblood under the Ministry's new law. And there have been plenty of half-bloods in Slytherin before."

"Like your godfather," Nott chimed in.

"I'm not questioning your daughter's pureblood status, Flint," Draco said to his prickly-tempered friend. "But I thought Bell was exiled from the magical world with the rest of the Mudbloods."

"Yeah, she was. We'd found out she was up the duff just before she left. I was in a right panic about what to do, but Theo helped me out. I've been living with her in the Muggle world almost full-time for more than four years now." Flint spoke nonchalantly.

Draco gaped at him. "How in Salazar's name have you managed that? You didn't exactly earn a N.E.W.T. in Muggle Studies."

Marcus sniggered at that. "Neither did you, mate. Both of our fathers would have flayed us for even stepping foot in Burbage's classroom."

He jerked his head towards Nott. "Theo set me up with all the Muggle documents and a cover story. I'm Mark Stone, a pharmaceutical sales rep who travels a lot, so Katie understands why I'm not home every night."

"What about your wife?" Draco asked.

Flint gave a rather unpleasant smile. "We both prefer it when I'm not around. I stand at stud once a month, not that it ever does any bloody good, and otherwise Brunhilda has no objection if I go on my merry way. Unlike this lucky bastard," he gestured at Nott, "my vows are of the 'til death do you part' kind, otherwise I'd have divorced the bitch years ago."

Draco nodded slowly. Flint had just described a relatively common marital arrangement, though he didn't know of any other wizards living with a mistress in the Muggle world.

Clearly, though, there was something he was still missing. "Why are you two both so chuffed that Isabelle did some accidental magic? You're a wizard, Flint, and her mother's a witch, even if she is a Mudblood. I'd expect your daughter to be magical."

"I always thought Isabelle was a Squib, what with the Dark Lord's curse," Flint answered.

"The Dark Lord cursed *you*?" Draco asked, unsure why Flint would be singled out for punishment. He had taken the Mark, of course, but he'd always kept his head down and his mouth shut, like a good soldier.

"No one ever told you?" Nott asked, his voice bitter. "Voldemort cursed *all* of us, his entire second generation of faithful Death Eaters. None of us have been able to have children, except for Marcus here and Goyle, and he was Marked just the week before the Final Battle. And everyone knows Goyle's little girl is almost certainly a Squib."

"Yeah, fucking Snake Eyes put something in the Dark Mark that cursed us all sterile, and then got himself killed by Potter before giving anyone the counter-curse," Flint growled.

"But I suspect you may have discovered how to get around the curse, both the infertility and lack of magical ability in any children who are born," Theo said thoughtfully.

He looked to Draco. "Are you certain your parents never said anything to you about the curse?"

"Obviously not," Draco answered with irritation, "because I haven't the slightest fucking idea what you're going on about." Although it made a terrible sort of sense. Purebloods, excepting only the Weasleys, had experienced difficulty conceiving in recent generations. Most of Draco's peers were only children. But Draco's own generation hadn't been able to have magical children, period. Now that he thought about it, the only christening he had attended since the War ended had been for Goyle's daughter.

"They may not have known," Nott speculated. "Your father certainly was not part of the Dark Lord's inner circle after his arrest, and Narcissa was never a Death Eater."

Draco nodded in agreement, though he suspected his mother had at least some inkling. "But your father was the Dark Lord's third in command, after my aunt. What does he know?"

"Precious little," Theo snorted. "Just that the Dark Lord had come up with a new way to ensure obedience by rewarding his most loyal followers with pureblood heirs. And, by implication, depriving the rest of us."

"As if the Cruciatus curse wasn't good enough?" Draco asked sarcastically.

"People will do a great deal to avoid pain," Theo conceded, "but not as much as they would do to ensure the continuation of their line."

At that, Draco nodded grimly. He recalled all the ways his parents had sacrificed and degraded themselves to protect him from the Dark Lord. "Are you certain your father doesn't know the counter-curse?"

"Due to my legal training, I try to avoid absolute answers, but I am positively, absolutely and unequivocally certain," Theo affirmed. "If he knew, I already would have had an heir out of Daphne without having to jump through absurd Muggleborn hoops."

Draco nodded. Nott's logic was unassailable. He filed away the dark-haired wizard's odd comment about jumping through hoops for later reference. "Come to think of it, my mother probably does know about the curse and that it doesn't have an effect on Mudbloods," he offered.

"Really?" Nott asked, with a solicitor's ingrained skepticism. "What makes you think that?"

"When the Wizengamot adopted your father's proposal, my father wanted me to take the Vow with some little old biddy in her nineties. He had the idea that she would die of natural causes in a few years and then I'd be released from any obligation. My mother stepped in and *insisted* on Hermione Granger."

Flint gave a wolfish grin. "Only the best for the Malfoys, right?"

Draco grinned back. After setting up wards on her flat and assigning a house-elf to check in on her periodically, he had essentially pushed the fiery Mudblood to the back of his mind. Now, thinking several steps ahead, the notion of using Granger as the means to his desired end was *very* appealing.

"Narcissa is an intelligent woman, with a great deal of foresight," Nott conceded, "but don't you think she would have said something to you?"

"Unlikely," Draco said. "My mother operates on a need-to-know basis. And she despises Mudbloods. She would only tell me about Granger as a last resort, if she were convinced there was no other way to continue the Malfoy line. I'm sure she's still hoping one of Astoria's pregnancies will stick or that the Ministry finds a solution."

Nott gave a sarcastic smile. "There may be hope! I've heard rumors that Umbridge's department is busy looking for a solution to the magical fertility problem."

Flint gave a derisive laugh. "That lot couldn't find their own arses with two hands and a map. They'll never fix it."

"It seems, though, like you've succeeded where the Ministry has failed," Theo said thoughtfully. "Did I hear you say that Katie is pregnant again?"

A proud smile crossed Flint's face. "You did indeed. She's only about three months gone, so we're just starting to tell people now."

"Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?" Draco asked, concealing his jealousy with difficulty. At this point, he would give his left bollock for any magical child, boy or girl, and that lucky

bugger Flint was going to have two.

"Not yet," Flint replied. "I try to avoid doing any magic around Katie. We're going to use the Muggle way to find out, but that won't be for a few more weeks. I'm hoping for a boy, of course."

Nott and Draco both nodded in understanding. Most wizarding estates were entailed and, by magical contract, had to pass to a male relative. Draco reflected bitterly that if current population trends continued, the Weasleys would end up wealthy due to inheritances from cousins five and six times removed from that family of blood traitors.

Flint shrugged. "I need a male heir eventually, but I don't mind trying again." He winked suggestively. "And again, and again, if I need to. Katie wants a big family."

Draco smiled, amused at the irony of Flint, of all people, finding a way around Voldemort's curse. "That's a brilliant solution. Just fuck a Mudblood and use her to produce your magical babies."

"Watch your mouth," Marcus warned. "That's not how it is with Katie."

Draco's smile widened. "Bully for you, Flint. I'm thinking about the rest of us. All I have to do," he summarized, "is seduce Granger, get her pregnant, and I'll have my son and heir."

Nott looked at him with pity. "You make it sound all so easy, Malfoy. It's not."

"Maybe not for you, Theo." Draco smirked. "It's not like I haven't had witches flinging themselves at me since I was thirteen. Mudbloods are no different than any other woman."

"Ah, yes," Nott smirked right back. "I distinctly remember Granger flinging her fist at your face that year."

Draco grimaced, remembering why he and Nott had never been friends, and decided a strategic change of topic was in order. "Who's your Mudblood, Theo?"

Nott cleared his throat. "Cho Chang."

"She's perfect for you. A pretty Ravenclaw who, despite her intelligence, is known for her piss-poor taste in men," Draco bantered.

Suddenly, Nott's wand was at his throat. "Before you explain exactly what you meant by that snide little comment, I'll have you know that I am courting Cho properly, with every intention of making her my wife."

"What the fuck is the matter with you?" Draco swatted Nott's wand aside. "I only meant that she dated Saint Potter, and both of you are spectacled gits. I wasn't insulting your Mudblood's virtue. I doubt the fumbling wanker ever did anything more than hold her hand and kiss her on the cheek."

Theo's face was mottled with anger and he was still clutching his wand. Flint put a restraining hand on his wrist. "Theo, mate, Draco doesn't remember what happened to Chang. He

wouldn't take the piss about something like that. Why don't you remind him?"

Nott took a steadying breath. "A few months after the Final Battle, Walden Macnair kidnapped Chang and brought her to Nott Court, since your mother had it made it clear Death Eaters were no longer welcome at Malfoy Manor. He and my father and several other Death Eaters spent the next few days and nights raping her."

"Oh, fuck," Draco swore. He remembered the incident now. Lucius had held a furious Floo call while Draco was in his father's study, listening in. Lucius had berated Nott, Sr. and ordered him to let Cho go free, not because he cared about the sexual abuse of a Mudblood, but so as to not jeopardize the Death Eaters' newly-won political capital. "I'm sorry," he offered inadequately.

"Apology accepted," Theo gritted out. "It's taken years - literally - for Cho to warm up to me, after what happened to her in my father's house. Given what your aunt did to Granger, you should expect the same."

Draco wasn't convinced the situations were equivalent, but prudently let it drop. "She won't remember, Nott. I Obliviated her myself. She'll just see a good-looking, charming bloke paying court to her and she'll be eating out of the palm of my hand in no time."

Nott shook his head. "I wouldn't bet on that, Malfoy. On some instinctive level, they remember us."

Flint nodded emphatically. "Katie does. Not magic or Hogwarts or shite like that, but she knew who I was when she woke up in the hospital. And whenever she's narked at me, she still calls me a cheating snake." He grinned, unrepentant. "Which I suppose I am, but she loves me anyway."

"Look, Granger dated the Weasel King. It can't be that hard to charm her out of her knickers," Draco argued. "Five hundred Galleons says I'll be shagging her before Halloween."

High-stakes bets had always been a favorite diversion among the wealthy members of Slytherin House, even back at Hogwarts. Nott and Flint both perked up at the wager.

"Shagging isn't good enough," the solicitor countered. "You can't just slip her a lust potion and collect your winnings. We'll want to see evidence that she's 'eating out of the palm of your hand,' as you've so eloquently put it."

"Yeah, if you want to win the bet, we want to see Granger arse over elbows in love with you," Flint added.

"Agreed," Draco said readily.

"Then make it a thousand Galleons, 'cuz both of us want in," Flint said.

It was the largest wager Draco had ever made, but he did not even hesitate. His vaults were vast and this was close to a sure thing. "Done," he said, extending his wand. Flint and Nott touched their wands to his, formalizing the terms.

Nott withdrew his wand and smirked. "So, Malfoy. You'll need a Muggle identity and cover story before you approach Granger, won't you?"

"I suppose I will," Draco groaned. Without Nott's help in navigating the Muggle world, Granger would think she was being propositioned by a raving lunatic. "And let me guess - your fee for providing those services will be five hundred Galleons?"

"Got it in one!" Theo exclaimed. "It's always a pleasure doing business with an intelligent client."

"Wanker," Draco grumbled as he reached into his pocket for his cheque book.

Nott accepted the cheque with a sunny smile. "Thanks, Malfoy," he said, folding the cheque and placing it in his pocket.

"What if she has a boyfriend? Or even a husband?" Flint asked suddenly. "She's a looker, and she's been in the Muggle world for more than four years."

Draco waved a dismissive hand. "I'll just Imperio the tosser and make him dump her in some spectacular fashion. Then I'll be there to pick up the pieces."

"You, Malfoy, are morally reprehensible," Nott pronounced.

Draco just smirked at him. "You say it like that's a bad thing."

The Head Girl from Gryffindor

September 1, 2003

Looking out over the rooftops and chimneys visible from the kitchen window in her tiny flat, Hermione realized it was a beautiful morning, with a cloudless blue sky. She pushed up the sill, enjoying the brisk breeze that had blown away the sooty humidity of London in late summer. With a decisive motion, Hermione flipped the calendar taped to her refrigerator from August to September. It had been an eventful month, too much so in Hermione's view.

Her godparents, Wendell and Monica Wilkins, had arrived from Australia on the first day of August for a month-long holiday. The childless couple, who were both dentists with a thriving practice outside of Brisbane, had been pleased as punch at the opportunity to attend Hermione's university graduation ceremony and to finally meet her boyfriend, Andy McLeod. She and Andy had been dating for more than a year (and had been "friends with benefits" and "just friends" well before that), but he had been visiting his family the past August when the Wilkins made their annual trip to visit their goddaughter.

As a graduation present, Monica and Wendell had planned to take Hermione and her boyfriend to the Lake District to celebrate the completion of their undergraduate education at University College London. Andy had merely earned a diploma, but Hermione had completed a dual degree, taking first class honors in both chemistry and English. She also had been awarded a full scholarship from the chemistry department as an incentive to stay on at UCL to obtain her master's degree, which is what she would be doing during the upcoming academic year.

Her boyfriend had seemed a bit off throughout the graduation day, alternately dazed and snappish instead of his normal happy-go-lucky self. Hermione had attributed this to the pressure of meeting her godparents or perhaps the irritant of having to wear mandatory academic dress on a hot summer day. For Hermione, however, the black robes had felt natural.

When Andy had disappeared from the English department's reception for honors students, Hermione had been concerned and a bit annoyed. The concern grew and the annoyance lessened when he failed to answer his mobile phone, and she and her godparents had left the reception early and returned to the flat she and Andy shared in case he had taken ill. The groaning she could hear from the hallway had seemingly validated those concerns, until she had unlocked the flat's front door and found her boyfriend, naked and in perfect health, shagging some blonde on the floor.

Upon hearing the door, Andy had looked up, auburn fringe flopping over his blue eyes, which had been vacant with lust. He had flipped the unknown girl over so that she was straddling him and grinned at Hermione, oblivious to both her outrage and her appalled godparents, standing behind her. "Want to take off those uncomfortable robes and ride my face, luv?" he had asked, utterly unabashed at having been caught cheating.

Hermione had walked out in a rage, slamming the door with enough force that she could hear the flimsy Ikea bookcase fall over, along with gratifying cries of pain from Andy and his bint.

She had spoken to him only twice since. Hermione had permitted him an opportunity the following day to apologize and attempt to explain, but his stammering, fantastical excuse that a voice in his head had made him do it convinced her that he was mental as well as unfaithful. After that conversation, they had spoken once by phone to arrange a time for her to pick up her things from the flat. Then she had blocked his number from her phone. So far as she was concerned, infidelity was unforgivable.

Wendell and Monica spent the rest of August helping her pick up the pieces, acting *in loco parentis*. After canceling the trip to the Lake District, Wendell had worked tirelessly with an estate agent to find her a new flat near campus on short notice. He then had painted the living room her favorite shade of blue and the bedroom her favorite shade of lilac, with the kitchen a sunny yellow. Wendell also had made her laugh through the tears with his vivid descriptions of the types of dental procedures he would like to perform on her ex-boyfriend, all without anesthesia.

Monica had alternated between providing a motherly shoulder to cry on and brisk, practical assistance in furnishing the new flat. She had gifted Hermione with several high-quality pieces the Wilkins family had placed in storage when they moved from England to Australia in 1997, including a lovely, feminine guest bedroom suite in ivory-colored wood that reminded Hermione of her bedroom growing up and an inlaid secretary desk, similar to one she recalled from childhood visits to her grandmother's house. With these additions, her new flat felt like home.

Then, her godparents had lovingly insisted that she join them on their holiday in southern France and northern Spain for the second half of August. As British expats, the Wilkins had fully adopted the Aussie practice of taking long, jam-packed trips whenever they ventured away from Down Under. Between the two of them, they had overridden Hermione's protests that they were being too generous and she was intruding on their vacation.

"Pish-posh, Hermione," Wendell laughed, "your mum and dad wouldn't have made us godparents unless they wanted us to spoil you more than a bit. They were our best friends since we were all in dental school together, so they knew full well we'd dote on you!"

Monica had been more serious. "You're like the daughter we never had, darling. We get to see you so rarely, but I hope you know we'd do anything for you."

And Hermione did know that. When she had woken up in a Wiltshire hospital more than four years before, the victim of a hit-and-run driver, Monica and Wendell had been there at her bedside, having flown in from Australia. Her memories prior to the accident were hazy, but she knew her godparents had been an important part of her life growing up and remained even more so now that she was an adult.

Wendell and Monica were the closest thing to parents she had left, and she had told them so just last night, hugging them fiercely at the airport's departure lounge. She would visit them in Brisbane over the Christmas hols, but right now those seemed very far away.

With her godparents' return to Australia and Andy's status as *persona non grata*, Hermione found herself at a bit of a loose end. Even though classes didn't start for another couple of weeks, she was ahead on her reading and coursework, with her research proposal already finalized and approved by the head of the chemistry department. While she supposed could get a head start on her applications to various doctoral programs, none were due until December, so that wasn't especially pressing on a beautiful September day.

Instead, she took full advantage of the weather, spending the morning in a meandering walk. She circled Regent's Park, climbed up Primrose Hill, and walked along the canal towpath until she turned south just past Pancras Road, her feet leading her inexorably towards King's Cross railway station.

It was late enough in the morning for the crush of commuters to have abated, but the station was still bustling with groups of children and adolescents bound for boarding schools in the northern shires and Scotland. Hermione dimly knew that she had attended such a school, and smiled nostalgically at the array of uniforms and laden luggage trolleys as she queued up for a fancy coffee at the kiosk just past Platform Eight.

She looked in amazement at a tiny brown Scops owl in a cage on one such trolley, until she blinked and realized it was a parakeet. Still odd, that a school would allow a feathery pet, but at least there was no blatant violation of the Wildlife and Countryside Act. The bird's owner, a sandy-haired girl in her late teens, caught her eye and smiled.

Hermione went to pay for her cappuccino, but a freckled hand thrust a crumpled note at the cashier. "My treat," announced the sandy-haired girl. "It's the very least I can do."

"No, really, that's not necessary," a puzzled Hermione demurred, but the girl was insistent and the line behind them was only getting longer.

As they stepped away from the kiosk, Hermione's eye was caught by the shiny badge on the girl's grey uniform. "You're Head Girl! Congratulations!"

The girl looked at her with wide, hopeful eyes. "Do you remember me? Bridey Finnigan. I was a first year your last year at school. We were in the same house," she said, pointing to her gold and maroon-striped tie.

Regretfully, Hermione shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't - "

Bridey interrupted her urgently, a wary eye on the crowd. The sandy-haired, middle-aged woman guarding the luggage trolley gave her a quick, tight-lipped nod. "What about my brother Seamus? He was in your year, in Gryffindor, too. You must remember him."

Hermione tried to tamp down rising anxiety as the questions prodded at her memory. "Of course, how is Seamus these days?" she bluffed. She had a vague impression of a pugnacious male version of the girl standing before her, telling dirty jokes in a thick brogue, but nothing solid for her mind to grasp.

Bridey's face lit up at Hermione's apparent recollection of her brother, despite the morose news she had to convey. "His arm never fully healed, but he does well enough to pull a pint.

Seamus took over the pub after You Know Who had our Da killed."

Hermione regarded her blankly. No, she didn't know who. The girl looked crestfallen. "I'm afraid my memory isn't the sharpest," Hermione explained apologetically, increasingly uncomfortable. She hated to be reminded of her accident and the damage it had done to her brain.

"I thought for a moment you - well, we remember *you*. People like Sea and myself and our mam - we won't forget what you did, and you have our undying gratitude. It's a travesty, it is, what the Ministry agreed to."

"Quit pestering the poor lass, Bridey!" The sandy-haired woman had abandoned the luggage trolley in favor of a firm grip on her daughter's arm. "You need to go, or you'll miss the train. And you have your duties to see to, or you'll lose that badge you worked so hard to earn."

The girl looked sadly at Hermione. "She doesn't remember, Mam."

"You'll only get yourself in trouble trying to help her recall," she warned her daughter in an undertone not meant for Hermione's ears.

Her daughter rolled her eyes in typical teenage fashion and asked one more question of Hermione. "Shall I give your regards to Professor McGonagall?"

The name brought forth an image of an upright old woman with her hair pulled back in a bun. "Please do! She was my favorite teacher," Hermione blurted out, knowing that was true but frustrated at her inability to remember why.

Bridey beamed. "I will, I promise!" She then obediently took herself off, pushing the luggage trolley one-handed, so that she could give a farewell wave. "Ta-ta, Hermione. Stop by the Red Lion to see Seamus if you're ever in Dublin!"

After her daughter's departure, the sandy-haired woman looked directly at Hermione, who drew in a sharp breath at the pity and pain in the woman's peridot green eyes. They reminded her of someone, though his eyes had been darker. *Harry*.

The woman was speaking, but Hermione was half-distracted by the wisps of her memories. "We Irish have a saying," she said. "'May you never forget what is worth remembering, nor ever remember what is best forgotten.'"

She sighed heavily, still staring into Hermione's eyes. "You've been cursed with the first, but blessed with the second. It's probably for the best, dearie."

With that strange dismissal, the woman turned sharply on her heel and disappeared into the crowd before Hermione could ask what she meant.

A Flashy Sort of Atonement

Chapter Notes

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

September 1, 2003 (early evening)

Draco was engrossed in a monthly sales report when a sharp crack disrupted his concentration and caused him to snap the point of his quill.

"Bugger," he swore at the sight of ink splattering his sleeve. "Typical fucking Monday!" Since the War ended, he wasn't normally so jumpy, but his office at Malfoy Enterprises was warded against Apparition. At least Apparition by humans.

"Mipsy is very sorry," the house-elf squeaked, prostrating herself so that her large ears touched the floor. "Mipsy did not mean to startle Master Draco and make him spill ink, oh no, and Mipsy will punish herself most grievously if young Master desires."

"No, Mipsy, I don't so desire," Draco said to the elf. "Just clean this up." He held out his arm and the bat-eared creature used her magic to make short work of the stain, with no further mention of self-harm.

Mipsy had been his personal elf since childhood. There were many reasons why he was fond of her, not the least of which was that she lacked the masochistic tendencies that characterized so many of the other Malfoy elves. Mipsy was also reliable, discreet, and owed her primary loyalty to *him*, which is why he had assigned her to keep watch over Granger.

"How's my little Mudblood doing?" he asked, suppressing a grin at the reproachful look in Mipsy's bulging eyes. The house-elf had grown absurdly fond of Granger over the last four years, even though it was a one-sided relationship, with Granger not even aware of the elf's existence. Mipsy been delighted with his orders, starting a month ago, to monitor Granger's activities on a daily basis instead of just occasionally checking in on her.

"Miss is feeling sad today," the house-elf reported, wringing her hands in sympathy. "She is missing her parents, now that they is going back to Australia."

Draco nodded while buffing his fingernails against his now-pristine sleeve, not particularly concerned or interested. "She'll see them again in a few months. It could be worse."

Really, it was thanks to him and his mother that Granger's parents were in her life at all. So far as he knew, Memory Charms could only be reversed by their caster or broken by torture. When the Ministry barred Granger from traveling to Australia, he and Narcissa had gone instead. They had augmented the Wilkins' memories to add a beloved goddaughter. It was the best they could do, and exactly what Granger had bargained for.

"She is also missing the ginger boy, even though he was messy and left socks and underwear on the floor for Mipsy to pick up," the elf continued.

That got his attention. "He's not still hanging around, is he?" Draco demanded, wondering what it was with Granger and her tolerance for red-headed tossers.

He thought that he'd gotten rid of her Muggle boyfriend for once and for all. The bloke had put up a good fight against the Imperius curse - certainly better than Madam Rosmerta - but when he succumbed, he had done so in a gratifying manner. Draco personally thought it had been a master stroke to force him to ask Granger if she'd like to take part in a threesome while her godparents looked on. Draco hadn't thought she would forgive the ginger anytime in this lifetime or the next. Still, he always had been surprised back at Hogwarts as to how much shite she put up with from the Weasel King.

"The ginger boy isn't being allowed in where Miss is living now, and Miss will not take his calls, but he sends her letters," Mipsy replied. "Miss burns them and cries some more." She pulled at her ears in distress.

"That's fine, then," Draco said with some relief. It would be degrading to have to compete with a Muggle for Granger's affections. As for her tears, she could cry on his shoulder. A sad Granger was a vulnerable Granger. "Don't worry, Mipsy," he reassured the elf. "I'll help her feel better."

The house-elf beamed at him. "Miss is going to the bookstore, so young Master can meet her there now."

Draco grinned, eager to put his plan into action and pleased to see Granger was acting true to form. He had Obliviated her memories with a very light hand, not wanting to risk any harm to her that would break the Vow and rebound on himself. The Granger he had known at Hogwarts would enthusiastically discuss books with anyone, even lowly Hufflepuffs and illiterate Weasels. It should be child's play to strike up a conversation with her at a bookstore and then, if all went well, continue it at a coffee shop or perhaps even her flat.

He grabbed the wallet containing his Muggle money and identification from a desk drawer and shucked off his robes. With a quick look in the mirror behind the door, Draco was ready to go.

"Alright, Mips," he said, holding out his arm. "Take me there."

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After the disturbing encounter at King's Cross station, Hermione returned home for a quick lunch and contemplation over a cup of tea. This wasn't the first time strangers had approached her to express their gratitude for something she could not remember, but this was the first time she had been given facts - just names, really - to work with.

With her background in a scientific discipline, she valued data. Before she could forget, she carefully wrote all of the information Bridey had divulged in a notebook, with dotted lines to indicate connections where appropriate. It was precious little to go on. Frustrated, she set the notebook back in the antique secretary desk and decided on a field trip to her favorite bookstore.

Located a short walk from her new flat, the bookstore sold a wide selection of new and secondhand books and other publications, and contained any number of comfortable chairs and secluded nooks over three floors to encourage browsing. As a sop to her conscience, Hermione spent some time upon entering the store with the most recent academic journals in the fields of organic chemistry and biochemistry to see if there was anything relevant to her term research project. She made note of a few promising articles to obtain from UCL's science library and then made a beeline for modern fiction.

In hindsight, the collision probably was her fault. She had a bad habit of not watching where she was going in bookstores, being too focused on eying the shelves for a promising new story. That didn't stop her from lashing out, though.

"Ouch!" Hermione yelped, as she collided with a hard, male chest. Pale, well-manicured hands shot out to grab her upper arms and keep her from falling.

Once she regained her balance, Hermione found her eyes on level with the second button down on an expensive, grey designer shirt. She looked up into matching grey eyes, fringed with dark lashes and looking much more amused than apologetic. Artfully tousled platinum-blond hair, perfect porcelain skin and sharp, aristocratic cheekbones completed the picture. He was far better-looking than any bloke had a right to be. Even worse, he clearly knew it.

He opened his pretty pink mouth to say something she was sure would be cutting, so Hermione beat him to it. "Watch where you're going, you oaf!" she snarled, shrugging his hands off her arms.

Something dark flashed in his silver-grey eyes and his jaw tightened, but his response was milder than she anticipated. "I *was* going to apologize."

"Don't bother," she told him. His voice was exactly the type of upper-class drawl she expected, and it rubbed her entirely the wrong way. "I wouldn't accept it, anyways, you over-entitled prat."

He raised one perfect eyebrow. "Well, cheers, then." He turned his back on her and walked away towards the front counter, where he embarked on a flirtatious conversation with the cashier.

Hermione watched him go with narrowed eyes. It wasn't like her to abuse a perfect stranger, but there was no reason for someone like *him* to be here. With a sniff, she selected a favorite novel from the shelf and began to read, keeping a wary eye on the blond and hoping that he would leave soon.

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Draco was quietly fuming as he turned away from Granger. Clearly, he had failed to remove her bitchiness when he had taken her memories of magic. Probably it was too ingrained in her character to ever be removed, even by an Obliviate. It would do him absolutely no good at present to continue conversing with the obnoxious bint. It would only devolve into a counterproductive exchange of insults.

The gratifying responsiveness from the cute little blonde minding the till, not to mention admiring looks from other women in the store, restored Draco's good humor and reinforced that the problem lay with Granger, rather than his Muggle persona. While a small part of his attention was devoted to the giggling cashier, the greater part of his mind was analyzing what he knew about Granger and recalculating the best way to approach her.

From his observations at school, he knew she was equally intelligent and stubborn, a fierce champion of any perceived underdog (witness S.P.E.W.), hot-tempered but ultimately fair, and prone to self-doubt where boys (now men) were concerned. Those insights gave him enough to work with. Draco smiled, a slow, predatory smile that made the blonde catch her breath in anticipation, even though it wasn't meant for her.

He had been subtly watching Granger for the last fifteen minutes. Her suspicious glances in his direction had become less frequent, as her temper cooled and her book captured more of her attention. The last few looks she had given him had been vaguely confused and much less hostile, and she was now nervously nibbling her lower lip. Draco figured there was no better time to strike.

Taking his leave of the blonde bird, he sauntered back in Granger's direction. He stopped a foot or so away, careful not to invade her personal space, and lightly cleared his throat.

She looked up and flushed faintly in embarrassment.

"My apology still stands, if you're now willing to accept it," Draco offered in a conciliatory tone.

And truly, he was sorry. Physically bumping into her had been a momentary impulse, driven by a curiosity to see how she felt in his arms, a practice run as it were. If Draco had known it would trigger such a hostile fight-or-flight response, he would have stuck with his original plan of walking over to her and initiating a conversation about books.

She responded to his sincerity like any good Gryffindor. "Apology accepted," she said in a low voice, looking down at her book. "I suppose I owe you one as well, for reacting as I did."

He waved it off. "No, you don't owe me anything. I barged into you, after all." Draco thought magnanimity would serve his purposes well.

For the first time in his life, he got an imploring look from those big chocolate eyes. "No, really. I shouldn't have insulted you when I don't even know you."

"It's alright. I probably reminded you of some git you went to school with, though I hope you won't continue to hold that against me. I'm Malcolm Foy," he introduced his Muggle alter ego with a disarming grin and outstretched hand.

Unlike that Muggle-raised barbarian Potter, Granger actually had some manners. She responded with an infinitesimal smile as she shook his hand. "Hermione Granger."

"What are you reading?" he asked, reverting to his original plan of literary discussion as an icebreaker.

Without a word, she turned the book so he could see the cover.

"*Atonement*? I'm not familiar with it."

"Really? The concept or the novel?" she asked, with a hint of her usual acidity when addressing him.

"Clearly the latter, since I've been trying to make amends for the last half-hour," he told her, with only a bit of snark.

"I can't believe you've never heard of it!" she exclaimed, wide-eyed. "It was short-listed for the Booker Prize just last year!"

"I'm afraid I've been a bit busy, between uni and work, to read much outside my field." Draco did not want Granger to think he was an ignoramus. "What's the book about?"

With that, she was off and running, summarizing the novel with an earnest swottishness that he previously had thought she reserved for *Hogwarts: A History*. Still, Granger was perceptive for a former Gryffindor. A couple of minutes in, she stopped her recital abruptly. "I'm boring you, aren't I?"

"No, I like hearing you speak," and Draco truly was enjoying her sparkling eyes and enthusiastic gestures, "but the book doesn't sound like my cup of tea. Perhaps you can suggest something lighter?"

"Do you enjoy history, Malcolm?" she asked, with a hint of underlying mischief. Clearly, she had something in mind.

Draco decided to play along. "It wasn't my favorite subject back in school, because the teacher was deadly dull, but I've always enjoyed reading it on my own."

Granger moved down the aisle and stretched to reach one of a series of brightly colored paperbacks on the topmost shelf, each featuring a chap with a handlebar mustache. "These were some of my dad's favorite novels. He always described them as the most painless way he knew of to learn the military history of the British Empire."

Draco reached over her shoulder to assist. "Is there a particular one I should fetch?"

She shrugged. "They all follow the same formula, but you may like this one. It's set in China." He followed her slender finger and, with an effort, kept his eyes from widening at the title as he retrieved the book.

"The entire series is about a bully at boarding school who is expelled, joins the army, and finds himself involved in most of the pivotal military campaigns of the mid-nineteenth century, despite his cowardice and consistent attempts to run away and let others do the fighting for him." Granger looked up at him, with a disturbingly knowing look. "He's also a vicious, lying, cheating cad."

Draco rolled his eyes at the predictable moralism of Gryffindors. "Let me guess. The protagonist, if you can call him that, winds up disgraced, impoverished, alone, and bitterly

remorseful when he dies a gruesome death at a young age?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Quite the opposite. He becomes a decorated general, winds up fabulously wealthy as a result of looting and shady business deals, and has any number of devoted grand-grandchildren when he finally dies a peaceful death in his nineties. And I believe he remains utterly unrepentant to the end."

"Sounds like my kind of story." Moderately intrigued, he leaned against the shelf, opened the book to a random page and began reading. After a few pages, he looked down at Granger with an expression of mock offense. "Miss Granger! There are lewd scenes in this novel!"

"Quite a few," she agreed readily, with an inviting little smirk. "And Flashy is a bigot and a snob, as well as a terrible chauvinist towards women, but I didn't think you would find any of that off-putting."

"Oh, do you know me so well?" Draco gave her a teasing look. It was fun to play with Granger, particularly with the deck stacked so lopsidedly in his favor.

"I know your type," she retorted, suddenly with an angry edge again.

"And here I was thinking you weren't the sort of girl to engage in stereotypes, to judge a book by its cover, as it were." He allowed just the tiniest hint of hurt to flavor the reprimand, and Granger reacted predictably. Her brown eyes widened and she gave a guilty gasp.

"I'm so sorry. I don't know what got into me." She worried her lip and then apparently decided to confide in him. "I just broke up with my boyfriend last month after I caught him cheating on me, so I'm not really fit company right now."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Hermione," he drawled, rather liking the sound of her name on his lips. He ran a quick glance over her figure. Her loose peasant blouse over a camisole was far from revealing, but her breasts had felt pleasantly round and firm against his chest when he'd bumped up against her. And her long, tanned legs, highlighted by denim shorts, were first-class. All in all, Granger was extremely fit.

"Prat! That isn't what I meant."

"I call it like I see it, princess. Don't expect me to apologize for that." Granger's cheeks were red, but she seemed flattered and flustered by the appraisal, rather than offended.

Draco closed the book she had picked out for him. "Thanks for the recommendation. Are you getting that one?" he asked, nodding towards the more serious novel in her hands.

She looked down at the book and shook her head regretfully. "No, I don't think so."

"Here, let me buy it for you." Draco plucked the book from her hands. He could tell Granger wanted it, but probably didn't think she could spare the money on her student stipend.

"Consider it a personal gesture of atonement for nearly knocking you off your feet."

"I'd really prefer that you didn't." She spoke coldly. Once again, Granger's behavior had switched on a Knut. Draco could tell this was a fight he wasn't going to win.

"Alright, Hermione. What about a cup of coffee, instead?" he asked, with a charmingly boyish smile.

She hesitated, but he was certain she was going to agree. Despite a couple of awkward moments, it had overall been a good conversation, and based on her body language, Draco would have bet his Firebolt IV that the attraction he was feeling was mutual.

"I know a great little coffee shop around the corner," he coaxed. And with that, he cocked it up.

"I know the place. I used to go there a lot." Granger's voice trailed off and her eyes were overly bright. "Maybe some other time?" she offered with bright insincerity.

"Sure," he agreed pleasantly, apparently accepting the rebuff even as he cursed himself for unwittingly suggesting a place she apparently had frequented with her ginger ex. It was clear he wouldn't make any further progress with Granger tonight. Fortunately, he had a back-up plan.

"Maybe I'll see you around, Hermione." With a smile and a wave, Draco paid for his two books and left the store, aware of Granger's eyes following him out the door.

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For the second time that day, Hermione sought the shelter of her flat, and the comfort of a mug of tea, after an unsettling encounter.

Bridey and her mother were strangers who had recognized Hermione. The situation in the bookstore had been the opposite. Malcolm Foy had not seemed to know her. But she couldn't shake the feeling that she knew him.

Perhaps she was just seeking an excuse for her poor behavior, Hermione thought, feeling both guilty and embarrassed. She had ricocheted between snapping his head off and flirting with him, for God's sake! While there was no denying she still was smarting from Andy's betrayal, there was no reason to take that out on mankind in general, or one specific representative thereof who had made her spine tingle with his deliciously attractive smirk.

Or was her spine tingling for some more sinister reason? He reminded her of someone, someone not very nice. But as Malcolm had accurately pointed out, it wasn't right for her to judge him just because he sparked a recollection of some git-like boy who had bullied her years ago. Her instincts were quite at war where Malcolm was concerned. On the one hand, they were screaming that he was a ruthless, selfish bastard and best avoided. On the other hand, she knew, with a bone-deep certainty, that he *couldn't* hurt her. He was a defanged snake, at least when it came to her.

Of course, her instincts might be worth bugger all. Hermione had noticed, since her accident, that she was inclined to like and trust people with red hair, to think they represented warmth, and affection, and close family ties. It was one of the things that initially had drawn her to Andy, and look how that had turned out.

Or maybe her instincts were spot on. Deep down, she always had a fear that her relationship with Andy worked so well because it was easy, and that he would walk out on her if things ever got difficult. And when she had caught him shagging that blonde slag, there had been a sense of déjà vu underneath her hurt and rage. Maybe there had been another boy with red hair in her life before Andy, before the accident. But if so, he hadn't treated her very well.

Hermione set down her cooling mug of tea, pushed up her sleeve and, for, perhaps the thousandth time, traced the dark pink scars on the inside of her forearm. *Mudblood*. She wished she knew what it meant. Nothing good, of course, but it was a slur that was no longer familiar to her. Hermione also half-wished she could remember how it had happened. Her nightmares supplied some answers - being held down and subjected to blinding pain, while screaming denials to a woman's questions - but no context. The scar tissue had been at least a year old at the time of her accident, so there was no apparent connection between the two injuries.

She could tell this would be another nightmare night. Sleeping with Andy - in both senses - had kept the worst of the dreams away. His warm presence at her back had been a comfort, while sex usually brought blissful oblivion in its wake. Cheap red wine from Tesco or tablets of Sominex were no substitute. Unbidden, her imagination supplied an image of Malcolm moving above her, lips parted on a moan and pale fringe hanging down over half-closed silvery eyes. Hermione found herself wondering how good he might be at chasing away her nightmares, and thought he might be very adept indeed.

She snorted to herself. She was extremely unlikely to find out firsthand after behaving like a harpy and then nearly bursting into tears when he invited her for a coffee. Malcolm couldn't possibly have known that she and Andy had often gone to that coffee shop on lazy Saturday mornings. She certainly wasn't looking to rush into a new relationship, but coffee and conversation would have been a nice diversion. Instead, she had tea and a book.

Hermione reached into her trusty messenger bag to pull out the well-worn paperback novel she had packed this morning before her sojourn around London. Her fingertips instead brushed a smooth, hardcover spine. With a puzzled frown, she pulled out the brand-new copy of *Atonement* she had decided against purchasing at the bookstore. There was a receipt with today's date tucked into the front cover, with a note scrawled in ornate cursive on the back:

Hermione - If I can persuade you to reconsider coffee, I will be waiting at Bar Italia in Soho, Friday evening at 6 o'clock. Yours, M. Foy.

There was a fairly large ink mark after his initial, as though Malcolm had begun to sign himself by his first name and then decided that was too informal. She found herself smiling at the thought of someone so cocksure second-guessing himself. Hermione wondered what sleight of hand Malcolm had used to place the book into her bag, without her ever noticing. She also was impressed that he had spelt her name correctly, and speculated that he might be a Shakespeare fan. She decided to ask him about both when she saw him on Friday, and made a note of the time and place in her calendar.

If the book laying on her lap provided any lesson, it was that second chances rarely came around and should be cherished when they did, even for something so trivial as coffee with an intriguingly familiar stranger.

Chapter End Notes

The books referenced in this chapter are Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and the *Flashman Papers*, specifically *Flashman and the Dragon*, by George MacDonald Fraser.

The Coffee Date

September 5, 2003

"I don't care if it's lunchtime, I need a drink," Flint moaned, as he slid into their usual booth at the Black Cat. "Your dad was in rare form this morning, Drake."

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose with a grimace and nodded in silent agreement. His day had begun with the arrival of a hysterical Howler - more of a Whiner, really - from Astoria, begging for forgiveness and promising to be a better wife if only he would agree to let her come home.

The manipulative little bitch had arranged for delivery while he was eating breakfast with his parents, shattering the polite fiction that she was "convalescing" at the Malfoy family villa after suffering another miscarriage. Lucius had been on his back ever since, unwilling to believe that his daughter-in-law functioned as the village bicycle among Draco's circle of so-called friends. The row between father and son had spilled over into the workplace, with Flint only one of several employees to suffer the sharp edge of Lucius's tongue.

"Three Butterbeers," Nott told the bored waitress.

"And fish and chips with mushy peas," Flint chimed in.

"For the table?" she asked.

Nott shrugged and Draco gave no sign he had heard. "Yeah, why not," Flint answered for them.

As soon as she walked away, Nott slid a folder across the table to Draco. "I have the proverbial good news and bad news."

"Hit me with the bad news first, so I can reach an absolute nadir for the day," Draco requested.

"You asked me for a second opinion on your prenuptial agreement. The Greengrasses negotiated the same terms for Astoria as they did for Daphne, which means you have an iron-clad magical contract for the first five years of your marriage. Merlin himself couldn't break it. When did you and Astoria get married?"

"The fifteenth of May, 1999," Draco recited automatically.

"Anytime after 15 May 2004, you can dissolve your marriage by mutual agreement so long as there are no children born of the union, which is what Daphne and I did, or you can unilaterally obtain a divorce if you have cause."

"Oh, I have cause," Draco stated, still bitter at his wife's infidelity. "So that's the good news, Nott? If I wait several more months, I can be rid of my cheating slag of a wife?"

"No, the good news is that I found a flat that meets your specifications. It's the ground floor and first floor of a terraced house in Knightsbridge, on a quiet side street. Three bedrooms, modern kitchen and bathrooms, a garden. The building is owned by a Squib, so you can ward it, even though it's in an entirely Muggle neighborhood."

Draco hummed in approval. "Sounds promising. Did you bring photos?"

Nott tapped the folder. "Right here."

Draco gave them a quick examination, shifting the folder to make room as the waitress returned with their order. "Very nice. Is it available now?"

"Ready to move in," Theo nodded. "If you'd like, you can stop by my office later to take care of the paperwork and deposit."

"It can't be too soon," the blond wizard muttered, "especially with my father so eager to let Astoria back into the Manor." His own flat would be a refuge, as well as a place to take Granger as their relationship progressed. Merlin knew he could never take her back to Malfoy Manor; his wrist twinged even at the thought.

He turned his attention to their lunch. "Are you sure it's safe to eat here?" Draco asked with a suspicious eye towards the less-than-sparkling cutlery.

"Don't be such a ponce, Malfoy," Flint laughed at him. "The fish and chips here are fucking excellent!"

"The fish and chips are no worse than those served at the Leaky Cauldron," Nott stated judiciously. "I've seen you eat those."

"Maybe late one night when I was eighteen and drunk off my arse," Draco grumbled, prodding at the breaded piece of fish with his fork as though it might still be alive. "I have a date with Granger tonight and don't want to be puking my guts out."

"How is it going with her?" Theo asked, curious.

Draco shrugged. "She runs a bit hot and cold, but the same can be said of any woman."

Flint grinned, mockingly. "Nervous, Malfoy? Got some butterflies in your stomach?"

"Hardly," Draco said. "I'm not exactly some virginal fourteen-year-old Hufflepuff who's never been with a woman."

"So I have been told," Nott said drily. "Did you sense any recognition on her part?"

Theo's question was a good one, and Draco took a moment to formulate his answer. "She doesn't remember me, but she has a devastatingly accurate sense of what I'm like."

"And what's that?" Nott inquired.

"The nicest thing she told me was that I'm an over-entitled prat."

Flint and Nott both chuckled at that. "She was always known as the brightest witch of our age," Theo pointed out.

"But I have my fair-minded little Gryffindor halfway convinced that her subconscious memories are nothing more than unfair stereotyping on her part." Draco grinned slyly.

"Where are you taking Granger?" Nott asked, no longer laughing. The solicitor recognized an effective stratagem when he heard one.

"Just out for coffee."

"Coffee?" Flint guffawed. "You've had more than a month and you've only managed to get Granger to agree to coffee? Your fourteen-year-old Hufflepuff would have at least snogged her by now!"

"I had to spend a couple of weeks with Theo learning how to act like a Muggle, and then Granger left the country," Draco defended himself. "This date is quick work on my part." He decided to omit the parts where Granger turned him down at the bookstore, and where he had to resort to a mild compulsion charm on his note - more of an enticement, really - to guarantee she would show up on Friday.

"It's not even a real date!" Flint insisted. "It's 'just coffee.'" He mimed air quotes as he spoke.

"Is this some Muggle rule I'm not aware of, that coffee doesn't count? What do you plonkers do when you take your Mudbloods out?" Draco demanded.

"Katie is sporty, so when we can find someone to mind the sprog, I'll take her down to the pub or out to a football match."

"Oh, that's fucking romantic!" Draco scoffed.

"Hey, arsehole, it's what the lady likes! In fact, I think I'll be using the Galleons I win off you to buy us season tickets for Arsenal."

Nott was still frowning at Draco's casual slur. "We often just get takeaway and a movie to watch at her place or mine, because *Cho* is very busy with her clinical training." The solicitor emphasized his girlfriend's name. "When she has a break from her rotations, I take her to the symphony."

"You detest the symphony, Nott," Draco noted. "Astoria told me that Daphne always complained you wouldn't take her."

Theo looked pointedly at his wrist. "You will find that it behooves you to do whatever is necessary to keep Granger content."

Flint chuckled darkly. "You'll see, Malfoy. You'll see."

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When Hermione arrived at the bustling Soho coffee shop a few minutes before six o'clock, Malcolm was already there, having managed to snag one of the desirable outside tables. He stood up with a smile and pulled out a chair for her.

"How was your day?" he asked.

Truthfully, it had been bloody awful, kicking off at half-past three in the morning with a nightmare about a giant, animated chess set that left her shivering and unable to get back to sleep. The daylight hours then had been filled with irritating first years, requiring undue effort on her part as a teaching assistant due to their own inability to grasp basic precepts of chemistry, as well as an exasperating roadblock in her own research.

But she wasn't about to burden Malcolm with that.

Before she could respond to his pleasantry with one of her own, the waiter arrived with a tall latte and steaming cup of espresso. Hermione took a grateful sip of the former. "You must be a magician, Malcolm."

He had taken a too-quick drink of his espresso and choked slightly. "I beg your pardon?"

Hermione waved an expressive hand. "You found a table, here, on a Friday night. You managed to guess my coffee beverage of choice. And, somehow, you bought a book and placed it in my bag without me ever realizing."

Malcolm smirked at her, a look that sent a rather nice tingle down her spine. "I'm a man of many talents, Hermione. So, how was your day?" he repeated.

She gave him a slow, considering smile. "I think," she said, "that it is about to get much better."

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Nearly three hours later, they were still laughing and talking over coffee. A panini had come and gone, but the remnants of a slice of chocolate cake remained on the table. The night wasn't yet over, but Draco was willing to rate it as a smashing first date. Flint could bugger off.

He was rather enjoying getting to know this older, Muggle version of the Granger he had gone to school with, particularly now that she had been divested of her ginger and scarred appendages.

Some things hadn't changed: she still was impressively intelligent, passionate about her causes, and quick to retort. But Draco found he was no longer threatened by her intelligence, now that they were not direct competitors. She could earn top marks at Muggle uni and gain admission to a top doctoral program (she mentioned her pending applications to "Oxbridge" and "the other Cambridge," whatever that meant) and his father wouldn't know or care. Similarly, her new causes were focused on the Muggle world. Unlike Granger's campaign for house-elf rights or her membership in the Order of the Phoenix, they posed no threat to his

way of life and he could dismiss them as harmless diversions. And her retorts now had an underlying flirtatiousness that had been utterly absent at Hogwarts.

The conversation had flowed easily, despite - or perhaps because - they were each concealing fundamental truths. He introduced Hermione to his Muggle persona, who wasn't all that different from the real Draco. He fully agreed with Theo's philosophy that the best lies were those closest to the truth.

So Malcolm Foy was the only child of a demanding executive father and a doting socialite mother, hailing from Wiltshire. His father, he told Granger, was active in Conservative political circles, while his mother's charitable activities focused on orphans and the local hospital. Like Draco, Malcolm had attended an exclusive boarding school, though the school he and Nott had selected for the cover story was all boys, so Granger would not even entertain the possibility she had gone to school with him. And like Draco, Malcolm now worked for the family business, though he had first attended Muggle uni and studied economics.

He was surprised to learn that Granger, from what she remembered of her Muggle background, also had enjoyed a privileged upbringing. Her parents had been successful dentists in Hampshire and her recollections of horseback riding lessons and dance class were not that different from a pure-blooded girl. Granger told him that she, too had attended a boarding school, but did not volunteer the name. Draco knew that if pressed, she would have made up a name - she no longer recalled Hogwarts. She also neglected to mention her accident or what had happened to her parents, though he noticed she always referred to them in the past tense.

"Would you like another?" he asked.

"If I have a third coffee, I won't sleep tonight!" Granger laughingly protested.

"You say it like that's a bad thing," he purred suggestively.

"No, not always." Her words were innocent enough, but there was a promise in those golden-brown eyes. "But if I stay up tonight, it will be purely for reasons of insomnia, and it would be for the second night in a row."

"Alright," he conceded, signaling for their check. For the first time, Draco noticed faint dark shadows under her eyes, skillfully hidden by Muggle make-up. Still, one could not grow up as Narcissa Malfoy's son without gaining an appreciation for the subtle ways in which women could enhance their appearance. He could tell Granger had made a bit of an effort for him, wearing a shirt in a flattering shade of blue-green and some gloss on her lips, and he appreciated it. She was more natural and less polished than Astoria or Pansy, both of whom were his usual type of witch, but there was no denying Granger was attractive.

"I'll walk you home," Draco offered, counting out the appropriate amount of Muggle notes and coins for their coffees and snacks and firmly waving away Granger's attempt to contribute.

It was a pleasant autumn night, with enough of a nip in the air to justify chivalrously offering Granger his jacket. She declined, which was a relief, since Draco was wearing a only short-sleeved T-shirt underneath and did not wish to mar the evening by trying to explain the Mark on his forearm.

He was curious to visit her neighborhood and see her building. He had been to Granger's new flat before, to set the wards, but Mipsy had brought him there and he had the Apparated back to the Manor. She lived on a quiet street of narrow and slightly shabby Victorian townhouses, most long since subdivided into flats.

"Oh, what is he doing here?" Granger's voice was suddenly low and angry, reminiscent of the way she used to address him.

Looking up the block, Draco saw a shock of red hair. Granger's ex-boyfriend was sitting on the stoop in front of what was evidently her building, waiting for her. The blighter had also had at least a pint too many, from the slightly slack expression on his face and sway in his step as he stood up to confront them.

"Hermione," he called out, desperately. "Please, will you give me another chance? Or just talk to me, let me explain!"

"You already had your chance to explain, Andy, and you wasted it. There is nothing further to be said. Your actions speak for themselves." Granger spoke with all the icy gravity of a judge delivering a lengthy sentence.

"That bint didn't mean anything to me. I don't even know her name!" The ginger cried out.

"Just making it worse, mate," Draco muttered, hiding his inner glee.

"Honestly, Andrew! That makes your conduct even more despicable." This was vintage Granger, hands on her hips and spitting with anger. Draco had been on the receiving end of that temper often enough at Hogwarts to feel a tinge of pity for the hapless ginger Muggle.

"I swear to you, Hermione, it won't happen again. Please, please don't cut me out of your life! I miss you so much. Could we start over, even just as friends?"

The Muggle was so obviously sincere that Granger was beginning to thaw, a tiny bit. Draco decided to intervene before the ginger tosser was permitted to regain a toehold in her life.

"I wouldn't believe him, if I were you," he advised Granger, stepping a bit closer and placing a lightly possessive hand on her back. "You told me you caught him with his pants down, literally. A snake may shed its skin but a leopard can't change its spots."

She nodded slowly, and spoke almost to herself. "Lions make a leopard tame, yea, but not change his spots."

Draco held her eyes. "Precisely."

The Muggle looked confused and angry. Draco wondered if he might be a distant, Squib connection of the Weasley family. He had seen a similar expression on the Weasel King's face

often enough when he attempted to trade insults with Draco.

"It's *Richard III*, imbecile," he snapped at the gormless Muggle, giving him the patented Malfoy sneer. "One of the many instances of Shakespeare elegantly expressing a universal truth."

Something flickered in Granger's eyes at the expression on his face. Draco hurriedly rearranged his features into a more neutral expression. "May I escort you upstairs?" he asked her, with all of the impeccable courtesy his mother had drilled into him.

"Hermione, who is that?" the Muggle whined. "Are you dating him?"

Granger gave the redhead one last scathing look but didn't bother to respond. Instead, she placed her hand on Draco's offered arm and swept into the building with a queen-like dignity. Draco shot a triumphant look at the Muggle over the top of her curly head and deliberately shut the door in his face.

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Once inside, Hermione stormed up the staircase.

"Hey, slow down," Malcolm called, having difficulty keeping up as she ascended despite his longer legs. "I don't want you to trip and hurt yourself."

At that, she whirled on the landing to face him. "Can you believe the nerve of that - that - "

"Unrepentant asshole?" Malcolm helpfully supplied.

She smiled despite her anger. "I was going to call him a hypocritical git, but I like your phrasing better."

He put a comforting arm around shoulders as they continued up the stairs. "You deserve better than that, Hermione."

Briefly, she rested her head on his arm. "Thanks for saying that, Malcolm."

There was an awkward moment when they reached the third floor and the door to her flat. As she inserted her key in the lock, she gave an apologetic smile. "I was going to ask you in for tea, but now . . . "

He shrugged, with a charming smile. "I understand. Hopefully some other time."

"Yes, definitely." And Hermione indeed hoped there would be another time. She had thoroughly enjoyed herself, until Andy had ruined the evening.

Malcolm placed a hand on the doorframe and leaned towards her. "I know you don't approve of staying up all night on a first date, but what are your views on kissing?"

She tipped up her face in clear invitation. "I don't recall having formulated an opinion on the matter."

As Malcolm moved closer, her impression was one of warmth. Warm breath ghosting across her cheek, a warm hand curled around the nape of her neck, warm lips slanted over her own, a warm body pressing her against the doorframe. When the pressure of his lips and body against hers grew more insistent and she felt the tip of his tongue against the seam of her mouth, she put a hand on his shoulder to nudge him away.

"It's only the first date," she reminded him softly, their lips millimeters apart.

Reluctantly, he nodded and released her, first bestowing a quick peck on the tip of her nose. "Until next time, then."

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Draco expected to be grabbed by the arm as soon as he exited the building that housed Granger's flat. What was unexpected was the surge of anger he felt upon realizing this unworthy Muggle had fully enjoyed the pleasures of her flesh, while he had been sent away with a mere closed-lip kiss.

"What did you do to her?" the red-haired wanker demanded.

"Shagged her up against the wall and left her begging for more," Draco told him, sneer firmly back in place.

Andy let go of his arm and swung wildly at his face. Draco blocked it with a wordless *Protego*. Despite casting it silently and with his wand concealed in his pocket, the shield charm was strong enough to knock the drunken Muggle onto the ground.

From his prone position, the ginger looked up at Draco, properly terrified. "You - you didn't touch me!"

"No, I didn't lay a finger on you," the blond wizard coldly agreed. With his height and the streetlight at his back, he knew he was an intimidating sight.

"But somehow you shoved me down. I felt it, like an invisible hand," the Muggle babbled.

"An invisible hand? Sounds to me like you're mental. Have you been hearing voices in your head, as well?" Draco taunted.

Andy's eyes widened as he scrambled to his feet, prudently putting some distance between himself and Draco. The redhead pointed at him with a shaking finger. "I recognize your voice!"

"Do you really? Are you going to say it was my voice you heard, telling you to fuck some blonde slapper in front of the best thing to ever happen to you?" Draco drawled, thoroughly enjoying himself. It was just like Weasel-baiting, with zero risk of being hexed.

"It *was* you!" the Muggle gasped.

"Was it me?" Draco queried with mock innocence. "Do you really think anyone would believe that?"

He moved closer, so that he could hiss the next words in the ginger's face without risk of being overhead.

"Think about this, you Muggle bastard. I want you out of Hermione's life, and I *will* make that happen, one way or another. If I can make you fuck another woman in front of your girlfriend, I can just as easily make you step in front of train, or make you jump off a bridge."

The blood drained from the other man's face, throwing his freckles into sharp relief.

"And if I can do it to you, I can do it to her as well," Draco finished, his voice implacable. The fiery, sharp pain in his entire arm gave lie to that claim even as he spoke, but Granger's old boyfriend didn't know that.

"Please, don't hurt her," he begged Draco.

"Get out of her life, and I won't hurt her," Draco offered. "Keep coming around, and I make no promises."

The Muggle looked he was going to cry. "Anything to keep Hermione safe," he agreed, swallowing hard.

"Don't fret. It's not forever," Draco consoled, calling after his retreating figure. "You can have her back in a year or two, not that much worse for wear."

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Three floors up, Hermione was watching the two men, crouched down by the windowsill in her darkened living room.

Following Andy's unbalanced attempt to shove Malcolm, there was no further physical contact, but she could tell - even without being able to make out their words through the glass of the closed window - that it was a tense and hostile encounter.

Andy's fists were clenched and his face was red. Malcolm was even paler than usual, with a vicious expression marring his features. After a few minutes, Malcolm said something that caused Andy to walk away, shoulders hunched in defeat. Malcolm watched him go and then briefly looked up towards her flat, his expression blank and blond hair gleaming under the streetlight, before disappearing into the darkness.

That night, she dreamt of being tortured by a woman with wild, dark hair while Malcolm looked on, grey eyes cold and a sneer on his face.

Hermione's Birthday Wishes

September 19, 2003

Hermione curled up on the couch, box of tissues, chocolates and wine glass close at hand, with Monty Python on the telly. It was her twenty-fourth birthday and she had decided to throw herself a pity party.

She was spending her birthday alone by choice. Malcolm had been an attentive presence in her life over the past couple weeks, and she had no doubt he would have been delighted to treat her to a lavish birthday celebration. However, she hadn't told him today was her birthday.

Two birthday cards and their enclosures lay on the coffee table. She picked up the first and re-read a warm, loving note from her godparents, expressing pride in her accomplishments and eagerness to see her again. They had sent an extremely generous Selfridges gift certificate, but it was the second enclosure that brought tears to her eyes.

It was a photo of a much younger Hermione, smiling happily at the camera between two boys, with their friendly arms slung over her shoulders. From her bushy hair and overbite, Hermione deduced it had been taken when she was thirteen or so, still in that awkward stage of early adolescence. She recognized the background - the picture had been taken at King's Cross station. Monica wrote that she had found it wedged underneath a drawer when cleaning out an old bookcase recently shipped from storage in England, and thought that Hermione might like the picture of her old school chums.

She could remember very little about the dark haired, green-eyed boy to her left in the photo, but she knew Harry had been like the brother she never had, and they had protected and looked out for each other from the time they were eleven. Hermione was aware that he had died, too young, though she could not recall attending his funeral or where he was buried. That hurt, because she wanted desperately to visit his grave, both to pay her respects and see if it would spark any further memories.

Hermione drew a complete and utter blank looking the second boy, other than a faint feeling of resentment. That, however, might be attributed to his carrot-red hair, similar to Andy's. Whatever the reason, Hermione decided she did not want to see the redhead's face, so she folded the picture before placing it a frame, leaving only Harry and herself visible.

The second birthday card chased away her melancholy and replaced it with anger. Andy had sent her a birthday card, enclosing what he apparently thought was a heartfelt plea for forgiveness - and caution.

She wondered if he had written it out in draft and then recopied it, because his sloppy penmanship was more legible than usual. The first page consisted of the same tripe she had heard from him before: he was sorry, he missed her, his behavior was inexcusable, it would never happen again. On the second page, though, Andy revealed himself to be a dog in the manger:

Hermione, as much as I want to see you (especially on your birthday - do you remember what a great time we had last year?), I won't seek you out again.

You need to know why. It's not because I don't care about you, but because I do. That blond fellow you're seeing - he's trouble. There's something very, very off about him. He threatened to hurt you if I kept trying to see you, and I'm afraid he meant it. Please be careful.

If you ever need my help, or just want to talk, you know where to find me. I'll believe anything you have to say, even if you think it's barmy. I love you.

- Andy

Upon a second reading, Hermione decided that tearing the letter into little pieces before throwing it in the rubbish wasn't good enough. She was going to burn it until nothing was left but ashes.

Putting her thought into action, she reached over to the side table and snatched a book of matches from the drawer. She marched over to the flat's tiny fireplace, absolutely furious at Andy for what he had written about Malcolm. Hermione crumpled the paper and flung it down into the grate. Crouching down, she pulled a match from the box. It ignited before she could strike it against the box, flaring up fiercely.

She straightened and watched Andy's libelous letter burn, blowing lightly on her scorched fingertips. *But truth is a defense to libel*, her subconscious supplied. Hermione wanted to scream at the unhelpful legalism and her own ambivalent mind. She had always valued logic over intuition. Normally, she could reconcile the two, but when it came to Malcolm, her mind was experiencing irreconcilable differences. Andy was wrong in claiming Malcolm was a danger to her, but there was an indefinable darkness about the blond man that drew her like a moth to the flame.

Hermione knew that with bone-deep certainty Malcolm could not harm her, and her instincts her had been borne out by his behavior. He had been in her flat several times now. While he had not always been a perfect gentleman - at her express invitation - he had always respected her boundaries. Hermione had no fear that Malcolm would hurt her when they were alone. If she had any concerns in that respect, it was that she might hurt *him*. Hermione had found herself fantasizing about pulling his silky hair, raking her nails down his back, even slapping him across the face.

She pulled another match from the box and held it up experimentally. "Happy birthday to me," she said, and then added the odd word that had flashed into her mind minutes before. "*Incendio*."

Nothing happened.

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In a neighborhood of rundown but still imposing townhouses only a few miles away from Hermione's flat, the Order of the Phoenix was meeting at 12 Grimmauld Place. Ginny Potter-Thomas had inherited the place when Harry died but immediately moved out, adamant that

the old House of Black was no place to raise a child. Kreacher remained on, as a desultory and resentful caretaker. Grimmauld Place was now effectively abandoned once again, used only every couple of months for Order meetings.

Minerva McGonagall stepped through the fireplace into the grimy, old-fashioned kitchen, followed by the rest of the Hogwarts contingent. Looking around the room, she saw that all of the Weasleys and their spouses were present, except for Charlie Weasley, still living in Romania, and Molly Weasley, who was at the Burrow minding the ever-growing brood of Weasley grandchildren.

Of the Order's non-Weasley members - and she reflected sadly there were only a handful of the old guard who had survived two wizarding Wars - all were accounted for except Shacklebolt, who was usually too busy to attend. In her own mind, Minerva did not afford him the respect of a title. Kingsley's willingness to sacrifice more than forty Muggle-born witches and wizards for "peace in our time" still grated on her, no matter how effective that bargain had been.

"May we begin?" Arthur Weasley requested, lightly tapping a spoon against his tankard to gain the company's attention. In Kingsley's absence, he led the meetings as his deputy. Around the table, conversation quieted and heads turned in his direction.

"I thought we could start off with a status report on the Muggleborn exiles," Arthur suggested, with his usual mild manner. Following a few nods of agreement, he gestured to Hestia Jones to begin.

Within months of the first "repatriations," the Order had voted to keep an eye on the Obliviated witches and wizards now living in the Muggle world, to ensure the Vows were holding and none were being abused by Death Eaters. It had been a challenge to find the Muggleborns at first, with the care the Death Eaters had taken care to ward their charges' residences. Even with surreptitious access to the Ministry's classified records, courtesy of Kingsley, it had taken the Order almost a year to locate all of them.

Once found, Muggle-raised Dean Thomas had come up with an ingenious way to keep tabs on the Muggleborns, through a simple tracking spell placed on a driving license or, for the youngest, a student identification card. As Dean pointed out, Muggles almost always carried these cards with them outside the home, making it easy to engineer a chance meeting every couple months or so. And while a paranoid Death Eater might check a person for a tracking spell, a pure-blooded wizard would never think to check a Muggle-issued identification document.

Minerva listened with half an ear to the updates on the older Muggleborns, all of whom had preceded her tenure at Hogwarts. She paid closer attention when any of her former students were mentioned, and was heartened by Filius's report that Cho Chang was doing extremely well in her chosen profession as a Muggle Healer. He had posed as a patient with a possible concussion from falling off a ladder and was squeakily enthused about his former Ravenclaw's bedside manner.

She paid closest attention to the reports on her ex-Gryffindors, like the one that was being given now.

"Ermione was in France with her parents on holiday, and zey seemed very happy to be together. Ze French Ministry has no restrictions on speaking with Muggleborns, so I spoke with her a bit about ze sightseeing." Fleur Weasley tossed her shimmering blonde hair as she spoke, every man in the room hanging off her words. "I zink, though, that she has suffered ze heartbreak, or at least ze break-up. Her boyfriend was not zere and 'Ermione seemed sad." Fleur gave a Gallic shrug. "Bah, men!"

"Good! I could tell he was a tosser," Ron Weasley declared in a loud voice, oblivious to the hurt look on his wife Lavender's face.

Minerva shook her head. Some things never changed. She spoke up, adding her own intelligence about Hermione. "The new Head Girl spoke with her on the first of September, at King's Cross station."

Around the room, heads popped up and eyes widened at the implications. "Blimey," Ron breathed, "does 'Mione remember?"

"More than she should, apparently," Minerva said, unable to keep a smile out of her voice. "Miss Finnigan told me that Hermione did not seem to remember magic *per se*, but has some recognition, at least, of people in the wizarding world."

"That's very interesting, because Katie didn't remember me at all," Angelina Johnson Weasley offered.

Unlike the other Order members, who rotated their surveillance responsibilities to ensure they did not become too familiar to the Muggleborns, Angelina always reported on Katie Bell. Even before the Order had decided to take action, Angelina had defied the Ministry's ban on any contact with the repatriated witches and wizards and sought out her best friend in the Muggle world.

"Katie also doesn't recognize any names," Angelina continued, toying thoughtfully with one braided strand of her hair. "I've tried dropping names of our old Quidditch teammates and Gryffindor housemates, but it's like she'd never heard of them."

"Yeah, well, it was Hermione who Obliviated her. She's always been a damn sight better at magic than the inbred Ferret," Ron sneered.

"Hear, hear!" Hagrid bellowed.

"How's Katie doing otherwise?" Lee Jordan asked.

"She's doing well," Angelina began, before she was interrupted by the Floo.

Minister Shacklebolt stepped through the greenish flames. "Please, carry on," he instructed, with a politician's practiced smile.

"Katie's expecting another baby, due in January," Angelina announced, to whoops and hollers from the Order. "And her little girl is displaying accidental magic just about every time she and little Freddy are together at the playground. It's a challenge covering up for them!"

"So that Umbridge cow can take 'er tripe about Muggleborns stealing magic and shove it up her arse!" Mundungus Fletcher hollered.

"Thank you, Dung, for that lovely imagery," Bill Weasley offered with a wry grin, his arm around his beautiful wife.

"Oi!" George exclaimed, when the noise died down. "Is that Muggle bloke she's with going to put a ring on her finger now that he's gotten her up the duff a second time?"

Angelina gave her husband a sharp look in rebuke. "I've told you, George, things aren't as conservative in the Muggle world. Katie's in a committed partnership that works for her. If you'd like to talk about rings, she has a honking great ruby that's twice the size of any stone you've ever bought me!"

George looked both unconvinced and indignant, but Kingsley's deep voice cut off any further marital squabbling.

"Speaking of Undersecretary Umbridge," he held up his hand to silence the chorus of catcalls, "she informs me that she received a request from the younger Theodore Nott, seeking official Ministry permission to reverse the Obliviation performed on Cho Chang."

"Nothing would make me happier," Professor Flitwick offered instantly.

Minister Shacklebolt shook his head in regret. "I'm afraid that Dolores denied the application out of hand, Filius."

"And you won't overrule her?" Bill Weasley asked with a frown.

"I prefer to permit my undersecretaries to operate with some autonomy, particularly in light of the broad governing coalition," Kingsley stated.

Having dealt with the Hogwarts Board of Governors for several years, Minerva had no trouble discerning the political realities behind the Minister's statement. His hands were tied so long as Umbridge retained the support of the former Death Eaters, but Kingsley would give her enough rope to hang herself and would act if that support ever wavered.

"However, the Undersecretary indicated she might reconsider her decision if Mr. Nott could provide some proof that Cho has wizarding blood in her family tree," Kingsley continued.

"What would possibly satisfy *her*?" Minerva asked in a voice dripping with contempt.

"A reliable source tells me that Undersecretary Umbridge remains convinced that magical children must have at least one magical parent," Kingsley stated. "Therefore, she is preparing a resolution for the Wizengamot's consideration that would revisit the blood status of any exiled Muggleborns who have magical children."

"Is she sincere, or is this just an attempt to get access to the Hogwarts scroll?" Minerva asked with suspicion.

"So according to the Toad, Katie's daughter could be an admission ticket back to the wizarding world?" Lee Jordan asked, disturbed.

"In a nutshell, yes," the Minister confirmed. "Her proposal has some support among the former Death Eaters, which makes me suspect some of them may have children with Muggle women."

"What, those they raped but didn't murder?" George Weasley snarled.

"Zat eez disgusting!" Fleur Weasley declared, to general agreement.

Shacklebolt deliberately made his way over to the chair next to Minerva as the speculation over Theo Nott's request, Umbridge's motives, and secret Death Eater children subsided and the Muggleborn status reports resumed.

"Do you have a moment, Headmistress?" he asked in an undertone. "Angelina's news and recent events at the Ministry jogged my mind about something I wished to ask you."

She gave him a curt nod.

"There is one aspect of Hermione Granger's Vow with the younger Malfoy that has always concerned me," Kingsley continued gravely.

"Just the one, Minister?" Minerva tartly retorted. "I should think the entire wretched situation should be of concern to you."

"Please, let's not spend our time revisiting that well-trodden ground," Shacklebolt pleaded. "Who came up with the language of her Vow?"

"Miss Granger, Professor Binns and myself crafted the language used for all of the Unbreakable Vows," she answered crisply.

"My apologies, Professor McGonagall, for being unclear," Kingsley said. "I was referring to the unique portion of Miss Granger's Vow, where Mr. Malfoy undertook to extend the standard set of promises to her 'blood relatives in the first degree.' Who selected that phrase?"

"I believe Hermione proposed the language and the Malfoys accepted it," she answered, puzzled at the urgency in the Minister's voice. "She was concerned about using the term 'parents,' because she wouldn't remember them as such, but the Malfoys balked at 'blood relatives' without limitation because they did not want Draco bound to protect some hypothetical fourth cousin Hermione might not even know about."

"Ah, that makes sense," Shacklebolt spoke with some relief.

Minerva's curiosity got the better of her. "Why were you concerned about the wording?"

"Because, Minerva, blood relatives in the first degree include children, and I have yet to meet a Malfoy who acts for any reason other than self-interest," Kingsley pronounced. "But you have reassured me that Miss Granger merely drove a careful bargain."

The Headmistress nodded, wanting to believe that reassurance herself.

"Are there any other items of business to discuss?" the Minister raised his voice to ask the assembled Order members. He received a chorus of "nos" and shaken heads in response.

Ginny Potter heaved herself to her feet, her belly immense even though her twins were not due until late October.

"I propose that we conclude with a toast, Minister," she declared in a clear voice, lifting her mug of hot chocolate high. "Today is Hermione's birthday, so I say we raise our glasses to her, a brilliant witch who was like a sister to me and who was always there when Harry needed her."

Across the room, Minerva could see Ronald Weasley's ears redden, though she could not tell whether it was the result of having forgotten Hermione's birthday or his sister's reminder that he had abandoned Harry on their Horcrux hunt.

"Hermione may be gone from our world, for now, but she is not forgotten," Ginny concluded.

Dull clinks and clanks of glass and pewter sounded throughout the room as the Order of the Phoenix echoed Ginny's toast. "Gone, but not forgotten."

Mother Knows Best

September 21, 2003

"Draco, dearest, are you *humming*?" Narcissa's cultured accent cut through the quiet of the Manor's dining room.

Draco grinned at his mother from the sideboard, where he was busy helping himself to eggs and bacon. "Indeed I am, Mum."

The last couple of weeks had been rather brilliant. He hadn't seen Granger every day - she was too busy with her research studies and too skittish about falling into a rebound relationship - but he had seen her several times and enjoyed every one of their excursions. Yesterday afternoon they had gone to the British Museum, followed by dinner at a Japanese noodle house, and capped off with a heated snog on Granger's sofa.

He wasn't yet sleeping with her, but things were progressing nicely. Draco hadn't even been thrown off by the photo of Potter she had unearthed from somewhere and placed in a frame on her bookshelf. Truth be told, he had found it rather titillating to remove Granger's blouse and fondle her breasts under Scarhead's unseeing gaze.

"What is that tune? It sounds *foreign* to me." Narcissa did not scrunch her nose or brow, due to fear of wrinkles, but her tone conveyed distaste.

"It is, in a manner of speaking," Draco said cheerfully. "Rather catchy, don't you think?" He had heard the Muggle pop song last night at dinner and it had been in his head ever since. With Lucius having a bit of a lie-in on this Sunday morning, and Astoria never rising before noon, Draco could afford to be a bit cheeky about his sojourns into the Muggle world.

Narcissa sniffed her disapproval in response. "Since it is an otherwise dreary day, I suppose I must assume that you and Astoria have mended your fences?"

"No, Mother, you should assume nothing of the sort," Draco told her in a much cooler tone. To date, Lucius had not let up on his efforts to force a reconciliation with Astoria, and Draco did not want his formidable mother to join forces with his father.

"Good."

"Pardon me?" Draco wasn't certain he had heard that correctly.

"It was a simple, straightforward, one-syllable answer. Did I fail to enunciate?" Narcissa asked.

"Of course not, Mother." Except that "simple" and "straightforward" were not words one typically associated with Narcissa Malfoy.

"Mipsy," she called.

The little house-elf appeared with a "pop" and bowed low. "Mipsy is here, Mistress."

"I want you to take over serving in the dining room, Mipsy. You may instruct the other elves to clean up the kitchen, and tell them to make sure they scrub the floor very thoroughly."

"Yes, Mistress!" Mipsy popped away, eager to carry out Narcissa's orders.

"Now that we may speak in confidence, I shall tell you that I have always thought Astoria to be a silly little trollop, just conniving enough to entrap you into marriage. She lacks the intelligence, discretion, and loyalty I had hoped you would find in your wife."

Draco was stunned by his mother's harsh but accurate condemnation of his wife. He had always thought that Narcissa and Astoria got along swimmingly.

"I never knew you felt that way about her, Mother." Draco narrowed his eyes. He had not believed Astoria when she claimed Narcissa had given her a green light for her infidelity, but it now seemed plausible that his mother might have done so, purely to undermine his wife.

"Did you encourage Astoria to cheat on me?"

"She told you that I encouraged her to be unfaithful?" Narcissa asked, coldly and quietly furious.

"Astoria said that you did not care about your putative grandchild's bloodlines, so long as he or she is raised as a Malfoy," Draco repeated what his wife had told him.

"Foolish girl," Narcissa hissed. "I was conveying a warning that she is not indispensable, not granting her a license to stray. I swear to Salazar, the Sorting Hat should have placed her in Hufflepuff for sheer stupidity, notwithstanding her lineage!"

She reached out and seized Draco's hand, her fingers cool against his own. "I swear to you, my son, I would never encourage anyone to betray you. Nor would I condone any Malfoy wife willingly breaking her marital vows."

He nodded, convinced by her unusually emotional response and feeling cold at the one qualification she had added. Draco tried never to think about what might have happened to his beautiful, brittle mother when she forced to play hostess to a house full of Death Eaters, or what might have driven her to defy the Dark Lord. Instead, he curled his fingers around hers and offered what little comfort he could. "I believe you, Mother."

"Now that we have that out of way," Narcissa disengaged her hand in a brisk motion, clearly eager to change the subject, "did you enjoy a pleasant evening with Miss Granger last night?"

Through sheer effort of will, Draco neither spit out nor choked upon the tea he had just sipped.

"Have you been using Legilemency on me?" he demanded, deciding that offense would be the best defense.

"Don't be so accusatory, darling. I haven't used Legilemency on you since you were sixteen," Narcissa responded.

Draco knew his mother's decision to refrain from reading his mind was a matter of practicality rather than respect for his privacy. At sixteen, Professor Snape had taught him Occlumency. "Good to know my mental shields are holding," he said lightly.

"They provide no defense against a mother's intuition, Draco. So, how is Miss Granger enjoying the Muggle world?"

"I have no idea, Mother." Draco was not yet willing to admit to his proper and refined mother that he was aspiring to a sexual relationship with a Mudblood.

"Really?" Narcissa raised a skeptical eyebrow and began ticking off the evidence on her fingertips. "You have been gone from the Manor most evenings for the past few weeks, you are humming a Muggle tune, and when you came in last night, you had a love bite showing above your collar. For the second time in a week, I might add."

Draco refrained from touching the now-Healed spot on his neck, silently cursing his mother's powers of observation and Granger's propensity for marking him.

His mother continued, relentlessly. "If you had been with a witch at some disreputable establishment in Knockturn Alley, you would have Healed the mark before returning home, and you would never lower yourself to consort with a Muggle. That leaves a Muggleborn witch as the only logical option."

Unable to refute her logic, Draco prudently stayed silent.

"So, what did you do to celebrate Miss Granger's birthday this weekend?" Narcissa asked, her blue eyes bright. "These little occasions are so important when you are wooing a woman, so I trust you took full advantage of the opportunity."

"Err, I . . . that is - "

"You forgot," Narcissa snapped.

"She didn't tell me it was her birthday!" Draco protested. "How in Merlin's name was I supposed to know?"

"You went to school with the girl for seven years," Narcissa tut-tutted. "Did all of her birthday parties at the Gryffindor table somehow escape your notice?"

"Six years," Draco muttered. "She was gone for seventh year, and I was rather occupied the prior year. And the stupid Gryffindors were always celebrating one thing or another."

Narcissa shook her head in clear disappointment. "Draco, if you are involved - or even aspire to be involved - with a woman, it should be elementary that you discover her birthday, as well as her favorite color, her favorite flower, and her favorite gemstone. You know the answers to these questions for Astoria, do you not?"

Effortlessly, he rattled them off: "October 8, black, stargazer lilies, and diamonds."

"And for Miss Granger?"

Sullenly, he gave it his best guess. "Her birthday falls between the fifteenth and twentieth of September, since I've clearly missed it; she likes red roses; red is her favorite color; and rubies are her favorite gem."

Narcissa snapped her fingers impatiently. "Mipsy! Answer my questions. Correctly, if you please."

The house-elf reappeared and bowed low, addressing her responses to the floor. "Miss's birthday is on the nineteenth of September. Young Master is correct as to Miss's favorite flower, but," Mipsy gulped and forced the contradiction of Draco past her clenched teeth, "periwinkle is Miss's favorite color, and she is liking sapphires best."

"That will be all, Mipsy," Narcissa dismissed the elf. "And thank you," she added as an afterthought.

On the heels of the elf's departure, Narcissa gave him a stern look of reprimand.

"Miss Granger agreed to enter into a Vow with you only due to my direct intercession. I had to sit down to tea and negotiate with her as though she were an equal. I had to *compromise* with her. Do not muck this up, Draco."

Draco decided to provoke his mother, as a possible method to wring the truth out of her. "Are you truly suggesting that I court Granger like a proper witch? She's a Mudblood, good for only one thing."

Narcissa gave him a withering look. "She isn't just good for entertainment at a Dark revel. Muggleborn or not, she may be able to break Voldemort's curse."

"What do you mean, Mother?" Draco inquired, not hopeful of receiving a response. So far this morning, their exchange of confidences had been heavily lopsided in her favor. "Theo's father told him the Dark Lord died before he could share the counter-curse with anyone."

Narcissa sneered. "I should be very much surprised if a counter-curse ever existed. It is my belief," she continued grimly, "that the Dark Lord wanted to eradicate the old pure-blood families."

"But we were his most loyal supporters." Draco made the token protest.

"Tom Riddle," she spat the name, "was nothing more than a half-Muggle bastard. And he was corrosively envious of those of us with pure blood. Think about what he did, Draco. He murdered those from the oldest pureblood families, even my own cousin, with no more thought than if they were Muggles. Not to mention the suicide mission he sent you on at the age of sixteen."

Draco nodded as she continued. Unlike his father, who remained blinded by ideology, his mother was much more clear-eyed when it came to Voldemort and his agenda.

"I have no doubt that half-blooded snake would have derived a profound enjoyment from forcing his loyal supporters to choose between sully their bloodlines and becoming half-

bloods like him, or dying out altogether," Narcissa concluded. "Fortunately, this family is not without political influence, despite some recent missteps in judgement."

Based on his mother's cat-like smile, Draco made an educated guess. "You were responsible for 'Potter's Law,' weren't you? The one that declares that any child of a wizard and witch is a pure-blood?"

Narcissa's grin grew even more feline. "My soft spot for the Potter boy is well-known. Of course I would support a law affording him the status of a pure-blood wizard, even if his mother *was* a filthy Muggleborn. For purely altruistic reasons, of course."

"Of course," Draco echoed, impressed at his mother's foresight. She had taken this step years ago, when the consequences of the Dark Lord's curse had barely begun to manifest.

"Do what you must to get the Granger girl to accept you in her bed, Draco. She holds the future of our family in her unworthy hands."

"I have it under control, Mother."

"Do you, my son? The fact that she chose not to tell you about her birthday does not bode well for your suit," Narcissa pointed out. "If the Mudblood rejects you, you'll be forced procreate with a Muggle and pray to Merlin that your half-blood children are not Squibs."

"Granger won't reject me," Draco said with confidence.

Narcissa sipped thoughtfully at her tea. "She is a very stubborn girl."

"It will be fine, Mother," he insisted. After a pause, he went on in a low voice, feeling once again like a little boy confessing a shameful fear of the dark. "Though . . . what if I can't get her pregnant? I haven't exactly the best track record with Astoria."

For the second time in a morning, possibly a Malfoy record, his mother took his hand in her own. "Draco, despite the Dark Lord's curse, you have been able to impregnate your wife, quickly and more than once. Indeed, when you first married, I dared to hope little Scorpius had evaded the curse."

Both of them were quiet for a moment, thinking of the tiniest tomb in the Malfoy crypt. His mother went on, with the barest hint of hoarseness to her voice. "Due to Miss Granger's blood status, your child with her will fall outside the Dark Lord's curse. During the War, she assured me she did not use any Dark spells. There is no reason why she cannot have a viable pregnancy and give birth to a healthy heir."

Narcissa wasn't finished. "I married your father at eighteen, right out of Hogwarts. It took us six years of trying before we had you, and you were my first and only pregnancy."

"I appreciate that, Mother." And Draco truly did, knowing that his father also had struggled with the basic biological task of siring the next generation.

His mother's calculating look was back. "Miss Granger just turned twenty-four, did she not?"

"Yes, she was the oldest in our year."

Narcissa smiled. "She is now the same age I was when I had you. Perhaps you should go to Diagon Alley this afternoon and buy a belated birthday present before you see her again this evening."

"I'll do that. Maybe there's something at Flourish and Blotts she'd like that falls outside the Statute of Secrecy."

"A book? I think not," his mother asserted with delicate contempt. "You should buy her jewelry. Nothing expresses affection so well as goblin-wrought platinum. Goldnuk's has an excellent selection of charmed pendants and bracelets."

It was a command gracefully disguised as a suggestion, and Draco acquiesced. "Thanks, Mum. I'll check it out."

As he rose to go, Narcissa called him back. "Oh, and Draco?"

"Yes, Mother?"

"I very much look forward to having a child here at the Manor to spoil."

The Scarlet Letter

Chapter Notes

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

October 7, 2003

Draco and Theo Nott were concluding a meeting at the solicitor's small office just off Diagon Alley. "I can handle creation of the partnership for you easily enough, but I'll need to put you in touch with a Muggle specialist on the intellectual property issues," Theo explained.

"Fine," Draco agreed. "Make the appointment under my Muggle name. It's for Granger, anyways. She's got this brilliant idea about adapting the Blood-Replenishing Potion for Muggle use that could practically mint money, but she's still all about serving the greater good."

Before he could expand on that thought, someone rapped on the door.

"Come in," Theo called with a faint frown. Draco knew he was not expecting any clients; instead, they were planning on going together to the Black Cat and meeting Marcus Flint there for lunch.

Instead, Flint bounced - there was no other word for it - into Nott's office and shoved a few files aside to perch on the solicitor's desk. He beamed at the other two men. "It's been the best fucking day of my life," he announced.

"I thought you already had the best day of your life, on Saint Scarhead's Day," Draco said, unamused.

He had been in a sour mood for the past couple weeks, and it was Granger's fault. If he hadn't Obliviated her himself, he would have thought that the Gryffindor princess remembered exactly who he was and was being a cock tease for the express purpose of driving him around the twist. Going home at night to Astoria's whiny mouth was no real consolation, either. Flint and Nott, tossers that they were, had been taunting rather than sympathetic.

"I did, wanker, but *my* life just keeps improving," Flint told him, enthusiasm undampened. "Here, check this out."

Marcus reached into his jacket pocket and handed over a photograph for their inspection. "We got this from Katie's obstetrician this morning."

As Nott glanced at the photo, Flint turned to Draco, who had raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar word. "An obstetrician is the kind of Muggle Healer you see when you're preggers," Flint explained.

"What is it?" Draco asked in genuine confusion, turning the grainy, black and white photo Nott had relinquished this way and that. It was clearly Muggle in nature, since the image

wasn't moving, but he had no idea what it depicted.

"It's a sonogram picture," Theo informed him with a superior air. "It's a type of Muggle technology that uses sound waves so their Healers can view a fetus *in utero*."

"How do you know all this Muggle medical shite?" Draco asked. "You're a wizard and a solicitor, for Salazar's sake!"

Theo shrugged. "Cho had a rotation on the maternity ward earlier this year. I listen." He turned to Flint. "So I take it your antenatal appointment went well?"

"Fuck, yeah!" Marcus exclaimed, gesturing towards the picture. "That's my son. My fucking heir!"

"How can you tell it's a boy?" Draco inquired, as he turned the picture right side up. "I can't even tell that it's human."

"Look!" Flint jabbed his finger at an arrow on the image. "That's pointing straight at his pecker!"

Draco squinted in an exaggerated manner. "Yeah, the sprog definitely takes after you. I can barely see anything between his legs. Still, my felicitations."

"Arsehole," Flint said, good-humoredly. "You've been in the locker room with me. You should know I'm hung like an Abraxan stallion."

"I know no such thing," Draco protested with a smirk. "So far as I'm concerned, your genitalia is like a thestral's - completely invisible to anyone who hasn't suffered a horrific experience."

Flint shook his head, regretfully. "I always suspected you were blind as a bat, Malfoy. We should have stolen Potter's specs for you. Maybe then you might have caught the Snitch a bit more often, eh?"

"Are you two quite done?" Nott asked, reverting to solicitor mode. "Congratulations on the prospective birth of your son, Marcus."

"Thanks, mate!" Flint cheerfully acknowledged.

"Draco Lucius Malfoy," he asked, with a sudden formality, "will you stand as my son's godfather?"

"Of course. I should be honored." Draco instantly responded. He was honored. Godparents in the wizarding world played an important role: Flint was effectively asking him to be his son's social and professional sponsor, as well as the boy's guardian should anything happen to his parents.

He gave a sidelong look to Nott, hoping he would not feel slighted. The solicitor caught the look and returned a sardonic grin. "You aren't that special, Malfoy, and my tender feelings

aren't even bruised. I'm Isabelle's godfather, and it's not like there are any other wizards who are in on Flint's secret he could ask."

"Puh-leeze, Nott. I would ask Drake to be my sprog's godfather even if everyone in the world knew. I need to make sure my kid gets the best presents growing up!" Flint chuckled.

"There's a Muggle ceremony, so I'll brief you on what to expect," Theo offered.

Draco nodded his thanks. "Who is going to be the godmother, Flint?"

"Dunno," his former captain shrugged. "One of Katie's friends. Some Muggle bird named Angie."

Flint looked at his watch. "Are you tossers okay with pushing back lunch today? I need to go and buy something sparkly for Katie. You know, the mother of my heir." He grinned cockily, unable to keep himself from gloating.

"I'll come with you," Draco volunteered. "I've witnessed your lack of taste when it comes to broomsticks, and I would hate to see how that spills over into jewelry."

Flint jokingly punched his arm. "Katie has no complaints."

"Well, she is a Gryffindor and sleeping with you, so that's not exactly a recommendation."

He dodged as Flint attempted to punch his arm again. "Nott, are you coming with us?"

"Why not?" the third man shrugged. "Who else is going to keep you two in check?"

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The discreet goblin jewelers and sales assistants at Goldnuk's did not betray, by so much as a blink, that Draco had been to their establishment twice in the past couple weeks, first to commission and then to pick up an exquisite piece of jewelry. The only hint of recognition was that Goldnuk himself, flanked by two minions, came over to the three wizards.

"May we help you?" inquired the goblin proprietor.

"I'm looking for rubies," Flint announced. "Either earrings or a necklace, to match a ring."

After a low-voiced conversation in Gobbledegook, Goldnuk deputized the goblin on his left. "Bogrud will assist you. He is familiar with the ring."

Bogrud bowed politely. "I remember it well. A six-carat, blood-red stone from Moguk, set in gold filigree with a Muggle proverb inscribed on the band. 'Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price *is* far above rubies.'"

Draco winced at the mental image of the gaudy Gryffindorish bauble.

"That's the one," Flint confirmed, "Katie's push present after she had Isabelle."

"This way, if you will." The goblin escorted them towards a case further in the shop, while Nott wandered off to browse on his own.

"What about this?" Flint asked, pointing to a three-stranded monstrosity that combined rubies with emeralds and diamonds.

Draco shook his head. "I never bought into that House unity bollocks. Besides, would she have any occasion to wear it?"

Reluctantly, Flint put it back in the case. His taste really was laughably bad, Draco thought.

"How about this one?" Marcus pointed to a large pear-shaped pendant covered in shiny diamond chips, with tiny rubies spelling out the letter "K."

Draco blinked. "It's blinding me," he complained. "That is not a gift to buy for a woman you love."

A cynical smile then crossed his face. "Can you create this with any letter and gemstone?" he asked the goblin.

At Bogrud's affirmative, Draco's smile became positively evil. "I'd like the letter 'A' done in garnets, please. Is it possible to have it by tomorrow for my wife's birthday?"

"Certainly, sir. We can have it ready before you leave this afternoon, unless you require special enchantments for this piece."

The jewelry he had bought for Granger was imbued with two complex charms, one suggested by his mother to engender trust, and the other suggested by Mipsy to relieve anxiety. The compassionate little elf had spent an afternoon in the Manor's vast attics, searching for a stained and discarded Persian rug so that Granger's blood could be forged into the platinum to target the enchantments to her. Astoria would not require such an effort.

"No, just the standard anti-theft charm, if you please."

The goblin bowed slightly. "Of course, sir. I should advise you that rubies would have a much greater clarity and depth, for not an exorbitantly greater cost."

"No, no," Draco shook his head. "Given that charming Muggle saying you quoted earlier, it has to be garnets."

Bogrud, with an impassive expression, beckoned another goblin over and conveyed Draco's order before returning his attention to Flint. "Would you like to see some earrings?"

Happily, the earrings were much less gaudy, and Draco was able to steer Flint in the direction of a pair of square-cut rubies, set in a simple gold backing.

As Bogrud boxed and wrapped the earrings, Theo came over, looking tense and followed by his own goblin jeweler bearing a velvet tray of rings.

"I'd like to get your opinion on something, Malfoy," Theo requested, looking pale.

"Of course, Nott."

"Which of these do you think your mother would like best?"

Looking down at the three diamond solitaire rings sparkling against the black velvet, Draco raised his brows. "I hate to crush your hopes, Theo, but my mother is irrevocably attached to my father, even if he is a right bastard."

"Don't be stupid, Malfoy. I'm not looking to propose to your mother. It's just that," Nott dropped his voice, "Cho reminds me of Narcissa in some ways, and I think they would share the same taste in engagement rings."

Theo had provided valuable assistance in approaching Granger, so Draco bit back the automatic comment that his mother was *nothing* like a Mudblood. Instead, he considered the request objectively. All three of the rings were coldly and austere beautiful, with superbly faceted diamonds set in platinum, and he could see his mother wearing any of them.

"This one," he said after a moment's thought, pointing to the one in the middle. It was not the largest diamond - though it was by no means small - but the bluish color and clarity were breathtaking. "My mother would like this the best."

"Thank you," Nott said sincerely. "I'll take it," he told the goblin.

"You really are serious about Chang, aren't you?" Flint asked.

"I intend to do the right thing by her this time," Theo affirmed, his voice almost grim.

He started laughing, though, when the goblin returned with Astoria's pendant for Draco to inspect. "You're giving your wife a scarlet 'A' to wear around her neck? That's bloody perfect!"

"What's so funny?" Flint asked, puzzled. "Is there something wrong with the necklace? I actually liked that one."

"It's a Muggle literature thing. Probably Draco and I, and now you, are the only pure-bloods who will get it, but he's publicly declaring his wife to be an adulteress."

Flint smirked. "That's vintage Malfoy, it is. But I thought you and Astoria were getting along alright?"

Draco smirked. "She's very, very sorry about cheating and has repeatedly apologized on her knees. But I still don't plan to forgive her."

"So you have your wife sucking you off because your wannabe mistress won't put out? That's fucked up!" Flint commented, with more than a hint of admiration. "Still, you're a lucky bastard for all that. I value my bits too much to let Brunhilda's teeth near them. And Katie's all about reciprocity unless I give her a lust potion, and I usually can't be arsed."

"Wait, you can give a Mudblood a lust potion? Theo told me it wasn't possible, because of the Vow!" Draco shot Nott an accusing look.

"Nah, he just told you it would be cheating to try and win the bet that way," Marcus said. "I wouldn't try any strong shite like Amorentia, but the Weasley WonderWitch potions always get Katie frisky."

"No, it isn't possible," Nott said at the same time. "The Vow won't permit you to do anything coercive."

"Yeah, it is possible," Flint argued. "I've done it before."

"Sounds like it can't hurt to try," Draco said, leaving unvoiced his suspicion that the effectiveness of the WonderWitch potion and restrictiveness of the Vow might vary with the underlying level of sexual attraction. If that was the case, he didn't foresee any problems with Granger - except for one.

"Are you really expecting me to walk into Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and buy a pink potion designed for teenage girls who need a date to the Yule Ball?"

If Flint said yes, Draco would know he was taking the piss. And his employee's next sales trip would be to Vladivostok.

Marcus snickered. "Nah, Malfoy. As amusing as that would be, I'll just get one of the loafers hanging around in Knockturn Alley to buy it for you on our way to lunch. You're too much of a miserable bastard to work for when you're not getting any."

(x) (x) (x)

When Hermione returned to her flat with a bagful of groceries for that night's dinner, it was nearly two in the afternoon. With the time difference, it was past eleven at night in Australia, but her godmother tended to stay up late. Resolutely, Hermione picked up the phone and punched in fourteen digits. After innumerable lists of pros and cons and exhaustive analysis, she needed impartial advice, and it was worth the expense of an international call to get it.

"Hullo?" Monica answered on the second ring.

"Hi, Monica. It's me."

"Is everything alright, Hermione?" her godmother asked, understandable concern in her voice.

"Everything is good. Great, even. It's just that . . ." Hermione trailed off, seeking the right words so that she didn't sound either mental or like a lovesick girl.

"Yes?" Monica prompted, now encouraging rather than concerned.

"I've met someone," Hermione blurted out.

"Oh?" Even over the long-distance phone connection, it was clear her godmother's interest was piqued. "Tell me about him. How did you meet?"

Hermione smiled at the godmother's correct assumption that the someone was male. "We met at a bookstore."

"Sounds promising."

"Mmmm, yes," Hermione agreed. She quickly summarized Malcolm's points, good and bad, for her godmother.

"Honestly, Hermione, he sounds perfect for you," Monica said. "Intelligent, ambitious, cultured. Even if he can be an arrogant arse, as you said, you need someone who won't be intimidated by you. How does this Malcolm feel about your goals? Is he supportive?"

"He is," Hermione affirmed. "It's not his field, of course, but he makes a real effort to understand what I'm doing. He even offered to put me in touch with a solicitor friend of his, because he thinks my research has commercial promise and wants to make sure my rights are protected."

"Good," Monica said approvingly. "I'm glad he's looking out for you. You deserve no less. So, let's talk about the important things. Is he good-looking?"

"Very," Hermione told her incorrigible godmother. "Tall, blond, well-built, gorgeous grey eyes that change with his mood."

"He sounds like an absolute dish. So, what's the problem?"

"I don't know what to do with him!" Hermione cried.

"Well, you just turned twenty-four and you've had a live-in boyfriend, so I'm sure you understand the basic mechanics."

Hermione could just imagine the grin on her earthy, practical godmother's face.

"I do have an elementary grasp, Monica, thanks ever so much," she told her godmother dryly. "It's just that I'm not certain I trust Malcolm enough to apply that knowledge to him."

"I see," Monica said slowly. "Is this a generalized mistrust, or has he given you any specific reason to doubt him?"

Thoughtfully, Hermione rotated the charm bracelet on her wrist in a motion she found to be soothing. It had only one charm at present, a miniature book with an embossed "H" on the front and a sapphire backing. The charm was so perfectly detailed that she could discern the individual pages.

A week after her birthday, Malcolm had arrived at her flat on Friday night with a bouquet of red roses, a sheepish smile, and a small, wrapped package containing the bracelet. He claimed a little bird had told him he missed her birthday, and infuriatingly refused to offer any information beyond that.

She almost had slept with him that night, but had held back because he had been so quietly confident after putting the bracelet around her wrist that she would. It was nothing so crude

as a *quid pro quo*, but there was something about Malcolm's self-assurance that had rubbed her the wrong way. And Hermione was nothing if not stubborn and self-disciplined.

"He didn't tell me the truth about my birthday gift," she told Monica. "He claimed it was a mere trinket, but the bracelet is solid platinum and the charm is platinum overlaid on a sapphire the size of my thumbnail. A jeweler appraised it at more than three thousand pounds!"

"That's not exactly a bad lie to be told," Monica said slowly. "What made you have the bracelet appraised?"

"I don't know," Hermione replied, frustrated. "Instinct? Woman's intuition? Some other nonsense?"

"It's not nonsense," Monica reassured her, "but it's possible you're a bit too suspicious at the moment because of what happened with Andy. Is there anything else about Malcolm that gives you pause?"

"Nothing specific," Hermione admitted, "except that he seems too perfect."

"That's not something you logically should hold against him," her godmother sensibly pointed out.

"I know, I know. Logically, I should grab him with both hands and hold on tight. And some of my instincts are on the same page, while others are telling me to walk away."

"I suppose it's your baser instincts that want to grab him?" Monica slyly asked.

Beyond an affirmative sort of humming, Hermione didn't answer.

"Have you tried our coin flip test?" her godmother inquired, more seriously.

"No, I haven't yet," Hermione said. "Perhaps I should."

The coin flip test was something she joked was taught in dental school, because both her parents and godparents endorsed its use. The test was simple enough: designate two potential course of actions as heads and tails. The value was in finding out one's immediate gut reaction once the coin flipped.

"Perhaps you should," agreed Monica. "It'll help you sort things out,"

Her godmother added a reassurance. "There's no wrong answer, Hermione. If you decide to grab onto Malcolm - literally - you're a responsible adult and you'll make sure to protect yourself. And if you walk away, Wendell met yet another nice young dentist at a conference he'd be happy to set you up with!"

(x) (x) (x)

It was an odd little foreign coin, bronze and about the size and weight of a pence piece. It depicted a bearded man on one side and a horned deer and the words "Unum Knut" on the

other. Hermione thought it might be Turkish.

She wasn't quite certain how it had wound up wedged under a cushion on her couch, though she could recall any number of occasions where Malcolm had been in an active horizontal position on that piece of furniture, such that a coin could have easily fallen unnoticed from his pocket. It might have fallen from her pocket, too, but somehow Hermione was certain it was his.

The Knut would do well enough for her purposes. "Heads I dump him, tails I shag him," she told herself.

She flipped the coin into the air, caught it in her palm, and slapped it onto the back of her other hand.

Hermione peaked at the result and noted her immediate, strong reaction to the way the coin had landed.

"Well, isn't that interesting," she murmured. "I suppose I'll just have to convey that to Malcolm tonight."

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Granger buzzed him into her building and was back to cooking dinner by the time he reached the third floor. Draco frowned slightly at the door to her flat, which she'd left ajar for him, and made a mental note to add security wards to the downstairs entrance.

He sniffed the air, savoring the aroma that had wafted out into the hallway. "Your shepherd's pie smells delicious, Hermione," he told her, depositing a small pastry box and wine bottle on the table before leaning comfortably against the doorway to her little kitchen. "Is there anything I can help with?"

She looked up from the counter where she was chopping vegetables. "You can cook?" Granger asked with a skeptical smile.

"Probably not," he admitted, because that's what house-elves were for, "but I can chop and slice with the best of them." Draco presumed it couldn't be all that different from potions.

"No need. I'm almost done with the salad and the pie's in the oven. Perhaps you could pour the wine?"

"Sure," he agreed easily. "It needs to decant first, though."

Granger took a closer look at the bottle of red and rolled her eyes. "Only you, Malcolm, would bring a vintage Bordeaux that's older than either of us to serve with shepherd's pie."

"Hey, it pairs well with lamb," he laughingly defended himself.

"The good glasses are in the cupboard over the frig," she directed. He reached over, deliberately pressing his body against hers, and bestowed a kiss on her neck on his way

through the kitchen. She was wearing a soft jumper in hunter green. He loved that color on her, not just because it brought out the color of her eyes.

Draco easily plucked two glasses from the tall cabinet - Granger would need a step-ladder to get up there - and admired the fine crystal. "These are nice."

"They were a wedding gift to my parents," she stated matter-of-factly, handing him a damp paper towel. "Here, they're probably dusty."

He wiped them with care, noting the monogrammed initials and a date some thirty years before. "What happened to your parents?" Draco asked, curious as to the story her Obliviated mind would have constructed. "You've told me about Monica and Wendell, your godparents, but you never mention your birth parents."

Granger kept her back to him, her attention in the cutting board, as she answered in an even tone. "They died in a car crash a few weeks before I turned eighteen."

"I'm sorry," he said, stroking his hands down the soft wool of her jumper in a comforting way.

"It's alright," she told him softly, still not looking at him. "It's a painful memory but it's dulled with time."

It was an interesting choice of words, and made Draco wonder if she was planning to confide in him about her accident and memory loss. He had always assumed Granger would be rubbish at keeping secrets, like a typical Gryffindor, but she guarded her own quite well.

Hermione turned around to face him, now perfectly composed. "Have a seat," she invited. "Dinner's ready."

Draco had come straight from the office, and she smirked upon noticing his business attire. "You look like such a City boy, Malcolm. Why don't you take off your jacket and make yourself comfortable?"

He took her at her word and slung his suit jacket over the back of the chair, loosening his tie while he was at it. Granger passed him a plate with a generous helping of shepherd's pie and he reciprocated by handing her a glass of wine.

"Is this your secret family recipe?" he asked after the first couple bites, which he found to be disturbingly reminiscent of the excellent shepherd's pie served at Hogwarts. He was fairly certain he knew the answer.

"No, I wangled it out of one of the cooks at my old boarding school."

Of course she had. Draco was amazed at how much information her mind had retained, reorganized and skewed to a Muggle perspective.

"How was your day?" she asked, in what Draco had come to recognize as an evasive technique. Granger would change the subject whenever her past came up. It served his

purposes to indulge her, so he shared an edited account of his shopping excursion with Flint and Nott that had her laughing.

"Your friend Mark sounds like quite the character!" Granger said, still amused.

"Oh, you don't know the half of it, pet," Draco drawled.

"Would you care to meet him and a few of my other friends? We're planning on heading out to a club on Halloween with a few other old school chums, if you'd like to come. I can pick you up here," he offered.

"Of course!" she accepted, apparently pleased at the prospect. He had met a couple of her friends as they'd been out and about, but this would be the first time he introduced her to anyone in his life.

"Brilliant! They've all been eager to meet you," Draco said with a straight face. Win or lose, he had now just committed himself to resolving his bet with Nott and Flint in a very public setting.

"Would you like dessert?" Granger asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," Draco smiled in anticipation. He had bought the chocolate raspberry tarte at a fancy pastry shop, and had Mipsy distill the violently pink WonderWitch potion into a glaze to brush on the fruit.

"Really, my asking was just a formality. I've never known you to turn down anything sweet," Granger told him, rising from the table and beginning to clear. Draco stood as well and began helping her, neatly stacking the dishes in the kitchen sink. Of all the things in the Muggle world he'd had to accustom himself to, chores were the worst.

"I thought maybe we could have dessert in the living room?" Granger asked, with unusual tentativeness. "And, Malcolm, we need to talk."

Draco tensed. Those words from any woman, pureblood, Mudblood, or Muggle, did not bode well.

"Sure, Hermione," he agreed with an easiness he was far from feeling. He settled himself on the sofa, dessert plate in hand, as Granger sat on the other end with one leg tucked underneath her.

As they tucked into dessert, Draco mentally reviewed possible topics for her intended talk, barely registering the rich, chocolate taste. The best possibility was that Granger planned to tell him about her accident and memory loss, in which case he would merely need to feign surprise and show appropriate sympathy. The worst possibility was that she had decided they should just be friends or some similar bollocks.

He was eating around the fruit, due to his concern that it would be unwise to mix a lust potion, no matter how mild, with a Vow that would exact consequences if he attempted to force his way beyond whatever boundaries Granger chose to set. Of course she noticed.

"The raspberries are so delicious! You really should try one!" Granger coaxed. Her eyes looked unusually golden, while her pupils were dilated in the dimmer light of the room.

Before he could demur, she had crawled across the couch with a fluid, feline grace and straddled his lap. "Here, take it," she purred, plucking a raspberry off his plate and holding it to his lips.

Obediently, Draco took the offered fruit. The effects of the WonderWitch potion were instantaneous. Already, he had been semi-aroused from his cock's Pavlovian association of Granger's couch with fun times, but now he was fully erect and felt a desperate need to shag her into sofa cushions.

Granger gave him a heated kiss. "Good boy," she murmured against his lips, before grinding herself against him and summarily stripping off her jumper.

Draco's final coherent thought of the evening, as he stared at creamy breasts spilling out of emerald green satin trimmed in black lace, was to give fervent thanks to Merlin that by some miracle, there was such a thing in this world as a competent Weasley.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: the inscription on Katie's ring is from Proverbs, in the King James version of the Bible. Astoria's necklace is an allusion to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

The Tijnana Tattoo

October 8, 2003

Granger was still fast asleep, despite the morning sunlight brightening her bedroom. Over the years, the deviant side of Draco's imagination had supplied any number of scenarios in which he had he fucked her, but he had never pictured waking up next to her, so vulnerable and trusting, with her lightly freckled nose and rumpled curls making her look like an innocent little girl.

He smirked to himself. Last night had proven Granger was no such thing. The sex had been feral. As rough as they'd gotten, though, he hadn't felt so much as a tickle on his wrist from the Vow. Draco thought it was because he had merely been acceding to Granger's demands. She was a bossy, vocal little thing, in bed and out.

She was still naked under the sheet, lying on her stomach with her face buried in the pillow. Draco propped himself up on one elbow for a better view, idly counting the few freckles sprinkled on her top of her shoulders, interspersed among the bruises left by his fingers. Granger had marked him, too, and he had no intention of Healing the scratches she'd left along his back, arms and torso, not when they were reminders of such an excellent night.

Draco wondered how much of that excellence was due to the Weasley WonderWitch potion and how much was due to the volatile chemistry he and Granger shared. His Galleons were heavily on the latter. George Weasley would be locked up in Azkaban if his WonderWitch products routinely caused underage girls to act like rabid bitches in heat. And the dead sexy bra and knickers Draco had torn off Granger's body were strong evidence that she'd had seduction in mind even before being dosed with the pink potion. Draco mentally wrote off the couple of Galleons he'd spent on the Weasley potion as an unnecessary expenditure.

Of course, further experimentation would be needed to ascertain if Granger was just as eager and responsive without the benefit of the potion. Draco thought she would be. His cock was eager to prove that hypothesis *now*. His morning erection was more persistent than usual, due to the lingering smell of sex in the room and Granger's proximity.

He reached out a hand and lightly stroked from the top of her head down to the curve of her buttocks. There was no response, not even a sleepy grumble or change to her deep, even breathing. He reversed the motion, with the same lack of result, and grinned ruefully. There would be no waking her for a romp between the sheets this morning. It probably for the best. He was due in the office for an early meeting and his father would not accept "shagging Hermione Granger" as a valid excuse for being late.

With some reluctance, Draco left Granger's warm bed and efficiently collected his clothes - including, most critically, his suit jacket with his wand ensconced in an interior pocket - from where they'd been scattered around Granger's flat and made his way to the bathroom.

It was a tiny room, so small that it had only a shower stall but no bath. Despite the older fixtures and a cracked tile here and there, Granger kept it scrupulously clean. He conducted a

quick reconnaissance, snooping in her medicine cabinet with wand in hand. When he found the packets of pills Theo had described, his Vow provided no impediment to a simple Switching Spell. After all, sugar pills were harmless.

As he ducked his head to avail himself of the shower, Draco reminded himself to get on with furnishing the flat Nott had found for him in Knightsbridge. It had a lovely marble ensuite bath off the master bedroom with a shower large enough for shagging and a soaking tub big enough to share.

After a quick shower and employing a few charms to shave, clean and press his suit, and change the color of his shirt and tie, Draco was ready for the day. He ducked back into the bedroom, where Granger was still deeply asleep, to leave a note on the nightstand inviting her to lunch. His presence was required at Astoria's birthday dinner this evening, but he would find time this afternoon to spend with Hermione.

Giving into a momentary temptation, he kissed her bare, bruised shoulder before pulling the corner of the duvet up higher, making sure she was covered and warm as she slept.

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Mundungus Fletcher groaned and pulled his hat lower over his eyes. A few pints with Aberforth at the Hog's Head had turned into a few too many, and he had woken up in the goat pen. Again.

He consulted his tarnished pocket watch and groaned a second time, more loudly. At the last Order meeting, he had been assigned to check in on Hermione Granger and advised that the best time to catch the busy girl was as she left her flat in the morning. For at least the tenth time, he was already too late.

Except when Dung cast the Point Me spell directed to Hermione's Muggle driving license, his wand spun aimlessly around in his palm, indicating that she was still at home, concealed by a Death Eater's wards. It seemed the lass was having a bit of a lie-in this morning.

Dung smiled and thought that this just might be his lucky day. It was chilly and overcast in Hogsmeade, but he knew the forecast in London was for sun and unseasonable warmth. It would be pleasant to lounge in the little park across from the Granger girl's building, watching pretty birds stroll by and cadging spare change from open-handed students, until she made her appearance.

Decision made, Dung Apparated to a discreet alleyway and took up his position on a park bench with a perfect view of the entrance to her building. Had he been a mere fifteen minutes earlier, he would have been treated to the sight of Draco Malfoy leaving, whistling a jaunty Weird Sisters song and wearing a very contented smile along with his bespoke Muggle suit.

Instead, Mundungus spent nearly three uneventful but mildly profitable hours waiting for the Granger girl to emerge from her flat. He was on the verge of leaving to find some grub for his growling stomach when she finally left the building, wearing sunglasses and a light jacket with a silk scarf that couldn't quite hide a livid bite mark on her neck. Even from across the street, he could tell that she had the satisfied look of a Kneazle that had gotten into the cream

and then topped it off with some caviar. Dung raised his eyebrows and wondered if the lucky bloke was still recovering upstairs in her bedroom.

"Scuse me, miss," he intercepted Hermione on the sidewalk, "but can you spare a few pence for an old War veteran?"

She stopped short and Dung mentally kicked himself. It had been more than two years, but he still hadn't forgotten her interrogation on his Muggle military service record and subsequent tongue-lashing when she found his answers unconvincing.

Hermione lifted her sunglasses and gave him a searching look, taking in his cracked boots, shabby cloak, and battered fedora. An unexpected smile curved her lips as she reached into her bag. "I suppose every army has its rogues as well as its heroes."

She dropped several coins into his palm. "Don't spent it all at the same pub, soldier."

Mundungus waited until she had disappeared down the street before counting his largess. "Morgana's saggy tits!" he swore. In the midst of the Muggle pence and pound pieces, a bronze Knut stood out.

Dutifully, Dung took out a battered notebook and recorded the details of his encounter with the curly-haired witch. Between that and two Death Eater punks asking him yesterday to buy a Weasley lust potion, most likely so they could go bugger each other, he would have quite a report to offer at the next meeting of the Order.

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Malcolm was waiting for her outside the quaint little bistro. His lingering kiss, his warm hand between her shoulder blades, and the polite way he drew back her chair dispelled some of Hermione's irrational morning-after fear that his charming behavior had been nothing more than a ruse to get her into bed and shag her until she barely knew her own name.

From the smug prat's smirk as she gingerly seated herself, Malcolm was not suffering from any false modesty about his prowess in her bed, or on her couch, or in the tiny hallway connecting her living room and bedroom. Hermione could feel her cheeks heating up at as he looked at her.

"How was your morning?" he asked, innocuously enough. "Did you get much done at the lab?"

"I slept in and came straight here," she confessed.

Malcolm's smirk reappeared. "Words cannot express how flattered I am to have diverted Hermione Granger, swot extraordinaire, from her studies."

Hermione smiled weakly. That wasn't all he had diverted her from, but *that* awkward conversation would have to wait until there wasn't a waiter hovering at her elbow.

"I'll have the potato leek soup, please," she requested.

Malcolm looked at her over the top of his menu but made no comment. However, when the waiter turned to him, he took the liberty of ordering more for her.

"I'll have the steak frites, rare. She'll have the same, but medium-rare. And a carafe of your house red."

She began to protest as soon as the waiter was out of earshot, but he forestalled her.

"Speaking for myself, I'm ravenous. I have to imagine you feel the same, especially if you skipped breakfast."

"I do," she admitted, "but I only have five pounds in my wallet and - "

"You thought I was such a cheap bastard that I wouldn't buy you lunch?" Malcolm asked, insulted.

"No, of course not! It's just that - "

"You knew that I *would* buy you lunch but your stubborn pride makes you reluctant to accept?"

"Something like that," she muttered.

"Hermione, look at me," he said, leaning across the table. "I invited you to lunch, so it is only proper etiquette that I should pay."

Hermione nodded. That was reasoning she could accept.

But Malcolm wasn't finished. "It is also my pleasure to buy you lunch, or really anything else your heart desires. I'm not doing it with the expectation of getting anything in return and I'm certainly not doing it as payment for services rendered."

She looked at him, unconvinced.

"Look," he sighed, "the way that I was raised, buying expensive presents is *the* way to show affection. In case you haven't figured it out, I like you - quite a bit - and it makes me very happy to spoil you. So please stop balking every time I try to do something nice for my girlfriend."

Hermione was disarmed by Malcolm's unusual candor about his childhood and description of her as his girlfriend. She had not been seeing anyone else, but they had never discussed their relationship status.

"I promise to try, but I was raised with the idea that a girl should pay her own way. And that's how it's been with my boyfriends in the past."

"What a sorry lot of impoverished wankers you must have dated, princess. I'll try to make it up to you."

"And I'll try to let you - within reason," she stressed in the face of his rather triumphant smile at her concession.

Hermione fidgeted in her seat. Their ongoing skirmishes over who paid for what was trivial to her horrified realization this morning when brushing her teeth. "There's something else we need to discuss."

Malcolm looked at her with a mix of amusement and exasperation. "What has you worried now, Hermione?" he asked.

"Last night, we should have used protection, but we didn't," she told him, brown eyes serious.

His grey eyes were unreadable. "Aren't you on birth control pills or something like that? Are you telling me I might have gotten you pregnant?"

Despite his even tone and impassive expression, she had the odd thought that he was secretly delighted rather than outraged at the prospect. "I *am* on the Pill, but it doesn't protect against any STI," she explained. "We both should have gotten tested before having sex, or at least used condoms."

Malcolm looked at her with blank incomprehension.

Hermione huffed a frustrated sigh at his not-unexpected reaction. Her boyfriend could be rather snobbish and narrow-minded in his thinking.

"I know a lot of people think that sexually transmitted diseases are limited to people who are promiscuous or 'dirty,' but that's just nonsense," she told him. "Even if you've only slept with one person in a committed relationship, you've still effectively slept with every person they've ever slept with. And if you've been cheated on, well, then . . ."

For just a moment, he looked murderous. Then his expression smoothed over. "I get what you're saying," Malcolm said agreeably. "You don't have to twist my arm. How do we get tested?"

Hermione blinked in surprise. She had thought he would be more resistant. "It's a simple blood draw - just a pinprick really. We can go to the student health center after lunch, if you'd like."

"Fine," he assented. "I don't think we have anything to worry about, but it's important to you, so let's get tested."

"It *is* important," she asserted. "The entire premise of my research is aimed at solving the shortage of blood products due to the large number of donors who are screened out due to a STI. I know the risks, and I've always tried to be so careful."

Indeed, after Monica's reminder about the importance of protecting herself, Hermione had gone out and purchased a box of condoms before Malcolm arrived for dinner. And then they had completely slipped out of her mind.

"I just don't know what got into me last night!" she fretted.

From the look on Malcolm's face, he was thinking of one thing that had gotten into her last night, repeatedly, but the lecherous prat prudently held his tongue and turned his attention to

his lunch instead.

(x) (x) (x)

It was chilly inside the student health center and the smell of Muggle antiseptic made Draco's nose itch.

He noticed Granger was shivering. He draped an arm over her shoulders and tugged her closer across the vinyl seats in the waiting area, to share in the warmth of his body. She rested her head against his shoulder and he was taken aback at how utterly comfortable it felt.

"Better?" he asked in a low voice.

"Much," she affirmed. "I just hate anyplace that reminds me of a hospital. And I'm worried that Andy might have infected me with something nasty and now I might have passed it along to you."

Draco realized his brave little Gryffindor had been shivering from fear rather than cold and hugged her more tightly. He had noticed she wasn't wearing the bracelet he had given her, probably because she was going into the lab, and it made a real difference in her level of anxiety.

"It'll be fine," he reassured her. "Just a little pinprick, like you said, and then you won't have to worry anymore once you get the results." And Draco would offer whatever bribes were necessary to get those results in an expeditious manner. He didn't want her to worry unduly and, of course, shagging with a johnnie on his prick would do nothing to advance his agenda.

A man holding a clipboard called their names. "Granger and Foy? This way, please." He led them to a small, curtained-off cubicle containing a countertop and cabinets holding Muggle medical equipment and two chairs.

"I'll go first," Granger volunteered, sitting down in the larger of the two chairs, pushing up her sleeve, and placing her left arm - the one his aunt had left unscarred - on the attached tray. Without comment, the Muggle Healer tied an elastic band around her upper arm. Draco averted his gaze when the man slid a needle into the vein at the crook of her elbow.

"Are you alright, Hermione?" he asked, more to distract himself than her. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her blood running through the plastic tubing into a tiny glass flask. It was just as scarlet red as the time he had seen her bleeding on the floor of his family's drawing room.

"I'm fine, Malcolm," she answered in a steady voice, more concerned for him. "Would you like to sit down?"

The Muggle was giving him a contemptuous look, so Draco realized he must look even paler than usual. He shook his head with a feigned casualness. "You're almost done, pet. I'd just be switching seats with you."

Mercifully, that was the case. The Muggle swiftly removed the needle, not causing Granger any obvious discomfort, and applied a bandage over the tiny puncture wound.

"Your turn, mate," the Healer told him, with an obscene sort of cheerfulness. Theo had told him the names for various kinds of Muggle medical professionals, but Draco honestly didn't know if this one was a male nurse, or a physician, or some sort of assistant. All that he knew was that the sadistic bastard was grinning at the prospect of sticking a huge needle deep in his arm. Draco was nonchalant. Whatever the bloke did to him, it would be nothing compared to a *Crucio*.

Draco took his seat and immediately realized there was a problem. "I'm left-handed," he protested.

And if he rolled up the sleeve on his left arm, Granger would see his Dark Mark. She hadn't noticed it last night, due to both positioning and her preoccupation with other parts of his body. Logically, he knew that she would have to see it soon, if he was shagging her on a regular basis, but he would prefer that it not be now, under harsh fluorescent lights and with a Muggle present.

"C'mon, mate," the Muggle said in a low voice. "Stop whinging and put on a good show for your girl. She was brave enough about it."

With that push, Draco resignedly rolled up his sleeve and presented his left arm.

"Nice ink," the Muggle complimented as he stuck the needle in. Draco gritted his teeth, out of exasperation rather than pain. The blood draw was as painless as Hermione had promised, but he didn't need this ignoramus praising a Mark that stood for genocide of his own people.

"What is that?" Granger asked in a sharp tone, a mix of disgust and fear on her face as she looked at his forearm.

Draco refrained from the smart arse answer that it was obviously a tattoo of a human skull imposed on a snake's body. Instead, he opted for a variant of the truth.

"It's a permanent memento of my youthful stupidity," he stated.

"Do tell," Granger prompted, not satisfied by his bare explanation.

"I was drunk in Tijuana, on holiday with a bunch of friends from school, and we somehow decided it would be a brilliant idea to get inked." Draco delivered the agreed-upon story convincingly, while cringing internally.

Years ago, Marcus Flint had been the first of their little group to have to explain his Dark Mark, to an Obliviated Katie Bell. Now he and Theo were stuck with the same story for the sake of consistency. While Draco could easily picture Flint, or his Muggle alter ego, behaving in such an asinine manner, the story was less plausible for him. When it came to the ever-sober Theo, it was ridiculous.

"It looks like a brand," Hermione accurately observed. Voldemort had magically seared the Dark Mark into the arms of his followers. Draco vividly remembered the burning pain and smell of his own charred flesh when he was Marked.

"Can't you have it removed?" she asked, as the Muggle removed the needle from his arm.

Draco shook his head as he rolled down his sleeve. "However it was done, it's permanent. Believe me, I've tried."

Granger offered no further comment, but continued to look uneasily at his now-covered forearm.

Tricks and Treats (part 1)

October 31, 2003

Hermione fluffed and then smoothed her hair, a bit nervously, as she waited for Malcolm to pick her up before they met a group of his friends at a popular club in Soho. Just now, she had just buzzed him through the building's front door, so he would be arriving in her flat at any moment. She wasn't certain if this was a costume affair or not, but it was Halloween night, so she had dressed to adapt. Her little black dress over sheer black stockings and patent leather Mary Jane high heels was standard clubbing gear, but she had a headband with pussycat ears if needed.

Hermione pulled the door open at his soft knock. Malcolm looked striking, as always, in a black tuxedo with silver vest and bow tie, and a black cape lined in a deep green silk negligently tossed over his shoulders. The quality of fabric in a costume he was using for one night was higher than just about any article of clothing in her wardrobe. She refrained from rolling her eyes at the extravagance. A silk top hat on his sleek platinum-blond hair and a fake wand completed his ensemble.

She reached up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss against his lips. "You make a very handsome magician, Malcolm. Shall I ask you to perform some tricks for me later?"

"I will happily perform whatever magic you require of me, Hermione." He kissed back, quick and hard, and then set her at arm's length for a quick inspection. "You look lovely, but I forgot to mention we were going in costume, didn't I?"

"You did forget, but it doesn't matter. I can put on my cat ears," she offered.

"Not necessary, pet. My first magical feat of the evening will be to transform your attire into a proper Halloween costume." As he spoke, Malcolm's hand was on the zip at the back of her dress, pulling it down with practiced ease.

Her boyfriend's eyes darkened as he took in her thigh-high stockings and emerald green and black lingerie, his favorite. Hermione thought he had irreparably torn the knickers the first time they had sex, but she had found them intact the following morning.

"If I weren't already horribly late, I would ravish you right here in the entryway," Malcolm told her in a husky voice. He slipped a finger under the strap of her bra. "Leave this for now, but I'll be taking it off later," he promised.

Hermione shivered, both in anticipation and from the chill of standing in her foyer wearing nothing but her underthings and shoes. Sex with her boyfriend was still very much a novelty. Between waiting to receive a clean bill of health from NHS, proctoring midterm exams, and her monthly, the past three weeks hadn't exactly been conducive to intimacy. She could still count the number of occasions they had slept together on less than two hands.

After one more admiring glance, he turned away to the garment bag he'd hung on the doorknob. Some of Hermione's cautious common sense reasserted itself. "Please tell me you're not going to have me dressed up like a tart."

"I swear I won't, honor bright," Malcolm grinned wolfishly as he pulled her costume from the bag. "I won't say it's not sexy, but it covers as much or more than what you were wearing."

As he spoke, he passed her a pleated grey skirt, which she stepped into, and a white Oxford shirt, which he buttoned for her. Since they had begun dating in September, he had undressed her any number of times, but this was the first time he'd helped her dress. Hermione found it rather erotic, though his choice of costume made her burst out laughing.

While Malcolm had told the truth, insofar as the costume he had selected for her covered as much as the black dress she had originally been wearing, the skirt hit mid-thigh and the blouse was tight, with enough buttons left undone to allow a glimpse of her brassiere.

"I can't believe you're having me dress up as a naughty school girl!" she giggled.

"I know, I know. It's predictable almost to the point of being plebeian, but I couldn't help myself. It's a recurrent fantasy where you're concerned," her boyfriend admitted cheerfully. "Jumper or vest?" he asked.

"Vest, I suppose."

"Good choice. It'll be warm in the club." Malcolm pulled the dark grey wool, trimmed with silvery-grey bands at the bottom and collar, over her head and smoothed it over her body. As she expected, the vest was far too tight, accentuating her breasts.

"Now for your tie," he said, pulling the strip of silk from his pocket rather than the garment bag.

"The colors are wrong," Hermione objected before he could wind it around her neck.

"Whatever do you mean?" he asked warily.

"Harrow's colors are blue and white," she stated. *And my tie should be maroon and gold.* At her boyfriend's flummoxed expression, she faltered but carried on. "I thought for some reason you were having me wear your old school tie."

His face cleared. "Oh, no. I just picked a tie that coordinated with my costume." With that explanation, he deftly looped the silver and green silk through her shirt's collar and tied it, securing it with a silver pin. For the second time that evening, Malcolm put her at arm's length to critically inspect what she was wearing.

"You look fucking *perfect*."

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Thumping bass from the club's sound system was audible as soon as Draco exited from the taxi, offering a hand to Hermione as she emerged. Her long legs, encased in sheer black

stockings, drew enough appreciative catcalls from the Muggle blokes waiting in line that Draco couldn't glare at them all.

He had planned to arrive earlier, but his father had insisted hosting on a small dinner party for Samhain, including Draco's Greengrass in-laws on the guest list. After an interminable meal, he had been escorted to the study by his father-in-law and Lucius and treated to a Firewhiskey and a homily on his marital duties. As summarized by the two older wizards, that meant keeping his wife on a short lease and getting her pregnant.

Draco had nodded and said all the right things in order to make a timely escape, but he had zero interest in having sex with Astoria ever again. He had spent a week earlier in the month waiting for the results of an ultimately clean blood test (after discovering, to his chagrin, that bribes did not work with the Muggle health service, not because its personnel were incorruptible, but because its bureaucracy was too Byzantine to even find the right palms to grease). He had been terrified the entire time that his dick was going to fall off from some STI, probably badger pox, since Macmillan was what passed for a player in Hufflepuff circles. Draco never wanted to experience a repeat of that anxious week.

The practical effect of Lucius pulling his *pater familias* act was that Theo and Flint and any other Slytherins in attendance had a two-hour head start in drinking, which made alcohol-induced slips to a clear-headed Granger all too likely. That made it imperative that he make one confession to her now, before they walked into the club. He pulled her off to the side just before the velvet rope. (In Draco's view, VIP passes and private bottle service were the only things that made Muggle clubs tolerable.) "Can I trust you with a secret, Hermione?" he asked.

"What is it?" she asked back, instantly suspicious.

In all fairness, Draco knew that he had lost his bet with Flint and Nott. For all that he was shagging her on a semi-regular basis and had her dressed up for the evening like a little Slytherin doll, Granger still did not trust him at some fundamental level. It came out unexpectedly, at times like this, and Draco hypocritically felt a bit hurt.

"Well, it's not really a secret, but it is a bit embarrassing," he hedged, in a playful tone. "You have to promise not to laugh."

With that cue, she reverted back to her usual banter with him. "An embarrassing non-secret? Tell me! And I promise to *try* not to laugh."

"I've never told you my middle name."

"Mine is Jean," she volunteered, eyes sparkling in anticipation at his revelation.

"That's a very nice, normal name. *My* middle name is Draco."

Rather than laughing, Hermione looked intrigued. "After the constellation?"

"It's a tradition in my mother's family, to use the names of constellations and such," he confirmed. "I went through a phase at school where I thought 'Malcolm' was stodgy, so I had

all my mates call me Draco or Drake or even Mal. You'll probably hear all of those tonight."

"Draco Foy," she tested the name, speaking slowly and thoughtfully. "Drake Foy. Mal Foy." She wrinkled her nose at the last.

Draco held his breath. His family name was notorious, and he was concerned about it what it might trigger.

"I like the name Draco. It suits you," a Granger pronounced, after a pause. "Does anyone still call you that?"

"A lot of people I went to school with still do," he replied. "And my mother has always called me Draco."

She nibbled on her lip in what he now recognized as a prelude to a request she thought might be unfavorably received. "Would you mind if I sometimes called you Draco?"

He caught her hand and kissed her wrist where the cuff of her uniform shirt ended. "You may call me anything you like."

"C'mon, princess," he said, guiding her into the snake pit with a hand at the small of her back. "There are some people I'd like you to meet."

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Inside the club, there were several people crowded around their reserved table, laughing and talking over the loud music. When they arrived, Malcolm holding her by the hand, the table quieted and Hermione found herself subject to the scrutiny of several pairs of eyes, most friendly or neutral, but one distinctly hostile.

"What is *she* doing here, Drakey?" demanded a young woman with a pug nose and sleek black hair pulled into two pig tails. Her prettiness was marred by the nasty expression on her face.

"I have the same question for you, Pansy, but it can wait until I've introduced Hermione to everyone," Malcolm answered evenly with an undercurrent of warning in his voice.

"Hermione, this is Pansy Parkinson Urquhart. Pansy, I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Hermione Granger," he stated.

Hermione wasn't about to lie and say it was a pleasure to meet the other woman, and Pansy was apparently of the same mind. Neither offered the other her hand to shake.

Instead, as soon as Malcolm was safely distracted in a hissed conversation with a serious-looking young man with glasses, the pug-faced woman turned on Hermione. "I can't believe Draco brought you out dressed like that!" she spat.

Hermione refrained from tugging down the hem of her too-short pleated skirt, instead giving the other woman an insouciant shrug. "As a naughty schoolgirl? It's a common enough costume on Halloween."

"Oh, I agree that it's common, Granger," Pansy said snidely.

Hermione struck back with a catty observation of her own on Pansy's blue and white checkered costume.

"Are you supposed to be Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*? The Wicked Witch would suit you better, Parkinson. You're certainly an unpleasant shade of green where *my* boyfriend is concerned."

"Mee-ow!" interjected the curly-haired blond man to Pansy's left. Teasingly, he bopped the pug-faced woman on the top of her head with a pink wand topped with a shiny silver star.

"I *told* Pansy she should go as the Wicked Witch of the West to my Good Witch of the South, but she insisted on being Dorothy." He leaned closer to mock-whisper in Hermione's ear. "Honestly, she just wanted an excuse to show off her new ruby-red Jimmy Choos!"

Peeking under the table, Hermione saw that Pansy's feet were indeed encased in a pair of glittering scarlet pumps, with a heels at least twice as high as her own.

"I'm Justin Finch-Fletchley," the curly-haired man introduced himself with a friendly smile. "But you can call me Glinda! Pansy's my date, because I'm between boyfriends right now."

"Hello, Glinda," Hermione played along, taking in the man's pale pink and silver-spangled dress, topped off with puffy transparent sleeves that resembled fairy wings. Justin was wearing a silver crown on his head and pink and silver ballet flats on his feet.

"Were you friends with Malcolm back at school?" she asked, with some hesitation. Her boyfriend was not homophobic, but she couldn't picture him being friendly with someone as flamboyant as Justin.

"I don't think so," Justin answered in an equally uncertain tone. "I went to Eton."

"Malcolm went to Harrow. So I suppose that makes you two old school rivals," she said pleasantly.

Justin nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, that makes perfect sense! Here, let me introduce you to my co-worker, Katie. She's a pediatric physiotherapist, while I do speech and language with the kiddies."

He tugged at the sleeve of a brunette with a pixie haircut, dressed as a football with the black and white hexagons stretched over her rounded belly. The broadly-built man she was sitting with noticed the action and beat Justin to the introductions.

"Hullo," he greeted Hermione with an exuberant, slightly inebriated hug. "Mark Stone. I went to school with your miscreant of a boyfriend. And he's now my boss." He winked at her. "Whatever you're doing to him, do keep it up, please. He's much easier to work for lately."

He reminded Hermione a bit of a friendly bear, complete with jagged teeth. He was wearing an Arsenal uniform, so Hermione assumed he was with the woman in the football costume. His next words confirmed that.

"And this is the love of my life, Katie." Mark wrapped an arm around the pregnant brunette, turning her towards Hermione.

Katie had even, white teeth, which she flashed in a sweet smile in Hermione's direction. "I'm so happy to meet you!"

"Likewise," Hermione smiled back. "When are you due?"

"January, and it can't come soon enough! It's no fun being out on a night like this with nothing alcoholic to drink!"

"We're having a boy," Mark proudly announced, patting Katie's belly. The movement drew Hermione's attention to the skull and snake brand on the inside of his forearm. She felt the same visceral reaction of repulsion and fear that she did whenever she saw Malcolm's bare left arm.

Katie seemed unaffected by the tattoo, as she smacked her partner's hand lightly. "*You* are not having anything. In case you've forgotten from the last time around, I do all the work, while you stand around and look helpless. And stop rubbing my belly! It's not a magic lamp, and the baby isn't going to pop out and give you three wishes!" She was smiling as she spoke, though, and Mark bent to whisper something in her ear about what he wished for that made her blush.

Malcolm rejoined them. "Now that you've been exposed to Mark, I'd like you to meet one of my more respectable friends." He inclined his head towards the serious-faced young man with glasses, who had dressed for the night in surgeon's scrubs, complete with stethoscope. "This is Theodore or Ted Knott, former classmate and my current solicitor."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Hermione," Theodore extended his hand with a small smile. "Malcolm's told me so much about you, including the research you're working on."

"Oh, of course!" Hermione connected the dots. "You must be the solicitor he's consulted."

"Indeed," he confirmed. "May I introduce my fiancée, Dr. Cho Chang? Cho is doing her postgraduate clinical training at Royal Free, so I expect you two will find you have a lot in common."

Hermione caught Malcolm giving his friend an odd, warning sort of look at that pleasantry, and made a mental note to ask her boyfriend about Cho later.

Theodore and Cho had swapped professions for the night, as the petite woman was wearing a barrister's curling white wig and black robes for her costume. Her posture was graceful but rigid, making Hermione think of a ballerina suffering from stage fright. Cho's grip was firm, but the bones in her hand felt so fragile that Hermione worried about squeezing too hard.

While Cho was not overtly rude like Pansy, her dark eyes were guarded and Hermione had the distinct feeling that Cho disliked her on sight. Hermione gratefully accepted Malcolm's proffered vodka tonic, looking up at him with a smile. "Is there anyone else you want me to meet?" she asked.

Theodore answered for her boyfriend. "Blaise Zabini is heading this way."

Malcolm frowned. "Blaise is not someone I *want* Hermione to meet, Theo. How did that viper manage to slither his way into our party?"

"Katie invited Justin, Justin brought Pansy, and Pansy just coincidentally ran into Blaise and he decided to tag along," the other man explained.

"I don't believe in coincidences where Zabini is concerned," her boyfriend snorted. "Why didn't you tell him to fuck off, Nott?"

"What, and deprive you of that distinct pleasure? I think not."

Malcolm turned to her, his expression softening despite her disapproving expression. "I know you think I'm being an arsehole, pet, but you haven't yet met Zabini. Do *not* accept any drinks from him. He - "

"Drakey!" Pansy interrupted with a shrill cry, before Malcolm could expound on his dislike of Blaise Zabini. She was with a tall, handsome dark-skinned man dressed in a white bell-bottomed suit, evoking *Saturday Night Fever*. "If you still need to talk to me, Drakey, you can do it while we're dancing. Oh, and Blaise wants to meet *her*."

She shot Hermione a look of deepest loathing and grabbed Malcolm's hand, pulling him towards the dance floor. He mouthed a quick "sorry" but allowed Pansy to lead him away, leaving Hermione fuming.

"Well, that was rude," Blaise observed, an amused expression playing across his chiseled features. "I'm Blaise Zabini, but I'm sure you already inferred that. May I have the pleasure of a dance, Hermione, while Mal Foy is otherwise occupied?"

She glanced once more at the dance floor, where the witch dressed as Dorothy had her arms wrapped around her boyfriend's shoulders. Malcolm was watching them closely. She smiled tightly at Blaise. "I don't see any reason why not."

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For more than half of his life, Blaise Zabini had hated Draco Malfoy. It started on their first day at Hogwarts, when the pointy-faced blond boy threw Blaise's trunk off the bed he had chosen, arrogantly announcing that he would have it for himself. At eleven, Blaise would have contested the point, but Malfoy had been backed up by his goons, Crabbe and Goyle. So he had sullenly taken a less desirable bed further from the fireplace and closer to the door, and his dislike and resentment of the blond wizard had grown ever since.

Blaise had largely avoided his classmates since leaving Hogwarts, preferring the easy pickings offered by Eurotrash Muggles, but his ears had perked up when Pansy Parkinson casually mentioned she would be at a Muggle club on Halloween with Justin Finch-Fletchley, a woman named Katie, and Katie's partner Mark.

There had been rumors of the Dark Lord's curse on the next generation of pure-blood children, as well as quiet conversations about whether there was any way to break it - or at least circumvent it. Marcus Flint's name had cropped up again and again in those conversations. Based on a hunch, Blaise had invited himself to the Muggle club with Pansy.

Now he knew that Flint had gotten a girl child out of Katie Bell already and she was pregnant with his heir. It was rather humorous to discover that Flint, who had been a feared enforcer for the Dark Lord, doted on his expectant Mudblood.

Seeing Cho Chang with Theodore Nott's engagement ring on her finger was an amusing bonus. The last time he had seen her, she had been naked and spread-eagled on a filthy mattress at Nott Manor, covered in her own blood and semen from a dozen or more Death Eaters. Blaise had taken his turn in every hole, but she had been a lousy lay, barely conscious and too hurt to fight back. Ironically, Cho had instinctively moved behind her Death Eater fiancé after being introduced to Blaise, as though Theo would protect her. He wished Nott the joy of her.

Seeing Malfoy and being re-introduced to the hot little Mudblood currently dancing with him as decorously as blaring hip hop music allowed had been less enjoyable. In Blaise's view, Granger was just the latest example of Malfoy always and unfairly getting the best. While Malfoy was going to get produce his legally pure-blooded and almost certain-to-be magically powerful heir by fucking her filthy, tight body, Blaise was stuck with Dennis Creevey, who was worthless for all intents and purposes.

Blaise was disappointed, too, that the secrets he had discovered tonight were not fodder for blackmail. It was perfectly legal for Flint, Nott and Malfoy to have any sort of consensual relationship with their Mudbloods, so long as they kept them ignorant of the existence of magic. And Blaise was no fool, to risk a term in Azkaban by violating the Statute of Secrecy and telling Granger anything she wasn't permitted to know. Still, he would do what he could to plant a spoke in Malfoy's wheel.

"I wouldn't worry too much about your boyfriend and Pansy. She's still crazy about him, but Drake moved on years ago," he told Granger with a smile that was meant to be sympathetic, his mouth brushing her ear.

"Thanks for that reassurance," she replied in a colorless voice.

"Did Draco ever tell you we all called him the Slytherin sex god back at school?"

"No, he didn't see fit to mention that one," Granger said, but he could tell she was curious. "What does that mean, to be a *slithering* sex god?"

"Maybe that he's good at slithering into girls' knickers? Probably you already knew that." Blaise smiled in a suggestive manner. "So, how long have you two been together?" he asked, white teeth glinting.

"A couple of months." Granger's social smile didn't reach her eyes, and she was keeping as much physical distance as the crowd of dancers allowed.

Blaise was a little surprised by her wariness. Women normally found him attractive and only realized he was a dangerous predator when it was too late. Malfoy hadn't had time to warn Granger against him, and she shouldn't be able to remember anything she had heard about Blaise's proclivities prior to her Obliviation.

"You just seem like too much of a good girl for him," the dark wizard observed. "So *wholesome*." He would love to defile and destroy that wholesomeness, but Malfoy would never allow it. Blaise knew the blond wizard had been watching them dance the entire time, twirling his wand between long, pale fingers and probably deciding which Dark curses to use on him.

"Opposites attract, don't you know?" Granger rejoined.

"I've always subscribed to the theory that like hews to like, myself," Blaise answered. "Like Mal Foy and Astoria."

"His ex-girlfriend who cheated on him?"

"Did she really?" Blaise filed away that tidbit for later. "Is that all he told you about her?"

When Granger said nothing, he continued maliciously. "They were together for more than four years. I highly doubt he's gotten over her in just four months. She's gorgeous - tall and slim with silky dark hair. Her parents are good friends with Draco's parents, and I know for a fact that his father is pushing him hard to get back together with her."

Granger looked troubled, encouraging Blaise to twist the knife. "You haven't met Drake's parents yet, have you? You should ask him to introduce you," he sweetly suggested. "Perhaps he can take you to the family Manor for a visit. Or maybe you're just his dirty little secret."

Out of the corner of his eye, Blaise could see the blond wizard approaching and knew his time with Granger was coming to an end. Draco always had been possessive of his toys, particularly given Blaise's tendency to break them.

"May I cut in?" Malfoy asked with icy politeness.

Blaise gracefully yielded, bowing over Granger's hand kissing it with exaggerated politeness. "It was a distinct pleasure, *carina*. Perhaps one we can repeat later, yes?"

He walked away but stayed within earshot, curious as to the dynamic between Malfoy and his Mudblood.

"You are not dancing with him again, Granger," Malfoy ordered.

Even though Blaise was doubtful Granger wanted to dance with him again, Malfoy's command got her nose in the air and her hands on her hips. "Who are you to tell me that, when you were off dancing with your ex-girlfriend? Oh, I know, you're the slithering sex god, so I'm just supposed to fall at your feet and do whatever you say?"

Blaise smirked to himself. This was going to be good.

"Zabini told you about Slytherin?" Draco was shocked, but quickly recovered. "You shouldn't believe anything that comes out of his mouth. He's an untrustworthy, deceptive snake."

"Pot, meet kettle?" Granger suggested mockingly.

"No!" Draco reached out and grabbed her wrist. "Listen to me, Hermione - "

"Let go, Malcolm," she told him. "You're hurting me."

"Am not," he said with certainty, but still complied.

Blaise raised his eyebrows. Malfoy certainly gave his feisty Mudblood quite a bit of latitude. Personally, he would have back-handed her by now.

"I would never hurt you, Hermione. I couldn't hurt you. But Zabini would. You can trust your instincts where he's concerned." Malfoy's voice was low and compelling and Granger nodded slowly, permitting him to take her hand and lead her into a dance.

Sneering, Blaise wondered to what extent those "instincts" were memories that had not been fully suppressed. In any case, he'd have to find new prey to play with. With a smirk, he decided to saunter back to the table to taunt Cho, to see if he could trigger any recollection of what he'd done to her.

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An hour or so into the evening, the departure of the ladies for the loo and Zabini for the dance floor left Draco, Flint and Nott alone at the table with a tipsy Justin Finch-Fletchley.

It seemed that alcohol put the blond Muggle-born into an amorous mood. He leaned over and planted a hand on Draco's knee, though it wasn't clear whether his intent was seductive or to prevent himself from toppling over. "Have we met before?" he asked Draco, batting his eyelashes.

"Sorry, you're not my type," Draco told him bluntly, ignoring the question. He didn't go for blokes, he didn't go for blondes, and he certainly didn't go for Hufflepuffs. At one point, Draco also would have said he didn't go for Mudbloods, but the curly-haired exception to that rule was on her way to the ladies' room, still in a bit of a snit with him.

"Are you sure we haven't met? I'm sure I've seen those gorgeous grey eyes before. And that silky blond hair!"

Justin reached out a hand to stroke his fringe, but Draco batted it away. As a pretty boy Death Eater at the tender age of sixteen, he had fended off much more aggressive propositioning from his erstwhile compatriots, but he wasn't in the mood to deal with a randy Hufflepoof.

"Listen, Finch-Fucker or whatever your name is, I don't swing your way. So bugger off, or go bugger yourself, or get someone else to bugger you, but leave me the fuck alone." He spoke in a low, icy tone that seemed to get through to the former Hufflepuff, even in his inebriated state.

"Well, fine!" Justin pouted. "If you change your mind, sailor, you know where to find me." With a final come-hither glance at Draco, he sashayed away in the direction of the men's loo.

Marcus grinned at Draco, but elected to comment on a different subject. "Merlin, Granger looks fucking hot in a Hogwarts uniform!"

"Stop perving on my girlfriend, Flint," Draco ordered.

"So she's your girlfriend now, not just a Mudblood?" Nott asked sourly. Zabini's little jibes at Cho had gotten under his skin.

Flint interjected before Draco could snap back at Theo. "I wonder if I could get Katie to play dress up in her old Quidditch uniform?" he mused.

He answered his own question. "Probably not. The leathers would be too hard to explain. And I may be in the doghouse anyways, since I have to wait for my year-end bonus to get her Arsenal tickets, now that I owe you some Galleons."

"I wouldn't be so quick to pay up, Marcus," Theo cautioned. "The terms of the bet called for Granger to be, quote, 'eating out of his hand.' All that I've seen tonight is that she's wearing a Halloween costume, which is not proof she has that level of trust in Malfoy."

"I never thought you were one to welch on a bet, Nott. If Granger dressed up like a Slytherin slut isn't going to satisfy you, what the fuck is?" Draco snarled, irritated by Theo's little legalisms.

Theo shrugged. "You two seemed to be having a little lovers' spat. I'd like to see you kiss and make up before the night's over."

Draco refused to take the bait, instead reverting to a concern that had been niggling at him all night. "Speaking of Zabini, what do we do about him? Personally, I suggest we *Avada* him and dump his body in the Thames."

"I'd like to beat him to death the Muggle way, myself," Flint said, cracking his knuckles. "Did you see the way he looked at Katie?"

Draco hadn't noticed, but he had seen Zabini's dark eyes resting on Granger with a disturbing intensity. "Nott?"

Theo shook his head. "We do nothing. There is nothing he can do to us - we're not breaking any laws by spending a night out with our forgetful Muggleborns. And I'm not going to risk Azkaban because you two drunken idiots think he looked at your girlfriends the wrong way."

"He did more than *look* at your fiancée, Theo," Flint said, his tongue loosened by too much alcohol.

"I'm not going to risk Azkaban through precipitous action," Theo repeated. "One of these days, Blaise will be held accountable, in a proper manner and by the proper authority, for his crimes."

Marcus looked at the solicitor in astonished disgust and Draco shook his head. "You've really bought into this Muggle rule of law shite, haven't you?"

Without waiting for Theo's response, Draco raised another concern. "What if the girls start comparing notes on us? You know that's what they're doing right now in the loo."

"Yeah, and your girlfriends are going to be so envious of my size and stamina and - "

"Not a joking matter, Flint," Draco cut him off. "I am still struggling to come to grips with the fact that Katie and Justin have worked together for years. He's been to your house as a guest, for Salazar's sake! You never realized that he's a Mudblood wizard?"

"He didn't play Quidditch, he wasn't in my year, and he obviously wasn't in Slytherin. There's no reason why I should have known him or recognized him," Flint answered reasonably. "All I knew is that he's queer, good at working with kids who can't talk properly, and Katie likes him. Seems like a decent enough bloke."

"He might be, but that's besides the point. Two Mudbloods working together isn't just a coincidence," Draco declared. "It has my brilliant little girlfriend's fingerprints all over it, and I don't know what other schemes she put in place before losing her memories."

"Granger doesn't know, either, Malfoy. She's forgotten all about it," Nott reassured him. "And I saw Cho's reaction when they were introduced. I doubt she's going to be sharing girlish confidences with Hermione anytime soon. Besides, Pansy is with them."

Draco merely shook his head, still unconvinced and uneasy, and signaled the waitress to bring another couple of bottles for the table. Given the clusterfuck this night was turning into it, he thought might need one of them all for himself.

(x) (x) (x)

Inevitably, there was a line for the ladies' loo. Pansy elected to while away the time critiquing the other women's jewelry.

She shuddered at Katie's rubies. "The size and clarity are well enough, but red gemstones are so *gauche*."

She sniffed at Hermione's charm bracelet. "Draco got me a nicer bracelet with his pocket money when he was fourteen. And of course he would pick a book for your first charm."

She pronounced Cho's engagement ring "adequate. My stone is larger, though," Pansy bragged, holding out her left hand to flaunt a square-cut diamond flanked by emeralds. "When is the wedding?" she inquired.

"Next Saturday," Cho replied, stony-faced.

"So as soon as the banns could be posted, hmm? Any particular reason for that?" Pansy asked, with a pointed look at Cho's abdomen.

"No particular reason, and it's a registry wedding," Cho stated in a flat voice.

Hermione's attention was caught by the diamond and emerald band on Pansy's ring finger. "You're married, Parkinson?"

Pansy gave a tight smile. "Five points to the bushy-haired know-it-all. That's the usual significance of a wedding band. Technically, it's Mrs. Urquhart now, but I usually try to forget the existence of my husband."

"D'ya mind if I go first?" Katie asked as they moved to the head of the line, looking a little bit desperate. "Of course, with the sprog, I'll probably just have to get back in line for the loo as soon as I'm done," she added jokingly, trying to lessen the tension among the other three women.

They shook their heads and Katie made a beeline for the vacant stall. A second stall opened up and Pansy walked forward to take it, nose in the air, and slammed the door behind her.

"I can't recall ever disliking someone more upon meeting them," Hermione observed. "What a bitch!"

Cho gave her a chilly smile. "Personally, I would reserve my hatred for Zabini. If I had a scalpel with me, I would stick it between his ribs."

"He is very creepy." Hermione agreed, "Like a serial killer." She paused, then plunged ahead. "You seem to dislike me, too, though I can't remember doing anything to offend you."

Cho looked at her in silence for a moment, her eyes inscrutable. "Would you remember if you had?"

On instinct, Hermione opted for the unvarnished truth. "Not if it was before June 1999. I suffered a head injury then and lost a significant portion of my long-term memories that precede that date."

"Interesting," Cho commented in a clinical manner. "That type of permanent or semi-permanent retrograde amnesia is exceedingly rare. As it so happens, I suffer from it myself."

"Perhaps that is why your boyfriend expected us to find common ground," Hermione offered. Even though Theodore shouldn't know about her memory loss, when she hadn't even told Malcolm yet, she sometimes suspected her boyfriend knew more about her than he let on.

Cho glanced at the loo stall Pansy was occupying. "Give me your mobile number and I'll call you next week."

Hermione quickly complied, before Pansy could finish. "Please do call. We can compare notes."

Cho nodded. "I don't think we can be friends," she told Hermione coldly, "but perhaps we can be allies."

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With more than a few drinks under his belt, Draco was beginning to realize the appeal of Muggle hip hop music. It encouraged a bump and grind sort of dancing which, with the right partner, was only a few layers of clothing removed from vertical shagging in a public place.

Granger was the right partner, gyrating her hips against his groin in a teasing promise of what he could expect later. Just now, she was dancing with her back to his front, rubbing her arse against his erection and tilting her head back so he had an excellent view down her shirt. He nipped her neck and ran his hands down her sides and over her flat stomach.

She spun around to face him so they were dancing nose to nose. "Let's go back to your flat," she suggested, eyes dark with want.

Tempting as it was, Draco shook his head. "It's not even midnight, princess. Do you really want to call it a night when the pregnant lady is still going strong?" He jerked his head to the left, where Katie was dancing energetically with Flint.

Hermione stood flush against him, swaying in time to the music. "I'm suggesting that we go to bed, not that we go to sleep. We wouldn't call it a night for quite some time," she purred in his ear.

"Do you want to find someplace private, to take the edge off?" Draco suggested, cupping her arse to pull her closer. At her eager assent, he grabbed her hand and pulled her off the dance floor, towards a convenient janitor's closet he'd noticed earlier.

"It'll be locked," Granger objected. Draco tried the handle, and it was indeed locked.

"That's what this is for." Draco held aloft his hawthorne wand, Glamoured to look like a Muggle prop. He gave it an exaggerated flourish and uttered a dramatic "abracadabra," camouflaging his silent Unlocking Charm. The handle yielded under his hand. "It was just stuck before," he assured a wide-eyed Granger before tugging her inside and shutting and locking the door behind them.

She was on him immediately, kissing him hungrily and winding her hands through his hair while rubbing herself against him.

"Someone's eager," he observed, smirking, pulling his mouth from her neck.

"Pot, kettle," she echoed her earlier comment. This time, with her hand stroking his hard length, Draco was much less offended.

"Ladies first," he told her, removing her hand and reaching down beneath her skirt to strip off her knickers. Carefully, he tucked them in his shirt pocket, arranged to look like a handkerchief to the casual observer. "I'm keeping these for the rest of the night," he told her, as he plunged two fingers into the heat and wetness between her legs.

Granger was gratifyingly responsive. Between the thrusting of his long fingers, curved just so to hit the spot that made her cry out on every pass, and the adept circling of his thumb, it was a matter of minutes to get her to climax. When the convulsive clenching against his fingers

subsided and she briefly sagged against him, Draco withdrew his fingers and held them to her mouth. "Suck them clean," he told her.

She complied willingly, making a bit of a production by swirling her tongue. Draco grinned at her antics and placed his hands on her shoulders to press her down onto her knees. He leaned back against the locked door for support as she unbuckled his belt and unzipped his trousers, barely registering the feel of smooth wood against the competing sensations of Granger's circling tongue and warm mouth.

As he fisted his hands in her curls to guide her bobbing head, an objective part of his mind couldn't help comparing her to his wife. Astoria's technique was much more polished, but she had been working to perfect it for years, practicing on the entire Slytherin Quidditch team. If he ever refused her alimony, she could go pro in Knockturn Alley.

Hermione, in contrast, brought a diligent willingness to please to her task that Draco found equally as arousing. Just right now, he'd give her efforts an "E," but she could easily earn an "O" with a bit of practice. His hips jerked forward of their own accord at that thought and she gagged. Draco moaned at the fluttering sensation around his sensitive head even as he stroked her hair in apology. "Sorry, pet. You're making me lose control."

Hermione tried her best to take him deep again, hollowing her cheeks and relaxing the back of her throat. "Oh, fuck, yeah! Do that again!" he urged.

As she repeated the action, he removed his hands from her hair and clutched blunt fingernails into his palms to restrain himself from taking over and fucking her mouth. "I'm almost there," Draco warned her, getting the hoped-for response as she hummed in affirmation and continued to suck and then swallow, choking slightly but keeping her mouth around him until he had finished. Hermione licked him clean, a ticklish sensation now that he was spent, and tucked his cock back into his boxers carefully before zipping up his trousers. Draco admired her attention to detail. Solicitously, he helped his girlfriend to her feet and kissed her with an open mouth, uncaring that he was tasting himself on her tongue.

She broke off the kiss, her eyes round and dark with uncertainty. "Was that okay?" she asked hesitantly. "I haven't done that much."

"Thank you," he said, with complete sincerity. "It was completely, utterly brilliant."

And now, not even a stickler like Nott could dispute that he'd just won their little bet.

Tricks and Treats (part 2)

October 31 - November 1, 2003

After their interlude in the janitor's closet, Draco and Hermione had rejoined their merry little group. Flint had taken one look at Granger's wild hair and reddened mouth and Draco's air of smug satisfaction as he solicitously passed her a fresh drink and had paid up, passing a thick wad of pound notes under the table in a manner that was far from stealthy. Theo, thin-lipped, had quietly promised to send a Gringott's draft in the morning.

The next couple hours were a blur of drinks and dancing, with Flint buying trays of tequila-infused Jell-O shots and insisting on their consumption, and Justin the Hufflepoo showing his laughable moves on the dance floor. Draco had his own private source of amusement in knowing that his swotty little girlfriend was shaking her arse to the music without any knickers on under her short Hogwarts skirt. That knowledge made him increasingly aroused as the night went on, until he couldn't wait to bury himself inside her.

When their party broke up shortly before three in the morning, he hauled Granger into a taxi, gave the driver the address of his Knightsbridge flat, shoved a ten-pound note in the man's hand, and told him there would be another twenty quid if he drove fast and didn't look into the backseat. Draco had then proceeded to snog and tease Granger until she was as riled up as he.

At his flat, he fumbled with the key in the lock, ultimately mumbling an "*Alohomora*," because he was too tipsy to pull off a silent spell and didn't think his girlfriend would notice, not after all the vodka tonics and tequila shots she had drunk.

Despite it being her first visit, Granger barely spared a glance for the elegant flat, with its beautiful moldings and original details highlighted by a mix of clean-lined, contemporary furniture and antiques. Instead, she just looked up at him with big, brown, slightly unfocused eyes. "Bedroom?" she inquired.

"Study," he answered with a smirk, pushing her none too gently through a door to the right. It was the one room he had furnished in a wholly traditional manner, with a mahogany desk dominating the room and shelves of leather-bound books lining the walls. In the morning, Hermione undoubtedly would want to inspect them all, but just right now she was moaning into his mouth as they kissed and unbuckling his belt as he walked her backwards to the desk.

He hoisted on her onto the desk's surface, ripped the vest over her head, and unbuttoned her Oxford shirt as fast as his fingers could fumble. She had shoved his cloak off somewhere between the flat's front door and the study, and was making quick work of his shirt's studs even with alcohol-clumsy fingers.

Draco hissed softly as her tongue circled one of his flat nipples. "Minx," he told her.

"I know," she looked up from under her lashes with a smirk, one thumb rubbing his other nipple.

"Since you know so much, do you know why I brought you to my office, Miss Granger?" Draco asked with mock-sternness.

Granger might be drunk, but she was never stupid, and she immediately picked up on his roleplaying. "No, sir, I have no idea," she replied, eyes wide and radiating innocence, both hands now clasped in front of her.

She was very good, although her act was compromised by the fact that she was naked from the waist up save for a very racy bra. Draco could see why she served so few detentions back at Hogwarts despite getting into nearly the same amount of trouble as Potter and Weasley.

"You were caught in a broom closet with a boy, Miss Granger. Were you snogging him?"

"No, sir," she repeated in the same innocent tone, before leaning forward to whisper, the tip of her tongue circling the shell of his ear. "I was on my knees, sucking him off."

"Tut-tut, Miss Granger," Draco shook his head in feigned reproof as he unclasped her bra and palmed her breasts, thumbs flicking her rosy nipples. "*That* is not the sort of behavior this school expects of a prefect and would-be Head Girl." He smirked at the unintentional pun before continuing. "I shall have to inform the headmaster and your head of house."

"Please, sir, don't tell them!" Granger begged, still in character. "Couldn't I serve a private detention with you, instead?"

Draco smirked. "I thought you'd never ask."

He removed his hands from her chest and stepped back a pace. "Turn around, Miss Granger."

With a show of reluctance, she complied, giving him a saucy wink over her shoulder before reverting to the schoolgirl role. "What should I do next, sir?"

Draco's cock was too impatient to draw this out much longer. "Bend over the desk, Miss Granger. Flip up your skirt."

She obeyed, and he ran a caressing palm along the bare cheeks of her arse. "Now spread your legs. Wider."

Draco stepped forward, between her thighs. With her knickers still in his pocket from earlier, she was fully on display to him. He pressed one long finger deep inside her, confirming that she was more than ready. Hermione whined deep in her throat as he rotated the single digit. "More, please. Sir," she gritted out.

"Not just yet, Miss Granger. Are you a virgin?" he inquired, continuing to tease with one finger.

"No, sir," she managed.

"No?" Draco echoed in feigned surprise, adding a second finger. "You're still so tight. How many boys have fucked you, Miss Granger?"

"Can't remember," she gasped.

"You filthy little slag," Draco commented, softening the dirty talk with a kiss between her shoulder blades. He was a bit surprised at the truthful answer. Having been Obliviated, she had no recollection of her sexual history before the age of nineteen, but she normally would have made up some plausible number. "I'll have to fuck you very hard to make certain you don't forget about me, won't I?"

His only answer from Granger was a frustrated sort of growl as he removed his fingers. Draco hastily shoved his pants and boxers down, freeing his cock. As he entered her, hard and deep, one final thought filtered through the rational part of his mind as she arched her back and cried out his given name.

It wasn't just the sheer animal pleasure of fucking her, the tightness and warmth that he craved as he thrust into her again and again. It was the singular, illicit gratification of knowing that he was fucking Hermione Granger, Gryffindor's Mudblood princess and the brains of the Golden Trio, and that she was so sweetly willing precisely because she had no idea who he was.

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Sometime in the middle of the night, Draco woke up with a dry mouth and pressing need to relieve himself. He blamed both conditions on Flint and his insistence that everyone except Katie take multiple tequila shots. After going to the loo, he silently made his way back to the master bedroom.

Hermione, as per usual, was deeply asleep, sprawled in the middle of his four-poster bed. Tonight, she was sleeping on her back, with her arms stretched over her head and the dark cloud of her wild hair. Staring at her body outlined under the sheet in the dim illumination of the streetlights and the way her wrists were criss-crossed on the pillow, Draco felt his cock begin to stiffen.

At Hogwarts, beginning in his third year, he had wanked off repeatedly to images of Granger in his head. Over time, he had developed three favorite fantasies: having her suck him off on her knees in a broom closet, bending her over a teacher's desk and fucking her from behind, and tying her up in his dorm room bed and playing with her until she begged for his cock. He saw no reason why he shouldn't experience the full trifecta tonight.

He had pulled his trousers back up after shagging Granger in the study and then discarded them somewhere on the bedroom floor. After a brief search, he found them, with his wand still in the left pocket. Ordinarily, he wasn't so careless, but alcohol and lust had impaired his sense of caution.

Draco glanced stealthily at the bed to make sure Hermione was still sleeping. Having reassured himself, he pointed his wand towards the door.

"*Accio* my Slytherin tie."

He captured it in his hand as it flew up the stairs from the study, where he had stripped it off Granger. On quiet feet, Draco approached the bed, wand in his left hand and tie in his right. With a whispered "*Incarcerous*," Granger's wrists were bound together and tethered to the headboard, the scar on the inside of her forearm facing up, with the crudely scrawled "Mudblood" legible even in the dimly lit bedroom.

Draco carefully placed his wand under the pillow and knelt over the sleeping witch, beginning to work his way down her body with open-mouthed kisses and licks and stroking, exploring fingers.

"Time to wake up, princess," he murmured darkly.

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It started off as a very pleasurable dream. Skilled hands massaging her breasts, replaced by fingers pinching and rolling one nipple just so while the tip of a tongue teased her other nipple into an equally hard peak.

Those hands moved lower, stroking up and down her legs. Hermione parted her thighs and canted her hips upwards, encouraging the phantom owner of the fingers to place them where she wanted - no, needed - them. "Please. Please touch me," she whispered.

She continued to beg for *more*, grinding herself on two long fingers, than three, seeking that delicious release. Just as she was on the verge, the fingers were withdrawn and she whimpered in protest.

"What do you want, pet? My tongue or my cock?" Malcolm asked. His tone was darker and somehow rougher than normal, and Hermione peeked open her previously closed eyes to confirm it was he. Her boyfriend was looking up at her from between her thighs, a hungry smirk on his face.

"I want your cock," she told him, without hesitation. As skilled as he was with his tongue, she wanted the sensation of being stretched and filled.

He eagerly complied, clambering up her body to position himself and entering her with a swiftness that made her gasp. Hermione was still exquisitely sore from being bent over his desk earlier and fucked with a force that had come close to being brutal. Her mind was too hazy with sleep and tequila to recall if she had come twice or three times, but she knew she had loved it.

She shut her eyes again to focus better on the sensation of overwhelming pleasure mixed with a delicious sort of pain as her boyfriend rode her hard. The restraints at her wrists were arousing but frustrating, limiting her to wrapping her legs around Malcolm's hips to encourage him to go deeper and tightening her internal muscles in a way that had him gasping obscenities.

Hermione was gasping herself, her normally extensive vocabulary reduced to monosyllabic begging, profanity, and her boyfriend's names. "So close," she moaned. "Fuck me more, Draco. Please!"

"Open your eyes," he commanded. "I want you to see who's fucking you, who's making you come."

With a smile, she shook her head. "No, Malcolm. Make me." This was a game they'd played a few times in bed, one of them trying to persuade the other do some little thing. He would now resort to various intimate methods to try and obtain her compliance.

In a deliberate attempt at distraction, she arched her back and clenched him tightly, earning a nip to her earlobe. "You play dirty, Granger. I dare you to do that again."

So of course she did, causing him to groan in pleasure. "You filthy, dirty little witch."

He picked up his pace until her clenching was involuntary and she was crying out his name.

"Look at me, Granger," he ordered again, through increasingly erratic thrusts of his own. "Look at me, *Mudblood*."

She snapped open her eyes to the sight of Draco Malfoy, his eyes silvery with triumph and his face contorted with lust. He had braced himself against the headboard for greater leverage and the Dark Mark was prominent on his arm as he slammed into her a few final times before grunting softly in satisfied completion and slumping on top of her.

For a minute or longer, she lay silent and rigid beneath him, too horrorstruck to move or even react. Hermione kept closing her eyes and reopening them, willing herself to wake up from the nightmare that Draco Malfoy, the amazing bouncing Death Eater ferret, had just finished shagging her *and she had liked it*. She pressed the thumbnail of one bound hand into the pad of her index finger, hoping the sharp pinch would bring her to a different reality. No matter what she did, it didn't change the fact that she could still feel him deep inside her, with his stickiness seeping between her legs.

Malfoy hadn't noticed anything was wrong at first, caught up as he was in his own climax. But now he was staring down at her, an utterly foreign expression of tender concern discernible on his face.

"Hermione, are you alright? Please tell me I didn't hurt you, pet," he pleaded, carefully disengaging his body from hers and gently stroking sweat-damp curls off her forehead.

And that was when she struck.

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Draco was reveling in the afterglow of one of the most intense orgasms he could remember, his forehead touching Hermione's as his heartbeat gradually slowed and his cock softened inside her.

Slowly, as he came down from that blissful high, he realized something was wrong. Granger was ordinarily cuddly and affectionate in the afters, wanting to pet him and willing to curve up against his body, only seeking her own space after she fell asleep. Right now, though, she

was so still beneath him that he might have thought she had passed out from all the alcohol consumed over the course of the evening, except for the tension in her petite body.

He had been careful to support his weight on his elbows, so he wasn't crushing her, but Draco worried he might have gotten a bit too rough towards the end. She wasn't the only one in this bedroom who'd had a bit too much to drink.

"Hermione, are you alright? Please tell me I didn't hurt you, pet," he said worriedly, brushing her hair back from her face.

She looked up at him, her face contorted with rage and loathing.

"I am not your fucking *pet*, Malfoy," she snarled, as she slammed her knee into his groin.

He rolled on the floor, clutching his bits in agony, with Granger screaming abuse at him all the while. "Fucking Death Eater rapist scum! Motherfucking mommy's boy ferret! Do you miss bending over and taking it up the arse as Voldemort's little blond fuck toy?"

She switched to threats, thrashing against her bonds. " - cut off your prick with a dull knife and shove it down your throat. See how you like it, Malfoy!" Draco felt chilled, having no doubt that Granger meant every word she said.

Suddenly, it was mercifully quiet in the room. The only sound Draco could hear was his own harsh, labored breathing. He dared to hope that Hermione had passed out, and cautiously stood up, still cupping himself in pain, to verify if that was the case.

Her eyes were closed, but her forehead was knit in concentration and her lips were moving. Draco wondered if it was a prayer, but Granger, to the extent she was religious at all, seemed like a subscriber to the self-reliant Muggle philosophy that God helped those who helped themselves.

"-um. *Finite Incantum. Finite Incantum.*"

"Oh, fuck!" The knots in his Slytherin tie binding her to the headboard were loosening. She was pulling off wandless magic, *deliberate* wandless magic, before his very eyes.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" His wand was under the pillow, and if Granger loosed herself and found it, he was a dead man.

Frantic, he threw himself onto the bed, pinning her down, and scrabbled for his wand. Despite being tied up and so much smaller than he, Granger was fighting him like a wildcat, intent on inflicting real damage. He jerked his head back as she snapped at his throat, literally going for the jugular. Draco flung up an arm to defend himself and she bit deeply.

He grunted in pain but thanked Merlin it was his right arm Granger had sunk her teeth into. He had largely immobilized her thrashing legs with his body weight, and that gave him the breathing space he needed to grab his wand.

"*Stupefy!*" he said, and then howled in fresh pain as the spell backlashed, sending a searing pain radiating from around his wrist up his arm.

Draco sought about frantically for a gentler spell to incapacitate Hermione, coming up with nothing in his panic. He had always excelled at potion-making, but his ability to brew three different sleeping potions didn't do him a damn bit of good without having a vial at hand to pour down her throat.

Flitwick had taught them a Sleeping Charm in sixth year, but he had been a bit too distracted with killing the headmaster at the time to learn it. In desperation, he attempted the charm anyways. "*Somnus*," he swished and pointed his wand between his girlfriend's eyes, currently staring at him with pure hatred. Nothing happened, but at least the spell didn't hurt either of them. Unlike Granger's teeth, still clamped on his forearm. "*Somnolus*," he tried again, still with no result.

What had Flint done when Katie had been in hysterics over their daughter's magic? Certainly he hadn't slapped her, even if that was a prescribed course of action for a hysterical witch. Draco had no desire to hit or fight back against Granger, and knew he would be incapable of hurting her even to defend himself. "*Confundus*," he said, wand tip at her temple, at last remembering what had worked for Marcus.

Mercifully, it seemed to work for him as well. Granger sagged back against the mattress and released her teeth from his now-bleeding arm. Her eyes were wide with confusion and terror. "Malcolm?" she whispered. "What happened? Why am I tied up?"

He shushed her gently, running his hands quickly over the shoulders and arms to check if she had hurt herself, finding nothing more serious than a deep reddish chafing at her wrists. "You had a nightmare," he answered her first question soothingly. "It was awful, but it's over now, and I'll get you something to drink to help you fall back asleep."

Hermione began crying, like a heartbroken child. "I thought you were someone else - someone evil," she choked out between sobs.

"It's just me. It was just me the whole time," Draco said, trying to comfort her. He wanted to untie her, but couldn't risk it just yet. "I'm getting you a drink. I'll be right back."

Draco hurried from the room, painfully scuttling sideways like a crab, and trying to close his ears to his girlfriend's still-frightened sobbing. He had to call for Mipsy where Granger couldn't see, and send the house-elf to Malfoy Manor for Dreamless Sleep and a healing salve. And, most critically, to fetch books on Memory Charms, so he could figure out what had gone wrong and find out how in Merlin's name to fix it.

The Hangover

November 1, 2003

Dawn was breaking and Draco's eyes were gritty from lack of sleep and hours of reading by the time he found a possible explanation for Granger recovering at least some of her memories, in a slim volume entitled *Mind and Memory Alteration Among the Indigenous People of the Americas*, written by a wizard shaman of the Navajo tribe.

The book included a single chapter on the use of herbs and plants to remove, alter or retrieve memories without use of a wand. Most of the text was devoted to peyote, but in a sentence near the end, the author noted that similar but more transient effects could be obtained from the use of fermented agave.

"Fucking Flint and his fucking tequila shots!" Draco swore.

He flipped through the book to see if there was anything else about agave that could be of practical use to him, but there was nothing but pages and pages of the shaman's lyrical descriptions of the visions he had seen after smoking peyote. Draco considered flinging the book across the room in frustration, but ultimately set it down on the crowded bureau with the other twenty or so books Mipsy had brought over from Malfoy Manor.

None of those books offered anything beyond reiterating the same unhelpful information that he already knew: Memory Charms could only be reversed by their caster or broken by torture. Draco hadn't reversed the spell he had cast on Granger - he didn't have a death wish, after all - and he certainly hadn't been torturing her when her memories resurfaced, no matter what she had screamed at him.

As a Death Eater, there had been two lines he managed never to cross. He had never murdered a defenseless person in cold blood, and he had never raped anyone. Draco certainly didn't expect an Order of Merlin for these dubious achievements, and knew his hands and wand had committed many other crimes at the Dark Lord's bidding, but Hermione's accusation that he was a "Death Eater rapist" had stung. Hell, it fucking *hurt*. That description applied to vile men like Zabini, not to him. As much as he got off on knowing something that Granger didn't, and quite frankly exploiting that knowledge, the Vow gave Draco confidence that he had not coerced her to do anything.

With a grimace due to his tender groin, he stood up and made his way to the master bedroom to check on Granger for probably the tenth time in less than four hours. She was still fast asleep, curled into a tight ball under the duvet. Draco had given her a smaller than usual dose of Dreamless Sleep, due to his concern about mixing it with alcohol, and as a result had no idea when she would wake.

"Is she alright, Mipsy?" Draco pitched his voice low as he addressed the house-elf seated in a chair, close at hand but outside of Granger's line of sight. She had been keeping watch over Hermione since returning from a series of urgent errands to the Manor in the wee hours of the morning.

"Miss is sleeping quietly now," the elf said, refusing to look at him.

"Thank you, Mipsy. You did very well in helping Hermione and me." In part, Draco was complimenting the elf in hopes that she would soften towards him, but he was mostly sincere. The vast majority of house elves would have carried out his disjointed orders of the night before literally, wasting time scouring the Manor's library before returning with books as well as the Dreamless Sleep potion and medical supplies.

Mipsy, accurately gauging the urgency of the situation, had brought the Dreamless Sleep within two minutes and helped him get Hermione to bed, between clean sheets and wearing one of his T-shirts, before returning to the Manor for everything else.

"Mipsy is honored to serve Miss and is guarding her now," the elf responded grudgingly to his praise.

"You don't need to guard her from me, Mips," Draco cajoled the house-elf.

"Mipsy is finding blood on the sheets and Miss is crying. You has been a bad, bad man, Master Draco!" The elf shot him a nasty look and then tapped her snout, very lightly, against the chair's cushion. "Oh, Mipsy is punishing herself for being a bad elf, saying such things about Young Master. Even if they is being true!" she added in a loud undertone.

Draco snorted at the elf's sarcasm, likely learned over four years of observing Granger. "The blood was mine, Mipsy. She bit me. You know I can't hurt her and you *should* know that I don't want to."

"You is deserving the biting, for making Miss cry," the elf sniffed, but at least she looking at him now.

"Probably," Draco admitted, trying for a conciliatory tone. He did not appreciate being taken to task by a house-elf, of all creatures, but he knew he had pushed things too far last night. And he would need the elf's help if Granger's homicidal mood persisted.

Draco still had no idea what he was going to do with her when she woke up. Too much tequila had caused the problem, but he would be buggered if he knew the solution.

His current plan was to present her with two choices: he could take her into the Ministry of Magic, where a professional Obliviator would perform a comprehensive Memory Charm, taking away many of the precious memories going back to age eleven that he had left intact, or she could agree to having him Obliviate just her memories of the prior night, and her relationship with "Malcolm Foy" - with *him* - would carry on as before.

He thought there was perhaps a chance he could reason with the witch, to persuade her to take the second option. Granger had always been level-headed for a Gryffindor, even calculating on occasion. Continuing to date him should not be a deal-breaker. Their attraction was undeniable, and it wasn't as though Draco had disguised himself with Polyjuice Potion in order to seduce her. He hadn't changed his personality for her, either, though admittedly as Malcolm Foy, Granger had seen his best traits, while at Hogwarts she had been treated to the worst. But they were all facets of who he really was.

If she chose to go the Ministry route, though, he would make sure Granger knew that a second wholesale Obliviation might cause enough damage to leave her a permanent resident of the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's. If she still opted for Obliviation by one of the Ministry hacks in the face of that risk, he hoped the Vow would spare him from the consequences of her obstinacy.

It all sounded so plausible in his own mind, but he didn't think it would persuade a hot-tempered, stubborn witch who had already expressed an interest in his castration. And if she refused to be persuaded, Draco didn't know where that would leave them, because he wasn't yet ready to let her go.

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Hermione woke up feeling utterly wretched. Her head was pounding, her mouth felt like it was stuffed with nasty-tasting cotton wool, her shoulders ached, and it was painfully obvious that she and her boyfriend had gotten carried away with their shagging the night before. To make matters worse, when she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, her head spun and her stomach lurched in a way that had her staggering for the loo.

Her knees barely had a chance to hit the floor before she was retching violently into the toilet. The smell of stale alcohol and bile made her heave all the harder. In her misery, it barely registered that Malcolm had been a step behind her into the bathroom and was holding back her hair in a one-handed ponytail, his other hand tracing soothing circles on her back.

"Feeling better now?" he asked with surprisingly solicitousness once her stomach was empty, given her recall of the events of the prior night.

"A little," she croaked.

Hermione had never been a coward, and she decided to face the truth head on. "What happened last night?" she asked. "Did I have a nightmare?"

Malcolm regarded her closely, grey eyes flat with suspicion.

"The part where you thought I was an evil rapist? That was a nightmare," he answered after a moment, in a cool, emotionless voice.

"The part where you attacked me, took a chunk out of my arm and crushed my bollocks with your knee? That really happened." His tone did not change, and Hermione flushed dark red in mortification as he held out his right arm for inspection, with the imprint of her teeth a stark red against his pale skin.

"Oh, God! I am so sorry, Malcolm," she apologized. She reached out to touch the bite mark but flinched back when he drew away.

Hermione bit her lip. "Will you let me explain, or shall I just be going now?" She would understand if he no longer wanted anything to do with a deranged woman who had attacked him when he was at his most vulnerable.

"Of course I'll let you explain, Hermione." Malcolm looked at her with sympathy as he offered a practical suggestion. "But why don't you first brush your teeth, get a shower, and then we can discuss this over breakfast like civilized people?"

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While she was showering, Malcolm left another of his soft, black T-shirts and a pair of his boxer shorts for her on the edge of the sink, with her pretty little charm bracelet on top of the folded clothing.

Outside the bathroom, she found her not yet ex-boyfriend waiting for her, fully dressed and freshly shaven. She immediately felt herself at a disadvantage, a feeling that persisted as he escorted her downstairs to a dining area off the kitchen. His manners were always excellent, but Hermione had the feeling that this morning Malcolm was walking by her side and carefully seating her at the modern glass table because he was fearful of what she might do if he turned his back on her. Politely, he poured mugs of tea for them both, playing the perfect host.

"Draco," she began hesitantly. His head snapped up and the mug clattered on the glass top, alarm apparent in his grey eyes.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," Hermione apologized, feeling worse than ever.

"It's quite all right," he disclaimed, in that same flat, cautious voice he had been using with her all morning. "Have a scone?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to risk it."

"You still look a bit peaky," Malcolm agreed. "At least drink some tea. It will settle your stomach."

Hermione found that he was right. The tea was herbal, with prominent flavors of chamomile and ginger, along with something that was not quite mint but seemed vaguely familiar. Whatever the ingredients, she found herself sipping it eagerly, as it rapidly alleviated her headache and nausea.

Reluctantly, she sat the mug down and squared her shoulders. "So, I owe you an explanation."

Malcolm nodded, eyes wary and face blank, his left hand casually resting in his pants pocket even though his overall posture was tense. "I'm listening."

"More than four years ago, I was hit by a car while riding my bike. Even though I was wearing a helmet, I suffered a traumatic brain injury and I now have large gaps in my memory, going back several years before my accident."

After that blunt admission, Hermione stopped and took a sip of the comforting tea before forcing herself to go on. "From what I've been able to piece together, there was a year or so, after my parents died, where my life sort of fell apart. I dropped out of school and, so far as I

can remember, spent months traipsing aimlessly around the countryside with a couple of boys, living in a tent."

Malcolm was watching her intently, his grey eyes as expressionless as glass. "That doesn't seem like you, but go on."

With unconscious resentment, her eyes raked over his cashmere jumper, pressed trousers, and polished shoes. "I doubt you've ever known what it's like, living on the fringes of society. I *do* remember being hungry, and cold, and always feeling as though we were in danger."

She looked down at the table, and toyed with the book charm on her bracelet before continuing in a low voice. "It's not a memory, exactly, but I have recurring nightmares about being chased through a forest by men who want to snatch me. And in my nightmares, after they catch me, they take me somewhere and throw me down and then there's nothing but pain and blood and I wake up screaming."

Slowly, Hermione rotated the bracelet on her wrist, willing herself to continue confiding in the cold-eyed man sitting across from her. "Whatever awful thing happened to me, whatever it is that I'm suppressing, it has something to do with *this*." She placed her right arm on the table, scar facing up.

"Last night, when you called me a Mudblood . . . It triggered something, and in my muddled mind I thought you were there. That you took part."

Two spots of bright color were burning in Malcolm's high cheekbones. "I should never have said that to you. It's just that - "

"Why did you call me that?" she questioned, desperate to know and somehow certain that he could tell her. "What does it mean?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose, looking defensive. "I like dirty talk in bed, and I thought you liked it, too. I hope you know I don't mean what I say, that I don't believe you are filthy or a slag or any such thing. But I swear I'll never call you that word again."

"But what does it *mean*?" she cried.

"It doesn't mean anything," Malcolm told her, his firm tone at odds with the gentle finger tracing the letters carved into her forearm with his index finger. "I saw this last night and, due to all of those tequila shots and the lack of any filter between my brain and my mouth, I blurted it out. And I'm sorry for what I did, more sorry than you can ever know."

Hermione stared at him, astonished that he was apologizing to her after she had attacked him. She had no doubts as to his sincerity, however. The steely coldness she had seen in his eyes all morning had thawed and his guard was down.

"Please, Hermione, will *you* forgive *me*?" Malcolm asked.

"Of course," she agreed quickly, so quickly that it was only later that she realized the incongruity that he had sought forgiveness for what he *did*, rather than what he *said*.

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Draco was thankful that he had training in the art of Occlumency, as well as years of experience in maintaining the cool demeanor expected of a Malfoy, because otherwise he would be whooping with laughter and gleefully skipping around the room. The last time he had felt such an exhilarating sense of relief had been when he was sixteen, and had by some miracle fixed the Vanishing Cabinet and earned his family a reprieve from the Dark Lord.

Granger didn't remember. He had spent the morning scrutinizing her for any hint of dissembling, but there was nothing. Now that she had sobered up, whatever crack in her mind had let her Obliviated memories resurface was sealed up again, and she was drowning in guilt from having attacked him. Draco was keeping count, and she already had offered him five abject apologies in less than an hour.

While there had been a significant period of time in his life where he would have enjoyed making Granger grovel and would have milked his injuries for sympathy, his Vow was a funny, pesky thing. Draco found himself equally unhappy in the face of her misery, and desperately wanting to make her feel better. He was starting to get an idea why Flint and Nott, ruthless bastards both, were each so absurdly sweet with Katie and Cho.

Draco had begun to realize that his promises to watch over Hermione, to protect her from harm, and to refrain from hurting her, all exerted a stronger pull as he spent more time in her company. He also had noted that the Vow's ambiguous terms seemed to hinge on her mood. Draco cynically thought that was only to be expected from an Unbreakable Vow drafted by a witch, most likely the same clever witch presently splashing around his oversized bathtub like a playful otter while chatting with him about their plans for the day.

He told himself that the Vow explained why he held back her hair when she was sick, why he had dosed her morning tea with a hangover potion, why he insisted that Granger take a hot bath to relieve the strain in her shoulders, why he had nipped over to her flat to fetch clean clothes while she was bathing, and why he had suggested an excursion to the Bodleian library so that she could review a few rare references that she had been coveting in the manner of a three-year-old hankering for sweets. Because any alternative explanation would be wholly unacceptable.

"As much as I'm enjoying the view, now that the bubbles are all gone, you're going to shrivel into a prune if you stay in much longer," Draco told her. "And didn't you want to catch an earlier train to Oxford?"

That was enough to get her out of the tub. "Would you hand me a towel, please?" she requested.

Draco stood up from his perch on the edge of the sink to comply with her request, taking his time while doing so to admire her wet, naked body. For at least the next few days, he would be confined to looking rather than touching after the number she'd done on his family jewels, so the least Granger could do was to allow a lengthy perusal.

She apparently disagreed, grabbing the towel from his hand and swatting him with it before wrapping it around herself. "Perv! You've been leering at me for the last ten minutes

already!"

"Play nice, Granger, or you won't get that lovely massage that I promised you," Draco warned. It was a bluff; he had seen her wince when reaching for the towel and was determined to get Mipsy's healing salve on her, one way or another.

She decided to play nice, though, laying face down on the bed as soon as she'd donned her knickers and pulling the towel down to her hips to give him full access to the smooth expanse of her back and shoulders. As he began working the ointment into her skin, Granger squirmed happily and mewled under his hands, leading Draco to smirk. Under her prim exterior, she really was a sensualist.

He ran a finger along her spine. "Do you have any plans for the weekend after next, pe-princess?" In addition to Mudblood, Draco was also excising "pet," from his vocabulary, at least as an endearment addressed to Granger. Only a fool would consider a lioness a pet.

"Nothing specific," she murmured in distraction.

"Good," he declared. "That means I can take you away for a mini-break. Do you prefer Dublin or Paris?"

He felt her predictable objection in the slight, renewed tension in her shoulders before she could give voice to it.

"Consider it a rather elaborate form of apology for everything that happened last night," he offered. Draco was feeling a bit of morning-after regret about the manner in which he'd won his bet with Theo and Flint, and hoped that spending his winnings on Granger would calm his squeamish conscience.

"I thought you had declared any further apologies *verboden*," Granger rolled over slightly to look him in the eyes.

"Ah, but that was specific to your apologies tendered to me," Draco said lightly, pressing her back down and continuing to knead her shoulders. "Among other things, I shouldn't have tied you up, at least not without getting your permission first.

"Dublin, then," she said after a brief consideration, her answer muffled by the mattress. "I passed through Paris in August with my godparents, but I've never been anywhere in Ireland. At least, not that I can recall," she added, a little sadly.

She turned her head to one side, eyes closed as he continued his ministrations. "You needn't be so apologetic about tying me up, you know. Before everything went pear-shaped, I was rather enjoying the experience. I wouldn't object to trying it again, without the tequila."

Draco's hands smoothed down her back. The memory of Hermione Granger tied up in his bed was one that he would cherish, but still he hesitated. "But what if that triggered something?"

Granger cracked open one eye and smiled in a way that made his pulse pick up. "We could pick a safe word. And you do have a four-poster bed."

Draco was too enthralled by the mental image of her naked, spread out, and willingly restrained at the ankles and wrists on his bed to pay much attention to the first part of her reply. "Sure, yeah, a safe word," he vaguely agreed.

She propped herself up on one elbow, musing over an appropriate word. "It needs to be something I wouldn't ordinarily say to you in bed, like an vegetable or an animal. Something so memorable that it would stop you in your tracks, as it were."

Her smile shifted into a smirk, and there was a sly gleam in her golden-brown eyes. "I've got it!" she announced, looking him over. "Our safe word is . . . *ferret*."

Knowledge Is Power

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains some non-con and self-harm references, as more of Cho's background comes out, and also mentions offscreen violence.

November 7, 2003

Cho was already seated at the café they had picked for their lunch meeting when Hermione arrived, with her sleek bk hair hanging loose and her face partially shielded by *The Sun*. A steaming cup of green tea and individual-sized pot occupied the table in front of her.

"I apologize for ordering before you arrived, but I pulled a twelve-hour shift overnight and had only four hours of sleep this morning. My need for caffeine was approaching a critical level," Cho said in greeting.

"That's perfectly understandable," Hermione responded, taking a seat opposite Cho and glancing at her newspaper. "Somehow, I didn't take you for a tabloid reader."

"Typically, I'm not, but Theo left this under my door with a note. He thought I'd find this article to be of interest." Cho gestured with one graceful hand, her engagement ring glinting. "So might you."

"E'-Z Does It," screamed the lurid headline, followed by, "Clubgoer Castrates, Kills Self In Drug Frenzy." The accompanying picture showed a handsome, dark-skinned man in a sleeveless shirt and tight pants, identified in the caption as Blaise Zabini, and, according to *The Sun*, a fixture on the Soho club scene and suspected Ecstasy dealer.

"How awful, to die that young," Hermione commented on the former schoolmate of Malcolm's she had danced with just last Saturday.

Cho was unmoved. "What a trite observation. There are much better people who have died younger, still in their teens." From the sad, distant look in her eyes, she had someone specific in mind.

She took a sip of tea and her face hardened. "Personally, I am thrilled that he is dead. The women of London are just that little bit safer with his suicide."

"Did you know him before?" Hermione had taken her own measure of Blaise and did not disagree with Cho, but the other woman's icy vehemence was disturbing. "You seem rather . . . invested in his death."

"Like you, I wouldn't necessarily remember if I had known him. But I generally don't have a desire to stab people on making their acquaintance. So I assume I did know him, most likely in an unwilling, biblical sense," Cho said in a level voice.

"What happened to you?" Hermione asked, not entirely certain she wanted the other woman to answer. Her innate curiosity was at war with an instinctive sense that Cho's story was a harrowing one.

"The short story is that I was dumped at a police station in South Yorkshire, unconscious and wearing nothing other than a man's black cloak stained with various bodily fluids."

Cho went on, softly and bitterly. "At the hospital, they found no evidence of any immediate sexual assault, but I had quite a bit of scar tissue indicating repeated, forcible penetration on at least one occasion within the past months. When I woke up and couldn't remember what had happened to me, the police assumed I was a prostitute who had run afoul of my pimp or some punters."

"With respect to all of the sordid details, it's easier for me to show you than to tell you," Cho added, handing over a blue folder. "Suffice it to say that what was done to me was so brutal that I may never be able to have children of my own."

Hermione passed over a red binder of her own and began reading through the other woman's copies of police and medical reports. Taking out their biros, both began to read, making the occasional note or asking a soft-voiced, tentative question.

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Draco and his father exited the lift into the Ministry of Magic's Atrium, dragonhide leather shoes clicking in tandem against the marble floor. Both men had matching satisfied smirks on their faces, following a highly successful meeting with the International Magical Trading Standards office. Over Percy Weasley's strenuous objection, they had secured the Undersecretary's support for a tariff on Russian sleep potions that ultimately would inure to the advantage of the bottom line at Malfoy Enterprises.

"Well done, Draco!" Lucius praised.

"Thank you, father," he responded off-handedly, taking it as his due. There was a time when he would have done back flips to hear those words fall from Lucius's lips, but Draco had realized years ago that the father he once idolized had feet of clay.

In the Atrium, on their way to the bank of Floo-connected fireplaces, they encountered the Notts, father and son, in an intense conversation next to the fountain. From the older Nott's heavy scowl and Theo's angrily flushed face, it was obvious their business at the Ministry had not gone as well.

"She overreaches herself," Nott, Sr. fumed. "A petty hag of a bureaucrat having the temerity to question *me*!"

"Not to mention her insult to my fiancée," Theo added in a dangerously soft tone.

"I have no objection to such sentiments about Mudbloods, but once we had shown her our proofs, Umbridge's tone should have changed. To refer to your future wife as a filthy whore -"

Lucius would have continued to eavesdrop until the Nott men noticed him, but Draco cleared his throat, interrupting Theo's father before he could embark on a full-scale tirade. Talk of Mudbloods easily could lead to mentions of Granger, and he and Narcissa had decided to keep his father in the dark until Draco had something - specifically, a healthy baby boy - to show from his liaison with Hermione.

The two older men acknowledged each other with the sort of urbane hostility normally reserved for heads of state whose countries are on the brink of war. Lucius then turned to Theo. "Congratulations on your upcoming nuptials. Who is the blushing bride?"

"Cho Chang," Theo said with more than a hint of defiance.

"Ah. Narcissa ordinarily tells me about these things, but I can see why you're keeping it quiet," Lucius commented maliciously.

"Don't you have more control over your son?" he asked the elder Nott. "Young wizards - and not so young - do enjoy rutting in the mud, but you of all people should know it's not necessary to marry the bitch first. Or even get her consent."

Nott, Sr. placed a restraining hand on Theo's wand arm. "It appears that mistakes were made in connection with Miss Chang's blood status. We are now in possession of evidence from the Guowuyuan in Beijing showing at least three of her four grandparents were magical, evidence that was misplaced when their Muggle political upheavals in 1949 and the 1960s disrupted the magical world."

"Oh, is that so? I look forward to examining those proofs, which our esteemed undersecretary found to be so underwhelming." Lucius sneered, patently unbelieving. Draco had no idea whether Theo's Chinese documents were real or fake, and was far too savvy to ask his friend and expect to obtain a truthful answer.

Lucius had a parting shot for Theo. "Enjoy your honeymoon, my dear boy. I did not fully partake in Miss Chang's charms, but I do remember that she has a wonderfully talented mouth when properly instructed."

With that, Theo lunged at Lucius. Draco stepped between them, and Theo's father grabbed his arms to hold him back.

"He's not worth it," Theo's father snarled.

Draco silently agreed, but focused in getting through to Theo another way. "C'mon, mate. You're in the middle of the Ministry. This is not the time or the place for a wizards' duel."

Between the two of them, something brought Theo back to his usual, rational self. He nodded curtly at Lucius. "Say what you will to me, but if you or anyone upsets Cho, there will be consequences, Lucius."

Lucius sneered but said nothing further to the younger man. "I would be interested in seeing the documentation supporting the purity of the Chang girl's blood," he said challengingly to Nott Sr.

"Come back to my office now and you can examine it," the other man invited.

"Fuckers, the both of them," Theo sneered at the two departing wizards' backs. "They fucked us up, they fucked our women up, they fucked our entire world up."

Draco did not disagree, although Granger was thankfully less damaged by her torture than Cho had been by rape. "Want me to buy you a drink?"

Theo shook his head. "I still have things to do for the wedding, like filling out some Merlin-damned form to get the Wizengamot to recognize my marriage to Cho, even though she's a witch."

"I'll come with you," Draco offered.

He re-entered the lift, Theo in his wake. They were the only passengers. "Where are we going?"

"Level 2, Wizengamot Administration Services." Theo answered, still seething.

Draco pressed the button. "So, when and where do I show up on Saturday for your wedding? I've never seen a Muggle ceremony before."

Theo looked uncomfortable. "You don't, actually. We're just having Mark and Katie as witnesses."

"I see," Draco said, feeling snubbed.

"I would like to have you there, but I don't want to trigger anything with Cho."

"I wasn't there," Draco defended himself. "I never laid a finger on her."

"I know," Theo sighed before continuing. "But your father was, as he just so charmingly alluded to. Cho had a horrific nightmare on Halloween night. I think Zabini caused it, but she met you then, too, and your resemblance to your father is strong. I just don't want to risk it."

"Did Cho remember you on Halloween?" Draco asked, pressing a button to hold the lift doors closed so they could speak in confidence.

"No, but it sounded like she remembered Zabini and . . . others," said Theo, his face grim.

"Did she try to hurt you? Granger went after me on Halloween when she realized who I was."

"Cho and I don't sleep together," Theo admitted sadly. "My flat is next to hers, so I could hear her screaming through the walls."

Before Draco could ask Nott why he hadn't gone in to comfort his fiancée, Theo turned to him, eyes wide. "Wait, did you say Granger remembered you? As Draco Malfoy?"

"Oh, yes, she remembered me," Draco confirmed bitterly. "As Death Eater scum, Voldemort's bitch, ferret boy - the whole kit and caboodle. And then I Confounded her and she seemed to have forgotten it all the next morning, or chalked it up to a tequila-induced bad dream. Except that - "

"Except what?" Theo prompted.

"You know what a safe word is, right?" Draco asked.

Theo held up one thin hand. Draco noticed his friend's usually well-manicured nails were bitten to the quick and his cuticles were ragged, signs of his nervousness about his upcoming wedding. "Stop right there. I have no desire to hear about what you were doing with Granger that required a safe word."

"And I'm not Flint, so I have no desire to overshare with you," Draco retorted. "And we haven't used it yet, seeing as I'm still recovering from taking her knee to my bollocks last weekend. But I thought you should know that she chose 'ferret' for our safe word, which makes me worry she might be getting some memories back."

"She chose 'ferret,'" Nott repeated, taken aback. Then he grinned. "That's hilarious!"

"It's not funny," Draco growled. "I know I Obliviated *that* memory out of her curly head. Hell, if I could, I would Oblivate everyone who saw me turned into a ferret and bounced down the stairs. Sometimes, though, I feel like Hermione remembers a lot more than she lets on and is just fucking with me. And *not* in the way I want her to be!"

After a quiet moment of deliberation, Theo shook his head. "As intelligent as she is, Granger is too straightforward to fool you about something like that. I suspect that she has some residual, non-magical memories of Potter and Weasley ragging on you in the Gryffindor common room. 'Ferret' is probably the nicest thing they ever called you and it's subconsciously a term she associates with you."

Theo's careful logic was somewhat reassuring to the blond wizard. "That makes sense, I suppose," Draco agreed. "I worry about the link between her subconscious and active mind, though, and just how much seems to seep through. Does Cho ever seem to remember what she shouldn't?"

"Not so much with the memories that Flitwick took, but all the time in her nightmares," Theo replied. "Now, may we go and get my license before the lazy Ministry buggers all head home for the weekend?"

Draco released the button and the lift doors slid open.

The two men exited into controlled chaos on the second floor, with a team of maroon-robed Aurors rushing into their vacated lift, Dean Thomas making it a point to shoulder Draco aside.

"Where are those wankers off to in such a rush?" he wondered.

Theo cast a *Muffliato* as they walked down the long hallway leading to the administrative offices.

"Probably off to view Zabini's mutilated corpse. I read in the Muggle newspaper that he was found dead, penis cut off and throat slit. Apparent suicide." Theo was smirking, not pretending to feel even the slightest bit of regret or remorse.

"Zabini? That arrogant toe rag would never off himself," Draco said with certainty. "And no man in his right mind would do that to his own bits. Zabini was an evil fucker, but perfectly sane."

"True," Theo agreed. "Amazing, isn't it, what a wizard will do under the influence of the Imperius curse? And it leaves no evidence. The Aurors look into the suspicious death of every wizard or witch, but I expect they'll find nothing to warrant further investigation."

"But if Auror Thomas does come asking, where were you last night, Mr. Nott?" Draco mockingly interrogated him.

"I was at the Wizengamot's annual dinner, seated with the Chief Warlock. Excepting the ten minutes I was on stage, accepting an award for my legal work assisting with the adoption of war orphans," Theo told him with a sunny smile. "Wand oath?" he asked.

Draco discreetly touched the tip of his wand to Theo's. He did always enjoy a good whodunit.

"Before you ask, Cho - if anyone would even dream of implicating her - was at the hospital from seven in the evening on, including several hours in the operating theatre helping to save Muggle lives."

"My father," Theo added, "has come to regret his short-sighted brutality towards my fiancée and is doing everything in his power to have her recognized as a witch. He was buttonholing various Wizengamot members last night to lobby for her, but regrettably developed a migraine and had to leave just after my speech."

"Let me guess - he returned straightaway to Nott Court and your loyal house-elves put him to bed?" Draco asked.

"Got it in one!" Theo confirmed. "While I remained at the Wizengamot dinner, periodically sipping from a hip flask to sustain myself. And if a Muggle happened to notice some skinny bloke with specs near Zabini's flat, there are a lot of people in London who fit that description."

"Fucking brilliant!" Draco praised him. This was the Theo he had grudgingly admired at Hogwarts, the slightly-built, bookish and motherless boy who nonetheless had never been bullied, because everyone knew about the viciousness that ran in the Nott family.

"I know," Theo agreed, with no false modesty. "Cho is rather hard to shop for, but I know this a wedding present she'll appreciate. I've set aside my memories of Zabini blubbing for her

to enjoy in a Pensieve once she's permitted back in the wizarding world."

"Did you use her scalpel?" Draco asked curiously. Granger had relayed Cho's well-merited desire to stick her surgeon's tool into Zabini's black-hearted body.

"No," Theo shook his head, "She doesn't bring that home from the hospital." He grinned evilly. "I did, however, use her wand."

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Two more pots of tea had come and gone, and a plate of sandwich crusts was nearly buried in notepaper. Both women owned laptops, but agreed that note-taking with pen and paper was more conducive to learning.

"This makes no sense!" Hermione complained. "The only commonalities are that in 1999, you and I both suffered a loss of a good portion of our memories from age eleven on. But that's it."

She ticked off the differences on her fingers, consulting her notes. "Your incident was in February, mine was in June. I was struck by a hit and run driver, while you were the victim of one or more sexual predators."

"Both are crimes," Cho noted.

Hermione shook her head. "Of a very different nature. Did the police check the semen on the cloak to see if it matched the DNA of any known sex offenders?"

"They claim to have checked and found no match, but they struck me as lazy, incompetent sods, the lot of them. Once the inspector decided I was a prostitute, the entire department was disgustingly eager to turn a blind eye towards any crime against me." Cho was understandably outraged. "The hospital staff at least saw that I received counseling, but it was more in the nature of 'do try not to be a sex worker anymore, dearie.'"

Hermione sensed that any comment about Cho's situation would be unwelcome, so she continued with her summary of the data. "You were left outside a police station in Rotherham, while I was found on a country lane in Wiltshire. Do you have any connection to that town or South Yorkshire more generally?"

"Not that I can recall," Cho said ironically. Both women suddenly laughed, in a shared moment of bleak humor. "Have you any connection to Wiltshire?"

"No," Hermione shook her head, "Other than it's where Malcolm grew up."

Cho looked up sharply. "Theo's family home is in a village called Upper Flagley, in Yorkshire. Rotherham is the nearest market town."

Hermione made a note of it. "Odd, but there are plenty of people who hail from those counties. How long have you known Theo?"

"Oh, more than four years. When I moved into my flat, he was already living down the hall," Cho replied.

"And I met Malcolm only a couple months ago, at a bookstore, so there's no commonality there." Hermione shook her head in frustration as the dots refused to connect.

"Do you have any old injuries, particularly of a sexual nature?" Cho asked. "I didn't see any mention of it in your hospital reports, but they may not have thought to look for evidence of assault under the circumstances of your accident."

"Nothing other than this," Hermione replied, pulling up her right sleeve. "Does 'Mudblood' mean anything to you?"

Cho hissed at the sight of the scar, but then shook her head in frustration. "It's gone. I know it's bad, but I've forgotten what it means."

"So you don't have anything like that on your arm?" Hermione asked.

"No, my scars are self-inflicted." Cho pushed up her cardigan to reveal thin white lines on both arms running from wrist to elbow.

"What did you do?" Hermione gasped, horrified.

"Slit my wrists when it all got to be too much, obviously. I thought you were supposed to be the bright one?"

Hermione paid no need to the other woman's caustic question. "How did you survive? That wasn't an amateur job."

"Why, thank you, Granger. I do value competence," Cho said with sarcasm. "And I even did it in the bath, to prevent clotting."

Cho readjusted her sleeves to hide the scars before answering. "Theo heard me through the walls, though I didn't think I made any noise. He called 999 and broke down the door of my flat to hold towels around my arms until the medics arrived." She smiled, an odd combination of bitterness and fondness. "We started dating soon after that."

"You do realize we aren't the only ones with scars on our arms," Hermione said. "Malcolm and Theo both have that skull and snake brand on their left forearms."

"I loathe that repulsive thing," Cho spoke intensely. "I still find it hard to believe that Theo let himself be talked into that kind of stupidity."

"I feel the same way about that disgusting thing on Malcolm's arm," Hermione agreed. "Do you think it's odd that we both suffered the same type of traumatic memory loss and then found ourselves involved with men who have that mark?"

"You're mixing cause and effect," Cho pointed out. "We met because your boyfriend and my fiancé were at school together, so any commonality we share through them should be discounted."

"Logically, I agree with you," Hermione conceded. "But - "

"But you still believe it may be important, even though you lack any rational basis for that belief," Cho finished the thought for her.

"Yes," Hermione admitted.

"I happen to agree with you, logic and rationality be damned. The problem, of course, is that you and I are the only two data points, which makes it difficult to discern patterns or develop a working hypothesis." Cho cupped her chin thoughtfully in her hand.

"Do you know whether Katie suffered any memory loss?" Hermione inquired. "Her partner has that same tattoo on his arm. I saw it on Halloween."

"I don't know, but we should ask. I was thinking of a more systematic approach, mining NHS records for amnesia diagnoses to see what we find," Cho said.

"Develop a database, as it were?" Hermione asked, already beginning to see the possibilities.

"Precisely. We'll have a bit of a delay since I'm not back at the hospital until after my honeymoon." Cho frowned in annoyance. "But after that, what do you say to a bit of interdisciplinary research?"

"I say, '*scientia potentia est*,'" Hermione quoted.

"Knowledge is power, indeed," Cho concurred.

Patience Is a Virtue

Chapter Notes

This chapter includes a Cho/Theo honeymoon scene that could be considered dub-con, because Cho doesn't know who her husband really is and because of what she pulls out of her medical kit. My personal take is that it's consensual but very, very sad.

November 15, 2003

Despite the man's myriad failings, Minerva McGonagall would concede that Kingsley Shacklebolt ran a tight ship where meetings were concerned. This particular meeting of the Order of the Phoenix seemed likely to wrap up in under two hours, notwithstanding the adorable distraction of the month-old Thomas twins, and some interesting developments, including Cho Chang's wedding to Theodore Nott, Jr.; a shouting match between Dolores Umbridge and both Theodore Notts over Cho's blood status; and the apparent suicide of Blaise Zabini.

The Headmistress shifted her dozing namesake, little Minnie, to a more comfortable position on her shoulder as Dean Thomas closed the books on the Zabini case during the meeting's open discussion period.

"We investigated and found no evidence of a wizards' duel, so the Aurors see no reason not to accept the conclusion of the Muggle police that he did it to himself."

"What's your opinion about the case, Dean?" Bill Weasley asked.

The Auror gave his eldest brother-in-law an indifferent shrug. "Personally, if someone did murder Zabini, I'd rather give her a medal than send her to Azkaban."

Dean exchanged a meaningful look with Ginny, who had left Hogwarts before completing her sixth year out of fear about what Zabini might do to her while the Carrows turned a blind eye. "So consider me content to accept the official conclusion rather than sifting through the alibis of every witch he ever wronged."

The conversation shifted to speculation about Cho Chang's blood status. "D'ya think she might really be a pureblood?" Ron Weasley asked, mouth full of his mother's fudge.

His brother George shrugged. "She was snooty enough back at school, for sure. Always got shirty whenever Fred or I asked to copy her homework."

Shacklebolt's assessment was more factual. "I've examined the proofs, and they seem convincing. Mr. Nott clearly spared no expense and used every bit of *guanxi* he and his father have with the Chinese magical authorities to compile them. Madam Undersecretary

Umbridge is withholding a final decision for now, claiming that the ability to bear magical children is the hallmark of a true witch."

Angelina snorted. "In that case, can we banish that hypocritical old hag to the Muggle world?"

Professor Flitwick could shed no light on Cho's blood status. "Her parents spoke relatively little English, so we never had an extensive conversation about her family history. For what little it's worth," he noted in his squeaky voice, "they did not seem shocked when I told them Cho was a witch."

"If Cho wasn't Muggleborn, wouldn't Hermione have found that out, like she did for me?" Dean asked.

His wife shook her head decisively, causing her red ponytail to sway. "Cho never would have asked her for help. She was best friends with Marietta Edgecombe and neither of them ever forgave Hermione for jinxing her."

"That sneak Marietta deserved it, for trying to betray the D.A. to Umbridge!" Seamus asserted from his seat on the other side of Dean. "Hermione's jinx was bloody brilliant!"

"I agree with you," Ginny said, passing her other twin baby girl to her husband, "but Cho thought it was a horrible trick. She was also always quite a bit jealous of Hermione's friendship with Harry."

"Setting aside Miss Chang's blood status, which should not be of more than academic interest to anyone in *this* room," Professor Sprout said, "should we take any steps to advise her as to Mr. Nott's true identity as a wizard?"

"I dunno, Professor," Seamus Finnigan replied. "I think we leave it up to Nott. Me Mam didn't tell my dad until after they'd been married. Bit of a nasty shock for him, but he got over it."

"It would have been an even nastier shock if your mother were a Death Eater," Bill Weasley noted.

"Don't insult me mam like that!" Seamus fired up.

Minerva broke up the squabble with an ease acquired over decades of instructing hot-tempered adolescents. "I tend to agree with Seamus. With half-blood marriages, it always has been left to the discretion of the magical spouse when to tell, so long as it is *after* the wedding. My own mother did not reveal to my father she was a witch until I was born, when they had been married more than a year."

She held up a hand to forestall Angelina Weasley's protest. "I am aware that the parallel is not exact, because Miss Chang is a witch. However, due to her Obliviation, she is in the same position as a Muggle in her current ignorance of magic."

Hestia Jones was philosophical. "At this point, does it really matter if we tell her or not? The wedding already took place, correct?"

"Correct," Kingsley confirmed. "Saturday last."

"Cho's intelligence is of the skeptical variety, so even if one of us were to violate the Statute of Secrecy to tell her she just married a wizard, I highly doubt she would believe it," Professor Flitwick reasoned. "Mr. Nott seems very motivated to have her memories restored, so he will tell her in due course if he hasn't already."

Out of the corner of her eye, Minerva saw Mundungus Fletcher attempting to sneak into the room. Shacklebolt fixed him with a gimlet eye and Minerva smiled grimly to herself. She personally would have expelled the petty criminal from the Order of the Phoenix years ago for unreliability, untrustworthiness, and general incompetence, but Shacklebolt had kept him on out of respect for Dumbledore. At least Dung would not be shirking his responsibilities at this meeting.

"Mundungus, how kind of you to join us," Kingsley's voice boomed out. "Perhaps you can give us your report on Miss Granger?"

"O'course, Minister," Mundungus agreed, stopping in his tracks and removing a well-thumbed notebook from the interior of his cloak and flipping it to the correct page, leaning against the kitchen mantel as he spoke.

"Ah, yes. Saw the lass very late in the morning on the eighth of October. Looked to be in bloomin' good spirits after riding a broomstick all night. Gave me a nice pile o' pocket change when I asked."

"What have you been smoking, Dung? Hermione hates flying!" Ron objected thickly around yet another mouthful of fudge.

Bill grimaced at his youngest brother's table manners. "He's speaking metaphorically, Ron."

"Yeah, Ronniekins, he's telling us your ex-girlfriend finally got a decent shag," George jibed. "Right, Dung?"

The bandy-legged little man nodded and Minerva thanked sweet Nimue that Lavender had stayed at the Burrow to help Molly tend the Weasley brood. She was certain that whatever tactless thing was about to drop from Ronald Weasley's mouth would only upset his wife.

Ron frowned. "Moving through them rather fast, isn't she? Didn't Hermione just break up with another Muggle bloke?"

"That was back in August. I say good on her," George declared, earning an approving nod from Angelina.

"I zink zat you are being a 'ypocrite, Ronald," Fleur reprimanded with a toss of her hair. "You are 'appy with your wife, no? So be 'appy for Hermione that she has found a man who puts a smile on her face."

Ron still looked sulky. "I want to be the one to check on 'Mione before the next meeting, to make sure this Muggle isn't a complete wanker."

"I've already called dibs for the next visit with Hermione," Ginny asserted hotly. "I want her to meet the twins before the weather gets too nasty. So unless you fancy bat bogeys coming out of your nose, brother, you'll wait your turn."

"Fine," Ron huffed, "but I get to check in on her after you."

"Patience is a virtue, Ronniekins," George teased his younger brother.

Kingsley nodded his acceptance. "Is that all, Mundungus?"

The little man grinned. "If you'd like a bit o' a laugh, I had two Death Eaters ask me to buy'em a couple of doses of a WonderWitch lust potion. The Malfoy brat and Marcus Flint, the day after I saw our Hermione." Dung had recited this particular anecdote at the pub often enough that he no longer needed to consult his notebook to verify the exact details.

George grinned back at him. "Verity told me about that little purchase, Dung. I was worried for you, that you'd fallen for some underage charmer."

"No, no," Dung shook his head. "Not at this time in me life. I was jus' taking a commission fer those snake-worshiping bastards."

"Do you have any information as to who they were intending to dose with the potion, Mundungus?" Minerva asked, concerned for her students.

"Prolly themselves, so they could go bugger each other up and down Knockturn Alley," Dung answered.

Seamus, George, Dean and Ron whooped with laughter.

"I always thought that was what they got up to in the Slytherin locker rooms!" Dean chuckled.

"So that's how Malfoy got Flint to let him play Seeker second year," George waggled his eyebrows. "It wasn't Daddy buying broomsticks for the team after all!"

"It is *not* a laughing matter, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Weasley, if two Death Eaters are seeking to incite young girls to engage in sexual intercourse!" Minerva said sternly. "Particularly using a product that you sell to the wizarding public!"

"It's alright, Professor," George told her, with a cheeky grin. "The WonderWitch infatuation potions are nothing more than Muggle soda water with some sugary flavoring and food coloring added. That's why Fred and I added the disclaimer on the bottles that effectiveness depends on the weight of the boy and the attractiveness of the girl in question. It's a placebo, and won't make any of your students do anything they weren't already inclined to do."

"So," the redhead continued, "if Flint and Malfoy found themselves playing a spirited game of 'Where's Your Wand?' in a dodgy hotel room after drinking a WonderWitch potion, the

potion is just a fig leaf for something they were going to do anyways."

"I am relieved to hear that, Mr. Weasley," Minerva said. She was relieved, too, that Mundungus had reported the WonderWitch purchase took place the day *after* he observed Hermione. She had never trusted the Malfoy boy, and had caught him looking intensely at her favorite pupil in Transfiguration a few too many times for comfort.

"Mundungus, do you have anything else to report?" Kingsley asked, preparing to adjourn the meeting.

Dung consulted his notebook again. "Aye, there was one funny thing. So's when I look to count the change Hermione gave me, there in the middle of me palm is a bleedin' Knut!"

"She gave you a Knut?" Kingsley questioned, the lines of his body suddenly alert. Minerva felt the same jolt of tension and excitement. Throughout the kitchen in Grimmauld Place, heads swiveled expectantly in Dung's direction.

Shacklebolt held out his hand. "May I see it?"

Mundungus shifted from one foot to the other, an apologetic expression on his face. "Well, you see, Minister, it's like this . . . "

"You spent it, didn't you?" Minerva questioned, sharply enough that the baby she was holding made a sleepy whimper.

Dung nodded, shamelessly. "It was just a bleedin' coin. The barmaid at the Black Cat proolly still has it, not that I can tell one Knut from another, meself."

"Mr. Fletcher!" Minerva modulated her voice so as to not wake little Minnie, but her strict tone was one familiar to generations of Hogwarts troublemakers. "Each Knut is stamped with a unique serial number, identifying the goblin who minted it and the date upon which it was minted. If you had retained Hermione's Knut, it might have provided the Order with valuable information."

"It was sorta shiny," Dung offered.

Minerva was not pacified. "That does nothing to confirm, Mr. Fletcher, whether it was minted after June 1999. It makes a very great difference whether it was mixed in with Miss Granger's Muggle coins and overlooked when she left us, or whether it more recently came into her possession."

"I'll see what I can find out when I meet Hermione in December, Professor," Ginny Thomas volunteered. "Maybe ask her about foreign coins or just happen to try to pay with something with a Knut."

"That's fine, Madam Thomas, but please be mindful of the Statute of Secrecy," Shacklebolt warned. "It would not look good for Harry Potter's widow to be caught breaking the law."

"Don't worry, Kingsley," Ginny brushed aside his caution with a wink and all the reckless zest of one of Godric Gryffindor's own. "I won't get *caught* breaking the law."

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With a stifled groan, Theo Nott - naked as the day he was born - rolled away from his equally naked wife and stared up at the bedroom ceiling of the resort's honeymoon suite, willing his throbbing erection to subside. When it refused to obey him, he cleared his throat awkwardly. "I'll just be in the loo for a few minutes."

Cho had also been looking at the ever-fascinating ceiling, but at that, she rolled over to face him, her eyes bright with tears. "I'm sorry, Theo. I thought - "

"Don't apologize," he cut her off. "*You have nothing* to apologize for." Theo reached out to lightly stroke her shoulder and counted it as a victory when Cho didn't shrink away from him. "I can be patient."

Unlike Malfoy, who had the impulse control of a toddler - especially where Granger was concerned - Theo *was* a patient man. He known Cho for more than a year as a casual, friendly acquaintance before they began dating. He had since dated Cho for more than three years in a largely chaste courtship, taking baby steps towards full intimacy as her trust in him grew. It was a testament to his patience that they could kiss on a bed, without clothing, and even do other things, but Theo had rather optimistically hoped that he would be able to consummate his marriage to Cho at some point during their honeymoon. Six days into a week-long vacation, with their flight back to London tomorrow afternoon, that was looking increasingly unlikely. When they did anything that approached penetration, she would freeze up and his wrist would begin to ache in a clear warning for him not to take things any further.

Relatively early in their relationship, Cho had told him what she knew and suspected about her past sexual assault. Theo knew far more. While he had only been present for the last hour or so of her ordeal, his father had been there the entire time. At Theo's request, he had gone into a Pensieve and compiled a list of every vile thing that had been done to Cho, every act she had been forced to perform, and every insult and mocking endearment used by her rapists. In addition to being patient, Theo was careful, and he would not set back the hard-won ground he had gained with his damaged witch by a thoughtless word or action.

Cho, regrettably, *was* a damaged witch, physically and mentally. When he proposed, she had been forthright that she might not be able to bear children, and he had known how mentally fragile she was since her suicide attempt.

Theo was less concerned about the physical damage. Cho's injuries had not compromised her fertility, but rather increased the risk that she would be unable to carry a pregnancy to term due to the weaker nature of scar tissue. The Muggles had some relatively crude methods that might work, but Theo had also spoken in confidence to a sympathetic Healer at St. Mungo's, one of Cho's Ravenclaw housemates, who thought a series of strengthening charms would work to prevent a miscarriage. That was one of the reasons Theo was so anxious to have Cho back in the magical world.

The other reason was to address the mental damage caused by a gang rape she couldn't remember, except in her nightmares. Theo never wanted to restore her memories of the actual sexual violence that had been perpetrated against her, but he did want her to know *why* she had been targeted. It was not because she had been a prostitute, as the moronic Muggle police

suggested, or even a victim caught up in a web of sex traffickers. It was because she had been a brilliant, feared fighter for the Light. Theo thought - or at least hoped - that would make a difference to her mental health.

Theo reminded himself to be grateful Cho was merely damaged, not entirely broken. When his father had advised him to undertake the Vow with a witch of child-bearing years, Theo had been largely indifferent when making his selection. Granger was the pick of the litter, in terms of magical power and ability, but Theo had not been tempted to contest Malfoy's claim. Her personality was too fiery for Theo's tastes. He thought that if Granger ever got her memories back, she and Malfoy would either kill each other or rule the world together.

Cho had been the most logical choice among the remaining younger witches. As a Ravenclaw, he knew she was intelligent, and from what he had observed in the chaos of the battle at Hogwarts, her spells were precise and powerful. His interactions with her in school had been superficial but not unpleasant. If he had to continue the Nott line with a Muggleborn, she was acceptable. Over the years, that cool logic had given way to much warmer feelings towards Cho. Theo did not know if he was capable of love - certainly his first wife, Daphne, had claimed he was not - but what he felt towards Cho was reasonably close.

The serious tenor of his thoughts had done nothing to alleviate his immediate physical problem. As he made to roll out of bed to masturbate in the shower like a randy adolescent, Cho forestalled him.

"If you want me to, I could touch you," she offered awkwardly.

Theo was tempted. His wife had a surgeon's skilled hands, and this was an act she was willing and able to perform for him. But in this instance, he didn't want the sweet torture of something less than what he really desired.

"That's a kind offer, love, but I can take of myself." Theo softened the rejection with an endearment and a smile, but apparently not enough.

"Kind? Bugger that!" Cho exclaimed, leaping out of the bed and storming towards the bathroom, stopping along the way only to snatch up his shirt and wrap it around her.

After a minute's worth of rummaging, she returned to the bedroom with a glass of water and two small white tablets in the palm of her hand.

"I am taking these," she told him with an icy sort of determination, "and then we are going to have proper sex like a proper married couple."

"We already tried that, and it didn't work," Theo said resignedly. Cho had brought Valium along on the honeymoon, but its tranquilizing effects could not overcome the residual memories of being raped. Alcohol, even in excess, had been equally ineffective. "Don't expect me to just carry on when you're stiff as a board and crying. I am not that much of a monster."

"It's not Valium," she informed him. "It's Rohyphol, which is about ten times more powerful. Popularly known as the 'date rape drug,' because in addition to the standard sedative and relaxant properties, it also lowers inhibitions and causes short-term amnesia."

"Are you certain about this?" Theo asked, feeling a gut-level unease, and not just from newlywed wife's willingness to misuse her prescription pad.

"As certain as I've ever been," Cho said, tossing back the pills. "It'll be about twenty minutes before they take effect."

She laid down back next to him, letting his shirt fall open to expose her body, and wound her arms around his neck. "You can kiss me in the meantime."

Theo did as directed. Kissing was something that Cho enjoyed without reservation, because it was something she had only ever done willingly, with nice boys like Cedric Diggory and Harry Potter. Death Eaters didn't kiss their victims.

Slow, sweet kisses became more urgent, and he slipped his shirt off Cho's body to trail more kisses down her neck and shoulders and then to her breasts. He could feel her body growing relaxed, bordering on limp, which was quite the opposite of how he was feeling.

Theo ran his hands down her body, stroking lightly and gently. Cho had closed her eyes and lowered her loose grip to his shoulders. A soft sigh escaped her, but it sounded like she was content. Hesitantly, he began to stroke lower, down her stomach and up her thighs. Cho mumbled something and Theo froze. This was usually the point where she tensed and the Vow exerted its influence. "Alright, love?"

Her eyes fluttered open and she looked at him with blank, dark eyes. "Theodore Nott? What are you doing?" she asked, sounding confused.

"Just what you asked me to, love."

"Love?" she questioned, in that same soft and puzzled tone.

"That's you, Cho. I love you."

The reaction to his heartfelt confession was a soft, anticlimactic "oh," as her eyes rolled back in her head.

Her body, laying next to his, remained completely pliant as Theo resumed his tentative touches below her waist. Gently, he rolled Cho from her side onto her back and parted her thighs.

"Cho?" he said softly. When she gave no response, Theo risked reaching under the mattress for his wand to cast a lubricating charm. After a moment's consideration, he cast a fertility charm as well, with the Vow offering no impediment. He and Cho had talked about having children, and she wanted a child as soon as possible, if possible, perhaps with a second to follow several years down the road.

As he moved his body over hers, she remained like an unresponsive doll beneath him. Theo thought bitterly that this was not how he had imagined his first time with his wife, but perhaps he was getting what he deserved rather than what he wanted.

"I'm sorry," he repeated like a mantra as he slid in and out of her unresisting body. "I'm so very sorry."

In the Fair City of Dublin

Chapter Notes

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

November 16, 2003

The *tap-tap-tapping* on the French doors leading to the hotel room's balcony began almost as soon as Hermione disappeared into the loo. Already half-awake due the departure of her warm presence from the bed, Draco swore grumpily as he pulled on a pair of discarded boxer shorts from the side of the bed. He grabbed his wand from underneath the mattress before going to find and *annihilate* the source of the annoying noise.

The flight from London to Dublin on a Muggle airplane had been mercifully short, but still hellish, with the plane tossing in turbulence all the way across the Irish Sea. Granger had kept a white-knuckled grip on his hand the entire time, the other clasped around a tumbler of whiskey on the rocks, which was, along with the larger seat, one of the perks of taking Theo's advice and booking seats in first class.

Draco had a newfound empathy for Granger's fear of flying. He loved nothing more than the rush of wind in his face and the sharp acceleration of a racing broom, but now appreciated he might feel differently if his formative years involved being crammed into a narrow metal cylinder with a hundred-plus Muggles and having to rely on Muggle technology and a Muggle pilot to stave off otherwise certain death. The idea that the cushion under his arse would save his life in the event of a water landing, as the flight attendant claimed, was the barmiest thing he had ever heard. And that was saying quite a bit, considering that his demented aunt had resided in his family's home for more than two years.

Despite his own qualms about Muggle airplanes, he had offered Hermione as much comfort and reassurance as he could during the flight. Upon reaching the hotel room, he had his reward when she pounced on him. Granger apparently considered flying in an airplane to be a near-death experienced and wanted to celebrate their safe arrival in a life-affirming way, by shagging him rotten.

His witch had been positively filthy in bed last night. She even had the foresight to bring a few extra ties, allowing them to take full advantage of the bed's brass headboard and footboard. But despite all they they had done, the word "Mudblood" hadn't passed his lips and the word "ferret" hadn't passed hers.

All things considered, Draco felt he was entitled to a bit of a lie-in.

His father's eagle owl, perched on the balcony railing, apparently was of a different mind. The evil-tempered bird glared at him with its uncanny orange eyes and ruffled its feathers, clearly annoyed at having been kept waiting.

"How long have you been out here, you feathery menace?" Draco demanded.

The owl hooted and swiveled its head meaningfully in the direction of the unmade bed before offering the scroll clutched in its talon.

"That long? Good thing you can only hoot," Draco muttered, eyes narrowing as he read the letter from Lucius.

Dear Draco,

*You may want to consider retiring your current elf. I had to threaten the wretched thing with clothes before it would tell me your whereabouts, and then it claimed you were in Dublin with "young mistress." Since Astoria presently is in your mother's suite, crying about how you neglect her, I can only presume your elf is senile and is confusing **your** mistress with **its** mistress. That is a mistake no Malfoy elf should be permitted to make.*

There have been some urgent developments regarding the tariff on sleep potions. The Russians filed an appeal to the full Wizengamot late yesterday afternoon. I have scheduled a meeting with our solicitor at nine o'clock this morning. I expect you leave off tuppung your little bit of fluff long enough to join us at the office.

"Miserable, nasty-minded old bastard! As if I don't already spend enough time with him during the week," Draco muttered.

The owl nipped his finger in reprimand for his filial disrespect, nearly hard enough to draw blood.

"Ow!" Draco cried, adding a few choice insults about the mating and dietary habits of Lucius's familiar.

Glancing back at the letter, he appreciated Mipsy's attempt to keep his father from discovering where he had gone for the weekend, and her successful avoidance at identifying Hermione by name. He hoped his father had not bothered to discipline Mipsy himself. Left to her own devices, the elf would merely pat herself on the back and call it a "punishment" for defying Lucius.

Withdrawing into the hotel room, he grabbed a pen and scrawled "fine" at the bottom of the parchment. With a one-word answer, he could hope his father might not notice the use of a Muggle writing implement instead of a quill. He attached the letter to the owl's leg and it flew off with a taunting hoot and buffeting wing to the side of his head.

Hermione was emerging from the bathroom as he closed the French doors. She clutched his shirt more tightly around her and shivered. "Brrrr! What are doing on the balcony in just your shorts, other than giving the ladies of Dublin an eyeful?"

"I got a phone call from my father," he gestured to his mobile, charging on the bedside table. "I took it outside so as to not disturb you."

"Silly!" Hermione scolded, wrapping her arms around him in a loose embrace. "I was already up. Is everything alright?"

Looking down at Granger, Draco decided that his father's use of the phrase "a bit of fluff," was apt, if only in a purely physical sense. Hermione was a petite woman, with the top of her head tucking neatly under his chin. And especially first thing in the morning, her hair could fairly be described as fluffy.

"Nothing more than an annoyance. My father scheduled a conference call for this morning." In reality, Draco would be Apparating into the Wiltshire office and then back to Dublin.

"On a Saturday? While you're away on a holiday?" Hermione lifted her eyebrows.

In every other sense, Draco decided it was absurd to consider Granger a bit of fluff, with her sharp mind, sharp eyes, and sharp wit. He was finding it a delightful challenge to stay one step ahead of her, even with her lost memories.

He gave her a wry grin. "Working for my father isn't a sinecure, princess. If anything, he expects more of me than any other employee."

"That makes sense, I suppose." Hermione nibbled on her lip before pressing on. "He's not doing it because you're here with me, is he?"

"No, not at all." If Lucius knew his son and heir was taking a mini-break with Hermione Granger, he would do a lot more than schedule an inconvenient meeting. "What makes you ask that?"

"Your friend Blaise told me that your father wants you to get back together with your ex-girlfriend."

"Blaise was no friend of mine. And given that I'm here with you, while Astoria is probably back in Wiltshire whinging, you can see how little my father's desires rate with me."

From the mulish look on her pretty face and noncommittal hum she gave in response, Draco could tell Granger was unconvinced. "Are you ever going to introduce me to your parents? Or am I just your dirty little secret, as Blaise said?"

He grabbed her upper arms and gave her a light, attention-grabbing shake. "You really should try to forget every bit of poison that snake poured in your ears. If I thought you were a dirty little secret, would I have brought you out to meet my friends?"

"And your parents?" Granger asked relentlessly, without answering his question. "Will I get to meet them?"

Draco released her to run a hand through his fringe. Her request to be introduced to his parents was not an unreasonable one, just one that was impossible to grant. Unless she was willing to accept half a loaf as better than none . . .

"I won't subject you to my father," he said decisively. "After meeting him, you'd probably run and dump me straightaway. But my mother does come to London every so often for shopping or a show. There's no reason why we can't see her the next time she's in town."

"Really?" Granger asked, surprised he had so readily agreed.

"Really," he confirmed, putting his arms back around her and pulling her closer.

She rested her head on his chest, but Draco could see she still wore a faint frown.

"You're not upset with me, are you?" he wheedled. "I promise this call won't go past noon, and then I'll take you out to lunch."

"I'm not upset." Granger raised her head to give him a sassy little smile. "I actually would like to see more of Dublin than what's on offer between the sheets in this room, so this is my chance."

She ran her fingers down his bare chest to his stomach and then traced the thin line of blond hair below his navel. "Though speaking of what's on offer between the sheets, do you have to get ready for your call right away? Come back to bed for a bit," she coaxed, brown eyes soft and shining.

Draco smirked at the overture, marveling that the prospect of meeting his formidable mother had put Hermione in an amorous mood.

"Join me in the shower," he suggested instead, feeling optimistic that he could get her to call out his real name again. "We can get each other dirty before we get clean."

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Hermione couldn't help but feeling a bit frustrated as she strolled through Dublin, not giving the gorgeous mix of architecture or well-kept green spaces the attention they deserved.

Last night, she had deliberately tried to recreate the circumstances that had allowed her repressed memories to briefly surface on Halloween: too much alcohol and rough sex while she was restrained. She had goaded Malcolm to fuck her harder, until the safe word was on the tip of her tongue and she felt like she was on the cusp of something, but no memories had broken through.

Instead, she found herself screaming his middle name loudly enough as she climaxed that in retrospect, Hermione was shocked no one had called the front desk to complain. Perhaps tequila might work where whiskey had failed, but her stomach roiled at the thought. She had sworn off the devil's water since her miserable morning after Halloween.

Then, there had been an odd moment this morning in the shower. Malcolm had pressed her up against the glass of the shower stall, moving in and out of her body at a leisurely, maddening pace as she shamelessly begged him for more. She had caught sight of his smirking face and damp, slicked-back hair in the fogged-up mirror, and had a sense of that nagging something. It wasn't déjà vu, not quite. It had been a boy with hair and a smirk like that, not a man, and certainly she had not been in such an intimate position with the boy. Then Malcolm had stopped his teasing and increased the speed and force of his thrusts and that wisp of memory had been lost in a whirlwind of sensation.

It troubled her, but perhaps now she would find some answers from an old schoolmate.

After a quick shared breakfast before Malcolm left for the hotel's business center to take his call, Hermione had spent the first part of the morning playing tourist. She walked up Grafton Street, ducking away from its shops and restaurants to the relative tranquility of the linked quadrangles of Trinity College. The Old Library was beautiful and spoke to her soul, and she had been one of the first to arrive when it opened, allowing her to view the Book of Kells and other gems of the library's collection without the distraction of a crowd of other tourists.

She tore herself away from the library after a mere hour, though, because it was opening time for Dublin's pubs and she had a particular one she needed to visit. Ever since her encounter with Bridey Finnigan at King's Cross in September, Hermione had wanted to get to the Red Lion, to see if the Seamus she so vaguely recalled could help her.

Initially, she had been inclined to turn down her boyfriend's invitation to go away with him for a weekend. Malcolm occasionally came across to her as a bit tone deaf where their relationship was concerned, treating her like a mistress rather than a girlfriend - like this morning, when there had been a post-shower row when she opened her suitcase to discover all new clothing, in her size and his taste. If Paris had been the only place he offered to whisk her off to, Hermione's answer would have been a firm no. But the opportunity to get to Dublin, and the Red Lion, changed the equation.

There were a few pubs by that name in Dublin, but Hermione was hopeful this was the right one, on a narrow lane in the shadow of medieval Dublin Castle. The pub was housed in a narrow, half-timbered building, marked by a wooden sign with a scarlet and gold lion rearing up on its haunches, with a wand clasped in its paws. She opened the door and walked into the pub, empty of any customers save herself this early in the day.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," breathed the sandy-haired man behind the bar, staring at her with wide eyes.

"Seamus?" Hermione questioned, knowing even before he gulped and nodded that she was in the right place and speaking with the right person. "I have some questions I was hoping you could answer."

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Seamus Finnigan had never aspired to become an Auror. He knew that his marks - and frankly, his raw magical ability - were average at best. However, he dreamed of becoming a patrol wizard with Magical Law Enforcement - a beat cop, as it were. That dream ended at the Final Battle, when an unknown Death Eater's curse splintered and shriveled his wand arm.

Now he spent his days behind the bar of the pub his mother's family had owned for six generations, pouring pints of Harp and Guinness and listening to the petty woes of Muggle tourists and nodding to the occasional cloaked man or woman who slunk through the pub to the storeroom in the back, which served as a secondary gateway to wizarding Dublin.

He expected this November Saturday to be much like any other autumn weekend: slow in the morning, picking up in the afternoon as football matches came on, and busy into the evening.

And then Hermione Granger walked into his pub and an ordinary, grey day was transformed into something special.

If Hermione had happened to walk into the Red Lion as an oblivious, Obliviated tourist - *of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine* - Seamus would have been thrilled just to see her, to confirm with his own two eyes that she was well. But to see her come through the door knowing his name, with her eyes bright with that mixture of inquisitiveness and tenacity he'd seen so many times when she was studying at Hogwarts - a look that meant she was looking for answers and wouldn't rest until she found them - it was like Christmas and Easter and his birthday all rolled into one.

"Hermione! You're looking well, a sight for me sore eyes in truth!" He raced around the bar to give her a crushing hug, lifting her up for a little spin for good measure.

And, truthfully, she was looking well. The hollow-eyed waif he'd seen fighting like a demon at the Battle of Hogwarts and waging political battles at the Ministry and watching her back for rogue Death Eaters in the months after had been replaced by a seemingly content and unexpectedly polished young woman, wearing designer denims cut to make her legs look a mile long and a curve-skimming dark green jumper with a cowl neck. He hadn't seen her in that color before, but thought it suited her better than the ratty red Weasley jumper she had worn when hanging out in the Gryffindor tower.

"Seamus! Put me down!" Hermione commanded in a bossy tone.

"Yes, ma'am," he obeyed immediately, albeit with a cheeky grin. He hadn't missed how she tensed when he grabbed her, and realized to Hermione, he was virtually a stranger. To help put her at ease, Seamus made an exaggerated show of pulling out and wiping down a barstool for her use, earning himself a small smile.

"So, about my questions," Hermione began, elbows propped on the bar.

To buy himself some time, Seamus made his way back to his side of the bar and began pouring a Guinness for each of them. Answering Hermione's questions was a violation of both the Statute of Secrecy and decrees implemented by Umbridge's Muggle-Born Repatriation Commission, and punishable by a hefty fine and term in Azkaban.

He slid one of the pints to Hermione and took a healthy gulp from his own. "Look, it's like this, lass," he began, with an awkward clearing of his throat. "I'd like to help you, but -"

"But you've mislaid your courage somewhere," she finished for him in an acid tone. "Perhaps at the bottom of a bottle?"

"That's hitting below the belt!" he protested. "You don't know the kind of trouble I'd get in with the authorities."

"The Seamus I knew always claimed to have an Irish respect for unjust authority," she challenged him. "That is to say, none at all. When did that change?"

He ran his hand through his hair. "It changed when me Da died. I've got a lot more responsibilities now, Hermione."

"Please, Seamus," she asked beseechingly. "If there's anything you can do, any hint you can give me to help me remember . . ."

He had never been able to resist those big, brown eyes. "Tell you what, lass. How 'bout we catch up over a pint like the old friends we are? You can ask me about people you remember and I'll tell you what I can about what's going in in their lives. Fair enough?"

"That's more than fair, Sea," Hermione beamed at him. Her smile disappeared quickly, like clouds chasing across a sunny sky.

"Harry's dead, isn't he?" she asked.

Seamus nodded solemnly. "He's honored as a hero, not that it does him a damn bit o' good when he's lying in the cold, hard ground at the age of eighteen."

She bit her lip. "Where's he buried? I'd like to go and pay my respects, if I can."

"He's buried in Godric's Hollow, in the West Country, about thirty kilometers west of Yeovil. There's no reason why you can't visit, though I don't know what you'll see," Seamus cautioned.

Hermione made a notation in her pocket diary. She drank a bit of her Guinness, trying to swallow back tears, and made a face.

"A bit too early for a beer, luv? Now that's proof you have no Irish in your family tree," he joked, trying to dispel the suddenly somber mood. Reaching under the bar, he handed her a bottle of Butterbeer. "Try this instead."

"This is really good," she noted after taking a cautious sip. "What is it?"

"A craft beer, of a kind. Rather hard to find, but you'll always be able to drink it on the house at the Red Lion."

Hermione smiled at that, before refocusing on more serious matters. "What about Ginny? How did she cope after Harry died?" She could remember the feel of smooth, flame-colored hair under the palm of her hand, as she tried in vain to comfort a girl whose body was wracked with sobs.

"Not very well, at least at first," Seamus admitted. "If it hadn't been for the baby, I think she would have done away with herself."

"Ginny had a baby?" Hermione asked, wide-eyed, trying to reconcile that bit of information with her memories of a coltish tomboy.

Seamus grinned at her. "Aye, she has three babies now! Little Jamie, who's four, and she just had twin girls last month. She married Dean Thomas about a year ago. D'ya remember him?"

She knit her brows. "He's a West Ham fan, isn't he? And he dated Ginny before she got together with Harry."

Seamus smiled in satisfaction. "He's a good bloke. And you remember a lot more than you ought to, and that's a fine thing, it is."

"There's so much I can't remember, though," Hermione fretted. "What else can you tell me about Ginny and her kids?"

Seamus smiled. "There was a lot of gossip about her remarrying - a bunch of hags with nothing better to do had something to say about it. But you don't want to mess with a Weasley woman when she's in a temper."

"I hope Dean makes her happy. She deserves it, and Harry would have wanted that for her." Hermione smiled at him as she made another note.

Reading it upside-down, Seamus felt a pang as he realized she had forgotten the Weasley name, even though they had practically been her foster family in the wizarding world. "Little Jamie's the spitting image of Harry, except he has brown eyes, like Ginny," he offered.

"I bet he hates hearing that, or he will," Hermione surmised. "Harry always did."

"Aye, the lad has some big footstep to follow," Seamus agreed. "And Ginny and Dean named their twins Minerva Lily and Mione Luna."

"After me?" Hermione asked, eyes shining.

"Of course! You and Ginny were like sisters."

"I can barely remember her," Hermione said sadly. "Just impressions."

Seamus regarded her with sympathy, cudgeling his brain for other tidbits of non-magical gossip he could offer. "You stood as godmother to Jamie, before . . . before you left."

Hermione immediately looked conscience-stricken. "I'm a godmother? But I've never done anything for his birthdays, or Christmas, or anything!"

Seamus hastened to reassure her. "It's alright, 'Mione. Harry and Ginny realized you wouldn't remember, but they wanted Jamie to grow up knowing about you."

She was only listening with half an ear, busy as she was rooting in her bag. "I am a *horrible* godmother. If I give you a cheque, can you see that Ginny gets it, to buy Jamie a really nice present from me? I can't go and visit her myself, can I?"

He shook his head. "You may be seeing her around, though."

"I'd like that," Hermione said distractedly, as she pulled out a wad of pound notes from her purse. "Oh, I am going to *kill* him for this."

That made Seamus raise a sandy eyebrow. "That's not the reaction I'd expect when finding a few hundred quid."

Hermione smiled tightly. "My boyfriend and I have had a few discussions about his over-generous impulses, but he never seems to learn." Despite her exasperation, she peeled off four hundred-pound notes. "Here, please buy Jamie a spectacular present, and get something for the twins as well. I can pay him back," she added, half to herself.

He placed the money in an envelope, writing "HG to JP and twins" on the outside. "Is there anything in particular you'd like me to get?"

"Books," Hermione grinned at him. "And maybe some stuffed animals - an otter? Or maybe a lion? And receiving blankets for the girls, and a broomstick for Jamie, and - "

Seamus interrupted her stream of consciousness. "Did you say a broomstick?" he repeated, incredulous.

She caught herself up short. "I don't know why I said that. A broomstick is a ludicrous present for a little boy."

Seamus added it to his list on the outside of the envelope regardless. "Ah, well. Kids like the funniest things." Inwardly, he was amazed - both at the patchy job the Ferret had done when Obliviating her and at the idea of Hermione Granger approving a flying-related gift.

"And how is Luna?" she inquired.

"Very well," he said. "The last I heard, she was looking for rare birds and beasties in the Amazon."

Her mobile rang and she answered. "Hullo?"

Seamus picked up his rag and resumed wiping down the bar to give her some privacy. From the male voice on the other end of the line, he assumed it was her boyfriend.

"Yes, at the Red Lion," she repeated. "Do you need the address? See you in a few, then." As she rang off, Seamus was happy to see the unconscious smile on her face. And he was very curious to meet the man who made her glow like that.

After another swallow of Butterbeer, Hermione cocked her head to one side, clearly thinking about something. Seamus braced himself to respond to an awkward question about Ron.

Instead, she tapped her pen thoughtfully. "Speaking of old friends and acquaintances, I recently met a woman named Cho Chang with whom I seem to have some things in common. Do you know her?"

For the second time that day, Seamus was sure his eyes were big as saucers. "I surely do."

"She and I are going to be working together, doing some research on memory loss. Perhaps you can suggest a few names of people we might want to approach as subjects?"

Thinking fast, Seamus gave her the Gryffindor and D.A. names, thinking they would be the most useful. "You'll want to speak with Dennis Creevey. He's a student at Leeds College of Art. And a woman named Katie Bell, who lives in London."

Hermione looked up from her notebook. "I've met Katie, too."

"Then you're on the right track," Seamus encouraged cryptically. He sought another topic that wouldn't get him thrown into Azkaban.

"So, tell me about this boyfriend of yours. Is he a nice bloke?"

"I don't know if I'd describe Malcolm as nice," she said slowly, "but he's very good to me." She smiled. "He even proofreads my essays!"

Seamus's answering grin was a weak one. Her response made him uneasy for a reason he couldn't pinpoint.

"His last name isn't Baddock, is it?" he asked. "That's someone else we were at school with. Pimply git."

"No, his last name is Foy."

"Malcolm Foy," Seamus muttered, half to himself, trying to figure out why the name sounded so familiar. And he realized why - too late - as the tall blond man entered the pub. "*Malfoy*."

The man didn't appear to have heard him. He ignored Seamus, taking the stool next to Hermione and giving her a kiss on the lips that lingered just long enough to stake his claim on the witch, but not so long as to upset Hermione with an embarrassing public display of affection.

"How was your call?" Hermione asked.

"Tedious, but ultimately profitable. Or so I hope," the blond drawled.

"Did you have a pleasant morning without me?" he continued, low-voiced, in a teasing, affectionate tone.

Seamus felt a glimmer of doubt. That simply wasn't the way Malfoy spoke to Granger - or to anyone, based on what he had seen at Hogwarts.

"I had quite a lovely morning catching up with an old school friend," she answered lightly. "This is Seamus Finnigan."

"Pleasure to meet you. I'm Malcolm Foy." The smile on the blond's lips didn't reach his eyes, but his tone was civil enough.

"Seamus Finnigan," he acknowledged, briefly shaking the proffered hand. He had a sudden, wild thought that Malfoy might have been Obliviated as well.

"You know," he said, trying to draw the blond out, "it's uncanny how much you resemble a boy we were at school with."

"So Hermione has told me," Foy acknowledged, idly twisting one of her curls around his finger. "I must have an evil twin."

Seamus grunted. Even if the bloke wasn't Malfoy, his territorial behavior towards Hermione was grating on him - even if she didn't seem to mind. He didn't like the way the blond had moved his stool closer, so their legs were touching, or the possessive little touches to her knee or shoulder. Even if Hermione's birthday was several months before his, Seamus had always thought of her as another little sister and didn't like seeing this blond bastard mauling her in his pub.

"Ready to go, love?" Hermione's boyfriend asked. "I made reservations for us at a seafood restaurant up in Howth, so it's a bit of a hike."

"Ready," she agreed, with a warm smile she then turned on Seamus. "Don't be a stranger the next time you're in London, Sea. It was great seeing you!"

"Likewise," he told her, not at all happy about the sly look in the blond's eye or the placement of his hand on the small of her back. He had no basis to bring in the Aurors, but as soon as they left, he would be contacting the Order so that they could determine if Hermione was dating Malfoy and stage an intervention if that were the case.

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Draco walked out of the Red Lion, arms linked with Hermione as they began retracing their path through the warren of medieval streets surrounding Dublin Castle back to the bustle of Grafton Street. All in all, he thought he had bluffed it out rather well with Finnigan, well enough at least to avoid a wizards' duel in front of his girlfriend.

As they walked along, he was scanning the shops that lined the street until he found what he was seeking.

"Oh, bugger!" he exclaimed, with a well-calibrated mix of surprise and exasperation. "I left my wallet on the bar! Do you want to browse in that bookstore over there while I run back to fetch it? I'll just be a few minutes."

The bookstore looked enticing enough that Hermione acquiesced, requesting only that he not say or do anything to Seamus that she would not. She had evidently picked up on the subtle hostility between the two men.

Draco readily agreed, because Hermione's past ruthlessness essentially still gave him a free hand to deal with Finnigan as he saw fit. Left to his own devices, Draco couldn't think of any lines he wouldn't cross in order to keep his Muggleborn witch without the interference of the Ministry or the buggering Order of the Phoenix.

As soon as his long-legged strides took him around a corner and out of her sight, Draco ducked into an alley and Apparated to the back entrance of the Red Lion. The Irishman was

cagily watching the front door while tapping on something in his palm, but he had not expected a Disillusioned Malfoy to sneak through the service entrance. He didn't even have time to draw his own wand before a jet of green light from Draco's wand hit the him squarely in the forehead. Finnigan slumped over the bar, unmoving.

Draco approached cautiously, mindful of the possibility that someone could walk into the pub at any minute. He saw a glimpse of gold clasped in Finnigan's hand and used his wand tip to dislodge the Galleon and push it onto the bar for a closer look. Instead of the usual serial numbers, a cryptic message ran around the edge. "HG at Red L with DM. Come no-"

Draco sighed in relief, that the message was incomplete and had not yet been sent. With a tap of his wand and a "*finite*," the letters were erased and replaced by ordinary-looking numbers.

He hefted the Galleon in his hand and flipped it, watching it catch the light as it spun in the air, smiling ironically. He had found out about the coins used by members of Dumbledore's Army at the end of his fifth year at Hogwarts, just before the Inquisitorial Squad disbanded. Against his will, he had been impressed that Granger had successfully pulled off something as advanced as a Protean Charm, and the knowledge that she had done it had goaded him throughout the summer to create his own set of Protean coins for use with Madam Rosmerta. Then, as now, he thought that the extremist view that Mudbloods were lesser in terms of magical power and ability was utter bollocks, at least so far as Granger was concerned.

Draco caught the Galleon with ease and placed it in Finnigan's pocket, alongside his wand, to prevent any Muggles from seeing the magical coin. He then walked out of the pub without a backward glance. It just wouldn't do to keep Hermione waiting.

Chapter End Notes

The "gin joint" quote is from Casablanca. The seafood restaurant in Howth, King Sitric's, really does exist and is excellent.

Ladies who Lunch

November 30, 2003

Cho joined Hermione at the table where she was seated, smack in the middle of the bustling cafe. "Is this really the best you could find for a confidential conversation?" she inquired in a cool tone.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Nice to see you, too, Cho. How is Theo? Did you enjoy your honeymoon?"

Cho's mouth thinned at the sarcasm, but Hermione wasn't through. "Now that we've exchanged pleasantries, let me explain why this is an excellent spot for a sensitive discussion. No one can hear us over the din and we can see anyone who might be paying too much attention to us. Were you able to get Katie to come?"

Hermione had spoken with Cho by phone a couple of times after returning from Dublin, sharing the two names she learned at the Red Lion. After Malcolm had asked Hermione one too many casual, subtle questions about her conversation with Seamus, the women had agreed that Hermione would find out more about Dennis Creevey, while Cho would invite Katie to meet them for lunch.

"Of course I was able to get Katie to come," Cho said, affronted that Hermione would question her ability to perform such a simple task.

"Did Theo give you any trouble over getting her phone number?"

Cho shook her head, causing her straight black hair to swing. "Not at all. He called Mark and got it for me right away. Though Theo did want to know if you were coming to lunch as well."

"What did you tell him?" Hermione asked uneasily. She did not like deceiving her boyfriend - indeed, she wasn't certain she *could* deceive him - but her instincts told her it would be a mistake to be too forthcoming about the research she and Cho were engaged in.

"I told him that I thought you were a know-it-all bitch. And then we moved on to another topic. Honesty is the best policy, don't you agree?" Cho replied with a sweet smile.

Hermione rolled her eyes. While she had returned from her mini-break in Dublin in an excellent, relaxed mood, Cho had been even more prickly than usual since her honeymoon. Still, she and Cho were not friends, and she wasn't about to risk having her head bitten off by asking about any troubles in her ally's relationship with her husband.

Katie walked in, stripping off her red woolen gloves and looking around the restaurant, waving cheerily as soon as she caught sight of them. "Hey, Cho! Hi, Hermione. I didn't know you were coming, too!"

She plopped into one of the vacant chairs, absently rubbing her stomach. "I swear, this baby *never* stops kicking me!"

"I hope it wasn't too much trouble to come to lunch," Hermione said.

"Not at all! It's nice to be able to schedule some girl time."

It was easy to draw Katie out over soup and salads, with seemingly idle chitchat about the men in their lives.

"Oh, I've known Mark for almost fifteen years now," she told them. "We grew up in neighboring villages that have that this ridiculous rivalry. We're the football version of Romeo and Juliet, with a happier ending! I played against him in a co-ed league at home, and then we became teammates after I moved to London for uni."

"So you remember growing up with Mark?" Hermione asked.

"Of course I do," Katie gave her an odd look.

"What Hermione means," Cho said smoothly, "is that it's nice you have memories of him as a boy as well as a man."

"Yes, it's cute you two grew up together," Hermione added, grudgingly grateful to Cho for the save. So far, Katie's answers to their leading questions were not what Hermione had expected. There was no indication the other woman suffered from amnesia.

Katie laughed. "Now I see what you mean! I don't quite remember Mark in nappies, because I was eleven when we first met and he's a few years older, but it is fun to be able to tease him about what he was like as a teenager. *Not* that he's matured all that much!"

"It's rare to meet childhood sweethearts these days, with how people move around," Cho observed.

"Oh, we were nothing but opponents back at home," Katie said with a grin. "And when we reconnected in London, I'd say we initially were shag buddies more than anything else, but Isabelle was a game-changer."

"She was a bit of a surprise?" Hermione asked.

"More than a bit, when I had just turned twenty-one and was still at school!" Katie agreed. "But a very, very welcome surprise by the time she arrived. I joke her middle name should have been 'Oopsie,' but Mark got to pick her middle name." From the way she crinkled her nose, she was less than approving of his choice.

"What is her middle name?" inquired Cho.

"Lucretia, after Mark's mum. A horrible name for a horrible woman."

"She's the stereotypical mum-in-law, then?" Hermione queried.

"Worse than most, I'm afraid," Katie said. "I can tell she thinks I'm not nearly good enough for her precious little boy, and she's convinced I fell pregnant with Isabelle on purpose. Nothing Mark says will convince her otherwise."

"She sounds like a horror," Cho said sympathetically.

"Lucretia has been better recently," Katie said, striving to be fair. "And Mark's dad is taking much more of an interest in Isabelle now that she's four. Mark actually has her over at their house this afternoon, so I really shouldn't complain."

"Sorry that I've been rattling on," she apologized. "What's new with the two of you?"

"Not so much," Hermione replied, deciding to take the proverbial bull by the horns. "Cho and I are working together on an interdisciplinary study, relating to long-term memory loss due to physical trauma. We're in the process of recruiting subjects now, but it's slow going."

Cho chimed in, sourly confirming Hermione's assessment. "I have access to NHS data, but it's close to useless. It doesn't differentiate by cause, so we're having to manually sift out tens of thousands of cases where the memory loss is due to Alzheimer's and other diseases. And even when we try to limit the data by imposing an age cut-off of under thirty, we're finding a vast number of cases where the amnesia is due to substance abuse."

"That sounds frustrating," Katie commiserated. "Would you like me to put you in touch with my colleague, Justin Finch-Fletchley? You both met him on Halloween. He keeps it pretty quiet, but he lost most of his memories of his teenage years after an auto accident."

The other two women both nodded, and Katie pulled out her mobile to find Justin's number. "I'll let him know you'll be calling," she offered, brushing aside their thanks. "No, really, it's no trouble and may help Justin."

"Oh, drat!" she exclaimed, looking at the time shown on her phone. "I hate to eat and run, but Mark booked a prenatal massage for me this afternoon and of course forgot I was meeting you for lunch." Katie shook her head as she counted out notes and coins to pay for her share. "He manages to be thoughtful and thoughtless at the same time!"

"Malcolm can be like that as well," Hermione grinned at the other woman's tone of fond exasperation. Cho smiled thinly, but said nothing.

Katie smiled back at them. "This was fun - we should try to get together again. I'll check with Mark, and if we can make it work with everybody's schedules, I would love to have you and the boys over for dinner before the holidays and this one's arrival," she said, with a punctuating pat to her abdomen.

"Of course," Cho assented.

"That would be lovely," Hermione echoed.

With a jaunty farewell wave, Katie pulled on her coat and gloves and left them.

Cho waited until she had exited the cafe before shaking her head. "She's not like us. Your bartender friend must have made a mistake."

Reluctantly, Hermione agreed. "She's far too happy and well-adjusted. Perhaps Seamus gave me her name so she could put us in touch with Justin?" She took out her notebook to add Justin's name to a small but growing list of contacts.

"Perhaps. It did sound like a promising lead. I'll reach out to him," Cho volunteered.

Hermione nodded, making to close her notebook.

Cho made a hesitant sound, causing Hermione to look up at her. "There's another name I'd like you to add to the informational category, though it may sound barmy. Theodore Nott, spelled with an 'N.'"

"Your husband?" Hermione asked, striving for an even tone even though Cho's request *did* seem barmy.

"No, his name is spelled with a silent 'K,'" Cho clarified. After a moment of silence, she opted to give Hermione an explanation. "While Theo and I were on our honeymoon, I had a brief episode where I was convinced he was someone else, a quiet boy I knew slightly at school whose surname had that slightly different spelling."

"What happened? Did you do anything to Theo?" Hermione asked.

"No, just asked what he was doing and then I passed out. Why would I have done anything to him?" Cho was puzzled.

"I had something similar happen with Malcolm on Halloween and I reacted rather violently," Hermione said.

"I see. Who did you think he was? We can add that name to the list."

Hermione shook her head in annoyance. "I can't remember his name. Just the bane of my existence, merrily shagging me into the mattress and then having the nerve to ask if everything was fine."

"That's awful," Cho shuddered.

"How are you doing with contacting this Creevey person?" she asked after a pause, in a brisk tone. Hermione appreciated her tact in switching subjects.

"Fairly well." Through her on-line research, Hermione had already confirmed that Dennis was a photography student in his final year of school and had even obtained his e-mail address. She was doubtful, however, that e-mail would be an effective approach to someone who didn't know her - or at least didn't remember knowing her - and who was studying in Leeds, two hundred kilometers away. "His photos are part of a student show in London in February," she offered. "I thought we could go to the opening night of the exhibit and introduce ourselves."

Cho's lips thinned. "Can't you come up with a way to meet him earlier? That's more than two months off."

"Not unless you're willing to take a trip to Yorkshire," Hermione told her.

With that, the other woman backed down. "No, I don't have the time and I would prefer never to return that region, for reasons I've already shared."

"Understood," Hermione said. She looked back at her closed notebook and bit her lip, before reaching a decision. As much as she wanted to make the pilgrimage to Godric's Hollow on her own, she also felt that Cho had the right to join her.

"Seamus also told me where a friend of mine is buried. I'm planning to visit his gravesite, if you'd like to come. His name was Harry Potter, and I feel like he was pivotal to everything that happened."

"Harry Potter?" Cho said slowly, her inflection unsure. Then she repeated the name, with more certainty. "Yes. Yes, I'll come with you."

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Isabelle Stone kicked her feet back and forth under the polished wood of the table, lightly enough that Grandmother wouldn't notice. Daddy had promised she could spend all afternoon flying on her broomstick, and Grandfather had promised her a visit to the stables, so long as she behaved at lunch.

Besides Grandmother, sitting at the head of the table with her iron-grey hair pulled back into an elaborate arrangement with loops and whorls, there were three other ladies who Isabelle had just met today. Mrs. Malfoy, who Grandmother called Cissy, was elegant and blonde, with sparkly blue eyes. When Isabelle shyly told the blonde lady that she smelled pretty, like flowers, Mrs. Malfoy had patted her cheek with a cool hand and praised her to Grandmother as "a charming little girl."

The other two ladies, Miss Daphne and Miss Tori, were younger and Grandmother said they were sisters. With their too-long faces and identical shiny, straight, shoulder-length hair, Isabelle thought they looked a little like horses, but kept that observation to herself so she could see real horses later, with Grandfather and Daddy.

Miss Daphne had blonde hair, darker than Mrs. Malfoy's, and greenish-blue eyes, while Miss Tori's hair and eyes were brown, like Isabelle's own. Miss Tori had been very excited about that.

"You're so pretty! You look like you could be *my* daughter," she cooed at Isabelle.

"Any child you had with my son would have blond hair, Astoria," Mrs. Malfoy reminded her daughter-in-law in a chilly voice. "She is a pretty child, though," she added with approval.

"That color is quite flattering to her, Lucretia."

Grandmother inclined her head graciously. "How kind of you to notice, Cissy. After raising a son, it's a delight to have a little girl to dress up."

Isabelle looked down and scowled at the dark pink silk. Grandmother had made her change out of her favorite denims as soon as she arrived.

"Pity she can't inherit," Miss Daphne observed, sounding smug rather than sorry. "The Greengrass family is one of the few that allows property to pass in the female line."

"Oh, the estate is entailed and will go to her brother, but we have enough in the way of dower properties to make Isabelle quite the little heiress," Grandmother said complacently. Isabelle did not know what an heiress was, but hoped it was like being a princess.

"She has a brother?" Mrs. Malfoy asked, her voice intent.

"Putative," Grandmother replied. "The baby is due in January and, at least according to Muggle tests, is indisputably male."

"How delightful for you!" Mrs. Malfoy congratulated Grandmother, who smiled broadly.

The blonde woman turned to Isabelle. "Are you excited to have a little brother, dearest?"

Her question caught Isabelle mid-bite, with a mouthful of chicken, but she remembered to chew and swallow like Mummy and Grandmother had taught her before answering. "I'd rather have a pony."

The women trilled with laughter.

"Oh, I want a little girl just like that!" Miss Tori said in a longing tone.

"She's rather precious," her sister concurred. "I haven't spoken to Marcus in years. I think I shall have to make a point of looking him up."

"I'll have to do the same," Miss Tori said, "to tell him how adorable his daughter is!" she added hastily, with a quick look at Mrs. Malfoy, who was glaring at her.

Her icy blue eyes warmed as she looked at Isabelle. "Her manners are quite nice, surprisingly so considering the disadvantages of her upbringing," she complimented.

"Indeed, Cissy, her mother is not as much of a savage as I first feared. The time she spent among us while at Hogwarts seems to have allowed her to acquire a basic grasp of etiquette, though the finer points of course elude her."

Isabelle frowned down at her plate at the not-so-nice things Grandmother was saying about Mummy. Of course, Mummy also sometimes said mean things about Grandmother, calling her a witch, and Daddy only laughed and hugged her and told her she was "too right."

Mrs. Malfoy nodded in understanding. "So much of that needs to be inculcated at a very young age. I trust you are doing so with Isabelle? Deportment lessons and the like?"

"To the extent I can, Cissy, especially now that she's shown her magic. But there is only so much I can do when she resides in the Muggle world. *And* when Marcus and Brutus would allow her to spend hours flying about on her broomstick," Grandmother said, throwing up her hands. "Which is something I wished to speak with you about."

"Which, deportment lessons for Isabelle, or the inexplicable male obsession with Quidditch?" Mrs. Malfoy raised a carefully plucked blonde eyebrow and smirked at Grandmother.

"Neither, Cissy," Grandmother said in an impatient tone. "There is a proposal before Undersecretary Umbridge that would allow Isabelle to be raised in our world. Your support, and your husband's, would certainly be influential."

Narcissa smiled cynically. "Yes, the Undersecretary certainly holds Lucius in high esteem. But I was not aware of any legal impediment to Marcus bringing Isabelle to the wizarding world?"

"There is no legal impediment with respect to Isabelle, but Marcus refuses to leave Katie. When a man grows up, he leaves his parents and cleaves unto his wife, or near as," Grandmother said sourly. "This measure would give those who have undertaken Vows greater latitude as to how they uphold them. In Marcus's case, it would be by living with his children and his Muggleborn *maîtresse* in our world, instead of the Muggle one."

Mrs. Malfoy pursed her lips. "You've given me a great deal to think about, Lucretia. Perhaps we can resume this discussion later, after pudding? Little pitchers do have big ears," she added, with a meaningful look in Isabelle's direction.

Grandmother snapped her fingers and a bat-eared elf appeared, bearing a lavishly frosted chocolate cake. Suddenly, Isabelle's eyes were a match for her ears, widening at the glorious sight. She loved visits to her grandparents' house.

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Ginny Thomas was having lunch at the Leaky with her favorite sister-in-law before embarking on an afternoon of shopping in Diagon Alley.

"It's the oddest thing," she told Angelina, between bites of bangers and mash. "Seamus Owled me yesterday, to send along an envelope of Muggle money he found tucked behind the bar with a note saying it was for Jamie and the babies. 'From HG,' is what's written on the envelope."

"From Hermione?" Angelina asked, eyes wide.

"I can't think of who else it would be," Ginny stated. "But Seamus didn't see her and he has no idea how long the envelope's been lying there. He thinks it's from a couple of Saturdays ago, when he had a dizzy spell at lunch and got a friend to tend the bar for him for the rest of the day."

"A dizzy spell?" Angelina scoffed. "Sounds more like a hangover to me. Seamus drinks too much."

"True," Ginny agreed, "but who can blame him? Still, it's a pity he missed her."

"Especially if she's starting to remember and is trying to reach out to us," Angelina agreed.

"Here, take a look at this," Ginny directed, holding out an envelope for the other witch to inspect.

By the time she finished reading, Angelina was grinning broadly. "Books listed first? That's definitely Hermione! And her Patronus was an otter, wasn't it?"

Ginny nodded excitedly. "And she wants to get Jamie a broomstick, just like Sirius did for Harry. That's not a Muggle toy."

"That's brilliant!" Angelina enthused. "Keep that for the next Order meeting."

"Of course!" Ginny agreed, then paused. "Do you think I should hang onto the money as well, after the way Dung was told off for losing Hermione's Knut?"

Angelina looked thoughtful. "It's just pound notes, right? May I see them?"

"They're still in the envelope," Ginny passed it back to her sister-in-law.

Angelina extracted the money and whistled. "Blimey, Ginny! She gave you about eighty Galleons."

The redhead's jaw dropped. "I didn't realize it was that much! That means I can get Jamie the Firebolt Mini he wants."

Angelina looked vaguely concerned. "How can Hermione afford that? She's still in school, isn't she? That's a lot of money for a graduate student to shell out."

"Dunno," Ginny shrugged. "Her parents were both dentists, so probably her family has money. Or maybe," she joked, "Hermione's found herself a rich boyfriend."

Not that Serious

Chapter Notes

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

December 12, 2003

After mailing the applications to her chosen handful of doctoral programs, Hermione felt like skipping down the street as she exited the post office at Russell Square into the wintry afternoon sunshine. None of the applications were due earlier than January, but she had been determined to get everything in by mid-December, so she could enjoy her holiday in Australia with her godparents without any deadlines looming over her head.

Malcolm had been a huge help. Even though he had been markedly more enthused about her applications to Oxford and Cambridge than more far-flung programs, he still had meticulously proofread all of them, offered thoughtful comments on her essays, calmed her typical end of term stress, and put up with the sharp edge of her tongue with a saint-like patience, even though he was far from being a saint. With a tiny smirk, Hermione decided that green and black lingerie and a brief interlude on her knees would properly express her gratitude for his assistance. The satisfaction she would derive from making her generally composed boyfriend unravel was merely a bonus.

A flash of bright color across the street, at one of paths leading into the center of the square, caught Hermione's eye. A red-haired woman pushing a double pram was waving in her direction. Hesitantly, Hermione raised her gloved hand and waved back. A broad smile, visible from across the street, crossed the redhead's face as she beckoned to Hermione and very slowly began to walk towards the drained fountain in the center of the square.

Hermione crossed at the signal and fell into step next the woman. "Are you Ginny?" she asked.

"You don't remember me?" the other woman responded, sounding disappointed.

"Honestly, not really," Hermione told her. "But Seamus told me you just had twins and that I might be seeing you soon."

The other woman was looking at her, evidently surprised. "You saw Seamus?"

"I saw him a couple of weekends back at his pub, when I was in Dublin with my boyfriend. Did Sea get you the money I gave him for the kiddies' presents?" Hermione asked anxiously. Malcolm hadn't exactly been upset at the disposition of his money, saying it was hers to spend as she saw fit, but he had made a snide comment or two about Seamus diverting the funds to whiskey.

"Of course he did," Ginny said. "All four hundred pounds of it. You know Seamus is as honest as the day is long. And thank you so much! Jamie loves the new toys."

Hermione waved away the other woman's thanks as she peered into the pram, admiring the sleeping babies with their cafe au lait skin and reddish hair peeking out from under their knitted hats. "They're beautiful, Ginny. Are they identical?"

"No, fraternal," she answered. "The one with the curlier hair is Mione."

"I still can't get over the fact that there's a little person named after me," Hermione smiled at the snoozing infant.

"I wish you weren't so surprised. If Harry and I had a little girl instead of Jamie, that's what we would have named her. You were like a sister to both of us," Ginny said warmly.

"If I am like a sister to you, why haven't I seen you in more than four years?" Hermione demanded, suddenly torn between anger and hurt. "I barely can remember you, I don't recall where you live or know how to find you, but what's your excuse?"

Ginny recoiled as though she had been slapped. Her answer was halting, something that Hermione was certain was unusual for the confident redhead. "After your . . . accident, it took us a while to find you. I *wanted* to be the one to see you right away, but we decided there was too much at risk with Jamie. Even now, just running into you 'coincidentally' like this might get me in a heap of trouble, but . . . I'm sorry. There's so much I can't tell you, but I can say that at least." Ginny shrugged helplessly. Even as they circled the fountain at the center of the square, she was scanning the crowd with watchful eyes.

Ginny's response raised so many questions that Hermione didn't know which one to ask first. "Who is the 'us' you referred to?"

"I'm sorry, I can't tell you," Ginny apologized again. "But you were one of us, and we hope you will be again."

"If there's an 'us,' there must be a 'them,'" Hermione declared. "Can you at least tell me if I'm in any danger?"

"You shouldn't be anymore," Ginny said, distracted. "Oh, look!" she exclaimed, picking up a coin from the ground. "What's that saying again? 'Find a penny, pick it up, all day long you'll have good luck?'"

"I'd prefer answers to luck, Ginny," Hermione told her.

"Hmmm, it's not a pence piece after all. Have you seen one of these before?" the redhead asked, ignoring Hermione's question and holding out the coin for inspection.

"Yes," Hermione said impatiently. "I found one under my couch cushions weeks ago. What of it?"

"Oh," Ginny said, sounding disappointed. "Well, a Knut is a way you can recognize one of us," Ginny replied.

"A nut? Like a cashew?"

"K-N-U-T," Ginny spelled out. "The 'k' is silent."

That jogged Hermione's memory regarding Cho's odd request to add a name to their list. "Do you know a Theodore Nott?" she asked, hopeful that Ginny, like Seamus, would be willing to play the "name game."

Ginny's mouth tightened. "He's someone to be wary of. How do you know him?"

"He's married to a woman I'm working with," Hermione explained. "You may know her, too. Cho Chang?"

"Oh, yes," Ginny confirmed. "I don't like her, but you can trust her. Unlike her snake of a husband."

"Seamus gave me another name - Katie Bell. How is she involved?"

"She's in the same boat as you, having lost her memories," came the surprising answer, given what Katie had told her and Cho over lunch. "Was anyone else in the pub when you spoke with Sea?"

"Nobody," Hermione shook her head. "Did anything happen to him? You sound worried."

"He's fine, but he doesn't remember seeing you," Ginny anxiously scanned the pedestrians on the sidewalk as she neared the square's perimeter. "Look, Hermione, I need to go. I've been here too long as it is."

"Wait, before you go - " Hermione had so many more questions to ask, about the Mudblood scar on her arm, the snake and skull tattoo, Seamus's sudden amnesia, and so many other pieces of an intricate puzzle that refused to fit together.

"I can't," Ginny shook her head. "Here, take this," she thrust a small wrapped package into Hermione's hands. "If you ever really need me, look at it and call my name. Happy early Christmas!" she called over her shoulder, walking away and pushing the pram at a pace that approached a jog.

Instead of giving into the temptation to chase after her, Hermione unwrapped the little parcel, revealing a tiny, mirrored compact. She crinkled her brows in puzzlement. "Why on earth would Ginny give me bright green eyeshadow?"

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Draco sprang up as the doorbell rang. "I'll get it," he offered, seeing as Katie was busy in the kitchen, Marcus was upstairs attempting to persuade Isabelle to sleep, and Theo and Cho were comfortably ensconced on a love seat.

"Eager much?" Nott chuckled at him.

"Not so much," Draco denied, falsely. "Just getting a bit worried that Hermione got lost coming from the station. The directions are a bit tricky."

Theo shook his head. "You've got it bad, mate. She's a very capable, intelligent woman, and this is a safe enough neighborhood to get lost in."

Draco ignored him in favor of opening the front door to Flint's house, revealing Hermione standing on the stoop, holding a pastry box.

"Hey," he said, bestowing a kiss on his curly-haired witch and reaching forward to relieve her of that light burden. "What did you bring me?"

"Hey yourself, greedy," she laughed up at him. "It's cannoli for everyone. You said Katie was making pasta, right?"

"Spaghetti bol," he confirmed, taking her coat.

"Mmmm, smells divine," Hermione commented, walking back towards the kitchen with her boyfriend in tow after exchanging brief greetings with Theo and Cho. "Hi, Katie. Is there anything we can do to help?"

As he placed the pastry box on the countertop, Draco bit back a smile at the bossy way in which his girlfriend had volunteered him for menial labor. "What, you expect me to sully my lily-white hands, Granger?" he snarked.

Both women rolled their eyes at him, and Hermione nudged him with her hip for good measure. He retaliated by snaking an arm around her slender waist and tickling her until she squealed.

"You two," Katie shook her head. "Get a room. Or will a closet do?" she added with a snicker.

Draco laughed as Hermione blushed beet-red. "Oh, my God! Please tell me no one else noticed."

Katie took pity on her. "I was the only one who was cold sober on Halloween. And I have to confess Mark and I have been in compromising positions in places much more public than a supply closet!"

"Do tell," Draco invited, smirking.

Katie pointed her ladle at him in a mock-threatening manner. "If Mark hasn't already spilled the beans, I certainly shan't. Now, make yourself useful and see if you can't help him put Isabelle to bed."

"Yes, madam." With a mocking salute, he sauntered from the kitchen, unconcerned about leaving the two women alone for a gossip. From what Flint had told him, Granger had done such a good job Obliviating Bell and implanting Muggle memories that Katie didn't even realize her Hogwarts-era memories had been lost.

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"So, how can I help?" Hermione offered again, as her boyfriend left for upstairs. "You're eight months pregnant - please, sit down and put your feet up."

"Don't worry, I get enough coddling from Mark!" Katie said, smiling as she looked around the kitchen for something Hermione could do. "Would you mind slicing the bread?"

"Not at all." Hermione crossed to the countertop, where an empty breadbasket sat next to a large garden salad, and began cutting the seeded Italian loaf.

"Have you and Cho gotten together with Justin yet?" Katie asked.

"Not yet, though I think we've found a date that works for us before the holidays," Hermione replied. "Would you like to join us?"

"Let me know when and where, and I'll be there if I can," Katie promised from her place at the stovetop, giving the sauce a stir. "Still, I know how hard it is to juggle three schedules, let alone four, and Justin is quite the social butterfly!"

"Would you like me to set the table?" Hermione asked, her task complete.

Katie shook her head. "Mark already took care of it in the dining room. I don't suppose you could fetch the pasta bowl from above the frig?" she asked the shorter woman doubtfully.

"With a chair I can!" Hermione grinned, pulling one over from the kitchen table and clambering up. "Which one is it?"

"White with red and green vegetables around the rim," Katie clarified.

Hermione passed the large, shallow bowl to the other woman and climbed down.

"Thanks!" Katie said gratefully. "I could have grabbed it myself, but Mark would have a stroke if he saw me up on chair like this!" Fondly, she patted her pregnant belly.

"I suppose it must affect your balance," Hermione agreed. She couldn't even imagine her body changing like that. "Have you fallen before, to make him so concerned?" With Ginny's statement about Katie's memory loss fresh in her mind, she figured it was a good line of inquiry.

"Mark is always overly protective - that's just how he is - but pregnancy makes him worse. I haven't had any issues with this one, but I wound up in the hospital with a concussion when I was expecting Isabelle."

"Oh, my! What happened?" Hermione queried.

"It was my own fault, really. I'd had a miserable first trimester, but when I hit thirteen weeks, it was like flipping a switch. It was so nice not to feel sick and not to feel tired that I decided to play in a pick-up football game."

Ruefully, Katie shook her head at her own stupidity. "I guess it's a good thing I was kicked in the head rather than the stomach. I woke up in the hospital bed with Mark frantically asking

if I knew who he was. As though I'd forget that!"

"When was that?" Hermione asked, feeling chilled despite the warmth of the little kitchen.

"End of February, 1999, on one of those unseasonably warm days that tricks you into thinking spring has arrived," came Katie's casual answer.

Hermione made a note to herself, and to tell Cho. The timing fit, as did the circumstances.

A series of loud thumps issued and Katie looked up in exasperation at the kitchen ceiling. "I don't know what they're doing up there to get Isabelle to go to sleep, but clearly it's not working. Do you mind?" she asked Hermione.

"Of course not." Hermione made her way up the stairs to a small back bedroom, painted pink with a border of featuring prancing unicorns. Isabelle was jumping on the bed, rather than tucked under the covers, and yelled at Hermione as she entered the room. "I'LL EAT YOU UP!"

She smiled at the miniature version of Katie and at the book in Mark's hand as she introduced herself. "Oh, are you a wild thing? I'm Hermione."

The little girl nodded with excitement. "I'm the queen of all wild things! We're having a wild rumpus! And I tamed them," she pointed to her father and Malcolm, "with the magic trick of staring at their eyes without blinking once! So now they have to listen to me."

Hermione laughed. "I'll have to give that one a try."

"You already have your own methods to get me to listen to you," her boyfriend murmured in her ear, looping two arms around her waist and planting a kiss on her neck.

"Yuck!" Isabelle cried, giggling and jumping higher. "You just kissed!"

Hermione disengaged herself from Malcolm and crossed to the well-stocked bookshelf to find a story more conducive to bedtime. "Would you like me to read this book to you?" she asked Isabelle, holding out an abridged version of one of her own childhood favorites.

"I want *you* to read it," Isabelle insisted, looking at Malcolm with imploring eyes.

"Sure," he agreed easily, taking a seat at the edge of the bed, "I'll start reading as soon as you're under the covers."

"Daddy, tuck me in!" the little girl commanded.

Having done so, Mark joined Hermione in the doorway, propping himself against the frame. Malcolm began to read about a little boy's shabby toy rabbit, in a calming voice. After a few minutes, Isabelle's eyelids were drooping.

"He didn't mind how he looked to other people, because the nursery magic had made him Real - " Malcolm read. Hermione smiled at one of her favorite lines.

"I can do nursery magic with my unicorn," Isabelle announced, eyes popping open.

Mark tensed and addressed his daughter with surprising firmness for such an indulgent father. "Not now, Isabelle. Wait until tomorrow when you're not so sleepy or you could hurt your unicorn."

The little girl pouted slightly, but her pout turned into a yawn as Malcolm continued to read to her, his blond hair bright even in the dim light cast by the bedside lamp. Hermione swallowed hard, not certain how she felt about that charming tableau. Her boyfriend was a complex person, and she wasn't naive enough to assume she knew everything about him, but she never had imagined he would be good with children.

"I think he has it under control," Mark whispered, ushering Hermione out of the room and following her down the stairs.

She stopped on the narrow landing to admire a collection of framed family photos. One snapshot in particular caught her eye, a picture of a younger Mark and Katie wearing matching black and white scarves, posing in front of a massive castle. The photo was so vivid that Hermione expected to see Katie's then-long hair blowing in the breeze.

"That's one of my favorite pictures," Mark said over her shoulder. "It was taken right after Katie and I became teammates, when she first started to see me as a person rather than an enemy."

Despite the reminiscent tone of his voice, Hermione was uncomfortably aware of him as a hulking presence behind her on the stairs. The thought crossed her mind that Mark easily could push her down the steps. But Malcolm's presence within easy calling distance reassured her enough to pose a question. "Where was the picture taken? It's a beautiful setting."

"Dunno. Somewhere in Scotland. Katie might remember." Mark's answer was innocuous enough, so much so that Hermione thought she might be imagining the underlying sly, dark humor.

"Let me get you something to drink," Mark suggested genially as they reached the bottom of the stairs, like a perfect host. "We have red wine, sparkling grape juice, which Katie swears is almost as good as the stuff with alcohol, water . . ."

"Red wine, please," Hermione requested.

Mark poured a generous glass of Chianti and handed it to her with a conspiratorial wink. "Looks like you're the only woman drinking. D'ya think Cho's joined Katie in the club?"

Hermione looked at Cho, sipping a large glass of sparkling water with her husband's arm draped over her shoulders, holding her close. "They've only been married a month," she protested weakly.

"Our Theo is very efficient," Mark smirked. "But very cautious. Even if she is preggers, they won't be telling us for a couple more months."

"Drake did a nice job with Isabelle, don't you think?" he inquired with seeming casualness. Mark went on without waiting for Hermione's answer to his loaded question. "He was a terrible, spoilt brat when he was younger, but I think he'll be a very good dad now that he's grown up."

"Maybe someday," Hermione agreed politely, despite her unease with the subject.

"Have you two talked about kids?" Mark asked, a wide smile displaying his crooked teeth.

"No, we're not that serious," Hermione muttered, grateful that her boyfriend was descending the stairs to rescue her from this awkward conversation.

"That's what you both think," Flint said to her back as Malfoy embraced her, too softly for them to hear.

Chapter End Notes

The children's books quoted above are Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and *The Velveteen Rabbit*, by Margery Williams.

A Trip to Godric's Hollow

December 20, 2003

"Foggy conditions, wet pavement, and a narrow, twisty road - it all added up to a nasty accident. My car slid down the embankment and flipped. The doctors told me I was lucky to walk away with a concussion and bruises and cuts all over my body, even if I did lose some of memories," Justin Finch-Fletchley concluded, his blue eyes solemn.

Three pairs of brown eyes regarded him with equal solemnity. Hermione's golden brown eyes were warm with compassion, Cho's almond-shaped brown eyes were dark with speculation, and Katie's chocolate-colored eyes were bright with tears.

"May I see your medical file?" Cho asked.

The curly-haired blond handed it over without comment. "Alright, Katie?" he asked his co-worker.

"Not really," she sniffled. "It just reminded me of what happened to my parents. I always get so emotional at this time of year, and the pregnancy hormones are *not* helping!"

Justin wrapped a comforting arm around her. "Don't cry, lovely. You'll make your mascara run and Mark will chase me up a tree if he thinks I've been mean to you."

Hermione opened her mouth to ask about Katie's parents and then shut it in the face of the other woman's distress. She would phone Justin later for details, but it was just one more coincidence piled on top of the others that Katie's parents, like her own, had apparently died in an auto accident.

"Katie, you need retail therapy," Justin declared. "Do you remember Pansy? From Halloween? I'm meeting her at Oxford Street later to shop and you're coming with us. Would you two like to join us?" he politely invited Hermione and Cho.

Hermione shook her head, relieved to have a ready-made excuse to avoid bitchy Pansy. "We have a train to catch."

Cho closed the file, having finished her review. "Have you undergone any treatments to attempt to recover your memories?"

"I tried hypnosis," Justin said. "It was horrible!"

"What happened?" Hermione asked.

Cho looked like she was biting her tongue so as to not make a scathing comment, but Hermione was intrigued. Certainly hypnosis was not a standard medical prescription, but she could see how it might work.

Justin shuddered theatrically. "My overly active subconscious came up with all sorts of nonsense memories. A giant snake freezing me, people fighting with light sabers, giants, werewolves. Freud would have a field day! And the real memories weren't so great either."

"What did you remember?" Katie queried, patting his hand and returning his earlier sympathy.

"Just the usual sort of nasty adolescent bullying," Justin replied. "I didn't come out until after my accident - that was when I realized life was too short to pretend to be something I'm not - but it was fairly obvious even when I was at school that I was different. So some of the boys at school shoved me around a bit, or called me names. Finch-Faggot, Hufflepoof, that sort of thing."

"Do you have notes from your session with the hypnotist?" Cho clearly was doing her best to use a non-judgmental tone towards hypnosis. "I would be interested in reviewing those."

"I'll check with my psychiatrist and try to dig them up for you," Justin said.

"What in the world is a Hufflepoof?" Katie wrinkled her nose, but at least curiosity had overcome her prior sadness. "It sounds so silly!"

"The usual teen slang, I expect," Justin shrugged. "As I said, I've been called worse."

"Have you ever seen anyone who reminds you of the people you saw when you were under hypnosis?"

"Funny you should ask, Hermione," Justin said, looking directly at her. "Your boyfriend looks like the ringleader, all grown up."

A mischievous smile lit up his face. "In all honesty, that was why I chatted him up so aggressively on Halloween. I normally wouldn't do that to a bloke who's not playing for my team, no matter how dishy, but it was too delicious to make him squirm! Payback can be a bitch, and so can I."

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After saying their good-byes and wishing Justin and Katie a happy Christmas, Cho and Hermione hurried to Waterloo station to catch the next westbound train.

Although they made it with five minutes to spare, Hermione still was annoyed at Cho's insistence that they meet with Justin over lunch instead of earlier in the day. Even with no changes, the train still would take nearly three hours. Then there was the matter of hiring a car and driving to the little village of Godric's Hollow in the dark on one of the shortest days of the year, while still leaving themselves enough time to catch the last train back to London.

Hermione would have preferred not to travel to the West Country the night before her trip to Australia, but the timing had been dictated in part by her desire not to explain what probably sounded like a fools' errand to her boyfriend. As it so happened, Malcolm's company had their holiday party tonight, and he had apologetically informed her it was for employees only.

Theo was making a dutiful visit to his father in Yorkshire for the weekend, so Cho was free as well, though she complained bitterly about having to take a colleague's shift on Christmas Eve to get off work and accompany Hermione.

The train wasn't especially crowded, and they had no trouble finding two seats together. "So, what did you think of Justin's story?" she asked Cho in a civil tone as soon as they were settled.

"It's the same pattern," the other woman noted. "A solo 'accident' with no witnesses causing a head injury leading to memory loss. The only difference here is that Justin had some additional abrasions and contusions, severe enough to make it into his hospital report."

"Meaning what?" Hermione wasn't sure what Cho was getting at.

"Not much, from a medical perspective. From a practical point of view?" she shrugged. "Perhaps Justin, as a male, was more difficult to subdue."

"Ugh," Hermione said softly, disturbed at the grim possibilities. "You're wrong, though, about their being no witnesses. Mark saw Katie get hurt."

"So he says, but I wouldn't trust him, not with that *thing* branded on his arm," Cho returned. "What did you think about Justin recognizing your boyfriend?"

"He didn't recognize him, not really," Hermione protested. "Malcolm claims he has an evil twin."

"Or maybe he's just evil," Cho said quietly.

"That's not funny," Hermione snapped.

"Was I laughing?" Cho rejoined.

Hermione opened her mouth to defend her boyfriend, but Cho had turned away, effectively ending the conversation. "Wake me when we get to Yeovil Junction," she requested, leaning back against the seat and closing her eyes.

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By the time they reached Godric's Hollow, Hermione deeply regretted ever inviting Cho along. She was a positively miserable traveling companion, and, being London-born and raised, was little help in deciphering rural signposts. She also insisted in cracking open the windows in their hired car, despite the December chill, to keep from becoming motion sick. With Mark's speculation about Cho's pregnancy fresh in her mind, Hermione bit her tongue and drove through the twilight and evening darkness in shivering silence.

Her irritation vanished on the walk from the car park to the village center, replaced by a strong and almost ominous sense of recognition. She had been here before, and it hadn't ended well. Still, the village itself was charming, with a little stone church, a pub, and a few other shops clustered around the town square and two lanes of cottages extending down little lanes in opposite directions. On this Saturday evening, the pub was lively while the church

was quiet and dark, but Hermione could picture the latter's stained glass windows glowing like jewels when services were held.

"Can you imagine how this would look in the snow?" Cho asked, gesturing at the quaint buildings with their holiday decorations.

"Easily," Hermione said, wondering whether the picture in her mind was imagination or a memory. "It's very pretty."

As they crossed in front of the square, Hermione stared intently at the stone obelisk, the village's memorial to its dead in two world wars. No matter how she looked, or from what angle, the stone remained unchanged.

"Are we visiting Harry's grave or aren't we?" Cho demanded impatiently.

Hermione tore herself away from the memorial and, with unerring steps, led Cho around the back of the church and through the kissing gate into the graveyard. Both women had come prepared with pocket flashlights, but while Cho scanned the headstones systematically, Hermione made her way to the back corner. "Over here," she called softly.

There were two white tombstones, one shared between Lily and James Potter and a smaller one to mark Harry's final resting place. Cho knelt before the former. "They were so young," she breathed.

"Harry was even younger," Hermione sadly agreed. His marker was a simple one, with his name and the dates of his birth and death, a mere eighteen years and scant months later. There was an oddity in the form of a third date and notation: "2 May 1998 - Triumphed."

Reaching into her carrier bag, Hermione pulled out a holly wreath and added it to the collection of flowers and presents at the grave. "Does that date mean anything to you?"

Cho briefly shook her head, laying down her bouquet of white roses and red carnations between the headstones. "It seems like it should, but it doesn't. I saw that same date on several other headstones, though." She traced the Potters' epitaph with her fingers. "'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.' I fear they had more concrete enemies to contend with."

Rather than answering, Hermione knelt at Harry's grave. She had hoped the visit would bring her a sense of peace, or at least closeness to what remained of her brother in all but blood, but she merely felt empty. There was no comfort for her in this cemetery, but maybe there were answers.

She began sifting through the litter of Christmas cards and dying flowers adorning Harry's grave, making occasional notes of names while ignoring Cho's hissed and scandalized protests. Clearly, Harry was a celebrity even in death.

A child's drawing caught her eye. A woman with carrot-red hair was holding a little boy's hand as they watched a man flying high in the sky on a broomstick. Despite the sadness imbued in the graveyard, Hermione smiled that Jamie had used an orange crayon to depict

Ginny's hair color. The little boy and the man had matching mussed black hair, and there were round circles around the man's eyes.

"Look, Cho," she urged. "It's a picture of Harry up in the sky."

"It's a very good effort for a four-year-old," her companion observed.

"His stepdad is artistic. Perhaps he helped?" Hermione fervently hoped so, that little Jamie had a loving father figure in his life. And she knew that Ginny, despite her irksome shortcomings as a friend, would be an excellent mother.

"Mmmm," Cho hummed in agreement. "I wonder why they're all holding sticks in their hands. Odd, too, that the paper hasn't been damaged by the damp."

"Perhaps they were here just this afternoon," Hermione suggested.

Cho looked at the pristine paper, bizarrely impervious to the elements, but dropped the subject. "Now, are you quite finished with your rummaging?"

"Quite," Hermione said, looking at her notebook. She would try to collate this in some sensible fashion on her long plane flight. "The ruins of the Potters' cottage are down this way, I think, if you'd like to see them," Hermione said, pointing down the lane into the darkness.

"I would like that," Cho agreed quietly. "I've lost every memory I ever had of Harry, but they couldn't make me forget what a good person he was."

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At the station cafe, Cho and Hermione sipped bowls of watery vegetable soup in a subdued, emotionally drained silence as they waited for the last train to London. They had tromped up and down the village lanes, and even asked a villager for assistance, but frustratingly had been unable to locate any sign of the ruined cottage.

Hermione absently rubbed the heel of her hand against her forehead, grateful that the migraine had held off while she was driving.

"Headache?" Cho asked, with surprising sympathy.

"It's perpetual these days," Hermione confirmed. "I thought it was stress-related, with the end of term and my applications, but it hasn't let up."

She stifled a yawn. "I hate this time of year. The lack of daylight makes me so sleepy."

"I've been tired as well," Cho nodded, regarding Hermione with a clinical sort of detachment. Then she asked a question that turned Hermione's world upside-down.

The Purebloods Have a Ball

December 20, 2003

Draco gave one last look in the mirror, smoothing his hair and removing an invisible speck of lint from his dress robes. A frown crossed his face as his wife walked into his bedroom at the Manor uninvited.

"Why aren't you wearing the emerald and diamond cufflinks I bought you for your birthday?" Astoria asked, in a tone that managed to be whiny and accusing at the same time.

"Because I prefer these," he answered shortly. The silver cufflinks with the carved jade dragons were his favorite of the Christmas presents he'd received from Hermione. They had exchanged gifts early, since she had a flight to Australia tomorrow and his parents were hosting a Yuletide ball tonight.

"Are those a gift from some Muggle slut?" Astoria asked rudely.

"Wrong as usual, Tori," Draco said in a cold tone, hoping to avert a hysterical scene. He held one sleeve out for inspection so that Astoria could detect the old magic imbued in the jewelry. It was minor stuff - a charm to keep the pair from being separated and a jinx to tarnish the silver if touched by Muggle hands - but it was still intriguing that Granger had managed to find them among the Muggle trinkets for sale at the Portobello Road market.

"These are a Black family heirloom." Draco lied easily.

"Oh," Astoria responded, temporarily at a loss for words. That happy state persisted only for a moment. "You've still been neglecting me shamefully, Draco. You're cheating on me, aren't you?"

His mother swept into the bedroom, resplendent in icy blue dress robes to match her eyes and demeanor.

"Astoria, a well-bred witch should never accuse her husband of infidelity. The preservation of domestic harmony should be her utmost goal," Narcissa scolded. "Particularly as we are minutes away from welcoming guests into our home. This is not the time or the place for one of your tantrums."

Astoria pouted, but had learned through repetition not to argue. "Yes, mama-in-law," she said obediently.

"Now, darling, why don't you run along to the kitchens and make sure the house elves have properly plated the hors d'oeuvres?" the blond witch sweetly requested.

Astoria removed herself in response to Narcissa's thinly-veiled command, leaving mother and son alone for a brief chat.

"I would hex your father's nose off if he treated me like you treat Astoria," Narcissa observed.

Draco remained mum and kept his face carefully blank. His father had not gained his position as one of the Dark Lord's top lieutenants by remaining on the sidelines at the Death Eaters' revels, but he wasn't going to be the one to shatter his mother's illusions.

Narcissa curled her lip at his transparency. "I'm not referring to whatever physical release Lucius obtains from those of inferior blood, Draco. Boys will be boys, after all."

He raised an eyebrow at that, as his mother continued her lecture. "You've essentially abandoned your wife - your entire family - to live as a Muggle for these last few months. I do hope you have something to show for that?"

Draco ignored the question, electing to address Narcissa's broader complaint. "You said it yourself, Mother. Granger isn't just entertainment at a Dark revel. She also isn't just a casual shag in the Muggle world. If you want me to have an heir, you're going to have to accept that I'm in a relationship with her."

"You're pretending to be in a relationship with her," Narcissa snapped.

"Semantics," Draco shrugged. Then, deciding if he was in for a Knut, he might as well be in for Galleon, he casually broached a request that was likely to make his mother tear out her perfectly coifed hair. "She'd like to meet you the next time you're in London."

"No," Narcissa flatly refused. "I've met her before and neither occasion was a pleasant one, for either of us. I have no wish to see Miss Granger again and I can't imagine she would disagree if she remembered our prior interactions."

"Please, Mother," Draco cajoled. "She doesn't remember, and in the Muggle world, we've been dating long enough for her to reasonably expect to meet at least one of my parents."

"What did you tell her about your father?" Narcissa asked shrewdly.

"That I wouldn't subject her to Lucius, because he's still intent on having me reconcile with my unfaithful ex-girlfriend," Draco glibly recited.

"You've been disturbingly forthcoming with the Granger girl," his mother noted, a slight frown knitting her brows. "I hope she hasn't managed to get her claws into you the way Katie Bell has done with Lucretia's son. It's a pity Marcus's firstborn was a daughter and he had to stay with her for years to try again for his son."

Draco did not waste his breath trying to correct her absurd misapprehensions regarding Katie. Instead, he gave his mother his most appealing look, designed to remind her that he was still her little boy despite being all grown up.

"Fine, I'll meet with her," Narcissa sighed. "But I hope your little sojourn into the Muggle world will prove to be fruitful - and soon."

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"Your mother has managed to pull off the social event of the season, yet again," Pansy commented, as Draco waltzed her around the room, their steps perfectly in sync.

"She always does," he agreed.

Pansy scanned the ballroom with bright eyes, but her commentary was wistful rather than malicious as he had expected. "Marcus's little girl is adorable."

"She's cute," Draco concurred. Isabelle was dancing with her father, giggling as he spun her around.

"Though I can't believe Lucretia let her wear a dress that color!" Now the claws were out.

"Red is a holiday color," Draco said with deliberate indifference. "Besides," he grinned, "Flint told me she lay down on the floor at Twilfitt and Tatting's and threw a fit until her grandmother got the dress robes in a color she wanted."

Pansy sniffed, but couldn't hide a smile. "Do you remember the first Yule ball where we danced?" she asked, oddly nostalgic.

"Of course, Pans," he rolled his eyes. "Hogwarts, fourth year, and you wore a dress that made you look like a pink Pygmy puff."

Pansy looked mildly affronted. "It did not! And I'm amazed you even remember what my dress looked like, given where your eyes were that night!"

Draco wisely let that pass, deciding some distraction was in order. Pansy had kept quiet about seeing him with Granger on Halloween, but there was no guarantee of her continued discretion. "I like your necklace, Pans."

"Staring at my cleavage, are you?" Pansy smirked. "Justin helped me pick out the necklace and my gown. Said the design would draw attention to the girls."

He ignored the unfounded accusation, though her dress was eye-catchingly low-cut. "So what are you doing with the Hufflepuff?" he asked.

"Much the same as you are with Granger, I expect."

Draco raised a skeptical eyebrow. Given Finch-Fletchley's proclivities, he highly, *highly* doubted that was the case.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Draco! I'm not referring to whatever disgusting sexual acts you've trained your bushy-haired Mudblood bitch to perform," she clarified.

"Watch it, Pansy," he warned.

"Oh, fine!" she huffed. "Be that way about your Muggleborn! I want the same thing from Justin that you want from Granger: a baby. And one who isn't a Squib, like Greg's poor little girl. Urquhart can't give me that, but Justin might." Pansy's expression soured as she mentioned her husband.

Draco shook his head regretfully. "Pans, I hate to break it to you, but Finch-Fletchley is bent. He's just not into you, or any woman."

"I know! That's why I was hoping you'd let me take a hair or two." Pansy opened her eyes wide, in a pleading expression. "For Polyjuice potion."

"No fucking way!" he cried.

"Please, Draco?" she cajoled. "For me? As my Yuletide present?"

"Abso-*fucking*-lutely not, Pans! And stop running your fingers through my hair. You're not going to sneak a strand that way."

Pansy pouted and Draco shook his head at the daft bint.

She tried another tactic. "You owe me, Draco. I haven't breathed a word to anyone about you and Granger. It's just one tiny little hair."

"It's not going to work, Pans," he said, referring to both her attempt at blackmail and half-baked plan to seduce Justin. "Unless I'm wrong, your honey badger is a Keeper rather than a Chaser. Even if you transform into me and trick him into sex, a dick up his arse isn't going to get you pregnant."

Pansy looked nonplussed at his crudity.

"Why don't you just ask him to wank off at a clinic and donate his swimmers to you?" Draco suggested.

"You can do that?" Pansy asked, incredulous.

"Yeah, Muggles have clinics that specialize in it. Ask Theo for details - he's the Muggle expert. They even do it at St. Mungo's. I'm surprised your Healer never mentioned it," he told her."

Pansy smiled bitterly. "Urquhart believes having babies is a natural process, and won't try anything other than drinking virility potions - his family's secret recipe - or making me drink vile-tasting fertility potions. After nearly four years and no pregnancies, I can safely say those potions work for bugger-all."

"Talk to the Finch-Fucker," Draco urged. "Tell him the truth - you want a baby, your husband can't get you pregnant, and you think his genes and yours would make for an amazing kid. He seems like a nice enough bloke. He'll say yes."

"You really think so?" Pansy asked, eager at the possibility.

"Sure. And if he refuses, you'll Imperius the poor bastard to make him do whatever you want."

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A few hours later, Draco excused himself from the dance floor in favor of the exclusively masculine company in the billiard room. He needed to have a word with Antonin Dolohov, now that his fellow Death Eater had imbibed enough vodka to loosen his tongue.

The earlier conversation with his mother had heightened Draco's growing concern that Hermione wasn't yet pregnant, despite his best efforts to make her so. The morning after Halloween, he had been hopeful her vomiting was morning sickness, but she hadn't been ill since.

Several nights before, when exploring her body most thoroughly with his tongue, he had come across a star-shaped scar under her right breast, with a tail like a comet running down to her ribcage. And he remembered that Dolohov had cursed Granger, and that she had spent the last weeks of their fifth year recovering in the Hogwarts infirmary. Draco needed to find out what that curse was and whether it had impaired her fertility.

The conversation in the billiard room easily was turned in the direction of reminiscences about past Dark hexes and curses inflicted upon Muggles and Muggleborns. In the past, Cho certainly would have been discussed gloatingly, but Nott Sr.'s glowering presence with a pool cue in hand ensured there was no mention of the newly minted Madam Nott.

Flint, freshly returned from taking a drowsy Isabelle to his parents' home by Floo, responded to Draco's elbow to the ribs as his cue. "Antonin has the best hex - those fucking purple flames! I saw you at the battle at Hogwarts, mowing people down with that," he said with admiration.

The Russian wizard smiled at the flattery, lighting up his twisted face. "Ah, yes. The *shashka* curse. I learnt it at Durmstrang. A pity there is so little occasion to cast it these days."

"Do the flames burn?" Flint asked ingenuously.

"*Nyet, nyet*," Dolohov shook his head. "It is like your *diffindo*, but reaches a greater depth and causes more harm. Like sticking in a long knife and twisting." He mimed the motion for his audience, and Draco dug his fingers into his palms until the urge to twist Dolohov's scrawny neck in the same way passed. His mother would be most displeased if he throttled one of their guests. Still, as angry as he was on Granger's behalf, he also was relieved. That type of curse should have no lingering effects.

He noticed Theo standing in the doorway, a stiff drink in hand and an anxious expression on his face. He jerked his head towards the terrace in a clear request for a private conversation. After casting a warming charm, Draco casually made his way over to him, grabbing a couple of cigars on the way as a fig leaf for their conversation outside in the freezing cold.

"I just got off the phone with Cho," Theo began without preamble. "Do you know where she and Granger were?" he demanded.

Draco had a sinking feeling that Theo was about to tell him and he wouldn't like the answer. "Hermione told me they were meeting for lunch and doing some last-minute Christmas shopping," he offered.

"Perhaps you'll find a Chosen One memorial snow globe in your stocking, then," Theo said sarcastically. "Cho was an emotional wreck after your girlfriend took her to Godric's Hollow to visit Potter's grave."

"Oh, fuck," Draco said eloquently.

"It's bad enough that you couldn't Obliviate Granger properly, and even worse that you have no control over her," Theo fumed, "but it's completely unacceptable that she's dragged Cho into her little schemes!"

"Your wife isn't exactly a fragile flower, Theo. And Hermione wouldn't take her anywhere unless Cho asked to come along," Draco disputed. "As for how well I Obliviated her, you of all people should appreciate how fucking difficult that spell is to pull off." He didn't even bother to refute the lack of control he had over Hermione, as there was nothing he could say.

"Cho is rather emotionally fragile at the moment, and I don't need her sobbing over her dead ex-boyfriend." Theo took off his spectacles and polished them, always an indicator that he was distressed.

"Did Cho say what they saw at Godric's Hollow?" Draco asked, worried that he might have to try and explain away magic to his clever little girlfriend. "And how did you get your mobile to work within the Manor's wards?"

"You have a null spot where the house wards end and the wards on the grounds begin. Right at the edge of the terrace," Theo pointed vaguely, putting his glasses back on. "Cho was crying too hard for me to make sense of what she was saying."

A prickle of unease crept up Draco's spine. He had always thought that a wand was needed at Godric's Hollow to see the Potter memorial and cottage, but Granger had been quite adept at wandless magic.

He walked to the terrace's boundary to check his mobile. As Theo had said, he had service, along with a voicemail and two missed calls from Hermione. His sense of unease grew: she was not a clingy girlfriend, and three calls from her in the space of an hour was unheard of.

Draco checked his voicemail and heard Hermione's voice. "Hi, it's me. Please give me a call after your company's party. It doesn't matter how late. I really need to speak with you. Bye." The characteristic bossiness almost would have made him smile, but for the carefully controlled tone and faint hitch before the recording ended, as though she were choking back a sob. *That* had him striding for the terrace doors, to quickly make his excuses and say his farewells.

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After his hasty departure from the Yuletide ball, Draco Apparated to a back alley near Hermione's flat.

She had gifted him with a key earlier in the month, so he let himself in and swiftly ascended to the third floor. With the cautious instincts instilled by surviving a war and the Dark Lord as

a house guest, he stopped just inside the door, stepping around her packed suitcase and backpack, and listened. He could hear Hermione's even breathing from the couch, but nothing else.

She stirred as he made his way across the room to her. "Draco? Is that you?"

As always, it startled him slightly to hear his real name on her lips. Her voice was thick with tears, and his wrist itched as he realized she'd cried herself to sleep. "It's me," he confirmed, kneeling beside the couch and stroking her hair. "I tried calling you back, but you didn't pick up. What's the matter, lovely?"

"I had dinner with Cho, and she - " Hermione's voice broke off and she began to sniffle.

"What did she do?" Draco asked, his gentle tone at odds with his raging thoughts. Vow or no Vow, if Theo's icy bitch of a wife had hurt Granger, she would have him to contend with.

"She didn't do anything," Hermione said, sitting up and irritably swiping tears off her face. "I had a wretched headache and mentioned how tired I had been all month, thinking to ask her about mononucleosis."

Draco nodded. He had noticed Granger's migraines and had the goblin jewelers imbue the miniature dragon now adorning her bracelet with a strong charm for good health as one of her Yuletide/Christmas gifts. "Is it anything serious?"

At her renewed crying, Draco tightened his arm around her shoulder, fearing the worst. Perhaps terminal brain cancer, due to her Muggle heritage.

"Cho asked me if - if I might be pregnant, and when I last had my monthly. And I, I realized I was a week late," Hermione stuttered through her tears.

"Oh," Draco said slowly, drawing out the syllable. "Do you want to go the hospital tonight for a test?"

Granger gave him a strange look, and Draco realized this must be one of the areas in which Muggle and wizarding healthcare differed. He knew a basic charm to confirm pregnancy - not that he was going to whip out his wand and perform it on his Obliviated girlfriend - but he and Astoria always went to St. Mungo's right away so the Healers could cast more sophisticated diagnostic charms to tell them the due date and gender and start Astoria on a regimen of prenatal potions.

"I already bought the tests at Boots. Three different ones, and they all came up positive," Hermione told him. "I'm not going to get a different result by going to a hospital, if that's what you were hoping for."

Draco wisely bypassed the loaded comment. "How are you feeling?"

"Like complete and utter shite. And I have no idea how this happened, when I've always been so careful, or what I'm going to do with it! I don't even know how far along I am." Granger started to sob again, and shrugged his arm off her shoulders.

"Hey, calm down. It'll be alright," Draco attempted to comfort her. He knew the words were a mistake as soon as they left his mouth.

She rounded on him, her hair practically crackling with anger. "That's easy enough for you to say! You can just walk away, while I'm stuck dealing with the consequences."

"I'm not going to walk away," he told her firmly. "Not when the baby is half mine."

"Half *what*?" Granger asked sharply.

"Half *mine*," he emphasized. She narrowed her eyes, and Draco wondered if she was angered at his claim or whether the phrase "half blood" was running through her mind.

He hurried on, hoping to distract her from any subconscious mulling over blood status. "I know you have the right to decide whether to terminate your pregnancy, but I hope you'll take my wishes into account. And I want this baby."

Draco tried to pull off a wandless compulsion charm as he spoke, but from the stubborn look on Granger's face, he was doubtful he had succeeded. As a back-up plan, he appealed to her sense of fair play. "Please, Hermione. Please don't make any decisions without consulting me. Think about what you want to do when you're in Australia, talk to your godparents, and talk with me when you come back. Promise?"

"Promise," she agreed grudgingly. Her amber-colored eyes caught and held his. "You seem almost . . . *happy* about this," she said suspiciously.

"Happy isn't the right word," Draco shook his head. Thrilled, ecstatic, overjoyed - those were all closer to the mark. He wrapped his arm back around her shoulders. This time, she let him.

"I'm terrified," Hermione admitted softly, her cheek against his chest.

"Me, too," he whispered against her hair. Though he suspected she was terrified of having a baby, while he was terrified of losing it.

She tipped her face up and he kissed her softly, gently, almost reverently, giving her the comfort and distraction she needed. Gradually, her mouth grew greedy and her hands began to wander, and he responded in kind, until their naked bodies were intertwined on the sofa. Hermione eagerly parted her thighs and he slid into her warm, willing body with far more care than usual. Draco laced the fingers of one hand through hers, using his other arm to brace himself, to keep the bulk of his weight off hers as his body moved on top of hers, pressing her down on the cushions. They rocked and thrust together in an age-old rhythm, their cadence slower and less urgent than usual.

Draco had fucked Hermione dozens of times before, but realized this was different: this was the first time he was making love.

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Later, when Hermione was deeply asleep, Draco picked her up and carried her to the small lilac bedroom. After tucking her in and checking that the alarm was set early enough to get to

Heathrow, he retrieved his wand. Standing over the bed, he mimicked the wand motion he had seen from the Healers at St. Mungo's. Quite simply, he did not trust Muggle tests.

"*Foetus revelio*," he recited in a quiet voice. A golden glow blanketed Granger's sleeping body and coalesced low in her abdomen, pulsing rapidly in time with his unborn child's heartbeat. It had been months since he had seen that charm cast on Astoria, but he was fairly certain the glow was brighter than he had ever seen with his wife's pregnancies.

He slid under the covers, reaching an arm around Granger's body to mold her to him. With the palm of his hand placed flat beneath her belly button, Draco drifted off to sleep smiling at the unexpected Yuletide present, the best gift Hermione - no matter how reluctantly - could possibly have given him.

For Auld Lang Syne, My Dear

Chapter Notes

There are some potential triggers in this chapter, as Hermione weighs her options in dealing with an unwanted pregnancy.

December 31, 2003

There was something unnatural about spending Christmas in a sub-tropical climate, but Hermione decided that she had no objection to heat, humidity and strong sunshine to ring in the New Year. Her godparents' home in the suburbs of Brisbane had a lovely landscaped backyard and pool, which is where she had been spending a great deal of time over the past ten days, swimming, resting, and most of all, *thinking*. Thinking that while she had choices, none of them were particularly great.

"Can I interest you in a piña colada?" Monica asked, having apparently made a pitcher as her first task after returning home from the dental office and changing into shorts and a tank top.

Hermione flipped over from her stomach to a seated position, an automatic "no" forming on her tongue until she noticed the bottle of rum in her godmother's other hand.

"There's no alcohol in the pitcher. You've told me a few times you're not drinking due to 'antibiotics,' and the message has gotten through." Monica was smiling, despite the faint skeptical intonation.

"In that case, a piña colada sounds lovely, thank you," Hermione said. Her godparents made the tropical drink with fresh fruit, not the nasty store-bought mixer, and it was divine on a hot day.

Monica passed over a tall, frosty glass and poured a second glass for herself, topping that one off with rum. She took a seat on the lounge chair next to Hermione, extending toned, tanned legs and kicking off her sandals. Her godmother still had a slender, almost girlish figure, and Hermione wondered bitterly if that was one of the perks of *not* having kids.

"Have you made any resolutions yet?" Monica asked. "What are you planning on giving up in the New Year, other than alcohol for the next nine months or so?"

Hermione coughed up a sip of piña colada. "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, you heard me!" her godmother huffed, exasperated. "You're tired all the time despite sleeping ten hours a night, certain foods and smells make you blanch, and, as a clincher, you're not drinking." Monica rolled her eyes. "Obviously, you're pregnant."

"Does Wendell know?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"I doubt it. I haven't said anything to him, and men tend to be less perceptive. I just don't understand why you didn't tell *me*."

Monica looked so hurt that Hermione felt a stab of remorse. "I'm sorry. I just thought you'd be so disappointed."

"Were you careless? Having unprotected sex?"

"Of course not! I am - *was* - on the pill, and we got tested for STIs early on. But . . . "

Hermione trailed off.

She had brought her packets of birth control pills to Australia, not because she was still taking them - talk about shutting the stable door after the horse had escaped - but to inspect them and comb through the fine print of the drug company's insert. The blister packs all were intact, with no sign of tampering, making Hermione feel as though the irrational pregnant lady hormones must already be kicking in for that suspicion even to have crossed her mind.

The insert, in contrast, provided a perfectly rational explanation as to how she found herself pregnant. The pills were supposed to be taken every day at the same time, with a back-up method utilized if one were missed. She had deviated from those instructions, vomiting up the pill she had taken on Halloween and belatedly taking her pill the next day because she'd stayed over at Malcolm's flat and they'd gone directly to Oxford. Hermione thought that while there were probably any number of women who could attribute their accidental pregnancies to tequila, she might be the only one to blame Bodleian as a contributing factor.

"But birth control pills have a failure rate, if you don't use them perfectly," Monica finished for her. "Maybe it was meant to be," she shrugged philosophically.

"Easy enough for you to say," Hermione snapped. "You asked me what I'm giving up in 2004? Absolutely *everything* if I continue with this pregnancy."

Monica arched an eyebrow. "A bit overdramatic, aren't we? Is UCL going to expel you for being unmarried and having fallen pregnant? Are Oxford and Cambridge now categorically refusing to admit mothers into their doctoral programs?"

"Of course not," Hermione was forced to admit.

"Your mother was pregnant with you much of our last year of dental school," Monica informed her. "She was exhausted, miserable, and the smell of fluoride made her retch - to the point where I still get queasy when I think about it - but she carried on. Graduated at the top of our class, too."

Hermione had not previously considered that, though it was true her parents had graduated from dental school less than three months before she was born. "Was I planned?"

"I don't know that. I know you were wanted, despite the rather inconvenient timing," Monica smiled with warm reassurance. "You're not going to be barefoot, perpetually pregnant and

confined to a kitchen if you decide to keep the baby. Even in the 70's, your mother was able to find a job that allowed her some flexibility with her work schedule, and then she and your father opened their own practice before you started primary school. I'm not trying to be glib, but really the only thing you *have* to give up on with a newborn is sleep."

Despite the empirical example of her own mother, Hermione was not wholly convinced. "You're making it sound far too easy," she protested.

"Oh, did you miss the part where I said your mother was exhausted and miserable and perpetually nauseous? You can't escape the smell of fluoride at a dental school." Monica looked a bit green, even at the secondhand recollection.

"It also helped tremendously that your father was a supportive partner," she added. "Did Malcolm react poorly? Is that the reason why you've been so evasive when I've asked about him?"

"We only found out the night before I left. And, no, he reacted as well as could be expected. He wants the baby." Hermione had been reluctant to discuss Malcolm with her godmother because Monica, after flipping through snapshots taken in Dublin and elsewhere, had been uncomfortably effusive in singing the praises of Hermione's boyfriend. Hermione had expected her godmother to comment favorably on his good looks, and she had, but her almost maternal protectiveness towards him was bizarre.

"Well, good! That's all settled, then!" Monica clapped her hands and gave a dainty, tinkling laugh completely at odds with her normal down-to-earth mannerisms and chuckle.

"Just how much rum did you put in your drink?" Hermione asked, with mingled amusement and annoyance. "Nothing is settled just because *he* wants the baby. It's *my* decision. I thought you supported a woman's right to choose?"

Monica nodded her head sharply, as though to clear it. "I do. And I will fully support you if you opt to terminate the pregnancy. All that I am saying is that you and Malcolm can make this work if you choose to have the baby." She looked pointedly at the platinum charm bracelet on Hermione's wrist. "Clearly, he has enough money that you can employ a first-class nanny."

"We haven't discussed any practical details like childcare. I hadn't really thought beyond whether to continue with the pregnancy or not," Hermione admitted. She assumed Malcolm would expect her to stay home with the baby, given his general conservatism, but probably she should feel him out on the subject. A nanny would allow her to carve out undisturbed time for her research and thesis, and that meant her studies and career wouldn't be derailed.

"You should talk about it with him before you make any sort of irrevocable decision," Monica suggested.

"Funny, he suggested that I do the same with you," Hermione said.

"It's good advice, and great minds do think alike," Monica smirked, before continuing in a more serious vein. "I have to confess my bias here. I always wanted children, more than one,

and physically could not have them. Personally, I would never terminate a healthy pregnancy simply because the timing was inconvenient."

Hermione nodded, thoughtfully. It wasn't as though she never wanted to have children, just not now. And once or twice, especially since seeing Malcolm reading to Isabelle, the thought had crossed her mind that he would be a surprisingly good father - someday. "I'm leaning towards keeping the baby," she said. "It's not ideal, but it feels better than the alternatives."

Monica looked pleased. "From the photos I've seen of your boyfriend, your baby will be gorgeous. And very, very special," her godmother said persuasively.

Hermione smiled weakly. The baby might be gorgeous and special, but at this moment the pregnancy was quite literally making her ill.

"Oh, and Hermione?" Monica said softly, leaning back against the cushions and allowing the afternoon sun to kiss her face. Hermione looked over, with an inquiring lift to her eyebrows.

"I think that Malcolm's family tradition of using stars and constellations for baby names is a charming one," Monica opined. "You should give serious thought to continuing it with the next generation."

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Hours later, the poolside patio was crowded with her godparents' friends and neighbors as they hosted a backyard barbecue to ring in the New Year. Having had enough of mingling as midnight approached, Hermione wandered over to a quiet corner of the backyard, with a clear view of the night sky.

The bright stars of Centaurus helped her locate the Southern Cross. Draco, her new favorite constellation, wasn't visible in Australia at this time of year, and she was surprised by the sudden wish that Malcolm could be with her to ring in the New Year. The end of the year always made her melancholy, and her snarky, sexy boyfriend had a knack for pulling her out of that kind of mood.

She also very much wanted to speak to him as a practical matter after her conversation with her godmother. The reminder that her own mother had juggled pregnancy and dental school, and then a baby and career, was reassuring to Hermione, but she had to know that Malcolm would support her choices.

He had been calling her twice a day while she was in Australia, brushing off her warnings that his phone bill was going to be astronomical. To his credit, Malcolm had refrained from putting any pressure on her when he phoned, merely inquiring about how she was feeling with enough intensity to make it clear it was not just a pleasantry.

They had already spoken late this morning her time, before he went to bed back in England, because Malcolm claimed hearing her voice before going to sleep gave rise to pleasant dreams. Hermione wished she could say the same, but without her boyfriend's warm body beside her, she was falling prey to increasingly vivid nightmares. She had been expecting to

hear from him again early in the evening in Australia, before he went to work in London, but he hadn't yet rang.

Almost as though her thoughts crossed the miles to inform her boyfriend's actions, she saw her godfather answer the phone in the kitchen, with the brightly lit room looking like a diorama from where she was standing in the darkness. Hermione couldn't think of anyone else who would be calling so late, only a few minutes before midnight. But Wendell's conversation with the caller dragged on, with his back to the window, until he walked out the back door to the patio, cordless phone in hand, and called for her.

"Hermione, it's that young man you're seeing." Her godfather handed over the phone with a faintly disgruntled expression before retreating to the kitchen to give her some privacy.

"Why was your godfather asking if I still have my wisdom teeth?" Malcolm started off.

Hermione laughed. "He's been muttering all day about removing them with pliers, rather than proper dental equipment. I told him I was pregnant, and he didn't take it all that well."

"That's an understatement," Malcolm said, the dryness in his voice apparent even over a less-than-optimal connection. "I hope your godparents haven't been too hard on you?" His concern was equally apparent, and Hermione was touched.

"Monica has been very understanding, and she's quietly thrilled at the notion of being a quasi-grandmother," she said reassuringly. "Wendell is a bit disappointed in me, but he's placing all the blame on you."

"As he should, since I *am* the responsible party."

"You needn't sound so smug about that, you prat!" Hermione laughed, easily picturing the smirk on his face. "And it takes two to tango, you know."

"I do know, princess. I take it you're feeling better?" There it was, the subtle inquiry about the pregnancy and her current state of mind regarding it.

"Much. I did want to ask you something, though," Hermione said hesitantly.

"Go on, then," Malcolm said after a beat of silence, sounding wary.

"How do you feel about engaging a nanny?" she asked, anxiety making her prattle on. "I know your mother doesn't work outside the home, but I don't want to give up my studies or career for a baby. Daycare is a possibility, too, but the hours are rather inflexible and I'd hate to expose the baby to so many germs. But if I had a nanny to look after the baby, I could manage it, though -"

"You want a nanny?" Malcolm cut her off. "Done. Do you want two? In case the first calls in sick or something? Or to get up with the baby at night?"

"Erm, no," she replied, fighting back a bubble of laughter at his absurdity. She lived in a one-bedroom flat, for Godric's sake! "One live-out nanny should suffice."

"So that means . . . " her boyfriend began in a hopeful tone, waiting for her confirmation.

"So that means 2004 should be an interesting year, with a baby and all," she confirmed.

The *thank you* on the other end of the line was so quiet and so heartfelt that Hermione suspected it was not meant for her ears. "You won't regret this, Granger, I swear it."

"C'mon, Draco, I should think we're close enough to be on a first name basis," she teased, half of her attention on Wendell, who had emerged from the kitchen and was waving her towards to patio. "I should go. We're eleven hours ahead, so it's almost time for the countdown here."

"Stay on the line with me," Malcolm cajoled. "I want to be the first to wish you a happy New Year."

"Okay," she acceded in a soft voice.

". . . seven, six, five, four, three, two, one," the voices of her godparents and their guests drifted across the yard to her. "Happy New Year!" a chorus exclaimed from the patio, as people exchanged embraces and toasts.

"Happy New Year, love," her boyfriend echoed. "It will be a wonderful year," he promised.

The crowd on the patio began singing, and Hermione's throat tightened and tears pricked her eyes at the poignant words. "Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind . . ."

"Happy New Year to you, too," she wished him, hoping she wasn't making a terrible mistake.

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After ringing off with Hermione, Draco made his way down Charing Cross Road and the entrance to wizarding London. He realized he was grinning like an idiot, but felt that wiping a smile off his face in favor of a cool Malfoy mask was a feat beyond his power at the moment.

Walking into the Leaky Cauldron, he found himself unable to muster a sneer for the surviving Weasel twin or his wife, finishing up their lunch at a booth near the front. Since they both looked perturbed by his friendly expression, he decided it didn't matter.

Draco also offered an unusually polite greeting to the barkeep. "Afternoon, Tom. I'm meeting a couple of friends for lunch, Theo Nott and Marcus Flint. Do you know whether they've arrived?"

Tom gaped at him. "In the back room, Mr. Malfoy," he managed after a moment.

"Excellent. Pour me out three pints of your winter ale, will you?"

Draco left a generous tip and levitated the three mugs, humming slightly. He lowered the drinks onto the tabletop, in a quiet corner in the back room, and grinned at Flint and Nott as

he cast a quick *Muffliato*.

"May I offer a toast?" he suggested cheerfully as they each selected a foaming mug. "To fatherhood!"

Both of the other wizards clinked their mugs to his, but in a manner that was more dutiful than enthusiastic.

"I take it this isn't some abstract praise of Lucius?" Theo asked dully. "Granger's pregnant, then?"

"Yep, I knocked her up right and proper," Draco bragged, unable to stop himself.

"I can tell you're thrilled," Nott dryly observed, "but does she feel the same?"

"She's come around," Draco said casually, hiding just how relieved he felt. When Granger was seriously considering an abortion, he had realized his options to stop her were much more limited and chancy than he would have preferred. He had planned to ask Katie to speak with her, but Narcissa had suggested allowing her to turn to her godmother, who was really her mother, for maternal counsel.

"Granger just wanted to make sure I had no objection to a nanny," he chuckled. He had found her hesitant request rather adorable. "As though I would, after being raised by nannies and house-elves."

"Yeah, and look how well you turned out!" Flint laughed at him. "Seriously, mate, congratulations. When's she due?"

"Not sure," Draco admitted. "She was a week late when she took the Muggle pregnancy tests, right before she left for Australia."

Theo looked up from the tabletop to glare at him. "Malfoy, you fuckwit, even Muggles typically won't announce a pregnancy until the first trimester is done due to the risk of miscarriage."

"So what if I'm a bit excited? We can't all be cold fish like you. Aren't you the slightest bit happy Chang's up the duff? Because we all know she is."

"Chang-Nott," Theo corrected automatically. "We're married now and she opted to hyphenate. And no, worry has managed to drown out any happiness."

"Is she having a rough time of it with morning sickness?" Draco guessed.

"If only. Cho's a high-risk pregnancy due to past trauma." Theo looked bitter. "Every time she spots, I'm convinced she's going to lose the baby. The Muggles want to do some barbaric procedure next month to stitch her cervix closed and now we don't have any better options."

He flung a piece of pink parchment on the table, bearing the seal of the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission. Draco picked it up and read a short decree denying the petition for

reclassification of Cho Chang's blood status. Undersecretary Umbridge had signed the decree with a gleeful flourish.

"Worst of all is that the pregnancy is wreaking havoc with Cho's mental state," Theo continued in a monotone. "She's been having nightmares every night and had to switch up her anti-depressants because of the baby. The new medication isn't working well, and I'm terrified she'll hurt herself."

"Um-bitch also denied the more general proposal that would have let each of us bring our Muggleborns into the wizarding world if we wanted," Flint said, passing over a second sheet of lurid pink parchment. "No Mudbloods allowed, period, full stop, on pain of Azkaban."

Draco skimmed it and shook his head. "This doesn't make any sense. Even Muggles are allowed in the wizarding world if they're married to a witch or wizard or have a kid at Hogwarts."

"Yes, well, mere Muggles apparently do not 'pose a threat to the social order and fabric of our society,' at least according to that cunt Umbridge. I'd throw her back in the forests with the centaur herd if I thought they'd take her," Theo muttered darkly.

"It's enough to make me wish Greyback was still alive. I'd turn the bitch over to him," Flint said with a murderous smile. "Too bad your girlfriend offed him at the Final Battle."

"She might even agree with you, if she remembered. Granger hated Umbridge with a passion." Draco smirked. "Still, what has your knickers in a twist, Marcus? This doesn't change anything with Katie."

"Yeah, I know," Flint rubbed the back of his neck, tiredly. "My mum's the one who was pushing for it, so she could see her grandkids more. Katie's happy enough not knowing about magic. But she's due any week and I wanted her to have the option of going to St. Mungo's."

"Why's it matter? She had Isabelle at a Muggle hospital, didn't she?" Draco asked.

"You won't be so cavalier when it's Granger giving birth, Malfoy," Nott informed him. "It hurts, and the Muggles can't magically block the pain."

Draco looked to Flint, who nodded in confirmation. "Katie had a pretty rough time of it with Isabelle. Screaming, crying, swearing, bleeding. And that was just me, what with the number she did clutching my hand and digging in with her nails."

The blond wizard snorted. "You're such a pussy, Flint. Even I'm tougher than that, and Hermione certainly is."

Marcus gave him a serious look. "All joking aside, Nott's right. It hurts like a motherfucker. I know your witch is a brave Gryffindor and all that bullshit, but so's Katie. It wasn't the screaming that got to me, because there wasn't much of that. It was just standing there like a useless lump, watching Katie bite her lip and whimper so she *wouldn't* scream. I swear to Salazar, if she hadn't wanted a second and if I didn't need a male heir, I wouldn't have put her through childbirth again."

Draco shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He had seen Granger biting her lip until it bled in a futile attempt to keep from screaming, writhing in pain under Bellatrix's wand, and it was a sight he never again wanted to see. "Don't the Muggles have pain potions or pills or something?"

"They've got something where the Healer sticks a whacking great needle in your spine, but Katie didn't go for that."

"I can't imagine why not," Draco muttered. Maybe he could sneak some of his home-brewed potions into the hospital for Granger when she was in labor.

"Oh, look, if it isn't Umbridge's boss," Theo sneered.

Kingsley Shacklebolt had indeed entered the back room of the Leaky Cauldron, flanked by Dean Thomas and another Auror, and was glad-handing his way across the room in their direction.

"Looks like you gentlemen are having a serious conversation," Shacklebolt observed with a politician's plastic smile as he reached their table. Over his shoulder, Thomas glared at them, reserving his dirtiest look for Draco.

"Not at all, Minister. Just skiving off work a bit to enjoy a late lunch," Theo smiled back, with just as much authenticity.

The Minister expertly cast a *Muffliato*, replacing the privacy spell that Draco courteously had cancelled at his approach and subtly reminding them that he was a fellow snake.

Shacklebolt inclined his head in the direction of Umbridge's decrees, laying crumpled on the table. "While I normally refrain from publicly undercutting my subordinates, I sincerely hope you'll put your legal skills to good use in appealing that nonsense to the Wizengamot, Mr. Nott."

"Oh, I intend to appeal," Theo informed him with a cold smile. "The evidence shows my wife is a pureblooded witch."

"Be that as it may," Shacklebolt permitted himself a sardonic smile, "it seems to me that Undersecretary Umbridge has overreached herself in denying witches and wizards born of Muggle parents the same rights available to a Muggle spouse or Muggle parents of a magical child. Given the composition of the Wizengamot and current political climate, that may be a more compelling argument than one witch's blood status."

"I'll bear that in mind. Pity that the Wizengamot's hearing process takes so long," Theo stated.

"The process can perhaps be expedited for good cause," the Minister noted. "Say, for example, if the delay might endanger a pureblood child *in utero* by denying the mother access to treatment at St. Mungo's, access to which she would otherwise be entitled."

Theo gave Shacklebolt a searching look, but his innate discretion prevailed. "I'll think on that, Minister."

"You do that." Shacklebolt clapped the younger man on the back. "And please accept my belated congratulations on your wedding and best wishes for your marriage."

The Minister shifted his attention to Marcus.

"Mr. Flint, I'm afraid Miss Bell may need to wait a bit longer to be reintegrated into our world," he stated in his low, deep voice.

Flint merely grunted and tried to look stupid, tactics that had served well to keep him out of trouble when serving the Dark Lord.

Shacklebolt smiled. "The redoubtable Lucretia showed me a picture of your daughter. Pretty little girl, and so clearly favors her mother."

Without waiting for a response, he turned his shark-like smile on Draco.

"How is Miss Granger these days? In blooming good health, I hope?"

Draco gave the Minister a bland look, careful not to react to his unusual and apt phrasing. "Well enough, I suppose, since I am."

"Be careful with her, Mr. Malfoy," Shacklebolt warned, looking mildly put out at Draco's tepid response. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and Miss Granger no longer has any way to defend herself against a jealous witch."

"I can't think of a reason for any other witch to be jealous of her," Draco lied. Shacklebolt merely gave him a look and shook his head in disappointment.

"Will I see you gentleman at the Ministry's New Year's Eve party tonight?" he inquired.

Draco nodded, but Flint and Nott shook their heads.

"Ah, how lovely to see two young men so devoted to their families," Shacklebolt declared. "Happy New Year to you and yours! I fully expect 2004 to be an eventful year."

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"We're making quite a habit of this," Pansy observed, as they danced at the Ministry ball much later in the evening. She smiled mischievously. "People will start to talk, say we're having an affair."

"Let them," Draco smiled back. He had taken Shacklebolt's warning to heart and spent the evening flirting with a select number of pureblood witches, all in an effort to create a protective smokescreen for Granger. "That's the impression I'm trying to create. It's much less scandalous than the truth, for both of us. Unless it'll cause trouble with your husband?"

Pansy gave a bitter laugh. "You couldn't make our marriage worse if you tried."

She looked disgusted. "I just realized I'll have to sleep with Urquhart this week, so I can pass off Justin's baby as his."

"So the nice Hufflepoof agreed to dedicate a wank to you?"

She nodded and smirked at him. "More likely to you. I gave him a picture of you in your swim trunks for inspiration."

"Pansy!" he groaned, rolling his eyes. Before he could take her to task, Astoria interrupted.

"I'd like to have the next dance with my husband," she advised Pansy in a haughty tone.

"Be my guest, Tori." Pansy relinquished him with a wink.

"You've abandoned me all evening, Draco." Astoria launched into a whiny litany, interspersed with catty comments on the witches who had been the subjects of his attention.

He tuned her out, indifferent to her complaints about his infidelity so long as she never found out that Hermione was the witch he was cheating with. Still, some distraction was in order before her shrill - and hypocritical - whinging left him with a headache.

"That necklace suits you," he murmured to his wife as he guided her around the dance floor.

Too stupid to recognize the insult, Astoria preened as she lightly touched the diamond and garnet pendant with a long, scarlet-painted fingernail. "Thank you. It was a lovely birthday present. Such a nice change from emeralds! Is your friend Marcus here?"

Draco shook his head, hiding a grin. Flint had expressed his annoyance, loudly and at length, over how both Greengrass sisters had been hounding him ever since they met Isabelle. Daphne and Astoria now were convinced Marcus's *other* wand was especially magical and were locked in a sisterly competition to seduce him. If Draco still cared a Knut for his wife he might have been upset, but as it was, he found Flint's plight and efforts to avoid the increasingly aggressive witches highly amusing.

"Draco! Astoria! I trust you two are enjoying yourselves?" Lucius approached with a broad smile, placing a paternal hand on Draco's shoulder and kissing his daughter-in-law's cheek.

Based on his father's unusual *bonhomie* and the slight swaying as he stood, Draco deduced that Lucius had been drinking Firewhiskey and soda rather than the Ministry's cheap champagne. He estimated his father's consumption at half a dozen, but upped that number on the heels of his next words.

"It's almost a New Year, children. Time to let bygones be bygones!"

Astoria nodded eagerly, while Draco wondered if someone had dared Polyjuice himself as Lucius. Malfoys always sought vengeance rather than forgiveness.

Lucius looked at them with bleary eyes. "My wish for you in the next year is to get your marriage back on track, perhaps provide me with a grandchild."

"Working on it, father." Draco smirked at the thought of a little zygote vacationing in Australia with his mum.

"Good, good!" Lucius winked at him. "Why don't you leave this stuffy party a bit early, get a head start on that resolution before the clock strikes midnight?"

Before Draco could demur, Astoria beamed at his father. "What a splendid idea!" she exclaimed. "I'm ovulating," she added in a stage whisper before grabbing Draco around the waist and Apparating them both away.

He stumbled as they landed in his bedroom at the Manor. "Don't do that!" he snapped at his wife. "You could have splinched us both!"

"I'm sorry, Drakey," she purred, stepping close and running a hand down his dress robes, lingering at the front of his trousers. "I'll make it up to you."

"No, thank you, Astoria. I'm tired and going to bed," Draco told her coldly.

His wife wasn't deterred. "Part of you is still up," she observed archly, giving him a meaningful look and stroking more boldly. "And your father said we should."

"Lucius doesn't get to tell me who I have to fuck."

"Fine, be that way." Astoria pouted but removed her exploring hand, stepping away from him. Draco sighed in relief. He wanted Granger, not Astoria, but couldn't control his body's natural response to the stimulation his wife was providing.

His relief was short-lived, as Astoria unzipped her black dress and let it fall to the floor. She wasn't wearing anything underneath other than black thigh-high stockings held up by a lacy garter belt. Draco gulped as he drank in her model-thin body and magically-enhanced breasts, and felt the blood rush away from his brain.

"You don't *have* to fuck me, but I think you *want* to." His wife licked her lips at his very obvious erection. She leaned down over the bed and spread her legs, looking over her shoulder with a come-hither smile. "Fill me up with your cock, Draco."

Alarm bells jangled in his mind. Astoria considered herself too lady-like to engage in dirty talk. And unlike his rough and tumble little Muggleborn, his wife's strong preference was to be worshiped in bed, not bent over it and fucked.

He eyed Astoria closely, noticing faint pink marks on her neck and the tops of her breasts, and decided to play along for a bit. Leaning in behind her, caging her between his arms, he sniffed and then growled softly in her ear. "You really want it tonight, don't you?"

She rubbed against him, her back to his front. "I do, I really, really do."

He inserted two fingers between her legs, making no effort to be gentle, and scissored them inside her. "You're so hot and sopping wet. All for me?"

"Oh, yes!" she gasped.

His temper flared, and he pushed her away from him, face-down onto the mattress. "You're a lying whore," he snarled, wiping his fingers on her bare back. "Do you really think I'm too

thick to recognize the smell of another wizard's spunk? Or his cologne on your neck? Who was it this time?"

"Zacharias Smith," Astoria said after a moment, her voice muffled by the duvet.

"Get out," he ordered. "I'm not interested in some Hufflepuff's sloppy seconds."

She began crying. "Please, Draco. We can work things out, have a better marriage in the New Year like your father suggested."

Draco regarded her coldly, having long since acquired an immunity to his wife's tears. Astoria cringed as he drew his wand and pointed it at her, but all he did was cast a contraceptive charm. He made a mental note to direct Mipsy to begin spiking Astoria's morning tea with a birth control potion. He wasn't going to run the risk of her complicating their divorce by getting pregnant with some other wizard's bastard.

"Here's a resolution for you, Astoria - try not to be so promiscuous in 2004. Learn to keep your legs shut, or I'll hex them together at the knees."

Astoria rolled over to face him. "You're cheating on me, too! Don't deny it!"

"Why would I bother? We're through," he sneered, turning away in disgust as she scrambled for her dress on the floor. He was going to take a shower, wash her smell off, and count down the days until Granger came back. Just right now, he wanted nothing more than to leave the cold luxury of Malfoy Manor for his comfortable flat and her warmth in his bed.

An Appealing Man

January 9, 2004

Generally speaking, Marcus Flint was content to live as a Muggle. Sure, he missed the ease of magic, but there were compensations. He might not be able to *Accio* the remote, but when he got up and fetched it, there were positively brilliant shows on the Muggle telly. And while he lived in a small semi-detached without the benefit of house-elves, Katie was there, with their daughter and soon-to-be-born son.

But with "soon-to-be-born" meaning early this evening, if the Muggle Healers could be trusted, Marcus was yearning for magic and the serene calm that prevailed on the obstetrical ward at St. Mungo's. When he had been born, Lucretia had passed the time she was in labor knitting a receiving blanket and playing Wizarding Chess with his father, except for a brief fifteen minutes for the actual delivery when Brutus had been banished to the waiting room to smoke a cigar. Marcus had heard their pain relief charms had only gotten better in the intervening thirty years.

"Just breath through it, luv," he coached. He watched the second hand sweep around the wall clock twice before the contraction eased. Katie loosened her death grip on his hand and panted in relief on the hospital bed. She'd spent the first six hours at the hospital pacing, reminding him of a lioness at the zoo, but she had decided to lie down in the last hour when her labor had intensified.

"Would you like some ice chips?" he asked, trying to be helpful.

She opened her eyes, which had been shut tight through the pain, to give him a glare worthy of the Dark Lord. "You can take your ice chips and shove them up your ar-rrgh," she finished on a groan. He could actually see the thin hospital gown move with the muscles clenching low in her abdomen as another contraction began.

"They're coming really close together now," Marcus observed.

"Are they really? I hadn't noticed," his normally sweet-tempered witch said with vicious sarcasm as the contraction ended.

She moaned as another began almost immediately. "Ohhh. I forgot how much it hurts."

"Aw, fuck, Katie. I'm so sorry." He really hated seeing her in pain, sweating with the effort of bringing their child into the world. His wrist, however, didn't even twinge. He found that reassuring, both that Katie was strong and healthy and not in any danger, despite her acute discomfort, and that he was living up the terms of the Vow, trying his damndest to look out for her and keep her safe.

"It's going a lot faster this time," Marcus said encouragingly, trying to look on the bright side. "Isabelle took sixteen hours, but it's only been seven with this one and the Healer said you're almost ready to push."

"*Only* seven hours?" she snarled at him. "And pushing isn't a holiday, you stupid snake. I swear, you're getting a vasectomy after this one, Flint."

He rubbed between her shoulders with his free hand, the one she wasn't crushing, focused on making her feel a little better. "Sure, baby. Whatever you want. That can be your Valentine's gift, or your push present. You just let me know." He would talk to Nott later and find out what he just agreed to.

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"Lucius, may I ask what you're doing here?" Minerva McGonagall asked with Scottish bluntness. She had kept him waiting outside her office for more than twenty minutes, to his obvious irritation, but she wasn't going to rearrange her schedule to accommodate a Death Eater.

"I'm here in my capacity as a member of the Board of Governors, one of the overseers of this school," he answered arrogantly.

Minerva made a show of flipping through her calendar. "Your next supervisory visit isn't scheduled until mid-February."

"Surprise inspection, Headmistress," Lucius said smoothly.

She looked him through narrowed eyes. Unlike Albus in his later years, she didn't play politics and, as a result, had a cordial relationship with the majority of the school's governors. Just this past weekend, she had enjoyed a Gillywater at the Three Broomsticks with Aurelia Bones, the current chair of the Board, while informally discussing the state of the school. Minerva therefore had little doubt that Lucius was here for his own purposes, without the knowledge or approval of the rest of the Board members. The only question in her mind was whether to call his bluff, or allow him to continue on, to see what he wanted.

"An inspection?" she asked, deciding on the latter course. There was an Order meeting scheduled for later this evening, and renewed Death Eater interest in Hogwarts would be a matter worth reporting.

"The Board is very concerned about Hogwarts' increasingly low standards and declining enrollment. You are now admitting students who are barely a step removed from being Squibs," Lucius sneered.

"I thought you would approve, since all of the current students have at least one magical parent," Minerva answered evenly.

"Not from our more prominent wizarding families," he sniped. "And the Mudbloods? Why haven't any been admitted?"

Minerva's nostrils flared at the slur. "If you can manage to rephrase your query in a less offensive manner, I shall attempt to answer it."

"You said all current students come from magical stock. What of those who do not?" Lucius ground out the question through gritted teeth.

"I really couldn't say," she said with an innocent look. "Though I assure you, Lucius, we offer admission to Hogwarts to every magical child whose name is written in the Book of Admittance by the Founders' Quill. However, the Book merely tells me the child's name and date of birth. It says nothing about blood status."

"Every year, some few families decline our offer of admission, but I do not know their reasons for doing so. I suspect, however, that most Muggleborn students from the British Isles are attending Beauxbatons. My counterpart there, Madam Olympe, informs me that enrollment has surged. Their international test scores have improved as well," she noted pointedly.

Minerva met Lucius's gaze candidly, without fear of any Legilemency. She had spoken the truth; due to her sensitive and prominent role as headmistress, she deliberately walled herself off from the Order's outreach efforts to young Muggleborns and their families.

"Have you given thought to the fiscal implications, should this decline in student numbers persist? The Board may need to trim Hogwarts' budget," Lucius threatened in a silky voice. "To the bone."

"I fear that declining enrollment is a trend that shall continue," Minerva agreed placidly, impervious to the threat. "I expect no Muggleborn students to enroll so long as the Ministry's reprehensible policy towards them remains in effect. And, as I am sure you must be aware, there have been a dearth of magical children in the more *prominent* families, including your own."

The wizard's lips tightened at the jab. Minerva smiled inwardly and answered his threat with one of her own.

"Should the school's budget be cut that deeply, I expect we can make up for the loss by consolidating four Houses into three once Horace retires. Really, the Book shows so few incoming students from the traditionally Slytherin families that it would be wasteful to maintain a dungeon dormitory for only a handful of students."

"You would abolish Slytherin as a House?" Lucius gasped, horrified. "What will happen to those students?"

Minerva shrugged, pleased at his reaction. "Some will be intelligent enough to be Sorted into Ravenclaw; there may be the occasional child from a Slytherin family, like a Sirius Black, who will find a home in Gryffindor, and the rest can go to Hufflepuff."

"I should like to see the Book of Admittance, to verify these declining numbers for myself," Lucius requested, hand out.

Ha! Minerva thought to herself. *So that's what he's after. Not such a subtle serpent, after all.*

"Certainly," she said aloud, rising and waking over to the glass case that also contained the Sorting Hat and Godric Gryffindor's sword.

"For what little good it may do you," she added, passing over the leather-bound book. "The Founders enchanted it so only the rightful head of Hogwarts, and his or her deputy, can decipher the names. To everyone one else, it is gibberish."

She watched Lucius Malfoy's eyes cross and revolve as he tried to read the swirling print. Still, he held the book with something close to reverence. Despite his myriad character flaws, she supposed the man did have a profound respect for magical tradition.

"Would you - would you please show me where Draco's name appears in the Book?" Her old enemy asked with almost unheard-of politeness.

"Here," Minerva flipped back to the page listing the students who had begun their magical education in 1991 and pointed to an entry. At her direction, the letters briefly swirled into a readable name and birthdate.

Lucius followed attentively as she flipped through the book. "Fewer and fewer names every year," he quietly noted.

"Indeed," Minerva agreed, sadly, as they looked at the last page, which had a mere twenty or so names. "And fewer still from the old pureblood families," she added acidly. In pushing for repatriation of Muggleborns, Lucius had made his bed and now he could lie in it, with Dolores Umbridge and all of the other blood supremacists.

With a soft swoosh, the Founders' Quill landed between them on the page and wrote a name, momentarily legible to them both, in golden, glowing cursive.

"Peter Marcus Stone," Minerva read aloud, with a certain malicious glee at the Muggle surname. "Not a name that you recognize, is it?"

"No." Lucius glared at her as the ink faded to black.

She returned the look, with interest, nothing giving away her internal disquiet at the nagging familiarity of the newborn child's name.

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Theo Nott unlocked the door to the flat he shared with Cho, takeaway bag in hand and shoulders slumped in exhaustion. He was a fairly skilled wizard, certainly better than average, but Apparating the length and breadth of the country had left him knackered.

Cho was still at work at the hospital, but should be home soon. He poured the soup into a small pot and placed it on the hob to keep warm, hoping she would eat something tonight, and busied himself putting the kettle on.

Theo also mentally prepared a story about his day, should Cho ask - he would tell her he'd had a series of meetings with various constituencies to garner support for a client's zoning

proposal. In reality, the series of meetings had been with Wizengamot members or his own solicitor, all on Cho's behalf.

Theo and his father both agreed with the adage that a lawyer who represented himself had a fool for a client, so they'd retained old Brocklehurst to prepare the appeal. In addition to the man's undeniable legal skill, he also was a member of a well-regarded wizarding family - not entirely pureblooded, because the Brocklehursts occasionally married out - but with deep connections among both the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff communities. The Nott men had spent the morning in the Essex town of Corbywood, meeting with Brocklehurst to review the final petition and discuss their plan of attack before with Wizengamot.

His father had been deputized to reach out to the traditionalists on the Wizengamot, including several Death Eaters. Theo was simply too emotionally invested to play with the subtlety required in that political snakepit, particularly with those Wizengamot members who had involvement in his wife's rape.

Theo's job had been to contact Wizengamot members who had some personal connection with Cho, to obtain their support on her behalf. So he had spent lunchtime at the Ministry, meeting with Madam Edgecombe about her daughter's old friend, before rushing to St. Mungo's to see Healer Clearwater, who had an uncle on the Wizengamot, and Healer Pyle, who held a seat and with whom Cho had begun an apprenticeship before being banished.

Teatime with the Diggorys in the West Country had been wrenching, with Mrs. Diggory leaving halfway through to sob in the kitchen, as her husband Amos stoically continued to flip through photos of the Triwizard Tournament and the last year of their son's life. Cho was in many of the pictures, looking young and carefree as she smiled with Cedric.

He then Apparated to Hogwarts, weighted down by Mrs. Diggory's fruitcake, a Geminio'd photograph of Cho at the Yule Ball, and far too many regrets. There he met with Professor Slughorn, who currently filled the Hogwarts seat at the Wizengamot, ostensibly because Minerva McGonagall supposedly didn't play politics. In reality, Theo suspected that his former Head of House wouldn't dare to take any action not pre-cleared by the Gryffindor battle ax. Slughorn's noncommittal response and poorly hidden disappointment when a portrait informed him the headmistress was busy meeting with Lucius Malfoy only confirmed that suspicion.

The meeting became less stilted and more productive when Professor Flitwick joined them midway through. The diminutive Charms professor was effusive in his support of the Wizengamot appeal, which seemed to persuade the consensus-building Slughorn.

"Is Cho still working at the Muggle hospital?" Flitwick inquired. "She showed such promise as a Healer."

Slughorn patted his ample belly in self-satisfaction. "One of my best NEWT-level students that year. Earned an 'O' in potions, as I recall."

"Yes, she still is working at the Muggle hospital," Theo said as neutrally as possible. The long, grueling shifts she worked despite her delicate condition were a constant source of worry to him.

"Oh, that's excellent news!" Professor Flitwick clapped his hands. "I was concerned she would stop working once you married."

Theo made a non-committal sound. He had floated the idea, but Cho had tearfully refused.

Professor Flitwick gave him a shrewd look. "If you'll consider some counsel from an old teacher?" He cocked his head to one side like a bird, and Theo nodded in forced politeness.

"Cho, like most Ravenclaws, thrives on intellectual challenge. Her work as a Muggle Healer provides that. But even more importantly, with her past experiences, helping others is a way to help herself. Please don't try to take that from her," the little man implored.

Theo reminded himself of that well-meaning advice as Cho walked into their flat's kitchen, looking like death warmed over.

"How was work?" he asked.

"Fine," she answered curtly. "I'm going to bed."

"Have some soup first," Theo cajoled. "It's lentil, your favorite."

Cho shook her head. "I'm not hungry."

"You should eat something, for the baby," he urged.

She gave him an irritated look. "Just leave it covered on the stovetop. I'll get some later, when I wake up."

Both of them knew that was inevitable, with her nightmares. Without Muggle medicine to hold them at bay, Cho woke up screaming almost every night from repressed memories. Theo had been desperate enough to consult Flint and Malfoy, but neither could help. Katie's nightmares had largely ended when Granger Obliviated her, and Malfoy's crude but effective solution to Granger's own demons in the night was to shag her senseless and hold her tight when she slept. Given the impetus for Cho's nightmares, that would be a recipe for disaster.

"What about a mug of tea?" Theo tried. "The kettle's still hot; I can pour it out now."

"Alright," she sighed, drooping where she stood.

He poured out the water, adding a chamomile tea bag and, through sleight of hand, a dollop of calming draught. The Healers had told him this afternoon that Dreamless Sleep was not safe for use in pregnancy, but had sympathetically provided him with a milder alternative. He hoped it would buy Cho an extra couple of hours of sleep.

As she stumbled off to their bedroom, Theo told himself that this was normal, that women usually were exhausted during the first trimester of pregnancy. Flint had told him so, and Malfoy had mentioned that even Granger, with her seemingly boundless energy, had been taking lots of naps. But he still couldn't shake the feeling, reinforced by the dull ache around his wrist, that there was something terribly wrong with Cho.

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Ginny Weasley was feeling flustered, despite arriving in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place ten minutes before the Order meeting was supposed to start. She parked the sleeping twins in a warm corner and decided to share with Angelina and Lavender, who were busy pouring out drinks and arranging the Burrow-supplied snacks on trays.

"The weirdest thing happened on the way over," she said.

"Oh? What was it?" Angelina asked.

"I ran into Malfoy in the Alley, and he was almost . . . nice." She literally had bumped into him with the bulky double pram. When she had seen who it was, Ginny had substituted a hex for the automatic apology on her lips, convinced he would attack - at least verbally, if not physically - but he had shrugged it off and complimented the twins. And then he had smiled - not a smirk, not a sneer, but an honest to Godric smile that lit up his face, crinkled his eyes, and made Ginny admit there was some basis for other witches to find him attractive.

"He said the babies were cute and then asked if I needed help getting the pram up the curb. I told him no, of course," Ginny added at Angelina's shocked look, "but it was just odd!"

"I don't think Draco's all that bad," Lavender commented.

"You would say that." Ginny rolled her eyes at her least favorite sister-in-law. "Just because you think he's hot." Though for once, she would admit Lavender had a point.

"Oi, George!" Angelina called into the next room.

"Yes, dear?" George said with mock-obsequiousness, appearing in the doorway. Ron wandered in behind him, predictably heading straight for the food.

"When did we see Malfoy acting all funny at the Leaky?"

"The afternoon of New Year's eve," her husband answered promptly. "Grinning like a loon, he was."

"It's sort of surprising, with his marriage on the rocks." Lavender pulled the latest edition of *Witch Weekly* from the bag. The cover photo showed Malfoy dancing with Astoria at the Ministry's New Year's gala, both looking tense and unhappy. The inset photos showed Malfoy laughing with Pansy and a shifty-looking Astoria emerging from the cloak room with Zacharias Smith.

"You can't believe everything you read in that rag," Ginny scoffed. "It's worse than the *Prophet*."

"Maybe," Lavender shrugged, "but I heard from Parvati who heard it from Hannah who heard it from Ernie that Astoria Malfoy is a nymphomaniac. Ernie said she was all over him for a bit, but now she's moved on to other Hufflepuff men."

"If you heard it from Parvati, it must be true!" Ginny snorted. Ron laughed, too, causing Lavender to flush with anger.

"I doubt Malfoy would be happy that his wife is cheating on him," Angelina sensibly observed.

George took a swig of Butterbeer and shrugged. "Maybe he's moved on and is happy to have a reason to divorce her."

"He was coming out of a jewelry store when I saw him," Ginny offered.

"Probably buying a man necklace for his boyfriend," Ron jeered.

"Yes, and it says 'Won-Won,' in flashy gold letters," George sing-songed.

Ginny and Angelina laughed, while Ron turned as red as his wife. Lavender grabbed a tray and stomped out of the kitchen.

"Geez, you'd think after being a Weasley for four years, she'd be used to me taking the piss," George said.

"Yeah, well, she's a bit sensitive right now," Ron muttered, ears still pink.

"Come on, you lot," Seamus stuck his head in the kitchen. "The meeting's about to begin."

Ginny smiled at the sandy-haired wizard and patted her pocket, checking that she had the envelope that had held Hermione's money. An Obliviated mind would always try to protect itself, but this was written proof - in Sea's own handwriting - that he had spoken with Hermione.

Kingsley started off the meeting by wishing everyone present a happy new year, and then immediately launched into a report of his own.

"The Notts filed an appeal of Undersecretary Umbridge's latest decrees earlier this evening. They are challenging both her refusal to reclassify Madam Chang-Nott's blood status, as well as her broader order denying Muggleborns access to our world, even if they have married a wizard or witch or have produced magical children. I received a request to expedite proceedings before the Wizengamot, which I shall grant first thing Monday morning." The Minister gave a grim look. "It's time to stir the pot with respect to our more extreme blood-based policies."

He then smiled, a genial smile familiar to voters throughout wizarding Britain. "Now, tell me how our Muggleborns are doing. How fares Miss Bell?"

"Ready to spawn any day now," Angelina reported cheerfully. "Perhaps even today - I left her a message this morning and haven't heard back."

"Just before I left Hogwarts, the Founders' Quill added a name to the Book of Admission," Professor McGonagall volunteered. "Peter Stone - does that ring a bell?"

"Oh, yes," Angelina smiled broadly. "Katie was planning to name the baby after her father, and Stone is her partner's last name. Both kids have his name."

"Ah, that explains why the name seemed so familiar," Professor McGonagall said with relief. "Isabelle Stone's name is already down for admission to Hogwarts."

Ginny saw her iron posture relax, just a bit, and wondered why the headmistress had been tense.

"Good on Katie!" George whooped. "Two magical kids - I wonder what darling Dolores and the other blood bigots will have to say?" He briefly broke into a Gryffindor Quidditch victory chant, joined by Seamus, Dean, Ron, Ginny and Angelina.

Kingsley waited until they were done, an inscrutable smile playing on his lips, before turning to the next Order member and requesting a report.

When Ginny's turn came, she provided an edited version of her encounter with Hermione. Dean knew she had given Hermione a fragment of Sirius's mirror and some Floo powder - just in case - but there was no reason to share that incriminating information beyond the marital bed.

"Hermione was a bit shirty with me, to be honest. She knows something is going on, but she's frustrated because she can't figure it out. And she was more than a bit angry that I couldn't tell her much, if anything."

"What about the Knut?" Professor McGonagall asked, causing Mundungus to study his dirty fingernails with exaggerated care.

"It was a dead end, Professor. She found it under the cushions of her couch; Merlin only knows how long it was there," Ginny explained.

"But she has been in contact with at least one wizard, as she asked me about Theodore Nott. The younger," she added hastily in response to horrified looks around the room.

"Still a Death Eater," Dean muttered.

"I agree," Ginny patted her husband's leg. "I warned Hermione he was a snake and not to be trusted."

She pulled out the envelope and passed it around before relating the next. "Hermione got the names of a few other Muggleborns from Seamus when she saw him in Dublin in November. Katie, Dennis Creevey, maybe a couple more. She already knew of Cho."

"I never saw her!" Seamus protested immediately. "Come on, Ginny. I would remember *that*."

"Not if you were Obliviated, Sea," Ginny said stubbornly. "And I'm sure you were. That's your handwriting on the envelope, and Hermione told me she saw you at your pub."

"Filius, you're the Charms expert. Is there a way to tell if Mr. Finnigan has been Obliviated?" Professor McGonagall asked sharply.

"I'm afraid not, Minerva, particularly if all that was lost was less than a hour of his life," Professor Flitwick shook his head. "Nor can I reverse the charm. That can only be done by the caster or through torture."

"Who cast it?" George asked.

"Hermione didn't see anyone else at the pub, so who knows?" Ginny said.

"Do you think Hermione might have done it herself?" Lavender asked, hesitantly. "I mean, if she was the only one there?"

"Are you mental?" Ron shouted. "She would never do anything like that. Daft bint," he muttered under his breath, directed at his wife.

"Of course she wouldn't, because Hermione's so good and so perfect," Lavender shot back, tears sparkling in her eyes. "Even if everyone in this room knows she cast Memory Charms on lots of people in the past! And she's angry at us - Ginny said so."

"Lav, she doesn't have a wand and doesn't remember magic. Even if Hermione wanted to Obliviate Seamus, and I can't think why she would, she couldn't," Bill patiently explained. "Probably it was Nott. If Hermione knows who he is, he probably knows about her as well."

"Perhaps, although it seems Mr. Nott has become rather sympathetic to Muggleborns," Professor Flitwick stated. "He seemed very sincere in his concern for Cho when I met with him earlier today."

Ginny saw that Shacklebolt was once more smiling like a sphinx. It was a bit unnerving.

"It could have been Malfoy," she suggested. "That's her Death Eater, and a few of us have noticed him acting odd."

"Yeah, Gin, but only in the last week or so. Whoever it was Obliviated Seamus back in November," George argued.

"It really could be any Death Eater, or anyone sympathetic to the policies of the Muggle-born Repatriation Commission," Bill pointed out. "It's a wide field."

"Don't worry, I've got Hermione this month. If someone's messing with her, I'll get to the bottom of it," Ron declared with what his sister thought might be unwarranted confidence. "And if it's that ferrety bastard, I'll make sure he pays."

A Prize Bitch

January 10, 2004

Draco was having an exquisitely pleasant dream, involving a witch with a talented tongue and a deep throat, when he woke up enough to realize there really was a woman in bed with him.

He reached blindly under the covers. If Astoria had managed to bully her way past Mipsy into his flat, he was going to yank his wife up by her hair and send her packing. But his hand encountered riotous curls instead of sleek perfection, and a surprised grin crossed his face. "Granger? Is that you?"

Really, it was a stupid question to ask, especially since she had to remove her deliciously warm mouth in order to answer.

"Of course it's me!" she exclaimed, emerging from beneath the duvet, with a grin of her own - just for him - and only a slightly raised eyebrow. "I hope you weren't expecting someone else?"

She wasn't really suspicious, however, because she climbed right on top of him, positioning her hips over his. *No knickers*, his brain registered happily. "No, of course not," he denied. "But I thought you were going to call when your flight arrived so I could pick you up?"

"Yes, well, the flight only arrived more than an hour early," Hermione explained. "Something about a favorable tailwind. Instead of waking you at half-five in the morning, I decided to come here and surprise you."

He blinked sleepily up at her, liking the view of Granger straddling him, wearing nothing but one of his T-shirts. She had a key, and the wards would recognize her, but he still was a bit taken aback he hadn't woken. It was a dangerous sign of just how comfortable he felt with her.

"So you decided to crawl into bed and have your wicked way with me?"

He smiled at her blush. "It's a *very* nice surprise. Please, carry on," he added, with a hopeful glance downward. Draco really didn't think he would be so lucky as to have her dive back under the covers and finish sucking him off, but he knew she wouldn't blame a bloke for trying.

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said, with a slow smile, realigning her hips so he could feel how eager she was. "I rather like it here on top."

Granger pulled off the shirt she had appropriated for herself and his breath hitched. *No bra either*. As she positioned her now-naked body over his, an unwelcome thought cut through his lust-fogged mind.

"Wait, what about the baby?" he asked, his hands stilling her hips.

"What about the baby?" she asked back, more than a touch irritated at his atypical restraint.

"I don't want us to do anything that would hurt the baby," he clarified.

"Oh!" she said in sudden understanding, followed by a know-it-all smirk. "There's nothing to worry about. You know how I told you I was a week late?"

Draco nodded mutely, not certain where she was going with this. Was she not pregnant?

"It turns out I was wrong," Granger said, blithely unaware of how devastating this was to him.

"Hey, are you paying attention?" She lightly tapped his bare chest and he repeated the dumb nod of a moment before, incapable of anything else.

"My godmother took me to a clinic to verify the pregnancy. It turns out I was *five* weeks late. I took my birth control pills straight through in November, so I wouldn't have my monthly while we were in Dublin, but I was already pregnant. The midwife dated the pregnancy from the end of October, so I'm already almost at the end of the first trimester."

"And the baby's fine? Just due a month earlier than we thought?" Draco asked with a touch of concern.

Hermione nodded, looking pleased despite herself. "I heard the heartbeat and everything. You should come to my next antenatal visit - I think you'd like that."

"You know I would," he told her, still holding her poised above him. He mentally reviewed their sexual activity in late October. "Wait, does this mean he was conceived on Halloween?"

"He or she," she said distractedly, biting her lip. "It's very probable. Does that bother you?"

"Not in the slightest," Draco replied immediately. Not that he really believed in divination and such bollocks, but All Hallows' Eve was considered an auspicious day for witches and wizards, particularly those with an inclination towards the darker arts. And while he placed very little value on honesty in the ordinary course, he found himself hoping that their child had been conceived the one time that had Hermione had known who he really was. "Certainly those were a memorable couple of shags."

She squirmed in his grip and gave him an impatient look for his crudity before continuing in a familiar, slightly lecturing tone. "Anyways, nothing we did in November or December - and there were several times when you weren't exactly gentle - harmed the baby."

Her eyes met with his, dark with lust at some of the memories.

"I'll tell you if anything feels off, but it's perfectly fine if we have sex throughout the pregnancy," she said persuasively as she rolled her pelvis, straining to get lower.

"You're sure about this?" Draco asked, desperately wanting to be persuaded.

"Positive. The midwife even gave me an illustrated pamphlet with suggested positions for the last couple of months, when my belly gets in the way."

Draco raised an eyebrow, interest piqued.

Granger favored him with a knowing smile. "I'll show you later. Most of them are rather submissive, by necessity, which I suspect will please you."

"You know me so well," he murmured. The sudden mental image of her naked on her hands and knees, belly swollen with his child, willingly taking him deep inside her, was enough of an incentive for him to release her hips for a proper shag, even against his better judgment.

"Oh, yes. I know you very well. Intimately, one might say," she agreed, sighing in pleasure as she worked her way down his cock. After nearly three weeks apart, she was equally wet and tight. Draco found himself mentally reciting potions ingredients so that he could last longer than a randy teenager with his first witch. When Granger was nearly fully seated, he angled his hips and pulled her down, eliciting a throaty moan.

"Missed me, did you?" he smirked up at the curly-haired witch with ingrained Malfoy confidence. There was a reason why they had peacocks strutting around the Manor's grounds.

"One part of you, at least," she retorted, beginning a slow, sliding rhythm. "Arrogant prat," she added under her breath.

"I heard that, minx." Draco tweaked one of her nipples, teasingly, but recoiled when she yelped in real pain. The Vow reprimanded him like a naughty child, with a feeling like a rubber band snapping against his wrist.

"Sorry!" he apologized hastily.

"It's alright," Hermione reassured him with a quick smile. "My breasts are extra sensitive right now."

"They're bigger, too," he noted.

"Yes, well, I assumed you'd pick up on that straight away," Granger's smile turned slightly evil as she resumed her tantalizing movement up and down his shaft.

Draco held her still again, smirking as she growled at him in frustration. "Just how sensitive?" He sat up and flicked his tongue around one areola, darkened a shade or two with pregnancy, and then blew lightly. "Can I make you come just like this?"

"You're certainly welcome to try," she invited with a sassy smile. Minutes later, he was smirking again, this time with success as her inner walls fluttered and clenched against him.

"That's a second part of you that I missed," she managed to gasp, cheeks pink and her eyes golden-brown and half-lidded.

He raised his mouth from her nipple, capturing hers in a deep kiss. "I missed your smart little mouth, too, princess," he broke the kiss and chuckled, hugging her flush against his body as

she recovered from her high.

"Did you miss me for anything else?" she asked, with a hint of vulnerability.

That was enough to make him answer with sincerity, instead of just listing certain other parts of her anatomy. "I missed *you*, much more than I ever expected."

He was rewarded with a dazzling smile and two hands on his chest, pushing him flat on his back against the sheets. Then she was riding him in earnest, hair flying and breasts bouncing. With unusual passivity, Draco was content to lay back and enjoy her efforts, his hands trailing idly up and down her flanks and buttocks, until they were both on the edge. Then he grabbed her hips and drove into her hard and deep.

Afterwards, he rolled them over onto their sides, lying face to face. "I didn't think you would be quite so . . . perky this early in morning," he nuzzled into her ear. Throughout December, she had been notably grouchy early in the day, albeit for a reason that was perfectly valid.

"Don't get used to it," Hermione smiled lazily, without opening her eyes. "My body doesn't know what time zone it's in."

"Mmmm," he hummed into her shoulder. "You did have a rather long trip. I don't suppose you'd be up for a play this afternoon? My mother's up from Wiltshire for a spot of shopping and Shakespeare. But I can make your excuses if you're too tired."

Draco smirked to himself. Really, it was a win-win situation for him. Either Granger would beg off, understandably so after three flights over more than twenty-four hours, and he could postpone her meeting with his mother, or she would insist on meeting Narcissa but would be too exhausted for any fireworks to ensue.

Her eyes snapped open and met his eyes. "Of course I'm up for it! I would love to meet your mother."

It was so predictably Gryffindor, how she always rose to a challenge even if overmatched. Draco bit back a smile. "She'll be delighted to meet you as well," he lied smoothly.

(x) (x) (x)

Perhaps the third time really was the charm, since Narcissa had to admit that this encounter with Hermione Granger was not nearly as painful as she had feared.

It was not merely a mother's fondness to say that Draco had planned well. The production of *As You Like It* was a sparkling one, and Narcissa always did so enjoy the Squib's portrayal of bumbling Muggles and their pathetic lives. Draco also had thoughtfully seated himself between the two women, curtailing their feminine conversation. After the matinee, he had escorted them to tea at Claridge's, where Narcissa always treated herself on her infrequent forays into Muggle London. The unobtrusive waiters made a pleasant change from house-elves and were nearly as deferential.

Of course, she reflected as she straightened the linen napkin on her lap, nothing could be so horrid as their first meeting. The girl had shown up bedraggled at the Manor, trussed to the Potter and Weasley boys, and had spent the next hour agitating Bella, distressing Draco, and making such a mess on the drawing room rug - a Black family heirloom, and one of Narcissa's favorites - that the elves had been unable to scrub out the stains.

The second meeting had been an improvement on the first only in that no one was subjected to any Unforgivable curses, not that Narcissa hadn't been tempted. They had begun with a chilly exchange of nods at the neutral ground of Hogwarts and ended with a compromise that left both women deeply dissatisfied. In between, there had been a veritable duel over tea, conducted with words rather than magic, but bruising to both nonetheless.

When they met at Hogwarts, Miss Granger had understandably been upset at the prospect of exile from the magical world - personally, Narcissa would *Avada* herself before living amongst Muggles - but that was no excuse for rudeness. She had laughed in Narcissa's face when she first broached her proposal, and her comments about Draco had been frankly insulting.

A cat-like smile crossed Narcissa's face as she watched the Granger girl now, smiling up at her son as they teasingly debated the merits of scones versus sandwiches. Narcissa almost wished the little bitch still had her memories, if only to throw her prior harsh words about Draco back in her face.

Unobserved, Narcissa continued her perusal of the Muggleborn witch. Draco clearly had taken a hand in dressing her. Narcissa approved of the simple but clearly expensive wrap dress, though she was a bit taken aback that her son had chosen sable brown rather than the black, grey, or green that he favored. The color was flattering to the girl's warm skin tone and brown hair and eyes, so perhaps that was his motivation. The rubies also were enough of an oddity that Narcissa was moved to comment on them.

"What a unique pendant and earrings!" she exclaimed, narrowly eying the blood-red stones set in intricate gold filigree.

"Thank you, Mrs. Foy," Miss Granger replied politely enough. Her manners were better than Narcissa expected, given her unfortunate heritage and past acquaintance.

"A Yule present from Draco, or were you marking some other occasion? They're not quite to his usual taste." Narcissa darted a glance between her son and his paramour, noting his telltale smirk and her reddened cheeks. Miss Granger evidently had caught the subtle insult and also seemed less than comfortable with her unmarried, pregnant state.

Draco laced his fingers through the girl's more delicate ones. "More of a token of my appreciation for what Hermione's going through, though we did find out she was expecting just before Yuletide."

"So you told me, dearest," Narcissa said complacently. "Congratulations," she inclined her perfectly-coiffed head in the Muggleborn's direction.

"But why rubies?" she persisted. "I thought the baby was due in late August or early September, so sapphires would be more *apropos* for the potential birthstone."

Draco gave a careless shrug. "These made me think of Granger when I saw them. As it turns out, rubies were an inspired choice, since she's due a month earlier than we initially thought, at the end of July."

"My, that *was* quick work on your part," Narcissa said with poisonous admiration to the younger witch.

"Not intentionally, I assure you," she responded evenly.

Narcissa waved a negligent hand. "Well, you can rely upon Draco to consult with his solicitor and do all that is expected."

"Mother," Draco said in a warning tone.

Narcissus gave a tinkling laugh. "No offense meant. I imagine your parents are thrilled?" she asked callously, knowing full well Miss Granger believed them to be dead.

"My parents are deceased, and my godparents have mixed emotions," she responded. "They are being supportive, however, especially my godmother."

Narcissa smiled in satisfaction that the seeds she had planted when fiddling with Monica Wilkins' mind had so effectively taken root, and then struck back at the implied insult.

"I, too, shall always support Draco in his endeavors, even if they are not what I would have wished for him." She allowed her distaste to drip into her words.

"Would you please excuse me for a moment?" The question was a mere formality; the chit already was taking to her feet.

Draco stood as well, making a production of tenderly drawing her away from the table and murmuring into her ear. Whatever it was he said caused her angry expression to soften. Narcissa smirked cruelly at just how smitten the little Mudblood was with her son.

Her triumph faded, however, when she caught the same besotted look in Draco's normally impassive grey eyes.

"Draco, you must be careful not to get too emotionally attached to Miss Granger," she hissed in warning as soon as the girl was out of earshot. "Do not forget that she is merely a means to an end. This is not real!"

"Are you certain, mother?" he questioned coldly. Like mirrors, his eyes now reflected no emotion. "As we just heard this afternoon, 'all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.' What I have with Granger is more real than what I had with Astoria."

"I do not want to see you hurt, my son," she implored. "This cannot last. She is not part of our world."

"Hermione would never hurt me," Draco stated with confidence.

Narcissa bit her tongue, unwilling to elaborate on other ways in which this unnatural relationship could end in hurt. There would be no reasoning with Draco in his present mood.

"As for being part of our world, that could change, too. And in the meantime, there are compensations," he grinned.

"Please, I have no wish to hear what those are," she said repressively.

"I'm referring to children," Draco said with a mock-innocent look. "Flint's heir was born yesterday evening."

"Healthy?" Narcissa asked avidly.

"Mum and baby both are doing well," he confirmed.

"A healthy baby boy!" she gushed, utterly indifferent to the well-being of the Muggleborn mother.

"Lucretia must be over the moon," Narcissa said with envy. "I'm surprised she hasn't sent me an owl to gloat. Did you see your father yesterday?" she abruptly changed topics.

"At work, as usual. Why do you ask?"

"He's behaving oddly," Narcissa said with a grimace. "He went to Hogwarts yesterday evening to see Professor McGonagall, but wouldn't tell me what it was about."

"Well, I'm certain it's not an affair," Draco grinned.

"Don't be cheeky!" Narcissa snapped. "He's being secretive and acting without my counsel," she asserted without any irony, even though guilty of the same. "You know as well as I do that is historically a recipe for disaster."

Draco winced. "I doubt he's plotting with McGonagall about raising the next Dark Lord."

"True," Narcissa agreed, "but he's still up to something. Perhaps he'll confide in you."

Draco opened his mouth to say something, but she forestalled him with a raised hand as she caught sight of the Granger girl approaching their table.

Narcissa sniffed, almost as though scenting prey, and reconsidered her tactics. Draco had made it clear he would not tolerate outright insults, so a more subtle needling was in order. She waited until the younger woman had retaken her seat and accepted a fresh cup of tea from Draco. Then she leaned forward with a *faux* expression of concern.

"Hermione, dear, are you quite certain you should be drinking so much caffeine in your condition?"

(x) (x) (x)

Hermione was experiencing the acute frustration of being tired to the point of exhaustion yet unable to fall asleep. She had tried to turn in early, only to spend the next couple hours tossing in her boyfriend's extremely comfortable bed while he was working downstairs in the study. Eventually, she'd given up and turned on the light, hoping a few chapters of a favorite novel would sooth her enough to sleep.

With a soft click, the bedroom door opened. "You're still up?" Malcolm inquired. "Would you like me to make you a mug of cocoa or something?"

"No thanks. I'm pretty close to nodding off," she declined with a little smile and a yawn.

He leaned against one of the bedposts and gave her a teasing grin. "I see you nicked yet another of my shirts, even after I've bought you a drawerful of lingerie."

"Mmm-hmmm," she drowsily acknowledged her theft. She knew that her boyfriend secretly loved it when she wore his clothes. "Your shirts are comfortable, and that drawerful of lingerie is back at my flat."

"So it is. Maybe we should think about moving your things over here," he proposed with a studied casualness. "Or at least some of them."

"Let me think about," Hermione temporized. It made practical sense to move in, given how much time she already spent at Malcolm's flat, and she supposed any concerns about moving too fast were moot at this point. But it wasn't a decision to make when she was jet-lagged and half-asleep.

"Join me?" she asked, pulling down a corner of the duvet in invitation.

"Gladly." Malcolm stripped down to his boxers and climbed into bed, positioning his front to her back. She snuggled happily into his warm embrace, inhaling his familiar scent.

"What did you think of my mother?" he asked against her neck.

Hermione stiffened and he chuckled. "That bad?"

"No, not at all," she lied. She certainly wasn't going to tell him the unvarnished truth, that she thought Narcissa was a terrible, selfish, and potentially evil woman.

"I think she loves you fiercely, and there is very little she wouldn't do for you." Indeed, Hermione could easily picture Narcissa sticking a stiletto in the back of someone's neck if they threatened Draco, or, more likely, hiring an assassin to do the dirty work for her.

"That's true," he agreed to her back, with some echo of pain in his voice making Hermione wish she could see his expression. "Any other observations?"

"Does she breed spaniels in her spare time?" she asked.

Malcolm laughed with immediate understanding. "She does not, though I can see why you would ask with all of her impertinent inquiries and suggestions . . ."

"Like whether I could have a second cup of tea, whether the clotted cream was pasteurized, whether smoked salmon was safe, whether my vitamins were adequate . . ." Malcolm chortled as she ran through his mother's nagging list.

"Like I was a prize bitch who needed to be coddled and put on a special diet so my pups can win best in show!" Hermione finished.

"I can't believe you just referred to yourself as a prize bitch!" Her boyfriend whooped with laughter.

"It's not that funny," she grumbled sleepily. "Thank you, by the way, for running interference with her."

"You're welcome, although I should be the one thanking you for putting up with her for the afternoon. My mother is not an easy woman to get along with." He said, one hand idly smoothing her hair. It was ridiculously relaxing, and Hermione could feel her eyelids drooping.

"She's a prize bitch, too." Sleep was finally catching up to Hermione, eroding the filter between her mouth and brain. "But I wasn't going to let her provoke me this time. Though I swear, if she made one more little dig I was going to hex her bald."

Hermione was dimly aware that her boyfriend's hand on her hair had stilled. His entire body was stiff behind hers and, even on the threshold of sleep, she suddenly worried she had gone too far in insulting his mother.

Warm lips pressed against her temple. Draco spoke into ear, gently but with an underlying note of command. "You're babbling, love. Go to sleep."

A Snowy Morning

January 29, 2004

All throughout breakfast, Hermione had been casting longing glances towards the back garden, blanketed in fluffy white. A blizzard had hit London yesterday evening, wreaking havoc with the rush hour traffic but leaving snowy serenity in its wake. With UCL closed due to the snowstorm and Malcolm off work, Hermione wanted to go out and play.

When she finished her tea and looked expectantly at Draco, he already had a half-resigned, half-amused look on his face.

"Let's go for a walk," she suggested. "The snow is so beautiful!"

"It's also cold and turns to wet," he pointed out. "Why don't we build a fire and admire it from inside the house?"

"Because you can't build a snowman or throw snowballs or make snow angels from inside the house!" she exclaimed. Like Katie had said, she had found the difference between the first and second trimester to be like flipping a switch. Her headaches and nausea had disappeared, and she felt positively bursting with energy.

"You say it like that's a bad thing," he drawled.

"You're a spoilsport," Hermione pouted. "Come on - it will be fun!"

He raised a skeptical eyebrow, but an amused quirk to his lips was a sure tell to Hermione that he would be indulging her desire to frolic in the snow.

"Alright, Granger," he sighed dramatically. "But you owe me. And I will be collecting later, in one or more positions of my choice, on that rug in front of the fireplace."

(x) (x) (x)

Ronald Weasley looked at his full English breakfast with a marked lack of enthusiasm. The eggs were cooked to rubber, the bacon was limp, and the grilled bread was too dark on one side and too light on the other. The tomatoes at least seemed all right, and the pudding had come from the Burrow, so Ron knew it was good.

With a long-suffering sigh, he picked up his fork and began to eat. "Honestly, Lav," he mumbled around a mouthful of food, "how hard is it to learn a few decent cooking charms?"

Lavender whirled around from the stovetop, spatula raised. "If you don't like it, cook it yourself, Ronald Bilius Weasley!"

"Oh, bugger," he groaned at her display of temper. "Is it that time of the month again?" Greyback's mauling at the Battle of Hogwarts hadn't turned Lavender into a werewolf, but,

like his oldest brother Bill, she now had some wolfish tendencies. One of those was to become irritable - honestly, a right bitch - at the full moon and during her period, which sadly for him did not coincide.

Rather than answering his question, she slammed a pot into the sink, which he took as a yes. Ron resolved to steer clear of her for the next couple of days.

He swallowed down his resentment along with a hearty bite of bacon and bread. This wasn't how his life was supposed to turn out. He and Harry should have been working together as Aurors, capturing Dark wizards like those bastards Malfoy and Flint. And Ron should have been coming home every night to Hermione and a sparkling clean house and a gourmet meal, because she was brilliant at household charms even if she found them dull. By now, he and Hermione probably would have had little Hugo or little Rose, maybe with a sibling on the way.

But instead, Harry was dead and Hermione was exiled and had forgotten all about him. Without the help of his two best friends, Ron had washed out of Auror training and now worked for George as a glorified shop assistant. And rather than coming home to the brightest witch of their age and a couple of curly-headed ginger sprogs, he had slovenly Lavender and no kids because they just couldn't afford them. There were days when he wished he had followed Hermione into the Muggle world, instead of being so quick to leave her and take up with Lavender after Kingsley had agreed to the repatriation of Muggleborns.

He inhaled another few mouthfuls - he was due at the shop in a bit - and spoke an indistinct "*Point Me*," while chewing. Instead of spinning aimlessly, as it had done the last few times he tried, his wand pointed due east, towards London and Hermione.

"Yeah!" he exclaimed in triumph. It had been proving bloody difficult to track Hermione down, even with magic. He had hung about the little park opposite her flat for days, braving the frigid January weather, before discovering that she was now spending nearly all her time at her boyfriend's place.

Ron knew he had looked like a nutter, walking through Muggle London muttering spells under his breath, but he'd finally found the townhouse where the bloke lived, not that it did him much good. The wards were even more impressive than the ones on Hermione's old flat, and the neighborhood was so posh that every time he tried to loiter aside, a Muggle pleeseman would appear and tell him to move along.

Still, Ron was a dab hand when it came to strategy, and he had fully expected Hermione to be drawn outside by the thick snow on the ground. He grinned, reminiscently, about all of the times she'd actually left the library and pulled him and Harry outside at Hogwarts to play in fresh snow. Mental, she was about snow, but in a good way.

"Hey, Lav, I'm off to check on Hermione," he announced, pushing back from the table.

"Give me just a minute, and I'll come with," Lavender offered, untying her apron.

"No, I don't want you to come," Ron said bluntly. He was looking forward to a nice chat with Hermione, a pleasant change from Lavender's incessant giggling and gossip.

He shrugged on his coat and threw a pinch of Floo powder into the hearth. While Hermione had been able to Apparate herself around the whole of the British Isles like it was just a hop, a skip, and a jump, Ron knew there was a good chance he'd splinch himself if he tried to Apparate all the way from Devon to London. "Diagon Alley," he called.

He stepped into the Leaky Cauldron. Before he could get his bearings, he was rudely pushed forward by his wife exiting the same fireplace.

"Merlin's saggy left ballock, Lavender! Why did you follow me?" Ron yelled.

"Because I don't trust you alone with Hermione," she cried.

"Shut your gob, Lav!" he snapped. The Order's monitoring of exiled Muggleborns was supposed to be covert, after all.

Ron, with a complaining Lavender in his wake, exited the pub onto Charing Cross Road. From there, his long legs and a series of locator spells made quick work of the short distance to Hyde Park, even with his wife bickering alongside and slowing him down.

At the park, he recognized Hermione from a distance, both by her distinctive curly hair and fuzzy pink hat, which she had owned since her Hogwarts days. She was walking next to a tall man who Ron automatically dismissed as some Muggle toff, until a gleam of winter sunlight caught the distinctive white-blond of his hair.

"Is that Malfoy?" he asked, aghast.

Lavender squinted ahead. "Oh, Merlin! I think it is," she said, sounding shocked.

As though aware of their scrutiny, the man looked in their direction and scowled. Even from a distance, Ron recognized the pointy features and unmistakable smirk as Malfoy raised his wand to the back of Hermione's neck.

"Bloody bugging hell!" Ron swore, racing forward with his wand raised. "Get away from her, you sodding Ferret!"

(x) (x) (x)

As they walked the snowy streets towards the park, Hermione's reddened cheeks, ridiculous wooly cap, and unbridled enthusiasm forcibly reminded Draco of the girl he had attended Hogwarts with for six years. Of course, that girl never would have extended an invitation to him to play in the snow.

London was beautiful like this, and it was early enough to be almost peaceful in the middle of the metropolis. His earlier complaints and grumbling largely had been for show. He suspected Hermione knew he would have agreed to go even without first extracting a promise of sexual favors, but that was part of the fun of dating a Gryffindor - they could be taken advantage of in negotiations. She even had sweetened the deal further - unnecessarily so - by offering to make him some sort of gooey Muggle marshmallow, graham cracker and chocolate treat over the fire if they could find a store that was open and sold the necessary ingredients.

"Hey, Malcolm, look over here," she called, with a telling note of mischief in her voice.

He spun around and dodged her snowball easily, advancing on her with a grin.

"Granger," he chided. "Have I taught you nothing? You should always attack from behind and without warning."

Draco caught her arm easily as she tried to run away. Hermione, laughing, slapped a handful of snow into the middle of his chest and he raised an eyebrow. "Don't think that because you're a girl, or even my girl, that you'll get a pass for that," he mock-threatened. "We'll keep walking for now, but when you least expect it, I'll have my revenge."

"All talk, no action," she taunted between giggles, grabbing his hand.

"Just you wait, princess," he promised with a dark smile.

Up ahead, he saw another couple walking. His eyes narrowed at the gangly redhead and straggly-haired blonde, staring at him and Granger with matching, horrified expressions. Draco swore under his breath, all playfulness gone.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

Thinking quickly, he scooped up a handful of snow and rubbed it into the back of her neck, making her squeal. While she was distracted, he Confounded her, the tip of his wand pressed delicately into her cold-numbed skin.

"It's your ginger wanker of an ex-boyfriend with some slag," he answered, truthfully enough, though Granger now would be confused into thinking it was the Muggle he had driven off rather than the Weasel King.

She looked over in their direction and her eyes narrowed. "He'd better not cause any trouble," she said angrily.

"Too late," Draco muttered pessimistically as Weasley pulled his wand and began running towards them, screaming like a maniac.

He shoved Hermione behind him and took careful aim at the ginger's wand arm. His Confundus charm was good, but it wouldn't explain away a full-blown wizarding duel. He needed to end this quickly and keep Hermione and their baby out of the way of any spell fire.

Draco's precise Expelliarmus sent the other wizard's wand flying into the snow, but his Stupefy went wild as the Weasel tackled him and began punching, Muggle-style. He had just a moment to internally sneer at the ginger's barbaric techniques before a fist crunched into his nose, and then they were fighting in earnest, hitting and kicking as they rolled around in the increasingly bloody snow.

(x) (x) (x)

"Make him stop!" Hermione yelled at the other woman. Andy had seemingly gone mad, racing up to Malcolm with a stick in his hand and attacking without provocation. "Get off

him, you stupid oaf! He hasn't done anything to you!" she screamed at Andy, but he ignored her.

"I can't believe you're defending him!" the blonde told her, wide-eyed.

"Why wouldn't I defend him, you stupid bint? He's my boyfriend!" Normally, Hermione would never speak so harshly, but something about the woman made her resentful and angry. The blonde looked familiar and Hermione assumed she was the woman Andy had been cheating with on graduation day.

"Your boyfriend?" the blonde screeched with laughter. "You're just his whore. He's using you!"

"You're one to talk about whoring around!" Hermione scoffed. "With your past and how you were shagging my then-boyfriend like a bitch in heat before we ever broke up!"

"How did you know?" the blonde gasped.

"You two weren't exactly subtle," Hermione sneered. "And unlike you, I don't keep my brains between my legs."

"You always did love to show off how smart you are, Hermione! Brightest witch of our age, but still you're too stupid to realize you're nothing but Mal Foy's whore!"

Briefly, Hermione puzzled over the description of her as a witch rather than a bitch, but passed over that in her rage that the other woman had once again called her a whore. She struck back hard, seeking to hurt with words.

"Your boyfriend knows I'm not a whore. He'd still be with me if he could. You're nothing but a cheap substitute!"

"Bitch!" screamed the blonde, now nearly frothing with rage. Hermione thought the woman might slap or shove her, but instead she reached into her pocket and pulled out a stick.

"What are you going to do with that?" Hermione laughed at the absurd sight of a grown woman brandishing a twig as though it were a weapon. "Poke my eye out?"

She stopped laughing when a jet of red streaked from the wand. *Lavender Brown is trying to hex me!* Acting on pure instinct and muscle memory, Hermione dove to the left and rolled. The red light missed, but now she was prone on the ground with nothing in her hands to defend herself or counterattack.

Lavender stood over her with a feral grin, her canine teeth prominent. "I may be just a substitute, but I'll make sure he wants me instead of you," she crooned, raising her wand.

Hermione raised a hand in a futile gesture to ward her off, and dredged deep down in her mind for some way to protect herself from this madwoman.

Nothing. She could remember nothing.

(x) (x) (x)

As he and Weasley rolled around in the snow, each desperately trying to gain an advantage, Draco dimly was aware of Hermione and the Brown bint screaming at each other like banshees. He was too occupied in fighting off the Weasel to pay much heed, until he felt a sharp pain in his wrist that had nothing to do with the other wizard's bruising fingers immobilizing his wand hand.

Draco whipped his head around, in time to see Lavender's first spell miss by mere centimeters.

"Fuck, Weasel! Your wife is attacking Hermione! With magic!"

He gave up the fight, frantically focusing on freeing his left hand. He still had his wand, but the Weasel's grip on his wrist kept him from firing off any spells.

"Huh?" the ginger grunted.

"Your wife!" The raw panic in his words got through to the other wizard, but too late.

"Lavender, no!" her husband's shout was ignored. Gold light shot from her wand, impossible to miss at point-blank range.

With wide grey eyes, Draco saw Hermione helpless on the ground, one hand cradled over her belly and the other raised in surrender.

Or not. A clear blue light exploded from her hand, covering her entire body and knocking Lavender off her feet. The gold light hit the shield and ricocheted off, hitting a tree with a dull thud.

The clear blue light dissipated, leaving two women lying motionless in the snow.

A Whitewashed Afternoon

January 29, 2004 (afternoon)

The pale blue light disappeared, and the only sound Draco could hear was Weasley's ragged breathing. The ginger outweighed him and had wound up on top. "Get off me," Draco snarled, pushing him away.

The Weasel flung himself towards the two unconscious women. Draco was pleased to see he was limping.

"Hermione," Weasley cried, kneeling by his ex-girlfriend and chafing her gloved hands between his own.

Draco tapped him on the shoulder with his wand and then dug its point into the redhead's carotid artery. "Don't touch her," he ordered coldly. "She's mine to take care of now."

"A fine job you seem to be doing," Weasley sneered, but he removed his hands.

Draco's voice grew even more frigid. "You should see to your wife," he said. It was an order couched as a suggestion, since he had the other wizard disarmed and at wand point.

The Weasel reluctantly obeyed. He crouched down by Lavender, who was now stirring, and shook her shoulder. "Wake up, you stupid bint. Do you know what you've done?"

"Make sure you keep your bitch muzzled and on a leash until she's thrown into Azkaban," Draco warned, taking the Weasel's former spot, kneeling next to Hermione in the snow. "I expect I'll see you both at the Ministry later," he spat over his shoulder.

Hermione still was out cold, but Draco was relieved to see that her breathing was even and her color was good. There were no obvious signs of physical or magical injury, but he wanted her out of the snow, under the care of a Healer, and far away from the unstable Weasels. As he recalled from Astoria's pregnancies, Apparition was safe at least through the second trimester, so he carefully gathered Hermione in his arms and focused on the master bedroom in his flat.

They landed next to the bed with a sharp crack, echoed by Mipsy's soft *pop*. "What is being wrong with Miss?" the elf squeaked, pulling her ears in distress.

"Granger pulled off a fucking impressive wandless and wordless *Protego*, but knocked herself out in the process. It's too much magic to channel without a wand," Draco answered distractedly, stripping off Hermione's clothes and carefully checking for bruises, bleeding or other injuries as he spoke. Thank Merlin, there was nothing.

Unasked, Mipsy stepped forward with Granger's most comfortable, least sexy pajamas. Granger hadn't officially moved in, but the majority of her clothes and belongings now were at Draco's flat, where she had slept over for two weeks running.

"Is the baby being fine?" Mipsy asked anxiously. Draco knew the elf was incredibly proud and excited over the prospect of serving as the night nanny to a newborn Malfoy.

Draco's concerned grey eyes met the elf's tearful, bulbous ones. "I don't know, Mipsy. Accidental magic like this is usually done by children before they go to Hogwarts, not a pregnant witch. I need to call Theo, to have him bring Cho over to check."

He flipped his phone open and dialed. Nott thankfully picked up on the second ring.

Hermione's eyelids were fluttering, so Draco chose his words carefully. "I need your help. And Cho's. We had a run-in with Granger's ex-boyfriend and she fell in the snow."

"Weasley?" Theo asked in a sharp voice. "Did she fall or was she pushed?"

"Yes," Draco confirmed. "The stupid bint he's with went after Hermione."

"The former Miss Brown?" Theo snorted. "Those two are a perfect match in their intelligence, or lack thereof. Was Granger hurt?"

"She did something *accidental* that knocked her unconscious. Both of them," he added, though he was indifferent to the well-being of the other witch.

Draco heard Theo's sudden intake of breath on the other end of the line. "Granger did accidental magic? Powerful enough to hurt someone?"

"Yes and yes. I'm going to require your legal assistance with the authorities later, but first I'd like Cho to examine Hermione, make sure she and the baby are alright."

"Of course. We'll come to your flat as quickly as we can."

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"So, what happened?" Cho asked.

Through the pounding in her head, Hermione tried to reconstruct what had happened. Before she could, Malcolm answered for her. "We got into a bit of a row with Hermione's ex and some slag he's seeing now. The stupid cow pushed her and she slipped in the snow. I think she hit her head."

"Hmmm. How many fingers am I holding up?" Cho questioned, taking a small flashlight from her bag and examining the other woman's pupils.

"Three," she replied correctly.

"Good. No sign of concussion," Cho smiled. The thought occurred to Hermione that her bedside manner was much more pleasant than her usual demeanor. "How are you feeling?"

"A bit woozy," Hermione admitted. "And my left arm and shoulder hurt."

Cho examined them. "Mild bruising, but nothing too serious. I suspect you landed more on your side than your head, which is a good thing. Do you remember anything else about your fall?"

Hermione was acutely aware of Malcolm hovering in the background, his face taut with worry. Theo was standing behind him, listening with an intent expression. "I remember . . . when I was on the ground, she picked up a stick and was going to hurt me with me."

"But she didn't," her boyfriend interjected quickly. "The bitch fell on her fat arse and I got you out of there."

With eyes closed, Hermione tried to recall the scene. "Andy came after you with a stick, too," she said. "Right at the beginning."

"They're both mental," Malcolm stated flatly. "I don't know what you ever saw in that ginger tosser."

Hermione saw Cho give her a significant look at the mention of sticks and blinked in acknowledgement. Both were thinking of the child's drawing at Harry's gravesite.

"Any spotting or cramping?" Cho inquired.

"Nothing," Hermione shook her head.

"That's good," Cho said reassuringly. "I doubt falling in the snow would have done any harm - the baby's pretty well protected in there." She pulled what looked like a stubby white phone from her bag and began running it low along Hermione's belly. "Portable fetal Doppler," she explained to Malcolm, who had crossed to the bed and was watching with wide eyes.

His eyes widened even further when Cho found the heartbeat and a rapid *swooshing* sound filled the room. "Is it supposed to be that fast?" he asked.

Cho nodded. "It will slow later in pregnancy."

When she removed the monitor, Malcolm placed two finger where she had found the heartbeat, resting them lightly on Hermione's skin. "I can't believe there's a baby in there," he said, looking amazed.

"You'd believe it easily enough if you were the one feeling wretched the past couple months," Hermione told him with a wry grin.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," he said. A dangerous look crossed his face. "I don't know what I would have done if that crazy bitch hurt you. Either of you."

"No harm done," Hermione told him with a smile, despite her unease at his intensity. He honestly looked as though he were plotting a murder.

"No harm done, except perhaps to your nose," Cho added. "Do you want me to check if it's broken?" she asked Malcolm.

"It's fine," he brushed it off. "Just a bloody nose."

Theo shifted from his spot near the door. "We should get going now, Draco. I imagine the police will have some questions."

Malcolm dropped a quick kiss on the top of Hermione's head before replying. "Oh, yes, there will be questions," he agreed, with his grey eyes hard and determined. "But nothing we can't answer."

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"How do you want to play this?" Theo asked Draco as they walked through the Ministry lobby, *Muffliato* firmly in place. "The kneazle's out of the bag that there's something going on between you and Granger, but we may be able to pass it off as more of a casual encounter."

"As casual as possible," Draco agreed, despite the twist in his gut. If it became publicly known that they were together, that she was carrying his child, she would be at risk from witches and wizards far more formidable than Lavender Brown Weasley. Astoria could be spiteful and knew some nasty Dark magic, and Draco shuddered at the thought of what his father might do.

"Assaulting a pregnant witch is an aggravated offense," Theo noted.

"We say *nothing* about the baby," Draco ordered. "It's too risky. Brown's in enough trouble as it is. Granger's nothing but an occasional fuck, an itch I like to scratch."

"Very good," Theo approved. "You almost convinced me, and I saw you hovering over her just a few minutes ago."

Theo cancelled the anti-eavesdropping spell as Narcissa came rushing towards them. "Draco! What's going on? There were Aurors at the Manor looking for you, saying something about an attack on a Muggleborn witch. Thank Merlin your father went to the office despite the snow - I don't know what he would have done!"

"Astoria?" Draco asked in a clipped tone.

"Having a lie-in," his mother replied. "The elves will tell her nothing."

As he sighed in quiet relief, his mother gave him a long-suffering look. "You've been brawling like a Muggle, haven't you?" She waved her wand and repaired his nose with a quick *Episkey*, followed by a *Tergeo* to remove the dried blood from his face and shirt. "Now you're somewhat presentable," she declared, still frowning at his Muggle attire.

A streaking silvery Patronus in the form of a zebra caught Draco's eye. Wand out, Dean Thomas stepped forward from his vantage point near the statute of magical brethren. "Come with me, Malfoy," he ordered. "The Minister wishes to see you, to personally address your assault of Hermione Granger."

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It was chaos in the conference room when Theo walked in with Draco and Narcissa. Theo winced and pinched his nose against the onslaught of noise, mostly emanating from Weaselbee's mouth.

"I saw him, with my own eyes," the ginger yelled, standing and pointing an accusatory finger at Draco. "Stuck his wand in the back of her neck and hexed her unconscious, he did!"

"Calm down, Ron," his wife urged. He ignored her, but responded to his brother Percy's peremptory tug on his sleeve.

"Anything you say can be used against you, Ronald," he cautioned in his usual pompous tone.

Theo gave the other solicitor an assessing look. Percy primarily practiced in the area of international trade, but there was no denying his intelligence or diligence. Certainly he was a better advocate than the feckless Weasel King could ordinarily afford.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Minister Shacklebolt drew all eyes as he entered the room. "Thank you for your Patronus, Auror Thomas."

The younger Auror nodded briefly, but Theo noted he never took his hard brown eyes off Draco.

Shacklebolt seated himself at the head of the table and folded his hands, gesturing for everyone to seat themselves. "I understand Mr. Weasley has sworn out a criminal complaint against Mr. Malfoy."

The Weasel nodded vigorously and spoke, ignoring his brother's restraining arm. "He attacked Hermione and then went after me when I tried to stop him!"

"Pardon me, Minister, but are you functioning in your capacity as Chief Auror?" Theo inquired. "The Wizengamot does require two Aurors for any investigation, as a check on any potential bias." His eyes slid to Auror Thomas. The ex-Gryffindor still was glaring at Draco.

"Indeed I am, Mr. Nott. Does anyone have an objection to my use of a Quick Quotes Quill to record this interview?" Shacklebolt smiled pleasantly. "I assure you this one is charmed to record statements *verbatim*, unlike the more colorful version used by reporters at the *Prophet*."

After a verifying glance at the Minister's parchment, Theo nodded. "No objection, sir." Percy Weasley did likewise.

"Now, Ronald, tell me in your own words the basis for your complaint against Mr. Malfoy," Shacklebolt instructed.

"Lav and I were taking a walk in the park when we saw *him* sneak up behind Hermione." The redhead threw a sneer in Draco's direction. "He dug his wand in 'Mione's neck. When I ran forward to help her, he hit me with a couple of spells."

"Which is an illegal use of magic in the Muggle world," Percy chimed in. Theo narrowed his eyes, wondering if the other solicitor knew his brother was lying through his teeth.

"I wrestled Malfoy to the ground and punched him," the Weasel looked absurdly proud of himself, "but then he got off some spell with a blue light that knocked Hermione unconscious. Lav, too," he added as an afterthought.

Theo raised an eyebrow. Based on Ron's self-righteous tone, it sounded like the ginger Weasel might actually believe what he was saying. Next to him, Draco was white with fury and could barely contain himself.

"Did you use any magic in front of Miss Granger?" the Minister asked.

"No, sir," Ron muttered. "He disarmed me." He gave Draco a venomous look.

"Mrs. Weasley, do you have anything to add?"

Lavender shifted uncomfortably under Shacklebolt's scrutiny, causing Theo to make a mental note. She would be easier to break under questioning, because she knew her husband's account was far from the truth.

"No, Minister," she muttered.

"And did you use any magic in front of Miss Granger?" Shacklebolt inquired, in a deceptively avuncular manner.

"I, uh, may have fired a couple of spells," she admitted, her voice low and ashamed.

"Which spells, Mrs. Weasley?"

"A tongue-tying jinx and furnunculus," Lavender mumbled, looking down at the conference table.

"You were attempting to jinx Mr. Malfoy with pimples during a duel?" Theo broke in with patent skepticism.

"It was the first thing that came to mind," Lavender replied, looking shifty. Narcissa tut-tutted in the background, though Theo was uncertain whether the Malfoy matriarch's disapproval was for the lie or how poorly it was told.

"Mr. Malfoy, why don't you provide us with your version of events?" Shacklebolt requested.

"Certainly, Minister," Draco agreed in a clipped tone. Theo was relieved to see the blond wizard had his temper under control. "Granger and I were walking in Hyde Park when I noticed these two coming towards us." He jerked his head towards Ron and Lavender. "I used a Confundus charm on Granger because I anticipated trouble, rightfully so."

"See, he admits it!" the Weasel crowed.

Theo cleared his throat. "The Confundus Charm is one that any witch or wizard is authorized to use when necessary to prevent a Muggle or Muggleborn from noticing the use of magic."

Percy Weasley nodded in reluctant agreement.

"He also put snow on the back of her neck!" Ron accused.

"That's not exactly assault," Theo pointed out.

"Yes, I think the Muggles refer to it as foreplay."

Theo managed to turn his laugh into a cough. "I believe you mean horseplay, Minister," he managed to choke out.

Shacklebolt smirked. "I stand by my prior phrasing. Pray continue, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco smirked back at the Slytherin politician. "Weasley ran towards me with his wand raised. As he said, I disarmed him. I attempted to stun him, but missed." He frowned in annoyance at his own poor aim.

"He tackled me, and while we were rolling around in the snow, Granger and Brown got into a catfight. The blue light was from the shield Hermione threw up to protect herself when Lavender tried to hex her. The spell was strong enough to knock both of them out."

"You expect us to believe that an Obliviated Muggleborn did that without a wand?" Percy Weasley asked incredulously.

"Well, it is Granger," Draco explained. "Brightest witch of her age and all that. I didn't hex her. I couldn't, with the Vow."

"Assuming it's even working," Percy said snidely.

Shacklebolt was looking unaccountably pleased, Theo noticed. "I performed the Vow myself, Percy," he said in his deep, mellow voice, "but you are free to check that it still is in place."

"Er, that won't be necessary, Minister," the elder Weasley brother said with a pink tinge to his narrow face.

"No, please, I insist," Shacklebolt ordered with a smile.

Percy made a few passes with his wand and muttered under his breath. A bright gold band appeared around Draco's wrist. "It's operational," the red-haired solicitor grudgingly conceded.

"I should like to examine everybody's wands, if there is no objection." Kingsley spoke gravely.

After a quick, confirmatory look at Draco, Theo nodded. "No objection, within reason."

Ron shrugged. Lavender opened her mouth, but shut it abruptly when her husband glared at her.

"It's fine, Minister," Percy stated.

Shacklebolt performed the *Prior Incantatem* spells himself, beginning with Lavender's wand. Theo leaned forward attentively, but the spell showed nothing beyond the two hexes she had confessed to. Before that, there was nothing but charms for cooking and cleaning.

Draco's hawthorne wand was next. The results were innocuous: two textbook dueling spells flung at Weasley; the Confundus used on Hermione; and multiple warming charms. Nonetheless, Theo was aware of Draco growing increasingly anxious, stirring slightly in his seat as the Shacklebolt worked his way back through the spell history to a shaving charm.

"I believe that's enough, Minister," Theo intervened. "You've already gone past this morning's incident."

Shacklebolt gave him an enigmatic look. "Just one more spell, I think, Mr. Nott."

Theo struggled mightily, but managed to maintain a poker face as the *Prior Incantatem* revealed a spell used to diagnose and monitor pregnancy. Even though Cho had a Muggle instrument that did the same thing, he had been known to cast the same spell on his wife when she was deeply asleep, to check their baby's heartbeat. He shouldn't have been surprised that Draco did the same with Hermione.

"What is it?" Ron asked nosily.

"None of your business," Draco snapped.

"Just a basic diagnostic spell," Shacklebolt answered with deceptive mildness.

All of the Weasleys in the room appeared to accept that explanation. Theo sighed in relief, recalling that Percy was a bachelor and Ron and Lavender were childless. Then he saw Dean Thomas, leaning against the wall with a stony expression and fury in his eyes.

"Your wand, Mr. Wesley." Shacklebolt held out his hand and the Weasel King reluctantly supplied his wand.

The Minister - and Theo along with him - raised an eyebrow at the multiple locator spells.

"Just what, or should I say who, were you trying to find this morning?" Shacklebolt asked.

"I was looking for Hermione," Ron answered sullenly.

"That's a crime," Theo declared with quiet satisfaction. "Seeking out an Obliviated Muggleborn. Punishable by at least a year in Azkaban, as well as a hefty fine."

"Wait, what about him?" Ron yelled, red-faced and pointing at Draco. "He was looking for Hermione, too, and found her."

Draco arched an eyebrow. "I was merely exercising supervisory rights over my Mudblood, as specifically permitted by the Muggleborn Registration Commission."

Theo watched with interest as Ron's color turned from red to maroon. In his peripheral vision, he saw Narcissa's approving smile at her son's expressed sentiment.

"You expect us to believe that 'exercising supervisory rights' involved you playing in the snow with Hermione? Isn't that beneath your dignity as a Malfoy or some shite?" Weasley shouted, now puce instead of maroon.

"I was hoping to get laid," Draco shrugged insouciantly.

"Hermione would never sleep with you!" Theo was disappointed to see that no more shades of color were available to the Weasel King. Instead, his face was now mottled and contorted with rage. Next to him, Lavender was simmering with resentment.

"I have every reason to be optimistic," Draco smiled, thoroughly enjoying the reaction he had provoked.

Minister Shacklebolt cleared his throat. "As fascinating as Mr. Malfoy's sex life may be, the Aurors were brought in to investigate an alleged crime he committed against Miss Granger. Based on witness statements and wand evidence, there is no basis to support charges against Mr. Malfoy. It appears, however, that a crime was committed by Ronald Weasley and that additional crimes may have been committed by Lavender Weasley."

Lavender's eyes filled with tears, while the mottling on Weasley's face faded to a stark white, making his freckles stand out in sharp relief. "But - but I'm a War hero! The only member left of the Golden Trio! You couldn't possibly - " he spluttered.

"I could," Shacklebolt cut him off in a grave voice, "though I should be loathe to do so. The next step in my investigation would be to utilize Veritaserum to see who Mrs. Weasley was attempting to jinx. However, I suggest - strongly suggest - that you find a way to settle with Mr. Malfoy and dissuade him from pressing charges. It does no one in this room any good for this morning's events to become more widely known."

Theo bit back a smile. Next to him, Draco was practically radiating satisfaction. Across the table, Percy Weasley frowned in understanding, but his younger brother - gormless git that he was - still looked confused.

"But Lav and I don't have any money!" Ron protested.

"True," Draco agreed. "And you certainly have nothing else that I desire." Lavender flushed under his contempt.

Draco planted his palms on the table and stared the Weasel down. "Except that silence is golden. Keep your mouth shut about what you saw and keep out of Azkaban."

Presented with those stark, simple terms, Weasley nodded.

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At the Minister's request, Draco followed him and Auror Thomas into the hallway outside the conference room. The negotiations regarding the best way to ensure the Weasel King's silence and that of his wife and everyone else in the room were ongoing, but Draco had every confidence in Theo and his own formidable mother.

Shacklebolt smiled like a crocodile, showing far too many teeth, and Draco felt a prickle of unease.

"Miss Granger would tell you I am nothing but an opportunistic politician, if she remembered me, but I do care about her well-being," the Minister stated. "For that reason, I have asked Auror Thomas to interview her regarding this morning's incident, as well as to report back to me about her general health and happiness."

Thomas sneered at him, and Draco had no doubt the Auror would do everything he could to put a spoke in his wheels.

"Auror Thomas will accompany you to wherever Miss Granger may be found," Shacklebolt continued implacably.

"Yes, sir," Draco agreed, mentally assessing his odds of catching the younger Auror unawares and modifying his memories. Perhaps he could contact Flint and arrange an ambush.

"Mr. Malfoy?" the Minister interrupted his train of thought. "Auror Thomas is one of my best men. I should hate for you to attempt to fiddle with his mind. As a precaution, I've given him a series of minor instructions to carry out this afternoon. When I debrief him, I will be able to detect any Obliviate by asking if those tasks have been carried out. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," Draco said bitterly. He was caught. And royally fucked.

A Forgettable Evening

January 29, 2004 (evening)

"Nice place you've got here," Dean Thomas observed as Draco Malfoy stopped in front of a terraced townhouse in a posh Muggle neighborhood. "Did it come with a dungeon where you keep Hermione?"

The blond wizard pulled a key from his coat pocket and gave Dean a cold look. "Let's get a few things straight, Auror Thomas. I was away at school for all but a few days during seventh year. During those few days I was at the Manor, I did my damndest to stay away from the dungeons. I'm not responsible for anything that happened there."

Dean clenched his jaw, tightly. What he had witnessed in those dungeons drove him as an Auror, to protect innocents like Luna and Mr. Ollivander. For Malfoy to so casually shrug off any responsibility for atrocities committed in his family's home made his blood boil.

"Second, as your annoyingly omniscient boss seems to have guessed, Hermione is my girlfriend, my not-quite live-in girlfriend," Malfoy smiled at some private joke, while Dean raised an eyebrow at the unexpected admission. Technically, what Malfoy was doing with Hermione broke no laws, but his reaction to Kingsley had been that of a man whose deepest secret had been ferreted out. Dean smirked at his own pun.

"She is *not* my prisoner," Malfoy stressed. "She comes and goes as she pleases, though my preference is to keep her in the bedroom. Which is where I hope she's resting now, though I highly doubt it."

Dean kept a wooden expression on his face, not allowing his disgust at the idea of Hermione engaged in sexual intercourse with the slimy Slytherin to show. He knew the blond bastard was trying to get a rise out of him, but beyond that, he was uncertain of Malfoy's game. After five years in the Auror ranks, Dean had gotten quite good at detecting falsehoods and reading criminals, but Malfoy was in an entirely different league. He lied as naturally as he breathed and had been trained in Occlumency from his teens. Dean tamped down his frustration and kept quiet, to see what else Malfoy might reveal.

The other wizard ran an exasperated hand through his pale fringe. "Hermione's had a rough day, and I don't want you to make it worse. I know Shacklebolt is insisting on this interview, but don't turn it into a fucking interrogation, alright? Your issues are with me, not with her."

For just the briefest moment, Dean felt a flicker of surprised approval, that the Death Eater really was trying to protect Hermione. Then Malfoy opened his mouth again, in a typically arrogant threat.

"You may be an Auror, Thomas, but you're not above the law. I'll be listening closely when you speak with Granger, and if you say one word to her that violates the Statute of Secrecy or Umbridge's decrees, I'll have you up before the Wizengamot on charges. Are we clear?"

"Clear as a Foe Glass, Ferret," Dean growled. "Now unlock that door before I have *you* up on charges for impeding an investigation."

Malfoy gave him a filthy look, but he obeyed. As soon as they entered the house, Hermione came rushing up to meet them in the foyer with a barrage of questions and a book in hand.

"Are you alright? What took you so long? How's your nose? Is it broken?" She delicately touched Malfoy's pointy nose.

"I'm fine, princess. Just a bloody nose, nothing broken." That was a bold-faced lie, told without hesitation. Dean had seen Narcissa's spell work firsthand. He found himself battling to maintain a professional demeanor, to not punch Malfoy and break his nose again.

"It took the police a while to sort everything out. They want your statement as well. This is Au-Inspector Thomas," Malfoy introduced him with neutral tone and only a tiny slip of the tongue.

Dean extended his hand and Hermione shook it without hesitation. "Let's speak in the lounge," she suggested, suiting action to words by leading them into a room with a Georgian fireplace, shiny wooden floors with an inlaid pattern, and a pair of modern sofas upholstered in pearl grey and separated by a glass table. Hermione and Malfoy sat on the sofa furthest from the door, hands linked, leaving Dean to take a seat opposite.

"This shouldn't take long, Miss Granger," Dean began with an official air, after taking his notepad and biro from an inside coat pocket. "Please tell me in your own words what happened this morning."

"Malcolm and I were walking in Hyde Park - " she began.

"Pardon me, but I have his name down as Draco in my notes. Is that not correct?"

Malfoy looked unruffled as Hermione answered easily. "That's his middle name, used by his mother and a few old friends."

"But you call him Malcolm?" Dean inquired.

"Hermione calls me Draco as well. Quite often." The purring tone and sudden color to her cheeks made the intimate context obvious.

Dean cleared his throat. "So Malcolm Foy is the name I should use in my report?" Deliberately, he coughed the second syllable, in case hearing 'Malfoy,' would spark some recollection by Hermione.

"Please do," Malfoy smirked, fully aware of what the Auror was trying to do. "Are you quite ready for Granger's statement now?"

At Dean's nod, she continued. "We were walking along a side path near the Serpentine when we were accosted by my ex-boyfriend. He screamed something that I couldn't quite make out and then tackled Malcolm and began pummeling him."

She was starting to look angry, Dean noticed, even at the retelling. "I told his girlfriend or wife or whatever she is to get him under control. He's not my responsibility any more, thankfully. She called me some names - "

"What did she call you?" Dean broke in, trying again to spur some recollection.

Hermione looked puzzled. "Bitch, and some kind of whore, but it didn't make any sense."

Malfoy snorted. "For anyone, but especially some slag like that, to call you a whore is utter rubbish."

"Then what happened?" Dean prompted.

"We exchanged words," Hermione admitted, "and she shoved me to the ground. She picked up a stick, like she was going to poke at me or something, but she slipped in the snow and fell over."

Slowly, Dean nodded. Hermione's account was consistent with the other statements and wand evidence, taking her Confounded state into account.

"Is there anything else you wish to add, Miss Granger?" Dean asked, no longer hopeful of eliciting any memories or obtaining any evidence that she was being ill-treated. To his irritation, Malfoy now seemed utterly relaxed, lounging against the cushions with an arm wrapped around Hermione as she leaned into him.

She shook her head. "No, that's all. I must have hit my head because I was knocked out for a bit. When I woke up, Malcolm had brought me home."

The blond looked smug at her description of his flat as her home, not to mention at having so thoroughly tricked the brightest witch of their age. Dean bit back a growl of frustration.

"I suppose you'll wish to press charges, Miss Granger?" he asked. Perhaps he still could upset the devil's bargain Ron and Lavender had struck with Malfoy. "You could have been seriously injured."

Hermione hesitated and chewed her lower lip. "I don't think so. I was absolutely furious at some of the things she said, but I said my share as well. Honestly, she seemed rather unstable - I think she needs mental help more than a stint in gaol."

Malfoy gave her a quick hug, shooting Dean a triumphant look. "You're a much better person than I am, love."

"No one would dispute that," the disgruntled Auror muttered. "I'll be off then. Thank you for your time, Miss Granger."

"You're quite welcome," she smiled. "May I ask you a question in a non-official capacity?"

"Of course," he said.

"Is your first name Dean? You remind me of someone I went to school with."

"Why, yes it is!" Dean beamed at her, reveling in the sight of Malfoy's horrified face. "I didn't think you'd remember me."

She smiled, politely avoiding the truthful answer that she had almost entirely forgotten him. "Would you please pass along my apologies to Ginny? The last time we met, I was a bit miffed with her, and I don't know how to contact her to say I'm sorry."

Over Hermione's shoulder, Dean watched Malfoy's expression shift from horror to calculation. Unwittingly, she had just exposed Ginny to prosecution.

"Ah, well. No worries. You know Ginny has a temper, too," he said with a nonchalance he was far from feeling.

"I know," Hermione fretted. "I just hope she's not holding a grudge. Maybe we could all meet for dinner, if you can find someone to mind the twins and Jamie?"

"That would be nice," Dean said sincerely, despite knowing it would never happen.

"Why don't you give Inspector Thomas your mobile number and he can have his wife call you to set that up?" Malfoy suggested, secure in the knowledge that Dean would do his utmost to keep Ginny from phoning and once again breaking wizarding law.

Still, Dean dutifully wrote the number Hermione supplied in his notebook. He would have liked to give her his mobile number in case she ever needed help, but it was impossible with Malfoy sitting right there.

"I'll show you out," the blond wizard offered.

When Hermione went to rise as well, Malfoy gently pressed her back on to the sofa, murmuring something for her ears alone. Dean narrowed his eyes as she acquiesced, waving a hand in farewell.

"Good-bye, Dean. I'd walk you to the door, but Draco is concerned I'm too delicate." She rolled her eyes at her overly protective boyfriend, but did not move from the couch.

The two wizards walked to the front door in silence. Dean was not at all surprised when Malfoy stepped outside with him, shutting the door behind them.

For once, there was no posturing from the ferret. "Both of us have a witch we want to protect, Thomas," he stated in an even voice. "My silence about Ginny is a fair trade for yours regarding Hermione. Tell Shackbolt you saw Hermione, met her nice Muggle boyfriend, and that while I've been sniffing around, I don't have a chance of getting into her knickers."

The Auror raised an eyebrow. "And how am I supposed to explain away that spell you were using to monitor the fetal heartbeat? The Minister knew exactly what that spell is and what it's used for."

"Tell him I used it on Astoria. You know, my wife?" Malfoy suggested, his usual sarcasm making a reappearance.

"I do know about your wife, Malfoy," Dean told the blond wizard. "Problem is, *she* doesn't." He jerked a thumb back in the direction of the closed door to the townhouse, where Hermione was trustingly waiting inside for her lying, cheating viper of a boyfriend. "And if Hermione knew, that would be one of the many reasons why she'd hex your prick off before letting you touch her."

"You heard Nott earlier today. It's a crime for anyone other than a Death Eater bound by a Vow to seek out a Muggleborn. Your wife is looking at a year in Azkaban, at the very least. That's a long time for a mother to be away from her babies," Malfoy threatened in a quiet voice.

Dean took a deep breath of wintry air in an attempt to calm himself. Assaulting the ferrety bastard would only make things worse. He had thought it despicable how quickly Ron had given in to Malfoy's demands to keep himself and Lavender out of Azkaban. Now, with Ginny facing prison, he found himself feeling much more sympathetic towards his brother-in-law.

"I don't have anything to hide," Malfoy continued persuasively. "I treat Granger *very* well - far better than that ginger git ever did. And if you want Little Red to set up a monthly lunch or shopping date, I would welcome that. With the way women talk about us when we're not around, you *would* hear about it if I did anything to upset Hermione." And Malfoy, clever snake that he was, would have even more evidence against Ginny and even more leverage to ensure Dean's silence.

As Dean wavered, he found himself asking the question that had provided his moral compass for the last several years. *What would Harry Potter do?*

Through some twist of fate, he had found himself living what should have been the Chosen One's life, married to Ginny, raising little Jamie, and rising rapidly through the Auror ranks. Dean felt it was the least he could do, to think about what Harry would have done, as a way to honor his memory. With bone-deep certainty, he knew that Harry never would leave an Obliviated Hermione to Malfoy's tender mercies. Ginny, too, would rather take her chances with the Wizengamot than abandon her friend to whatever sly scheme Malfoy was engaged in.

"No, Malfoy. I'm taking this back to the Minister and to the Order," Dean said with a firm confidence he was far from feeling.

Then he turned sharply on the spot and Apparated away, before the infuriated blond wizard could take any steps to stop him.

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The Minister of Magic looked up from a large pile of paperwork at the tap on his door. A genuine smile crossed his face and the furrows on his brow smoothed at the sight of Dean Thomas.

"Come in, Dean," he invited warmly. Not only was he eager to hear his report about the Granger-Malfoy situation, but he considered the young Auror to be his most promising

protégé. In a decade or two, and not merely because they were distant cousins, Kingsley would be more than pleased to turn over the reins of power to him. "How is Miss Granger?"

Dean provided a succinct account of his meeting. "So she is as well as can be expected, given that she's unwittingly shackled up with a Death Eater and her archenemy from Hogwarts," he concluded bitterly. "Oh, and she's pregnant with his child."

"Is she really?" Kingsley asked, steepling his fingers. "I'm surprised Mr. Malfoy would confirm that."

"Not in so many words, but it's obvious enough from the way he acts around her." Dean had been much the same way when Ginny was pregnant with the twins, even though the coddling drove his independent wife batty. "Hermione also alluded to her 'delicate' condition."

"So the next Malfoy heir will have a Muggleborn mother," Kingsley mused.

Dean gave him a surprised look. "You say it as though that's a good thing, sir. And she very well may decide to terminate the pregnancy once we tell her who Malfoy really is."

"Then perhaps we should refrain from telling her."

"Sir?" Dean asked, a wealth of shock and disbelief packed into that single syllable.

With a sigh, Kingsley found himself explaining what should have been obvious. It wasn't that Dean was unintelligent - far from it - but his thinking defaulted to the straight and narrow path rather than more serpentine byways.

"Dean, do you have any idea how difficult it is to govern a society so recently ripped apart by civil war? And over a cause that will never go away? Muggleborns have been among us since Morgana! We Shacklebolts are an old, proud pureblood family, but we have always recognized that Muggleborns need to be integrated, because they cannot be eradicated."

He continued in the face of Dean's stony silence. "You would be appalled at some of the imbecilic proposals floated to heal the divisions in our world. Fudge actually suggested a marriage law, forcing purebloods and Muggleborns to wed! Depending on who was the quicker to cast, one spouse would be dead and the other in Azkaban." Kingsley snorted in derision, but from Dean's blank face, comprehension still was eluding him.

"I would *never* support that sort of coercive social engineering. But when my hand was forced into accepting the repatriation policy, I was hopeful that it might allow some Death Eaters to develop a less acrimonious relationship with their Muggleborns. Particularly those who were bonded to an attractive witch."

He continued in a faintly lecturing tone as Dean listened intently. "Our history, as well as that of the Muggles, is replete with examples of conflicts that were ended by treaties consummated between a woman's thighs and alliances cemented by the birth of a child."

He was encouraged by the younger wizard's silence. "So I do think it is a good thing - indeed, I would go so far as to say an excellent thing - for Hermione to bear Malfoy's heir," he

concluded. "Katie Bell already has done as much for the Flints, though they are not so prominent a family as the Malfoys. And of course Theo Nott actually married the Chang girl."

"Is this something you planned with the Death Eaters?" Despite his dark skin, Dean was looking ashen.

"No, it wasn't planned," Kingsley shook his head. "I merely anticipated it might be an unintended consequence of the Vow and resulting proximity. And I was right," he concluded with satisfaction.

Color flooded into Dean's face. "So that's why you had the Order check on the exiles so casually and so infrequently, to give the Death Eaters a free hand," he accused. "You made Hermione and the others pawns in some sick political game!"

"They are far more important than mere pawns, Dean," Kingsley said in his deep, reassuring voice, impressed that the younger man had so quickly realized his motivation in hobbling the Order. "They are very useful tools - levers, if you will - to get the repatriation law repealed and allow Muggleborns back into society."

Dean scoffed, but Kingsley forestalled him with a raised hand. "You've already seen the results. What else would motivate blood purists like Lucretia Flint and the Notts to push for reforms to the law to allow Muggleborns back into the wizarding world?"

"It's not working and it's not worth it," Dean ground out. "The Notts are claiming Cho is a pureblood, while Katie and Hermione are nothing but a dirty little secret. I saw what Flint and Malfoy said to you at the Leaky Cauldron."

"I cast a *Muffliato*," Kingsley said shrewdly, not allowing himself to be bluffed. "You couldn't have overheard us."

"I can read lips," Dean shrugged. "I've known Malfoy since we were eleven. He's a cold-hearted bastard who's just using Hermione. He'll probably steal the baby from her and try to pass it off as his wife's."

Kingsley's eyes lit up. "If they tried, that knowledge would be very empowering to the Minister of Magic, whoever he might be."

Dean simply looked disgusted, more focused on Hermione than the possibility of blackmailing the Malfoys. "It's despicable, it is, how he's lying to her about who and *what* he is," the younger Auror muttered.

"Even snakes seek warmth. Indeed, being cold-blooded, some might say they need it more than others," Kingsley said in a consoling way. "It certainly is not unprecedented for a pureblood wizard to seek companionship with a woman in the Muggle world, and to tell her nothing about magic. Your own father . . ."

"It's not the same, sir!" Dean interrupted. "My father loved my mother, would have married her if the Death Eaters hadn't killed him. As for what Malfoy is, I'm not just talking about

him being a wizard. He's a Death Eater himself and Hermione's enemy. She would never consent to what they're doing if she remembered him."

"Are you so certain she's forgotten him?" Kingsley asked thoughtfully. "Miss Granger remembered you, and I daresay you were not so pivotal to her formative experiences as a witch."

"I'm certain." Dean was adamant. "We need to mobilize a few Order members - not Ron, obviously - and confront Malfoy, make him reverse the Memory Charm."

Kingsley crossed his arms and smiled sardonically at his idealistic subordinate. "And when he refuses? Are you going to torture Hermione until you break through to her lost memories?"

"Of course not!" Dean was horrified at the very thought.

"You couldn't even threaten to do so. Malfoy would know you'd never carry it through," Kingsley said decisively.

"I have no problem torturing him, though," Dean declared. "Ginny will be happy to help, once I tell her what he's done to Hermione."

Kingsley raised a skeptical eyebrow. "And what will you be doing with Miss Granger while you're in the midst of hexing and cursing her boyfriend? You expect her to stand idly by?"

Dean looked flummoxed and Kingsley took ruthless advantage. "We are not going to intervene in Miss Granger's relationship with Malfoy," he said with authority. "It is illegal and, at this point, would be counterproductive."

Rather than agreeing, Dean looked mutinous.

"That is a direct order, Auror Thomas," he snapped.

"Then I'd like to submit my resignation, Minister," Dean shot back.

Kingsley suppressed a sigh at the stubbornness of Gryffindors. "Dean, it doesn't have to be like this. Take Malfoy up on his offer to have Ginny visit with Hermione on a regular basis. She can gain her trust and we can act in a few months."

The younger Auror shook his head. "We don't have a few months to wait, Kingsley. She's pregnant, after all. I'm going to tell Ginny now and we'll figure out the best way to get Hermione away from him."

Mentally, Kingsley swore a vicious oath. This sort of impetuous obstinacy was the worst aspect of dealing with Gryffindors, and had gotten a dozen or more Order members killed over the course of two wizarding wars. Still, he swallowed his anger and his pride and made one last attempt to persuade the younger man to see reason. "Dean, would you please reconsider? Truly, I have considered Hermione's well-being and not just the greater good."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't," he said regretfully.

Kingsley heaved a sigh. "I'm sorry, too," he said in a quiet voice as the other wizard turned away.

And then, in an even softer voice that was barely above a hiss: "*Obliviate*."

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Dean blinked muzzily, trying to remember where he was. Minister Shacklebolt clapped a fatherly hand on his shoulder, causing him to startle.

"Did I just catch one of my best men woolgathering?" the Minister asked, with amusement.

"I apologize, sir," Dean said, feeling mortified and, underneath, faintly resentful at his boss's laughter. He cudgeled his mind, trying to pick up the thread of their conversation.

"Thank you for your report on Miss Granger. I'm very relieved to hear she is thriving in the Muggle world." He sounded as sincere as he ever did, but Dean was again conscious of that faint thread of resentment. Typical pureblood condescension, though Shacklebolt kept it buried deeper than most.

"Of course she's doing well there, sir. She's a brilliant person, not just a brilliant witch," Dean stated.

"And you are certain that her encounter with Draco Malfoy in the park this morning was a chance one?" The Minister's dark eyes bored into his.

"I'm positive, Minister. She had no recollection of ever seeing him before and believes she was merely a witness to a snowball fight that got out of hand," Dean recited.

"Ah, excellent," Shacklebolt sighed with relief, breaking his eye contact.

"You've had a trying day, Dean, cleaning up the mess made by your idiotic brother-in-law. Why don't you head home and enjoy an early dinner with your wife for a change?" he suggested pleasantly.

"Thank you, sir. I will," Dean agreed, wondering what it was that he had wanted to tell Ginny. Well, if it was important, it would come back to him.

Not Quite Hearts and Flowers

February 14, 2004

For more than two weeks, ever since Dean Thomas had Apparated away in a whirl of self-righteousness worthy of Harry Potter himself, Draco had been playing a waiting game, poised for the Order of the Phoenix to confront him about Granger, or even for some official contact from the Ministry about his treatment of his Muggleborn witch. Getting her up the duff didn't violate any laws or the terms of his Vow, but he suspected it would meet with universal disapproval from the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission; the Auror Department, which still kept discreet tabs on him and all former Death Eaters; and Granger's friends in the wizarding world.

However, Draco had not been waiting passively. Instead, he had been laying the groundwork for a plausible story that would keep Hermione on his side - and, more importantly, *at* his side - should any meddling members of the Order of the Phoenix show up on their doorstep. For once, the Weasel King and his stupid were-bitch had made themselves useful. If necessary, Draco could exploit their attack in Hyde Park to support his version of the truth: that Granger had been sent to the Muggle world to keep her safe from a group that wanted to harm her and he had been assigned to protect her. She would hopefully conclude, based on the limited information available to her, that the Order was the group in question and its members were not to be trusted.

He wasn't about to relinquish her yet, especially not when she was pregnant with his child. Hermione was seventeen weeks along, as far along as Astoria had been when they lost Scorpius, and Draco had spent the past week on tenterhooks, watching for any signs of a miscarriage. But Granger, to his eternal gratitude, remained healthy, if emotional and with a strong craving for pumpkin juice. He had come home from work earlier in the week to find her in kitchen, tearfully trying to mix canned pumpkin and water into a juice and instead producing something that looked like cat sick. He had solved the problem rather handily by sending her to the lounge to relax with a book while Mipsy delivered a pitcher of proper pumpkin juice from the Manor. His mother had continued the deliveries on a daily basis, pleased that Hermione was drinking something so rich in vitamins.

A tawny owl wearing a Ministry of Magic collar tapped on the window of his office at Malfoy Enterprises, interrupting Draco's fond musings about his Muggleborn girlfriend. When he slit open the envelope, he realized his waiting was at an end. The letter, which had been handwritten rather than entrusted to an assistant, was from the Minister of Magic himself.

Dear Draco,

I enclose an advance copy of the Wizengamot's decree clarifying the circumstances under which "repatriated" Muggleborns may be advised of the existence of the wizarding world and magic itself. I request that you do not show this to anyone until it is publicly released later

this afternoon, excepting Mssrs. Flint and Nott, since the three of you share a particular, personal interest in this decision.

With warm regards,

Kingsley

Draco snorted. Since when had he and the Minister been on a first-name basis? Apparently ever since the wily bastard acquired leverage over him. Shacklebolt was far too subtle to attempt to blackmail him in writing, but Draco had no doubt some extortionate demand would come.

In the interim, he would Owl Theo and Marcus to meet him for lunch. Shacklebolt was correct, damn him, that the three of them shared a very personal interest in whatever it was that the Wizengamot had done. He scrawled two notes inviting each of his friends to the Black Cat at noon and gave them to the Ministry owl for delivery - his tax dollars at work - before turning his attention to translating the Wizengamot's legalese into plain English.

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"So the upshot is that Muggleborns married to a wizard or witch or Muggleborns with a child attending Hogwarts may be told about magic and may visit or even live in the wizarding world, but cannot ever be informed they are themselves a witch or wizard," Theo summarized the Wizengamot decree for his friends in his best solicitor's voice.

Marcus furrowed his brow as he chased the remnants of his bangers and mash around his plate. He frowned at Theo's sympathetic look. While he might not be the smartest kneazle in the litter, but the upshot of what Theo said was clear and not unexpected. Marcus knew that Umbridge never would allow Muggleborns back into magical society with their memories restored and the full ability to use their powers. Still, he had hoped the progressive members of the Wizengamot would have pushed a bit more for the Muggleborns' rights. He wasn't about to ask Katie to live like a Squib in a world where she couldn't have her memories *or* her magic back.

"Bugger that," he said in disgust, chasing his disappointment with a swallow of ale. "So Katie's got to wait another seven and a half years, until Isabelle's gotten her Hogwarts letter, before I can tell her about magic and take her flying?"

Theo shook his head. "Even once Isabelle's at school, you still won't be permitted to tell Katie she's a witch."

"That's our Theo - a bookworm rather than a Quidditch player," Marcus guffawed. "The brooms are enchanted. Even a Muggle could learn to fly one. But that's a long time for us to have to wait."

"That's all you care about, being able to take Bell flying?" Draco asked, looking incredulous.

Honestly, it was, if Katie couldn't have her magic. His mum had been the one pushing the Wizengamot petition, because she wanted more access to Isabelle and Peter. She had even

been hinting that Marcus could move his entire family into the dower house if Katie were allowed back into wizarding Britain. Personally, he liked his Muggle house and not having to live near his parents.

"She loves flying," he answered simply. "It was her favorite thing about the magical world." And Katie always looked so natural on a broom, so graceful and so happy, that he ached to see it again.

Draco was looking at him like he was a lovesick Hufflepuff. Marcus narrowed his eyes at his poncey boss and growled at him. "C'mon, Drake. Don't tell me there isn't something you'd want to do for Hermione if you could bring her back into the magical world today."

The blond wizard smiled, a shockingly nice expression on his normally smirking or sneering face. "I would take Granger to Hogwarts, to the library. Where else?"

Theo blinked, patently surprised that his two fellow Slytherins actually sounded *sensitive*, even a little bit wistful. Marcus spoke quickly, to correct any misapprehensions that they might be getting soft. "And then you'd do filthy things to her in the restricted section," he chortled.

Draco gave him a two-fingered salute but laughed as he did. "I might at that."

"I expect Lucretia will be disappointed," Theo observed.

"Yeah, she'll probably send some Howlers and hex a couple of the Wizengamot members the next time she sees them," Marcus agreed. "But it's not like this decision is going to keep her from seeing her grandkids." His mother, rather pragmatically for a pureblood witch, had decided to venture into the Muggle world. "She's coming over tonight to mind Isabelle and Peter, so I can take Katie out for a romantic dinner."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Your mother is spending the evening in a Muggle house, changing nappies without magic? If you tell me your father is coming along to play dolls with Isabelle, then I'll know the world has gone mad."

"Not dolls, but yeah, Brutus is coming over with gobstones and a pack of Exploding Snap cards," Marcus smiled. Isabelle, just like he would expect from a miniature Slytherin witch, had her grandad wrapped around her manipulative little finger.

He turned to Theo and bared his jagged teeth in a wide grin. "So, Nott, what are you going to do? You're the only one of us who is permitted to bring his witch back into the wizarding world."

"Even if it is on sufferance," Draco muttered, to Marcus's surprise. Given Granger's high profile and rather formidable dueling skills, he had assumed Draco would want to keep his witch far away from the wizarding world and any use of magic. But he truly sounded disappointed.

Marcus shrugged. If Draco was that fussed, he could divorce Astoria when their marital contract ran out in a few months and marry Granger. He, on the other hand, was shackled to

Brunhilda until one of them died, and witches, on average, enjoyed a longer lifespan than wizards.

Theo smiled, trying hard to tamp down his enthusiasm but not quite succeeding. "Well, I think we'll keep our dinner reservation in Muggle London."

Marcus and Draco both nodded at that sensible decision. Fine dining options in the wizarding world were sparse compared to what the Muggles had to offer.

"After that, though . . ." Theo smiled like a little boy on his birthday morning. "I'm taking her to see Diagon Alley."

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When Cho walked into the flat she shared with her husband after another grueling shift at the hospital, she was greeted by the unwelcome sight of Malcolm Foy, slouched elegantly at the kitchen table while drinking a mug of tea.

Before she could demand to know what he was doing, Theo rose from his chair, lacing his fingers with hers. "I need to speak with you," he said seriously, "and I asked him to be here to vouch for me, so you don't think I've gone around the twist. Please, sit down."

Cho took a seat next to husband and opposite the blond, feeling her apprehension rise at the steely expression in Malcolm's eyes. She had never felt entirely at ease around Hermione's boyfriend, even though he had never been anything but pleasant and polite to her.

"What is it, Theo?" she asked, striving to keep her voice calm.

Her husband continued to hold her hand even as they sat at the table. That alone was enough to alarm her, since Theo's overt displays of affection were rare and always private.

"I've wanted to tell you this for some time, even before we were married," he began. "But as a solicitor, I need to abide by the law, and it wasn't legal for me to tell you before today."

Cho wracked her brain to recall what articles she had read in today's newspaper on her break. As hard as she tried, she couldn't think of any act of parliament that could possibly apply to her marriage. Theo took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and shut it, looking helpless. Now, she truly was worried.

"Er, that is to say . . .," her husband began, before breaking off and looking to Malcolm for assistance.

"I'm not going to tell her for you," he drawled in an annoyingly superior tone. "As precious as your hemming and hawing is, I advise you to just spit it out already."

Theo glared across the table at the other man but collected himself. "Cho, I'm a wizard," he announced, simply.

She stared at her husband's pale face and tight lips, waiting for the punchline. Looking at Theo's light blue eyes, through his glasses, she saw he looked entirely serious and more than

a bit sad.

"You're joking, aren't you?" Her question was formulaic. She knew he was not, but her rational mind refused to accept it. "Aren't you?" she demanded.

Theo shook his head. "I'm not."

"He's not joking. He is a wizard," Malcolm confirmed. "We both are," he added, in a casual afterthought.

"Please, please tell me this is a joke!" she implored, her voice rising in something close to panic.

Theo squeezed her hand in reassurance. "It's not a joke, but it's not a bad thing."

Cho shook her head frantically, black hair swinging, and tried to pull away. "It's unnatural," she hissed.

Theo regarded her steadily, now looking a bit hurt.

"I don't believe you!" Cho cried in a shrill voice. "Either of you!"

"Show her your wand," Malcolm suggested impatiently.

Theo removed a polished length of wood from the back pocket of his trousers and rolled it over to her. Cho placed a cautious fingertip on the wand, feeling a humming sensation throughout her hand that was dissonant but not painful. Across the table, Malcolm was regarding her with laughing grey eyes. He had pulled his own wand from his pocket and was twirling it through long, pale fingers.

"May I touch yours?" she asked him.

He shook his blond head, laughter bubbling to the surface. "That's a very personal request to make of a wizard, Cho. Only Hermione gets to play with my wand."

Cho recoiled, but forgot her embarrassment in the face of Theo's sudden alarm.

"You don't really let her - " he began.

"Not *this* wand," Malcolm cut him off with a smirk. "I wouldn't dare. Granger's not as docile as your wife."

Cho narrowed her eyes, stung by that dismissal and the way he was speaking about her, as though she were not even present. "Can you actually do anything with your wand, other than brag about it?" she asked snappishly.

"Speaking of that," Theo said in a sheepish voice, once again patting her hand. "I've asked Malfoy to cast a couple of spells on you, to make sure you don't violate the Statute of Secrecy."

"You don't trust me?" She turned reproachful, dark eyes on her husband.

"With my life," Theo answered, "but the penalties for a violation are too stiff to risk."

Cho still felt hurt, but could accept that explanation. She still had one objection, however. "Does *he* need to do it? I would rather have you cast the spells."

Her husband looked, if possible, even more uncomfortable. "I can't," he confessed. "The spells are harmless ones that are often used on magical children - Marcus has cast them on Isabelle - but the first technically is considered a curse."

Cho looked at him, puzzled. "Why does that matter?"

Before Theo could try to explain, Malcolm lost his patience and interrupted. "May we get on with it?" he asked her husband. "It's Valentine's Day and I have plans for Granger that don't involve sitting around your kitchen table chatting all night."

Cho shivered at the heated look in those grey eyes, feeling a flicker of pity for Hermione. Theo had brought her a lovely bouquet of flowers and booked a table at a Michelin-starred Cantonese restaurant, but she was certain Malcolm had something more deviant in mind for his girlfriend.

Theo gave a hesitant nod in permission. Cho flinched as Malcolm raised his wand to her face at point-blank range.

"*Mimblewimble maledix*," he recited, with an evil little grin.

Cho wanted to taunt him for the nonsensical-sounding words, but a feeling like an icy wind hit her as she opened her mouth. She felt a momentary panic at the feeling of her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, but then it faded.

"What was that?" she gasped, relieved she could speak.

"Yes, what was that?" Theo echoed in cold accusation, wand leveled at the other wizard.

"A little addition of my own," Malcolm smirked. "Perfectly harmless, as you should know." He held her husband's gaze and tapped his wrist in an apparently significant gesture that Cho did not understand.

Theo still looked upset, and Malcolm huffed a sigh in exasperation. "I didn't think you would appreciate it if I hit your wife with a Babbling Hex in addition to the Tongue-Tying Curse. What's cute in a small child would seem mental in an adult woman. So I used a variation that will cause Cho to respond with scathing disbelief to any suggestion that magic exists."

He smirked at Cho. "I have every respect for my girlfriend's intelligence, but her skills at deception leave something to be desired. Now I can rely on you to undermine, with extreme bitchiness, whatever brilliant conclusion she might eventually reach as the result of your little research project."

Cho looked at him in horrified silence. The puzzle pieces were falling into place, but she wouldn't be able to share the solution with anyone. Malcolm Foy's spell would force her to belittle and antagonize Hermione if the other woman suggested magic might be the reason for their memory loss.

"Have a pleasant evening," the blond wizard bade them in a mocking tone. "I'll just show myself out."

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"Happy Valentine's Day, dearest." Lucius Malfoy watched expectantly as his wife opened the wrapped package from Goldnuk's, mindful of her blood-red manicure.

Narcissa held up the platinum and diamond bracelet, dangling it between two fingers. From her expression, one might have thought she was holding a dead rat by the tail. "Lovely," she said tonelessly, before dropping it back into the jeweler's box.

She clapped her hands to summon one of the elves. "Tippy, take these flowers and place them in the drawing room with the missing chandelier," she ordered. "The bracelet can go in my dressing room, in the bottom left drawer of my vanity."

"Cissy, tell me what's wrong," Lucius said pleadingly, as soon as the elf disappeared. He had bought her favorite enchanted blooms from a florist in Diagon Alley, paying an exorbitant amount due to the lovers' holiday, and now she was banishing them to a room they never used. He had purchased an exquisite bracelet - one he was certain would be sufficient to bribe his way out of the Crup kennel and back into his wife's good graces - and she hadn't even given it a second glance. This had been going on for a month now, even though Lucius could not recall having done anything particularly awful in that time. Unless Narcissa had found out about the reason for his visit to Hogwarts

"Flowers and trinkets are all very well, but I want to know what you were doing at Hogwarts last month," Narcissa stated flatly.

"It was Board of Governors business. Quite dull, but still confidential." His wife's ability to find out what she wasn't supposed to know was uncanny. He took a sip of Ogden's Old to moisten his suddenly dry mouth as his fear was realized.

"You're certain that's all it was?" Narcissa questioned, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow.

"Quite certain." Lucius compressed his lips in a stubborn line. His trip to Hogwarts had not entirely been a wild goose chase, but neither his wife nor his son would appreciate the conclusions he had reluctantly drawn as patriarch of the Malfoy family.

For some few minutes, they sat in strained silence, Lucius sipping his genial beverage as Narcissa glared at him.

Then she leaned back in her chair, tapping her wand impatiently against her knee. "Ready to tell me what you were up to at Hogwarts, husband dear?"

"I wanted to see the Book of Admittance," he ground out, against his will.

"And why was that?" Narcissa asked sweetly.

Lucius stubbornly compressed his lips, fighting a futile battle against the Veritaserum in his drink. He had forgotten that particular trick, since Narcissa had not tried it on him in more than a decade. The last time had been when he had tried to conceal from her the Dark Lord's return.

Narcissa easily recognized the signs that the truth serum was working. "Do tell, darling, and then we can finish our Valentine's Day celebration upstairs in our bedroom, where there's a comfortable mattress."

"Which I will be fucking you into all night, you manipulative witch," he growled.

"Promises, promises," she smiled. "So long as you first tell me why you went to Hogwarts."

"To see what information is available to the head of Hogwarts in the Book," he stated, giving into the potion. "As it turns out, McGonagall sees only the child's name. Not the parents' names and not the child's blood status."

Narcissa's blue eyes narrowed slightly at that tidbit. "So if the necessary arrangements were made prior to birth, the Book would not show if a child is adopted?"

"Or if the child was borne by a surrogate," Lucius added, pleased that his wife had so quickly appreciated the implications. But that was one of the many reasons why he had married her.

"I fear that Astoria will not be able produce an heir," he volunteered with a heavy sigh. It had taken him years to regretfully acknowledge that fact.

Narcissa brushed it off as of no account. "I came to that conclusion long ago. But am I to understand that you intend to encourage Draco to continue the Malfoy line with some other witch?"

He nodded. "I had hoped the Book would identify some young pureblood mothers we might approach, to reach some sort of confidential arrangement. But, as I said, it only lists the names of admitted children."

Narcissa paused, seemingly engaged in some sort of internal debate. "The only young mothers I know of with pure blood are from families of blood traitors, like Ginevra Thomas. Is that what you are willing to resort to?"

Lucius cringed, both at the disgust in her tone and the mere notion of a Weasley grandchild. "No one will have to know. We'll bribe Astoria to pass off the brat as her own."

His wife continued as though he had not spoken. "You do realize that any child Draco produces with a witch is legally a pureblood. That widens the field quite a bit."

Candidly, he was surprised at her broad-mindedness. The Blacks were among the most fanatical of the pureblood families. "That's correct, but it's not quite the same as being a *true*

pureblood. Though there are half-bloods like Hannah Abbott with connections to the Sacred Twenty-Eight," he offered.

His wife sneered. "You want a grandchild out of a Hufflepuff who works as a barmaid?"

"It's not what I *want*," he protested. "But it may be what we have to do to prevent the Malfoy line from ending with Draco."

"He can do better than that," Narcissa said dismissively. "If you're going to sacrifice purity, there's no need to sacrifice power as well."

Lucius mulled that over as she undulated towards him, wand in hand. "But I suggest you speak with Draco directly. Our son likely has some refinements to add to your plan."

Before Lucius could inquire as to what she meant, or what she had been plotting with their son, Narcissa was upon him, kissing and stroking and driving all coherent thoughts out of his head as only she could do.

Neither of them noticed their daughter-in-law creeping away from the doorway where she had been listening, her eyes bright with tears and her fists clenched in rage.

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Theo wound up ringing Hakkasan to reschedule their romantic dinner. Cho simply had too many questions that could not be answered at a restaurant, in public. Instead, they ordered Chinese takeaway and he found himself explaining what he could about the wizarding world and demonstrating spells over wonton soup and chow mein noodles.

He found himself heartened by her delight at the simplest of spells. For months now, Cho had been trapped in a depressive funk. Theo had worried he would never see her bright-eyed and happy again, but here she was, smiling broadly at *Lumos* and *Nox*.

"Do it again, please!" she requested, and he cheerfully obliged by lighting, extinguishing and re-lighting the candles at their table.

"Tell me more about wizarding society," she asked, cupping a hand under her chin. The soft candlelight masked the dark circles under her eyes.

Theo brushed a strand of hair back from her forehead, marshaling his thoughts. He had shared the basics: population, the names of villages with sizable magical communities, the lack of electricity, the existence of magical creatures. At some point, however, Cho would start asking more difficult questions.

"It's easier to show you than try to explain," he temporized. "Why don't you put on your cloak?"

Thirty minutes and a short taxi ride later, they were walking through the Leaky Cauldron, with Cho looking askance at the shabby decor and dodgy clientele. Theo escorted her through the pub to the rear courtyard, where he tapped his wand against the bricks to open the archway into Diagon Alley. Standing at his shoulder, he heard Cho gasp in wonder.

Gently, he grasped her hand and led her through. "I know it's not quite hearts and flowers, but it's something I wanted to share with you."

He regarded Cho with anxiety, gauging her reaction to the most magical neighborhood in London. She clutched his hand tightly, eyes darting in all directions.

"Oh, my," she breathed, craning her head to see more.

Theo grinned at her reaction, which was all he had hoped for. When he was younger and buying his school supplies in Diagon Alley, he had always looked down at the Muggleborn students and their awe at seeing the wizarding world for the first time. Now, he wanted nothing more than to see that same amazement and joy on his wife's face.

"Here, let me show you around," he offered. Arms linked, they strolled through the cobbled streets, while Theo pointed out the goblins at Gringotts Bank and various shops. Cho cooed over the magical pets at Eyelops; admired the fashions on display at Madame Malkin's; and raised her eyebrows at the parchment and quills for sale at Scrivenshaft's.

"Why don't wizards use biros?" she asked. "There's nothing electrical about them to interfere with magic, and it's ever so much more convenient than dipping a quill into an ink pot."

"We're a traditional lot, love," he said lightly, nothing in his voice hinting that this traditionalism, taken to an extreme, had contributed to two wars and her memory loss and exile. But now she was back.

Theo let out a tiny sigh of relief that Flourish and Blott's was closing up as they walked by. While not in Hermione's league, Cho loved her books. He would be hard-pressed to explain away much of what she might read in the modern history or current events sections. He also did not point out Weasleys' Wizards Wheezes, but the joke shop was attention-grabbing enough on its own. Cho took in the bright purple storefront and eye-popping displays in silence.

"Would you like to go inside?" he inquired.

Cho shook her head with a smile. "No, pranks and practical jokes aren't really my cup of tea."

Theo hid his relief. He had no idea how George and Angelina Weasley would react to the return of a Muggleborn witch, and he wouldn't be surprised by two former Gryffindors doing something impetuous. Fortunately, no one bothered them. As a former Death Eater, Theo drew the occasional hostile glance, but no one dared to say anything. He noticed a few pureblood sticklers giving Cho a cold look, but her status as his wife and the lingering possibility that she might be a pureblood herself - that petition was still under consideration by Umbridge - prevented any heckling.

"How about a cuppa, then?" he asked, gesturing towards a tea shoppe down a side street. "They have a nice herbal blend."

She was on the verge of agreeing when a stocky man in a black, hooded cloak brushed by them. He was a stranger to Theo and not a Death Eater, but Cho shrank back against him. Her

breathing sped up as she surveyed the thinning crowd. Her eyes widened in panic, rather than wonderment, and her grip on Theo's arm tightened.

"All those men in cloaks," she breathed in terror. "We need to leave. *Now!*"

"It's alright," he soothed. "They're wearing cloaks because it's a cold night."

Cho was beyond listening to reason, tugging hard on his arm to lead him back to the Leaky and Muggle London. "It's not safe, it's not safe," she chanted under her breath. "They'll hurt me, they'll rape me, they'll make me do things - "

"Stop!" Theo said sharply, giving her a little shake despite the ache in his wrist. He needed to snap her out of an emotional state that was fast approaching hysteria. Never had he anticipated that bringing her to Diagon Alley would trigger her memories - especially *those* memories. "You're safe with me."

He gripped her slight shoulders, staring intently into her eyes. Cho's pupils were dilated with fear, but she seemed to be listening. "No one is going to hurt you, no one is going to rape you, and no one is going to make you do anything you don't wish to do."

The firmness in his voice matched his hold on her shoulders, to keep her from bolting. She sagged against him, no longer pulling on his arm, but with her breath still coming in rapid pants. Theo wrapped his arm around her, cursing himself at how she was shivering in fear, and led her towards the exit from the alley.

To keep from breaking down himself, he pretended not to hear her whispered, broken protest. "But Theo . . . they already did."

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

February 15, 2004 - morning

When Cho stumbled bleary-eyed into the kitchen, Theo was there to greet her with a mug of tea and plate of dry toast. Her morning sickness had persisted into the second trimester, and he was concerned by how thin she was.

"Rough night?" he asked with sympathy. She had locked herself in the bedroom upon their return from Diagon Alley. While Theo easily could have unlocked the door with magic, he respected his wife's desire to fight her demons on her own. Looking at Cho now, he realized the only reason he hadn't been woken by her nightmares was because she hadn't slept at all. As exhausted as she looked, however, there was a diamond-hard edge to her this morning.

"My night was both rough and enlightening. Thank you ever so much for that." Her voice was sharp enough to cut.

"I regret taking you to Diagon Alley. I had no intention of distressing you," he apologized stiffly.

Her expression softened and she cupped a cool hand to her cheek. "Don't be sorry, Theo. The acquisition of knowledge is never painless. What I learned last night was worth any amount of distress."

Then she removed her hand and crossed her arms defensively in front of her. "I assume wizards have a spell to cause people to lose their memory?"

Theo flinched, but still nodded in confirmation. He would tell her the truth about that, at least. Unlike Malfoy, who seemed utterly unperturbed by deceiving Granger, Theo hated lying to his wife. It didn't implicate the Vow or hurt his wrist, but it made his stomach twist with guilt.

"Is it reversible?" she demanded.

"Not at present," he answered, technically truthful given the current state of wizarding law.

Cho looked at him sharply. "Is a cure being developed? Might that change?"

"It might," he said, responding to her second question and sidestepping the first. The cure to this problem was political reform, not medical research. "I hope it will."

She swallowed hard and addressed her next question to the refrigerator, not meeting his eyes. "Are there wizards who prey upon women in this world? Use them and take their memories away?"

"In years past, yes," he admitted in a hoarse tone. As a newly-inducted Death Eater, he had gone on some of those raids during his school holidays, before and during seventh year. Most

of those Muggle women had been killed, because it was easier to murder someone than to Obliviate them, but he saw no need to share that with Cho. He did not want to add survivor's guilt to the already toxic mix of emotions she carried.

"It's not in the past, though. Not entirely," she insisted, pinning him with her dark gaze. "Zabini was out at the clubs, looking for victims."

"Maybe," Theo conceded. "But he's dead now."

"And that's good." Briefly, a smile curved her pale lips. Then it disappeared. "But what about your blond friend?"

"Malfoy?" he blurted.

"If that's his real name," Cho said with disgust.

"He's not like that." Theo was quick to defend Draco. Over the last several months, he had come to consider him a friend.

"No?" Cho asked skeptically. "He was quick enough to cast a malevolent spell on me. It also seemed as though he enjoyed doing it. Who knows what he's doing to Hermione behind closed doors?"

"Nothing she doesn't fully consent to and enjoy," Theo said firmly. "Trust me, he is quite literally incapable of doing anything to harm her."

"She doesn't even know his real name, let alone that he's a wizard." Cho shook her head, frowning in thought. She uncrossed her arms to take a bite of toast. Inwardly, Theo cheered that she was eating.

Watching her as she nibbled, Theo suspected that she was trying to come up with a way to circumvent Draco's curse. He hoped not - as intelligent as Cho was, she didn't remember how magic worked and her attempt to get around the spell was certain to backfire.

"Granger's a smart girl, Cho," he gently tried to warn her off, stroking lightly down her back. "She can take care of herself."

She leaned into his hand, but looked at him, unblinking. "As am I, and as can I."

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Hermione loved lazy weekend lie-ins with her boyfriend. The sex was slow and languid, a perfect counterpoint to their urgent roughness in the night. It was a time for both of them to soothingly stroke over bruised skin and to kiss each other's scratches and love bites better.

She was a fastidious person, who enjoyed her showers on a daily basis, but a more animalistic part of her liked it when she smelt like Draco, when the insides of her thighs were sticky because of him, and reveled in the sensation of the rough stubble on his chin rubbing against her more sensitive skin. There was a distinct pleasure in staying in that natural state

for an hour or so on a Saturday or Sunday, rather than having to rush into the bathroom to get ready for work or uni.

On weekdays, his father expected him in the office before eight, sometimes earlier for a meeting, and her own academic load had not lightened with pregnancy. None of the components of her blood-replenishing serum were teratogens, but she still was being circumspect about her laboratory time to minimize the risk of exposure to any harmful chemicals used by other graduate students. But as her lab work had tailed off, her academic writing and teaching assistant duties had picked up. So it was a delightful luxury to just lie in bed on this Sunday morning, tangled up in the sheets, with one of Draco's hands warm on her rounded belly while his other played with her hair. Hermione felt protected, even cherished.

"So, what are your plans for this dreary February day? Once I decide to let you out of bed that is," he queried in a soft, intimate murmur.

"Visiting an art gallery with Katie and Justin. Cho may come, too."

"Mmmm," he hummed against her shoulder. "Anything I'd like?"

"Probably not," she shook her head. On their visits to the Tate, her boyfriend had made his disdain for most contemporary art clear. "It's a student exhibition. All modern sculpture and photography."

He snorted softly. "More pretension than talent then, I imagine. Not quite your scene, is it?"

That was true. Her preferences, like his, ran to the more traditional where art was concerned. But Dennis Creevey was one of the students whose work was being featured, and she wanted to meet him while he was down from Leeds.

"Not quite," Hermione agreed. "Justin knows one of the artists." That wasn't a lie, she told herself, it just wasn't the whole truth.

"Is this another misguided attempt to expose my son to culture early on?" Malcolm asked jokingly, apparently accepting her explanation.

"Another misguided attempt?" she echoed. "And how can you be so sure it's a boy I'm carrying? We won't find out for another couple weeks."

"Boys run in my family," he stated with confidence, planting a soft kiss on one shoulder. "So much so that I would give you excellent odds if you'd like to make a friendly wager to the contrary?"

"No, I don't think so," Hermione demurred. "I feel like it's a boy, too."

"And you are hardly ever wrong," Malcolm said, before kissing her other shoulder. "As for your first question, I was referring to that infantilized perversion of Mozart I caught you playing to the sprog last week." He tapped lightly against her abdomen as he teased her.

"There are studies showing that listening to classic music in the womb enhances the development of key neurological connections in the brain," Hermione advised with a sniff,

hiding her smile.

"I don't think you have to worry about our child being intelligent, love," he said, changing his tapping to a soothing circular motion. "But if you enjoy classical music, my grandmother had a large collection of albums I can bring back."

"Back from where?" she asked.

"I'll probably run down to Wiltshire today, while you're out with the girls. My mum thinks it's time for me to tell my father about you."

"Would you like me to accompany you to the lion's den?" she offered, responding to the faint note of tension in his voice.

"Absolutely not," he said decisively, his arm tightening around her. "On the unlikely chance my mother is wrong and I find myself disinherited and banned from the house, I'd rather not have you there as a witness."

"But wouldn't it be better if we both went, so your father could meet me?" Hermione persisted, flipping over to face him.

Draco shook his head. "I'm more likely to gain his acceptance if I go alone. There are some . . . cultural differences you can't possibly understand."

Hermione stiffened in his arms. "Oh? Snobbery isn't that complicated."

"That's not what I meant," Malcolm said, nuzzling against her neck. "It's not about social class. It's - things like the expression you just used. My father would find that terribly offensive."

"Really?" Hermione asked. "But lions are fierce and majestic - the kings of the jungle."

"My father detests lions. Thinks they're stupid, lazy brutes. Now, if you bravely volunteered to come with me to the serpent's lair, he would be flattered."

"Your family is odd," she muttered.

Playfully, he pinched her bum, laughing as she squealed. "Even more so than you can imagine, princess."

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"Rather morbid, aren't they?" Katie asked rhetorically, peering over Hermione's shoulder at the photographs of cemeteries and headstones shot in stark black and white. Unconsciously, she snuggled her sleeping son a bit closer in his sling. Hermione smiled at the sight. Peter was a bald baby with his father's bone structure and incongruously chubby cheeks. Katie joked that looking at him was a preview of what Mark would look like in fifty years.

"Morbid, but beautifully shot," Hermione agreed. "The contrast is breathtaking."

"Why do they all show the graves of people who died on May 2, 1998? Did something happen on that date?" Katie asked in puzzlement.

"Not that I know of," Hermione shrugged. There was something naggingly familiar about that date, but her research on the computer and among the library's microfiche had not revealed anything especially noteworthy. There had been an odd display of northern lights in the remote Scottish highlands that some gullible locals blamed on aliens in the tabloid press, but no massive accident or terrorist attack.

Her gaze hovered on a photo of two familiar graves. "Cho, it's the cemetery at Godric's Hollow," she pointed with excitement.

Cho had been very quiet at the gallery, keeping her distance from Hermione, Katie, and even Justin. Hermione assumed the other woman was in a snit with her for some reason, as often was the case. She reddened as she realized Cho's judgmental gaze now was locked on her wrist, slightly chafed from the prior night, rather than the photo of the Potters' graves.

"Admiring my bracelet?" she asked in a challenging voice. "Malcolm got me a new charm for Valentine's Day." She turned her wrist to show off the platinum otter with dark topaz eyes, also purposefully displaying a thumbprint-shaped bruise.

"How can let him abuse you like that?" Cho hissed.

"If I choose to give my boyfriend kinky sex as well as decadent chocolates for Valentine's Day, I don't see what basis you have to object," Hermione hissed back. "It's not abuse, and it's certainly not your concern."

"You don't even know who he is or what he's capable of," Cho warned in a low voice.

"And you do?" scoffed Hermione. "I'm the one who lives with him!"

"Listen to me, Hermione, please!" Cho's voice rose with her distress. "Malcolm is a w-wanker," she choked out.

Hermione's eyebrows rose at Cho's unexpected crudity. While she sometimes accused her boyfriend of being just that, it wasn't anyone else's place to say so. Before she could tell Cho as much, a slightly nasal masculine tenor interrupted.

"Hermione?" he asked. "Hermione Granger?"

She turned away from Cho to acknowledge the greeting and suppressed a sigh at another stranger who somehow knew her.

He held out his hand. "I'm Dennis Creevey."

Her eyes widened in surprise. The entire point of attending the student exhibition had been to meet Colin's younger brother. But she had been scanning the crowd for a slightly built, mousy-haired university student. Sweet but slightly hyperactive, running around in his brother's footsteps, swapping two old-fashioned cameras between them. That was the ghost her wisps of memories had created.

The young man holding out his hand was whipcord thin and only a few inches taller than her own height, but otherwise nothing like what she remembered. Dennis was dressed all in black, from his turtleneck sweater to his vintage trainers, his hair spiky and dyed to an equally inky color. He was wearing heavy-framed black glasses that he probably did not need to correct his vision and carrying himself with a carefully cultivated insouciance.

A faintly defensive expression crossed his face at her scrutiny. "Pardon me," he bit out, "I thought you were someone I went to school with."

"I am," she said hurriedly, before he could turn on his heel and stalk away. "I am Hermione Granger. You're just not how I remembered."

A sudden grin replaced what she suspected was a habitual sneer, transforming Dennis into someone more compatible with her memories of an overly enthusiastic schoolboy. "You *remember* me?"

"Just little bits and pieces," she hastened to say.

"Still, that's bloody amazing! Do you remember my brother Colin?" he asked in an eager voice.

"Just that you were always together, and always taking pictures," Hermione said.

Dennis smiled, more than a bit sadly. "Yeah, that's what my parents say. Right little paparazzi, we were. I have some of Colin's photos here - have you seen them?"

Before she could respond, Katie approached with wide eyes and a faintly troubled expression, Cho trailed behind her, looking disgruntled. "Hermione," Katie said, "I need you to come look at these photos over here. There's something really odd about them."

"Whatever d'ya mean by that?" Dennis asked, eyeing Katie's ballet flats and cashmere twin set with disfavor. "They aren't *banal*, but it's a bit rude to describe them as odd."

"Oh, you must be the photographer!" Katie exclaimed. "I wasn't referring to how they were shot, and I didn't mean to be rude, but several of your photos show a castle in the Scottish highlands in ruins."

"Yeah? What about it?" Dennis demanded, not entirely mollified.

"I've been there, with my partner, only about five years ago. The castle was still intact!" Katie explained, wide-eyed.

"Are you sure it's the same castle, Katie?" Hermione asked.

"Fairly certain, but I wanted you to take a look. You've seen the picture with me and Mark."

Dennis was now looking at her more closely. "Katie? Not Katie Bell, any chance?"

"Yes, that's me. Plus one," she said pleasantly, with a little gesture at the sling.

"Hermione, did you come here with anyone else?" he asked with some urgency.

"Yes, with Cho Chang." Hermione was quick to correct herself, but not fast enough to avoid Cho's glare. "And Justin's around here, somewhere."

"Over there, flirting with the bartender," Katie pointed him out.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley?" Dennis asked, with increasing enthusiasm.

"Do you know him?" Katie asked.

"Do you know us?" Hermione added.

"I know your names - all of your names," he replied, bouncing slightly with excitement. "And if there's somewhere we can go that's a little more private, I have some more pictures I think you'd be very interested to see."

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As soon as Draco arrived at the Manor's Apparition point for family members, the ornately carved oaken front doors swung open to welcome him to his ancestral home. That was ordinary and only to be expected. His mother intercepting him as soon as he set foot in the foyer, however, was neither. Normally, he would be escorted by a house-elf to her presence, usually in the drawing room or conservatory.

Narcissa embraced him and smiled in a conspiratorial fashion. "Your father is waiting for you in his study."

Draco drew back in alarm. The prospect of a meeting with Lucius in his study no longer made his stomach flip in fear, as it did when he was younger, but it still was not something he looked forward to.

"Silly boy," his mother lightly reprimanded. "Your father is in an excellent mood today. I think you'll find him quite receptive to your mésalliance with Miss Granger."

Resolutely, Draco refused to think about what his mother might have done to engender his father's goodwill. Taking his silence as consent, Narcissa pushed him towards the study door. "Go on, then, and I'll see you both at lunch."

Lucius was seated behind his massive desk, reviewing ledgers and looking every inch the lord of the manor. He looked up and smiled at his son before standing and crossing to the sideboard. "Join me for a drink?"

"Sure." Even though it was before noon, and even though his father was in a mellow mood, Draco suspected he would need some alcohol in his system before this conversation finished.

Lucius took a seat on the long couch facing the fireplace, glass in hand, and gestured for Draco to join him. Once he did, his father levitated a tumbler of Firewhiskey on the rocks into his waiting hand.

"What is our family's motto, Draco?" he asked, as soon as they both were settled against the dark green leather cushions.

"*Sanctimonia vincet semper*," Draco responded, that answer - and underlying philosophy - having been drilled into him since boyhood. "Purity always will conquer."

"And that of the Black family?" Lucius inquired.

"*Toujours pur*," Draco stated, his French accent flawless.

"Indeed," his father agreed. "The Blacks were 'always pure.' Do you appreciate the distinction?"

Draco was quick on the uptake. "The Black family motto seems to express a more rigid view. Of course, they no longer exist in the male line."

"The Blacks always were a bit more idealistic - perhaps one could even say fanatical - when it came to blood purity. While this family is, shall I say, more results-oriented." Lucius regarded him over the rim of his glass, with the grey eyes Draco had inherited, exactly the same in their shade, shape, and calculating coolness. "The purity of our blood will always overcome any inferior blood - filter it out, if necessary."

After a bracing swallow of whiskey, his father continued. "We have never had a family tapestry, like the Blacks, to record the existence of our bastards. And if an illegitimate child were accepted as a Malfoy, despite the unfortunate circumstances of his birth or blood status - well, *our* blood will tell."

"Have there been Malfoy bastards in the past, father?" Draco was honestly curious - this was not something that his parents or the ancestral portraits ever had shared before.

Lucius chuckled. "Depending on who you ask, some would say all Malfoy men are bastards. But none of us have been borne out of wedlock since before the time of Lucius I." His namesake had planned to sully the bloodline irrevocably, setting aside a pureblood witch for a public marriage to his Muggle mistress, the so-called "Virgin Queen" of England, until his wife had cursed them both.

Draco blinked at the implication that his family's bloodline was not pure from the days of Merlin, as he always had been taught, but held his tongue. His father was in a good mood at present, but that could shift on a Knut.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," Lucius continued. "Since the Battle of Hogwarts, there has been only one child born among all of the traditional Slytherin families. Your mother has convinced me that we need to find someone other than Astoria to carry and bear your heir."

Draco nodded. "I had reached that conclusion myself, father."

"Oh?" Lucius arched an eyebrow. "Your mother did mention that you might have some refinements to suggest to my plan."

"What is your plan, father?" Draco asked.

Lucius drew a folded sheet of parchment from his pocket. Draco took it, swiftly read it, and burst out laughing. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

The Rise of the Muggleborn Alliance

Chapter Notes

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

February 15, 2004 - afternoon and evening

"I fail to see what you find so amusing," Lucius told him, his narrowed eyes and clenched jaw warning Draco that he was on thin ice. "With your mother's assistance in identifying young witches who have given birth within the past three years, I've come up with a list of candidates to approach for a surrogacy contract."

Draco had thought as much when he reviewed the short list of names. "I never knew you and mother had such an absurd sense of humor."

"Whatever do you mean?" Lucius frowned.

"You've listed Hannah Abbott Longbottom, Susan Bones Smith, Angelina Johnson Weasley, Alicia Spinnet Jordan, and the She-Weasel! There aren't enough Galleons in Gringotts to get any of *them* to agree to continue the Malfoy line."

Draco drew his finger further down the parchment. "Millie probably would do it - she's an old friend and Goyle doesn't make much money - but everyone knows their daughter is a Squib."

His father looked pained. "These are the young women your age who attended Hogwarts and have had children."

"And the names I don't recognize?" Draco asked.

"Young mothers residing in wizarding Britain who did not attend Hogwarts," Lucius answered.

"Magically weak, then," Draco sneered. "Except for Fleur, and she's married to the eldest Weasel. That would be unacceptable."

Lucius did not disagree. "Yes, well, I wanted a complete list."

Draco read the last item on the list aloud, in an incredulous voice. "'Marcus Flint's mistress?' Are you serious?"

"Quite serious," Lucius said. "Two healthy children, with the little girl showing appreciable magic at age four. Lucretia's bragging has been insufferable."

Draco smiled to himself as he realized this might be easier than he thought. "I doubt Flint would agree to the arrangement. He's very possessive of his mistress."

Lucius shrugged. "You wouldn't have to sleep with her to get her pregnant. And we're prepared to offer very generous terms - 100,000 Galleons for a healthy baby boy and the

mother's agreement to be Obliviated following delivery."

Draco nodded. His parents would never trust a witch outside of the family with this kind of secret. "Would you pay for a girl?"

"In the unlikely event that your firstborn was female, I would," Lucius stated. "Only as half much, though, and with an option to enter into a second contract and try for a male heir."

It was interesting, and something of a relief, to discover his father would value a granddaughter. Half the amount of Galleons his parents were willing to pay for a baby boy still represented five times the average annual income of a wizarding household. As contrary as Granger was, Draco wouldn't put it past her to be carrying a girl.

"Flint's mistress is Katie Bell," he told Lucius with studied nonchalance, nothing giving away how much rested on his father's reaction.

"A Mudblood?" Lucius frowned. "The Flints have managed to keep that quiet." Then he shrugged. "No one need know. Marcus works for us - he'll agree for the right price. Certainly he was amenable enough to bribery in your second year."

Draco was relieved enough to let the insult pass, even though he was a damn good flyer and knew he had *earned* his spot on the house team. The broomsticks had been purchased only after Flint offered him the Seeker's spot, no matter what anyone thought. Only Granger had dared to say it to his face, though. He smiled sardonically at the memory.

"There's no need for a surrogacy contract, then," he said. "I'm already expecting a child, due in late July." He couldn't stop himself from smirking. "Conceived the natural way."

"With your Muggle mistress?" Lucius was shaking his head. "That just won't do."

"With my Muggleborn mistress," Draco corrected. "Hermione Granger. And there'll be no need to Oblivate her afterwards, since she remembers nothing about magic or our family."

"Hermione Granger?" Lucius's voice rose in shock. "I can't believe you've impregnated Potter's Mudblood!"

"She's mine now," Draco stated with narrowed eyes, not appreciating the insulting nickname or his father's continued doubts in him. "Brightest witch of her age and all that. I expect your grandchild will be quite magically powerful."

Lucius was silent for several moments, thoughtfully sipping his whiskey.

"I would expect nothing less," his father said finally, with a casual air of acceptance at odds with the excited gleam in his eyes. "So that's the refinement your mother mentioned?"

"Indeed," Draco replied, enjoying his father's reaction. Lucius was a self-contained man, but he was finding it difficult to hide his glee.

"No wonder you've been so pleased with yourself these past few months," Lucius mused. "Is the girl as filthy in bed as her heritage would suggest?" he inquired, with a sly nudge to

Draco's ribs.

"She's a hellcat," he confirmed, not wholly comfortable with this line of inquiry. "In every respect."

"Lucky boy," Lucius smirked. "That's quite an enticingly dirty little secret you've been keeping to yourself." His father crumpled the piece of parchment with the other witches' names and dropped it to the floor for the elves to pick up as he stood. "Well, we won't be needing this."

Draco stood as well, so they could join his beloved mother and superfluous wife for lunch. He had drank only half his Firewhiskey - the conversation with his father had not been nearly so unpleasant as he feared - but downed the remaining half at the thought of Astoria alternating between whining and cooing in his ear at the dining table while her hand crawled up his leg under the polished wood.

Lucius clapped him on the shoulder, the closest he ever came to an embrace with Draco. "I'm very proud of you, son."

(x) (x) (x)

Hermione led the way as they trudged up the three flights of stairs to her old flat. She was followed by Justin and Dennis, engaged in an animated discussion about chiaroscuro, and Katie with baby Peter still dozing in his sling.

Cho lagged behind by half a flight, debating whether she should just turn around and leave. She was incredibly curious as to what Dennis had in his messenger bag that couldn't be shown in public, but also increasingly wary of the power and range of Malfoy's curse. She hadn't expected to be able to denounce him to his oh-so-trusting girlfriend as a wizard, though Cho stood by what she had instead blurted out - he *was* a wanker.

But she hadn't anticipated that the curse would make her fulminate against Hermione's not-so-vanilla sexual practices with her partner. Cho, for obvious reasons, had zero desire to experiment in that way with Theo, but she took no issue with what consenting adults chose to do with or to each other. She had merely planned to warn Hermione not to be so trusting of Malcolm Foy or Malfoy or whatever he was calling himself these days. His curse had twisted her warning.

Resolutely, Cho decided to carry on. She firmly believed what she had told Theo - the acquisition of knowledge was worth any amount of effort or even pain. She *would* be going back to Diagon Alley, and she *would* stay to find out what Dennis Creevey had to show them, hopefully without alienating everybody in the room.

Hermione's flat still was furnished - at least there was a couch and enough chairs for everyone to sit down - but had been largely stripped of personal items when she moved to her boyfriend's more spacious flat. When Cho entered the small living room behind everyone else, she found them clustered around one of the few photographs left behind.

"It's Harry Potter!" Dennis squeaked in excitement, entirely abandoning his ironic hipster facade. "But where's Ron Weasley?"

"Gangly redhead?" Hermione asked. At Dennis's nod, she explained. "I folded the picture. I don't remember him and didn't want to see him."

As Cho looked at the photograph of the black-haired, green-eyed boy - who had never gotten to grow up and become a man - it suddenly clicked in her mind. The picture drawn by Harry's son, showing his dad and mum holding sticks; the ginger-haired man and blonde woman who had accosted Hermione and Malfoy in the park and who had been carrying sticks; and Malfoy pointing his magic *wand* at her face and cursing her. Those people were wizards and witches, all of them.

"How well did you know Harry?" Hermione was asking Dennis when Cho's attention snapped back to their conversation.

"I honestly don't remember, because I lost my memories about five years ago. My amnesia anniversary is coming up at the end of next month, as a matter of fact," Dennis stated.

Hermione nodded slowly. "I thought that might be the situation. All of us have large gaps in our memories, from accidents in the first half of 1999," she said. "Except Katie," she added conscientiously. "She suffered a concussion during a football game in that time period, but her head injury did not cause any apparent memory loss."

"Some of us remember more than others," Hermione continued. "Justin has remembered a few things through hypnosis and I'm like you - I know names and faces but not much else. Cho's memories come out in her dreams."

"They do not," Cho snapped. "They are nightmares, nothing more. And I'll thank you to let me speak for myself, Granger." Even as she spoke, Cho knew with a sickening certainty that Hermione was right. The impact of the curse confirmed what she already had suspected - that she had been raped by wizards, and wizards had stolen her memories.

Dennis gave an odd look at Cho's outburst but said nothing. "I don't actually remember names and faces, Hermione. I've learned them from photos."

Reaching into his satchel, he pulled out two large albums, each stuffed with photographs, and placed them on the coffee table. Hermione immediately bent her curly head over one, while Katie shifted Peter slightly to look at the other with Justin. Cho hung back, but could see there were dozens of pictures of students - children and adolescents - taken all around a boarding school housed in a stone castle.

"My brother and I took these. And we usually wrote names and dates on the back. That's how I knew who you all were," Dennis explained. Hermione grabbed her notebook and began scribbling as she reviewed the photos and their captions.

"Here I am!" Justin exclaimed, gazing at a younger image of himself with a girl in pigtails and round-faced boy with a slightly pompous expression. All three were wearing yellow-striped ties as part of what was obviously a school uniform.

"That's Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan," Dennis told him. "Taken in 1993."

"Doesn't ring any bells," Justin said. "But now I know why I've always adored yellow!"

Cho looked at him. Indeed, he was wearing a butter yellow Oxford shirt under his navy jumper. A thought entered her mind, and she began scanning photos for variations in the uniform ties. Maroon and gold predominated, but she also saw yellow stripes and a blue version she found appealing.

Many of the pictures had been taken in a large, round room, cozily decorated with gold and red chintz. Cho looked at those pictures with indifference, but Hermione gasped in recognition. "It's our common room!"

"Yeah, there you are with Harry and Ron in second year. Colin took that one." Dennis flipped a few pages forward. "Katie, here's one of you with Alicia Spinnet and Angelina Johnson."

Katie's eyes grew wide. "That's my friend, Angie Weaver. But - but I didn't go to boarding school with her," she protested. "And why are we all holding broomsticks?"

"I think it's obvious," Cho rolled her eyes. "You were cleaning. Probably you visited her at school."

"Maybe . . .," Katie trailed off uncertainly. "How is it that the castle is now a ruin, when it was a school just a few years ago?"

"Dunno," Dennis said. "I went back to where I thought it was, and that was all I found."

"It might not even be the same castle," Cho pointed out. "It's hard to tell from a ruin."

Dennis pointed out a photo to her. "Here's one with you, Cho."

She looked over his shoulder with some trepidation, but it was ordinary enough. She was dressed up for a formal dance, standing on a stone staircase with a boy who apparently had been her date. He was handsome, but his face struck no chord of recognition.

"And here's another," Dennis said as he flipped the page. "You'll all want to see this one."

They crowded around the album, looking at the photo of four couples, including Cho and her mystery date. "The caption says it's from the Yule Ball in 1994," Dennis told them.

From her dress and hairdo, she could tell it had been taken at the same dance. In the picture, she was standing between an incredibly beautiful blonde and a black-haired girl wearing a sari, with Hermione on the end and Harry Potter standing behind them.

"So we went to school together," Cho stated. "That's . . . a meaningless coincidence." She compressed her lips, fighting back tears of frustration at the curse forcing her to say entirely the opposite of what she meant.

The only bright side of Malfoy's spell was that it was helping her distinguish between what was magical and what was mundane. Inwardly, she was reeling at the implications of

everyone in this room having been at boarding school with Harry Potter. Who had been a hero and a wizard and died tragically young. Cho's clever mind quickly reached the logical conclusion - if logic even applied to a situation like this - that she, Katie, and Hermione were witches and Dennis and Justin were wizards.

"Cho, are you feeling quite all right?" Katie asked compassionately.

"Not really. I have an awful migraine," Cho answered, grateful for the out and that the curse allowed her to give a civil response to Katie's question.

"These photos are amazing." Hermione's eyes were bright with excitement as she browsed through one of the albums. "Do you have any more?" she asked, fingers hovering over a blank space where a picture had been removed.

Looking at the albums, Cho realized there were a substantial number of gaps. On every page, at least one and sometimes every photo had been removed. She suspected the albums themselves had been carefully curated to eliminate any photos that showed wands or anyone using obvious magic.

"This is all that I have," Dennis said with an apologetic air. "And I don't know what happened with the missing photos. Honestly, it was kind of weird how I got these albums."

"Oh?" Justin prompted.

"Yeah, I got a notice from the Royal Mail that the quarterly payment for my post box was overdue. I didn't remember ever remember renting a box - of course I wouldn't - but it turns out I'd gotten it just a couple days before my accident."

Cho raised her eyebrows at the timing and noticed Hermione doing the same.

Dennis continued. "The really odd part is that the address was in my own handwriting, but it was postmarked from London on a day when I was in the hospital recovering from after falling off a roof."

"You fell off a roof?" Katie asked with gasp.

"Yeah, my brother and I used to climb out of our bedroom window at home and sit on the roof. It was like our secret clubhouse," Dennis said. "After he died, I would go up there alone. I was home from school for the Easter holidays and must have slipped somehow. That's how I lost my memories."

Cho was highly doubtful that had been an accident, but when she opened her mouth to make that observation, an insult came out instead. "Rather careless of you, wasn't that?" she asked in an acid tone.

Dennis and Hermione shot her nasty looks, and even Katie was appalled, but Justin rather tactfully intervened. "Are there any pictures with all five of us?" he asked, referring to the adults in the room.

"Just this one." Dennis turned to a page near the back of one album and showed them a photo of about two dozen students, all wearing their school uniforms and standing in two rows.

It was a typical picture of a school team or club, unusual only in that everyone had posed with their hands behind their backs. *To hide our wands*. With an effort of will, Cho kept herself from saying anything untoward at that realization.

"The caption reads 'The D.A., 1995-96.' Does that mean anything to you?" Dennis asked.

All of them shook their heads, though Cho noticed Hermione's tiny frown of concentration.

"It's an acronym," she said slowly.

Cho literally bit her tongue in fighting the curse-driven urge to retort that was obvious. Hermione was onto something, and she wasn't going to sidetrack her.

"It stood for - defense? No, that's not right." Hermione shook her head again, this time in frustration. "It's not coming back to me."

"It think it stands for Dumbledore's Army," Dennis announced with a grin.

"Dumbledore? What kind of name is that?" Cho demanded in a snooty voice, wondering how he had come up with that outlandish name. "Sounds like some old fraud to me."

"I believe he was the headmaster of this school none of us remember attending," Hermione answered. "Dennis, do you have any pictures of him?"

"No photographs, sorry." He shook his head, but with a slightly cheeky expression, as though he knew a secret.

Cho took a deep breath, wanting to draw their attention to the second half of the acronym. "What's with this 'army' nonsense?" she scoffed. "We were school kids. What in the bloody hell did we think we were fighting against? Curfew?"

"Something more serious than that," Hermione gave her a significant look. "I saw Ginny in December." She pointed out a red-haired girl in the photograph. "She was very cagey, and kept looking around like she was going to be arrested or something for talking to me," Hermione told them. "But she did confirm there were two sides in some sort of conflict. Ginny said I wasn't in danger any more, for what it's worth."

"What a load of bollocks!" Cho snorted. "I doubt you ever were in danger. Typical attention-seeking behavior, if you ask me."

"Well, no one did," Hermione said coldly, turning away from her. She flipped through her notebook and turned to Justin and Dennis. "Have you ever met anyone with a snake and skull tattoo on the inside of their arm?"

Cho stuffed her fist in her mouth and suppressed the vicious words she otherwise would have spoken aloud. Clearly, the brand that Theo carried on his forearm, along with his friends, had something to do with magic.

Justin shook his head. "Never. And I've seen quite a few blokes shirtless," he added with a wink.

Dennis, however, was nodding eagerly. "Oh, yeah!" he exclaimed. "I've got one of those myself. D'ya want to see it?"

(x) (x) (x)

"Miss, it is being time for lunch," the house-elf announced in a squeaky voice, popping into the humid conservatory."

"Fine, I'll be right there," Astoria huffed petulantly, tempted to kick the little creature. "Now go away!"

The elf - she never bothered to learn their names, when the ugly things all looked alike - disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

"Wait, come back!" she commanded.

The elf reappeared, its snout quivering with excitement to serve.

Astoria stood up from her hiding place among the potted palms, brushing off her skirt. Despite what Draco might think, she wasn't entirely stupid - certainly not stupid enough to try and eavesdrop on a private conversation in her father-in-law's heavily warded study. Instead, she had spent the past half-hour in the conservatory, where the glass walls ran parallel to the French doors leading from Lucius's study to the rose garden, giving her an excellent vantage point to observe father and son.

"I left a piece of parchment crumpled on the floor of your master's study. Fetch it for me now."

The elf popped away to obey. As she waited, Astoria conjured a mirror, frowning slightly at her reflection. With a flick of her wand, she adjusted the glamour charms to smooth her hair and brighten her lipstick.

The elf popped back into sight, the crumpled parchment in its gnarled green hand. Astoria snatched at it, burning with curiosity to see the contents of the parchment Lucius had so carelessly discarded. She might not have overheard the conversation, but she was adept at interpreting male body language. Clearly, they had been discussing Draco's little whore, whoever she might be.

Her eyes widened in surprise at the list of more than a dozen names. "Oh, for Merlin's sake!" She stamped her foot in exasperation.

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Dennis stripped off his black turtleneck before Justin or any of the shocked women could respond. From his neck to his wrists, his greyhound-thin torso was adorned with swirls and patterns of color. He held out his left forearm for inspection.

With a sense of relief, Hermione released a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. The snake and skull on Dennis's arm were inked rather than branded into his flesh. The skull had been crushed and the snake, as depicted, was decapitated and defanged. It was nothing like the repugnant thing that marred her boyfriend's arm.

The horrified betrayal she had felt at Dennis Creevey's announcement dissolved into a giggle. "I can't believe you got yourself inked with a parody of the Dark Mark! Cheeky little monkey, aren't you?"

"*Sic semper tyrannis*," Katie read the motto that ran from the inside of Dennis's elbow to his wrist.

"Thus always to tyrants," Justin translated. "I like it!" he grinned.

"Glad it meets with your approval," Dennis grinned back. "What did you call it?" he asked Hermione with curiosity.

"Oh!" Hermione thought back. "I called it a parody of the Dark Mark. I don't know why, though."

"It's a Light Mark!" Justin exclaimed. "Or a Snark Mark."

"Stupid names," Cho muttered.

"I like them," Dennis said to Justin, ignoring the sour woman. "This one," he pointed to his chest, "is for my brother."

"It's a perfect memorial," Justin said with sincerity.

The tattoo showed a dying lion, older than a cub but without an adult male's full mane. An adder was crushed under the young lion's paw, but with its fangs sunk in deep in a fatal bite. Colin's full name and dates of birth and death scrolled underneath.

Hermione was not a fan of tattoos, but had to admit Dennis's were truly artistic. "Lions and snakes, serpents and lions," she muttered, half to herself, Malcolm's statements from the morning about his father echoing in her ears. "Are those the two sides?"

Cho was silent, looking at Dennis's body art without comment. Hermione was thankful for small mercies.

"May 2, 1998. Why does that date keep cropping up?" Katie asked.

"It's a question I try to answer through my photography," Dennis said solemnly.

"Pretentious little Shoreditch twat," Cho said under her breath, softly enough that only Hermione heard her.

Dennis still was speaking. "My parents told me Colin died in a fire at our boarding school, and that he wasn't the only one killed, but that doesn't seem right."

Hermione agreed. "I've looked at microfiche until my eyes crossed, and there's no record of anything like that. A fatal fire at a school would be headline news."

"Who cares about the date?" Cho snapped. "All men must die - does it really matter when?"

Dennis turned his back on her, muttering something uncomplimentary. "So I think this one is a picture of Dumbledore," he said over his shoulder to the others in a level tone.

Hermione examined the tattoo that took up most of his back. It was a variation of historical American military recruiting posters. Like Uncle Sam, the old man depicted between Dennis's shoulders had white hair and a beard, but much longer. His face was smiling rather than stern, with a twinkle in his eye, and the blue and white starred hat on his head ended in a point.

"Dumbledore's Army - Still Recruiting," she read aloud.

"Is that a wizard's cap?" Justin wondered.

"No, of course not, poof-." Cho abruptly, clamped her hand over her mouth. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Loo's that way," Hermione directed her.

Katie watched her retreating back with concern. "I think I should check on her. Cho's been a little bit off today."

Hermione thought that was a charitable way to describe extreme bitchiness, but merely nodded. "Of course. Would you like me to hold Peter?" she asked, hoping the answer would be no. She had minimal experience with babies.

"If you would," Katie said with a knowing grin. "The practice will do you good." Skillfully, she transferred the sleeping baby to Hermione's arms. "Just mind his head," she advised, "and jiggle him a bit if he starts to wake up."

"So, I take it congratulations are in order, mum?" Justin asked, smiling, as Katie left the room.

"As if it weren't obvious," Hermione said, awkwardly shifting the baby. Even her baggiest jumper couldn't hide her protruding abdomen.

"Oh, I dunno," Justin laughed. "Look at Dennis!"

Indeed, the other man looked gobsmacked. "Er, congratulations?" he offered. "Is the dad anyone I would recognize?" Dennis asked, with a glance at the albums.

"Thanks," Hermione smiled. "And no, I didn't see any pictures of Malcolm Foy - my boyfriend - in either of them." And she had looked carefully as she flipped through both albums, half-convinced she would see a younger version of Draco smirking at her from a photograph.

"It's just so strange," Dennis shook his head. "From the photos, I always thought you were going to end up with Ron."

"No, that never would have worked," Hermione said with certainty.

"You'll have to come out shopping with Pansy and me," Justin stated. "We've found the best baby boutique."

"Pansy's having a baby? That's nice," Hermione said with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

Justin did not seem to notice, or was too excited about sharing to care. "It's early days yet, but she took on the first try. I'm the donor daddy!"

As Hermione was digesting that, the blond started digging through his bag. "Speaking of daddies and photos . . . Ah hah! Found you!" Triumphant, he removed a photo from a plastic sleeve and handed it to Hermione.

"Pansy lent it to me, and I thought you might like to see it," Justin explained.

Like wasn't the right word, Hermione thought as she stared down at a snapshot of a teenaged Pansy pouting at the camera in a skimpy bikini on the shores of a Scottish loch. The stone castle featured in so many of Dennis's photos was in the background, but Hermione was more focused on the blond boy to Pansy's right, dressed in swim trunks and looking broodingly at the camera.

"May I borrow this?" Hermione asked Justin tightly. "And, Dennis, may I borrow one of your photos, too?" Both men nodded, and she carefully extracted a photo of her choice from one of the albums.

"Is everything fine?" Katie asked as she returned, sensing the tension in the room.

"Just peachy," Hermione muttered. "How is Cho?"

"She's okay - a touch of 'morning' sickness. Poor thing still gets nauseous morning, noon and night," Katie said sympathetically.

"Cho's pregnant, too?" Justin inquired.

"Yes, what of it?" Cho asked rudely as she walked into the living room.

"Er, nothing," Justin sought to mollify her. "It's just a bit of an odd coincidence that you, Katie, Hermione and Pansy all will have babies born in the same year. A nice coincidence!" he added hastily as Cho glared.

"Well, if Hermione hadn't been so eager to spread her legs for her degenerate boyfriend without using reliable birth control, she wouldn't be in this position." Cho stated.

Katie glared at her. "I can't believe you just said that!"

"I can," Dennis muttered. "What a bitch."

Cho clapped her hand over her mouth in horror. "I need to leave now," she managed to say.

"Yes, you do," Hermione agreed, coldly furious. "You know where the door is."

"Here, I'll walk you out," Justin said, a gentlemen to the end. "I'll be back," he promised the others, making it clear where his loyalties lay.

Hermione had calmed by the time he returned. She looked up with a smile and patted the seat next to her on the sofa. "Dennis's photos open up some new avenues for research, if you'd like to hear about them."

(x) (x) (x)

Draco was in the lounge, listening to one of his grandmother's old vinyl albums on her gramophone, when the door slammed and Hermione stormed into the flat. He bit back a grin. Granger in a rage was a sight to behold.

"Cho is a miserable cow!" she declared.

He raised an amused eyebrow. "What did she do this time, love?"

"What didn't she do?" Hermione asked rhetorically. "She insulted Dennis and Justin and even managed to upset Katie. According to Cho, you're a degenerate wanker who can't be trusted and I'm an irresponsible slag who puts up with your abuse."

Draco processed the effectiveness of his curse with quiet satisfaction. He stood up and gathered Hermione in a hug, his chin resting on the top of her head. "You don't deserve that," he comforted her, surprised at how much he meant it.

"Who's Dennis?" he asked, mildly curious but more to distract her.

"Oh, he's the friend of Justin's I mentioned," Hermione said. "He's a photographer."

Draco's ear for deception, well-honed by years in Slytherin house, pricked up at her airy tone. "Is that so? Would I like his work?" He drew her down onto the couch, snuggled against his side.

"Perhaps," she said with an odd sort of challenge in her voice. "I brought one of his photos to show you."

She drew away slightly to hand him a snapshot of herself, sitting under a tree reading a book. He recognized the setting instantly - she was on the shore of the Black Lake, with Hogwarts visible off to her right. Draco also recognized a test when he was confronted with one.

"Very pretty," he commented, referring to the younger Hermione and photo itself. He liked the effect of the autumn sunlight on her hair. "How old were you?"

"Fifteen or sixteen. Do you recognize the place? I don't remember it." The faint note of challenge was still there in her voice.

"It looks vaguely familiar," he admitted. He tightened his arm around her, pulling her close.

"Oh," she said, sounding disappointed. "Well, you were there." Hermione handed him another picture. It lacked the artistic quality of the first, but showed the same scenery. Draco's sixteen-year-old self had an arm slung around Pansy and a world-weary expression on his face.

"It appears I was," he agreed with deceptive mildness, while mentally damning Pansy. "Did you get this from Finch-Fletchley?"

Draco relaxed marginally at Hermione's nod. The Hufflepuff was ignorant of the photo's provenance, which made it safe to tell a half-truth. "I believe this was taken at Pansy's boarding school when I was visiting her."

"Does that mean I was at boarding school with Pansy?" Hermione asked, with a pleading look.

Draco felt a twinge of guilt at just how desperate she was to remember. "It seems like a logical inference."

"Did I know you then? Did we ever meet?" There she was again, with the imploring brown eyes he found it increasingly hard to deny.

"It's possible," he confessed in a low voice.

"Please, can you tell me what you remember?" Hermione begged.

Draco swiped a hand through his fringe, buying time as he sought the right words. Just how much did he dare to tell her?

"Pansy's boarding school was very rigidly divided into houses. She never would have befriended anyone from a different house. When I was there, I would have done the same," he explained.

"How can you be so sure Pansy and I weren't in the same house?" Hermione asked.

He laughed softly and pressed a kiss against her temple. "You're like oil and water. It's just impossible. Besides, you saw her reaction to you on Halloween. She didn't exactly greet you like an old school chum."

"When you were there with Pansy, did you ever see me or speak to me?" Hermione persisted.

More than a dozen instances ran through Draco's mind, where he or Pansy, or both of them, had insulted Granger or sent a hex her way. Then there was the Yule Ball, where he had stared at her with such naked want that Pansy had jinxed him and then refused to grant him any sexual favors for an entire week.

There was only one way to answer Hermione's question. "I was a vile little prick back at school. If I even deigned to speak to you, it would have been to insult you. So far as I'm concerned, the first time we met was in September, at the bookstore."

"So we didn't know each other back at school?" Hermione pressed.

"Not in any sense of the word, princess," he answered.

"Do you like the music?" Draco asked, in an abrupt change of subject.

"It's lovely. Tchaikovsky, right?"

"As always. I brought my grandmother's collection back from Wiltshire. I think the vinyl just sounds better, don't you agree?"

"How was the visit with your father?" Hermione asked, ignoring his rhetorical gambit and going to the heart of the matter with typical Gryffindor bluntness.

"Better than expected. You shouldn't expect an invitation to visit my ancestral home any time soon," Draco cautioned, knowing she would want to meet Lucius, "but my father is reasonably pleased about the prospect of a grandchild."

"That's good, I suppose," Hermione said, looking vaguely troubled and hurt.

"Dance with me," he said, wanting to ease the sting of his family's rejection, the basis for which she could never possibly understand.

"What?" she asked, taken aback.

Draco stood and, with a slight bow, held out a hand to her. "Will you do me the honor of giving me this dance?" he asked, with formal pureblood manners.

Hermione hesitated. "I don't remember if I ever learned how to dance."

With thoughts of Granger twirling around the dance floor at the Yule Ball in the forefront of his mind, Draco was not going to take no for an answer. "It's muscle memory," he coaxed. "If you ever knew how to dance, you'll remember."

"And what if I never knew how to dance?" Hermione asked, making a token protest as he pulled her to her feet and took her in his arms.

Draco smirked down at her as he began to waltz them around the living room. "Just follow my lead. I won't steer you wrong."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I picture Dennis as an angsty, angry little hipster. Per Wikipedia, Shoreditch is the London equivalent of Williamsburg in Brooklyn and Shoreditch Twat was a UK magazine that parodied the hipster lifestyle. Cho quotes the tag line from Game of Thrones. Also, thanks to Grovek26 for the idea and phrase the "Muggleborn Alliance."

Apologies, Apologies

February 27, 2004

Marcus Flint would be the first to admit his brains weren't first class, but his instincts were excellent and had kept him out of trouble any number of times. Those instincts were screaming that danger was present when he returned to his office after lunch to find his boss's wife perched on the edge of his desk, wearing revealing chartreuse robes and looking like a cat that had cornered an appetizing canary.

"Marcus, how lovely to see you," Astoria purred. "It's been far too long." She uncrossed and recrossed her legs, making it blatantly obvious she had foregone knickers that day.

"Nice to see you, Tori," he greeted her with his best wooden expression. He had been doing his level best to avoid her since Yule, when she and her sister had become hellbent on seducing him. Marcus had hoped she had lost interest when he was absent from the wizarding world on paternity leave, but apparently he was not so lucky. The very fact that he was the rare pureblood wizard who had a reason to take paternity leave only seemed to have whetted Astoria's interest.

"Draco is meeting with the research team if you want me to fetch him for you," he offered. Because that's how he wanted people to think of him, as an attack dog that would fetch and carry and do whatever else his current masters requested of him.

"That's quite unnecessary, Marcus. I came to see *you*." Astoria leaned forward, her low-cut robes allowing him to see *her* quite well.

He grunted and ran a finger along the inside of his collar, acutely uncomfortable.

"Are these your children?" she asked, snagging the framed photograph of Isabelle holding Peter off his desk. "How adorable," she cooed, without waiting for his answer.

"I want one," she demanded bluntly, with the spoilt viciousness of a Greengrass daughter and Malfoy wife.

"You can't have either," he snarled, showing his teeth.

"I don't mean Isabelle or Peter, silly," she chided him, as he silently cursed his mother for bragging so much about her grandchildren that even a self-absorbed bint like Astoria knew their names. "I want one of my own, and I think you can give that to me."

"No, I can't," he said bluntly.

"Is it because you're friends with Draco and work for Mr. Malfoy?" she guessed. "You know, you're much more loyal to them than they are to you."

She pulled a previously crumpled sheet of parchment from her bag and held it out to him. "Congratulations," she simpered. "Your mistress made the short list of potential Malfoy sperm receptacles. Draco is desperate enough for an heir that he wouldn't hesitate to try to seduce the mother of your children."

At a glance, Marcus recognized Lucius's handwriting. "Draco wouldn't do that to me," he said with confidence. For among other reasons, there was no need, with Granger carrying his child. "This is his father's list. I suppose Draco was the one to throw it away?"

Astoria blinked, clearly not expecting that Marcus would have appreciated the crumpled state of the parchment. In her surprise, she gave what he felt was an honest answer. "His father did, but from the way they were laughing and smirking, he and Draco already had reached some agreement about which witch to approach."

So Lucius probably knew he was going to be a grandfather. That would explain the pleasant atmosphere at the office these days, though it did make Marcus wonder exactly what - if anything - Draco had said to his father about Hermione.

"I don't know anything about any agreement, and I can't help you, Tori," he stated, hoping that repetition would yield results. "I can't get you pregnant."

"Whatever do you mean, Marcus?" she asked in a seductive voice, slithering off the desk and towards him. "I know you're virile. And I refuse to believe a red-blooded wizard like you can't get it up for *me*."

"No one with the Dark Mark can get you pregnant," he reiterated, nearing the end of his patience. "And I'm not the slightest bit interested in fucking you just for the sport of it. I may not be a 'Puff, but I have *some* loyalty."

"Draco and Lucius would turn on you in a heartbeat," Astoria sneered.

Marcus just shrugged. He did not agree, but he was not refusing her for the sake of the Malfoys. The lion's share of his loyalty - ironic phrase, that - ran to Katie and their children.

"If you want a baby so badly," he advised, "stop slagging around pureblood circles and go ride some Muggle's dick."

"You are so crude," Astoria complained, but at least she was moving away from him, preparing to take her leave in a cloud of noxious perfume. "But maybe I shall," she called over her shoulder.

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As dusk fell and the street lamps switched on, Cho looked around the rundown street in east London with a jaundiced eye. She and Theo had stopped in front of an old department store that looked as though it had been out of business since the 1970s, based on the fashions on display in the window.

"This is a hospital?" she asked with justified skepticism.

"Indeed it is. The largest one serving wizarding Britain," Theo replied. "The main entrance is through that mannequin there - she acts as an intercom to the reception desk - but I prefer to come and go in a more discreet manner."

Her husband led her around the side of the building and used his wand to tap out an intricate pattern around a chained and padlocked door. The door itself remained firmly shut, but an arched entrance opened to its immediate right. Cho walked through, following Theo and clutching his hand.

Theo had been her rock, even more than usual, for the past fortnight. He had slowly and patiently reintroduced her to the magical world. He also had helped her deal with the effects of Malfoy's curse. When she had come home crying from her disastrous afternoon with Hermione and the others, Theo had calmed her down and then gently advised that she offer a written apology to her friends.

Malfoy's curse prevented her from even writing about magic, but she could choose her words with care when writing in a way that prevented her from giving any further offense. Katie and Justin had graciously accepted her apology, but Hermione and Dennis had yet to respond. Being on the outs with the irritating hipster photographer did not bother her much, since she could only recall meeting him once, but she had hoped Hermione would forgive her, for the sake of their alliance if nothing else.

"Are you alright, love?" Theo interrupted her thoughts.

"Oh, yes," she said, not wanting to worry him. "Just taking it all in."

Once inside, St. Mungo's looked ordinary enough, with scrubbed linoleum floors and institutionally pale yellow walls that clashed with the lime green scrubs worn by the hospital staff. The antiseptic smell in the air was more herbal than the sharp alcohol-based scent Cho was used to at Royal Free, and she found the absence of the constant chirping and humming of medical machinery disconcerting. Still, the hospital environment was comforting to her despite these differences.

"Have I been here before?" she asked Theo. "It seems very familiar."

"I know you haven't been here with me. Otherwise . . ." he shrugged, which could mean either he did not know or was not legally permitted to tell her. Over the past two weeks, Cho had become rather familiar with those helpless shrugs.

Theo unerringly found his way to what looked like a service lift and pressed the button for the fifth floor. "Maternity care is on the top floor, along with the tea room and gift shop," he commented. "They keep the new babies and expectant mums well away from magical bugs and diseases on the second floor."

Cho wondered how Theo had come to be so familiar with the hospital's layout. "How is it that you were able to get an appointment on a Friday evening?" she asked instead, as the lift rose. "This must be after regular consulting hours."

"St. Mungo's isn't part of NHS," he quirked his lips in a small smile. "It's private, and if a patient is willing to pay, it's easy enough to persuade a Healer to take a late appointment."

They sailed through the empty reception area. Theo knocked on a door, which was opened by a pleasant-looking blonde a few years older than Cho. She ushered them into an examination room.

"I'm Healer Penelope Clearwater," she introduced herself. "It's very nice to have you as a patient, Cho. And of course to see you, Mr. Nott."

Cho bridled slightly at the friendly informality of the woman's bedside manner towards her, particularly when contrasted with her formal politeness to Theo. "It's Dr. Chang-Nott, if you please," she replied in a cool tone. "I understand you've spoken with Theo about this procedure, but I'd like to hear firsthand what it is you intend to do, and what the risks are."

"You've qualified as a Healer in the Muggle world? That's wonderful!" the Healer exclaimed with warm enthusiasm. Before Cho could ask what Muggle meant, the other woman had launched into a complex medical-magical explanation.

Cho followed carefully, making an occasional note of unfamiliar terminology. "Let me make sure I understand," she inquired after Healer Clearwater had finished. "You have the ability to use your wand to manipulate maternal and fetal energies to effectively create a net, to strengthen the cervix and reduce the risk of miscarriage or preterm labor. Correct?"

"Correct," the Healer nodded.

"And this procedure is painless and carries no risk?" Cho was unconvinced. Based on her experience, even the most routine medical procedures, such as inoculations, still involved some minimal discomfort and a risk-reward calculation.

"You may feel some tingling as I work, but in your case, I am not manipulating any energies that you currently use," Penelope patiently explained.

"Of course not," Cho agreed, bitterly enough that Theo shot her a worried look. Based on the Creevey brat's photos and other information she and Hermione had compiled, Cho now believed she had once been a witch. In addition to her memories, she also had been stripped of her ability to do magic. She thought a little bit of bitterness was warranted, under the circumstances.

"The only risk is that the procedure may not work, if the baby is a Squib."

"A Squib?" Cho asked.

"A child born to one or more magical parents who is not himself capable of magic," Theo defined, before the Healer could clarify.

"Oh, I see. Is that the same as a Mudblood?" Cho asked innocently.

She could tell she had dropped a brick in it. Healer Clearwater drew in a shocked breath and Theo grimaced.

"Quite the opposite," the blonde began.

Smoothly, Theo cut her off. "It's a very loaded term, Cho, and would take quite some time to explain. Rather than keeping Healer Clearwater here even later, you and I can talk about it at home."

The Healer shifted, but Cho could not pinpoint what was making her uneasy. "If you would lie down here, please, Dr. Chang-Nott," she requested politely. Evidently, the subject of Mudbloods was taboo and she was eager to leave it.

Cho took her place on the examination table. Theo sat next to her, holding her hand. She closed her eyes as Healer Clearwater ran a few diagnostic charms before she began tracing a pattern on Cho's slightly rounded belly while changing something in dog Latin. There was an odd tingling and Cho could see a pink light emanating from the witch's wand and feel a warmth sinking into her body. As promised, there was no pain.

"Well, that worked like a charm," Healer Clearwater said brightly, swiping her hair back from her face as she finished. She looked tired, but very pleased. "The baby definitely is not a Squib. I had more than enough energy to work with."

"Thank Merlin," Theo breathed, sagging a bit in relief. Cho, who had thought all his concern was for her, was perversely hurt and a bit annoyed. Did magic matter so much to him?

"Now, I understand you're receiving the bulk of your pregnancy care from Muggles, but I will need to renew the charm every two to three weeks throughout the second trimester, and probably weekly after you hit thirty weeks," the Healer told Cho, who nodded.

"Due to the special circumstances, you can rely on me to be flexible with scheduling. You can Owl me for appointment times." This last she directed to Theo, who nodded in turn. Cho wondered if Theo really kept an owl somewhere for messages; she had only ever seen him use his mobile.

"Have you found out the baby's sex yet?" Penelope asked the couple.

They both shook their heads. "I'm not quite sixteen weeks," Cho explained. "Ultrasound isn't very reliable this early."

"I'm glad I was careful in avoiding pronouns, then," the Healer smiled. "Would you like to know?"

After a moment of silent communication, Theo and Cho both nodded. She liked to plan ahead and he disliked surprises.

"Congratulations," said Healer Clearwater. "You're having a baby girl."

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"Order, please. Will the Order please come to order?" Arthur Weasley requested, mildly and ineffectually. For the most part, the chattering members of the Order of the Phoenix ignored him.

Ginny sighed. She loved her dad, but he was not a born leader of men. "Settle down, you lot!" she bellowed.

Quiet descended over the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, with a speed that would have made Molly Weasley proud. In the silence, the Floo sounded unnaturally loud as it discharged Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Good evening," he stated, perfectly at ease with being the subject of all eyes in the room. "My apologies, I was unavoidably detained. Shall we begin?"

Angelina thrust her hand in the air. "There's been a development with Katie," she announced.

"Please continue," Kingsley said by way of permission.

"I was at her home last week for a play date," she began. "We were just chatting about things, and out of the blue, Katie asked me whether we'd been at school together."

"How did you respond?" Kingsley asked. Despite his calm manner, Ginny could tell he was concerned.

"I asked what had brought this on, and she told me she'd seen some photos of us together. Then she showed one to me - the three Gryffindor Chasers, all of us holding our broomsticks."

"Where did she get the picture?" Arthur asked, befuddled.

"Katie got it from a photography student at Leeds named," Angelina paused, dramatically, "Dennis Creevey."

Ginny grinned. "Let me guess - Hermione introduced them?"

Angelina grinned back in affirmation. "Hermione dragged her out to a student art show a couple weeks back to meet him."

Ginny mentally saluted Hermione's foresight. The redhead had in her possession an entire boxful of photographs taken by the Creevey brothers during their time at Hogwarts, which Hermione and Dennis had brought to the Burrow the week before he was Obliviated. Dennis had told Ginny that he preferred to give them away rather than have the Ministry destroy them.

Ginny, who had been within days of giving birth and still reeling from Harry's death, hadn't even opened the box until the summer. By that time, Hermione had been gone, too, and there was no one to ask, but Ginny had always suspected the photos she had were not the entire body of the Creevey brothers' work. Hermione and Dennis must have figured out some way to smuggle some photographs into the Muggle world and hide them from the Muggle-born Repatriation Commission, despite Umbridge's best efforts to destroy all evidence that there had been magic in the Muggleborns' lives.

"What did you tell Miss Bell after you saw the picture?" Kingsley asked.

"Well, I couldn't exactly deny it," Angelina pointed out. "I told her we were best friends at boarding school who had lost touch. I said I was really surprised when she didn't remember me the day I saw her at the playground, but a psychologist friend of mine had suggested that I not push the issue in case Katie was suppressing some underlying trauma."

"Good thinking," Shacklebolt said with approval. "I suppose, however, that Miss Bell continued to press for information?"

"Well, yeah," Angelina admitted. "Of course she had questions about our classmates and what they were doing these days."

The Minister cupped his chin in his hand, eyes narrowed in thought. "I think," he opined with slow deliberation, "that the Order should suspend its monitoring of Muggleborns for the next six months."

An outcry greeted his words.

"The political winds are shifting in a more tolerant direction, but Undersecretary Umbridge will seize on any pretext to shift them back," Kingsley warned, his voice deep and compelling. "I am concerned that as certain Muggleborns have become more informed, it is harder for us to avoid committing crimes in our conversations with them. Miss Granger, in particular, has been problematic to monitor recently."

Ron flushed a sullen red. "It wasn't my fault that 'Mione remembered enough about Lav to get into it with her," he snarled. "Or that her evil fucker of a boyfriend went after me."

Ginny blinked at the harsh description. According to Dean, Hermione's boyfriend seemed like a nice enough Muggle bloke, if a bit of a ponce. Her brother was a jealous git, but that did not entirely account for the discrepancy with her husband's description.

"You royally cocked it up, Ronniekins," George told him. "Just admit you were wrong for once."

"It wasn't that big of a deal," Ron muttered.

"Oh, really?" Dean eyed his brother-in-law with annoyance. "I had to spend the entire day covering up for you because you just had to go and get into a fistfight with a Muggle."

"Kingsley, perhaps the better solution would be to limit the monitoring duties to those Order members who can be trusted to blend into the Muggle world," Bill Weasley offered. "We need to continue to keep a discreet eye on the Muggleborns. I don't trust any Death Eater not to take advantage if we stopped altogether."

"Don't think for a moment that I'm going to abandon Katie," Angelina warned. "Especially not before the christening. Her baby needs a magical godparent."

Murmurs of approval greeted both statements. Shacklebolt, attuned as he was to political currents, skillfully backpedaled. "Bill's suggestion is an excellent one. Dean, could I ask you

to draw up a new roster for my review? You can assign to me the responsibility for checking in on Miss Granger."

"Of course, sir," Dean said.

"Angelina, I also agree with you on the importance of magical godparents," Kingsley stated. "When is Katie's son having his christening?"

"Two weeks from Sunday," she answered promptly.

"You certainly should attend. That reminds me, Marcus Flint filed the paperwork today for a wizarding baptism on the same date," Kingsley advised. "It's quite a little baby boom. He's asked Draco Malfoy to stand as godfather to his son." Predictably, boos and hisses filled the kitchen.

"Who is the godmother? Puggy Parkinson?" Seamus sneered.

"It was not a name I recognized as belonging to a witch," Kingsley stated, a tiny smile playing about his lips. To Ginny, it looked as though the Minister knew an amusing secret.

"That's odd," Bill Weasley commented. "I assumed a pureblood fanatic like Flint would insist on two magical godparents."

"Maybe the godmother isn't a British witch?" Angelina suggested. "Bill's right - I can't see a Neanderthal like Flint allowing the mother to pick a Muggle."

Kingsley merely shrugged. "That seems like a reasonable explanation."

Looking at the sly grin on the Minister's normally serious face, a completely preposterous thought crossed Ginny's mind, that the two christenings were one and the same. Then she shook her head at the impossibility of her former Gryffindor teammate with Marcus Flint. After all, Katie had lost her memories, not her mind.

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Hermione tried hard not to smirk when Malcolm cleared his throat, signaling the start of what he clearly anticipated would be a contentious conversation. He had laid the groundwork with some care, with her favorite casserole heating in the oven when she came home and a lovely and ongoing post-dinner foot massage. Her boyfriend was clever and devious, but after several months of dating, she had learnt some of his tricks.

"So, I was thinking it might not be too early to discuss baby names," he suggested, thumbs pressing and rotating on her left instep.

Hermione propped herself up on her elbow from her prone position on the couch, leaving her feet in his lap. She had thought they would wait until after her scan next week, once they knew whether they were having a boy or a girl, but saw no harm in opening preliminary negotiations. "So long as you keep doing that, we can discuss whatever you wish."

He smiled at her and continued with the massage as he spoke. "As I've told you, my mother's family has a tradition of naming the boys after constellations and stars. Draco is the best of the lot, in my opinion, but we won't name a child after a parent. There's also been Sirius, Regulus, Cygnus, Orion . . . "

"What are some of the names on your father's side?" Hermione asked, hoping there would be something better on offer. Given Malcolm's acute respect for his heritage and an obstinacy that rivaled her own, she was fairly certain she would have to concede at least one of their child's names to his choosing.

"On the paternal side, we've tended to favor Roman emperors and statesmen," Malcolm said. "Brutus, Septimus - my father's name is Lucius."

"Ugh. Why not just call the baby Caligula and be done with it?" she responded.

"Really?" he asked eagerly, grey eyes sparkling like polished silver. "You like Caligula?"

The tiniest quirk of his lips clued her in to his game. "You are such a prat!" she laughed, punctuating her complaint by drumming one heel against his leg.

He grabbed her by the ankle. "Careful, Granger," he warned. "I have you pregnant, barefoot, and very much at my dubious mercy." To punctuate that, he began tickling to sole of her trapped foot.

"I'm not scared of you," she laughed, trying to free her trapped foot. That was not merely bravado on her part. Instinctively, she trusted Draco to employ every bit of cunning and ruthlessness at his disposal to keep her from harm.

Her trust in him, however, was neither blind nor limitless. Her boyfriend lied as easily as he breathed, and Hermione was certain Draco knew more about her past than he had owned up to and that they had met when he was supposedly "visiting" the boarding school she had attended. She also did not doubt that he was telling the truth when he described his teenage self as a vile little prick. Even now, he was just sadistic enough to tickle her until she was at risk of wetting herself.

"Stop!" she yelped. "Leo!"

Immediately, he left off tickling her. "Leo? Does that mean you yield?" Draco asked. He smiled, and her pulse picked up as he slid his hand up, caressing her ankle.

Hermione smiled back. So far as she was concerned, actions spoke louder than words. Unlike Cho, who apparently expected forgiveness on the basis of a glib note apologizing and attempting to explain her hurtful comments, her boyfriend seemed to have embraced the concept of atonement. For that reason, she was willing to reserve judgement and give Draco the clean slate that he wanted with her, and to allow a fuller trust between them to develop over time.

"Never," she said. "Leo is a suggestion. A nice, normal name that also honors your family's obsession with astronomy. And their equal obsession with tradition, I might add."

He shook his head. "Not a bad opening gambit, but my father will have a conniption if we dub his first grandchild a lion."

"Well, Serpens is out of the question!" Hermione told him, in no uncertain terms. "My family's tradition, since you haven't asked, is to use names that begin with the letter H. My father's name was Harold and my mother was Helen."

Malcolm looked vaguely horrified. "I should have known," he muttered to himself. "You want to name the baby Harry, don't you?"

"Henry, actually, with Harry as a nickname," she clarified. "I'm glad we're on the same page."

"No, no, no, no," Draco repeated. Hermione was amused to see he was actually clutching his pale blond hair in distress. This would make it much easier to get his eventual agreement to name their son Hugo, her real first choice.

"Hyperion," he suggested in desperation. "It's one of the moons of Saturn. Or Hercules."

"You must be joking," she scoffed.

"Shall we agree to disagree for now?" he inquired. "Your proposal has made me feel a bit ill."

"You are so dramatic," Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "But that's fine, we can table this discussion for later, until after the scan," she agreed, taking pity on him. Malcolm was looking unusually pale, even for him. And perhaps she was carrying a girl, and they would find it easier to agree on a name for a daughter. Or they could leave it until after the baby was born, because she was fairly sure her ever-protective boyfriend would agree to whatever she wanted after watching her go through labor.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

March 4, 2004

Theo watched Cho's stilted movements as she removed juice, bread and fruit from the refrigerator, and wished he could take the day off from work. She was scheduled for an overnight hospital shift, and he worried about what she would do all day by herself if she couldn't sleep.

"Are you alright?" he asked, fearing her answer.

"Just peachy," she snapped. "I had another nightmare, if you couldn't tell by the screaming."

Cho slammed the juice onto the countertop. Cautiously, Theo took it and poured glasses for both of them.

"If some wizard had to go and steal my memories and my magic, I wish he wouldn't have botched the job. He could have had *those* memories with my thanks."

From her repressed shiver and dead eyes, Theo knew she was referring to the memories of her assault, which played out on a near-nightly basis in her dreams. He looked down at his orange juice, feeling wretched. "I'm sorry," he offered inadequately.

"Are you really?" she asked dully. "Even if you are, you can't possibly understand. And the only people who know what I'm going through aren't speaking to me anymore!" Cho cried.

"Katie and Justin are speaking to you," he noted, wanting to calm her. "You had brunch with them on Sunday."

"I know," Cho sniffled, "but I can't talk to them about anything for fear of insulting them. And Hermione still is furious at me. I doubt she'll ever forgive me, especially with Malfoy dripping poison in her ears. If only there was some way I could get around his curse . . ."

From the way she spat Draco's surname, Theo had no doubt she now considered the blond wizard to be her enemy, which was another worry to add to his ever-growing list. His wife was depressed over the loss of magic as well as her memories, and he was too boxed in by laws and lies to comfort her with any effectiveness.

He hadn't even disabused Cho of the notion that she had lost her ability to do magic along with her memories, fearing it would upset her delicate mental balance to be told that she still had magic, but legally was forbidden from remembering the spells that would allow her to use it. He also did not want to risk Azkaban by running afoul of the Wizengamot's decision that prohibited him from telling her she was a witch, even if Cho had worked that out quickly enough on her own.

Umbridge still was sitting on the petition regarding Cho's blood status. Despite unrelenting pressure from Theo's father - because Nott, Sr. was better-versed in intimidation - the

Undersecretary was sticking firmly to her position that any decision would have to wait until Cho produced a magical child. It was the height of hypocrisy, of course, when there were any number of pureblood witches who had given birth to Squibs or never had children, but Umbridge operated on the basis of vindictive bigotry rather than any sort of fairness or consistency.

Against these larger forces, Theo felt helpless. "Do you want to have lunch with me?" he asked. It was a small enough thing, but it would get Cho out of their flat for a bit.

She looked unconvinced, but at least she didn't refuse outright.

"We can meet in Charing Cross road and I can take you into the Alley," he wheedled. They had been back to Diagon Alley twice at Cho's request, and Theo thought it was something she enjoyed.

Cho hesitated, but then smiled. "Yes, if we can make some time for shopping after lunch. Maybe that bookstore that was closed when we were there on Valentine's Day?"

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In the dimly lit examination room, Hermione clung to Draco's hand as she shivered.

"Are you cold? Does anything hurt?" he whispered from his seat next to the examination table. The Muggle healer, currently preoccupied in fiddling with her machine, had said it would not hurt, but no Malfoy would ever trust a Muggle.

"The gel is just a bit cold." From Hermione's dilated pupils and well-chewed lower lip, he thought she was anxious rather than in pain, and she confirmed this for him. "I'm worried she'll find something wrong with the baby. Or that you'll be disappointed."

"Unlikely," he said with bracing confidence. "And I don't care if it's a boy or a girl, just so - "

"- long as it's healthy," Hermione finished for him.

He rubbed Granger's icy hand and made soothing noises as she ran through a litany of Muggle disorders that could turn up through an ultrasound scan. In reality, his only concern was that child be magical, since health would follow from that. The only birth defect he had ever heard of in a magical child was being a Squib.

They both fell silent when the ultrasound technician began running another of those stubby white wands over the smooth expanse of Hermione's rounded belly, fully exposed for the scan with her shirt flipped up and her yoga pants pushed low on her hips. As always, Draco felt a twinge of possessive pride at seeing her so obviously pregnant with *his* child.

Then his attention was wholly captivated by image on the screen. It was grainy, it was black and white, but it was undoubtedly a baby. With his chin and nose.

"Oh, Salazar," he breathed, overcome enough to use a wizarding oath. Hermione tore her eyes away from the screen long enough to give him an odd look, but that softened when he caught her gaze and smiled with the intense fondness that he reserved for her. Both of them

turned back to their baby, watching in rapt attention as the technician began taking a set of measurements.

"Why is his head so big?" Draco asked. "He looks like a little goblin."

"It's normal for the fetal head to be disproportionately large," Hermione said, laughing at his description of their baby despite her nervous tension. "He's too cute to be a goblin, even with your pointy chin."

"Does everything look fine?" he asked the technician, hoping for an answer to allay Hermione's anxiety.

"I just take the measurements," the woman answered in an officious tone. "The doctor will meet with you to go over results. It's clinic policy."

Draco didn't like that answer, and he could tell Hermione didn't either. Touching his hand to his wand in his pocket, he focused on the incantation for a minor truth-telling hex.

The technician began speaking, merrily violating the clinic's policy as she related what part of the baby's body she was viewing, what she was measuring for, what the normal size range was for that body part, and whether the measurement fell within that range. Personally, Draco thought it was too much information - he cared only that everything was normal and in proportion - but Hermione drank it up like a sponge.

He listened indulgently as she asked any number of questions, all of which the technician was compelled to answer. Draco could tell Hermione was reassured, as her hand warmed in his and her posture relaxed. Now, she was fully enjoying the first glimpse of their baby, even if it was monochrome and two-dimensional.

Draco had just one question he cared to get the answer to. "Is it a boy or a girl?" he interrupted the Muggle in the middle of a long-winded response.

Hermione looked up expectantly, as the technician moved that stubby white wand along her abdomen, to focus the image and answer his question. "Is that little Harry or little Rosalind?" she asked softly in a teasing tone.

"You mean baby Cygnus for a boy, don't you?" he teased back. After further discussion, they had been able to agree on a name for a little girl, one that nodded to the Shakespearean origins of Hermione's name. They each were championing a boy's name and were finding it hard to reach middle ground, but the baby's surname was proving to be the greatest headache for Draco.

Hermione wanted to *hyphenate*, of all nonsense, and he simply couldn't allow it. It wasn't that he was a chauvinistic dinosaur with an overly inflated sense of his family's importance, as she'd claimed during one of their rows on the subject. Or, at least, it wasn't just that. If a child with the last name of Foy who shared a first or middle name with a star or constellation popped up on the Hogwarts scroll, McGonagall would correctly assume the child was an illegitimate Malfoy. Other than mentally relegating the brat to Slytherin, the headmistress

would do nothing. But if that same child appeared on the scroll as a Granger-Foy, the old cat would hunt him down and hang him from the battlements of Hogwarts by his bollocks.

Some of his inner thought process must have shown on his face, because Hermione squeezed his hand. "Don't worry about the names so much. Agree to disagree, alright?"

The technician cleared her throat to get their attention. Draco had found it difficult to tell what they were looking at throughout the scan, but this one was pretty obvious. A gleeful grin split his face.

"It's a boy," the woman stated, unnecessarily.

"Yes," Draco exulted. "My son, the next Malfoy heir."

His triumph lasted only until he looked down at Hermione's angry eyes and furious expression.

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Cho was sitting in an overstuffed chair at Flourish and Blotts, skimming through a small stack of books about the Second Wizarding War in growing frustration.

Other than a self-aggrandizing personal account of the Battle of Hogwarts entitled *I, Cormac*, the books uniformly focused on the saintly pureblood Harry Potter and his defeat of the half-Muggle Voldemort. She eyed the jacket photo of the egotistical Cormac with disfavor and huffed a sigh. Based on all the other written accounts, one would think Harry acted alone, without the support or guidance of anyone except Albus Dumbledore.

Theo peeked around the corner from the next aisle over, where he supposedly was engrossed in a legal text. Cho strongly suspected, however, that he was keeping a discreet eye on her.

"Everything alright?" her husband asked.

"The quality of the publications isn't really up to snuff," she complained.

"That's what happens with a relatively small, insular population," Theo said with an air of apologetic excuse. "What are you looking for?"

"Facts rather than hagiography," Cho said. "A reasonably clear and unbiased account of major contemporary events."

"Try this," her husband suggested after a moment of thought, reaching for a thick tome shelved with medieval histories. "It's dry as dust, but it is factual."

"*Hogwarts: A History*, by Bathilda Bagshot and Cuthbert Binns." Cho read the title page aloud. "How is this useful? Or contemporary?"

"Well, Potter was still at school for all but the last year of the war, and the Final Battle was fought on school grounds, so this book provides the most unbiased, firsthand account I've read," Theo replied. "Though you need to wade through a good deal of minutiae to get to it."

Cho, as she began flipping through the thick book, soon realized the truth of that. For every academic year dating back centuries, the book listed the students in each incoming class, prefects and Head Boy and Head Girl for every year, and even scores and lists of players from inter-House Quidditch matches, whatever that was.

She gave the embossed cover, with its stylized H, a second glance. "Hermione has this as a charm on her bracelet. Do you know what that means?"

"That Draco has a twisted sense of humor?" Theo deflected.

Cho frowned at the non-answer and turned her attention back to the book, disappointed to find that there was no index. "That kind of organization would be too much to hope for," she muttered half to herself.

"It is chronological, at least," Theo consoled.

With that guidance, Cho turned almost to the end and, after a few pages of flipping, struck gold with a paragraph on the formation of Dumbledore's Army and its now-familiar list of members. She looked up at Theo with a clear plea in her eyes. "I want to purchase this, please." She had sufficient pounds in her purse and a credit card for emergencies, but no wizarding currency.

"Please," she repeated as he hesitated, a worried furrow on his forehead.

"You understand it has to be for your eyes alone," Theo said. "You can't share this with Hermione or Katie or anyone else."

"I understand," Cho confirmed in a soft voice.

She hoped, as she followed Theo to the cash register, that he wouldn't be too angry when he discovered that her understanding was not the same as her agreement.

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"You may want to let up on the martinis," Daphne Greengrass suggested to her younger sister, "or at least let me cast a Sobriety Charm. You look a mess."

Defiantly, Astoria took a large sip of her third drink. She was having a liquid lunch today, while Daphne picked at a grilled chicken salad. She frowned in disapproval at Astoria's disheveled appearance. Not only was her sister fast on her way to being publicly inebriated, but her eyes were red and ringed with runny mascara and she also was wearing a dress that looked like a sack.

"I must confess," the blonde witch continued, "it escapes me why you're so upset by Draco's indiscretions when you've cheated on him for years. Pot, kettle, don't you think?"

Astoria sneered at her older sister. "It's not just cheating. He's gotten some other witch pregnant."

"Oh. Do you know who?" Daphne asked, wondering if Tori appreciated how precarious her position was. In slightly more than two months, Draco would be able to dissolve his marriage contract if he chose, just as Theo had done to her.

"I have the list of witches who were under consideration, but I don't know who Lucius and Draco picked." With a watery, dramatic sigh, Astoria plucked the parchment from her designer handbag. "If I find out, I'll make her sorry."

"You are fortunate," Daphne told her after a brief perusal. She still couldn't quite understand why Astoria was taking this as a personal betrayal - this was clearly a list of contacts for a potential surrogacy contract, not a list of Draco's mistresses - but her sister *was* rather stupid. "None of the pureblood witches on this list would consent to marry into the Malfoy family to take your place."

"Fortunate?" Astoria screeched. "My husband has spent the last months in some other woman's bed! My horrid in-laws are expecting me to raise Draco's illegitimate brat and pass it off as my own!"

She plucked at her dress in distress. "Narcissa ordered me to wear this fashion atrocity in public because I'm supposedly already a few months along. And I'm going to be under house arrest - pardon me, 'on bed rest' - for the entire summer so the Malfoys can fool everyone into thinking I gave birth to Draco's baby, instead of some mixed-blood tart!"

"*Fortunate*, Tori," her sister repeated, with greater emphasis. "Despite your various and sundry infidelities and general brainlessness, Draco isn't going to set you aside."

Astoria smiled cruelly, a drunken gleam of malice in her eyes. "Like Theo did to you. Imagine divorcing a pureblood witch and then marrying a Mudblood!" She shuddered in dismay. "I would *Avada* myself if that happened to me!"

"Well, we can always hope," Daphne muttered. Their parents had spoilt Astoria dreadfully, and here was the result. Her little sister had married into the wealthiest family in wizarding Britain. Draco was handsome and young and had treated Tori quite well until he discovered her cheating; even after that discovery, her only punishment was to be ignored. And now Astoria would get the baby she wanted without having to gain weight or get stretch marks, but she still was complaining and fulminating against the unknown mother. With a curled lip, Daphne thought that the Malfoys could do so much better.

"Ooooh, look!" Astoria squealed, pointing out the café's window with excitement. "It's your ex-husband and his filthy new wife!"

Daphne glanced out the window and there was Theo, carrying a shopping bag from the bookstore and walking hand-in-hand with Cho Chang. Daphne had never spoken with her at Hogwarts, but easily recognized the pretty Ravenclaw who had always been crying over her dead Hufflepuff boyfriend.

"She wasn't so fat back at school," Astoria noted cattily.

Daphne rolled her eyes at her sister's stupidity. "She's expecting a baby at the end of the summer. Didn't you read about the Wizengamot's decision? It allows her to receive treatment at St. Mungo's."

"Was it in *Witch Weekly*?" Tori asked.

"No," Daphne shook her head in disgust at such ignorance. "Just the *Prophet*."

"Then I wouldn't have read it." Astoria smiled and twisted the knife. "So Nott's baby will be almost the same age as Draco's. Too bad you aren't the mother - it might have made the inevitable play dates almost tolerable."

In that moment, Daphne made a decision. She would never actively harm her younger sister or sabotage her marriage, but she would give Astoria the tools for her own self-destruction. And if Draco ultimately set her aside . . . well, there was another Greengrass sister who was eminently more suitable to be his wife and raise his motherless child.

"Do you really want to find out who the mother of Draco's baby is?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," Tori hissed, a nasty look on her face.

"You know he won't be happy if you harm her. Or his unborn child," Daphne warned.

"I don't care!" Astoria said petulantly. "And I'll find some way to make her ugly that doesn't hurt the baby."

"Well, then, the first thing we need to do is figure out if any of the witches on this list are pregnant," Daphne said.

The two sisters put their heads together, one blonde and one dark, and began to plot.

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One of the Malfoys' eagle owls flew into the dining room as Narcissa and Lucius were finishing a light luncheon.

"Oh, that's Draco's familiar!" Narcissa exclaimed. "Have you brought us good news?" she asked the bird, casting a quick silencing charm just in case Astoria was lurking nearby instead of at lunch with her sister.

The well-trained owl fluttered over to her first, offering the letter tied to its right leg. It then approached Lucius by walking awkwardly on its talons across the polished table. The wizard took the letter tied to the bird's left leg and offered it a piece of chicken, which disappeared with a quick gulp and soft hoot.

Narcissa skimmed the short note from her son, advising her that the appointment had gone well and the Muggles had confirmed the baby was a healthy boy. Turning her attention to the enclosed photo, she made a delighted noise. "He is *adorable*! Look at him sucking his thumb - what a clever little mite. And I can see that he has Draco's chin!"

She made a small *moue* of regret. "What a pity that these Muggle pictures don't move. Though it is rather impressive that they can capture these images from inside the mother's body."

Across the table, her husband was paying her no heed, instead chortling to himself as he looked at his own picture of the baby. "The plumbing looks to be in good order," he commented, grinning.

Narcissa narrowed her eyes. "Let me see that!" she commanded, appropriating the photo. Her blue eyes widened and she bit back a smirk, settling for an offended sniff. Lucius had gotten a photo that left no doubt as to the baby's gender. "What is it with boys and their wands? The picture Draco sent me is much more tasteful."

"Our son knows how to play to his audience," Lucius stated dryly.

The tip of Narcissa's polished fingernail rested briefly on the edge of the black and white photo of her precious grandson, above where the mother's name had been printed and partially torn away, leaving only a few letters. "As to that . . . I'm concerned about Draco. In pretending to care about the Granger girl, he may have grown unsuitably fond of her."

"I wouldn't fret, Cissy. Let the boy play with his toy while he can," Lucius said, maddeningly calm.

"I fear that she's become more than a toy. Draco told me himself that he considers them to be in a real relationship," she related.

"Well, of course they're in a real relationship - an intimate one, at that," Lucius said, clearly not perceiving the problem. He held up one of the pictures Draco had sent. "Here's the proof."

"He told me he considers what he has with that Muggleborn chit to be more real than what he had with his wife," Narcissa told her husband. "I don't want to see him hurt."

"Well, Astoria has been something of a disappointment," he shrugged. "As for Miss Granger, he and I spoke about her, and Draco's sentiments were exactly what I would expect."

From her husband's smirk, Narcissa surmised that conversation had been a salacious one. That was somewhat reassuring, though a nagging voice reminded her Draco was a consummate actor. "If you say so, darling," she said, hiding her doubts.

"She'll be gone from his life soon enough," Lucius counseled. "Let him have his fun."

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Lust and anger made for a very potent combination, Hermione realized, as she looked down beneath hooded eyelids at Draco's sleek blond head between her thighs. "Gods, yes," she hissed in pleasure at the sensation of two skilled fingers corkscrewing inside her while his tongue did something positively illicit.

She tightened her fingers in his hair and pulled, none too gently, relishing his muffled growl in protest. It was not, perhaps, very nice of her, but nice was the furthest thing from her mind

at the moment. The simmering resentment Hermione had felt towards her boyfriend during the early days of their relationship had flared up with a vengeance with Draco's gloating proclamation about *his* heir.

She was the one carrying the baby, dealing with morning sickness, migraines, hormonal swings and massive changes to her body, not to mention the one who had to go through labor, but Hermione never would be so presumptuous as to claim *their* son as hers alone. After his glib reassurances to her that he would be equally happy with a girl, Draco's air of naked triumph at the confirmation they were having a boy struck Hermione as bad faith.

Luckily for him, Draco was intelligent enough to appreciate his misstep and had immediately apologized for the presumptuous slip of the tongue. He also had promised, as soon as they were out of the technician's earshot, make-up sex that would leave Hermione feeling as "fucking excellent" as he did. So far, the obnoxious prat was making good on his word.

"More," she demanded. "Deeper." She groaned as he added a third finger, intensifying her pleasure, and literally wailed when he sent her careening over the edge moments later with a final twist of his tongue and graze of his teeth where she was the most sensitive.

Hermione sprawled on the bed, breathing hard. Malcolm stood up to his full height and stretched, swiping a negligent hand across his face. "Feeling better?" he grinned. "Am I forgiven?"

She narrowed her eyes, not an easy feat when she was feeling practically boneless from satisfaction. "Not yet," she responded to both questions.

"I hoped you would say that." Her boyfriend's grin broadened and turned feral, and then he was on her, working his way up from her belly button with butterfly kisses and little licks and nips. When he reached her lips, she tangled her fingers in his hair again and captured his mouth in a searing kiss that still, on her part, involved teeth as well as tongue. Hermione's nails were too blunt and clipped to do much damage, but she still raked them along Draco's shoulders and chest as he sucked at the pulse point in her neck, leaving faint pink tracks in her wake.

Hermione suppressed a surprised gasp when he abruptly disengaged and rolled her onto her stomach. Pulling her arms behind her back, he grabbed her wrists loosely in one hand.

"May I?" he asked in a dark whisper.

With her mouth dry in anticipation, she nodded. Swiftly, he snatched his discarded tie from the bedroom floor and looped the silk around her arms from her elbows to her wrists before knotting it securely. Hermione felt her core clench with anticipation. Right now, she wanted it rough and he seemed eager to oblige.

Draco surprised her again when he lifted up under her armpits, pulling her off the bed. He guided her over to the large standing mirror that occupied a corner of their bedroom. "On your knees," he directed, supporting her as she knelt in front of the mirror.

Hermione craned her head around to look him in the eyes. "Just so you know, I'm still angry enough that I'd be tempted to bite you," she warned.

"I'd expect nothing less, hellcat." Her boyfriend shrugged off his already unbuttoned shirt and toed off his shoes. "Luckily for me, I wasn't looking to get sucked off. I'd rather fuck you until you forget your own name, let alone why I angered you."

Draco smirked as her gaze was drawn downward, watching him as he unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned and unzipped his trousers. Unconsciously, Hermione licked her lips as he shoved his trousers and boxers unceremoniously to the floor and stepped out of them, towards her. He knelt behind her, graceful as a cat, and positioned himself so she could feel the broad head of his rigid cock at her entrance. She trembled in her eagerness, waiting and wanting to take him deep inside her body.

Instead of the expected hard thrust of his hips to join them fully, Draco leaned forward. "Do you believe in magic?" he asked, low and compelling against the shell of her ear.

"What?" The *non sequitur* was bizarre enough to snap her attention off baser matters. "No, magic doesn't exist."

"Are you positive of that, Hermione?" her boyfriend purred, with the inborn surety that always put her on the defensive.

"Of course," she said, with an absolute certainty she was far from feeling.

"And here I thought you knew everything," Draco shook his head in mock disappointment. "What would you give me if I could prove magic exists?"

"I hope you aren't asking for my firstborn child, Rumpelstiltskin," she laughed.

"No, I already have enough of a claim to him," Draco smiled slowly. "How about you give me naming rights, if I can prove to you that magic is real? If I can't prove it to your satisfaction before he's born, you get to choose."

"What makes you so certain magic exists?" Hermione demanded, taking the offensive.

"Do you agree to my terms?" he demanded in return.

Hermione nodded slowly. It was such an absurd offer for him to make. "Yes, Draco. I agree." She startled at a slight jolt where his hand was resting on her hip, and where her hand was touching his leg.

"Good." Even though he was kneeling behind her, she could see the amused glint in his silver eyes reflected in the mirror over her shoulder. "Surely you've read about magical mirrors, Little Miss Know-It-All."

"Only in fairy tales," she insisted.

"Really?" A blond eyebrow rose in surprise. "Have you heard of the Mirror of Erised?"

Hermione crinkled her brow as something elusive tugged at the corner of her memory. "I can't remember," she admitted. "You're really ruining the mood!" she added in complaint, rocking her hips against him.

"Shhh - this is important," Draco shushed her and held her wriggling hips still. "Even more important than shagging you senseless."

She smiled despite her mounting frustration, sexual and otherwise. "I never thought you would prioritize fairy tales about some magical mirror over sex."

"It's not a fairy tale, Hermione. The Mirror of Erised shows you what you desire above all else." For once, there was no mocking undertone to Draco's voice - he seemed entirely serious.

"Look in the mirror," he requested, low and compelling. She did, and saw the reflection of her naked body, intimately joined with Draco's. With pregnancy, her breasts were larger and made more prominent by her arms being tied behind her back. Her belly was nicely rounded. Draco rubbed it slowly, almost reverently, the paleness of his hand contrasting with the honey undertones of her skin.

"*This* is what I desire above all else," Draco told her. "You, pregnant with our son, willingly accepting me as your lover. That I can look into this mirror and see that as reality . . . how could I not believe in the power of magic?"

The intensity shining in those grey eyes was almost frightening. Hermione had to lighten the mood. "Did I have to be tied up? Is that part of what you desire most?" she joked, tipping her head back to look at him.

He smirked. "No, but it adds a certain piquancy to the image. Besides, I'm a firm believer in self-preservation." Draco bent his head to nuzzle and nip at her neck, and Hermione pressed back against him in pleasure.

"Is that your proof that magic exists?" she asked lightly. "Because, if so, you'd better get accustomed to Harry Granger-Foy."

"No, I'm easing you into it. I'll prove it to you before Cyg's born." But he wasn't yet done with their odd discussion about magical mirrors.

"If you looked in the Mirror of Erised, what would you see?" Draco asked.

Hermione stared blankly at the perfectly ordinary mirror in front of them and thought about her answer. Herself, with all her memories restored? But that was looking backwards, not forwards, and she had always been goal-oriented.

She smiled, playing along. "I see myself, years in the future, accepting a Nobel Prize for a ground-breaking discovery in my field."

"That's it?" her boyfriend sounded slightly disappointed.

Hermione smirked. "Oh, you're there, too," she reassured him. "Standing in the front row, applauding, and looking very distinguished. With our children."

"Children?" he repeated, eyes wide but clearly pleased.

"Children," she confirmed with a smile. "Two boys, two girls, all tall and fair-haired."

Draco swooped in and kissed her neck. "I thought your greatest desire would be to get your memories back," he said.

"No, as much as I want that, I'd rather look to the future than dwell in the past. I also wouldn't mind enjoying the present," Hermione added, with a pointed nudge back against him.

His arms tightened in their embrace around her. "That," he murmured huskily, "is among the many reasons why I love you."

The Fairy Godmother

March 14, 2004

"You boys will be good while I'm gone, won't you?" Angelina asked, lifting Freddy for a hug.

"You look pretty, Mummy," her little boy said.

"You *do* look pretty," George echoed, with a devilish grin.

While pleased that her boys liked the sunset-pink Muggle sheath and matching bolero jacket, Angelina noticed they had not answered her question and refused to be diverted. "You *will* be good while I'm gone. Don't burn down the flat, George."

"I won't, love," her husband promised with a cheeky grin. "And if Freddy manages to pull that off despite his tender years, I promise to have everything fixed before you return. Give my regards to Katie and her Muggle, won't you?"

With a wave and a smile, Angelina left their flat, conveniently located above their shop in Diagon Alley. It would be a quick walk to and through the Leaky Cauldron, and then she would hail a taxi on Charing Cross Road to take her to the chapel.

The Alley was relatively quiet this early, though the brunch crowd was beginning to trickle in on this sunny Sunday morning. Wizarding London had been safe as houses since Kingsley had agreed to the devil's bargain of "repatriating" all Muggleborns, so Angelina certainly wasn't expecting an attack. When a spell hit her in the back, she lost precious seconds fumbling in her handbag for her wand. She cast a shield charm and whirled around, prepared to duel. But no one was there. A few witches sitting on a patio under magical warming lamps gave her odd looks. Breathing hard, Angelina scanned the street, but saw nothing unusual.

She kept her wand out and her shields up as she walked towards the pub, thinking furiously. From the slight tingling and pinkish light, Angelina knew she had been hit with a harmless antenatal diagnostic spell. That made an aggressive reporter the most likely culprit. With Fleur ready to pop any day now, Angelina could see either the *Prophet* or *Witch Weekly* running an article on the fecundity of Weasley wives. Those rags usually could not be bothered to check their facts, but she couldn't think of any other reason why someone would scan her with a spell to check if she were pregnant.

Shaking her head at Rita Skeeter and her ilk, and making a mental note to complain to the editor after the article was published, Angelina proceeded to Muggle London. As the godmother, it just wouldn't do for her to be late to the baptism.

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"So that's another one," Astoria said in disgust. Angelina Weasley was the third witch on the Malfoys' list to have come up pregnant, along with Fleur Weasley and Hannah Abbott

Longbottom. "Honestly, these half-bloods and Weasels breed like vermin." She tossed back half of her mimosa in annoyance.

"Drowning your sorrows, Tori?" Daphne asked with false sympathy, spearing a small bite of quiche. "Honestly, it's quite simple. If Draco went with someone on that list, Hannah is the only possibility. Fleur Weasley is due any day. As for Angelina - she's not even showing yet, and it would be hard to pass off her child as yours with the difference in skin tone."

Astoria nodded impatiently. Daphne had a tendency to treat her as though she were still a child, and a rather stupid one at that. "Even if you're Narcissa Malfoy, there's only so much glamour charms can do."

Daphne looked disapproving as Astoria took another healthy sip of her drink. "Why are you drinking so much?" her older sister asked. "You're supposed to be acting pregnant. And aren't wizards your usual vice of choice?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I've branched out to Muggles, and it isn't going so well," Astoria confessed casually. "There are all sorts of cultural cues that are hard to pick up on."

"Men are men," Daphne commented cynically. "It can't be that hard to persuade one to shag you."

"Oh, it's not that," Astoria trilled. "I wound up leaving the pub with two last night, so I'm a bit knackered."

"Muggles, plural - that's a bit low, even for you," her sister said, revolted.

Astoria reminded herself that Daphne, from childhood, had always been spiteful and jealous. Still, she was family, and could benefit from some sisterly advice. "If you want a baby, you have to sleep with a Muggle. That's what Marcus Flint told me," she advised.

"Oh, so Marcus now is a Healer as well as a potions salesman?" scoffed Daphne. "I can't believe you'd listen to him!"

"Flint has two children, which makes him twice as much of an expert as any other pureblood wizard I know," Astoria said.

Daphne did not bother to correct her younger sister's multiplication. "Tori, he's friends with Draco and works for the Malfoys. Don't you think he might be setting you up?"

"Maybe," Astoria said indifferently, "It doesn't matter, though. Draco's parents won't let him divorce me."

"Having sex with Muggles is like bestiality, Tori. Do you really think Lucius would do nothing if he knew there was a risk you'd try to pass off a half-blood as a Malfoy?"

"So long as it's the spare and not the heir, why would he care?" Astoria said dismissively. "I would try for a Muggleborn if I could, since there's less chance of a Squib, but they're hard to

find." And the nasty little one she *had* found was not interested, but no one needed to know about that humiliating rejection by a tattooed freak.

Daphne looked startled, and then thoughtful, but said nothing about Muggleborns. Instead, she carefully wiped her mouth. "So, have you given any thought as to how you'd like to confront Hannah?"

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Draco escorted Hermione up the marble steps of the church, his hand - partially protective, partially possessive - at the small of her back. He was careful to release her as soon as they reached the top, however. Hermione appreciated good manners, but she bridled when he coddled her or staked too obvious of a claim on her person.

They were among the first to arrive, and Katie greeted them with a warm smile just inside the entrance. She was wearing a navy dress with a red belt accenting her now-slim waist.

"You look lovely, Katie," Draco offered politely, kissing her cheek. "Nice earrings," he added.

"You picked them out, didn't you?" Flint's girlfriend grinned.

He grinned back. "I can neither confirm nor deny that statement, madam."

"I love that color on you," Katie complimented Hermione as the women hugged. Draco smiled. He liked that periwinkle shade on her, too. And the demure strand of pearls was a nice touch, if somewhat deceptive.

"Oh, he's getting so big," Hermione cooed at the baby.

"It's because he does nothing but eat," Katie explained with a laugh. "Would you like to hold your godson?" she asked Draco mischievously.

"Er, I'll defer to you," he recoiled, thinking about all the ways in which Flint's baby could defile his suit.

Katie took pity on him. "Why don't you go find Mark," she suggested, adjusting Peter on her hip. "I think he and Angie were meeting with Father Donovan to go over the details of the ceremony."

He happily fled the scene. Muffled voices were coming from the sacristy. Recognizing Flint's deep tones, Draco entered without knocking and was brought up short by a woman's screech. "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

His body was frozen, but Draco's eyes still could move, and they shifted to the tall black woman brandishing a wand.

"Two on one, is it?" she shrieked. "Just the kind of odds you Death Eater bastards like!"

"What the fuck, Johnson? What if you'd just cursed some Muggle?" Flint bellowed, using his wand to slam and lock the door.

She laughed, wildly. "Since when does a snake-worshipping scumbag like you care about Muggles? You disgusting pervert, taking advantage of a woman who's been Obliviated!"

Draco's eyes widened as he recognized Angelina Johnson, the Gryffindor Quidditch captain his sixth year whose best friend had been - and apparently, still was - her fellow Chaser, Katie Bell. Based on Astoria's gossiping, he knew that Johnson was a Weasley now, having married the one-eared prankster who owned the joke shop. His quick mind made the connection between the irate witch and Angie Weaver, Katie's "Muggle" friend. If his lips weren't frozen, he would have smirked - apparently, Slytherins weren't the only ones to use obvious aliases in the Muggle world.

"What're you on about?" Marcus protested. "I don't take advantage of Katie. And it wasn't my decision to Oblivate her. Take it up with the buggers at the Ministry if you don't like it." He had his wand up to defend himself but wasn't using it, much to Draco's surprise.

"You're still abusing her trust," Angelina insisted, her voice dripping with disgust. "She would never let you near her if she remembered who you are, Flint. Katie loathes Death Eaters. Your lot murdered her parents!"

"Believe me, she had and has no problem letting me get close to her," Flint growled. "Katie's happy with me."

"Why should I believe you, arsehole?" Angelina shot back, angry enough that her wand was emitting red sparks. "Everyone knows that snakes like you will always slither out of telling the truth."

Draco's eyes darted back and forth between the two antagonists, hoping his petrification would wear off before they started throwing hexes.

"C'mon, Johnson. I know Gryffindors are known for brawn rather than brains, but surely you can count to nine?" For now, Flint was staying calm, but Draco knew the vein throbbing in his friend's forehead was a dangerous sign.

Angelina looked uncertain at the question, so Marcus spelled it out for her. "Isabelle was born on September 4, 1999, and she was almost two weeks late. Katie got Obliviated at the end of February 1999."

"She was pregnant then?" the witch asked, incredulous.

Flint slowly clapped his hands. "Congratulations, Johnson. Got it in one."

"How did that happen?" she blurted out.

"Well, when a wizard and a witch like each other . . . " Flint began, sarcastically. "Aren't you a Weasley by marriage? You really should know how babies are made."

Draco wished Flint would lift the body bind curse on him so that he could contribute to the Weasel-baiting, not to mention the impending duel. Two on one did give them better odds.

"That doesn't change the fact that you lie to her every day," Angelina declared defiantly. "Katie doesn't even know that you're married to someone else. Do you really think she'd stay with you if she knew the truth, that she's nothing more than your dirty little secret?"

"Don't call her that," Marcus warned. "Have you thought this through, you self-righteous bitch? Do you really think Katie would be better off knowing that I can't marry her, no matter how much I want to, because I'm trapped in a magically binding marriage?" he countered. "Do you think she wants to remember that her parents were murdered because she's a Muggleborn witch?"

"Katie deserves to know the truth," Angelina spat.

"Katie was a wreck back when she knew the truth - she couldn't stop blaming herself about her parents." Flint's voice was grim. "If you only knew how many times I held her when she woke up crying She's better off not remembering."

"And you're better off, too, if she can't remember you're a lying, cheating snake. What a coincidence, you self-serving piece of shite," Angelina said scathingly.

If Draco hadn't been paralyzed, he would have hexed the witch twice over by now. Flint's self-control truly was remarkable.

"If you weren't Peter's godmother . . . " Marcus threatened.

"But I am," Angelina said smugly. "You won't dare to lay a finger on me. I'm going to tell Katie the truth and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

Then it clicked for Draco. Even Muggles knew enough to treat a godmother with utmost courtesy. As their fairy tales related, albeit in a distorted way, any harm or insult to a godmother could result in the infant or his entire house being cursed. As a Gryffindor, Angelina was hot-headed enough to do just that, and her status as a godmother would amplify any curse she cast into something truly malignant.

Flint continued in a more mollifying manner. "Look, Johnson, I can't stop you if you decide to break Umbitch's laws."

Draco blinked frantically, trying to convey to Flint that Angelina was breaking those laws now, by spending so much time with Katie in the Muggle world. The threat of Azkaban really could be conducive to negotiations, in his experience.

"But please, don't tell Katie anything today," Marcus begged, shoulders slumped in defeat. "This is a special occasion for our family - don't ruin it. We'll tell her tomorrow, together, so she might actually believe us and not think we're both mental."

If he could move, Draco would have torn at his hair with frustration. He had thought that Flint was much more intelligent than Crabbe or Goyle, yet here he was, allowing himself to be played by this Gryffindor hussy. If Marcus went along with Angelina's mad plan, he would be just as culpable as she. And if they told Katie that she was a witch who had been Obliviated, how long before the other shoe dropped with Hermione?

Angelina looked suspicious. "What's to stop you from hexing me as soon as I turn my back?"

"I'll take a wizarding oath that neither I nor my parents will lift our wands against you," Marcus promised.

"What about pretty boy, here?" Angelina glared at Draco.

"He'll do the same," Flint guaranteed. "Can you lift the Body Bind enough for him to speak?"

Too quick for Draco to react, Angelina lifted the curse and replaced it with an *Incarcerous*. Immediately, he began testing it, trying to loosen the ropes with wandless magic.

"Marcus, are you insane?" he hissed, angry and incredulous.

His so-called friend pointed his wand at him, his eyes as flinty as his name. "I am deadly serious, Malfoy. I will *not* risk any harm to my son. You will *not* walk out of this room without agreeing to Johnson's terms."

Draco's sense of betrayal shifted to understanding, though his face maintained his outraged mask. Nott would handle the Weasley bitch. "I will do it, but I am *not* happy with you, Flint. Do *not* expect me to forgive you."

He shifted his cold grey eyes to Angelina. "In exchange for my oath, I want one from you. For the next day, you will not violate Umbridge's decrees in your interactions with any Muggleborn witch or wizard."

"Yeah, and you have to promise you won't tell anyone else about Katie and me. Or Draco and Granger," Flint added.

Angelina looked disgusted. "Hermione, too? You're both despicable."

"Hold out your wand," she ordered Flint after a moment's thought. "Do you, Marcus Flint, swear upon your magic that neither you, your parents, nor any other witch or wizard acting at your behest will lift wand or hand against me?"

Draco mentally swore as the Gryffindor closed the loophole he and Flint had been relying upon. She was more cunning than they'd given her credit for.

"I swear it," Flint grunted, touching his wand tip to hers.

Angelina turned to Draco. "Have you loosened the bonds enough to reach your wand?" she asked with cold amusement.

"I have," he glared, not appreciating her sense of humor. She swiftly repeated the wizarding oath with him, before touching their wands again with her promise to obey Umbridge's decrees and keep silent about Katie and Hermione - for one more day only.

With a curt nod, Angelina took her leave. "I'll see you both in the chapel. Let's put on a good show for Katie, yeah?" She walked away without waiting for their response.

As soon as the sacristy door closed behind her, Flint was babbling an apology. "Drake, I'm sorry. I didn't think she was smart enough to pick up that we could get Nott to take care of her."

"You should consider yourself fortunate that she left one loophole still open," Draco said icily. Flint was going to be in his bad books for quite some time.

Marcus looked puzzled, but not for long.

"Mipsy," Draco called, clapping his hands. His elf appeared with a pop, bowing low.

"How can Mipsy helps Master Draco?" she inquired.

"There's a witch who wants to take Miss Hermione and the baby away from us," he explained in a grave voice.

Mipsy twisted her ears in distress. "No, no!" she squeaked in protest. "Mipsy will be stopping the bad witch!"

"Yes, you will," Draco smiled in approval. "And here's how you'll do it."

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Hermione sat in a pew, hands folded as she listened to the baptismal service with half an ear while trying to analyze the undercurrents swirling in the chapel.

Those undercurrents seemed to be emanating from the baptismal party. Katie's friend Angie, who seemed perfectly pleasant when introduced to Hermione, was flanked by Mark and Draco in a manner that suggested they believed she might attempt to kidnap the baby at the first opportunity. Angie, in return, was giving both men a basilisk stare. If looks could kill, Peter's father and godfather would be in their death throes. Or maybe, Hermione mused, they would merely be petrified, given how carefully they were avoiding the godmother's angry gaze.

A shaft of sunlight from the leaded glass windows shone onto Draco's platinum hair and provided a happy distraction from Hermione's thoughts about giant snakes with deadly yellow eyes. The sun created a halo effect, giving her boyfriend an angelic look. The illusion disappeared when he caught her staring and winked, adding a wicked little grin for her benefit.

She raised an eyebrow and gave a pointed look towards the priest, who now was directing questions to the godparents. The Catholic baptismal rite was a bit different than the Anglican ceremony she was familiar with, fundamentally the same but more lyrical in its phrasing. Draco gave the correct responses as to his belief in God, Jesus and the saints, though Hermione personally doubted that he believed in anything other than himself. Mark and Katie had selected him as a godparent for social cachet, not spiritual guidance.

"Do you reject the glamour of evil and refuse to be mastered by sin?" the priest intoned.

"I do," Angie emphasized, staring daggers at Draco.

"I do," he echoed glibly. Hermione felt a sudden chill at the certainty he was lying through his teeth. She winced at the stabbing memory of a crowded bookshop and a dowdy woman with rusty-red hair hissing that all the Malfoys were evil as a younger Draco sauntered away with his cane-wielding sociopath of a father.

She must have made some noise, since Cho's head swiveled in her direction from a pew across the aisle. In the face of her concerned sympathy, Hermione suddenly felt like crying, and damned her silly pregnancy hormones.

A soft, fluttering sensation in her belly, one that still struck her as miraculous even after feeling it these past few weeks, helped calm her. "It will be fine," she whispered in reassurance to the baby inside her and to her own self, placing a comforting hand on her belly. "It all will be fine in the end."

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At the reception following the baptism, Angelina was counting the minutes until she could politely make her escape. And escape is what it would be, with four Death Eaters and Lucretia Flint all watching her with beady eyes. She had known she was outnumbered in the sacristy and had done her best to balance her safety, and that of her unborn child, against helping Katie.

Tomorrow, she promised herself grimly, she and the Order would return in force. However, Kingsley would not be leading them if Angelina had any say. Shackbolt had seen the baptismal application and had to have known he was sending her into a veritable snake pit, but he had not warned her. In fact, thinking back to the last Order meeting, it had seemed as though the Minister thought he was privy to a very amusing secret.

The oath she had made Malfoy and the younger Flint undertake should keep her safe today, unless and until they found a loophole. There was a risk they might use the Imperius curse to force a Muggle to come after her, but she didn't think they would risk life in Azkaban. If Seamus's experience was a guide, and she was pretty sure it was, the Death Eaters would want to make her forget.

Angelina was sticking close to Hermione, convinced Malfoy would not run the risk of having her hit by a harmful spell. Hermione's memories also seemed closer to the surface than Katie's, which forced the evil Ferret to be much more circumspect. The downside was that Angelina was spending much of the reception in Malfoy's noxious presence, forced to keep a neutral expression while he pretended to dote on Hermione.

When Malfoy had "introduced" her to Hermione, Angelina had found it hard to hide her horrified reaction to the other woman's obvious pregnancy. It was no consolation that Hermione seemed happy and content, full of plans for juggling the baby and her doctoral studies. Knowing how ambitious and responsible Hermione was, Angelina would stake her wand that there had been a contraceptive failure - and not an accidental one. It made her even more furious at the blond wizard so courteously fetching them canapés and beverages.

"Would you like a glass of punch, Angie?" Malfoy offered with a smirk. "It's not spiked."

Since he had a second glass for Hermione, and was giving her first choice, he might be telling the truth. Still, better safe than sorry. "I'll fetch something a bit less sweet."

"Suit yourself," the blond shrugged, giving one drink to Hermione and sipping from the second.

Angelina took a ginger ale from a passing waiter and drank it fast, hoping it would settle her stomach. Watching Malfoy play at being the perfect boyfriend on top of morning sickness and anxiety about being ambushed by Death Eaters was a nauseating combination. She took a few deep breaths, in through her nose and out through her mouth, hoping it would help. It didn't - she still felt ill, though dizziness was fast replacing nausea.

"Angie, are you okay?" Hermione called, as if from a great distance.

Angelina opened her mouth to reply and pitched forward into the other woman. She tried to remove Malfoy's steadying hands from her upper arms, to no avail. "Geroff me," she slurred.

"Here, just sit down and put your head between your knees," Hermione suggested. "Will you get Cho?" she asked Malfoy.

"She's right here," he replied.

A petite, familiar-looking Asian woman peered into Angelina's eyes and held her wrist, taking her pulse. "What's wrong?" she asked with professional concern.

"We were talking and she just collapsed," Hermione said.

Angelina tried to speak, but her tongue felt too thick to form intelligible words. The best she could manage was to roll her eyes in Malfoy's direction.

Apparently, Cho understood. "What did you do to her?" she hissed at the blond in an undertone, too low for Hermione to hear.

Malfoy widened his eyes in mock innocence. "I did nothing. Angie obviously drank a bit too much. I'm sure she'll feel better in the morning and won't even remember this embarrassing little incident."

That was the last thing Angelina heard before she passed out.

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Back at the Flint's comfortable house, Katie and Hermione had kicked off their heels and were seated around the kitchen table, sorting through Peter's presents. Peter himself was down for a nap, while Mark and Malcolm had agreed to mind Isabelle, which involved taking her out for ice cream.

"Thanks for helping out with this," Katie said with sincerity. "It's not like Angie to flake out like this, or to drink like that." Still, if a tipsy godmother was all that had gone wrong at the christening, with her horrid in-laws in attendance and an undefinable sort of tension in the air, she was not going to complain.

"It's no trouble," Hermione reassured her, efficiently writing down each gift and the giver in a small notebook for Katie's thank you notes.

Katie reached for the next present. "This one is from Cho and Theo."

She pulled the first present from the gift bag and unwrapped it. "A silver cup with serpent-shaped handles. And the snakes have emerald eyes," Katie reported, stifling a giggle.

"Always with the snakes," Hermione muttered. "It looks like something the Borgias would give their enemies to drink out of."

Katie giggled. "Yeah, Peter's not going to be using that thing as a sippy cup." She dug deeper in the bag, finding some classic children's books. "I suspect these are Cho's contribution."

Hermione nodded and made a note of the titles.

"That's strange," Katie said, crinkling her forehead as she removed a final, wrapped package from the gift bag. "It's for you."

"Not that strange," Hermione replied. "Cho knows I'm still not speaking to her, and she knows you would be a good intermediary."

Katie just smiled. She had been attempting to effect a reconciliation, because she hated seeing her friends at odds.

"Let's see what she sent me," Hermione sighed, curiosity overcoming any lingering anger towards Cho. Tearing off the wrapping paper, she exposed a thick, leather-bound book, with an ornate "H" embossed on the cover.

Hermione flipped through the pages and shook her head in puzzlement. "Do you have any idea why Cho would give me a book with all blank pages?"

"Maybe it's a journal?" Katie suggested. "And she thought you'd like it because it's the same as the charm on your bracelet?"

"Maybe," Hermione said non-committally, touching the sapphire charm with a troubled look.

Katie decided a change of subject was in order. "So, I hear Peter is getting a playmate," she smiled at the younger woman. "Mark said Malcolm was over the moon with excitement."

"Yes, he was thrilled to find out we're having a boy," Hermione said, with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

"Did you want a little girl?" Katie asked.

"I never cared about the baby's sex, and I'm beyond relieved that he's healthy. But . . ." she trailed off.

"But?" Katie prompted, concerned.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Does it ever occur to you that there's something a little bit off about our partners? The way that Draco reacted to the news that it was a boy was almost medieval."

Katie stiffened, automatically defensive, especially after the way Angie had seemed so angry at Mark throughout the ceremony. "Well, Mark has told me that most of the estates among their set are entailed, so that only a son can inherit," she said. "As for being a bit off . . . he just had a really old-fashioned upbringing. You met his horrid mother today. It's really quite remarkable Mark's as normal as he is."

Hermione shuddered in agreement at the horridness of Lucretia. "She was polite enough with Draco standing right behind me, but still . . . Was that really a stuffed vulture on her hat?"

"It really was," Katie snorted.

"Have you ever asked yourself why it is that Draco and Mark and even Theo are so old-fashioned?" Hermione returned to more serious matters. "You can't explain it away as a matter of social class. It's like they grew up in a completely different culture. It's *strange*."

Katie ducked her head, occupying herself with opening another present. It was strange, but it also was not something she wished to examine too closely. "What I know," she said after a moment, "is that Mark is a devoted partner and we have two lovely children together. We've had our differences in the past, but we've grown up and moved beyond them."

"Don't you want to know more?" Hermione pressed. "To understand what makes him the way he is?"

Katie shook her head. "Sometimes it's best not to turn over every rock to find the nasty things underneath. Sometimes it's better not to peer too closely behind the masks that people wear."

Hermione looked disappointed, so much so that Katie felt a twinge of disappointment in herself, but the other woman let it drop.

"So, what's the next gift?" Katie asked with false cheer.

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Ginny was feeding the twins mashed avocado at the kitchen table when George called through the Floo.

"Hey, sis," he greeted her, sounding worried. "Can we come through?"

"Sure," she agreed.

"Lionsgate Cottage," he called. Angelina staggered through the Floo and collapsed on all fours on the kitchen floor, retching and then hiccuping. George followed on her heels, carrying Freddy and giving Ginny an apologetic look. He set Freddy down and then helped his wife to stand on unsteady feet.

"Jamie's playing with Dean in the back garden, if you'd like to join them," Ginny told the little boy. He ran off to join his cousin and she made to Vanish the mess on the floor.

"No, don't!" George cried. "I need to analyze it!"

"Does it really matter what kind of alcohol Angelina got sloshed on at a Muggle christening?" Ginny asked, chuckling.

"Muggle," Angelina giggled wildly. "That's really funny."

"She's not drunk," George said, grim-faced. "We haven't told anyone yet, but we just found out last week she's pregnant. Angelina doesn't drink alcohol when she's expecting. Someone dumped her on the Muggle side of the Leaky Cauldron after slipping her a potion. I need to figure out what that potion is."

"Let me get Dean," Ginny gasped.

George nodded absentmindedly, already waving his wand over a sample of what Angelina had vomited onto to kitchen floor. "Double-strength Befuddlement Draught . . . what else?" he muttered.

Ginny raced outdoors and quickly summarized the situation for her husband. Leaving the two cousins playing in the walled, warded garden, Dean followed her back into the kitchen.

Angelina now was slumped over the kitchen table, laughing softly.

"Is this an Auror matter or just a prank?" Dean asked, eying her with concern.

"Someone gave her an extra strong Befuddlement Draught mixed with Forgetfulness Potion, with a dash of Euphoria Elixir and Babbling Beverage to make it seem like she's drunk," George reported. "Thank Merlin, it shouldn't harm the baby, but it makes her a completely unreliable witness - you can't trust her memory or anything she says."

"So it is a matter for the Aurors, if she saw a crime and was made to forget it," Dean stated. "Other than Katie and Angelina, do you know if there were there any magical folk at the christening?" he asked.

"Hermione was there," Angelina volunteered. "She came with Lucifer."

"See what I mean?" George said. "I highly doubt Hermione Granger attended a christening with the Prince of Darkness."

"Not dark. Pretty boy with pretty blond hair," Angelina sighed.

"Lucifer? Could she mean Lucius Malfoy?" Ginny asked.

"Attending a Muggle baptism with Hermione? Not likely," George dismissed his little sister's concern. "She's babbling, like I said."

"Luscious, luscious Lucius," Angelina sing-songed. "No, it wasn't *Lucius* Malfoy."

"Thankfully, she won't remember any of this once the potion is out of her system," George snorted with laughter.

"I should probably report to Kingsley before I pay a visit to Hermione," said Dean.

"You don't have to tell Kingsley," Angelina crowed. "He already knows!"

"Maybe . . . maybe Kingsley doesn't need to know," Ginny suggested. "It might just be a prank, after all." And he had been acting suspicious at the last few Order meetings.

George nodded in agreement. "Talk to Hermione first and see if anything unusual happened at the baptism."

"Fine with me," Dean agreed easily. "I'll check in with Hermione and see if there is anything worth reporting."

A Fool's Errand

April 1, 2004

Theo was waiting in the hospital lobby when Cho got off her overnight shift. She gave him a hug, and he took comfort in the familiar scent of shampoo in her still-damp hair as he loosely wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

"How're you?" he asked. "How was work?"

"I'm quite well. It was a busy shift, but no serious trauma. One young woman came in seriously hurt from an automobile crash, but we managed to stabilize her." Cho's smile was bright as she related that success.

"That's wonderful to hear," Theo said, truly delighted that the latest adjustment to her antidepressants seemed to have worked. For the last few days, he felt like he had the real Cho, the woman he loved, back in his life.

He gave a light caress on her baby bump. "And how's Drusilla Mei?" They had decided to name the baby after his mother, who had died when he was young, and Cho's only living grandparent.

"Since I was on my feet almost the whole night, Dru was quiet, but she started kicking just now when I was in the shower." He was glad she had changed to regular Muggle clothing in the facilities Royal Free provided for its physicians, knowing that her blue hospital scrubs would draw some funny looks at their early morning appointment at St. Mungo's.

"I wish I could feel her kicking," Theo said with a wistful expression.

"Any day now," Cho reassured him. "Penelope and the midwife both said I have an anterior placenta and that's why you haven't felt her yet."

"That's not a complication, is it?" he asked worriedly. He had never realized just how many things could go wrong with a pregnancy, and he knew Cho wasn't having the easiest time of it.

"Not at all," she said quickly, slightly allaying his concern.

"It looks like a beautiful morning," she observed, as they exited the hospital. "What do you say to walking towards Hampstead Heath and taking the Silverlink? At this time of the morning, it probably will be faster than a taxi. And certainly more economical!"

"And then you can spend the savings on something frilly and pink for Drusilla," Theo predicted with a fond smile. His wife was a practical dresser herself and had no objection to wearing her comfortable hospital scrubs most of the time, but she was finding miniature clothing for their baby girl too adorable to resist.

"You've discovered my weakness," Cho admitted cheerfully. "Do you have a busy day at the office?"

"Moderately, but nothing too pressing," Theo answered. "Draco has an appointment late in the day, so we may grab a pint before I'm home for dinner."

"Does he have legal troubles?" Cho asked, not even trying to hide her hopefulness that the sly blond was neck-deep in them.

Theo's lips quirked in amusement. "Don't you wish!" he said. "You know I need to maintain my clients' confidentiality. But generally speaking, Draco asks me to find legal loopholes that enable him to stay out of trouble."

"Typical!" Cho snorted. She linked her arm in Theo's, turning her face up to the weak early morning sunshine as they walked north to the right path to the rail station. "I love spring. I truly appreciate the sunlight after such a dark and gloomy winter."

Knowing that she wasn't just speaking of the weather, Theo wholeheartedly concurred.

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For the first time, there was a brief wait at St. Mungo's. The receptionist apologetically informed them that Healer Clearwater had been attending a birth overnight and would be ready to see them in ten minutes.

Cho shrugged it off. Even in the best-run hospitals and medical practices, some delays were inevitable, and the Healer had an excellent reason for running late. If Cho had learned anything during her own obstetrics rotation, it was that labor and delivery were unpredictable and babies arrived in their own good time. She took a seat and began flipping through the selection of dog-eared magazines in the reception area.

Theo, however, was pacing nervously.

"Theo, relax," she urged. "It's just a routine appointment. We've been here twice already for the same thing."

"I know, I know," he said, glancing at his watch.

"I can meet with Penelope on my own if you can't stay," Cho offered. She had become extremely comfortable with the Healer over a surprisingly brief period of time. And without Theo in the examination room, she would have a chance to ask about the curse Malfoy had placed her under and whether the Healer could lift it.

"No, of course I can stay," Theo answered. His pale blue eyes darted to the door leading to the main corridor. "What are you doing here?" he demanded in a suddenly harsh tone.

Cho looked in the same direction and blanched at the sight of the grey-haired man in wizarding robes. He was short and barrel-chested where Theo was tall and lean, but the ice-blue eyes were the same.

"I wanted to make sure everything is going well," the older man said in a conciliatory way, with a sidelong glance towards Cho, "but you haven't responded to my owls, Theo." There was a reproachful note in that last statement.

At the sound of his voice, she began shaking uncontrollably. Theo crossed to her, encircling the nape of her neck with a warm hand in an effort to calm her. "This is not the time nor the place," he warned the man.

"I just wish to speak with you for a few minutes," the man with grey hair cajoled.

"Please, Theo, go and talk to him," Cho chattered between clenched teeth. Anything to get him out of the room, away from her.

The other man looked at her directly and nodded his head in a formal acknowledgement. "Thank you, daughter-in-law. I appreciate your courtesy."

"Alright, love," Theo brushed his lips against her temple. "I'll be right back, since he only needs a few minutes to say his piece."

Cho managed a nod in response, repressing a shudder until Theo and his father - who terrified her, who made her want to crawl under the chair and hide, who she wanted to slice open from neck to navel with her scalpel - left the room. Then she picked up a magazine with shaky hands and stared at it with blind eyes, willing herself to take deep breaths and think of something else. Anything else.

Cho decided that speculation as to why Hermione had yet to contact her, despite having had enough time to read *Hogwarts: A History* cover to cover at least twice, was an excellent diversion from her panicked fight or flight response to Theo's father. She had been sure Hermione would be unable to resist any book, let alone one that contained the answers to many of the questions they had posed to each other, including why Harry Potter was a hero and why so many had died on May 2, 1998.

She worried that Malfoy might have taken and destroyed the book before it ever reached Hermione. If Katie had given it to Mark to take into to office and pass along to his boss, or if Hermione had shown it to her boyfriend, or if she had left it on the coffee table before getting to the very last few chapters . . .

Cho shook her head. Rather than fretting about what might have happened to the book, she would call Hermione, or perhaps send an email to avoid the lingering effects of Malfoy's curse, to verify she had received it. Decision made, she looked to the tired gossip magazine in her hands for further distraction from what Theo might be discussing with his father.

Cho's eyes widened as she took in the familiar scowling blond and his beautiful but unhappy brunette wife, depicted on the cover of *Witch Weekly*. "*Malfoy Marriage on the Rocks?*" queried the headline. With hasty fingers, she skimmed the accompanying article and then secreted the magazine in her bag. A satisfied smile danced across her face. On second thought, she would pay Hermione a visit in person. Cho would like see the sneaky bastard try and explain his way out of this one.

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From a tiny crack on the wall of the examination room, a beetle with iridescent green wings watched Healer Clearwater draw her wand over Cho Chang's pregnant belly.

Madam Nott, Rita Skeeter mentally corrected herself. It was important to get her title just right to draw in the pureblood readers. Theodore Nott, Sr. had paid a hefty amount for the *Prophet* to run a sympathetic story about his daughter-in-law, hefty enough to risk the wrath of the St. Mungo's administration for a gross breach of patient confidentiality.

The Animagus listened carefully to the conversation between Cho and the Healer, wishing for her Quick Quills Quote. Skeeter knew the Muggleborn witch had trained as a Healer before her exile and now had qualified as the Muggle equivalent, so she wasn't that surprised at all of the medical jargon. Still, there were useful human-interest snippets here and there. After a few more minutes, Healer Clearwater concluded Cho's treatment and Rita scuttled away, mentally composing her article.

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Hannah Longbottom had bought the Leaky Cauldron from old Tom just a couple of months before, and she was still glowing with pride at what she and Neville had done with their new acquisition. With help in the form of a loan from her formidable grandmother-in-law, the stained, scarred bar had been sanded to expose the honey-colored wood, the walls were bright with a fresh coat of paint, and the formerly tarnished and greasy tin tiles on the ceiling now gleamed a bright silver.

As a result, the pub was now attracting a better class of customer, so Hannah was not too surprised when the aristocratic Greengrass sisters walked in. She was a bit surprised, however, when they took their seats at the bar rather than demanding table service.

"Good morning, ladies," Hannah greeted them. She had been in same Hogwarts class as Daphne, but had never exchanged more than a handful of words with the so-called Ice Queen of Slytherin during school. Astoria was something else altogether, a vicious little cat who had taken a sick enjoyment in tormenting her classmates, much to the Carrows' pride. Hannah had been victimized by her on more than a few occasions.

"What can I bring you?" she asked courteously. She had a pub to run, and she would run it right out of business if she didn't serve pureblood bitches like these with a fake smile plastered across her face. Never mind that their father and the men they had married were Death Eaters and Death Eaters had killed Hannah's mother - that was the price of peace in a society that had endured two civil wars in as many generations.

"I'll have a gillywater," Daphne requested. "Please," she added in a clear afterthought.

"A vodka tonic," Astoria replied, not bothering with the courtesies where a half-blood was concerned.

As Hannah moved away to get their drinks, she could hear the sisters squabbling.

"So, how are you enjoying life as a divorced nonentity?" Astoria asked Daphne in a cutting tone.

"Much more than I ever enjoyed being married to my cold fish of an ex-husband," Daphne retorted. "I'd much rather be happy alone than miserable with someone else."

"To each her own," Astoria shrugged. "Personally, I've become accustomed to the prestige of being a Malfoy. One does get such excellent service." She flashed a mean smile at Hannah as she placed her drink in front of her.

"So, are you pregnant or have you just gotten fat?" the brunette asked.

"Tori!" Daphne admonished in an undertone. "Sorry, Hannah. It's a sensitive topic for her."

"So says the witch who was set aside because she couldn't produce an heir," Astoria sniped at her older sister. "I've suffered through five miscarriages trying to give Draco his heir, but you can't even conceive."

Hannah smiled at them, none too nicely. Children were a treasure, and the Greengrass sisters were paupers compared to her. "Yes, Madam Malfoy," she said with false servility. "Neville and I are expecting our second later this year."

"Boy or girl?" Astoria asked with unnerving intensity, cutting across Daphne's murmured congratulations.

Hannah's instincts for self-preservation kicked in as she recalled tabloid stories about psychotic women who attacked Muggle mothers-to-be and cut their babies out of their dying bodies.

"A girl," she said hastily. "We're having another little girl." Knowing how the old pureblood families were about male heirs, Hannah expected that would dampen Astoria's interest.

Instead, the dark-haired witch smiled a slow, cruel smile. "I don't believe you. I think you're having a little blond boy for the highest bidder, and that's how a barmaid like you managed to pay for this dump. You couldn't earn enough spreading your legs otherwise."

Hannah gasped in outrage as Astoria raised her wand, a mad look in her dark eyes. "Tell me the truth, you half-blood whore," she commanded. "Is that Draco's baby you're carrying?"

Silently blessing Augusta Longbottom and her iron-willed determination to never lose another loved one to Death Eaters and their ilk, Hannah ducked under the bar and hit the panic button her grandmother-in-law had insisted on. A shrill Caterwauling Charm split the air and Hannah hastily cast a shield charm on herself, praying it would hold until the Aurors arrived.

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For the second time in a week, Dean Thomas was footsore and well and truly baffled, having been thwarted once again in his efforts to contact Hermione Granger.

It shouldn't have been difficult. He had her mobile number in the little notebook he used when posing as a Muggle policeman, but although he had called several times in the couple of weeks since the christening, she never picked up the phone or returned his voicemails. Since Hermione hadn't called him back, Dean had resolved to visit her flat. He had not made a note of the address, but he had a good sense of direction and knew the general vicinity. Plus, he had magic at his disposal.

On Monday, a reportedly Dark object for sale in an antique shop had taken him into the Muggle part of London to investigate. With that speedily wrapped up, he had made his way to Knightsbridge. Once there, he had spent more than three hours walking up and down the quiet, posh side streets in without ever finding Hermione's flat.

Today he had come prepared with a handy little gadget borrowed from Anthony Goldstein in the Department of Mysteries, who would be enjoying box seats for the remainder of the Holyhead Harpies' matches this season. The gadget counteracted Notice Me Not spells and enchantments that made a location Unplottable. With that gadget in hand, Dean again had ventured out into Muggle London. After an hour of walking around Knightsbridge - which reminded him why he became an Auror, rather than a beat cop in MLE - he found the terraced townhouse he had visited before.

No one answered the bell. Even from the outside, he could tell there was no way of getting into the flat without an express invitation or a team of skilled curse breakers. The wards were relatively new, but strong to the point of being impenetrable. To Dean, they felt malevolent. *Blood wards.*

The April sunshine disappeared behind a cloud and Dean shivered as a cold breeze whipped around him. He could not recall wards like this from his last visit to the flat, but it wasn't the sort of thing he would have overlooked or forgotten. Blood wards also made no sense. Without her memories as a witch, Hermione would be unable to set wards keyed to her own blood. But if Malfoy had set up the blood wards, something that Dean conceded was within the Death Eater's expertise, Hermione - not to mention her Muggle boyfriend - would be unable to access the flat.

He decided to mull it over as he walked back towards the Leaky Cauldron. Maybe Ginny would have some ideas. Or maybe he should pay a visit to Katie Bell, since she had been at the christening and would be a more reliable witness than Angelina. Dean's train of thought was interrupted on Charing Cross Road by a blaring alarm. Recognizing it as a Caterwauling Charm, Dean broke into a dead run for the Leaky Cauldron.

Love Makes Fools of Us All

Chapter Notes

A/N: While this story does have some lighter chapters with no need for trigger warnings, this chapter is not one of them. It contains a wide variety of potential triggers, including harm to others, self-harm, mental illness, and past events that can contribute to mental illness.

April 1, 2004 - afternoon & evening

Outside a spanking new recreation center in Falmouth, Kingsley Shacklebolt held a ribbon taut and Narcissa Malfoy used her wand to cut it with a sharp *diffindo*, both of them offering toothy smiles for the flashing cameras.

Narcissa then looked on with every appearance of attentiveness as Kingsley gave a brief speech about the importance of offering wizarding youth from all backgrounds a safe place to play and practice their magic. Underscoring his point, he hugged a little half-blood boy while Narcissa applauded politely. When the Minister thanked the Malfoy and Greengrass families for their generous support, she said a few words in gracious acknowledgment. Nothing betrayed her anger or disquiet that her trollop of a daughter-in-law had failed to show for the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

But of course the Minister of Magic noticed. "And how is dear Astoria? I was hoping to see her here today," he said in a jovial voice at the reception following the ribbon-cutting.

Narcissa smiled up at him. Really, did nothing get by that man? She decided to turn Astoria's absence to her family's advantage; there was no time like the present to lay the groundwork for the arrival of the newest Malfoy.

"I'm afraid Astoria is indisposed and won't be up for her usual charity work for the next several months," she said sweetly, "but it's for the happiest of reasons."

"Oh, is she expecting?" Shacklebolt asked, an enthused light in his eyes. "How marvelous! When is the little one due?"

"The end of the summer," replied Narcissa, deliberately vague.

Kingsley's social smile widened into a shark's grin. "Astoria must not have known she was pregnant when I saw her at the Ministry's New Year's Eve ball. She was a bit inebriated that night. Or perhaps that when she conceived?"

"Oh, no," Narcissa made a quick denial, not wanting Shacklebolt to even entertain the idea that Zacharias Smith might be the father. Astoria had been caught by the staff photographer

for *Witch Weekly* emerging from a broom closet with Smith at the ball, ringing in 2004 with a spot of infidelity. "It was early days, and she just didn't realize."

"Of course," Shacklebolt nodded. "I understand perfectly."

Narcissa was all too worried he did have a perfect understanding that she was lying through her teeth, and decided to go on the offensive. "So, Minister, when will you be setting up your own nursery?" she asked archly.

"I'm afraid you'll never see me setting up my own nursery, Narcissa," Kingsley said with good humor. "I should hate to subject a woman I cared even a whit for to the pressures of being a politician's wife. And young children? To my mind, that sort of public exposure borders on child abuse."

Briefly, Narcissa debated whether to take offense at what could be interpreted as a shot at Draco's upbringing. She decided there were better ways to needle Shacklebolt.

"My dear Kingsley," she smiled radiantly, "we witches are much more resilient than you seem to give us credit for. And any capable witch could be trusted to shield your children from the prying public. It would be short-sighted for the Shacklebolt line to die out due to your concerns, and I know you've always been one to play a long game."

"Ah, Narcissa, how you flatter me," Shacklebolt deflected smoothly.

She laid a hand on his arm, a preliminary move to guiding him in the direction she wished. "I should like you to meet my dear friend Alecto. Impeccable pureblood lineage and, despite what the *Daily Prophet* would have one believe, she adores children."

"I've met Madam Carrow before," Kingsley protested, gamely repressing a shudder.

"Ah, but I doubt you truly know her," Narcissa persisted, congratulating herself on the ashy hue the Minister's skin had acquired at the prospect of entanglement with the sole surviving female Death Eater. "Come along, Kingsley," she urged with a tinkling laugh. "Don't be shy!"

A zebra Patronus ran into the room and skidded to a stop before them, offering Shacklebolt a reprieve from her machinations. "Sir, you are needed at the Ministry," the animal whinnied in Dean Thomas' voice. "Astoria Malfoy just attacked Hannah Longbottom!"

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Astoria eyed the dark-skinned Auror with calculation when he arrived outside her holding cell at the Ministry. "It's Dean, isn't it?" she asked. He was a good-looking specimen, but purely for recreation rather than procreation. His complexion was just too different from her husband's.

"Auror Thomas," he introduced himself stiffly. "I'm here to escort you to one of the interrogation rooms. Your solicitor will meet you there."

She pouted slightly as he led her down the hall. "You didn't have to arrest me, Deanie. I didn't do anything to hurt Hannah." All that Astoria had done was cast a simple spell to verify the

Longbottom wench indeed was carrying a girl. Once the light from her wand flashed pink, there was no point in hexing the hapless Hufflepuff. She wasn't the one Draco had impregnated, since everyone knew Malfoys always produced boys. Besides, Draco wouldn't be strutting around like a self-satisfied gamecock unless he had a male heir planted in some witch's belly.

"Hannah's been admitted to St. Mungo's for observation and a sprained ankle," Dean said sternly, steering her around a corner.

"It's not my fault she's a clumsy cow and tripped," Astoria shrugged.

"And just what would you have done if she was carrying a boy?" the Auror asked shrewdly.

"I'm not answering any questions without my solicitor present," she glared at him.

"We're here," Dean announced, opening the door to a small conference room.

Astoria stepped into the room and frowned at the sight of her mother-in-law. "What is she doing here?" she asked Theo Nott, who Draco had seemingly selected as her solicitor.

"Madam Malfoy was with me at the Falmouth Youth Centre when I was alerted to the disturbance at the Leaky Cauldron." Astoria was slightly taken aback as the Minister of Magic stepped forward from a darkened corner. "Narcissa asked if she could accompany me, since it was a family matter, and of course I said yes," Shacklebolt concluded.

Astoria narrowed her eyes. Of course he said yes to her odious mother-in-law - powerful men always did, and she didn't even have to get down on her knees to obtain their assent.

"Astoria, an assault on a pregnant witch is a matter that the Auror Department takes very seriously," Shacklebolt said in a grave tone.

"I didn't harm Hannah at all, sir," Astoria simpered. "I was simply curious if she was having a boy or a girl."

"You couldn't just have asked her?" Dean Thomas asked with a sardonic lift of his brows. "And as your solicitor will tell you, any use of an unwanted spell on another witch or wizard may be charged as assault."

Theo nodded in silent confirmation.

"It's not just Hannah Longbottom, either," Auror Thomas reported to the Minister. "I interviewed Daphne Greengrass Nott earlier and she told me Astoria has been hitting other witches with spells to check whether or not they are pregnant."

"I spoke to dear Daphne earlier and she told me the same," Narcissa chimed in. "Needless to say, Astoria's actions were despite her sister's best efforts to dissuade her."

Astoria bit her lip to keep from screaming in frustration at being outmaneuvered by her older sister. But that was the way it always had been in the Greengrass household. Daphne was the clever one, the one who had been tutored in politics and manipulation because she would one

day take over the family estates and Wizengamot seat. Astoria was the most useless sort of a spare - a female who would need to be married off, with her dowry a drain on the family coffers. All that she had ever been taught were Glamour charms, by her mother, and how to suck cock and spread her legs without complaint, by her father.

The tables had turned more than five years ago when Astoria managed to fall pregnant after seducing the Malfoy heir. Her marriage to Draco had made her nearly as important as Daphne, even more so after her older sister's divorce. All that Astoria had to do to secure her position was to produce a living male heir, but that seemed to be beyond her body's capabilities.

Shacklebolt's deep voice pulled her out of her self-pitying reverie. "These are very serious accusations, Madam Malfoy. You could be looking at some time in Azkaban."

Narcissa gasped theatrically. "Surely, Minister, you would not subject a witch in Astoria's delicate condition to the rigors of prison."

"Special arrangements would have to be made, assuming a Medi-witch confirmed her *delicate condition*." Shacklebolt agreed with subtle skepticism.

"True," Narcissa agreed. "I had taken Astoria at her word regarding her latest pregnancy, but perhaps I should not have done so. It's not uncommon for women who desperately want a child to fake pregnancy symptoms and even fool themselves into believing they are pregnant."

Astoria dug her long fingernails, painted a lovely fuchsia for spring, into her palms. She would not give her mother-in-law the pleasure of any other reaction. But it was clear Narcissa had turned on her.

"We shouldn't overlook the younger Madam Malfoy's mental health, which clearly is delicate," Theo said seriously. "She needs a professional evaluation to determine whether her actions are due to some sort of pathological imbalance."

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?" Astoria hissed. She wasn't mental, just rightfully upset at the prospect of Draco discarding her because she couldn't give him a baby. "You must be sick in the head, to marry your father's discarded fuck toy."

"Don't be crude, Astoria," Narcissa reprimanded, her blue eyes cold. "And do bear in mind that a wise woman will not fling insults at others that could be redirected onto herself."

Her mother-in-law turned to the two Aurors. "Theo raises an excellent point. Commitment to St. Mungo's for evaluation and treatment seems to be a more appropriate and compassionate response than Azkaban."

"I don't know, Narcissa," Kingsley shook his head. "Augusta is out for blood."

"But surely, Kingsley, she would not wish to subject her daughter-in-law to the rigor of testifying at a criminal trial," Narcissa cajoled. "I should be happy to speak with Madam

Longbottom, but I expect she appreciates more than anyone that indefinite confinement to the Janus Thickey ward can be a punishment worse than death."

Horried, Astoria began to protest. "No, don't make me go there! I'd rather go to Azkaban, please!" At least the prison had male guards who surely would be willing to grant a pretty witch preferential treatment in exchange for sexual favors.

Narcissa patted her with a consoling hand. "Don't fret, darling. It won't be forever. Just until you've gotten better."

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Draco accepted two foaming mugs from the surly barkeep at the Black Cat. He had planned to meet Theo after work at the Leaky Cauldron, but his bitch of a wife had closed the place down by attacking Hannah Longbottom.

As his solicitor, Theo had promptly informed him earlier in the afternoon that Astoria was in custody at the Ministry for attempted assault. Draco had decided he couldn't be bothered to rearrange his schedule in order to bail his wife out and had requested that Theo deal with it.

Theo claimed a booth, and Draco passed one of the mugs to him, since he looked as though he needed it. "Thank you," Draco said sincerely. "I hope Astoria wasn't too troublesome."

"Not at all," Theo reassured him. "Your mother was there and had her well in hand. Astoria will be spending at least the next few days at St. Mungo's under observation."

"Good." He hoped that those days would stretch into weeks, keeping her safely out of the way until he could divorce her. He would stop by the Manor on the way home to thank his mother in person.

"How's Cho?" Draco asked, making a guess as to the source of Theo's misery.

"She was doing well until she saw my father at St. Mungo's this morning," his friend muttered into his ale.

"Buggering hell," Draco said. He might not like Cho, but he wouldn't wish that on anyone. "How did she react?"

"Not well, but better than I hoped. She doesn't have any conscious memories of" Theo trailed off, clearly not wanting to put it into words.

"It's probably better for her that way," Draco counseled.

Theo just shook his head, unconvinced. "So my bastard of a father, in addition to wanting to check in and make sure all is well with the baby, has made arrangements to put pressure on Umbridge by generating some sympathetic press coverage."

"It's not a half-bad idea, if you can keep the Skeeter bitch on a leash," Draco opined. "And a muzzle, to be safe, unless she's biting someone at your command."

"That's a tall order," Theo grimaced. "Is Hermione well?" he asked courteously.

"Wonderful," Draco grinned, unconcerned if Theo thought him a besotted fool.

Even with the Vow, he had never anticipated feelings this intense for Granger. Lust was a given, and that had yet to be slaked despite having enjoyed her body repeatedly, in a variety of ways and positions. Concern for her, too, was not unexpected, particularly now that she was carrying his heir. Draco was grateful every day that Hermione was having a relatively easy pregnancy. But deep affection had come as a surprise, along with the pride he felt in her.

"She's gotten acceptance packets from both Oxford and Cambridge," he related. "Granger being Granger, she's fretting and making lists to help her decide where to go, but it's a nice dilemma for her to have."

"Do you care?" asked Theo.

"Not particularly," the blond answered. "I can Apparate easily enough to work or the Manor from either. Once Hermione picks her school, we'll get a flat or maybe a house. I like the idea of the sprog having a garden to play in."

Theo blinked. "You know your mother thinks the baby will be raised at the Manor."

"Yes, well, that's an awkward conversation I'm postponing until after the baby is born," Draco admitted.

"I don't blame you," Theo smirked. "Narcissa is a formidable woman. Now, speaking of formidable woman, I've looked into whether you break any laws by teaching Hermione magic."

"Yes?" Draco leaned forward, eagerly. This was important to him, for a variety of reasons.

"As I understand it, you want her to know magic exists, but not that there is a separate wizarding world. Correct?" Theo asked.

"Correct," Draco verified. Naming rights to their son were at stake, after all. And it would be convenient for him to not have to hide his magic from her. But there was something even more important. "I also want her to be able to do magic, at least enough to defend herself."

He had been terrified to see Hermione down on the ground in the snow, seemingly helpless against even a pathetic excuse for a witch like Lavender Weasley. That had been the impetus for him to have Theo look into the legalities of whether Granger could use even a fraction of her magic.

Theo made a noncommittal noise, common to the legal profession the world over. "You have no intention of restoring her memories, do you?"

"Never," Draco said with vehemence. "I can't run that risk."

"Well, that's a relief, because restoring her memories would earn you at least a decade in Azkaban, courtesy of the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission," Theo advised.

Draco merely nodded, though he had not been particularly focused on the risk of incarceration. He was more concerned about Hermione's reaction. As much as he liked the notion of being in a relationship with a version of Granger who knew his past and forgave him for it, he was too much of a realist to think that could ever happen.

"You also can't give her a wand. That's punishable by five years in Azkaban," his solicitor continued.

Draco frowned at that. Hermione was a powerful witch, and Draco wanted her to be able to use that power, within certain boundaries, to keep herself - and their son - safe from harm.

"As it turns out, though, there's nothing on the books about *wandless* magic," Theo emphasized. "In fact, the Ministry has no mechanism in place to detect wandless magic, whether accidental or deliberate, by Muggleborns. There's no Trace."

That made Draco smile. Granger always had been a dab hand at wandless magic, especially shield charms and those blue flames she was always conjuring. "You're right. When she knocked the Weasel's bitch on her arse, no one at the Ministry was any wiser." And that was precisely the sort of magic he wanted Hermione to be able to perform on a deliberate basis.

"You're cutting it rather fine with the Statute of Secrecy," Theo warned him, "but that's a relatively minor offense. Typically, if a wizard slips up and divulges something to his girlfriend, he's let off with a warning or at most a fine."

Draco waved that off as a matter of no account, pleased that Theo had found a usable loophole. "I can afford it. And Granger's worth it."

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Hermione had just returned home from uni when the doorbell rang. When she peered through the peephole and saw Cho, she hesitated for just a moment before opening the door to her erstwhile ally.

"Hi, Cho," she said civilly, willing to mend fences if that's what the other woman was here for. "I was just going to make some tea. Would you like some?"

"No, I can't stay," she said quickly, shifting nervously.

"Really, are you sure?" Hermione asked with genuine concern. Cho was well into her second trimester and should have gained some weight by now, but her arms and legs were stick-thin. Hermione was reminded of pictures of famine victims, their bellies bloated with hunger even as they starved to death. "Are you quite alright?"

"Quite," Cho said brightly with a manic energy that deepened Hermione's concern for her. "Is your boyfriend here?"

"He won't be home from work a little while. We certainly have time for a cup of tea before he arrives. Please, come in." Hermione knew there was some tension between them, and hoped that Cho would be more willing to linger if she knew Malcolm wasn't around.

"Okay," Cho agreed, hesitantly stepping inside. "Did Katie give you the book?" she asked anxiously. "Have you read all the way through it? The last few chapters are the most important."

"I did get the book, but I wasn't able to read it," Hermione said in a gentle voice. She made a mental note to reach out to Theo. Something serious was wrong with Cho if she expected Hermione to read a blank journal. "Now, how about that tea? It's a chamomile blend - very soothing," she coaxed the skittish woman.

Cho hesitated, but then shook her head. "You won't want me to stay. You know what they say about shooting the messenger." She handed Hermione a glossy magazine, somewhat worse for wear.

"Is this some kind of sick joke?" Hermione demanded, eyes wide as she scanned the cover photos of her boyfriend with a woman identified as his wife. "I've never even heard of a magazine called *Witch Weekly*. How do I know this is even real?"

"It's not a joke," Cho averred. "It's a real magazine, just with a niche audience." She choked out the last bit.

"Maybe it's someone else who looks like Malcolm," Hermione said, grasping at straws. "It's not the same name."

"You're in denial, Hermione. Malcolm Draco Foy and Draco Malfoy are the same person. He lied to you about everything, including his name." More so than the words, the malicious glee in Cho's voice caught Hermione's attention.

"You're happy about this?" She looked up from the magazine angrily.

Cho said nothing, but her lips twisted in a nasty smirk that was answer enough.

"Get out," Hermione told the other woman. "Get out now, before I throw you out."

But she kept the magazine.

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Draco was barely through the front door of their flat when Hermione pounced on him, and not in the way he preferred. She hit him hard in the chest with a rolled-up magazine, seeming to take pleasure in his grunt of pain.

"Explain this," she demanded, angry and suspicious but still willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

He unrolled the magazine as Hermione watched him carefully. As he took in the immobilized cover of *Witch Weekly*, Draco's expression darkened. He stood still, but not stiffly, ensuring nothing in his body language gave him away. This was a lie that it was critical for Hermione to believe.

"It's not real, obviously," he spoke calmly.

Searching brown eyes stared into his, trying to sort the truth from a lie. Draco met her gaze with apparent candor: he was an excellent liar and Occlumens, who had deceived his way through interrogations much more brutal than anything Granger could do.

"Then what is it?" she asked. From the faint, pleading note in her voice, he could tell that Hermione *wanted* to believe him. That meant the battle was more than half won. Still, he was ever so tempted to slip her a few drops of the Befuddlement Draught and Forgetfulness Potion that he kept in a magically-locked cabinet in the kitchen, just in case a situation like this arose.

"Would you like some tea? It might calm you down," he offered.

"Absolutely not. I would like an explanation as to why you're the cover boy on some rag of a magazine with *your wife*." Clearly, Granger wasn't going to be falling for at least one of his tricks.

"Not my wife, my ex-girlfriend. The one who cheated on me, who I broke it off with before I ever met you, remember?"

He hid a smile as she nodded. It helped that she was wearing the charm bracelet he had given her, with enchantments to encourage Granger's trust forged into the platinum and sealed with her blood.

"Do you really think I could be married to someone else, with all the time we spend together?" Draco asked rhetorically. He didn't wait for an answer before pushing on, speaking as persuasively as he knew how.

"There are some people in my set in Wiltshire who have far too much money and time on their hands. Once a year, they put out a magazine as an April Fool's joke, poking fun at us all for things that happened during the year," Draco explained. He had seen a few Muggle equivalents in the past week and *Witch Weekly*, with the moving pictures frozen by a charm, looked like a tawdry tabloid. "I suppose this year's theme was to pretend we're all witches or wizards. The cover article is a parody of my rather humiliating break-up."

"Oh, I see," Hermione said, a look of sudden comprehension mixed with compassion for him and embarrassment at herself for being fooled. "I'm sorry," she offered, picking up on his lingering sense of emasculation at being so publicly cuckolded.

"Don't be. It certainly worked out well for me in the end." Draco gave her a warm smile that she returned, despite some clearly lingering suspicion.

"But the pictures of you dancing?" Hermione asked.

"Those are real enough," he admitted. "Taken at some society ball as I was fulfilling my social obligations while you were in Australia. Do I look as though I'm enjoying myself?"

"Not really," Hermione conceded.

"You'll note the names are all changed around. Tori's real last name is Green, not Greengrass. Have you looked the reporter up on the Internet?" Draco inquired.

Hermione shook her head.

"You should," he suggested. "I doubt you'll find that Rita Skeeter," he rolled over the name with disdain, "has any other bylines. Same with any of the other names listed - you won't find anything online."

"That's a very sensible idea," Granger agreed. "I should have thought of that before flying off the handle at you." Now she sounded just a little bit sheepish.

Draco took a chance and ran a hand through her hair, futilely trying to smooth it in a gesture she always found soothing. Hermione leaned into his hand rather than jerking away, and he counted that as a victory.

He drew her into the living room and pulled her down on the sofa, partially in his lap. Seemingly at random, he flipped to a page in the magazine. "Would you like to read about the Weird Sisters' European tour - that's the most famous band you'll never have heard of - or the best way to de-gnome your garden?"

That drew a watery little laugh from her. "I should have read this cover to cover. Then I would have realized the entire magazine is a joke."

"That's one way to describe it," Draco concurred. He never had understood why witches liked to read this rubbish.

Hermione twisted on his lap, turning so she could once more look up into his eyes. "If I someday find out this is true, I'll never forgive you," she warned.

"I know," Draco whispered softly, pressing a kiss against her temple. *You won't ever find out*, he promised silently.

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As soon as Hermione was asleep, Draco stormed out of the flat into the back garden and spun in a tight, deliberate circle, picturing his destination. Despite his white-hot rage, he knew there was no danger of splinching himself. He was a gifted wizard and had Apparated to this desolate stretch of Hampstead Heath often enough. The Dark Lord had favored it as a gathering place for his Death Eaters, holding impromptu meetings there before releasing his followers to wreak mayhem in Muggle London.

In an echo of those times, Draco was dressed all in black, though this time he was wearing trousers and a thick jumper rather than robes and there was no silvery mask tucked into his pocket. Still, he hoped that Chang - the most likely person to have given *Witch Weekly* to Hermione - retained enough memories in her subconscious to be properly intimidated.

From the Death Eaters' meeting point, it was a short walk to the southern tip of the heath and the Royal Free campus. Draco covered it in long, loping strides, slowing only when he

reached hospital reception.

"Good evening," he gave the woman working the desk his most charming smile. "I have an important message for Doctor Chang-Nott."

The Muggle simpered and chattered and finally agreed to page her. Draco took a seat in the lobby that allowed him to watch the elevator banks and stairs, and was rewarded when Cho arrived within a few minutes, making a beeline towards him.

"Is everything alright with Theo?" she demanded abruptly, real anxiety underlying her sharp tone.

Draco raised an eyebrow. Apparently, the selfish bitch did care about someone other than herself. That would make this all the sweeter.

"I really couldn't say," he said levelly, "because I spent the entire evening calming Hermione after you left that joke of a magazine with her."

"It's no joke, and you know it. She needed to know about you," Cho said heatedly, confirming his suspicion that she was the source.

"Did she really?" Draco drawled. "It's not going to change the fact that we're having a baby together. She's not going to leave me, if that's what you hoped. You just made her upset and unhappy, to no real purpose."

"At least she knows you aren't to be trusted," Cho spat like an angry cat.

"Hermione knew that before," he shrugged, also in a feline manner. "Still, if you truly believe that women should have full disclosure on their partners" Rather than anger, he now was feeling smug, like a Siamese who had gotten into the cream and then topped it off with a live canary and some caviar.

Draco reached into his satchel and pulled out Cho's copy of *Hogwarts: A History*. "Hermione asked me to give this back to you. Among other reasons, she's a bit irked at you for giving her a blank book."

"It's not blank," Cho insisted, puzzled.

"Perhaps not to you," Draco said with practiced insouciance. "But to anyone who isn't a Nott by blood or marriage, it is."

"So you used magic to hide this from her?" Cho accused.

"Not I," Draco said innocently. "I recognize the cover, of course, but the pages appear blank to me as well. Someone in the Nott family cast this spell, and I can tell you Theo used a similar charm back at school to protect his journal from prying eyes."

Cho blinked. "Theo wouldn't do that to me."

Draco just smirked at her flimsy denial. "Speaking of Theo and what he would and wouldn't do, you might want to read this. He handed over the issue of *Witch Weekly* Cho had given to Hermione, open to a one-page fluff piece on how Daphne Greengrass Nott had thrown herself into charitable works to recover from the shock of her divorce.

Cho's face turned ashen, and a nasty smile crossed Draco's face.

"You can dish it out, but can you take it?"

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No, I can't take it, Cho thought to herself, silent tears streaking down her cheeks.

She had lasted at the hospital less than an hour after her confrontation with Malfoy before the consulting physician ordered her home. Cho managed to stammer out something about a family emergency that seemed to placate her supervisor, and she could only be grateful that none of her errors had resulted in any harm to a patient.

Cho crept quietly into the flat, not wishing to wake Theo in the middle of the night. Her plan had been to change into pajamas, brush her teeth, and crawl into bed, but she found herself stalled between steps one and two, huddled in misery on the bathroom floor, toothbrush in hand.

Theo had been her rock, the foundation that held her steady, until she had been brutally informed by the events of the day that her foundation was nothing but quicksand. And now she was being sucked down into it, drowning in despair. Malfoy would be so disappointed if he knew the article he had shown her in revenge for her revelation to Hermione barely registered against Theo's breach of trust. As bad as it was that her husband had been married before and divorced within the past year, all without ever telling her, that wasn't what had Cho reaching for her sleeping pills through her tears.

She was grimly pleased that she had refilled the prescription only last week. She rarely took them, since they didn't prevent her dark dreams and made her almost too drowsy to function the following morning, so the bottle was only a couple of tablets short of being full.

Theo had tried to deny it at St. Mungo's, telling her that her memories were faulty and not to be relied upon when making such a serious accusation, but she *knew* his father from her nightmares. She had taken the weight of that stocky body atop hers and felt him painfully thrusting into her. She had seen those icy blue eyes, too much like Theo's, looking on with cruel amusement as she was used and abused. She had heard that gravelly voice, the same one that had so respectfully recognized her today as his daughter by marriage, hissing to her that she was a filthy Mudblood whore. And Theo, despite his legalistic defense, knew - had to know - that his father was one of her rapists.

She pawed through the medicine cabinet, looking for something with codeine to drink. They seemed to be fresh out of any prescription cough syrups, but Cho's searching hand alighted on a purple glass bottle half-hidden on the top shelf.

"Dreamless Sleep," she read the handwritten label aloud. There were no warning labels or dosage instructions. She unstopped the bottle and sniffed the purplish liquid with suspicion, fairly certain that it had never been subject to any MHRA regulation. Then Cho gave a brittle laugh at the absurdity of worrying about that under the circumstances.

She upended the bottle of sleeping pills in her mouth and chased it down with a sizable swallow of the purple potion. Right now, dreamless sleep sounded like the best thing in the world. And Cho really didn't give a damn if she ever woke up.

Doing the Right Thing

Chapter Notes

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

April 30, 2004 - May 1, 2004

"Enter," Lucius Malfoy barked, in response to the knock on his office door. His features relaxed into a smile when his son walked in. "Oh, Draco, it's you," he said in a much more welcoming tone. "Take a seat."

Draco perched on the armrest of the leather couch. "I can't stay," his son warned. "I just wanted to let you know I'm taking the afternoon off. Hermione and I are going to Oxford for the weekend."

Lucius frowned. "Miss Granger is more than six months along. Should she really be gallivanting about the country? You were in Cambridge with her just last week."

"She's twenty-eight weeks, but unless you want me to drop dead from breaking my Vow to her, there's very little I can do to stop Hermione from doing exactly what she wishes." Draco sounded amused rather than aggrieved by this obstinacy.

It went against the grain for Lucius Malfoy to counsel anyone to look out for the well-being of a Mudblood, but the Granger girl was performing a singular service for their family at a not-insignificant cost to herself. He chose his words carefully. "Expectant mothers need to be coddled, Draco, especially in the last few months. Do try to take good care of Miss Granger and persuade her not to overexert herself."

"Hermione's fine, Father," his son reassured him with a hint of impatience. "Quite excited about continuing her studies next year and everything is progressing as it should." Draco's lips curved slightly in a fond smile, though Lucius could not tell whether that emotion was for the mother, the baby, or both.

The older wizard felt a slight twinge of conscience, but swiftly quashed it. He did not share Narcissa's concerns about the girl. One recovered readily enough from the loss of a pet, even a beloved one. Draco would be fine. Certainly he had moved on quickly enough where Astoria was concerned. His son's next casual announcement was proof.

Draco cleared his throat. "I'm also meeting with Theo to go over the paperwork for the divorce."

"I see," Lucius steepled his fingers together. "It's a pity about Astoria, but you're doing the right thing. She's too unstable to be trusted around an infant." He shook his head in true regret. The Greengrass alliance had been a valuable one. "Unfortunately, mental illness does crop up on occasion, even in the best of families."

Both men shared a pained grimace at the memory of the late, unlamented Bellatrix Lestrange.

"I am grateful every day that your mother escaped that taint in the Black bloodline. Daphne Greengrass seems to be a similar case," Lucius volunteered.

"I thought you were supposed to be subtle," Draco snorted, to his father's irritation. "Wait until I've divorced the one sister before you try to push me onto the other."

"If you think I'm pushy, wait until you hear your mother on the issue," Lucius shrugged.

"Why do you think I avoided coming home for Easter?" Draco rejoined.

"Touché," Lucius acknowledged.

"I also wanted to stay in London to help Theo," Draco added.

"That poor boy," Lucius sighed, in not-entirely insincere sympathy. He loathed the father, but took no issue with his son's friend. "There's an article about his wife in this morning's paper. Did you see it? The *Prophet* was unusually sympathetic."

Draco nodded, his face impassive. "I saw it. The Notts paid Skeeter well."

"Indeed," Lucius agreed, "for what little good it will do them. My views on blood purity seem positively moderate when compared to Umbridge's fanaticism. I at least acknowledge that attractive Mudblood females have their uses."

"I expect those are the type Umbridge hates the most," his son observed astutely. "Still, if anyone could persuade her to soften her stance towards Cho, it would be you."

"Umbridge does have a soft spot for me," Lucius acknowledged complacently. "She's been useful once or twice, enough to put up with the incessant simpering and irritating little *hem-hem*."

Draco laughed at the cruel mimicry. "Theo would be eternally grateful, and you would have succeeded where his father had failed."

Now it was Lucius's turn to snort. "Was that supposed to be a subtle attempt to manipulate me?"

His son just grinned at him, a boyish expression that softened Lucius more than he would ever admit. Sometimes he missed the adoring, unquestioning boy his son had been, but he was pleased - more than he would admit - that Draco had grown into a man who knew his own mind and would pursue his own agenda.

For that reason, he heaved a long-suffering sigh and agreed. "Well, I suppose I could pop in and speak with the odious woman the next time I'm over at the Ministry. Or perhaps delegate to your mother."

"Thank you, Father." Draco gave him a crooked smile. "I seem to have developed a somewhat inconvenient conscience where Theo and Cho are concerned."

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"Good morning, sunshine," Marcus trilled, as Cho blinked her eyes against the late morning sunlight. She had been spending a great deal of time since her suicide attempt a month ago sleeping or pretending to sleep, making his job as guard dog an easy one.

"You're still here?" she asked grumpily, sitting up in bed. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

"Malfoy's relieved me of the need to meet any sales quotas for this month," he informed her cheerily. "So long as you don't off yourself on my watch, I get my bonus."

"That must be costing him quite a bit of money," Cho observed. "He could have just apologized. Theo's forgiven him quickly enough."

"Ah, that's the thing," Marcus said, not commenting on the bitterness imbedded in her last statement. "Malfoys never apologize. I think it's a family rule. They go in for grand gestures instead."

If it was a Malfoy family rule, it was one they had adopted after the Dark Lord fell, after Draco and his parents had done enough groveling to that madman to last them for a lifetime. Marcus could still remember the three of them crawling on the floor in front of that snake-faced bastard's makeshift throne, faces streaked with snot and tears, begging Voldemort in between *Crucios* to spare Draco's life after the seventeen-year-old predictably failed to murder Dumbledore.

Cho made a derisive sound. "Honestly, flowers and a get well card would have sufficed. It's not like Malfoy and I are friends, or that I expected any better of *him*." The emphasis made it clear to Marcus that she had expected better of Theo. "I doubt whether Malfoy cares whether I live or die," Cho concluded, sarcasm fading to sadness.

"He cares. Theo cares. We all care," Marcus said simply. "We're not really such heartless bastards as we like to pretend."

"Could have fooled me," Cho snarked.

"I should think it's fairly easy to fool you, given the stupid stunt you pulled, drinking Dreamless Sleep while pregnant," Marcus said, purposefully blunt. "Of all the daft things to do! Kill yourself if you must, but don't take anyone else out with you."

Cho glared at him. Marcus was happy she was feeling well enough this morning to spar with him. He hoped that meant her sessions with the Mindhealers at St. Mungo's were yielding results. Normally, she just stared at the ceiling and ignored him, but he didn't take offense. After all, Cho hadn't spoken to Theo, other than necessary monosyllables, since he found her on the bathroom floor on April Fool's Day and revived her.

"You made this morning's paper," Marcus told her, changing the subject.

"Oh?" Cho asked, curious despite herself.

Casually, he tossed the folded *Prophet* to her in a gentle arc, knowing better than to approach her while she was lying vulnerable in bed. Even though he was devoted to Katie and would

never do anything like that to Theo's wife, it was certain to trigger a panic attack.

Cho caught the newspaper - even nerdy Ravenclaw Seekers had halfway decent reflexes - and smoothed it over the duvet. "*St. Mungo's Healers Labor Overtime to Save Pureblood Baby*," she read aloud. She looked up at Marcus, clearly affronted. "What kind of rubbish is this? Does your lot have zero respect for patient confidentiality?"

"If you keep reading, you'll see that Healer Clearwater refused to comment and Healer Pyle is threatening legal action. But Skeeter - the reporter - always manages to find a source," Marcus explained. "It's damn near impossible to sue her for libel under wizarding law."

Cho looked grim as she read on, but her eyebrows rose higher and higher as she reached the end of the article. Marcus had read it earlier, when she was asleep, and he surmised she had reached the point where Skeeter stopped praising the hospital staff for their tireless efforts on behalf of Cho and her unborn baby and transitioned to the question of Cho's blood status.

Once again, she read aloud, as though that would help her make sense of the printed words. "*The Honorable Wu Shengli, the Chinese ambassador to the ICW, denounced the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission's actions towards Madam Chang-Nott.*

Ambassador Wu, speaking through a translation charm to your correspondent, insisted that Madam Chang-Nott is the descendant of witches and wizards. "Her great-grandfather, Chang Zheng, an illustrious wizard, was one of the leaders of the Long March. His battle magics were instrumental in the defeat of the Guomindang."

Ambassador Wu explained that the Changs, like many prominent Pureblood families, fell into disgrace during the Cultural Revolution. Madam Chang-Nott's father was able to flee the country, but not before his magic was forcibly suppressed. "This was a dark period in the history of modern China, comparable to the current actions of the British Ministry," criticized Ambassador Wu.

The ambassador stated he was prepared to testify before the Wizengamot in support of the petition appealing Madam Chang-Nott's blood status. In light of this development, and the proof already put forward by the Nott family, which a Ministry source describes as "compelling and irrefutable," Madam Undersecretary Umbridge may wish to reconsider her earlier decision and admit that a mistake has been made."

Cho looked up from the newspaper. "This is utter rubbish!" she seethed. "A disgusting invasion of privacy!"

"Skeeter's stuff usually is," Marcus agreed in a soothing tone. "So I take it Wu is talking out his arse? Nothing like that ever happened to your dad?"

"He did escape from a labor camp in the 1960's and fled to Hong Kong, but he's never said anything about magic to me," Cho said, looking troubled. "Besides, why would it matter?"

"Because the laws are different depending on whether your parents, or even one of them, have magic. If your dad's a wizard, then you're at least a half-blood and Umbridge fucked up

royally." Marcus was cheered at the prospect, and not just because he wanted Cho to have her memories back.

"So Drusilla will be a half-blood, because Theo has magic, even though I don't?" Cho asked, obviously confused by the connection between blood and magic.

"No, any kids you have with Theo will be purebloods. Before, they would have been half-bloods if you're not a pureblood, but the law changed. So now if a wizard and a witch have a baby, the sprog is a pureblood. It doesn't matter what the parents' blood status is," Marcus explained, somewhat confusingly.

Cho processed this in silence for a moment. "So there are purebloods, half-bloods, and Mudbloods?"

"Yeah, but the polite term is Muggleborn. That's a witch or wizard who doesn't come from a wizarding family."

"Am I considered a Mudblood?" Cho demanded bluntly.

Marcus debated for a moment, and then decided if he was in for a Knut, he was in for a Galleon. Besides, he thought she deserved to know.

"Yeah, but I don't know if that's right," he answered.

"It's wrong on so many levels that I don't even know what to say." Cho shook her head in disgust.

Marcus, not being one for deep, philosophical discussions, stayed silent.

"Are you really supposed to be telling me all this?" she asked.

"I dunno," he shrugged. "I think it's worse if you don't know. If you're asking me whether I'm breaking the law, Theo's the solicitor, not me. I'm just a potions salesman."

Cho regarded him steadily before giving a grudging nod. "Thank you. For everything."

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Within ten minutes of leaving Malfoy Enterprises, Draco was ascending the marble steps of Gringotts Bank. He had omitted this errand when telling his father his plans for the rest of the day, knowing that Lucius would not approve.

A surly goblin teller examined his wand before waving him into a rickety mine cart driven by one of his colleagues. "Sharpshank will take you to the Malfoy vault. Number 73," he directed the other goblin.

After a stomach-jolting ride into the lowest level of the bank, the cart shuddered to a halt in front the Malfoy family's primary vault. Draco disembarked from the cart and held out his hand so Sharpshank could slice open his left index finger. He then signed his name in his own blood in a guest book next to the vault door, which opened smoothly as it recognized the

Malfoy Heir. Draco strode into the vault as though he had every right to be there and dispose of the contents therein, even though he knew his parents would drag him out of the depths of Gringotts by his hair if they knew what he was retrieving and for whom.

It took him only a few minutes to find the ring he was looking for. There was enough priceless jewelry in the ancestral vault to start up a shop, but rings were rather thin on the ground. Malfoy wives valued their engagement and wedding rings, and employed any number of creative curses to ensure those rings couldn't be pried even from their cold, dead hands.

This ring, however, had never belonged to a witch. It had been commissioned by his great-grandfather many times over for a Muggle queen, who had cherished it above her many other jewels and worn it until her death. Draco wanted it for two reasons: he thought the rubies that studded the gold made it the perfect bauble for his Gryffindor princess and he knew the ring was imbued with powerful protective enchantments to protect the wearer, including during childbirth.

Holding it between his thumb and forefinger, Draco flicked open the diamond cover of the locket ring and looked at the miniatures inside, of Lucius I and his red-headed lover, Elizabeth. Apparently she had been terrified of dying in childbed, a not-uncommon risk for Muggle women at that time, so terrified that she had refused his ancestor's repeated proposals of marriage. Or perhaps she had merely been unwilling to share her throne. Once he had the ring on Hermione's finger, Draco knew the pictures would change to show her with him.

Draco pocketed the ring and left the rest of the vault untouched. The ride back to the main lobby was nauseating but uneventful, but the brief walk through the marble lobby to Diagon Alley proved to be nauseatingly eventful.

"Ah, Mister Malfoy!" boomed the Minister of Magic, crossing the bank lobby to intercept Draco. "Might I have a quick word?"

Given that the man was flanked by two large and foreboding Aurors, including Dean Thomas, Draco didn't feel that saying "no" was an option. He only hoped that the quick word wouldn't involve a trip back to a Ministry holding cell. "Certainly, Minister Shacklebolt."

Shacklebolt drew him into a quiet nook and cast an anti-eavesdropping spell. "I had a rather disturbing conversation with your mother at a charity event earlier this month."

Draco raised an eyebrow in a silent invitation for the other wizard to continue.

"I would congratulate you on your expected heir, except that Narcissa told me Astoria is the mother." Kingsley's dark eyes bored into his, and Draco reflexively put up a shield against Legilimency.

"Astoria is in St. Mungo's, getting professional help with her delusions," Draco said flatly.

"Poor woman," Shacklebolt shook his head in well-feigned sympathy. "I must say, it relieves my mind to discover that Narcissa Malfoy is wrong for once in her life."

"Is that because you have no wish to see the Malfoy line continue?" Draco drawled, curious as to how much the Minister would reveal.

"Not at all," Shacklebolt protested, smooth as ever. "I should be pleased to hear you are expecting an heir. However, I should be distressed to see the brightest witch of her age deprived of all credit for her . . . shall we say, *contributions* to that effort?"

"There's no need for you to feel distress," Draco told him. "I appreciate Hermione and her contributions very much." He was careful to keep his hands out of his pockets, not wishing to draw attention to the ring. Still, Shacklebolt's gaze darted downward to the small bulge caused by the square box. Like Narcissa, and the dearly departed Dumbledore, Shacklebolt seemed to make a habit of annoying omniscience.

A pleasant smile crossed the Minister's face and Draco tensed. The man did have significant leverage over him, after all.

"It's rare for a Malfoy to do the right thing, but I expect nothing less of you where Miss Granger is concerned," Shacklebolt intoned in his deep voice.

Draco merely nodded at the threat couched as a compliment. He wouldn't be blackmailed into something so significant as marriage, but it seemed that his agenda dovetailed nicely with the Minister's goals.

Message delivered and received, Shacklebolt clapped him on the shoulder in a friendly way and took his leave.

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"How is Cho?" Draco asked politely as he took a seat in Theo's law office.

"Well enough," Theo sighed. "Her Muggle Healer put her on modified bedrest, so she's a trifle bored. The Healers at St. Mungo's tell me the baby is doing fine. We got the Dreamless Sleep out of Cho's system quickly enough to prevent any damage, and for that I thank you," he stated formally.

"Really, it was the least I could do," Draco muttered. "I didn't think that - "

"No, you didn't think," Theo agreed coldly. He didn't blame his friend for Cho's suicide attempt - his father held that dubious distinction, and he was close behind for concealing so much from his wife - but the blond wizard was the metaphorical straw that had broken the camel's back. But Draco also had raced to Theo's flat with life-saving antidotes on that horrible night when Cho tried to play the ultimate April Fool's joke by killing herself and their baby girl.

"I spoke with my father," Draco said. "One of my parents will talk to Umbridge, to try and get her to reclassify Cho's blood status."

Theo recognized the extension of the olive branch for what it was. "Thank you," he said, accepting it. Still, he had no desire to discuss his wife's precarious mental health with Draco.

"Here, you'll need to sign these." Theo pushed a sizable folder across the desk, by way of distraction.

Draco picked up a quill and began repeatedly signing his name. Theo sat quietly behind his desk, allowing his thoughts to wander as he absently rubbed his aching wrist. Despite the best efforts of the Mindhealers at St. Mungo's, Cho was far from stable. There were limits to what they could do when she was blocked from recalling the source of her mental trauma.

Draco signed his name one last time, with a bit of a flourish, and replaced the quill in the ink pot on Theo's desk. "Is that the lot?" he asked.

Theo shuffled through the parchment, verifying that his friend had signed the divorce petition and other forms for the Wizengamot in all the correct places. "That's the lot," he confirmed. "The Chief Warlock or his designee will issue the official decree dissolving your marriage on your fifth wedding anniversary, and then all you need to do is serve a copy on Astoria."

"It will be easy enough to find her," Draco observed. "She's still committed to the Janus Thickey ward."

"Are you planning on keeping her there indefinitely?" Theo inquired. "You'll actually lose any authority to do so once your divorce is final."

The blond wizard shook his head. "I don't care where Astoria is so long as it's nowhere near Granger or me. I'll even sign her release papers before I serve her with the divorce decree."

Theo merely nodded, listening with only partial attention as his thoughts drifted back to Cho and what he could do to possibly help her. Perhaps a visit to Hogwarts was in order, though persuading Professor Flitwick to restore Cho's memories would be a difficult task and illegal to boot.

"Once Astoria and I are divorced, how long do I need to wait before I can remarry?" Draco asked, regaining Theo's attention.

"Once Astoria's been served, there is no legal impediment to you marrying Granger the very next day, if you choose," Theo advised, hiding his reaction behind a bland solicitor's mask. "I can walk you through the legal requirements for a Muggle civil ceremony, if that's what you intend to do."

"I'll wait and see if Hermione wants to get married in a church," Draco said.

He had known Draco for more than twenty years, yet the man still had the ability to surprise him. Theo never would have expected Draco to want to marry Hermione Granger, let alone show any consideration for her preferences when it came to the wedding. After all, Draco had spent years - up to mere months before - deriding her as a filthy Mudblood.

"Or maybe we could get married in a magical ceremony outside of Great Britain," Draco added.

"That won't work," Theo told him. "The Wizengamot will not recognize a foreign marriage where both the husband and wife are citizens of wizarding Britain. Or the Muggle United Kingdom," he added, since Hermione technically had lost her wizarding citizenship once she was repatriated.

"That's unfortunate," said Draco, looking annoyed.

"Have you told Hermione there are magical communities? You know you have to be careful," Theo warned. "You may be a Malfoy, but you still could get yourself sent to Azkaban."

"No, I haven't told Granger anything about magic at all," the blond said, frustrated. "I had planned on starting to teach her wandless defense, but after Cho showed her *Witch Weekly*, I have to treat magic as a big joke."

"You should have brought that damned magazine back to me, rather than handing it over to Cho," Theo reproved.

"It would have been best if neither of our witches ever saw that rag," Draco said defensively. "I'm sorry Cho ever got her hands on it."

Theo knew that was the closest Draco could make himself come to an apology. "Indeed," he agreed.

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At the end of his Auror shift on Friday evening, Dean Thomas went into Muggle London instead of Apparating home. Katie Bell's address had been relatively easy to track down, listed as it was in the Muggle phone directory.

Unlike Hermione's flat, the pleasant semi-detached where Katie lived with her family was not protected by blood wards, though it did have appreciable magical protections. Dean knew he would either need to wangle an invitation into the house or conduct his conversation with Katie on the stoop, because the wards would not allow any witch or wizard to force their way in.

His former Quidditch teammate had not been home the last two times he had tried, but his luck was in today. Dean had barely had time to warm the bench at the bus stop halfway down the street when he saw Katie turn the corner, pushing a pram with a pig-tailed little girl walking alongside.

"Excuse me, Miss Bell?" he intercepted her and her children on the path bisecting her lawn and leading to the front door.

Katie looked at him inquiringly, and Dean adopted his best official manner, presenting a charmed business card in his outstretched hand. "Detective Inspector Thomas, C.I.D. Do you have a few moments to answer some questions about a potential criminal incident at your son's christening?"

Katie's eyes widened. "Of course, but I don't recall anything like that."

"I'm referring to the poisoning of Angie Weaver," he informed her.

Katie's eyes grew even larger. "I didn't realize . . .," she said, half to herself. "Please, do come inside."

He assisted her in carrying the pram with the sleeping baby up the front steps. She parked it in the hall and gestured him towards the lounge, meanwhile directing her daughter in a low voice to go and play upstairs. Within minutes, she was seated across from him, both of them with cups of tea in hand. Dean smiled to himself. At Hogwarts, Katie had briskly and efficiently dealt with schoolwork and Quidditch practice, and those traits had stayed consistent in her Muggle life.

"Did I hear you correctly, that Angie was poisoned?" she asked. "I thought she just had too much to drink on an empty stomach. We've met up since the christening, and she hasn't said anything."

"Mrs. Weaver doesn't remember the incident. She may not have said anything to you, because it's early days yet, but she's pregnant," Dean said seriously. "I believe someone spiked her drink, with alcohol or some powerful sedative, and I classify that as poisoning."

"That's terrible!" Katie gasped. "I didn't know Angie was expecting, but there were other women at the christening who are pregnant. I can't believe someone spiked the punch."

She shook her head in dismay. "What a horrid prank!"

"Did Mrs. Weaver partake in the punch?" Dean asked, biro poised above his notebook.

Katie closed her eyes in an effort to remember. "Now that you mention it, I don't believe she did. Hermione's boyfriend brought glasses of punch for both of them - I already had a drink - but Angie took a ginger ale from one of the waiters."

"So Hermione drank the punch with no ill effects?"

"I believe so," Katie nodded. "Her boyfriend took the other glass when Angie didn't want it."

Dean took notes, hiding his disappointment. "And do you recall who Angie was speaking with before she collapsed?"

"She collapsed right after she finished her ginger ale. I was there, and Hermione and Malcolm."

He nodded, vaguely registering the name of Hermione's innocuous Muggle boyfriend. "What did the waiter look like?" Lavender's bizarre theory that Hermione was attacking her watchers in the Order was starting to seem a bit more plausible, but he very much wanted to find a different culprit.

Katie was at a loss. "Honestly, I didn't notice. I probably could get his name from the caterers if you think it's important. Or I can call Hermione and see what she remembers."

"If it's not too much trouble, it would be great if you could call Hermione. I find that it's often helpful to get an account from multiple witnesses." Dean tried not to sound too eager, but here was a chance to kill two birds with one stone: to question Hermione about what she had seen - or done - at the christening and discover why she hadn't returned his calls.

"Sure," Katie agreed, helpfully. "She was going out of town for the weekend, but I'll see if I can reach her on her mobile."

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Either trains were inherently lulling or third-trimester fatigue was setting in early, because Hermione found herself yawning and unable to keep her eyes open when their Oxford-bound train was still chugging through London. She leaned into Draco's side, snuggling up against his shoulder. He made a wonderful pillow, and Hermione thought, as she drifted off to sleep, that she had missed out all those years traveling to and from boarding school.

The persistent ringing and buzzing of her mobile jolted her back into wakefulness. She extracted her phone from her back pocket and flipped it open. "Hullo?" she muttered.

"Hi, Hermione! It's Katie. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Not at all," Hermione lied through a yawn.

"I'm sorry if I did," Katie said, seeing right through her. "It's just that I have Detective Inspector Thomas here at the house, and he had some questions about Angie getting sick at Peter's christening."

Hermione stiffened, instantly alert. After the fight in Hyde Park, she had called up the local police station - at Draco's suggestion - to see if DI Thomas needed anything further from her to close out the case against her ex-boyfriend. She had been shocked to discover that there was no record of the incident in Hyde Park and no individual by the name of Dean Thomas employed as a police officer anywhere within the CID ranks. For that reason, she had steadfastly sent Dean's calls to voicemail and refused to respond to his voicemails seeking her assistance with another "police" matter.

"Katie, is Mark back from work yet?" she asked carefully, uncertain if Dean could overhear her on the other end of the line. Certainly Draco had heard Katie, if his narrowed eyes and tense posture were anything to go by.

"No, but he should be here soon," Katie said, slightly puzzled.

Draco had his own mobile out and was already dialing. Hermione could hear his urgent, low-voiced conversation with Katie's husband, telling him to get the fuck home *immediately*.

"I don't think you should answer any more questions without your solicitor present," Hermione advised, her voice loud and clear. "We'll call Theo for you. Tell Detective Inspector Thomas he'll be there shortly, along with your husband." She hoped Katie caught her sarcastic inflection with the officer's title.

"Okay," Katie said, drawing out the word. "DI Thomas, I'll be right back. I need to get a pencil and write down the name of Hermione's solicitor."

Hermione heard a faint rustle and the click of a closing door. Next to her, Malcolm was having another quiet but intense conversation, this time with Theo.

"What's going on?" Katie asked softly, sounding nervous.

"Dean's not a real police officer," Hermione warned. "Mark and Theo are on the way, and we'll call 999 for you. Can you get the kids out of the house?"

"Maybe," Katie answered. "Isabelle's up in her room, but I can pretend she called for me. Once I bring her downstairs, Peter's in his pram by the door, so I think I can get us all out. And I'm in the kitchen right now, so I can grab a knife."

A sharp crack interrupted her.

"Katie, are you alright?" Hermione asked, trying not to panic.

"I'm fine," Katie reassured her after a few heart-stopping moments. "That must have been the front door slamming, because he's gone."

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"Hi, Daddy," Jamie said, looking up from his coloring with a smile for his stepfather when Dean Apparated into the kitchen.

"I thought I told you not to Apparate into the house," Ginny lectured from the door leading to the front room, arms akimbo and looking disturbingly like her mother. "I just got the twins to sleep, and Merlin help you if that woke them up!"

"It was urgent," Dean defended himself. "Katie Bell was about to come after me with a knife."

"What are you on about?" Ginny asked, incredulous. "She would never do something like that."

Dean snorted. "Katie was out there fighting Death Eaters before she was twenty. She's perfectly capable of stabbing me if she believed I was a threat to her or her kids, and that's exactly what she and Hermione thought."

He flopped down into a chair and pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "How did this get so bugged up?" he asked, the rhetorical question muffled by his hand.

Ginny sat down next to him. "What happened?" she asked, now much more sympathetic.

"What happened?" Jamie echoed curiously.

Dean smiled at his stepson but directed his answer to Ginny. He needed his wife's sharp intelligence and no-nonsense perspective. "It should have been just a routine interview,

impersonating a Muggle police officer."

Ginny nodded in understanding. It was something Dean was called on to do quite a bit, because he one of the only Aurors who was Muggle-raised and who could pass as a Muggle in undercover operations. Among other things, the repatriation policy had made liaising with the Muggle world much more difficult.

"I was off the clock, since we haven't told Kingsley that someone poisoned Angelina, but I thought it would be a quick and easy conversation. Katie's always been the friendly sort."

"She is that," Ginny agreed.

"Yeah, she was a good witness, very helpful. So helpful that she volunteered to phone Hermione to get some more details. And that's when it all went to hell," Dean related.

"You said 'hell'!" Jamie parroted gleefully. "That's not a nice word!"

"I know, buddy," Dean said, ruffling the boy's messy black hair. "But it's an accurate description of what happened."

He looked back at Ginny with a troubled expression. "I used an Extendable Ear to listen in on their phone call. Somehow, Hermione knew I wasn't a Muggle police officer. She had her boyfriend calling up Theo friggin' Nott to come and rescue Katie from me. A Death Eater!"

"That's awful," Ginny commiserated. She looked faintly guilty. "I'm afraid I may have gotten Hermione a bit paranoid. I was so jumpy when I saw her back in December, worried that someone from the Ministry might see us together. And then with Ron punching her boyfriend"

"Yeah, I know," Dean sighed. "Hermione thinks we're the bad guys. So, the question is, how do we fix it?"

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Hermione was panting slightly as they ascended the narrow spiral staircase to the top of Magdalen Tower on Saturday evening.

"I thought you kept yourself in shape with all that yoga, love," Draco gently teased her as he followed her up the steps.

"How about we strap a bowling ball around your middle and see how well you do?" she snapped back. Still, she appreciated his watchful presence at her back, knowing he would catch her if she stumbled. Hermione was also more impressed than she would ever admit that he had wangled their way into the tower, on May Day no less, without being an alumni of Magdalen College.

"Oh," she gasped breathlessly as she reached the top. "It's beautiful!" Oxford was spread out before them, town and gown twinkling as street lights came on in the twilight.

"It's a lovely night," Draco agreed. "I thought you were afraid of heights," he murmured into her hair, wrapping an arm around her as she rested her elbows on the parapet, gazing off towards the river and Magdalen bridge.

"I'm only scared of flying," Hermione smiled up at him. "I don't mind heights at all when there is solid stone under my feet."

"I'm glad you chose Oxford," he told her. "There's something special about this place. It reminds one of tradition, no matter how much one's values have altered."

She gave him a sharp glance, certain that he was speaking of himself despite the impersonal phrasing. Oxford tugged at the edges of her memory as well, invoking some forgotten tradition.

Draco's quicksilver eyes held hers. "I have said a great deal to you since we've known each other, one way and another, but . . . Will you marry me?" he asked abruptly, removing a small box from his trouser pocket and snapping open the lid.

It was a beautiful, priceless ring, with the golden band studded with blood-red rubies. Hermione's initial reaction was to covet it, to hold out her hand so Malcolm could slide it onto her finger. Instead, she looked away, staring with blank eyes at an intersection below. The traffic signal winked from red to green to yellow before she answered. *No. Yes. Wait.*

She lifted her eyes back to his, the silver-grey darkened with an emotion she could not quite read.

"Why? And why now? Is it because of me or because of the baby?" she questioned him. "It seems as though this is something you are desperate to do."

"Desperate?" He raised one blond eyebrow. "I wouldn't insult either of us with a word like that. I can only tell you that if you marry me, I would make you as happy as you've made me."

Hermione stood very still, looking out over the stone railing at the university's quadrangles and venerable old buildings. Draco stepped behind her, his body warm and solid against her back. "I cherish you. You know that I would never hurt you, that I would do anything in my power to keep you from harm," he whispered temptingly. "If I could, I would give this all to you as your kingdom. Marry me, Hermione."

She turned around to face him, laying both hands on the front of his light spring jacket, searching his face for something that would tell her what answer to give. Draco stood tall and proud, his platinum blond hair gleaming even in the dimming twilight. There was an inbred arrogance in the way he held himself, in the aristocratic lines of his chin and cheekbones, and in the almost complacent expression in his grey eyes. She loved him, but she found no reassurance there, no hint of humility.

Her response came from somewhere deep inside her, instinctive rather than rational.

"No, Draco. I won't marry you."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: the ring described above is the Chequers Ring - you can check out pics online. The last scene above is a homage to the proposal of marriage in Dorothy Sayers' *Gaudy Night*.

A Legitimate Question

May 17, 2004

"Oh, bugger!" Hermione cried as the mug slipped from her hand to crack on the tiled kitchen floor.

As Draco looked up from the *Financial Times* at the noise, she began to cry. "That was my favorite mug - my mum and dad gave it to me when I turned sixteen because they said I was finally old enough to drink coffee," Hermione sniffled as she gathered the pieces.

Immediately, he went to give her a hug, kneeling next to her on the hard tiles. "It's alright, love," he shushed, "we can fix it."

"No, we can't! Once something's broken, it's never the same even if you manage to glue it back together." Hermione swiped at her eyes. "Stupid pregnancy hormones," she muttered.

"Here," Draco handed her a clean handkerchief. "We can fix it," he repeated, quite willing to avail himself of the opportunity presented. He placed his hands around hers and carefully closed her hands around the pieces of the broken mug. "Picture it looking good as new and say *Reparo* with me," he instructed.

From the look she was giving him, Hermione thought he was a nutter.

"Trust me," he urged.

"I suppose it can't make it any worse," she granted.

"*Reparo*," they said in unison. A violet light shone through their joined hands.

"There, all fixed," Draco said with satisfaction.

Hermione examined the mug from all angles, rotating it slowly. The motion made the rubies set into the ring on her right hand gleam with a suppressed fire. She had accepted the ring at his insistence, even if she was wearing it on the wrong finger. That, too, was something he intended to fix.

"That's odd," she noted, finishing her inspection of the mug. "I thought it must have broken when it hit the floor, but there's not even a chip."

Looking into her guileless brown eyes, Draco realized Hermione was wholly sincere about the bloody thing never being broken. Her Obliviated mind was working overtime, protecting her from the knowledge that magic existed, even when it was right in front of her face. And unlike Theo, who had been able to convince his wife beyond a doubt that magic existed by taking her to Diagon Alley, Draco was limited to small, piecemeal spells. It would be illegal for him to take Hermione to the Alley unless they were married, and even then, he didn't think he would risk it. She was simply too well-recognized not to be accosted.

Draco shrugged it off as he helped Hermione to her feet. He had some time until the baby was born and would keep trying, perhaps when she was tired and the barriers in her mind were more porous. Granger was an obstinate witch, but he was an even more persistent wizard.

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Astoria was in her new friend's private room at St. Mungo's, playing a version of Exploding Snap that involved some rather creative forfeits, when Healer Strout rapped on the open door.

"Mrs. Malfoy, your husband is here to see you," she announced, looking at the two patients giggling on the bed with sour disapproval.

"I assure you, Mr. Malfoy, your wife is properly supervised at all times to prevent anything untoward," the humorless cow reassured her husband. Draco, for his part, looked entirely disinterested.

Astoria smiled slyly. The nursing staff tried hard, but she was a sneaky Slytherin and found it child's play to circumvent their silly little rules. The skimpy hospital gowns provided such easy access, after all.

"Did you finally get around to remembering our wedding anniversary?" she asked Draco in an arch tone.

"I've been thinking about it since Saturday." Draco's smile was a mean one. "Five years married to you, and then I had to wait two extra buggering days because the lazy sods at the Wizengamot don't work on weekends."

Astoria pouted at the sheaf of parchment her husband thrust in her direction, a self-inking quill on top. "That's not a very good anniversary gift," she complained.

"Ooooh, papers to sign?" her new friend squealed in excitement. "Allow me!"

"Sorry, Lockhart," Draco said firmly. "Tori needs to be the one to sign these."

"You know Gilderoy?" Astoria asked brightly.

"He taught Defense Against the Dark Arts the year before you started at Hogwarts. He's quite the dab hand with Cornish Pixies," Draco smirked.

Gilderoy looked confused and Astoria leapt to his defense.

"Don't be cruel, Draco. Don't you know Gilderoy's lost his memories?" she scolded.

Her husband pinched the bridge of his nose in a familiar gesture of exasperation and muttered something about Merlin and patience under his breath. Astoria chose to ignore that commentary in favor of more pressing matters.

"Did you bring me a present other than these moldy old papers?" she demanded.

"Tori," her husband began a long-suffering tone, "Once you sign the papers you get a million Galleons. Is that a nice enough present for you?"

She batted her eyelashes at him. "That's not a present. That's what I'm entitled to under the terms of our prenuptial agreement, along with all of the jewelry, clothes, and other personal effects that I brought to or acquired during our marriage."

Draco blinked as she quoted their prenuptial agreement back at him. "Indeed," he said. He pulled a particular paper from the stack. "What about the villa in Ibiza? Is that an adequate gift? I know it's your favorite."

"You're giving me the villa?" Astoria asked happily. She positively adored the villa.

"On one tiny little condition," Draco hedged.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"A magical oath that you will never approach or harm, or have anyone else approach or harm, a certain witch and her children," Draco stated implacably.

"Is this certain witch pregnant with your child?" Astoria asked shrewdly.

At her husband's nod, her eyes narrowed. Between bouts of shagging Gilderoy like a bunny in springtime, she'd had quite a bit of time to think in the six weeks since she had been involuntarily committed to the Janus Thickey ward, and her thoughts - naturally - had turned to the identity of the woman who had supplanted her. "She must be very *brave*," Astoria said, hazarding a guess.

"I don't know what you're on about, but I hope that's not a threat," Draco said evenly. He didn't blink, or betray himself by the slightest twitch, but that told Astoria everything she needed to know. They had been married five years, after all, and her soon-to-be-ex-husband's tell was to go absolutely still when he was hiding something - like an intimate relationship with Gryffindor's Mudblood princess, Hermione Granger.

"I want the condo in Miami as well," Astoria bargained. She found it fascinating that her normally fastidious husband was sullyng himself with a Mudblood in order to have a baby. Astoria didn't judge - not when she'd resorted to the same measures herself - but she did think Draco was a tad bit hypocritical on how harshly he'd condemned her affairs. "And I hope for your child's sake that he inherits your hair, rather than his mum's."

"All Malfoys have white-blond hair," Draco stated, pretending not to understand her. He made the necessary adjustments to the document to transfer the Miami condo to her. "Sign these," he ordered.

"You can use my quill," Gilderoy offered with an eager smile. Sweet, befuddled Gilderoy, who had forgotten so much - including the need to lie about his parents' blood status. He should have been repatriated with the rest of the Mudbloods, but the Ministry apparently hadn't bothered since his memories already were compromised. Or perhaps Healer Strout was covering for her favorite patient.

Astoria took the proffered peacock feather and signed her name, several times, with a flourish.

"Now for the wand oath," Draco directed, handing over her wand. He must have gotten it from Healer Strout, since patients on the Janus Thickey ward weren't trusted with them.

A quick incantation and it was done. Their marriage was over. Astoria wondered if something was wrong with her, that she wasn't more upset over five wasted years. But they both had moved on. Surreptitiously, she rubbed her lower belly. She was only two weeks late, but she had a good feeling about this pregnancy.

"I wish you well," Draco said awkwardly.

"I wish you the same," Astoria said. She meant it, too.

"Er, would you like me to sign your release papers, to get you out of here?" Draco asked, clearing his throat.

Gilderoy looked stricken and clutched at her arm. "Don't leave me!" he cried. "You're a wonderful listener, and so helpful with answering my fan mail."

"I don't want to leave St. Mungo's just yet," she told Draco. "I need some more time to get better." And Gilderoy needed her.

Draco looked absolutely flummoxed, which was par for the course when he was attempting to be a decent bloke rather than an outright bastard.

"Look, how about I sign you out and then you can check yourself right back in? That way, you control when you leave," Draco suggested. "Otherwise, your father will get to decide whether you can get out of here."

Astoria hissed in displeasure. "We'll do it that way," she agreed. "I'm done with having men control my life."

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Marcus Flint couldn't help but feel a little resentful when Malfoy showed up at lunch and announced he was a free man, waving his executed divorce papers in glee before handing them over to Theo to do whatever it was that solicitors did with all of the papers in their possession. More than anything, Marcus wished he could divorce Brunhilda and marry Katie, but if wishes were broomsticks, then even Squibs would have Firebolts.

"I presume you'd like me to arrange for a Muggle marriage license so that you can wed Hermione as soon as possible?" Theo asked Malfoy.

"Not just yet," the blond wizard said, too casually.

The vulnerable, hurt look that flashed across his face was one that Marcus hadn't seen in more than a decade. The last time had been Draco's first year on the Slytherin Quidditch

team, when he had received a scathing lecture from his father for allowing Harry Potter to beat him to the Snitch.

"Granger's got a mild case of cold feet," Draco informed them. "Says she doesn't want to marry under false pretenses, or some bollocks like that."

"Sounds like you're well and truly caught, mate," Marcus observed. "How'd she figure out you've been lying to her?"

Draco gave a twisted smile. "She hasn't figured it out. Hermione's worried about deceiving me, in case she gets her memories back and there's something in her past that changes how I feel about her."

Theo snorted. "Isn't that ironic?"

"That's a polite way of putting it," Draco agreed, swiping a frustrated hand through his fringe. Marcus wondered if his friend had ever been turned down by a woman before.

"Have you thought about the legitimacy issues?" Theo asked, concerned.

"Incessantly," the blond wizard snapped.

"What's the problem?" Marcus asked. "Lucius still can recognize the baby as a legitimate Malfoy even if you and Granger aren't married. That's what my dad did with Isabella, once she showed her magic, and Peter, as soon as he was born."

"That's precisely the problem. It's at my father's discretion as the head of the family," Draco said.

"But the kid's yours - there's no doubt about that," Marcus replied. He liked Hermione, who was nothing like Astoria, and he would hex anyone who suggested she wasn't faithful.

"Of course he is," Draco agreed. "But that won't stop my father from placing conditions on legitimizing the baby if Granger and I aren't married by the time he's born. Like requiring me to marry a proper pureblood witch like Daphne Greengrass, to make sure the baby's raised properly at the Manor."

"Daphne?" Theo raised an eyebrow at the mention of his ex-wife. "I wish you the joy of her."

"Don't be a wanker, Nott," Draco snapped. "I don't want to marry that frigid bitch. I want Granger."

"That's awful, Drake." Marcus's earlier resentment towards his blond friend evaporated, replaced by sympathy. "My dad's a hard man, and did a piss-poor job arranging my marriage, but he's not so much of a bastard that he'd ever try to make me choose between Katie and the kids."

Theo made a sympathetic noise in concurrence, but apparently had no legal advice to offer. Marcus decided to offer up some plain common sense instead. "You need to figure out a way to convince Hermione to tie the knot, and quickly, too."

Rather than biting his head off for stating the obvious, as expected, Draco looked thoughtful and then grinned. "That's fucking brilliant, Flint! If Granger will agree to a handfasting, we're as good as married. In the Ministry's eyes, it's even better than some bullshite Muggle wedding."

"You'll need a Ministry official - one you can trust to be discreet - to perform the ceremony," Theo cautioned.

Draco refused to let his solicitor friend dampen his enthusiasm. "Don't you worry. If I can get Granger to agree, I have the perfect man in mind."

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The past fortnight had been quite trying for Dolores Umbridge. On top of her weighty responsibilities and full schedule as an undersecretary, she had been repeatedly forced to defend her actions as the head of the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission following that horrid article in the *Daily Prophet*.

Skeeter's slanted reporting had been all too effective. Since the story about the Chang girl's pregnancy and putative heritage had run, Dolores had received a flood of letters - and no few Howlers - having the temerity to criticize *her* actions. Most of the witches and wizards who wrote in were disgusted by the mistreatment of a potentially pureblood, or at least half-blood, witch and her unborn child, but a significant minority were appalled at the Ministry's policies towards Muggleborns as a group.

Undersecretary Umbridge was disappointed. Even after years of educational outreach and fetching pink pamphlets published by her department, there still were those witches and wizards who persisted in the misguided belief that Mudbloods had a rightful place in wizarding society. Just now, she was compiling a list of names of those blood traitors - an ugly term, but it applied here and she would not hesitate to use it - so that the Ministry of Magic could target them and their families for necessary reeducation.

A knock at her door disrupted her attention and Dolores looked up, hiding her irritation. If the visitor had made it past her dragon of a secretary, then he or she was someone important. "Do come in," she called out, in a falsely sweet voice.

Lucius Malfoy walked into her office and seated himself on the edge of her desk, scorning the visitor's chair. Dolores' heart pitter-pattered at the site of the handsome wizard. She fought back the urge to pat down her hair, and thanked Salazar and all his snakes that she was wearing her favorite pink cardigan set today.

"Lucius, what a pleasure to see you," she simpered.

"It's always a delight to see you, Dolores," he murmured, taking her hand and brushing his lips across the back of it with exquisite pureblood manners. "Even on occasions that are less than delightful."

Lucius placed a back edition of the *Prophet* on her desk, folded face-up so that Skeeter's article was showing. "We need to do something about this, Dolores."

"Believe me, Lucius, I've done my utmost," she said earnestly. "Unfortunately, my solicitor tells me the piece isn't actionable and I haven't found any basis to discredit Ambassador Wu or his claim that Madam Chang-Nott comes from a Chinese wizarding family."

He frowned. "I'm referring to a different sort of damage control. Gracefully admit that a mistake was made - find some subordinate to blame if you must - and accept the Notts' claim that the girl isn't a Mudblood."

"I can't do that!" she protested, shocked and offended that Lucius Malfoy - who she always had thought was a right-thinking wizard - expected her to back down on a question of blood status. "If I admit I'm wrong about one Muggleborn, people will assume I'm wrong about others. Every Mudblood lover will seize upon this as an excuse to bring those vermin among us again."

Lucius shook his head in contradiction. "If you persist in denying that Madam Chang-Nott has some magical relatives," he warned, "you risk having the chit used as a wedge, widening the crack in the door so that more Mudbloods are permitted back in our society."

Dolores clutched at her pearls in horror. "We can't have that!"

"The circumstances surrounding Madam Chang-Nott's newly discovered magical heritage are extraordinary," Lucius said soothingly. "The records were lost by a foreign government due to a civil war. Giving the Notts a concession in this one instance in no way sets a dangerous precedent."

She nodded, with some reluctance. Lucius was persuasive, though she wasn't yet wholly convinced.

"It's not a situation like with my son's Mudblood," he pressed on, "where her filthy antecedents are well-known and wholly indisputable."

"How is dear Miss Granger these days?" she inquired, saccharine sweet despite her hidden anger. Even a mention of that conniving, centaur-loving little bitch was enough to make her blood pressure spike.

"Draco has no complaints," Lucius drawled. "You need not worry about Miss Granger ever coming back to our world."

The nasty grin on the handsome wizard's face drew an answering smile from Dolores. "Oh?" she inquired with girlish enthusiasm. "Do tell!"

Lucius did, and at the end of his recitation, she sighed with a mix of satisfaction and regret and picked up her quill.

"If there's no risk of Miss Granger or any other undesirable tagging along, I suppose I can agree that the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission made an error with Madam Chang-Nott in this one instance."

Dolores dashed off a quick note and signed it, all in pink ink, before folding the memo in the shape of an airplane and launching it. "There!" she exclaimed. "MLE will process it this afternoon. In the meantime, can I interest you in a spot of lunch?"

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"Mr. Nott, please take a seat. Would you like tea?"

Theo grimaced to himself. His meeting with Flitwick already was off to a poor start, with the diminutive Charms professor remaining seated behind his desk, receiving him as though he were an errant student.

"Tea would be good, thank you," he accepted the offered beverage in a mild tone, hoping to put things on a more cordial footing.

"What brings you here, Mr. Nott? And for the second time in only a few months?" Professor Flitwick inquired, his eyes sharp.

"I thought teachers enjoyed visits from their former students," Theo parried.

"It depends upon the student," Flitwick said blandly. "Personally, I find your visits unobjectionable, but somewhat surprising. You weren't a member of my House and never seemed particularly interested in Charms."

Theo refused to take offense. "I am married to one of your Ravenclaws and I am here once again on her behalf," he replied.

"Oh?" Professor Flitwick cocked his head to one side like a curious bird.

Absently, Theo rubbed his wrist. The dull ache never went away these days, and hadn't for months, ever since pregnancy had wreaked havoc with Cho's mental equilibrium. That was yet another fault he laid to his own account. He never would have gotten his wife pregnant if he had known it would take this kind of toll on her health. At least it wasn't the sharp, searing pain that had woken him twice now when Cho's demons had overwhelmed her and she had tried to end it all.

"Cho tried to commit suicide at the beginning of April," he confessed, deciding that honesty, although more of a blunt tool than he usually preferred, would serve him best.

"The Mindhealers at St. Mungo's have done all they can to stabilize her, but they are handicapped by the blocks placed on her mind when she was Obliviated. I'd like you to reverse that spell, if you can."

"Oh, I can reverse it easily, since I was the one to cast it," the little professor said with confidence. "But why should I risk a decade or more in Azkaban at your behest?"

"It's not for me, it's for Cho. I know you were her favorite teacher," Theo said persuasively.

"I've taught many students over the years," Professor Flitwick said dismissively. "While I remain very fond of many of them - Cho included - I am not about to risk prison for any of

them. Particularly the wife of a Death Eater."

Looking at the implacable Charms professor, Theo was reminded that he was half-goblin, and capable of all of the pragmatic ruthlessness of that race.

"Then there's nothing more to be said and I thank you for your time," Theo said with stiff politeness, taking to his feet.

"Sit down, you foolish boy," Professor Flitwick scolded him, irritably. With his wand, he *Accio'd* a thin book, bound in red, from an upper shelf. "Here, take this."

"*The Mutable Mind*," Theo read aloud. "What is this?"

"A treatise focused on charms and spells that alter the mind, including how they can be reversed," the professor explained.

"Pardon me, sir, but how will this help if you aren't willing to reverse the Memory Charm you placed on Cho?"

"Cho was Obliviated twice, once by me and earlier at the time of her kidnapping and assault," Flitwick stated. "Presumably by a Death Eater who balked at murdering a young woman, even after committing other crimes against her person."

Theo nodded, trying to keep his face impassive. It was public knowledge that Cho had been unable to identify her attackers because her memories had been stripped.

"Memory Charms function like a dam in a river, keeping memories back but not destroying them," Flitwick lectured. "I could sense that earlier blockage when I was in her mind. If the Death Eater who Obliviated her were to reverse his spell, the ensuing flood of memories should theoretically 'wash away' any subsequent mental blocks, including the ones that I placed."

"Is there any downside?" Theo asked, with a solicitor's inherent caution.

"The worst that will happen is that she'll remember being raped, but my Memory Charm will hold," the older wizard answered. "Even in that case, it still would help make her treatments at St. Mungo's more effective."

"Thank you, Professor Flitwick," Theo said, this time with sincerity. "I appreciate your help."

"It's my pleasure to assist Cho in what little ways I can," the Charms professor replied. "Keep the book, please. Now all you have to do is find the Death Eater who Obliviated your wife and persuade *him* to risk Azkaban by reversing the Memory Charm he placed."

From the pointed look that Professor Flitwick gave him, Theo was uneasily certain that the little man knew exactly who that Death Eater was.

What Doesn't Kill Us, Makes Us Stronger

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings apply to this chapter with full force, in particular the italicized portion.

May 17, 2004 (afternoon)

In the ordinary course, Theodore Nott was a cautious, deliberate wizard. The law suited him well as a profession, with its careful weighing of the pros and cons. But now, sitting at the bar at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade, he realized his legalistic mind was a handicap. He was paralyzed when he needed to take action.

"Would you like another, luv?" inquired Madam Rosmerta.

Theo looked down at the Butterbeer he had been nursing for the past hour, ever since leaving Professor Flitwick's office. As mild as the beverage was, Theo wanted to keep an entirely clear head. "No, but thank you," he politely declined.

The buxom barmaid gave him a kind smile. "I hope all is well with your wife," she said confidentially. "That poor dear, having to undergo all of those treatments at St. Mungo's and with the Muggles to have a baby. I sent a letter to Undersecretary Umbridge and gave her a piece of my mind, I did."

He gave a small nod that seemed to satisfy Madam Rosmerta. Theo wondered if the woman had been at Hogwarts and, if so, whether she had been a Gryffindor. Writing a letter criticizing the vindictive Pink Menace struck him as rather brave - and foolhardy.

"If there's anything at all I can do for Cho, you let me know," the older woman urged. She seemed so sincere that Theo blinked in surprise.

Suddenly, he felt ashamed. Here was a woman who barely knew Cho, just as a face in a crowd of students clamoring for service, yet Madam Rosmerta had taken a stand publicly supporting her. And while he suspected that her offer to do anything for Cho didn't include acts that could get her hauled off to Azkaban, she also hadn't taken any vows - Unbreakable and marital - to protect and honor Cho and keep her safe from harm.

Throwing a few coins on the bar, Theo took to his feet. He knew now what he had to do.

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Cho had just finished lunch and was washing up when Theo arrived home at their flat, hours earlier than usual.

His serious demeanor unconsciously echoed his behavior on Valentine's Day, when he had reintroduced her to magic and turned her life topsy-turvy.

"Please, will you sit down?" he asked, pulling out a chair for her at their kitchen table.

She sat down and looked into his anxious blue eyes. "What is it, Theo?"

He took a deep, bracing breath. "I met with a professor today, an expert on Charms, and he told me there may be a way to reverse your memory loss."

"That's good news, isn't it?" she asked, even though Theo seemed distressed.

"It involves removing the first block that was placed on your memories, so it likely will be emotionally painful," Theo warned.

"I see," Cho said slowly. "Is there any other way?"

Theo shook his head. "And it may be that you remember nothing but - nothing but that." Her sensitive husband couldn't even bring himself to say the word rape, she noted.

"Do it," Cho told him firmly. "I may not want to remember, but I *need* to."

"You probably should sit down on the couch then," Theo suggested worriedly. "It sounds as though the effects can be disorienting."

Cho settled in on the couch with her pale-faced husband next to her. "Whatever else you remember, don't forget that I love you," Theo said, running a caressing hand over her baby bump and placing a light kiss on her forehead. "Both of you."

"Please forgive me," he whispered before raising his wand. "*Redintegro memoria*," he chanted three times, each time executing a complicated pattern with his wand.

Initially, Cho thought it hadn't worked. Then pressure began building behind her skull, like the onset of the worst migraine of her life. She cradled her forehead in her hands and whimpered.

"Cho, are you alright?" Theo called, as though from the other end of a dark tunnel. She felt as though her consciousness were split in two, between the present and the past, as memories came flooding back.

She was lying atop a long mahogany table on a filthy mattress, scratchy under her cheek and stomach and ominously damp at the juncture of her legs. They had immobilized her limbs with magical bonds, loosely enough that she could be twisted and turned into whatever sick position the man or men using her desired. Her head, however, always faced the fireplace, so that she could see new Death Eaters arriving for their turn or previous rapists returning for another go.

Time had blurred during her ordeal, but she had been captured leaving St. Mungo's after a late shift and seen the arrival of two dawns through swollen eyelids. Now it was dark again, and Cho didn't think she could make it through another night. During the daylight hours, she

was left alone and unmolested in the formal dining room for long stretches of time, but nighttime was when the Death Eaters came out to play.

Thorfinn Rowle, the massive blond, sauntered into her field of vision, leering at her as he undid his trousers. When Cho closed her eyes to avoid the sight, he yanked her towards him by her hair and casually slapped her across the cheek. "Pay attention, whore! Put your filthy mouth to some good use." Rowle shoved his semi-flaccid penis into her mouth and Cho forced her jaw to relax, trying hard not to gag as he hardened and began to thrust. That was a matter of self-preservation rather than any desire to please the loathsome Death Eater. When she gagged, it aggravated her cracked ribs. And when she had bitten Rowle, the first time, he had beaten her into unconsciousness.

Cho once more began cataloging her injuries and methods of treatment, both as a method to disassociate and as a way to give herself hope. Every injury inflicted upon her - at least every physical injury - could be fixed. The hanks of hair that had been torn out could be regrown with a potion, and the injuries to her scalp could be healed with a salve. Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes sold a bruise paste that would fix her black eye and the bruises on her arms, torso and thighs in a trice, while dittany would mend the bite marks. If Rowle had broken her eye socket and not just blackened her eye, Skele-gro would heal it, along with her cracked ribs and left ankle. Macnair had snapped that in punishment after she kicked him.

She was more worried about her internal injuries, since those could kill her before the Aurors rescued her. Cho knew that Harry, even though he was too ill to personally assist in the search, would insist the Auror Department leave no stone unturned. But if they didn't arrive at Nott Court soon, it might be too late. She was fairly certain her spleen was ruptured as a result of Rowle's beating. The tearing to her vagina and rectum also was more than superficial, but she had no way of gauging how bad it was.

Cho couldn't hold back a pained cry when a second Death Eater - she couldn't see who it was - rammed into her from behind. "The bitch is starting to like it," one of the watching Death Eaters commented with a coarse laugh. Rowle groaned in pleasure as the force of the second wizard's thrusts forced her to take him deeper down her throat. "Fuck her harder, Jugson," he directed. "It feels good on my cock." Cho took note of the name and mentally added a second count of rape to Jugson's tally. That was her other coping strategy, keeping careful track of who had committed what crimes against her person.

She heard the Floo activate as Rowle climaxed in her mouth. She let as much as possible dribble out between her lips, but couldn't help but swallow some of the disgusting fluid. "I've turned her into quite a good little cocksucker," he bragged to the Death Eater waiting to take his place. Cho shifted her eyes enough to see that it was Nott, the owner of the manor where she was being kept. She felt a flare of hatred - Rowle and Macnair were brutes, but Nott was a dangerous, urbane sociopath. He was the one who had insisted on the mattress, not for her comfort, but so as to not mar the finish of the wood. He had unfastened his smoking jacket and was stroking himself in preparation when a younger wizard stepped out of the fireplace to claim his attention.

"Father? I was hoping you could sign these - er, is this a bad time?"

Had her personal circumstances not been so dire, Cho would have laughed at the comical expression of shock on the younger Theodore Nott's face. She recognized him from Hogwarts, and he had always seemed so quiet and serious. She supposed it would be a bit disconcerting to enter one's family home and find a classmate being raped on the dining room table. The older Nott had the decency to tuck himself back in before addressing his son. "Theo! I wasn't expecting you this evening. Would you like a turn?"

"No thank you," Theo declined politely. "Daphne would be a bit irked, I'm afraid. I can just wait in the kitchen until you're finished," he suggested.

"Splendid!" his father agreed. "Give me a quarter-hour or so, will you, to finish and get cleaned up?"

"Of course," Theo said, with a faint undertone of distaste. "Take as long as you need." Then he walked away, leaving the room - leaving her - without a backwards glance.

"Theo, don't go!" Cho cried desperately. "Don't leave me!"

"I'm right here, love," Theo promised, holding her hand. But his grip felt as unsubstantial as a ghost's, not nearly strong enough to pull her out of the overwhelming flood of memories.

Memory-Theo didn't return for at least twenty minutes, not until after Jugson and Nott, Sr. had finished. Cho barely noticed his arrival through the grinding, burning pain that Blaise Zabini was inflicting. He pulled out at the last instant, spraying her buttocks and lower back with warm, sticky semen and laughing darkly as her blood seeped onto the mattress. "Zabini, you wanker!" someone complained. "You buggered her half to death!"

The vile Zabini just laughed harder. "Scabior and the Snatchers are on their way to finish the job." Even half-conscious, Cho was chilled to hear that. Everyone had heard the grim storied of what the savage Snatchers did to the witches they caught. Zabini was right - she wouldn't survive that.

When the Floo sounded again, she was almost relieved to see Lucius Malfoy, his aristocratic features twisted in rage. "Nott," he shouted, "I told you to let the Mudblood bitch go! I am not having you jeopardize our political gains because of your disgusting proclivities."

"Not just mine, Lucius," the older Nott sneered. "We've been having quite the party here. Are you miffed that you weren't invited?"

"Hardly," Malfoy sneered back. "Your party's over. Have someone Obliviate the Mudblood before you release her."

"You'd still remember, though," Nott growled. "I'm not giving you that kind of leverage over me, Lucius."

"You want me to enjoy her, too, so we're all equally guilty?" Malfoy asked. Cho didn't hear an answer, but Nott, Sr. must have nodded. "Fine," Malfoy said with annoyance, "but your son needs to join me. I'm certain he hasn't touched the girl either, with his quaint ideas on the distastefulness of rape."

"Do it," the elder Nott ordered.

"But, father - " Theo protested.

Lucius Malfoy moved into Cho's field of vision, unfastening his robes and trousers. "She's been well-fucked," he observed casually. "Probably her mouth's the tightest hole left. Theo, do you want her cunt or her arse?"

"Neither, sir, but I'll make sure she services you properly, if that's acceptable," Theo offered. "I'll be culpable as well, but won't have to worry about my wife removing my bollocks with a hex."

Peeking up from her eyelashes, Cho could see Lucius Malfoy considering Theo's offer. "Very well," he consented, seating himself in one of the ornately carved chairs and spreading his legs.

"Imperio," Theo said softly behind her ear, after a few quick spells to release her bonds. "Listen carefully, Cho," he whispered as he lifted her off the table. "I need you to trust me and do as I say, and then I can get you out of here. Understand?"

"Yes," she whispered back, reveling in the floating feeling inside her head.

"Good girl," Theo said, and she warmed at the praise. "Now crawl over to Mr. Malfoy and kneel between his legs." As Theo coached her through the mechanics of oral sex, a rational corner of her mind marveled at his foolishness. By using an Unforgivable on her, the younger Nott was risking life in Azkaban, a much harsher sentence than he would face for a single count of sexual assault.

The same rational corner of her mind judged that Lucius Malfoy was close to finishing, based on how he was vocalizing his pleasure at her actions while his hands fisted in her hair. Theo apparently reached the same conclusion. "When Mr. Malfoy comes, I want you to swallow every last bit and then thank him for the privilege of being allowed to suck pureblood cock." Controlled as she was by the curse, Cho had no choice but to obey his degrading instructions.

Lucius Malfoy laughed and patted her on the head like a dog as he zipped himself back up. "What a good little bitch," he crooned to her. "You should let her take care of you," he suggested to Theo, smirking meaningfully.

"Maybe I'll do that, once we're in private," the younger wizard smirked back, yanking Cho to her feet. "Come along," he directed. She stumbled, trying to obey despite a broken ankle.

As soon as they were out of the dining room with the door shut behind them, the jeering Death Eater disappeared, replaced by a scared teenager who swore softly to himself and began levitating her up the stairs. "You're bleeding," he said, stating the obvious in his panic. "Just hang on until we get to my room - don't pass out on me."

With that direct command, Cho stayed conscious down the long corridor. Once in the bedroom, Theo released the Hovering charm and Cho slumped on the floor like a puppet with

broken strings. He spared her one worried look before diving into the en suite bathroom. Dimly, she could hear him rummaging, apparently with success, since he emerged quickly with potion vials and a bath towel in hand. "Keep this pressed between your legs and drink these." She drank both vials of the foul-tasting Blood Replenishing Potion obediently, without complaint.

"One's usually enough, but you've lost a lot of blood," he commented. "They're also a few months old and may have gone off a bit. I haven't had the need to patch myself up since Potter offed the Dark Lord." Cho said nothing, too drained to speak even if she had been inclined to converse with a Death Eater. Theo's analytical monologue seemed to sooth him, however, and he seemed much more composed as he handed her an anonymous black cloak. "Put this on," he directed. "Are you able to Apparate now?"

Cho gratefully covered her nakedness with the cloak. "My ankle," she said softly. "It's broken."

"Ferula." Theo pointed his wand at her ankle and it was swathed in bandages.

Cho sighed in relief, relief that ended abruptly as Theo raised the wand to her face, regret prominent in his light blue eyes. "I'm really sorry, but . . . Oblivate."

She felt like she was endlessly falling, spiraling into a black void as dark and soft as velvet, with no concept of space or time. Cho wondered if Theo Nott had followed up the Oblivate with the Killing Curse and if she were in some sort of wizarding version of purgatory. If so, she wouldn't mind staying for a while, where it was peaceful and there was no pain.

A man shouting broke into her peaceful black space. "It's in the past, Cho. You survived it!" It was Theo's voice, strangely muffled, even though he was screaming in her ear. "Come back to the present, love! Come back to me!" The vestiges of the Imperius Curse he had placed on her all those years ago - but never lifted - compelled her to obey, ever so reluctantly.

The first thing she saw in the present was her husband's concerned face and regret-filled blue eyes, mirroring his expression from five years ago. She screamed, long and loud, letting out the raw desperation and black rage that had been blocked up in the walls of her mind for far too long. It was a sound fit to shatter glass, but the exploding wineglasses and cracked plates were the result of uncontrolled magic rather than the pitch and volume of her voice. When Cho stopped screaming, the air in the room seemed to vibrate in the sudden silence. Her wave of accidental magic had broken every glass and piece of crockery in the buffet and knocked over every piece of furniture in the room. Theo was slumped against the base of a kitchen cabinet, having been thrown from his chair.

Cho stepped over the wreckage and felt for a pulse. When she felt his heartbeat under her fingertips, disappointment warred with relief. She needed time to process her memories, to determine how she felt about her husband. For now, she left Theo lying unconscious on the floor, stooping down only to extract his wand from his trouser pocket before leaving their flat.

She was a witch, after all, one who had been deprived of her magic for far too long. And a witch needed a wand, especially for what Cho intended to do.

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When the doorbell rang and Hermione saw Cho standing on her front step, her initial reaction was to slam the door in her face. The tear tracks on Cho's cheeks and the desperate expression in the other woman's eyes changed her mind.

"What's wrong, Cho?" she asked, ushering her into the lounge. With some concern, Hermione noticed her wrinkled medical scrubs and mismatched shoes. "Should I call Theo?"

"Don't do that!" Cho begged her.

"Did you two have a row?" Hermione guessed.

"No, it's not that." Cho laughed shrilly, on the verge of hysteria. "If only it were that."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Hermione asked, hoping Cho would confide in her, or at least help her to understand what was going on.

"I need to borrow a dress, make myself presentable. I rushed out of the house so quickly" Cho took a deep, steadying breath before continuing. "I remembered the identities of those who assaulted me, and I need to go to the authorities and give them my memories before I lose them again. Before they are taken from me again."

Hermione hesitated, not the least because of Cho's paranoid phrasing. "Theo's a solicitor. Wouldn't it be better if he accompanies you to the police station?"

"I'm perfectly capable of going on my own," Cho snapped, showing shades of her old self. "I just need a dress, but if you aren't willing to help me - "

"No, I'm happy to lend you a dress," Hermione said in a soothing voice. "Come along."

She led Cho upstairs to the large bedroom she shared with Draco, feeling vaguely uncomfortable at the way Cho's eyes lingered on the decadent four-poster bed. "Here, all of my things are in this closet. What sort of dress did you want?"

"Something dark and authoritative. And cut to accommodate this, of course," Cho answered, gesturing to her pregnant belly.

"Of course," Hermione echoed, slightly put off by the cold way Cho referred to her unborn daughter. Her own pregnancy had been an unwelcome surprise, but one she had reconciled herself to. Now, she and Draco both were anticipating the arrival of little Harry Cygnus Granger-Foy. Cho and Theo, in contrast, had wanted a baby, but it seemed like the other woman had changed her mind.

Hiding her disapproval, Hermione rummaged in the closet and pulled out a deep green dress with a conservative neckline and pleasing sway to the skirt. "Here, try this."

"Green?" Cho raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Did your boyfriend buy this?"

"Yes," Hermione admitted, feeling defensive at the other woman's tone. "You'll find a lot of green in my wardrobe. It's Draco's favorite color on me."

"Of course it would be," Cho muttered. Modestly, she ducked behind the open closet door to change into the dress.

"Why do you call him Draco?" Cho inquired with curiosity as she reappeared moments later. "His name's Malcolm, isn't it?"

"Draco's his middle name. And it just seems to suit him better," Hermione replied. "The dress looks nice on you," she offered politely. In truth, the cut was flattering but the color made Cho look sallow.

Cho made a non-committal noise at her reflection in the full-length mirror. "May I borrow stockings and shoes as well? I hate to impose, but I do need to dress to impress. Or at least not look like a nutter."

Wordlessly, Hermione handed over a pair of black maternity tights, still in the package. Once again, Cho disappeared behind the closet door. When she appeared after some murmuring behind the door, Hermione would have sworn the dress looked more blue than green, but dismissed that impossibility as a trick of the light.

"Pumps or boots?" she asked.

"Do the boots have heels?" Cho asked back. "I'll take them," she said at Hermione's affirmative. "To hide my swollen ankles," she added with a deprecating smile.

Hermione smiled back, trying to remember if she'd ever heard Cho joke before. She was always so sad or angry.

"Thank you for this," Cho said sincerely, looking much more put together as she pulled on and zipped up the black boots. "I have to ask you for one more favor, though - do you know how to reach Dean Thomas?"

"He's an imposter," Hermione warned. "Not a real police officer."

"I know he's not CID, but he is a special type of law enforcement," Cho insisted, scraping her long, black hair back into a severe bun as she spoke.

The faint emphasis on the adjective did not escape Hermione. "Dean's Special Branch, then? Spies and terrorists? What in the gods' names are we caught up in?"

Cho gave her an assessing look. "Not quite, but do you really want to know?"

She held up a slender hand to forestall Hermione's answer, her diamond-studded wedding band and exquisite engagement ring glinting in the well-lit bedroom. "I can't tell you anything right now or my pregnancy-related Tourette's Syndrome will kick in."

Hermione had personally never heard of pregnancy triggering Tourette's Syndrome, and from the sardonic twist to Cho's lips, she suspected that there was a story behind her supposed

disorder that Cho was unwilling - or perhaps unable - to share.

"I really do want to know what is going on," Hermione told her instead.

"Even if it hurts more than you can ever imagine?" Cho asked, pain stark in her brown eyes.

"Even then," Hermione asserted.

"You're a braver woman than I am," Cho said, without much admiration. She sighed. "I hope to be able to tell you more within the next few days, Hermione. Until then, you and Katie and the others are on the right track, but you're not going to find answers in books or newspapers."

As Hermione processed that cryptic response, Cho pressed her earlier question with greater urgency. "Do you know how to reach Dean? I can't get to where I need to go without his help."

"He called me a few times last month. I still should have his number on my mobile." As she spoke, Hermione was checking her phone. "Here it is!"

She dialed the number, looking up at Cho as it rang and rang. "Should I leave a message if he doesn't pick up?"

Frantically, Cho shook her head. "Try again, please - see if he picks up. I don't have that much time."

As Hermione redialed, she could hear Cho worrying under her breath. "Oh, shite, shite, *shite*. His phone probably doesn't work at the Ministry. Seamus is accessible in Dublin, but I don't have time to get there."

"Do you have any way of getting in contact with Ginny?" Cho asked urgently, her voice now meant for Hermione's ears. "You saw her before Christmas, right?"

That jogged Hermione's memory. "She gave me a present - some eyeshadow." Hermione began rummaging in a drawer and quickly found it among her modest collection of cosmetics. "Ginny told me to look in the mirror and call her name if I ever really needed her."

"Will you try, please?" Cho implored. "I truly need her help."

Feeling foolish, Hermione peered into the mirror. "Ginny? Ginny, are you there?"

"Sorry, Cho," she said when nothing happened.

"Try again, please!" Cho begged.

With a sign, Hermione looked back into the tiny compact mirror. What did they think was going to happen, anyways?

"Ginny! Ginny!" she called. "Ginevra Molly Weasley Potter Thomas! Can you hear me?"

Hermione nearly dropped the compact in shock when a bright brown eye, not her own, appeared in the mirror. "Is that you, Hermione?" Ginny asked, incredulous.

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Minnie and Mione, who were each cutting their first teeth, had finally settled down for a nap after a restless night. Ginny Thomas found herself debating between joining the twins for a lie-down or making some strong tea and enjoying a couple of precious hours to herself. The latter won out and she made her way to the kitchen.

The exhausted redhead thought she heard someone faintly calling her name, but at first dismissed it as her sleep-deprived imagination. Her babies were happy little babblers, but they couldn't even say mama yet, let alone -

"Ginevra Molly Weasley Potter Thomas! Can you hear me?"

Ginny snatched up her purse from the kitchen counter, looking for the compact, with a packed pinch of Floo powder for emergencies, which was a pair with the one she had given Hermione in December. The tiny compacts contained the last two usable fragments of the magical communication mirror Harry had gotten from his godfather.

"Is that you, Hermione?" Ginny asked in disbelief, despite the familiar voice and gold-flecked, long-lashed brown eye looking at her.

"It's me," Hermione confirmed warmly, her anger from Ginny's refusal to answer questions the last time they met apparently having dissipated. "Ginny, I hate to impose, but could you come over to my flat? A situation's come up and I need your help."

"Of course!" Ginny agreed without hesitation. "Just give me your address and a few minutes to get my mum over to mind the twins, and I'll be right over!"

She cut off Hermione's thanks as a thought occurred to her. "D'ya mind waiting outside for me? I think your flat may be hard to find, otherwise." Ginny recalled Dean's frustration with trying locate where Hermione lived, due to the wards Malfoy had placed on her flat.

"No, it's a beautiful day," Hermione agreed readily, despite the odd nature of the request. "Do you live nearby? How long do you think you'll be?"

"Not more than a half-hour," Ginny promised. With Apparition as an option, it didn't matter that the Thomas family's cottage was hundreds of kilometers west of London. The longest part of her trip would be the taxi ride from the Muggle side of the Leaky Cauldron to Hermione's flat.

Twenty-five minutes later, Ginny's taxi was cruising slowly along a posh street in Knightsbridge when she saw Hermione, standing on the front steps of one of the terraced houses with an Asian woman who looked vaguely familiar. Ginny's mouth dropped open in shock as she realized both women were several months pregnant. "Stop right here, please," she directed the driver, pulling some Muggle money from her purse.

Hermione greeted her with a hug. Ginny hugged back, hard, and then held her out at arm's-length. "Blimey, 'Mione! You've grown a bit since I saw you in December!" she joked.

"I didn't even know I was pregnant the last time I saw you! Now it's pretty obvious," Hermione grinned, with an affectionate pat to her belly.

"Well, congrats! Is it a boy, a girl, or a mystery? And when are you due?" Ginny asked with enthusiasm.

"A boy, due at the end of July, right around Harry's birthday. And he'll be named Harry, too, if I get my way," Hermione told her, smirking.

"That's wonderful!" Ginny squealed. "He'll be in the same year as my girls!"

A soft cough interrupted her raptures. "Ginny, I don't know if you remember me," the black-haired woman said hesitantly. "Cho Chang?"

Ginny looked appraisingly at Harry's first girlfriend. With her hair up and her expensive, conservative dark blue dress, not to mention her cool demeanor, Cho looked to be the perfect pureblood wife. "Madam Nott? Of course I remember you," Ginny said, with the cold politeness she reserved for Death Eaters and their family members when she was forced to interact with them.

Cho winced and Ginny took a closer look at her. She was almost painfully thin, despite her pregnancy, and her eyes were red-rimmed, with a haunted look. "Please, you don't need to be so formal. Just Cho is fine."

Ginny softened marginally. She always had been jealous of Cho, and had never understood her defense of that sneak Marietta Edgecombe, but Cho had been one of them. And the Death Eaters had made her pay a steep price for her loyalty to Harry. "Sure, Cho. I can do that."

"Gin, I was hoping you could help Cho," Hermione said. "Can you take her to Dean, please?"

"I want to swear out a criminal complaint for rape against several prominent men," Cho said with gritty determination. "Dean is someone I trust to see justice done."

Ginny's jaw dropped. "You remember? Hermione, what about you?"

Cho nodded, but the brunette shook her curly head sadly. "Not yet. Soon, I hope."

"I'll get you to Dean, to where you need to go," Ginny promised Cho recklessly, thinking hard about how she could help without it being traced back to her. She was probably violating five different Umbridge laws by smuggling a Muggleborn witch into the heart of the Ministry of Magic, but she really didn't give a Kneazle's whisker.

"Can we go now?" Cho said pleadingly. "I don't know how much time I have."

Hermione bobbed her head in agreement and gave Ginny a quick hug. "Try not to be a stranger, Gin." Then she hugged Cho as well. "Good luck with whatever it is you need to do, Cho."

Ginny saw Cho stiffen for a moment before returning Hermione's embrace. "Thank you for being a friend, not just an ally. I hope I'll be able to return the favor someday."

Quickly, Ginny and Cho walked away, with the redhead thinking fast. "How far along are you?"

"It's still safe for me to Apparate," Cho stated, and Ginny recalled she had trained as a Healer.

They ducked between two houses where the gate had been left open.

"Alright," Ginny said. "I'm going to take you Sidealong to my house. You can Floo to the Ministry from there. The Auror Department's on the second level. You'll have to get through the atrium lobby and into the lift, but I doubt anyone's going to stop you looking like that," she gestured to Cho's intimidating attire.

"That was my thought," Cho said. "Your plan sounds reasonable to me."

"Are you ready?" Ginny asked, extending her arm so she could Apparate with Cho to Lionsgate Cottage.

"As much as I'll ever be," Cho replied grimly as she took it and they turned on the spot, disappearing with a crack.

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Dolores Umbridge had enjoyed a delightful lunch with Lucius Malfoy. Like the true gentleman he was, he had insisted on treating her at a charming Italian trattoria. She only hoped that Narcissa appreciated just how fortunate she was in her delectable and devoted husband. Dolores had thrown out a few lures, but Lucius apparently was immune to her girlish charms.

Delicious pasta, a glass of Chianti, tiramisu, and a chaser of limoncello, instead of her usual cafeteria lunch, had left the Undersecretary in an unusually mellow mood. That evaporated when she saw a black-haired witch clear the wand checkpoint and make her way towards the lifts at the far end of the atrium. Dolores moved quickly to intercept her, unsure how the jumped-up little tart had so quickly recovered her memories when she had only signed the decree before lunch.

"*Hem-hem*. Madam Chang-Nott?" Dolores called sweetly, after clearing her throat. "May I ask what you're doing here?"

"I don't see that it's any of your business," the other witch said coldly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, please?" she asked, with a pointed glance towards the bank of lifts, currently blocked by Dolores' stocky, pink-clad body.

"Don't you know who I am?" she asked, affronted.

"Oh, yes," the Chang girl hissed. "You're Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge, former Grand Inquisitor of Hogwarts and current head of the Muggleborn Repatriation Communion. Before that, you ran the Muggleborn Registration Commission. I know *exactly* who you are."

Despite herself, Dolores flinched. The chit made her titles and accomplishments sound like an indictment, and there was something dark and unstable behind her eyes.

"Madam Chang-Nott," she simpered, deciding that she would play nice and indulge the pregnant witch rather than taking offense. After all, Cho was no longer a Mudblood, according to Dolores' own decree, and she had contrived to marry into the Sacred Twenty-Eight. They also had attracted quite a crowd of curious Ministry workers on their way back from lunch, and Dolores knew Cho was a sympathetic figure. "You seem overwrought. I suggest you allow me to contact your husband, so he can take you home and give you a Calming Draught. Or perhaps I need to involve your father-in-law?" she threatened. If the rumors had any credence, Cho had every reason to be terrified of Nott, Sr.

To her credit, the younger witch did not flinch. "Contact them if you must," she said with a twisted smile. "They can meet me at the Auror Office, to save the Aurors the trouble of hauling them in."

Dolores blanched. Clearly Flitwick, in reversing the Ministry-sanctioned Obliviation, had somehow restored all of Cho's memories. That meant the witch was on her way to swear out a criminal complaint against some of the most ardent supporters of the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission, who also happened to be the financial backers of Dolores' planned run for the Minister's position when Shacklebolt eventually retired.

"I'm afraid we can't have that," Dolores said, pulling out her wand. "*Stupef-*"

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Her Stunner was aborted as Cho disarmed her. Dolores could hear scattered cheers and whoops among the watching crowd.

"Stand aside," Cho commanded in an icy voice.

"I shan't," Dolores said angrily. "Give me my wand back this instant," she snapped.

"I shan't," Cho mimicked, pocketing the Undersecretary's unusually short and stubby wand while keeping her own at the ready. "For the last time, I'm warning you to move before I make you."

The sheer cheek ignited the Undersecretary's wrath. "How dare you, you insolent little trollop? You have been admitted back into our magical world today only through the indulgence of your betters. I am warning you that you remain here among us very much on sufferance."

"My betters?" Cho repeated, incredulous. "Are you claiming to be my better in some respect? Certainly not in magic, not when your wand is in my pocket."

"With respect to my heritage, of course," Dolores announced with saccharine condescension. "I am, after all, a pureblood witch, descended from the Selwyn family."

"That's your claim to superiority? Your supposed lineage?" Cho snorted derisively. "I learnt in History of Magic that there were Changs serving as imperial mages as far back as the T'ang Dynasty, when your ancestors still were wearing pelts and using pointed sticks to make fire. And my Muggle ancestors were using paper and ink even earlier than that, when the illiterate wizards and witches you claim to be descended from were rhyming spells because they didn't know how to write. Does that make me your superior?"

"Of course not!" Dolores scoffed. "You admit to having Muggles in your family tree, which naturally makes you inferior. Blood will tell," she concluded smugly.

"I don't think so," Cho contradicted with a chilling laugh. The dark instability flickering in her eyes leaped into prominence and Dolores shuddered, forcibly reminded of the late Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Bow down to me, bitch," Cho cackled, teetering on the edge of insanity. "Bow down to your better, I said," she commanded.

Very much against her will, Dolores felt her spine curve, as though pressed upon by a giant's invisible hand. She tried to resist and Cho increased the force of the spell, causing her face to smack against the floor with an audible crack. Dolores moaned, clutching her broken nose and rolling in pain on the ground as blood dripped onto her pink cardigan.

The Chang bitch casually nudged her out of the way with a booted foot to call the lift. In the dead silent atrium, the sound of two isolated hands clapping together echoed, unnaturally loud, until so many of the onlookers joined in the applause that Dolores gave up on taking names as futile.

A disembodied voice announced the lift's arrival. Cho Chang-Nott stepped aboard, alone and with her head held high.

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Dean Thomas was at the water cooler next to the reception desk when an elegantly-attired woman pushed through the glass doors of the Auror office.

A bored receptionist seated behind the counter for public inquiries looked up from her magazine. "Can I help you?" she asked, sounding anything but helpful.

"I'll assist Madam Chang-Nott," Dean volunteered.

Cho looked at him with haunted eyes. "Please call me Dr. Chang, or just Cho."

"Of course, Cho," Dean agreed soothingly, leading her to an interview room. "Would you like some tea?"

"Only if you'd like to dose it with Veritaserum," Cho said with a wry smile. "I'm here to swear out a complaint against more than a dozen Death Eaters for their roles in my kidnapping and rape in September 1998. I'll take Veritaserum or give Pensieve evidence,

whatever you wish. But I need to do this immediately, before Undersecretary Umbridge has me Obliviated again."

"She can't do that," Dean said with satisfaction, even as he was sending his zebra Patronus to fetch another Auror to assist him with the interview. "Just today, she issued an order granting the Notts' petition to reclassify your blood status. Legally, the Ministry doesn't consider you to be a Muggleborn anymore. So, welcome back."

"What bollocks!" Cho said in disgust. "Wait, does that mean I would have gotten my memories back anyways?"

Dean nodded. "I assumed you'd already seen Professor Flitwick to have your Obliviation reversed."

"No, it was my husband who did it," Cho said, blinking back tears. "One of life's little ironies."

Dean opened his mouth to ask how Theodore Nott, Jr. had managed that, but Cho cut him off. "If you don't mind, I'd like to do this only once and on the record. This isn't exactly pleasant for me and I still am worried about interference. Undersecretary Umbridge did try to stop me in the atrium, after all, and I doubt she'll be pleased with me after I left her bleeding on the floor."

Dean laughed outright. "I would have paid good money to see that!" He didn't expect that Umbridge would dare to directly interfere in an Auror investigation, but as a precautionary measure, he sent a second Patronus to alert Kingsley Shacklebolt of the situation.

A mousy-haired female Auror unobtrusively entered the room, wheeling a portable Pensieve. "This is Auror Gwen White. A dab hand at surveillance and covert missions," Dean introduced her.

Auror White smiled in silent greeting and took out a notebook and Quick Quills quote.

"Alright," Dean said. "Let's begin."

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Nearly two hours later, Dean sat back in his chair, radiating quiet satisfaction. Auror White was on her second quill, having taken copious notes of Cho's responses under Veritaserum. Best of all, resting on the table were vials of evidence, filled with silver wisps of memories and labelled with each Death Eater's name: Walden Macnair, Thorfinn Rowle, Theodore Nott, Sr., Antonin Dolohov, Augustus Rookwood, Rabastan Lestrage, Edward Jugson, Morton Mulciber, Gordon Goyle, Peregrine Derrick, Lucian Bole, and Cassius Warrington. Each man was looking at a lengthy term in Azkaban, and Dean would be sending teams of Aurors to arrest them as soon as Cho finished giving evidence.

Cho was proceeding in chronological order. She was into the last night of her captivity and had just finished recounting Blaise Zabini's crimes against her. She was an excellent, detailed

witness, but reliving her assault was taking a clear toll. As Cho drooped in her chair, Auror White slid a fresh box of tissues to her in a quiet gesture of comfort.

"May I?" Dean asked, waiting for Cho's nod of permission before holding his wand to her temple to remove the memories of Zabini. He bottled them and stoppered the vial, but set it to one side.

"Do you know he's dead?" he asked Cho, wanting to provide comfort to this cold, contained woman but uncertain how. Dean couldn't imagine anyone more different than his notoriously hot-tempered Ginny.

"I know," Cho said with a ghost of a smile. "It was in the Muggle papers. Good riddance, if you ask me."

"I may ask you if you killed him," Dean said meaningfully. Cho was under Veritaserum, and he was going to ask only if he knew her answer wasn't incriminating.

"Go right ahead," Cho invited.

"Did you kill Blaise Zabini?" Dean questioned.

"No," Cho replied.

"That's all I need to know about Zabini, then," Dean concluded. He had no desire to push any further for information she might have about that twisted bastard's well-deserved demise. "Would you like a break before we proceed?"

Cho looked exhausted, physically and emotionally, but she shook her head. "Let's get this finished. There are only two left - Lucius Malfoy and Theo." Her voice wavered slightly at her husband's name, but Dean did her the courtesy of pretending not to notice.

"Can you tell us in your own words what they did to you?" Auror White asked in her colorless voice.

"Theo cursed me and made me perform fellatio on Mr. Malfoy," Cho replied, emotionless.

Before Dean could embark on his standard set of questions, Cho's husband burst into the interview room, disheveled and with a large bruise forming on the side of his head.

"Speak of the devil," Dean sneered, raising his wand. "Get out, Nott."

Theo ignored him, instead kneeling next to Cho. "Are you alright, love?"

"No, no thanks to you," she said stonily.

"I'm so sorry," he apologized. "I knew it would be painful for you to get your memories back, but I didn't realize it would be so traumatic."

"You knew what I would remember about you. That's the worst part," Cho accused.

"All I can do is beg you to forgive me," Theo answered, hanging his head in misery. "I know what I did - what I made you do - was horrible, but - "

"It was unforgivable," Cho told him. "Not what you did that night, but that you hid it from me for years."

"Yes," Theo conceded hopelessly. He stood up to his full height. "Auror Thomas," he spoke, with a pathetic sort of dignity, "I am here to turn myself in and to corroborate my wife's testimony, to the extent I am able."

"Do you admit to cursing your wife so that she was compelled to give oral sex to Lucius Malfoy?" Dean asked.

"Yes," Theo admitted.

"Did you use the Imperius curse to accomplish that?"

"It wasn't *Imperio*," Cho interrupted whatever answer her husband was about to give. "It was some sort of curse that inspired lust, not obedience."

"Are you certain?" Dean asked. For the first time today, he suspected Cho was being less than candid. And her dose of Veritaserum probably had just about worn off.

"Seeing as I was the one under the influence of the curse, yes, I am certain," Cho averred, her voice sharp enough to cut glass.

"Fine," Dean pursed his lips in disapproval. If Cho chose to lie for the Death Eater scum she was married to, there was little he could do about it. The Auror Department rarely dealt with domestic violence, but Dean wasn't entirely unfamiliar with witches telling lies to protect the wizards in their lives from prosecution. At the end of the day, he wasn't certain Nott deserved life in Azkaban for using an Unforgivable when the actual rapists were facing a shorter sentence. And he wasn't about to push Cho and call her honesty - and her prior testimony against those rapists - into question. "What happened next?"

Again, Cho cut over her husband's answer. "Theo took me out of there, up to his old bedroom. He got some blood-replenishing potion into me and cast a few healing spells, enough so that I could Apparate with him. Then he left me where Knockturn and Diagon Alleys meet, so someone would be sure to find me."

"Do you have anything to add, Nott?" Dean asked.

Theo, who was looking dumbfounded at Cho's testimony, mutely shook his head.

"May I have your memories concerning Nott and Malfoy?" Dean asked.

After an infinitesimal pause, Cho held her wand - actually her husband's wand - to her temple and extracted a long, silvery strand. "That's the lot," she said with finality.

"Come with me, Nott," Dean ordered. "I've got a holding cell with your name on it."

The other wizard seemed indifferent to the prospect of imprisonment. "I intend to plead guilty and then, after I've begun serving my sentence in Azkaban and there can be no claim I'm seeking leniency, I will testify against every other Death Eater who I witnessed assaulting Cho."

"Including your father?" Dean asked skeptically.

"Especially my father," Theo confirmed. He looked longingly towards his wife, but made no move to approach her. "Cho, no matter what you think of me now, please know that I love you, and I always shall."

"Don't, Theo," Cho looked away from her husband's pleading blue eyes. "I can't stand to hear that from you right now."

Feeling exceedingly awkward, Dean led Nott from the room, leaving Auror White behind to comfort the prisoner's now-sobbing wife.

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Cho was slumped over the table in the interview room, her head buried in her arms, when Kingsley Shacklebolt walked into the room. He had held Dolores Umbridge at bay for the entire afternoon, leaving the investigation and now the arrests in the capable hands of Dean Thomas.

" - showed him as much mercy as he showed me," the still-distraught woman mumbled. "Was I wrong?"

Kingsley dismissed inconspicuous Auror White with a smile, wondering if Cho had been speaking to the female Auror or if she had entirely forgotten the other witch was in the room. Auror White had that knack.

"No, you weren't wrong," Kingsley answered, his voice deep and resonating with reassurance. "You confronted a difficult situation with grace and dignity, not to mention the careful intelligence one would expect of a Ravenclaw." He left unspoken his thoughts that Theodore Nott, Jr., if married to a Gryffindor, would be spending the rest of his days in Azkaban, but would have gotten off scot-free if his wife were a loyal Hufflepuff. Had Cho been a snake, he suspected she would have held back the most damning evidence against her husband to use for herself. But the Minister knew all about difficult decisions and situational ethics, so he would be the last to condemn Cho for her choice.

Cho's head snapped up and Kingsley silently handed her a handkerchief. "I'm not certain we've ever met. I'm Kingsley Shacklebolt," he introduced himself, offering his hand.

"I know who are you, Minister," Cho said, looking overwhelmed.

He shook her cold, frail hand as gently as possible, actually worried about breaking one of her bird-like bones. "Please, just call me Kingsley for now. I am not meeting with you in my role as Minister, but rather as the head of the Order of the Phoenix."

"I'm familiar with the group," Cho acknowledged.

"Good," Kingsley rumbled. "I'm here to suggest that you take shelter at Hogwarts until the trials are done. Your actions today have angered several powerful men and their families, not to mention Undersecretary Umbridge. I'm afraid you may find yourself a target once again."

Cho paled at the thought. "Will I be safe at Hogwarts? Will we be safe?" she asked, lightly touching a spot on her abdomen where Kingsley assumed she could feel the baby kicking.

"You'll be extremely well-protected at Hogwarts," he promised. "The school's wards have been repaired and strengthened since the Final Battle and the professors - even those who aren't Order members - are a formidable fighting force. After you were attacked in 1998, Hermione Granger lived at Hogwarts for several months, and the Death Eaters weren't able to get to her there."

Cho looked up at that, an expression of upset mixed with guilt crossing her face. "Sir, Draco Malfoy is - "

"The Order has kept discreet tabs on every one of the Obliviated Muggleborns, so I am fully aware of what has transpired between Miss Granger and young Mr. Malfoy," Kingsley said, gently forestalling her. "Their baby is due shortly before yours, is he not?"

"Yes, by about a month," Cho confirmed automatically, looking aghast. "Don't you think that's a problem, that Hermione is - "

"Having a baby with a man who is devoted to her and would stop at nothing to keep her and their child safe from harm?" Kingsley interrupted again, with a politician's flair for spin, just as Dean Thomas entered the interview room.

"Dean, you've met with Hermione and her boyfriend, haven't you?" Kingsley appealed to the other man.

"Yes, back in January," Dean agreed.

"What do you think about Hermione having a baby with him?" the Minister inquired.

"It's not what I would have expected or chosen for her," Dean answered honestly, "but Hermione seems happy and the bloke is arse over elbow for her, so" He shrugged. "It's not my place to interfere."

To Kingsley's satisfaction, Cho looked disgusted with the both of them and dropped the subject of Hermione.

"Sir, I came to tell you that we have twelve of the Death Eaters in custody," Dean reported. "Dolohov is off somewhere in Russia, where we don't have an extradition treaty, and LeStrange escaped before we could get through his wards. Lucius Malfoy's solicitor is making noise about getting his client bail before trial, as well."

Kingsley's brow furrowed in concern. "Doctor Chang, with two Death Eaters at large, I sincerely hope you will accept the Order's offer of sanctuary at Hogwarts."

"Of course I will," Cho said. "How quickly can we leave?"

"I'll escort you there now, myself," Kingsley offered with a mix of gallantry and calculation. That would prevent any exchange of information between Cho and Dean about Hermione, as well as giving Kingsley an opportunity to emphasize to Cho the importance of upholding the Statute of Secrecy and decrees of the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission while she remained on Umbridge's hit list.

Family Ties

Chapter Notes

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

May 28, 2004

Upon entering Madam Puddifoot's, Rita Skeeter curled her lip, having forgotten just how twee the place was. She counted it as a small mercy that it was early on a weekday morning, leaving the tea shop free of spotty Hogwarts students engaged in awkward adolescent courtship rituals.

Her source - who had designated the time and place for their meeting - looked as comfortable amidst all of the doilies and floral china as a spider in its web, drinking a cup of tea with her pinky extended. Dolores Umbridge set the cup in her saucer and extended a stubby hand to be shaken with an insincere smile. Like any politician, she tolerated the press as a necessary evil. "*Hem-hem*. It's lovely to see you again, Rita."

"Likewise, Undersecretary Umbridge," the reporter smiled back with real anticipation. Over the years, Umbridge had provided her with some excellent dirt on political rivals, resulting in front-page bylines.

Rita ordered a scone and Earl Grey from Madam Puddifoot. Once it arrived, and the plump proprietress ceased her infernal hovering, Umbridge got down to business, sliding a manila folder under the skirted tea table into her lap. "What is it?" Rita asked, even as she opened the folder in her lap and began skimming.

Umbridge smiled brightly. "Oh, just some Muggle police and hospital records I picked up here and there regarding Cho Chang. Did you know the Muggle authorities believed she was a prostitute? *They* recognized the little whore for what she is."

"Those Muggles are fools," Rita snorted. "The Notts have publicly admitted to dumping her naked at a Muggle police station after she was Obliviated so she could get counseling as the victim of a sex crime. Cho Chang was never a prostitute."

"Speaking of counseling, she's highly unstable." Umbridge shook her head in mock regret. "Sees the Muggle equivalent of a Mindhealer, takes all sorts of antidepressant medications, *and* she's tried to kill herself at least once," she finished triumphantly.

"I wonder why that is?" Rita asked sarcastically. "Do you being gang-raped and stripped of her memories might have anything to do with it?"

"No, she's merely weak-minded," Dolores opined. "And a liar, to boot. It's impossible that so many respectable wizards - like Lucius Malfoy! - would force themselves on a filthy Mudblood. She must have led them on, asking for it with her tight clothes and come-hither ways."

Rita's eyebrows rose so high that they disappeared into her blond fringe. "Cho was kidnapped after a shift at St. Mungo's, wearing hospital scrubs. And you want me to run an article blaming the victim on the basis of how she was dressed?"

"It's an angle that usually works," Umbridge pointed out with cynical accuracy. "Or you can play up her mental health problems to call her veracity into question. Like you did with the Potter boy."

"His lies turned out to be true," Rita rejoined. Her interview with the Harry Potter setting the record straight was an article she was proud of, even if it had run in the *Quibbler* after she'd been blackmailed into writing it. However, her original series of articles pointing the boy as disturbed and deranged had kept her in the Ministry's good graces, where she still very much wished to remain.

Umbridge just shrugged. "I've given you all the material you need on the Chang girl. I trust you'll know what to do with it. Now, I must excuse myself - I have a meeting with Minister Shacklebolt first thing." She tossed a few coins on the table, leaving only a Knut as a tip, and exited Madame Puddifoot's in a swirl of pastel self-importance.

Rita Skeeter remained at the little round table until her tea grew cold, thoughtfully nibbling on her acid green Quick Quills quote. Dolores Umbridge indeed had given her the material for a blockbuster story. The only question was the direction in which to take it. Reaching a decision, she ordered a fresh pot of tea, her quill scratching along the parchment and an evil smile on her face as she crafted an article that would ruin a woman's life.

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Due to his prowess as a salesman, Marcus had been awarded with his own reasonably spacious office at Malfoy Enterprises. Still, it was barely better than a cubicle when compared to Draco's palatial executive suite, which made it all the more surprising that his blond-haired boss and friend was lounging in the visitor's chair, dragonhide loafers negligently resting on the desktop.

"Oi, Malfoy!" Marcus scolded. "Feet off!"

"Your wife's got you well-trained," Draco observed snarkily, but he took his feet and shoes off the desk.

"Katie, not my wife," Marcus corrected. "She always tells me I act like I was raised in a barn rather than a manor."

Draco shook his head, ruefully. "You know, I always think of Katie as your wife. I can never even remember the other one's name."

"Brunhilda, not that it matters," Marcus muttered. Malfoy had tapped into a sore spot. He knew Katie was hurt by what she perceived as an unreasonable unwillingness to get married. It was the only issue they ever had serious rows over, including the night before.

"What brings you here?" he asked, hoping his friend would take the hint and drop the subject.

"I was hoping you had some more of those Muggle ginger biscuits," Draco confessed.

Marcus extracted the tin from a desk drawer and tossed it over. "You do know you can buy these in the store yourself, right?"

"They taste better when I cadge them off you." Draco's laughter didn't quite reach his eyes.

Looking more carefully, Marcus took in the dark circles under Draco's eyes and the rapid consumption of the biscuit. "Everything alright, mate?" he asked carefully. "How is Hermione doing?"

"She's quite well," Draco answered, with a quick, involuntary smile mixed with an eyeroll. "Obstinate as a mule when it comes to convincing her magic exists, though."

Personally, Marcus didn't see that as such a bad thing. Given the clusterfuck Theo had caused in returning Cho's memories, he thought it might be better if the Gryffindor Princess continued in her refusal to recognize magic.

"So have you two managed to agree on a name for little He Who Must Not Be Named?" Marcus grinned. "Harry Malfoy has such a nice ring to it."

That earned him a glare. "You're not the slightest bit funny, Flint," Draco said scathingly. "You should thank Merlin you're a damn good potions salesman, because there's no fucking way you could ever learn a living as a comedian."

"Harry's not that awful of a name," Marcus consoled, believing he had found the reason for his friend's bad mood and outright theft of two biscuits (and counting).

"Really?" Draco asked. "Would you like to be reminded of the dearly departed Saint Potter every time you say your son's name?"

"You've got a point, mate," Marcus had to admit. "But Granger's never going to agree to anything else. Especially since she's got some mental block that keeps *her* from believing in magic and *you* from winning you that bet you made with her."

Draco waved a dismissive hand. "I've got the naming rights under control. It's one of the Malfoy family rules - if you're losing, change the rules of the game."

Marcus raised an eyebrow at that. "So how about the kid's last name? Any progress on that front?" he prodded, still trying to figure out what had Draco's knickers in a twist.

"Working on it," Draco said curtly.

Uncharacteristically, Marcus decided to play agony aunt and offer some sage advice. He did have several more years experience than Draco in handling an intimate relationship with a volatile Gryffindor. "Granger wears her heart on her sleeve," he pointed out the obvious. "You, on the other hand, guard your emotions like a goblin with a vault full of Galleons. You might try letting her know exactly how you feel."

"She already knows. Hermione's not thick," Draco scoffed.

Marcus shook his head. "She knows you like fucking her, she knows you're pleased as punch that she's having your baby, but have you ever told her how you feel about *her*? Recently, that is - not back when you were kids. And anything recent doesn't count if either of you were naked at the time."

He was fascinated to see two pink spots of color appear high on Draco's cheekbones. Apparently, the Malfoy scion wasn't entirely shameless. "Er, maybe I should try that."

"Maybe you should," Marcus advised in a mild tone. "It probably will work. I'd like to say she's smart enough to know better than to take on the thankless task of being your better half, but she does have it bad for you."

"You don't say," the blond wizard drawled, but Marcus had seen something eager flare in his friend's eyes at that last observation. Just as Marcus was congratulating himself on helping to address Draco's relationship problems, the blond reached over and snagged another ginger biscuit.

That left option three as the cause of his friend's disquiet. Marcus braced himself before posing the loaded question. "How're things with your dad?"

Lucius had been conspicuous in his absence from the office since the day Cho had pressed charges, even though he had been released pending trial after posting a bond that would be sizable for anyone other than a Malfoy.

Draco shrugged with undue nonchalance. "He's been closeted with Brocklehurst, working on his defense, but I honestly think he's more worried about my mum than the Wizengamot. She doesn't appreciate my father airing his dirty laundry in public."

Marcus suppressed a wince at the poor word choice. "Does he actually have a defense?" he asked instead.

"He thinks that Cho can be persuaded to drop all charges against him." Draco took a deep breath, reaching the crux of the matter. "And he wants me to accompany you to Hogwarts this afternoon, when you make your quarterly sales call on Slughorn, so we can make that happen."

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Hermione had not wanted a baby shower. She and Draco had or easily could afford everything they needed for the baby. Also, she knew his mother would refuse to attend and her godmother couldn't be expected to fly in all the way from Australia. Katie, however, had insisted that at least a "sprinkle" was in order for the new arrival, which is how Hermione found herself being dragged from the university's research lab straight to a high-end baby boutique to go shopping with Katie, Justin and Pansy Urquhart, formerly Parkinson, of all people.

Pansy was in rare form, greeting Hermione outside the shop by running her eyes up and down her body with a frown. "So this is what I have to look forward to in a few months?" she asked with a shudder.

"Sheathe your claws, Pansy," Justin commanded with good humor, kissing Hermione on the cheek. "You look adorable - like you tucked a beachball under your shirt. And you've got that pregnant lady glow about you!"

"Like a fucking golden retriever, he is," Pansy muttered under her breath. "I bet my mothballed Manolos that you're good at finding things, Finch-Fletchley, but nothing else."

"I'd take you up on that bet, Pans, because I'm going to be a *fabulous* donor daddy, among my many other talents, except your shoes wouldn't fit me," the blond said disarmingly.

"Just ignore her," he advised Hermione and Katie in a stage whisper. "Pregnancy makes her bitchy."

"I highly doubt that pregnancy solely is to blame," Hermione said in a dry voice.

Katie elbowed her. "So, are you having a boy or a girl?" she asked Pansy, brightly.

"A little girl," Pansy preened. "Esmeralda Jonquil Parkinson Urquhart."

Hermione's reaction to quite possibly the most pretentious baby name she had ever heard must have shown on her face, because Pansy rounded on her. "It's not like you have room to criticize, Granger, not when you're carrying a baby likely to be named Cygnus in your belly."

The black-haired woman picked up a customizable, pale blue bib and brandished it in Hermione's direction like a weapon. "Perhaps I'll get you this, monogrammed with CM and with embroidered swans and peacocks around the border!"

"Peacocks are precious," Justin cooed with enthusiasm.

"What does the 'M' stand for?" Katie asked Pansy in confusion. She turned to Hermione. "Did you agree on Malcolm for a middle name?"

"We haven't quite managed to agree on any names," Hermione told Katie, watching Pansy through narrowed eyes. The other woman looked uncharacteristically nonplussed. "Exactly what *does* the 'M' stand for, Pansy? I can't think of any constellations or stars starting with that letter that Draco and I have considered, and his last name - *if* the baby takes his last name instead of mine - is Foy."

"Did I say 'M'?" Pansy asked disingenuously. "I meant 'F,' of course."

"Of course you did," Hermione echoed, unconvinced. "Anyhow, I suggest everyone hold off on monogrammed items for now, until Draco and I come to a consensus. Or," she added with a smirk, "you can assume I'll prevail and get them monogrammed with an 'H.'"

"For Harry?" Katie smirked back. "Good on you, sticking to your guns on that."

To Hermione's amusement, Pansy looked properly horrified, to the point where she only regretfully set Katie straight. "Actually, I've offered Draco a very reasonable compromise - Hadrian. He was a Roman emperor with a deep interest in astronomy, so the name nods to the

traditions on both sides of Draco's family. And, obviously, it begins with a 'H,' so it works for me."

"I like it," Katie declared. "It's much better than the other names you two have been bandying about."

"Well, unfortunately, Draco nixed it. Unless the name is that of a constellation, or a star, or some other celestial body at a pinch, it's just not good enough," Hermione grumbled with frustration.

"Maybe he'll come around," Justin offered with sunny optimism.

"It's more likely that I'll cave," Hermione admitted. "Draco's birthday is next week and I'm at my wit's end trying to come up with a present. What do you buy for the man who already has everything?" she asked rhetorically. "Letting him pick out the baby's name is a nice gesture, don't you think?"

Justin gave her a cheeky grin. "You're overthinking this, Hermione. Malcolm's a red-blooded bloke - just give him a blow job."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure Draco would relish that, having you on your knees for him," Pansy chimed in. Where Justin's suggestion had been playful, her comment was spiteful.

Rather than retaliate - her first instinct - Hermione raised her eyebrows in mock confusion. "Why would you say that, Pansy? Is it because of what happened back when we were at school?" She hoped her question was broad enough to pry some information out of Pansy.

An expression of pure shock replaced the malicious smile on the other woman's face. "Draco told you?" she practically shrieked. "I can't believe him - does he have troll shite for brains?"

Then, a cunning look came into her eyes and she turned to Justin and posed a question in a dangerously sweet voice. "Did you happen to share that photo I gave you - the one with me and two handsome young men in swim trunks - with Granger?"

He gulped. "As a matter of fact, I did."

Pansy hit him rather hard with her handbag. "That's for sharing my things without permission."

Justin slunk away, rubbing his shoulder, while Hermione tried to hide her frustration. Pansy gave her an appraising look and infinitesimal smile. "That's more subtlety than I would have expected from you, Granger. Clearly, Draco is rubbing off on you in more ways than the obvious one."

Hermione smiled back, wondering if she could persuade Pansy to tell her more about their school. "I understand we weren't friends at school, but is there any reason why we can't be civil now?"

Pansy laughed meanly. "I had heard pregnancy makes you stupid, but I never expected such direct evidence." She snorted so hard that strands of her perfectly coifed black hair flew out

of place. "There are too many reasons for me to enumerate. You may think you're something special, but you're nothing more than Draco's Mudblood incubator."

"Pansy, come here this instant!" Justin squealed from across the store, holding aloft a little white dress embroidered with yellow flowers. "You *must* see this dear little dress for Esmerelda! The flowers are jonquils, like her middle name! Or this one - it has pansies."

Distracted, Pansy flounced over to him, oblivious to Hermione and Katie glaring at her back.

"I'll have to thank Justin later, for preventing a cat fight," Hermione said, absently running the inside of her scarred arm. "She's so unspeakably awful that she makes Cho seem sweet by comparison."

"I know," Katie agreed. "Have you heard from Cho?"

"Just a letter, which didn't tell me much other than that the police arrested her rapists and she's staying in a secure location until the trials are over."

"She told me the same. I hope she's alright," Katie said with concern. Hermione nodded. As prickly as Cho was, she still was a friend.

Hermione hesitated, then resolutely raised the question weighing on her mind. "Do you honestly think there's anything to what Pansy just said?"

"Honestly, no," Katie said after a moment's consideration. "He's asked you to marry him, hasn't he? Clearly, *your* partner sees you as more than an attractive incubator."

Hermione immediately picked up on the faint bitterness in Katie's voice. "You know you're more than that to Mark," she reassured her.

"Oh, yes, I at least rise to the level of a favorite mistress," Katie laughed without humor. "Given *carte blanche*, with every kind of sparkly jewelry to wear except a wedding band. Did I tell you that Mark even gave me the deed to our house just last night?"

"Oh, dear," Hermione commiserated. "Like he's making sure you and the kids are taken care of - "

" - when he grows tired of us and heads back to his real wife and family," Katie finished. "I don't want a pretty little house all paid off and wrapped up a bow - I'd rather we were married and struggling a bit to pay our mortgage like almost every couple we know."

"Do you think I'm being unfair to Malcolm, in asking for more time to think about whether to marry him?" Hermione asked. "Please tell me what you really think - you're the most sensible person I know."

"That's not saying much," Katie rolled her eyes in the direction of Pansy and Justin, who had finally decided to purchase both dresses after a near-hysterical screaming match over the merits of yellow flowers versus purple. "And no, I don't think you're being unfair. You - unlike my stupid arse of a partner - at least have some valid reasons for hesitation. You only

met Malcolm in September, and who knows where your relationship might have gone if you hadn't fallen pregnant."

"And from a purely practical matter, I want my godparents here for the wedding," Hermione noted. "Why not wait until September, when they'll already be in England to meet the baby?"

"Why not, indeed?" Katie shrugged in agreement. "Just don't wait too long," she warned, "or you may find that Malcolm - like Mark - is a traditionalist about everything except the fine institution of marriage."

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Dolores Umbridge was sitting at her oversized desk at her office in the Ministry, staring off into space as several interoffice memoranda flew around her head, jostling for attention. She was still in a state of shock and disbelief that Rita Skeeter had double-crossed her, but the proof was right there in front of her, in black and white, on the front page of the *Prophet's* evening edition.

"*Senior Ministry Official Attempts to Subvert Justice*," screamed the headline, in large font. "*Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge Violates Statute of Secrecy to Assist Death Eater Rapists*." Just in case the *Prophet's* semi-literate subscription base was unaware of who she was, the article was accompanied by a photograph of herself in her Wizengamot robes, with a little pink hat on her head and a distinctly shift expression on her face.

Kingsley Shacklebolt interrupted her thoughts on damage control and a painful revenge on that bitch of a reporter, walking into her office without bothering to knock. "Dolores, didn't you get my memo scheduling a meeting in my office at 5:00 PM?"

"I'm so sorry, Minister," she simpered. "As you can see, I've had a positive *flock* of messages late this afternoon!"

"Indeed, I imagined you might," Shacklebolt said with a sardonic smile. "Well, you'll shortly have ample time to catch up on your correspondence, seeing as I am here to graciously accept your letter of resignation."

"Wha-what?" Dolores stuttered, caught completely off-guard.

"My administration has been very tolerant of political diversity," Kingsley stated piously. That was a lie - he *had* to put up with Death Eaters in key positions in a coalition government as the price of peace. "However, I cannot tolerate criminal misdeeds and outright hypocrisy by senior Ministry officials. I am an Auror, after all, and the foundation of any civilized society is rule of law."

Dolores narrowed her eyes at him, certain that Kingsley had broken some few laws in his rise to power. He had covered his tracks well, though - as much as she cudged her brains, she couldn't think of anything significant with which to blackmail him and keep her position of power. So she tried another tactic.

"Political diversity has been a hallmark of your administration, Kingsley," she simpered in agreement. "If I were to resign, you would lose a key voice in government for traditional wizarding values. I daresay that would make some of our most prominent citizens less supportive of the current government."

"You can't please everyone all of the time," Kingsley shrugged off her threat. "Your base also isn't what it was. Quite a few of them are up on charges for sexual assault, and I know for a fact that you lost the Nott family's support months ago."

"The Malfoys - " began Dolores.

" - are focused on keeping Lucius out of Azkaban. And their strategy, so I have been reliably informed, is to emphasize that everything he did was for purposes of persuading his fellow Death Eaters to release Cho Chang rather than murdering her. Since the Malfoys wish for Lucius to be seen as a somewhat misguided savior, they do not share your interest in painting Madam Chang-Nott as promiscuous or unstable."

Based on the Minister's implacable tone, Dolores could tell he would not be swayed. "Don't expect me to admit I'm resigning because of Skeeter's muckraking! What reason shall I give for my *temporary* leave of absence?" she bargained shrilly.

"Well, you can always claim to want to spend more time with your family," Kingsley suggested. "That is the politician's classic excuse, is it not?"

Dolores tightened her lips. "The Ministry's demands on my time were such that I never married, Kingsley. You know that - you've remained single yourself."

"I truly hope that's not a proposition," Shacklebolt muttered. "In any event, your father may have passed on, but you still have a brother and mother, do you not?" he inquired, with a sinister significance.

"I was an only child," Dolores stated in automatic denial. "And my mother died when I was still at Hogwarts." Although Kingsley was wily and a skilled investigator, she was hopeful he was bluffing. She had buried her secrets deep - there was no one alive who would dare to speak of her Muggle mother or Squib brother. She would have buried *them*, too, if they hadn't disappeared into the Muggle world and hidden themselves well. Even mentioning her father, Orford, was taboo - or at least no one ever spoke of his menial job at the Ministry, where he had mopped the floors for decades before Dolores was able to end that humiliation (for her) and send him into an early retirement.

"Well, then, perhaps I am mistaken," Shacklebolt said politely. "But I did have a most delightful lunch a month or so back with a man claiming to be your younger brother Brian. He had quite a few memories to share, not to mention the photographs. You quite resemble your mother, Ellen, when she was younger."

Dolores gulped.

"Family ties do sometimes bind and chafe, don't they?" Kingsley asked with exaggerated sympathy. "And I shan't accept anything less than your permanent resignation from all

positions you hold within the Ministry," he added, his eyes glittering with knowledge.

"I don't know what you mean," she protested weakly. "I have no family other than my dear cousins, the Selwyns."

"Ah, well," Shacklebolt said, complacently accepting her lie. "If you don't wish to spend more time with your family in your retirement, you can always devote yourself to gardening."

"Gardening?" Dolores repeated with a sneer. She loathed the outdoors, even more so ever since that Granger bitch had tricked her into the Forbidden Forest to be molested by centaurs. At least the filthy Mudblood was going to get what was coming to her, if Lucius Malfoy could be believed.

"It's not just grubbing in the dirt. You could attempt to create the perfect pink eggplant," Kingsley offered with jovial sarcasm.

"Very well," Dolores snapped, reaching for her quill. She was not pleased, but she had no choice. Her resignation would keep her out of Azkaban, and she would utilize the enforced downtime to regroup and fine tune her strategy for taking over the Ministry of Magic. Much like a certain Muggle general, Dolores vowed that she would return.

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Cho thought it was strange being back at Hogwarts after all these years. Madam Pomfrey showered her with care and the professors were uniformly kind, but Cho felt she was caught in an odd sort of limbo, not a student but also not a teacher. And, if she were to be frank, not a Muggle but also not a witch. Theo's removal of the block he had placed on her mind had resulted in all of her memories being restored to her, but after living for so long without magic, Cho was finding it unnatural to reach for a wand to accomplish everything.

Even worse, every time did so, she thought of Theo, since the wand she was using belonged to him. Professor Flitwick thought it was too dangerous for her to go into Diagon Alley to purchase a new wand. Theo's wand was responsive to her, but using it was a constant reminder of her husband. She had loved him, and perhaps still did, but he had betrayed her trust for five long years, watching her struggle with suppressed memories that he could have restored at any time with a flick and a swish of the wand now residing in her pocket. Theo wrote to her every day from prison, asking how she and the baby were doing. Cho read his letters, but hadn't yet been able to bring herself to reply.

Hermione and Katie were her only current correspondents. In the abrupt aftermath of Theo restoring her memories and Cho taking sanctuary at Hogwarts, she had been unable to contact them except by the cumbersome combination of Owl post and Royal Mail. Her mobile didn't work in the ancient castle and of course there was no Internet access, but she had written to both of them, explaining as much as she could. Between the Statute of Secrecy and her own wounded feelings at Theo's betrayal, that was precious little. Still, both had written back, expressing concern and support.

She thought dully that she might return that correspondence tonight, particularly since Professor Flitwick had informed her that he, the headmistress, and several others would not

be at dinner due to a meeting. Perhaps reaching out to two other women who were in same boat as she - even if they did not realize it - would help keep her from feeling increasingly adrift. Cho worried, however, that they would reject her after hearing some twisted account from their partners.

On her way to the Owlery, a couple of stilted letters in hand, Cho heard two male voices that sounded unnervingly familiar. She quickly ducked into the girls' loo, hoping to avoid a confrontation with Draco Malfoy and Marcus Flint.

Luck was not on her side. A ghostly form drifted out from one of the stalls and greeted her with distressing volume and clarity. "Hello, Cho. How are you doing this evening?" Moaning Myrtle morosely inquired.

"Fine, fine," Cho replied distractedly, gesturing for the ghost to remain quiet.

"Don't try to shush me!" Myrtle screeched, offended. "Just because I'm dead doesn't mean I'm not allowed to speak, Cho Chang!"

The door burst open and Marcus Flint charged into the loo like a bull in a china shop, his yells echoing off the tile. Cho's Stunner ricocheted back at her off Flint's shields. She realized, too late, that he was merely a distraction.

"Expelliarmus!"

Cho's wand flew into Malfoy's hand and he pocketed it. She cringed against the wall, realizing she was once again helpless in the presence of Death Eaters. She remembered now what those ugly, twisted tattoos on their arms signified.

"Help! Help!" she screamed.

Malfoy shot a silencing spell at the door as Flint held up beefy hands in the universal sign of peace. "Cho! Calm the fuck down! You're going to send yourself into early labor."

"Myrtle, go and alert a teacher - Peeves - anyone!" Cho begged. "Tell them there are Death Eaters in Hogwarts!" But the ghost ignored her, too busy petting Malfoy's hair with transparent hands.

Flint looked exasperated. "It's not like we illegally infiltrated the castle. I make regular sales calls on ol' Sluggy - bring him some crystallized pineapple and premium liquor in hopes he'll buy some potions off me. We just want to talk with you."

"Do you ordinarily bring him with you?" Cho asked suspiciously, looking past him at the blond wizard. Giving Moaning Myrtle's greeting to Malfoy, those suspicions were well-founded.

"Draco," the ghost cooed in complaint, "I haven't seen you in ages. Why don't you ever visit my bathroom anymore? We used to be such good friends!"

"I haven't been back to Hogwarts since graduation, Myrtle," Malfoy said, surprisingly cordial. "How have you been?"

"Still dead," she moaned. "How are your parents? You used to tell me how much you worried about them, with your father in Azkaban and your poor mother left all alone."

"Well, that's what brings me here." Cool grey eyes slanted in Cho's direction. "My father's facing prison again."

"Deservedly so," Cho snapped, straightening her posture, suddenly more angry than frightened.

"Maybe, maybe not," Malfoy said, with an infuriating nonchalance. "If it weren't for my father's intervention, you'd be dead now. And you know as well as I do that Lucius didn't force you to do anything."

Cho flushed red in humiliation and rage at the truth of that last statement. It had been Theo. Her sweet, loving, perpetually supportive and apologetic husband. The other Death Eaters had brutally forced her, but Theo had controlled her with a curse, making her service Lucius with every appearance of compliance.

"Given my father's passive role, I doubt he's looking at more than a year in Azkaban," Malfoy continued with that same horrid casualness as he referred to the most degrading experience of her life. "Theo, on the other hand "

Flint took over, earnestly playing good Auror to Malfoy's bad one. "Theo was just a kid. You know he's not a rapist. He did the best he could to get you out, but . . . "

". . . he still used an Unforgivable on you - and my father knows it," Draco continued with the tag team. "Lucius won't lie for Theo's sake if he's forced to testify. And the self-righteous old goats on the Wizengamot won't care why Theo used the Imperius Curse on you. It's an automatic life sentence for your husband and the father of your unborn child."

"That's not fair, and you know it," Flint added.

Cho remained stony-faced, despite her agreement with Flint, as Malfoy relentlessly went on. "The contradiction between your testimony and my father's - if it comes to that - will call your credibility into question. You're running a risk that truly violent, sadistic fuckers like Rowle and Macnair may go free."

"None of us want that to happen," Flint growled, looking dangerous. "Katie and every other Muggleborn witch is a helluva lot safer if those fuckers stay in prison until they're too old to get it up anymore."

"Lucius abjectly regrets that he didn't act more promptly to secure your release from Nott Court," Draco stated, with a straight face. "He's willing to plead guilty to failing to report a crime to the Auror Department, so he'll be on probation for that. Our family also would like to make a generous donation to the charity of your choice."

"Will you agree?" Draco looked at her intently, his grey eyes nearly shining with sincerity. Cynically, Cho wondered if this was how he kept Hermione so captivated.

"Sod off, Malfoy," Cho found her voice. "I'm not taking a bribe from you."

He shrugged. "Most people prefer their blackmail to be sweetened with a spot of bribery, but that's your choice."

"Choice?" she laughed, a touch hysterically. "You know you haven't left me with any choice at all."

"Yeah, well, we're sorry about that," Flint said, looking vaguely ashamed as he scratched the back of his neck.

"I'm simply glad we were able to make you see reason. You *don't* have a choice." Malfoy's smile was cat-like. "My father's solicitor will contact you tomorrow to arrange for the paperwork."

The two men politely took their leave, pureblood manners on display now that they had gotten their way. Flint even courteously insisted on taking the two letters still clutched in her hand and delivering them, to spare her the walk to the Owlery.

When they had left her, Cho slumped down against the tiled wall and cried, feeling violated once more.

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"Angelina, Dean and Fleur - thank you for those cogent, concise reports," Kingsley Shacklebolt praised. He thought to himself that the monitoring of the Muggleborn witches and wizards was proceeding much more efficiently now that it was entrusted to the handful of Order members with deep ties to the Muggle world. Or, in Fleur's case, an innate ability to entrance men and make them excuse any cultural lapses as a product of her French nationality rather than her magical heritage.

"Excuse me, Kingsley," Ginny Weasley interrupted. "What about Hermione?"

In lieu of glaring at the pushy redhead, Kingsley gave her his most polished smile. "I checked in on Hermione myself," he intoned. "She's doing quite well - making plans to attend Oxford in the autumn."

Mild interest greeted his statement, until Ginny dropped a bombshell. "And how is she going to manage Oxford in September when she's having a baby at the end of July?"

A surprised muttering, interspersed with gasps and exclamations, swept the room. Ron Weasley screamed an obscenity and punched the wall, subsiding only when given the Minister's most quelling look.

"Order! Come to order!" Kingsley demanded with a bellow.

"Minister Shacklebolt, why weren't we informed of Miss Granger's pregnancy earlier?" Minerva McGonagall questioned him sternly in the ensuing silence.

"Apparently, none of her earlier visitors from the Order perceived she was pregnant, other than Ginevra," Kingsley stated. "Ginevra, why didn't you mention Hermione was pregnant as part of your report in December?" he inquired, neatly turning the tables.

"She didn't even know she was pregnant then," Ginny answered warily. "I found out just recently when I happened to run into her."

"Well, wasn't that fortuitous!" Kingsley exclaimed, making a mental note to warn the younger Malfoy to beware of meddling gingers.

"That's your answer, Minerva," he continued. "We only have the resources to check in on our Muggleborn friends occasionally, and I expect our watchers during the colder months just didn't realize Hermione was pregnant. Clearly, Mr. Weasley is shocked," Kingsley noted.

"No, I didn't realize she was carrying that bastard's bastard under her parka, or I would have hexed her myself," Ron fulminated, his face as red as his hair.

"Ron, please!" Lavender tried to reason with her husband, whispering desperately in his ear. He pushed her away and stormed from the room.

In the wake of his departure, Kingsley continued in a placating tone. "Now that Miss Granger is so far along, I just assumed her pregnancy had been mentioned at an earlier meeting. I apologize for my oversight," he said with what he hoped would be received as disarming candor.

Most of the Order seemed satisfied by the explanation, though Kingsley noted that Headmistress McGonagall and Ginny Weasley both looked suspicious. Nevertheless, they held their peace.

The Minister exhaled in relief that his plans still were on track. He flashed a white-toothed smile at the room as he subtly changed topics. "Moving along, I have some interesting political news to report regarding former Undersecretary Umbridge . . ."

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Hermione had once again fallen asleep on the couch, her feet in Draco's lap and her head tipped back on the armrest. With a tiny smile playing on his face, he watched her sleep. Every so often, she would make a snuffling noise - not quite a snore - that made his smile widen just a fraction more at how adorable she was. It was the perfect antidote for his stressful afternoon at Hogwarts. He hadn't enjoyed intimidating Cho into dropping the charges against his father, but family was family - no matter how dysfunctional.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," he spoke softly. Lately, this was his favorite part of the night, waking his pregnant girlfriend just enough to transfer her from the couch to their bed. In particular, Draco loved the moment when her brown eyes fluttered open and she recognized him.

When Hermione slept, he knew her Obliviated memories drifted closer to the surface of her mind. Every time she woke, he would see confusion or even wariness flicker in her eyes before dissolving into warm affection. For him. And then her arms would wrap around his

neck and she would snuggle trustingly into his chest and Draco was sure that all was well with his world.

Since All Souls' Day, when he had apologized to Hermione for everything he had done - an apology that spanned years of bigotry and bad acts on his part - Draco had never again seen the hatred and malevolence that had glittered in his girlfriend's eyes on Halloween night. He dared to hope that he had made peace with Granger, the swotty, vicious-tongued witch who had loathed him as much as he despised her. And he hoped with all his heart that their truce would hold, given how it had all gone to shite for Theo and Cho. Not that Draco ever would be so insanely stupid as to give Hermione her memories back, not when he and she both were so content with the status quo.

Hermione's eyes blinked open and she regarded him sleepily. Draco couldn't help but smile as the faint expression of distrust slipped away. "I don't want to wake up," she complained drowsily.

"You'll be more comfortable in bed," Draco persisted. "And I have something to show you." He drew her to her feet and towards the French doors that opened into the back garden, opening those one-handed while keeping his other arm wrapped around her waist. He truly hoped she would appreciate his surprise.

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"A telescope?" Hermione yawned, looking up at her boyfriend when they stepped into the back garden. "This is what you wanted to show me?"

"You'll need to look through the telescope," he explained, grinning in anticipation. "London is rubbish for stargazing, but you still should be able to see it."

Hermione stepped up to the telescope and adjusted the focus, so automatically that she realized this must have been something she'd done often before losing her memories. The night sky was clear, and she found herself identifying familiar constellations.

"What am I looking for?" she asked.

"Draco," he replied. Even in the dark, she could tell he was smirking.

"You're rather hard to miss," she teased back.

He stood behind her, making sure the telescope was pointed in the proper direction. "When my mum was pregnant with me, my parents couldn't agree on a name. She wanted an astronomical name - Cygnus, for her father - while my dad wanted to call me Severus, after the Roman emperor," he related, his breath warm against the shell of her ear in the cool night air. "Draco was a compromise. It's unique in that it's the name of a constellation, but also a classical statesman and lawmaker."

Hermione nodded. "Of course - draconian law."

"Precisely. Draco was Greek rather than Roman, but my father decided that was close enough - especially if it made my mum happy."

Hermione held her breath, hoping this conversation was going where she thought.

"I like Hadrian for our son, and I appreciate how you're trying to meet me halfway with my family's traditions," Malcolm said.

"Except Hadrian isn't a constellation or even a star," she echoed his earlier arguments against the name.

"True," he agreed, "but it's now a comet. Look at approximately three o'clock from Thuban. Do you see it?"

Hermione oriented herself, squinting through the telescope at a faint, moving object. "Yes."

"It was newly discovered this year. And the astronomer bloke who discovered it decided last week to name it after the emperor."

"What a coincidence," Hermione said, pulling away from the telescope with a raised eyebrow.

"He also may have been seeking subscriptions towards a new telescope for the observatory where he works," Draco smirked.

"You're incorrigible!" Hermione laughed. "So, Hadrian Harry?"

He made a face. "Yes, but don't expect me to ever use that middle name unless I'm scolding him."

"Deal," she agreed, sealing it with a kiss.

"So that leaves only his last name to be resolved," Draco murmured against her lips. "I'd like both of you to have my last name."

Gracefully, he knelt before her and looked up, his silvery eyes holding hers in sincerity. "Hermione, you are the light to my darkness, the faith to my cynicism, and the strength to my weakness. I've come to love you more than anyone or anything in the world. *You* are my Polaris."

She caught her breath at the depth emotions swirling in his eyes, reaching out her right hand to card it through his moonlit hair. He gently grasped her hand in his. She could feel him lightly running one finger along the ruby ring he had given to her.

"You are the bravest woman I know, but I understand why even you might hesitate before marrying me, amoral and flawed as I am," he admitted, with shocking humility. "Still, I beg you to reconsider. Say yes to me, my love."

Hermione thought there was something terrible about seeing such a proud man humbled on his knees, her mind flashing back to Pansy's vicious comment earlier. "Draco, get up. Please."

He did, carefully controlling the expression on his face. Still, she knew him well enough to read hurt and disappointment in the lines of his body. "I do wish to marry you, someday. We will get married, after the baby is here," she promised.

"So, are we engaged?" he asked, cautiously, with a hint of his usual arrogance. "It would mean the world to me, with the moon and the stars tossed in for good measure, if we were formally betrothed."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at his old-fashioned terminology, coupled with the still-vulnerable expression on this face. She couldn't deny him, not when a single word from her had such power over him. "Yes."

He tugged the ruby ring from her right hand and replaced it on her left before kissing her deeply, one hand at her neck and the other resting on the side of her belly. "You'll never regret this, either of you," he vowed, with the tender smile on his lips warring with the pure triumph in his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Umbridge's gloriously hypocritical family history is from JKR, by way of Pottermore as distilled on Wikipedia. Pansy has a line from the Harry Potter musical.

A Certain Sense of Déjà Vu

Chapter Notes

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

June 4, 2004

"Good morning, my dear. Did you sleep well?" Minerva McGonagall asked, kindly. She had not been close to Cho Chang-Nott as a student, since the girl was not a member of her own Gryffindor House, but in the headmistress's firm opinion, Cho's actions over the past month were as courageous as any lion.

"Quite," Cho said, continuing her trend of monosyllabic answers from the prior evening's dinner.

Minerva took no offense at what others might have seen as rudeness. She knew that it must be difficult for Cho to appear before the Wizengamot and testify publicly against her husband and others; moreover, the younger witch had been closeted with MLE attorneys all week, preparing her for cross-examination. For a quick study like Cho, it now would be automatic to answer precisely what she was asked - nothing less but certainly nothing more.

The headmistress also suspected that Cho would have preferred that Professor Flitwick accompany her to the trials. He was, after all, the Head of Ravenclaw House and had been Cho's favorite teacher. However, the MLE wanted a show of support from the headmistress of Hogwarts, not her diminutive, half-goblin deputy. Two wars had done nothing to resolve festering prejudice in the wizarding world, and Shacklebolt's administration had merely papered over it.

Minerva adjusted the tartan cape she wore over her black witch's dress. As requested by the MLE attorneys, the plaid included the colors of all four Hogwarts houses, so no member of the Wizengamot would feel slighted. She hoped they would forgive her that red predominated, while only the thinnest stripes were green. Given the MLE's insistence that appearances *mattered*, Minerva also scrutinized Cho from head to toe. She nodded once in satisfaction at the well-cut dark blue dress, fashionable bronze scarf, low-heeled nude pumps and a bun severe enough to rival Minerva's own.

"You look quite nice," the headmistress complimented.

"I do hope," Cho spoke with distinct bitterness, "that no rational person could look at me and think I was somehow 'asking' to be raped."

"No decent person, let alone any rational one, would think that," Minerva reassured her.

"Well, I am dealing with witches and wizards," Cho shot back. "Common decency and rationality seem very much lacking among them."

Minerva flinched. "Not here at Hogwarts. We do our best to teach tolerance, to -"

"Undo the despicable prejudices inculcated in these children from birth?" Cho interrupted. "And with no Muggleborn students attending to show them how wrong they are about us? What lessons will my daughter learn if she comes to Hogwarts in the future?"

"It's for the best," Minerva said defensively. "If I admitted Muggleborn students, they would be Obliviated upon graduation. It's better for them to be taught magic elsewhere, outside of Britain."

Cho shook her head in disgust. "It might be better for all of us outside of Britain," she muttered. The younger witch fell into a pensive silence, staring into the flames flickering in the fireplace.

"Are you ready, Cho?" Minerva asked after a few minutes and a glance at her watch. She wanted to give Cho time to compose herself, but they needed to get to the Ministry soon.

"I'm ready," Cho confirmed, unsmiling and without emotion.

A sense of déjà vu froze Minerva in the act of grabbing a pinch of Floo powder. Had it really been five years since she had heard those same brave words from another Muggleborn witch, on her way to the Ministry to face an unpleasant ordeal?

"Headmistress, are you ready?" Cho asked with concern. "You look a bit pale."

"I'm fine," Minerva said shakily, still shocked at the realization she had not seen Hermione Granger in five long years. As the daughter of a Calvinist minister, Minerva had been raised to never shirk a righteous duty. With sudden clarity, she realized just how remiss she had been with respect to her favorite student.

"Very well," Cho said as she threw a bit of Floo powder into the fireplace. "Ministry of Magic atrium," she enunciated, stepping into the green flames with resolution and with the headmistress at her heels.

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Draco Malfoy regretted his height and distinctive platinum hair only on rare occasions. This was one of them, with a beady-eyed Scottish harridan eying him from across the Ministry of Magic's atrium and then swooping down upon him like he was her rightful prey, Cho Chang-Nott reluctantly following.

"Ah, Mister Malfoy," said Minerva McGonagall, anger making her brogue more pronounced than usual. "I trust that you and Mister Flint received my Howlers?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said placatingly. "I apologize. Marcus and I had no desire to upset Madam Chang-Nott." Draco turned steady grey eyes on Cho, keeping her distance by standing slightly behind McGonagall. "Cho, I apologize if my concern for my father and Theo caused you to feel pressured in any way."

McGonagall snorted, even though it was true. Draco had not *wanted* to intimidate Cho, to try and make her drop the charges against his father, but family came first. Cho nodded in

silence, acknowledging but not accepting his apology.

"I do hope that you will reconsider your ban on visits from any employees of Malfoy Enterprises, Headmistress," he continued, politely. "Marcus was at the castle at Professor Slughorn's invitation. It was my idea to visit with Madam Chang-Nott. As my employee, there really was very little he could do when I insisted on accompanying him. I can assure you that I will not set foot in Hogwarts again without express permission."

"No, you shan't," the upright old witch agreed, grimly. "You may have a member of your company's sales staff who isn't a Death Eater call on Professor Slughorn in the future. I have already adjusted the wards to prevent anyone with a Dark Mark from entering the castle grounds. Albus never added that protection because of Professor Snape, but there's no reason now to keep that hole in Hogwarts' defenses."

McGonagall gave him a pointed glare, still angry after all these years that he had managed to get a squad of Death Eaters into the castle and bring about Dumbledore's assassination.

"Needs must when the devil drives," Draco quoted in self-defense. He wasn't proud of what he had done at age of sixteen, but he would do it again if he had to. He considered one dead headmaster more than a fair trade for his life and the lives of his parents.

The headmistress furrowed her brows, wrong-footed by his use of a Muggle proverb. Abruptly, she changed tactics. "While I'm on the subject of defense, how well is Miss Granger protected?"

"I beg your pardon?" Draco asked, wondering if the old witch had somehow found him out, or if Cho had managed to get around his curse to rat him out. McGonagall seemed worried rather than enraged, however.

She looked at him as though he were a particularly dim-witted pupil. "You are the Death Eater tasked with ensuring Miss Granger's safety and well-being, are you not? What are you doing to protect her?"

"Granger has the best wards money can buy," he answered, deliberately misleading by omission. There was no reason for McGonagall to know about the enchanted jewelry or the blood wards he had personally placed after finding out Hermione was pregnant. Both were very telling forms of protection.

"Anything else? Do you do anything whatsoever to check on her well-being in the Muggle world?" McGonagall asked, her voice sharp.

"Yes, Malfoy, what else do you do with Hermione?" Cho asked mockingly.

"Her- Granger has a house elf assigned to watch over her," Draco answered, barely catching his slip in time.

The old cat's stern mask slipped for an instance. Underneath her very real desire to take him to task was an equally real concern for Hermione. "Do you know if she is well?"

"I have no reason to think otherwise." When he had left early this morning to attend the trials, she had been sleeping peacefully in their bed. "And I do try to take good care of Granger. After all, her life is as important to me as my own," Draco smirked, knowing McGonagall would interpret his statement as one of pure self-interest.

The witch glared at him in annoyance. "Very well, Mister Malfoy."

Cho looked even more venomous. "Why don't you try to tell the truth for once in your life, Malfoy? That your wife is a stupid slag!" She clapped her hands to her mouth, mortified at what had come out.

Draco suppressed a chuckle. When he had cursed Cho at Theo's request to prevent her from speaking about magic to any Muggles or Muggleborns, he had added a little twist to keep her from spilling his secret about Hermione to any witch or wizard. If she tried, the curse would make her talk about Astoria instead.

"My ex-wife," he said, unoffended. "Not that Astoria has any relevance to this conversation."

"She's pregnant!" Cho blurted out.

"I know, by Gilderoy Lockhart," Draco said. "My mother read all about it in *Witch Weekly* and shared the details with me." He shrugged. "I don't begrudge Astoria any happiness."

"How gracious of you," Cho said, with thick sarcasm. "Professor McGonagall, do you know where I could obtain the services of a competent curse breaker?" she inquired sweetly.

McGonagall looked between her and Draco, aware something was afoot. "I can recommend Bill Weasley without reservation. He's in Egypt at present on an assignment, but he'll be back early next week, if that's not too late."

"That should be fine. I'll be safe enough at Hogwarts until then." Cho eyed Draco with thinly concealed triumph. He maintained an unruffled facade, but inwardly his mind was racing, calculating how much damage she could do if free to reveal his relationship with Hermione and whether it was worth the risk of trying to stop her.

Someone shoved into him from behind. "Move along, Malfoy," Auror Dean Thomas ordered. "The Ministry won't tolerate any further attempts by you to intimidate this witness."

"Since when is a public exchange of pleasantries considered witness intimidation?" Draco demanded.

Dean sneered at him. "The only reason you and Flint aren't up on charges of suborning perjury is because Madam Chang-Nott has insisted, under Veritaserum, that your conversation with her at Hogwarts will have no impact on her testimony. She's still happy to testify against your father, ferret scum. Now get out of here."

"It's a public trial, Auror Thomas. I'm here to support Madam Chang-Nott, at her husband's request."

Cho flinched visibly at that. Briefly, Draco wondered if that was a lever - if he could trade Cho's silence regarding Hermione in exchange for his father's agreement to omit testifying about the precise curse Theo had used. Headmistress McGonagall drew Cho away, leaving the two men to posture at each other.

"You're despicable, Malfoy," Dean spat. "Harassing a pregnant witch to keep your father from enjoying another stint in Azkaban. Nothing would make me happier than to have you two arseholes sharing a cell."

"Hypocritical much, *Auror* Thomas?" Draco asked, sardonically emphasizing the other wizard's title. Since January, Dean had known about his involvement with Hermione, but he had kept silent to keep his redheaded She-Weasel of a wife out of Azkaban for violating Umbridge's laws. He really had no room, in Draco's opinion, to be so self-righteous.

"What are you talking about?" Dean asked, looking genuinely befuddled.

Now it was Draco's turn to sneer. "Don't try to tell me that you've never been derelict in your duty, covering up a crime committed by someone you love."

"I really don't know what you're on about." The Auror was so genuinely puzzled that he forgot to look at Draco like he was something nasty scraped off the bottom of his shoe. Draco realized that Thomas had forgotten their last encounter - or, more accurately, had been made to forget.

"Never mind, Auror Thomas," he said with a smirk.

"What are you so pleased about?" Dean demanded suspiciously.

Draco looked past him to one of the Ministry lifts, where Kingsley Shacklebolt was exiting, dressed in his plum-colored Wizengamot robes and attended by a small entourage of Undersecretaries and Aurors. "I was just thinking how nice it is to have friends - or at least allies - in high places."

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In the visitor's gallery at the Wizengamot, Narcissa Malfoy sat, her back as straight as her wand and a carefully calibrated expression of sympathy on her face. The wizarding court had been in session for more than seven hours, with a brief break for lunch, but Narcissa's facade had shown nary a crack.

She had listened impassively to the prosecution's opening statement, the testimony of the MLE patrol wizard who had found the Chang girl unconscious at the juncture of Knockturn and Diagon Alleys, and medical testimony from the senior member of the team of Healers who had treated her injuries. Nothing revealed her thoughts when the testimony shifted to Dean Thomas's introduction of Cho's Pensieve memories against each of the individual defendants on trial today. Draco had placed his hand over hers once, in a subtle gesture of comfort, but she moved hers away within minutes.

With the possible exception of her son, who was unusually perceptive and had lived in the Manor part of the time during those dark years, no one in the courtroom would ever hazard a guess that she was viciously gleeful, bordering on giddy, to see brutes like Walden Macnair and Thorfinn Rowle finally on the verge of getting their just desserts. They had never dared to assault her - a pureblood witch with possession of her wand and knowledge on any number of Dark curses - but they had insulted, threatened, and even groped her in her own home while Lucius was imprisoned. But that was Narcissa's secret, one she would carry with her to the grave.

Narcissa did not even mind that the instrument of their downfall was a Mudblood witch. She did not for one moment believe the faradiddle that Cho Chang was a pureblood or even a half-blood. If she had a claim to even a drop of magical blood, the chit would have brought it to the attention of the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission rather than lose her memories and magic. No, the Notts had come up with a marginally plausible story and then spent enough in the way of bribes to make it seem true. She and Lucius would have done the same for Draco and their expected grandson, if required. Narcissa was extremely pleased that it would not be necessary for her to hold her nose and pretend that Granger girl was something other than a filthy Mudblood, as her scarred arm so accurately stated.

The younger Nott, who had volunteered to be the first Death Eater to be sentenced, was presently taking the opportunity offered by the Wizengamot to make a statement in his own defense. In Narcissa's considered opinion, her son's friend had quite a few mitigating facts to offer, but Theo's entire demeanor was so downtrodden and guilt-stricken that it weakened his overall presentation.

"That cold-blooded bitch won't even look at him," Draco snarled softly from his seat next to hers. Indeed, Cho Chang-Nott's reaction to her husband's impassioned plea for forgiveness was to ignore it entirely in favor of staring at the top of the wooden table where she was seated with the MLE prosecutors.

"That's precisely the sort of ingratitude I should expect from filth like that," Narcissa whispered back.

The Wizengamot declared a brief recess so that they could confer over Theo's sentence. Narcissa had planned to spend the break in idle chit-chat with the wives of some of the more influential Wizengamot members, putting forward her suggestion that Azkaban alone might not be punishment enough for the more violent of Cho's rapists, and perhaps an Impotence Hex should be imposed for the duration of their prison sentences. However, as soon as Draco departed for a quiet conversation in the corner with the Minister of Magic, Rita Skeeter slid into his seat with a smile like a crocodile's, effectively boxing Narcissa in.

"Madam Malfoy," the reporter began brightly. "How does it feel to know that your husband will be sitting in shackles before the Wizengamot next week, facing justice for his role in the atrocities perpetuated against Madam Chang-Nott? Has this very public revelation of his sexual misconduct with a woman young enough to be your daughter caused strains in your marriage, or are you - as the Americans say - standing by your man?"

"My family and I are standing by Madam Chang-Nott, to use your phrase," Narcissa answered with composure. Part of the reason she had agreed to attend today was to take

advantage of any opportunity offered to shape the media's coverage. "My son Draco and I are here today to show our support for poor, dear Cho," she went on, as Skeeter avidly wrote down every word.

The Wizengamot's public seating was arranged so that the judges could easily see the family, friends and supporters mustered for the victim and the defendants. By their presence in the gallery, Narcissa and Draco were implicitly ratifying the truth of Cho's accusations and silently showing the more conservative members of the Wizengamot that the Malfoy family had no objection to the actual rapists being found guilty.

"But what about Lucius?" Rita Skeeter persisted. "Is it true that you barred him from Malfoy Manor after Madam Chang-Nott's allegations against him came to light?"

"Of course not," Narcissa shook her head. "Malfoy Manor is his ancestral home. We've lived there together for our entire marriage and I am confident we will continue to do so once the wise judges of the Wizengamot acquit my husband." She saw no need to mention to the nosy reporter that she had hexed Lucius so that he had no choice but to sleep on the couch in his study. Any time he entered their bedroom, he felt as though thousands of fire ants were stinging his genitals.

"This is a tragic situation for my husband and young Theo Nott," Narcissa spoke earnestly, wanting this quote to make it into Rita's article. "They did what they had to do, no matter how personally distasteful they may have found it, to rescue Miss Chang from her Death Eater captors. Lucius and Theo should be commended rather than prosecuted."

"What about the Death Eaters other than your husband and Theodore Nott, Jr.? Do you believe they should face lengthy prison terms? Is there any truth to the rumors that you have a very personal interest in seeing certain of the defendants locked up for their crimes against witches?" Skeeter rattled off, rapid-fire.

"I expect that the Wizengamot will act appropriately in each defendant's case, based on the facts," Narcissa offered blandly, only the slightest tightening of her mouth betraying her emotions at that last question.

Over Rita Skeeter's shoulder, she could see the members of the Wizengamot filing back in, preparatory to imposing their sentence on Theo. Narcissa waited until the reporter's Quick-Quills Quote disappeared into the depths of her crocodile-skin handbag before continuing with a low-voiced threat. "And if you try to pass off any rumors regarding me as news, I'll see you squashed like the insect you are."

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After taking the big step of agreeing that she would marry Draco - eventually, after the baby was born - Hermione thought it was only a minor thing to acquiesce in his request for a traditional betrothal ceremony. He had warned her that she might find the handfasting a little bit odd, but she had read up on the practice and was trying to keep an open mind. However, just before the actual ceremony, on the Friday evening before Draco's birthday, real doubts began to creep in. The catalyst was the arrival of the so-called minister her boyfriend had selected to perform the binding.

"Hello, I'm Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt," the man introduced himself in a deep, rumbling voice, taking her hand in his much larger one and shaking it. He was a tall, broad man of African descent with a shaved head and an earring in one ear. His elaborate reddish-purple robes should have made him look absurd, like a charlatan, but Hermione instinctively knew he was anything but. There wasn't the slightest hint of piety or spirituality about him, but the man radiated power and charisma. A politician rather than a priest, Hermione decided. If he were a Roman Catholic or Episcopalian rather than a neo-pagan, this Shacklebolt would be at least a bishop, and more likely an archbishop.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir," she said politely, despite her internal assessment. "We haven't met before, have we?"

"I should never forget such an intelligent and beautiful young woman," Kingsley said with gallantry, lips brushing the knuckles of the hand he had just shaken. "Truly, you are a fortunate man," he added for Draco's benefit.

"Don't I know it," her boyfriend murmured, pulling her into an embrace. His hands caressed down her sides and over her abdomen, coming to rest just above her belly button. "You look like a princess."

"Thanks - Katie was busy this afternoon!" she smiled up at him, relishing the warmth in his normally cool grey eyes.

Her friend had spent more than an hour taming Hermione's curls, braiding a portion in a circlet while the remaining curls hung long and loose. The style complemented Hermione's dress, with its empire waist and embroidered sleeves and hem. She had chosen not to wear white - the stark color wasn't flattering, and she couldn't exactly pull off a virginal appearance less than two months away from her due date. Instead, her dress was a deep ivory, the color of antique lace.

"Katie's already here, then?" Draco asked. At her nod, he smiled. "Good. Mark should be here any minute."

"I hope he isn't running late," Katie offered, walking down the stairs in a red sundress that set off her dark hair and eyes. "Punctuality isn't always his strong suit."

She offered Draco a light kiss on the cheek. "Congratulations, and thank you for asking Mark and me to be your witnesses."

"What a lovely color on you, Miss Bell," Minister Shacklebolt smiled at her as Draco performed the introductions. "If there's no objection, I'll take myself outside to make the final preparations."

"I'm going to nip upstairs and get changed," Draco told the two women, giving Hermione a kiss that lingered long enough to make Katie intervene.

"Break it up, Foy," she laughed. "You and Hermione will have time enough for that after the ceremony."

Mark had arrived, looking surprisingly dapper in a dark suit, by the time Draco reappeared in similar attire. Hermione raised her eyebrows a tad at her boyfriend's green and silver necktie, recognizing it as one that had been used to restrain her any number of times. Her soon-to-be fiancé met her gaze and grinned. "It's my favorite tie," he explained, unabashed.

"So, why'd you pick the day before your birthday to tie the knot, mate?" Mark asked, genuinely curious.

Draco chuckled. "Assuming our union proves fruitful, which is not in doubt," he patted Hermione's belly, "and assuming neither of us revokes the vows, we're officially married after a year and a day. I couldn't imagine a better birthday present to give myself."

Mark's grin displayed his jagged teeth. "Yeah, and mm- Foys always demand the best."

"There's also no chance you'll ever forget your anniversary," Katie pointed out, cheery and practical.

"Do you think that the minister is ready for us?" Hermione asked, feeling unusually anxious. She twisted the platinum bracelet on her wrist for comfort, playing with the miniature book, dragon, and topaz-eyed otter.

"I'll check," Mark offered, with a heavy but well-intentioned pat on her shoulder. A minute later, he beckoned from the door leading to the back garden with a grin.

"Oh, my," Hermione gasped at the back garden, transformed as it was by hundreds of twinkling candles in the twilight. Minister Shacklebolt had managed to arrange them to create a perfect circle within the tiny patch of lawn, as well as setting up a makeshift stone altar, though she couldn't imagine where he had acquired the rocks. Certainly he had been empty-handed when he arrived. Curious as always, Hermione examined the carvings on the little altar, which she couldn't place.

"Shall we begin?" Shacklebolt inquired in his deep, slow voice.

At their nods, the minister ushered Draco and Hermione into the grass circle. "Face each other and kneel, please," he directed.

Tenderly, Draco helped her onto the lawn, knowing that her balance was compromised by her changing body. Once she was settled, he knelt beside her.

"Draco, take Hermione's right hand in your left." Her boyfriend did as the minister instructed, giving her a reassuring grin as he interlaced their fingers.

Hermione forced a smile in return. Although kneeling wasn't physically uncomfortable, the position made her uneasy for reasons she couldn't pinpoint. Even worse, she could feel a migraine coming on, and quickly, with a near-painful pressure building behind her eyes.

Minister Shacklebolt draped a silken cord over both of their wrists. Hermione thought the cord's interwoven colors - black and white, set off by silver and gold - were lovely, echoing the contrast between her tanned, slender wrist and Draco's paler, stronger wrist.

"Draco and Hermione, is there any impediment that prevents you from plighting your troth to one another?" the minister began.

"No," her boyfriend answered immediately, in a firm voice.

"No," Hermione echoed, more softly. Her loss of memory did not render her incompetent to enter into a vow like this, and she was certain she had not been married at the age of nineteen.

The minister looped the cord once around their joined hands.

"Do you each plight your troth of your own free will?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Yes." This time, their answers were simultaneous, and Hermione gave Draco a small, strained smile as Shacklebolt wrapped the cord once more around them, even though her head felt like it was going to split in two.

Her clever, perceptive boyfriend immediately noticed something was wrong. "Can you skip to the end?" He asked Shacklebolt. "Hermione isn't feeling well."

The minister shook his head and placidly proceeded to his next question.

"Hermione, will you have Draco to be your wedded husband, once a year and a day have passed?"

"I will," she replied.

"Will you love, comfort, and honor him, and accept his protection, for all of your days?" Hermione would have sworn she saw Shacklebolt smirk as he tied the first knot in the cord.

"I will," Hermione said, through clenched teeth due to the pain in her head.

"For him, will you forsake all others?"

"I will," she answered, as a sudden memory of Andy kissing her passionately, as though the world were ending around them, invaded her mind. Was it Andy, though? She couldn't ever remember sharing a kiss like that with her ginger ex-boyfriend. She could only be thankful, through her distraction, that it now was Draco's turn to take his vows. Hermione breathed in shallow breaths, trying to hold her headache at bay.

"Draco, will you have Hermione to be your wedded wife, once a year and a day have passed?"

"I will," he answered quickly. She had the impression he was trying to hurry the ceremony along for her sake.

"Will you love, comfort, honor and protect her, for all of your days?" Shacklebolt smirked again, as Hermione vaguely wondered, through the stabbing pain behind her eyes, why they had to do this a second time.

"I will," Draco vowed, grey eyes watching her with concern.

"For her, will you forsake all others?"

"I will," Draco agreed, as she gripped his hand through the pain in her skull. "Seriously, Shacklebolt, will you skip to the end?"

"I'll be fine," she whispered. "It's just a migraine."

The minister looked unaccountably pleased. "I'm almost done," he told Draco, speaking more slowly than ever. "Marcus, will you pluck a rose off the arbor for me? Mind the thorns."

Mark did as directed, snapping off a long-stemmed flower in full bloom. Behind him, from her place just outside the circle as a witness, Katie smiled mistily at Hermione and Draco.

Taking the rose from Mark, Shacklebolt placed it between their bound hands. "Prick your thumb on one of the thorns," he told Draco.

"A Blood Vow?" her boyfriend asked, raising an eyebrow. Hermione could see that Mark also seemed taken aback, while Katie looked as puzzled as she felt. "That seems a tad redundant."

"Do you have any objection?" Shacklebolt challenged.

Draco met it head on. "None whatsoever," he replied, slicing his thumb on a wickedly sharp thorn. Droplets of blood welled up immediately, a perfect match for the scarlet rose petals.

"Now do the same to Miss Granger," the minister ordered.

"No," Draco refused. "I won't inflict even the tiniest of hurts on her."

"I'll do it," she volunteered, breaking the stalemate between the two men. Hermione jabbed her thumb onto a thorn. As she expected, Draco swiped the pad of his thumb against hers, smearing their blood together. She did not expect him to dip his platinum-bright head to gently suck on her thumb, cleaning the blood with his tongue, or to place his thumb expectantly on her lower lip so that she could do the same. Hermione shrugged it off as she swirled her tongue around Draco's digit. It was less blood than a paper cut, and it wasn't as though she and her boyfriend hadn't exchanged other bodily fluids before.

With an elaborate hand gesture, Shacklebolt caused the cords to loosen from around their wrists and drop to the altar. Hermione was amused by the classic conjuror's trick, but Draco was unimpressed.

"The cord and the knots binding you together are the merest symbol of your handfasting," the minister proclaimed, looking exultant. "Your true bond is formed by your Vows to one another, the mingling of your blood, the joining of your flesh, and communion of your souls."

Even through the haze of pain in her head, Hermione appreciated the beauty of the words and the power behind them. Her wrist felt like it was buzzing with energy.

"Do you have the rings?" the minister asked.

Mark stepped forward, pulling two rings, each on a silvery chain, from his pocket.

"Always with the snakes," Katie said softly, but in admiration. Each ring was an ouroboros, a serpent with diamond eyes and golden-tipped platinum scales. As per usual with the jewelry Draco selected, the rings were beautifully detailed and clearly expensive. Shacklebolt muttered something over them, which equally could be a blessing or an incantation, before handing the man's ring, on a heavier chain, to Hermione and the smaller of the pair to Draco.

"What token do you give as a symbol of your love and faith?" Shacklebolt asked, turning to Draco.

"With this ring I will wed you, with my body I will worship you, with my goods I will endow you, and with all my heart I will love you. This I swear, by the stars in the sky, the air that we breathe, the water that we drink, the fire that warms us, and the earth under our feet." As Draco spoke, staring into her eyes, he fastened the snake ring on its delicate platinum necklace around her neck to be worn there for a year and a day, until he moved it to her ring finger as a traditional wedding band.

Hermione repeated the vow over his ring, her headache making her stumble over the words and fumble with the clasp of the chain. But Draco was patient and in the end she succeeded in fastening it around his neck.

"As these rings show, all that ends shall begin anew, like a phoenix rising from the ashes." The minister paused and gave Hermione a significant look that she did not understand. "Day becomes night, darkness overcomes all that is Light. And then the cycle repeats. Night turns into day, and daylight drives back the Dark."

"Draco and Hermione, like your rings, the unity that you share is infinite and cannot be extinguished or torn asunder." Shacklebolt continued, his dark eyes boring into Hermione's more golden-brown ones. "If you remember nothing else, remember this: only a thin line divides love from hate, devotion from obsession, and blind faith from trust. Heed my words well, for you are linked now even more so than before."

Through the black spots rising in her vision, Hermione could feel Draco practically vibrating in fury as he knelt next to her. She understood the words, of course, but not why they angered him so.

"You may kiss your handfast bride," Shacklebolt concluded, sounding almost disappointed.

Despite his fury at the minister, her fiancé's lips were gentle on hers, as was his hand at the nape of her neck. Hermione gratefully leaned back into it for support. Shacklebolt, Draco and Mark were exchanging words, but it sounded as though they were talking from a great distance, or perhaps underwater, for all the sense that they made.

Katie's voice, however, was clear as a bell, a figure of speech that made Hermione smile as she thought it. "Grab her, Malcolm! I think she's going to faint!" she cried.

Then the pain in Hermione's head took over and everything went black.

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Alone at a table in a nondescript pub on a quiet street in a modest town that formed part of the outermost ring of London's suburbs, Kingsley Shacklebolt nursed a pint of ale. It was a sour red Flemish ale, the taste a perfect match for his mood.

Five years before, Hermione's impetuous decision to make Draco Malfoy Obliviate her had been, in Kingsley's opinion, a cunning stratagem worthy of a Slytherin. Even though Draco was a skilled wizard, and as clever and devious as one would expect from a Malfoy heir, he had not been prepared to undertake the difficult, tricky task of Obliviating eight years' worth of magical memories. He also had no experience with the Muggle world, other than isolated spots of Muggle-baiting on the Dark Lord's orders, and therefore was entirely incapable of making up memories to replace what he took away.

As a result of having put Malfoy on the spot like that, Kingsley was convinced that Hermione had more of her memories intact and accessible than any other Muggleborn. He pictured the Obliviation spell blocking her memories of magic as a poorly built brick wall, and it had been his intent to exploit and widen the chinks in the mortar until that wall collapsed.

While Kingsley personally could not undo Hermione's Obliviation - only Malfoy could reverse the spell - the Minister of Magic had planned everything about the handfasting ceremony to a nicety, beginning as soon as Draco asked him to officiate. He had deliberately recreated the circumstances of the younger Malfoy's first Vow to Hermione as much as possible in order to jog her memory, and it had very nearly worked.

Throughout the handfasting, Kingsley had seen her increasing distress and acute discomfort as those repressed memories fought to break free of whatever magical compartment Draco had confined them to. Still, the minister had persisted, for her own good and the greater good. A master at wizarding chess, Kingsley pictured Hermione as a white pawn, navigating a treacherous chessboard. Once he guided her successfully through the ranks of the black chess pieces to the other end of the board, she would transform into a queen - the most powerful piece on the board. Except it had not worked.

When Hermione had fainted, Kingsley had been hopeful she would wake up as a witch in full possession of her faculties. If she had done so, he would have had a very powerful ally for the restoration of Muggleborn rights, wedded into the wealthiest and most powerful of the traditionalist families in wizarding Britain through an irreversible Blood rite. She also would have been able to restore the memories of several other Muggleborn witches and wizards, those whom she had personally Obliviated.

However, to his immense frustration, the so-called brightest witch of her age had returned to consciousness with no more knowledge of magic than a Muggle. Hermione had been embarrassed about passing out during the ceremony, although Marcus Flint's teasing about Draco's kiss making her swoon made her laugh. Katie Bell had attributed the fainting spell to pregnancy and taken him aside with a stern lecture for dragging the ceremony out when Hermione obviously wasn't feeling well. Malfoy had been torn between concern for his fiancée and rage once he realized what the minister had been trying to accomplish. Kingsley doubted that the younger wizard would allow him near his Muggleborn betrothed anytime soon, if ever.

"She could've been a queen, but she's still just a pawn," he muttered into his mug.

Perhaps he could cultivate Katie Bell, Kingsley thought, as he contemplated the dregs in his mug, even thought she was not as powerful a witch and the Flints were not as influential as the Malfoys. She also was the "other woman" and not a wife, which could prove controversial. Cho Chang-Nott's rampage through the Ministry proved she had power to spare, but the Nott men both would be confined to Azkaban for the foreseeable future. And even with her memories restored, the former Ravenclaw had shown no inclination to become a crusader for bringing Muggleborns back into wizarding Britain, not like a Gryffindor witch would.

Kingsley sighed in discontent. There was a younger Gryffindor girl, still a student at a Muggle university, who was bonded to Adrian Pucey.

"That might be an option," he informed his drink, without any particular enthusiasm. The Puceys were a wealthy old family, but nothing compared to the Malfoys.

"How 'bout another?" the young man behind the bar offered. "You look like you might need it."

The Minister of Magic was tempted, but shook his head after a glance at his watch. "I need to be getting home soon."

As if on cue, the mobile that Kingsley kept in his jacket pocket vibrated. He cancelled the Disillusionment spell, not wanting the Muggle bartender to think he was mental, talking on an invisible phone, before he flipped it open to answer. He didn't bother to check who was calling - only one person in the world had this number.

"Hello, dear," he said warmly, happy as always to hear the woman's voice on the other end of the line.

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In her surprisingly modern en suite bathroom at Hogwarts, Cho emerged from a steaming hot shower and towed herself dry with vigor. After the day's set of trials, she felt the need to scrub herself clean.

So far as she was concerned, one good thing about the justice system in the wizarding world - perhaps the only good thing - was that it moved swiftly. A single day of trials before the Wizengamot had seen seven men sentenced.

All four of the younger generation of Death Eaters had pled guilty in exchange for more lenient sentences. Derrick, Bole and Warrington each had been sentenced to six years for a single count of sexual assault. With time off for good behavior, they likely would be out within five years, still young men with their lives in front of them. Cho was appalled at the brevity of their sentences, but with otherwise clean records, the MLE prosecutors told her the Wizengamot would not impose anything longer.

Theo had received the shortest sentence of all - three years for casting a curse to facilitate sexual activity without consent. Most likely, he would be out in two years and some months, which meant he would miss every single one of their daughter's milestones. Drusilla's first

smile, first words, and first steps all would take place while he was incarcerated. Cho, however, could not find it within herself to care. For far longer than two or three years, it had been within Theo's power to help her by giving back her memories, yet he had dithered and delayed for no reason she could perceive other than to shield his father and other rapist Death Eaters.

Theo's father - she would not let herself think of that vile man as her father-in-law - had thrown himself on the mercy of the Wizengamot, claiming he never would have assaulted Cho if he had known she was a pureblood. As disgusted as she was by the defense, the judges were receptive: Nott, Sr. had received twenty years in Azkaban, which was light considering he was charged with multiple counts of rape and sexual assault, not to mention conspiracy and false imprisonment.

Rowle and Macnair had elected to stand trial. Cho had held up under cross-examination by their attorneys and she had remained impassive when the Wizengamot announced their sentences. Now, alone in her bathroom at Hogwarts, safe from prying eyes and newspaper photographers, she permitted herself a bitter, triumphant smile. Those animals would be spending the next fifty years in prison for their leading roles in her kidnapping, rape, and assault. Even with the longer lifespan enjoyed by wizards, those two could expect to die in Azkaban or to be released as very elderly, frail old men.

The MLE prosecutors had been pleased with the day's results. They optimistically expected more of the remaining defendants to accept a plea bargain over the weekend before the trials formally resumed on Monday. They warned her, however, that Lucius Malfoy would stand trial and take his chances with the Wizengamot rather than accept a deal that involved time in prison. Cho shrugged it off. She too was willing to take her chances, to run the slight risk that the elder Malfoy's testimony might expose Theo to a longer prison sentence.

After her visit from Draco Malfoy and Flint the prior week, she had picked herself up off the bathroom floor, dried her tears, and coldly analyzed the situation. She had concluded that the Malfoys were bluffing and that Lucius would not reveal that Theo had used an Unforgivable on her. That information would not help Lucius's defense and might be considered an aggravating factor. Even if he did testify that Theo used the Imperius curse, it would be his word against hers and Cho was reasonably confident hers would prevail. She had ostensibly been under the influence of Veritaserum when she had identified the curse Theo used, and she had been careful when extracting her memory for the Aurors' Pensieve. In contrast, Lucius had been known to lie about the use of the Imperius Curse and, as a suspected Legilemens, even his testimony under Veritaserum would not be considered reliable.

When Professor Flitwick returned from his meeting that night, she had presented the situation to him. He agreed with her conclusions. On Monday, they would find out if their impersonal Ravenclaw logic worked to predict the actions of a cunning Slytherin.

Instead of her nightgown, Cho exchanged her towel for a Muggle tracksuit, too restless to sleep. Instead, she made her way out of her rooms and through the quiet castle. It was after curfew, so any students who were not tucked safely in their dormitories would be as eager to avoid her as she was to avoid them. At present, Cho had no desire for company - she just

wanted to feel the cool Scottish air on her face, whipping away thoughts of the day's trials and Theo.

Next to the Quidditch pitch, Cho let herself into the broomshed and selected the least dilapidated of the school's broomsticks. Surprisingly, flying on a broom was not one of the many magical activities pregnant witches were advised against. According to Healer Clearwater, it was a safer form of transportation than Apparition and even Floo, since one could always trip exiting a fireplace.

Cho kicked off and began a leisurely circuit around and above the castle, heading towards the Black Lake. In the light of the nearly full moon, she could see every ripple on its inky surface. She took a deep breath of the bracing night air and exhaled, trying to expel dark thoughts and memories stirred up by the day's testimony.

To her surprise, it actually worked. As the Healer had testified, in excruciating detail, Cho had been battered and broken after her rape. But she had been Healed physically and was at least on the way to healing mentally. Not very long ago, if she had been hovering on a broomstick above a body of water, Cho knew she would have been thinking about the height and velocity necessary to kill herself rather than admiring the view. She wasn't happy - not even close - but she had something to live for.

"It's just you and me against the world, baby girl," Cho said, patting a spot under her ribcage where Drusilla often kicked.

Usually, the baby responded to Cho's touch, but tonight she felt no movement. Probably Dru was sleeping, lulled by the motion of the broomstick and her mother's brisk walk through the castle before that. Cho flew on, with no destination in mind, wanting nothing more than for her mind to be as numb as her wind-whipped cheeks. Flying helped her forget her troubles, at least for as long as she remained in the air.

A sharp cramp made her gasp. "It's just a Braxton Hicks contraction," she told herself, speaking out loud even though she was alone and several meters off the ground. "Nothing to worry about." Until another hit minutes later, doubling Cho over her broom in pain as she landed on the Quidditch pitch, and a third contraction brought tears to her eyes as she ascended one of the moving staircases as she hurried to the nearest Floo connection to call St. Mungo's. Now she was worried.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: in case you missed it, there was a nodding reference to *The Princess Bride* - one of the rare instances where the movie is even better than the (excellent) book.

Draco's Birthday Wishes

June 5, 2004

"I'm so sorry," Healer Clearwater said, her professional demeanor cracking with her distress. "You've been through so much, and now this . . ." She ran her wand over the lower part of Cho's torso and shook her head, tears in her eyes.

"Is my baby dead?" Cho managed to ask, through her dreadful, choking fear.

"No, the heartbeat's strong and steady. But you're in labor and your amniotic fluid is leaking. That's not something I can fix with a *Reparo*," the Healer spoke gravely.

Cho let out a sigh of relief as she processed that information. "Alright. I'm thirty weeks, six days." She glanced at the clock on wall of the examination room at St. Mungo's. When her contractions had continued, she had Floo'd to the hospital. "Actually, it's gone midnight, so I'm thirty-one weeks. It's not ideal, but Merlin willing, she'll be fine."

Penelope Clearwater patted her hand in sympathy. "Cho, you don't understand. Magic can't fix everything. Things like a Bubblehead Charm or warming charms don't work on preterm infants - their magical cores are too immature. I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for a baby born this early."

"Are you telling me that premature infants *die* in the wizarding world?"

"We can save them if they are born a month or even six weeks early. And we've never lost a witch in childbirth in the 367 years we've been operating as a hospital," Healer Clearwater said defensively. "Muggle women routinely die from giving birth."

"Not in the United Kingdom or the rest of the developed world, at least not in the last hundred years," Cho snapped. She was not in the mood for a discussion of the history of obstetrical care, nor when she was terrified for Drusilla's well-being and experiencing the discomfort of contractions every nine minutes. "Muggle hospitals can save premature infants born as early as twenty-four weeks. For infants who are twenty-eight weeks or older, the survival rate is greater than ninety percent. Does no one at St. Mungo's know this basic medical information?"

Penelope just gaped at her. Cho had been pleased that the young blonde was the Healer on-call, since they ordinarily had a good rapport, but just right now she was appalled at her ignorance. "No, I've never learned anything about Muggle medical care," the Healer confessed. "I don't think anyone on the staff knows anything about it."

Cho's irritation spiked with the cramping pain of another contraction. "Aren't you a half-blood?" she demanded. "I can't believe that you're this ignorant when one of your parents is a Muggle!"

"My mum left when I was a toddler," Penelope said quietly. "She couldn't handle my accidental magic. My dad raised me entirely in the wizarding world."

"I'm sorry," Cho muttered, feeling guilty for lashing out. But despite - or maybe because of her medical training - she was close to panicking and knew it was imperative to get herself and Dru to Barnet Hospital and its neonatal intensive care unit as quickly as possible.

"The only reason witches are advised not to Apparate in the third trimester is the risk of triggering preterm labor, correct?" Cho asked Healer Clearwater. She knew the answer, but hoped appealing to the other woman's professional expertise would help smooth her ruffled feathers.

"As well as the risk that compression might cause the amniotic sac to rupture, yes," the Healer agreed.

"Well, that's the least of my worries at present." Cho grasped her wand prior to Apparating, but then paused, holding out her hand. She desperately wanted Theo, but that was impossible. Penelope's soothing bedside manner and cautious friendship would be far better than giving birth alone. "Would you - could you please come with me?"

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Theo jolted awake, nearly falling off his narrow prison cot. Like all of the other inmates, his cell was kept dimly lit even in the middle of night so the Azkaban guards could monitor them. He blinked owlishly, wondering if another prisoner in the corridor had cried out in his sleep, waking him.

He stretched and absently rubbed his wrist before bolting to his feet, alarm bringing him to instant wakefulness. His wrist only hurt when Cho was hurt or in danger. In past experience, pain around his wrist meant she was in danger of hurting herself. This was more of a throbbing ache, but it was enough to bring him to the bars at the front of the cell, shouting for help.

Minutes passed before one of the prison guards, formerly a low-level Snatcher, bothered to saunter over. "What's got your knickers in a twist, pretty boy?" the man demanded, with a mix of boredom and irritation.

"It's my wife. There's something wrong with her," Theo related urgently.

"The uppity little bitch we all thought was a Mudblood? She's probably just lonely with you and all your friends here in Azkaban." The guard made a crude gesture towards his groin.

Theo gripped the bars until his knuckles turned white. "If you Floo-call the Auror Department to report my concerns and have them verify she's safe at Hogwarts, my solicitor will ensure that your salary for the week is doubled."

The guard ran a thoughtful tongue along his teeth. "Make it a fortnight and we have a deal. Just for making the call, mind you."

"Fine," Theo agreed curtly.

The guard ambled away at a pace that was far too leisurely for Theo's taste. More than a quarter-hour later, he returned, shaking his head with ghoulish relish. "Something's happened," he stated. "Your wife left Hogwarts for St. Mungo's 'cuz the baby was coming early, but she ain't at the hospital now. Apparated away with one of the Healers. The Aurors are looking for them now."

Theo sat heavily on his cot, his legs suddenly as wobbly as if he had been hit with a Jelly-Leg Jinx. He buried his face in his hands, knowing it would do his prison reputation no good to be caught crying. "Oh, fuck! Not Cho! Not Dru!" he begged some unknown force, his mind torn between prayers to every dead sorcerer and deity he could think of and frantic thoughts as to where his wife and daughter might be found.

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"I thought we were hiring a car!" Hermione exclaimed in surprise as she exited their flat, early enough in the morning that the London air still was crisp. A classic silver Jaguar was pulled up to the curb, the boot open for Draco to place their overnight bags inside.

"This is my birthday present to myself," he explained, patting the hood with a proprietary smile.

"Is it safe?" she asked. "A car like this won't have any modern electronics or safety systems."

"Do you really think I would do anything to put you or the baby in danger?" Her boyfriend - no, her newly-minted fiancé - asked back, shaking his head at her lack of faith. "It's been outfitted with safety features you can't even imagine, sweetheart. Now, in you go," he directed, holding open the passenger door.

She sank into the leather seat and buckled the safety belt, leaning back against the headrest with a grateful sigh. Ever since the horrible headache that had arisen during the handfasting the day before, her skull had felt fragile, like it was made out of eggshells.

"Are you sure you're feeling better?" Draco asked, concerned. "We don't have to go away this weekend."

"Of course we do!" Hermione exclaimed. "It's your birthday present and our babymoon! Besides, I'm feeling much better. I can't wait to show you the Forest of Dean. I went camping there only a few times, but I've never forgotten how lovely it is."

"Alright," he acquiesced, not entirely convinced. "You can take a nap once we're on the motorway - just help me navigate out of London."

"That sounds nice," Hermione readily agreed. Even though she had only been officially awake for an hour, she had not slept well the night before, unable to get comfortable despite Draco's arms looped around her. The vows she had taken yesterday - that they both had taken - had been beautifully worded, but with a strange power behind them. Hermione felt as though they had shaken something loose, but she couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was.

Draco skillfully maneuvered the sleek silver car through light London traffic, quickly accessing the M4. Hermione was not surprised to find that he was a good driver and quite mindful of the cars and lorries around them, though she expected that if she glanced over at the speedometer she would find he was oblivious to the speed limit. With the Jaguar's smooth power it was difficult to tell, however, and she was very close to dozing off when her mobile rang.

"Hi, Hermione! It's me, Dennis Creevey!" came the excited voice on the other end of the line. "You'll never guess what I found out!"

"What did you find out?" she asked patiently. Since their meeting in February, Dennis had followed up on each of her suggested avenues of investigation with enthusiasm, recalling the exuberant schoolboy instead of the jaded hipster. So far, however, his investigations all had hit a dead end.

"It's Dennis Creevey," she mouthed to Draco, in response to his look of inquiry. He rolled his eyes and gave her knee a sympathetic squeeze before returning his gaze to the road and both hands to the wheel. As he knew from prior calls, Dennis was a talker.

"I found the tattoo parlor!" Dennis chirped.

"Oh, really?" Hermione asked, with unfeigned interest. One mysterious point was how Dennis had been able to get inked when he was underage and presumably unable to afford the hundreds of pounds it would cost to get such extensive body art.

"Yeah, I must've gone to every tattoo parlor near my town now that I'm home on summer hols," Dennis said. "I finally found the place last night, but it was too late to ring you. The bloke running the place remembered me straightaway. Had the records and everything."

"That's wonderful!" Hermione praised, shifting slightly in the buttery leather seat, away from Draco. It wasn't a secret, but she didn't think her boyfriend cared to know about her little extracurricular research project. "Did you learn anything useful?"

"A lot!" Dennis enthused. "He thought I was Colin - I used my brother's driving license because we looked so much alike."

Hermione nodded. "That makes sense."

"And I came in with a friend!" Dennis squeaked. "A tall black guy who drew the designs and helped me pay. It was Dean Thomas!"

"How do you know it was he?" she asked, suddenly wary at the coincidence and involvement of the fake CID inspector. "Did you recognize the description?"

"Well, I thought it was Dean right away. You know I've got those photos of him sketching, right? But he paid with a cheque, so the guy had his name *and his address!*" Dennis's voice rose in pitch and volume due to his excitement, to the point where Hermione moved the phone slightly away from her ear. In profile, Draco smirked at her gesture, seemingly amused.

"That's a huge find," she congratulated him.

After Dennis's photography exhibition, Hermione, Katie, Justin and Dennis each had taken an allotment of their former classmates' names and tried to locate them. Some showed up in public birth records or, more depressingly, obituaries, but none seemed to have a current address. The couple of students they had located remembered nothing about their school years. "Do you know if it's a current address?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't know," Dennis admitted. "It's in east London, so I was thinking we could check the next time I'm in town."

Overhearing this, her fiancé shook his head vehemently, keeping his eyes glued to the road. "Absolutely not," he hissed. "You are not wandering around some possibly dodgy neighborhood in the East End looking for a man who you already know is a criminal, impersonating a police officer."

Hermione bit her lip. Draco had a point. Still, she hated to abandon such a promising lead.

Even with a brief glance, he had no trouble reading her mutinous expression. "I'll go with Creevey," he volunteered. "And maybe we'll take Mark as back-up, just in case."

Dennis was amenable and rang off, promising to let her know the dates he would next be in London.

Draco's mention of their jagged-toothed friend jogged Hermione's memory, reminding her of a question she had wanted to ask since yesterday evening. "Why did Mark look like he was going to have kittens when that minister made us exchange blood?" she queried.

Draco visibly hesitated, passing a slower-moving Range Rover and sliding the Jaguar back into the lane before replying. "If you believe what Mark and I were raised to believe, then - "

"My blood is dirty? Muddy?" she interrupted, anticipating where he was going with this and not wanting to hear that word fall from his lips. "Is that why you were so angry at Shacklebolt, because he contaminated your pure blood?"

"Fuck, no!" he exclaimed, shocked enough by her unexpected aggression that he took his eyes off the road to stare at her. "That's not what I was going to say at all."

"What was it, then?" Hermione demanded.

"A Blood bond can't be broken," Draco explained. "Shacklebolt shouldn't have just sprung that on us. Especially you, since you didn't know what it meant."

"Oh," she said simply, as her anger dissipated.

He gave her a quick, assessing glance. "As thrilled as I am at the prospect of a permanent binding, I thought you'd be more upset."

"Why should I be upset?" Hermione shrugged and rubbed at her forehead. "I've always believed that marriage is for life - that's how my parents raised me. I read all about

handfasting beforehand. Since we are having a baby, I knew going into it that tying the knot wasn't going to be a temporary arrangement for us."

Then she smiled at him, mischievously. "Though I suppose I still could get out of marrying you on grounds of non-consummation. I did have a wretched headache last night!"

The corner of Draco's mouth quirked up in amusement. "That might work for the next couple of hours, Granger. But I thought the entire point of allowing you to drag me out into the woods for a mini-break was to get in some shagging before the baby arrives?"

"Indeed it was," Hermione agreed with a wicked little grin. "I'll need to rest up for that."

She leaned back against the headrest and closed her eyes with a yawn, unaware of the wary, sidelong glances that Draco kept giving her.

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Kingsley Shacklebolt eyed the pile of paperwork on his desk, tempted to Vanish the entire lot with his wand. Due to yesterday's circus of a trial and his early departure to preside over the Malfoy-Granger handfasting, he was spending a sunny Saturday morning in his office at the Ministry of Magic, catching up on paperwork.

Opening up a dossier for Mulciber, one of the remaining Death Eaters to stand trial for the rape of Cho Chang, Kingsley made a note in the margins that Mulciber had been expelled from Hogwarts in 1978 for the attempted sexual assault of a younger student, a Muggleborn witch. He wanted to be certain that his fellow Wizengamot members were apprised of that transgression and took it into account for sentencing purposes.

The Minister of Magic turned his attention to a second stack of files. With Umbridge's resignation, he needed to nominate a witch or wizard to head the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission. He began flipping through the resumés of candidates, brow furrowed in thought.

"Sir?" his capable assistant entered the inner sanctum with yet another pile of papers and a discreet cough.

"Yes, Davies?" Kingsley asked, confident that he was being interrupted for a reason. That sort of competence was the primary reason he tried to have a support staff primarily made up of Ravenclaw alumni, the secondary reason being that they were less likely to plot against him than ex-Slytherins.

"Headmistress McGonagall is here to see you," Davies announced.

"Send her in, please," Kingsley said, pulling one of his visitor's chairs forward with a flick of his wand so that the elderly witch would be comfortable.

"Minerva, to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?" he asked with an affability he was far from feeling. Kingsley respected her, but they were like oil and water. He knew, too, that she had never forgiven him for bowing to the inevitable and going along with the Obliviation and

repatriation of the forty-odd surviving Muggleborns, even if doing so had averted another civil war.

"Nothing pleasurable, I'm afraid," the headmistress replied dourly as she settled herself into the chair. "Cho Chang went into early labor late yesterday evening and left Hogwarts for St. Mungo's."

"That poor girl," Kingsley said with automatic sympathy. "The strain of testifying must have been too much for her. I hope she's far enough along that the Healers can save the baby."

His mind shifted to the practicalities. "Cho won't be able to testify on Monday, of course. I expect none of the Death Eaters' attorneys will agree to a continuance, so MLE will have to redouble their efforts to get the plea bargains finalized over the weekend." He scribbled a note to the chief prosecutor on a magical purple pad and sent the memo whizzing away.

"Can't the trials go forward without Cho present? You do have her Pensieve evidence," Minerva noted, clearly not happy at the prospect of any Death Eater getting off scot-free.

"They can if necessary, but the Wizengamot is usually reluctant to convict when a complaining witness fails to appear. Live testimony and questioning is much more persuasive than a Pensieve recollection, since memories can be distorted or tampered with," Kingsley explained.

Professor McGonagall nodded in reluctant acknowledgement. "Hopefully they will excuse Cho's absence, given her compelling reason. And the Wizengamot did just see her testify on Friday, so they know she is credible."

"Hopefully so," Kingsley agreed. "I believe there's enough physical and Pensieve evidence to convict the remaining rapists, but the case against Lucius Malfoy will be trickier to prove."

Minerva pursed her lips in dissatisfaction at the truth of that statement.

"Thank you for informing me about Madam Chang-Nott," Kingsley added in polite dismissal, knowing that as a busy woman herself, Professor McGonagall would not waste his time. To his surprise, the headmistress remained seated, another item clearly on her agenda.

"I fear that I have been remiss with respect to Miss Granger," the old witch confessed, sitting rigidly upright. "I am increasingly concerned that she is floundering in the Muggle world, after we cast her adrift."

"Whatever do you mean by floundering?" Kingsley asked cautiously.

"The Hermione Granger that I knew would never be having a child out of wedlock with some Muggle before finishing her education," Professor McGonagall stated. "She was far too sensible and motivated."

Kingsley relaxed. "You'll be pleased to know, Minerva, that I have the paperwork for Miss Granger's marriage right here," he advised, gesturing to one of the piles on his desk, where he knew the license - with the groom's name - was safely covered by other papers. "And, with

the full support of her partner, she is committed to embarking on her doctoral studies at Oxford. That's not precisely floundering."

"I'm relieved to hear that, more than you can imagine," Minerva admitted. "But is her marriage to a Muggle considered valid?" she inquired with concern. "Her child is already going to face some discrimination due to Hermione's blood status, and I should hate for illegitimacy to be added to the mix."

"The marriage is perfectly valid in our world," Kingsley reassured her, omitting to mention that the license was for a probationary marriage that might not be recognized as legal by the Muggle authorities. With a baby due in July and his own addition of a Blood Vow, Kingsley was confident he had performed a binding ceremony under wizarding law in both senses of the word. "I should also be very surprised if Miss Granger's children are discriminated against based on their blood status."

"Do you really think wizarding society is so progressive?" Professor McGonagall gave him a beady-eyed glare. "I suppose it may seem so to you, as a member of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, but let me assure that it seems very different to half-bloods like me."

She wagged a finger at him. "We are not so blatantly discriminated against as those who are Muggleborn or Squibs, but if I had a Galleon for every condescending comment or backhanded compliment I've fielded over the years, I would have retired from teaching as a very wealthy woman!"

"I would like to work with you to improve that," Kingsley said with sincerity. The rights of non-pureblooded witches and wizards were much dearer to his heart than the headmistress could ever imagine. "Starting with your views on who should be the next head of the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission. Arthur Weasley has put his name in . . ." he trailed off, inviting her opinion.

Minerva shook her head decisively. "Arthur is a sweet man, but utterly ineffectual when it comes to playing politics. You'll also have a backlash from the conservatives if you appoint someone they consider to be a blood traitor."

Kingsley nodded in satisfaction as she echoed his own opinion. "My wish, Minerva, is to select someone who can work with you in effecting incremental but meaningful change in our repatriation policies, starting at Hogwarts."

"Translate your political speak into plain English, Kingsley," she requested acerbically.

"I'm leaning towards appointing Mandrake Brocklehurst," he revealed with atypical bluntness, "and I should like to know whether he is someone you are willing to cooperate with. Eventually, I would like to see the repatriation laws modified at least enough so that Muggleborn children may attend Hogwarts without risk of being Obliviated upon graduation."

Professor McGonagall pursed her lips again, but this time in thought rather than disapproval. "Brocklehurst is the attorney the Notts hired to appeal Cho's blood status, correct?"

Kingsley nodded. "Yes, Mandrake is very well-connected among the Sacred Twenty-Eight. He's currently representing Lucius Malfoy before the Wizengamot. "

"So he's quite skilled at finding loopholes, I imagine?" Minerva questioned, looking sour at the mention of the elder Malfoy and his enhanced prospects of slithering out of time in Azkaban.

"Quite," Kingsley agreed. From the expression on Professor McGonagall's lined face - as though she had been made to swallow a bitter pill - he was confident she would reluctantly agree. Her next words proved it.

"I don't like the prospect, but if it means Muggleborn children can take their rightful places at Hogwarts, I would work with the devil himself," she said resolutely. "Or even that *nighean na galla* Umbridge, not that she would ever compromise."

Kingsley hid a grin, both at the unexpectedly spiteful vulgarity and his triumph at securing the stubborn Scotswoman's agreement. "Mandrake is far from being a devil. And, as a lawyer, I expect you'll find that compromise comes readily to him."

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Even with London traffic and stopping for a pub lunch once they were off the M4, Hermione and Draco were all checked in to their quaint inn, a former manor home at the Forest's edge, by early afternoon. Draco would have been happy to lounge around their suite, cuddling and doing other things, but she was having none of that.

"Come on," Hermione urged, her face bright with excitement as she laced up her shoes, an odd cross between Muggle trainers and hiking boots. "I need to show you my favorite place in the world!"

She tugged him along, out of the old manor proper and through the gardens into the Forest of Dean itself, with a strength that belied her size and supposedly delicate condition. Draco allowed himself to be led, amused by the manic gleam in her eyes - one that he had previously associated with Granger only when it came to libraries.

He also was relieved that she had woken from her nap in the car with her headache gone and no further mention of his or her blood status. Draco had figured out what Shacklebolt was up to shortly after the ceremony began, though he still did not know what the man's motivations were. The Minister's meddling had strained whatever barrier held Granger's memories back almost to the breaking point, but it seemed to have held. Still, Draco knew that exhaustion was a trigger for her recollections, so he planned to be very watchful around Hermione's bedtime and insistent that she get enough sleep over the next few weeks, until the effects of Shacklebolt's attempt to bring back her memories faded.

After what he estimated to be a few kilometers of walking through the sun-dappled forest, following a route that existed in Hermione's childhood memories, she stopped and took him by the hand. "Almost here," she announced, her voice hushed and reverent.

Several meters further on, when they emerged from beneath a shady green canopy into a fair-sized clearing, Draco understood the reverence. Hermione had brought him to a Druidic tree circle, where ancient oaks alternated with venerable rowan trees. Hawthorne trees, with some white flowers lingering into this first week in June, marked the cardinal points. The entire place hummed with a power Draco could feel even from the circle's edge.

He hovered on the outskirts of the grove, unsure how this Druid magic, which had a feminine and earthy feel, would interact with his own darker powers. Hermione had no such hesitation, having entered the circle and removed her hiking shoes and socks to revel in the soft moss under her bare feet. As he watched, she pulled off her hair clip and shook her curls loose and long past her shoulders, twirling in the middle of the clearing with a smile on her face.

"Isn't this amazing? Come and join me," she invited as she began unbuttoning her shirt.

Draco stepped a cautious foot inside the circle of trees and immediately realized why his ordinarily modest intended was stripping down in the woods. The feeling of magic intensified and shot straight to his groin. There was no doubt in his mind as to the types of fertility rituals the Druids had performed in this circle in the past, or that he and Hermione would be reenacting those, consummating their handfast marriage while skyclad in the forest.

"Come on, Draco," she urged, stepping out of her khakis.

He licked his lips in anticipation of having those toned, supple limbs hooked around him, before a disgusting thought intruded.

"Granger, when you came here before, who were you with?" he demanded, his voice harsh with jealousy at the idea of her fornicating in the circle with Potter or Weasley or - Merlin forbid - Potter *and* Weasley.

"Just my parents, the summer before I started boarding school. And I promise you the circle didn't have this effect on any of us," Hermione added. "I knew it was magical, but not like this."

The rational part of his mind nodded at that explanation. She had been a prepubescent little girl when she started Hogwarts, and her parents were Muggles who would be oblivious to the circle's magic. The bulk of Draco's mental process, however, was devoted to lustier thoughts as Hermione unclasped her bra, revealing ripe, round breasts and berry-pink nipples.

"You look like a wood nymph," he said with admiration.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Does that make you a satyr? Hurry up and catch me, then!" she urged bossily.

Draco had enough presence of mind to clasp the wand in his pocket and mutter some silencing and repelling charms, having no desire to be caught by Muggles while cavorting starkers in the woods. With that accomplished, he pulled his shirt over his head and walked towards the center of the circle with lascivious intent, unbuckling his belt as he went. Hermione met him halfway, pausing only to step out of her knickers. She embraced him on tiptoe, her tongue aggressively dueling his in an open-mouthed kiss. When they broke apart,

she gave him a positively wicked grin before dropping to her knees, shoving his now-unfastened trousers and silk boxers down.

"Fuck, Hermione," he cried out at the feel of her hot, wet mouth engulfing his shaft. She slid down and then back up his length, pressing a kiss on the tip before smirking up at him.

"You will be, very soon," she promised. Then she took him in her mouth again, to his appreciative groan. Draco fisted his hands in her hair, holding her in position and pushing his hips forward as she sucked and licked. From the happy humming noise she was emitting, Hermione had no objection to the way he was fucking her mouth and throat. But when he released her hair to knead her lush breasts, she abruptly popped off, leaving him hard and throbbing.

"Granger," he growled, having no desire to be teased.

She turned around and positioned herself on all fours, her legs apart in wanton invitation. "Please, Draco," Hermione begged, looking at him over her shoulder with lust-darkened eyes. "I want your cock in my cunt."

Draco toed off his loafers and stepped out of his trousers and boxers, not needing to be asked twice. He knelt behind her, his cock giving an involuntary jerk forward at the sight of her glistening folds. He ordinarily used his fingers to prime her for his girth, but she was already wet and literally begging to be fucked.

He lined up and drove into her, burying himself to the hilt and eliciting a delicious sound from Hermione. Without pausing to let her adjust, he gripped her hips and began to thrust with a hard, driving pace that had her inner walls spasming around him almost immediately as she screamed his name. Through a sheer effort of will, Draco kept himself from coming along with her, grinding deep inside her as she rode out her orgasm.

He allowed her a brief recovery, fondling her breasts and stroking between her legs, before he began to fuck her in earnest. Over and over, he pulled out all but the tip of his cock before slamming back in, deep enough to clip her cervix. The tree circle rang with the sound of Hermione's sharp cries as she straddled the line between pleasure and pain, along with his own deeper grunts as he fucked her like an animal on the forest floor.

When she came the second time, this time whimpering his given name, Draco allowed himself to lose control, slamming into her a few last times before he spilled his seed deep inside her. He then rolled them both onto their sides, keeping their bodies connected and holding her tightly as their breathing calmed, his fingers tracing patterns around her pregnancy-swollen breasts and belly.

As he came down from his post-orgasmic high, Draco felt vaguely ashamed at his loss of control. He had intended to worship Hermione's body, lying side by side and making love under the trees, rather than rutting into her like some beast. He told her as much, murmuring apologetically. "I hadn't planned on being so rough - I hope I didn't hurt you."

"You didn't," she said with certainty. "That was what I wanted and what the Forest wanted. I only you hope you remembered to cast a silencing charm."

Since they were lying with her back to his front, Hermione could not see his shocked expression, but she felt his entire body stiffen with sudden tension. "Draco, is something wrong?"

"Not exactly wrong," he temporized, "but I'm not sure I heard you correctly."

Hermione rolled over to face him, propped up on one elbow, close enough that the tips of her nipples brushed against his bare chest. "You heard me," she grinned, "but you want me to repeat myself, to stroke your already overinflated ego. I said I hoped you cast a silencing charm, with how you made me scream."

"So you remember silencing charms?" Draco asked warily. He vividly recalled what happened the last time Hermione Granger remembered she had magic and that made him want to cross his legs and remove his bollocks from striking distance. This time - at least so far - she was not showing any violent propensities.

"I think so," Hermione said uncertainly. "It's all very foggy, but I know there are spells so people can't overhear you or won't notice you. I don't remember . . . I can't remember the incantations or wand movements, though." She bit her lip and furrowed her forehead in concentration, brown eyes troubled.

"Don't worry - it will come back to you," he reassured her. "Do you remember me?" he asked, unsure of what he wished the answer to be.

"Yes, Draco," she snorted, now on much more certain ground. "The man who just shagged me into the forest floor? The father of my unborn child? I should *hope* that I remember you!"

He marginally relaxed at her response. If their relationship since September was all she remembered about him, Kingsley's meddling may have given him the best of both worlds - a Granger who knew about magic but not about their fraught personal history. He wondered if that had been the Minister of Magic's intention, given the man's seeming enthusiasm for a Malfoy heir out of a Muggleborn witch, teamed with his concern that Hermione was vulnerable without use of her magic.

"What were you drawing on my stomach just now?" she asked, with classic Granger curiosity.

Draco smiled. "It was a rune."

"A rune? Why were you doing that?" Hermione inquired, eyes bright. "What does it mean?"

"There is a magical tradition in some families," he explained, carefully avoiding the use of "pureblood" as a potential trigger, "that the parents express their wishes for their unborn child by tracing runes over the womb that represent what they desire for him."

"How does it work?" his witch queried, clearly receptive to the idea.

Draco's smile grew brighter. This was something he had wanted to do for Hadrian, but that he thought would be impossible without Hermione's participation. "It's simple, really - each

parent chooses three attributes or benefits he or she wishes to grace the child with, and then they agree upon one more."

"Because three and seven are the most magically powerful numbers!" Hermione exclaimed, inordinately pleased at herself for recalling that fact.

"Exactly," Draco agreed.

"So what did your rune mean?" she asked again. "Was that part of the ceremony?"

"I would need to trace it again with my wand," he said hesitantly, not sure how she would react. "It won't leave a mark, but it may tickle or tingle while I'm doing it."

"Well, go on then," she urged, settling back onto the mossy ground, utterly comfortable with her nakedness, at least while within the circle of trees. "And tell me what it means!"

Draco laughed outright at her curiosity as he retrieved his wand from his trousers, laying crumpled on the forest floor. Hermione watched intently as he approached, staring covetously at the length of hawthorne. He seated himself facing her and answered her persistent question. "The rune means power. For my son, I wish for power."

Carefully, he traced the rune below Hermione's belly button, using the tip of his wand. It was a complex one, extending beyond magical power to include power in the physical and political senses. She watched him, looking vaguely troubled, but also fascinated by the wand work.

"For my son, I wish that he has compassion," Hermione countered.

Draco masked his surprise at her choice as he drew the requested rune. He had thought intelligence would be the primary trait she would wish for her child. Well, if she hadn't picked it, he would. "I wish that my son will be intelligent."

Hermione looked mildly annoyed as he traced the third rune on her body. "I was going to choose that next," she complained.

Draco grinned, pleased at how well he had read her. "There are other attributes to wish for," he pointed out, unrepentant. "Mother's choice," he prompted when she hesitated.

"Ambition," she stated. Draco raised an eyebrow and smirked at her selection of a consummate Slytherin trait, drawing the familiar rune with ease.

"What's your last wish for our son?" Hermione asked.

"I would like for him to be courageous," Draco replied. Courage was a trait that he had often been accused of lacking, though he chalked that up to self-preservation rather than cowardice.

Hermione gave him a strange look. "I hadn't expected you to wish for courage," she said.

"Did I just take another of your choices?" he asked, amused.

She shook her head, vehemently enough to make her chestnut curls bounce. "No, I'm already feeling protective of this little guy. A mother's worst nightmare is a boy who rushes headlong into danger! So my last wish for my son is for common sense."

Draco smiled in approval. "I agree, but I'm not sure there is a rune for that. Is wisdom close enough?"

"Yes, but I should have known - should have *remembered* - that." Hermione bit her lip, annoyed at herself.

"It will come back to you," Draco soothed as he traced the invisible rune for wisdom on her rounded belly. "What do you suggest for our shared wish?"

"I was thinking - what about family?" Hermione suggested. "Parents who will love him and support him, even if he's entirely different than what we've imagined or wished for."

"Parents who will allow him to make his own choices, and not expect him to follow their path or fix their mistakes?" Draco asked dryly. "I could get on board with that."

Without further ado, he drew the final rune. As he finished the last strokes, all seven of the runes - previously invisible since he was using his wand and not ink - glowed golden for a moment on Hermione's skin before fading away into nothing.

"What was that?" she asked, eyes wide in wonder.

"Magic," he smirked, pleased at the highly auspicious color. "Don't you remember?"

She made a frustrated sound. "A bit, but it's so elusive. When you were a child, did you ever play in a stream with minnows? It's like that - the memories are right there, brushing up against me, but when I reach out to grab them, they dart away."

Draco nodded in understanding. "Would it help you if I showed you some spells?" he asked.

Hermione's entire face lit up. "Yes, please! Actually, may I handle your wand? I think that would help more than anything."

Even though they were both still naked, there was not the slightest hint of innuendo in her voice, so Draco refrained from any suggestive comment. He thought she was correct - having a wand in hand would help focus her memories - but still was reluctant to give his up. If Hermione suddenly remembered their history, she might attack. She had already done so once, and Cho had done something similar to Theo, knocking him unconscious with uncontrolled magic when he restored her memories.

"It won't work for you," he refused as gently as he knew how, hoping he was making the right decision. "The wand chooses the witch or wizard. What if I teach you some wandless magic instead?"

Hermione was agreeable. He tossed her his shirt and pulled on his trousers, to avoid undue distraction, and began teaching her *Aguamenti*, since he was parched and they were both sweaty and sticky. By the time the afternoon sun had faded into twilight, she had moved on

from that spell to conjuring bluebell flames and levitating objects, starting with leaves and advancing to sticks and then rocks.

"Had enough?" Draco asked. "Wandless magic is hard work. You're doing brilliantly, but I don't want you to overdo it."

Hermione gave him a tired smile. "It's coming back to me, but I'm worried I'll forget it all again once we leave. There's something special about this place, isn't there?"

"Other than it made us shag like kneazles in heat?" Draco teased, in part to hide his unease that she might be right about forgetting magic again once they left. "It's a Druidic tree circle, so magic is very concentrated here. It might make wandless spells easier, but it shouldn't impact your memory." Except that magic followed its own unique laws, and her amnesia was magical in nature.

"If you say so," Hermione said, still skeptical. He led her out of the circle and through the forest, relying on *Lumos* to light the last part of the way. Back at the inn, she asked him about various spells and what they did over dinner, speaking softly so no one would overhear. Once in their room, Draco's sharp ears caught her muttering basic incantations as she fell asleep, continuing even after her eyes fluttered shut.

But in the morning, when he asked her if she wanted to keep practicing *Wingardium Leviosa*, Hermione looked at him blankly. She had forgotten everything.

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With Auror Gwendolyn White in tow, Dean Thomas approached the entrance of Barnet Hospital. Gwen was staring at the building with something akin to awe. "It's even bigger than Hogwarts!" she exclaimed.

"I suppose it is," Dean agreed, unimpressed. He had been raised in Muggle London, where large buildings were commonplace. And architecturally speaking, the hospital had nothing on Hogwarts Castle.

With his charmed CID identification, Dean and his fellow Auror had no trouble obtaining Cho's room number from the reception desk and slipping past hospital security to the maternity ward, where a harried-looking midwife provided a room number. When no one answered Dean's cautious knock, he sent his female partner in first, not wanting to see anything he shouldn't.

"It's fine for you to come in," Gwen advised, "except that Madam Chang-Nott isn't here."

"Where the hell is she, then?" Dean asked, frustrated. They had been tracking Cho since three in the morning and it now was past ten at night.

"She's back in the operating theatre," volunteered a blonde woman dressed in green scrubs, slumped tiredly in a chair in the corner of the room. Dean had assumed she was part of the Muggle nursing staff, but took a closer look at the vaguely familiar voice. "Penelope Clearwater?"

She nodded, and Dean lost his temper. "What in Godric's name were you thinking, Apparating away from St. Mungo's with Cho without telling anyone? We thought she had been kidnapped by Death Eaters!"

"Cho Apparated *me*, for your information, because this hospital has the facilities to save her baby. We had no idea the Aurors were looking for her. Frankly, we've been a bit preoccupied," the Healer snapped.

"How are Cho and the baby doing?" Auror White asked. Dean felt vaguely guilty that had not been his first question.

The Healer chewed on her lip. "A lot of what's going is outside my experience and frankly sounds barbaric to me, but Cho says everything is going as well as could be expected. They're cutting the baby out of her now."

Both witches shuddered, but Dean did not bat an eyelash. "A cesarean section? That's how my youngest sister was born."

"According to Cho, it's a common Muggle surgical procedure," the blonde Healer agreed, but still looked worried. "She thought it would take less than an hour, so she should have been back by now."

"Did it take this long for an operating room to open up?" Dean asked, disapprovingly. "That would be pretty bad, even for NHS."

"No, Cho was insistent on delaying the surgery as long as safely she could," Penelope replied. "The Muggle consultant gave her some shots right when we arrived to help mature the baby's lungs. Cho wanted to wait twenty-four hours for the shots to take full effect, but her contractions intensified. With the amount of scarring she has, the risk of a uterine rupture or cervical hemorrhage got to be too high, even with me casting strengthening charms every quarter-hour."

The door to the hospital room clicked open, and an orderly wheeled Cho in on a hospital bed, her face radiant despite the dark circles below her eyes. "She's more than 1500 grams!" the proud mother exulted to Healer Clearwater. "No ventilator - she's breathing on her own, with just supportive oxygen through a nasal canula!"

Penelope's face broke into a genuine, relieved smile. "That's excellent news!"

"Congratulations," Dean added, even though he did not fully understand the medical jargon and his twins, though petite girls, had each weighed twice as much as birth.

"Why are you here?" Cho asked, looking at him and Auror White with mingled surprise and concern. "Did something happen to Theo?"

"Your husband's fine," Dean said, unable to hold back a sour frown at the mention of any Death Eater, even a relatively inoffensive one like Theo Nott. "He was worried something had happened to you."

"Oh, poor Theo!" Cho sounded contrite. "As an Auror, you have access to Azkaban, don't you? Will you tell him we're both fine, and bring him a picture of Theodora?"

"Theodora?" Penelope questioned. "I thought you were naming her Drusilla."

"I was, until I saw how tiny and perfect she looked in her incubator," Cho explained. "It didn't seem fitting to her name her after a witch who died young, not when she's a perfect, precious gift from the gods."

What's In a Name?

July 24, 2004

"Draco, I'm fine," Hermione protested, in vain, as her hovering fiancé insisted on escorting her out of their townhouse flat and to the curb. "I am pregnant, not incapacitated, and perfectly capable of walking down a few steps and out to Katie's car."

"Do you mean walking or waddling?" he teased, with his trademark smirk, not removing the arm wrapped around her non-existent waist.

She punched his upper arm, hard.

"Ow, witch! That hurt!" he complained.

"Good - it was meant to," she smirked back.

Mark, who had been leaning up against his wife's car, a small blue SUV, straightened and opened the passenger side door for Hermione. "How're you feeling?" he asked solicitously.

"Enormous," she snapped, buckling herself in. She did not miss the cautionary look that Draco shot his friend.

"She's in a snit because the midwife told her at yesterday's appointment that the baby's likely to be overdue," he explained to Mark.

"Hadrian's due today and nothing is happening. *Nothing*," Hermione complained. Logically, she knew that first babies were statistically likely to be born late, and that a due date was nothing more than a projection, but she was more than ready to be done with this pregnancy.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Hermione," Katie greeted her with a commiserating smile from the driver's seat. "The last few weeks are the worst, aren't they? Especially with a summer baby."

Draco sauntered around to the passenger side window and bestowed a warm kiss on her lips. "Do you have your mobile? Is it fully charged?" he inquired. "Just in case something does happen"

"Yes and yes," Hermione answered, with no little irritation.

"Good," Draco kissed her again, this time on her forehead. "Katie, do you know where St. Mu- Mary's is, again, just in case? That's where Hermione is delivering."

Katie nodded. "Quite the posh hospital you've selected," she commented.

"Foy's always demand the best," the blond intoned with more than a bit of self-mockery.

"Draco . . . you are getting on my last nerve," Hermione warned. "Can you please refrain from being such an elitist prat?"

"I promise to try, love, but some traits - like my appreciation for the finest things in life - are innate," he said, unrepentant.

"Inbred, you mean," Hermione muttered, but she smiled as he kissed her a third time. "Please tell Dennis I said hello."

"I'll do better than that - I'll bring him back to the house after we've finished your wild goose chase. Even if this Thomas fellow still lives at the same address, I'd be shocked if he tells Creevey anything useful."

"I really do appreciate it, Draco." This time, she kissed him.

"Oi, Katie!" Mark called. "Drive away before they turn this into a full-blown snog."

Hermione grinned at her fiancé's non-verbal, two-fingered response to his friend.

"Give my regards to Cho, please," Draco requested, stepping away from the car. "And my congratulations on baby Theodora, as well. Do you think she chose that name as an olive branch or a slap in the face? I'm sure Theo would like to know."

"I'll see what I can find out, though Cho doesn't exactly confide in me. And I will pass along your regards, though perhaps more courteously than you would wish," she promised with a wave, rolling up the window as Katie carefully maneuvered away from the curb.

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Flint grinned as the blue SUV turned the corner. "Your little witch is feisty when she's about to pop."

Draco's answering grin was slightly strained. "Hermione's always feisty, but for the last couple of weeks she's been borderline hostile. But a pregnant witch must be indulged," he recited, as if by rote, "so Merlin help me, I'll indulge her. Even if she can be a right bitch sometimes."

"Katie was the same when she got towards the end with Isabelle and Peter," Marcus sympathized, as the two men walked to the garage where Draco kept his Jaguar. "Can't blame 'em, really. They just want the baby out after nine months, but know what they'll have to go through to get them out."

"Yeah," Draco agreed, suppressing a shudder. "Hermione and I took an a course on labor and delivery last weekend. You could show those natural childbirth videos at a Dark revel for entertainment. My fucked-up uncle and his brother would be wanking each other off to see Muggle women screaming in that kind of pain."

Marcus nodded vigorously. "I'm not going to lie to you, Drake - it's worse in person. But did I hear you right? Were you really thinking about taking Hermione to St. Mungo's?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," Draco admitted. "Even though it's technically illegal, my family's given enough money to the hospital over the years that I expect the Healers would be willing to overlook Hermione's blood status and treat her."

"I expect so," Flint agreed. "So why are you still going to a Muggle hospital?"

"I don't trust the Healers' discretion," Draco said. "You read the article Skeeter wrote about Cho when she was pregnant - they never figured out who was responsible for that leak. If Hermione delivers the next Malfoy heir at St. Mungo's, it will be front page news in the *Prophet*. I can't have that."

"Yeah, that would be a problem," Marcus agreed. "I can just picture the entire bloody Order of the Phoenix storming the maternity ward to rescue Hermione from your evil clutches."

Draco grimaced. "Precisely. After the stunt he pulled at my handfasting, I can't rely on Shackbolt to keep those hot-headed idiots in line. So I'm stuck relying on Muggles," he concluded, "even though I trust their competence about as much as I trust the Minister of Magic's integrity."

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"Dean, can you get the door?" his mother asked, not even turning around from the stove and the massive fry-up she was preparing for his breakfast, after he had popped over for his weekly visit. His mum could put Molly Weasley to the test in a cooking competition, even without the advantage of his mother-in-law's magic.

"Sure, Mum." Their block, on the west side of football stadium at Upton Park, had always been a quiet and safe one, but there were some rougher neighborhoods and council housing in close proximity to the east. Even on a Saturday morning, it was better for a big man like Dean to deal with any unexpected visitors.

The young man on the front step did not appear to be much of a threat, however. He was scrawny, perhaps half of Dean's weight soaking wet, with messy black hair and black-rimmed glasses. The Auror was reminded of Harry Potter, especially how he looked his first five years at Hogwarts, before the D.A. toughened him up.

"Can I help you?" Dean asked.

"Hi, Dean! It's me - Dennis Creevey! It's so great that you're here! May I come in?" the little guy squeaked.

"Sure, come on in," Dean said, surprised but opening the door wider. There was little he could tell him without breaking the law, but he was happy to chat with the kid - and find out how Dennis had managed to track him down.

Dennis stepped forward, into the small front parlor, followed by two larger men Dean had not previously noticed - probably because the bastards had used a Notice-Me-Not spell or Disillusioned themselves.

"Malfoy," he spat, "long time, no see. And who's your goon? Flint, is it?"

"You always were terrible with names, Thomas," the blond wizard said coolly. "This is Mark Stone."

"Are you friends with these two?" Dean asked Dennis, shocked that he was accompanied by two Death Eaters.

Dennis looked defensive at the hostile tone, believing it was directed at him. "We're friendly enough," he said.

"Friendly enough that when Creevey decided to ask some questions of a person we know has been impersonating a cop, we offered to come with him," Flint volunteered, cracking his knuckles. "Just to make sure he didn't run into any trouble."

Malfoy just smirked and said nothing, watching Dean with the unnerving air of a man who knows a secret.

"There's very little I can tell you, Dennis," the Auror said calmly. "As for the accusation that I have been impersonating a police officer, I am not CID, but I am a *special* type of law enforcement." He knew that Dennis would assume he was Special Branch.

"Oh," Dennis said in dawning comprehension. "So I guess a lot of what you do is classified."

"Virtually all of it," Dean agreed.

"I doubt Inspector Thomas was acting in any official capacity when he helped you get your tattoos, Dennis. And surely he should be able to tell you all about your adventures at boarding school." That was Malfoy, trying to stir the cauldron and cause trouble.

Dean narrowed his eyes. The Death Eater would love nothing more than to catch him, an up-and-coming Auror, breaking the law. He knew that there was virtually nothing Dean could say about Hogwarts without violating the Statute of Secrecy, but it would help to know what Dennis knew.

"Have you been in touch with any of our old classmates?" Dean asked.

"Yeah!" Dennis replied happily. "Hermione Granger, Katie Bell, and Justin Finch-Fletchley. We've gotten together a few times when I've been in London."

Dean carefully kept a wooden face, not wanting Malfoy and Flint to see just how pleased he was that Hermione's plans had worked, and that his Muggleborn friends had found each other in the Muggle world even without their memories.

"Oh, and I met Cho Chang once, but she stormed out on us," Dennis chattered on. "And there were a couple of others we talked to recently, but they didn't remember much."

"School was a while back. I'm afraid I don't remember much, either," he lied to Dennis apologetically.

"Do you remember *anything*?" Dennis asked imploringly. "Anything at all?"

"Sorry, there's nothing I can tell you," Dean replied, hoping Dennis would realize he was sincere in his regret.

Then inspiration struck. "What's your mobile number - maybe you, me, Hermione, Katie and Justin can all meet up some time? We could catch up," Dean suggested. *Without two Death Eaters hovering over us*, he mentally added.

"Deanie, breakfast is ready!" his mum announced from the doorway. He was grateful for her timely interruption, though wished she had not used his childhood nickname. He could see Malfoy and Flint smirking at each other over it.

His mother gave them a hard look, gripping her spatula as though she would swat anyone who bothered or threatened her son. "Are your *friends* staying for breakfast?"

From her inflection, she clearly knew that those two were anything but. Dean wondered if his mum could tell they were wizards. He doubted it - surprisingly for purebloods, Malfoy and Flint seemed to have figured out how to dress and act to blend into the Muggle world.

"We've already eaten, but thank you," Malfoy answered for the group.

"I'll show you out," Dean said, ushering them through the front door. Once outside, he shook Creevey's hand, pointedly excluding the Death Eaters. "Nice to see you, Dennis. I'll be in touch." And he would be, Dean mentally promised himself. Kingsley's new restrictions on contact with the exiled Muggleborns seemed counterproductive to him.

Caught up in his own thoughts, he was surprised when Flint suddenly shoved him against the house. "Stay away from Katie," the jagged-toothed wizard growled. "The next time you show up and harass her, I'm pressing charges."

"The same goes for Hermione," Malfoy added, the cold threat in his voice contrasting with Flint's hot temper. "Leave her alone."

Dean just sneered and shrugged Flint's hand off, shutting the door in their faces. It wasn't until he was seated at the kitchen table, halfway through his scrambled eggs and beans on toast, when it hit him. The Death Eaters both had referred to the Muggleborn witches by their first names, not as Bell and Granger.

"Oh, buggering hell," Dean swore, as he thought about what that might mean.

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Cho smiled as Katie and Hermione gushed over little Theodora. She admittedly had a mother's bias, but there was no denying that her baby girl was adorable.

"She's at a normal birth weight now, and gaining steadily," she related with pride. "Theodora's got a wonderful appetite, nursing every three hours like clockwork."

"I love Theodora as a name. What made you decide to switch from Drusilla?" asked Hermione.

"What do you think of when you hear the name Drusilla?" Cho asked back.

Katie giggled. "One of Cinderella's wicked stepsisters!"

"Honestly, it sounds like a name for a wicked old witch," Hermione admitted.

"Nah, that's Lucretia," Katie joked.

"You're not far off, either of you," Cho said, giving them both a speculative glance. She wanted to tell Hermione that Drusilla was a popular name in pureblood families, and to inform Katie that Flint's mother really was a witch. But Kingsley Shacklebolt had impressed upon her the importance of abiding by the Statute of Secrecy and Umbridge's vile decrees, and Professor Flitwick had confirmed the harsh penalties for breaking those laws. Theodora already had one parent in Azkaban, and Cho would not run the risk of doing anything that could get her sent there to join Theo.

"May I pick her up?" Katie asked. At Cho's nod, she lifted the baby from her bassinet, carefully supporting her head and neck. "You must be so happy to have her home from the hospital."

"You can't imagine how much," Cho said fervently. "I hope I never have to see the inside of a neonatal intensive care unit ever again, unless it's in some professional capacity." Indeed, her experience in giving birth to Theodora nine weeks early had made her realize that there was at least one gaping hole in wizarding healthcare. As a witch with Muggle medical training, she was going to see what she could do to fix that. But not in wizarding Britain.

"Do you need help setting up the nursery?" Hermione asked, looking around at the boxes stacked around Theodora's room.

"Actually, I'm packing rather than unpacking. I asked you both to come over so I could say good-bye. Dora and I are leaving the country," Cho announced.

Now that Theodora was out of the hospital, Cho had no intention of lingering a day longer than she had to. She felt very unprotected in wizarding Britain. Dolohov was at large, though hopefully still somewhere in Russia, and Lucius Malfoy had been acquitted when Cho refused to leave Theodora's side in the hospital to testify against him. Minister Shacklebolt had also warned her that the relatives of the convicted rapists might try to retaliate against her, and there was little the Ministry or Aurors could do to protect her.

The Minister of Magic had been more helpful - almost suspiciously so - in arranging immigration paperwork to Canada, New Zealand, the United States, Hong Kong, and Singapore; Muggle and ICW passports for her and Theodora valid for entry into any of those jurisdictions; and an international Portkey that Professor Flitwick would charm once she decided on a destination. Her plan was to disappear with Theodora into an English-speaking city with a sizable Asian population, with Vancouver as her current top choice.

"Where are you going?" Katie asked. It was a natural question, but not one Cho was willing to answer. For safety's sake, only Filius would know exactly where she was going.

"I don't have a forwarding address yet, but you have my email and my mobile," Cho temporized. "We can stay in touch."

"Of course," Katie said, a sunny smile glossing over her hurt feelings. "I think Theodora's getting a bit fussy, if you'd like her back."

Cho took her daughter and snuggled her close. Hermione offered a pinky finger for the baby to grasp and grinned when Dora took it.

"I won't tell Draco where you're going, if that's what you're concerned about," Hermione said with a shrewd glance at Cho.

"I trust you not to say anything, but I don't trust him to refrain from snooping," Cho replied. Including through use of Legilimency, if Malfoy saw the need for it.

"I suppose I should rise to his defense, but he can be a sneaky snake," Hermione acknowledged with a laugh.

Cho eyed the bracelet on Hermione's wrist and the ring on her finger with distaste. Now that she had her memories back, she recognized the enchanted jewelry for what it was. Really, with all of those spells woven into the charm bracelet, it was remarkable that Hermione still was able to realize that Malfoy was not entirely trustworthy, even if she did not perceive the full scope of the smooth lies and partial truths that he fed her.

A thought crossed Cho's mind, a possible way to sabotage Malfoy. "When you go in to have your baby, you'll want to leave your jewelry at home," she suggested. While there was no guarantee it would work, Cho could not see any risk of harm. "The hospital won't want you wearing it while you labor, and they won't have anywhere safe to keep it."

"That's a good tip. I appreciate it," Hermione thanked her. She shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other, then nibbled lightly on her lip, in what Cho recognized as signs of a Gryffindor preparing to confess weakness. "Do you . . . do either of you have any other advice? I mean, I've read all the books and Draco and I took a childbirth class, but I'm still not entirely sure I know what to do or what to expect."

"Every labor and delivery I've attended has been different, so I can't really tell you what to expect. However, speaking as a physician, the general rule is the fewer medical intervention there are, the better it is for you and the baby." Cho counseled, hiding a smile as she seized upon the golden opportunity Hermione had just offered up.

"If you're thinking about attempting natural childbirth," she continued, "I've observed that the key to success is a supportive partner. But I expect Draco will pressure you to take some painkillers or get an epidural."

"That's not nice, Cho!" Katie scolded. Hermione was glaring at her, too.

Cho only wished they both could remember that when Hermione had been tortured and carved up at Malfoy Manor, Malfoy had stood by and watched, doing nothing. "I'm merely telling you what I've observed as a physician," she said. "And I stand by my assessment that Draco will react poorly to seeing you in pain over the course of at least several hours."

Hermione had paled a shade or two, but Cho could not tell if it was due to anger at her criticism of Malfoy or fear of impending childbirth.

"Of course Draco isn't going to want to see her in any pain!" Katie huffed in exasperation at Cho's tactlessness. "If he's anything like Mark, he'll hover and dither and offer you things and generally get in the way until you want to scream at him, but he *will* be there for you."

Cho looked down at Katie's words. Theo had not been there for her, locked up as he was in a wizarding prison somewhere in the North Sea. But from his letters, she knew he had known she was in labor, and had desperately wanted to be with her at the hospital.

"Now, speaking as your friend, because I'm not a physician, the best thing I can tell you is that most women who have one baby go on to have another," Katie stated wisely. "So no matter how unpleasant things are in the moment, it's worth it in the end."

Cho stiffened as Hermione reached out to grab her and Katie in an impulsive hug. She was recovering, now that she remembered what happened to her at Nott Court, but still flinched at unexpected physical contact. That, along with Hermione's pregnant belly and Dora in Cho's arms, made for an awkward embrace.

"Thank you both for being such good friends," Hermione said.

Cho hugged her back, hard, with her free arm. "Friends, not just allies," she agreed.

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"You done good, little guy," Mark said, swiveling around from the front passenger seat of the Jaguar with a broad grin.

Dennis, who was feeling slightly cramped in the rear of the classic car, despite his small size, smiled back, albeit weakly. "I don't know," he said. "I feel like we really didn't find anything out. I always thought Dean was one of the good guys, but he seemed to be hiding something."

"More like lying through his teeth," Malcolm snorted from the driver's seat, keeping his eyes on the road. "Thank you for your discretion in not mentioning my relationship with Hermione."

"I just hope she isn't too disappointed," Dennis worried. "Or Katie, either," he added as an afterthought, though she was a less formidable personality.

Malcolm snorted again, this time with amusement. "Don't worry, I'll make sure that Hermione's disappointment is deflected onto me. Or I can always drop you back at your hostel if you're not willing to risk her temper."

"No, I'll be fine," Dennis said, bravely.

"That's good, because she wants to see you, and I'm doing my damndest to keep her happy," the blond commented, still facing forward. "I also have a business proposition, if you're interested."

"I'm all ears," said Dennis. He truly was, given that he was majoring in photography, living with his parents for the summer, and desperately in need of income to travel and augment his portfolio.

"I'd like you to take some pregnancy photographs of Hermione, as well as some baby photos and a family portrait once Hadrian is born," Malcolm stated. "I'll pay double your going rate."

Dennis considered the offer in silence. He had not gone to Leeds to become a society photographer, taking pictures of weddings, mums-to-be, and babies, but everyone had to start somewhere. His artistic principles warred with his need for funds to pursue his true interests.

"Hermione showed me a picture you took of her back when she was at boarding school. You're very talented - you really captured her personality," Malcolm coaxed. He glanced in the rearview mirror, seemingly puzzled that Dennis had not leapt at his offer.

"The terms are very generous, but I'm not that sort of photographer," Dennis tried to explain.

At a stoplight, Malcolm turned around and looked at him, grey eyes piercing. Dennis felt uncomfortable under that scrutiny, but refused to look away. He wasn't a coward.

Hermione's fiancé smirked, knowingly. "I apologize - I didn't mean to offend your artistic sensibilities. I suppose you would prefer to be off in some war-torn hellhole, capturing human nature at its worst, rather than photographing happier but more mundane domestic moments."

Astonished, Dennis gaped like a fish. It was as though the other man had read his mind.

"You do realize that the money I'm willing to pay will go a long way towards funding your summer trip to Afghanistan, or Iraq, or whatever combat zone you desire, don't you?" Malcolm asked, dangling temptation in front of Dennis's nose. "Name your price, and I'll meet it."

Dennis dared to name an exorbitant sum, the going rate for the top photographer in Mayfair. Malcolm merely nodded. "I'll write you a cheque. You can take the pregnancy photos today, and then we'll set an appointment about two weeks out for the rest. This time next month, you'll be chronicling a war with your camera and trying to win that Pulitzer Prize for your photography before fall term starts at uni."

Mark coughed something that sounded like a woman's name.

"Oh, yes!" Malcolm exclaimed, grey eyes bright in the rearview mirror with an emotion that could have been amusement or could have been malice. "Marcus reminds me that we should introduce you to a female acquaintance of ours."

"Are you trying to set me up on a date?" Dennis asked, in surprise. Anyone who moved in the same circles as men in the front seat of the Jaguar was unlikely to be his type.

"No, I think it would be more of a professional arrangement. Every *artiste* needs a patron, and Daphne's quite the patroness of the arts," Malcolm drawled, with a sarcastic inflection that made Dennis think the blond did not hold a very high opinion of this Daphne.

"Yeah, we think she'd really like your photography," Mark chimed in from the passenger seat. "Plus, she's hot! Tall, blonde, and knockers out to here." He held his hands out an improbable distance from his chest.

"Fair warning, though - she's got the face of a thoroughbred," Malcolm added. "And the bloodlines to match." He swung the Jaguar around a corner, into a parking garage.

Dennis shook his head, uneasy. "Sorry, she really doesn't sound like anyone I would have anything in common with."

"Aw, come on, Creevey! Live a little!" Mark urged. "Draco's told her all about you, and Daph's really excited to meet you. Opposites can attract - look at Draco and Hermione."

"You could just meet her for coffee," Malcolm suggested, pulling the car smoothly into an empty spot. "This arsehole reliably assures me that doesn't even count as a real date." He elbowed Mark, none too gently, after placing the car in park and pocketing the keys

Mark just chortled. "That's what I used to think, but look what happened when this tosser took Granger out for coffee. She's nine months up the duff with his sprog and he's arse over teakettle for her."

"That's enough, Flint," the blond warned, clearly displeased. "What's the harm?" Malcolm turned to Dennis and posed the rhetorical question.

"Er, okay. I'll meet with her," Dennis agreed, gratefully exiting the vehicle. He had been starting to feel a bit trapped in the back seat of the car.

Mark clapped him on the shoulder, hard enough to make him stagger a bit. "Good lad! I promise you won't regret it."

Dennis smiled weakly, wondering why he felt like he had agreed to whore himself out - twice - in the short ride from the East End back to the West End.

Be Careful What You Wish For

July 30, 2004

"Are you quite certain about this, Cho?" asked Professor Flitwick, peering up at her. Since Portkeys were not operational on Hogwarts' grounds for anyone other than the headmistress, he had come to her flat in Muggle London to charm an international Portkey to her final destination.

"Quite," Cho replied, adjusting the sling holding her baby daughter. "I want you to duplicate the coordinates, using my engagement ring for the second Portkey."

"There is a risk that someone could follow you, if the ring falls into the wrong hands," he warned.

"I trust you to make certain that doesn't happen, Filius." She removed her engagement ring and handed it to him, the diamond's facets sparkling in the morning light. Her wedding band, however, stayed on her finger.

The professor nodded, bowing to her judgment. "And just where is it you have decided to go?"

"Vancouver, British Columbia," replied Cho. Further research had borne out her initial impression that this would be an optimal place to raise Theodora, at least for the first few years. The magical community was sizable, diverse, and fairly indifferent to blood status, while there was also a sizable ethnic Chinese community in the Muggle city. There was a wizarding hospital that served the entire western half of Canada where Cho could finish her training as a Healer if she chose, as well as several Muggle facilities that would be pleased to hire a physician trained in the United Kingdom.

"An excellent choice," Professor Flitwick approved. "The Canadian government is quite a progressive one, particularly with respect to the rights of goblins and other intelligent species." He tapped his wand onto the Ministry-provided stapler and her diamond ring, turning both into Portkeys.

Cho smiled, knowing that this was an issue dear to the Charms professor's heart, given his part-goblin heritage. "Speaking of goblins, would you be so kind as to take this ring to Gringott's and have it deposited in the Nott family vault?" Only Theo and his father could access that vault, and Theo would be paroled decades before Nott, Sr. was released from prison.

"I should be pleased to be of assistance," Professor Flitwick said warmly. "While I would not risk Azkaban for you, I am delighted to perform any service within the bounds of the law."

Cho nodded. She understood his position perfectly, and indeed had adopted it with respect to her Muggleborn friends. If Hermione heeded her Muggle medical advice and it worked to restore her memories, as Cho wished, she would have done nothing criminal.

Cho lightly embraced Professor Flitwick, his tiny size and harmless demeanor making him one of the few men besides Theo she could stand to touch. "Thank you for allowing me to stay at Hogwarts, and for confirming Theo's account of how I got my memories back."

"It was no inconvenience to me, my dear, on either count," he told her.

Cho fussed with the sling one more time to make sure Theodora was secure and then hefted a duffel bag with diapers, clothes, and other essentials over her shoulder. She grasped the stapler, and her last sight of England was Professor Flitwick waving to her, a bit sadly, before everything was lost to a whirl of color.

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"What are you doing here?" Lucius demanded, entering Draco's office without bothering to knock. That was one of the privileges of owning the company.

"Working, of course," his son answered, looking up from the end of month sales reports with a faintly puzzled expression, given that it was a weekday morning.

"What about Miss Granger? What if she needs medical attention? You do know that the baby's coming any day now, don't you?" Lucius asked, rapid-fire.

"Merlin, I hope he comes soon," Draco said fervently. "Hermione's overdue and miserable, and claims it's all my fault."

"Well, it *is* your fault," Lucius pointed out, lips quirked in amusement. "Is that why you aren't with her?"

"She told me that a watched kettle never boils or some nonsense like that, and to go into the office so she could get some work done at home in peace," his son admitted sulkily.

Lucius merely raised an eyebrow.

"I've been stepping outside every half-hour to check my voicemail," Draco defended himself. "She hasn't called yet, and she gets irritated when I ring her."

"Not good enough," Lucius said decisively. "Go and tend to your pregnant Mudblood."

Draco began to protest, but Lucius was implacable. "Your mother's already annoyed enough with you as it is, with that snippet in the *Daily Prophet's* gossip column about Daphne Greengrass getting engaged to Miles Bletchley. Do not make me aggravate her any further by forcing me to tell her that you are putting her grandson's health at risk."

Rather than being cowed by the threat of Narcissa's wrath, Draco unexpectedly smirked at the mention of the Greengrass engagement. "Would you care to wager on when the wedding will be? I anticipate sometime before Halloween."

"That would be quick," Lucius mused. "No, I'm not inclined to make a bet where you clearly have inside information."

He made a shooing motion with his hands. "Off you go, Draco. I don't want to see you back in the office until at least three weeks after Hadrian is born."

Lucius decided to offer some sage advice to his son and heir. "Your mother swears that French food brought on her labor with you. Why don't you take your Mudblood out to a nice bistro for lunch?"

"I may see if Hermione's up for that," Draco responded, again ignoring the blood-based slur.

"You do so," Lucius said, at his most congenial. After all, there was that quaint Muggle tradition to uphold, allowing the condemned one last delicious meal.

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Hermione was in the nursery, folding Hadrian's miniature clothes, when she heard Draco come into the flat. She carefully made her way down the stairs, unbalanced by her belly, and flung herself into his arms with a bright smile. "You're home early!" she exclaimed.

Draco's arms wound around her in a tight embrace before he set her back on her feet. "My father sent me home. My paternity leave has officially begun. How was your morning?"

"Extremely productive," Hermione said happily. "I revised my article and sent it off to the *Journal of Biochemistry*, collated all of Cho's notes for our amnesia project, and folded almost all of the baby clothes."

"You *have* had a busy morning," Draco commented. "Are you free now to join me for lunch? I was thinking we could go to that little French bistro you like? The one we went to - "

"The morning after bistro?" Hermione joked, using their nickname for the French restaurant they had first visited together back in early October and numerous times since. "I wanted to finish up in the nursery, but they do have the best steak frites," she said, willing to be persuaded.

"My mum apparently claims that French food induces labor," Draco said, to secure Hermione's agreement. "Of course, that is the only sort of 'foreign' food that she ever eats," he added as a disclaimer.

Hermione's nose crinkled in distaste at the mention of Draco's mother, but her dislike of the woman was no reason to refuse his thoughtful offer of lunch. "At this point, I'm willing to try just about anything to get this baby born. I just wish Hadrian would arrive already! Let me grab my bag."

Hermione retrieved her purse and slipped on a comfortable pair of sandals. "Do you mind if we walk there? I know it's hot outside, but the midwife mentioned walking was one of things I could try to bring on labor."

"I don't mind a bit," Draco shook his head. "We can always grab a taxi if you get tired." He interlaced his fingers in hers.

"You're very good to me," she said softly, standing in tiptoes to kiss the corner of his mouth, feeling a sudden surge of emotion towards her fiancé. "I love you, you know. Even when I'm mean to you."

"I know." His lips curved into a smirk and his hands caressed down her sides. "And I try to be good to you. I have every reason to be."

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Theodore Nott sat in the chilly interview room at Azkaban, contemplating his next move as he eyed the Auror sitting across from him.

"Auror Thomas, to what do I owe this pleasure?" he asked politely, sarcasm buried deep.

"It's not exactly a pleasure to meet with a Death Eating scumbag," Thomas growled. "It is, however, part of my job to interrogate you."

Theo steepled his fingers and looked at the man, waiting for him to continue.

"Malfoy and Flint are keeping interesting company these days," the Auror began.

"Oh? Do tell," Theo invited. He wondered if Dean Thomas or someone one in the Order, other than Shackbolt, finally had connected the dots between Draco and Hermione, as well as Marcus and Katie.

"Dennis Creevey came to my mother's home last weekend, with those two arseholes in tow. What the fuck is up with that?"

Theo made a reproving noise. "Language, Auror Thomas. Profanity is never professional."

He shifted back in his chair, watching dark color suffuse the Auror's cheek as his blood pressure visibly rose.

"Why are your Death Eater pals hanging out with a Muggleborn wizard like Dennis Creevey?" Dean Thomas rephrased the question through gritted teeth.

"I have no idea," Theo shrugged. "Did you try asking any of them?"

"Dennis told me they were friendly," the Auror said with patent disbelief.

"Stranger things have happened," Theo noted mildly. *Like Draco and Hermione*, he thought to himself. "It's not a crime."

"I don't think you're being forthcoming with me," Thomas accused.

Theo shrugged again and said nothing. He really did not know what was going on with his friends and Creevey. Plus, he had no incentive to cooperate.

"I heard your wife's left the country," Dean taunted. "Took your baby daughter with her. You never even got to see her, did you?"

Theo looked at him, impassive. He had a letter from Cho in his pocket, telling him that she was leaving with Theodora and explaining the reasons why. But he wasn't about to share that with an Auror on a power trip.

"Did I tell you I was at the hospital the night your daughter was born?" Dean asked. He reached into a file folder and removed a handful of snapshots of the newborn. "I was asked to give you these, but it slipped my mind."

Theo reached for the photos, unable to restrain himself.

Thomas shook his head, whisking them out of reach. "C'mon, Nott. Tell me what you know about Creevey. You have to give a little to get a little. Isn't that how Slytherins operate?"

"We're typically more subtle than that, Auror Thomas," replied Theo, quietly furious that the self-righteous Gryffindor was withholding precious pictures of his baby girl, but maintaining his self-control. "Though Slytherins such as Gregory Goyle and the late Vincent Crabbe may resort to the crude methods you just outlined."

Dean's nostrils flared at the insult. "What can you tell me about Creevey?"

"Let's see," Theo said, pretending to be deep in thought. "I haven't laid eyes on him in more than five years, but he was a mousy-haired little fellow who always had a camera with him. He was sorted into Gryffindor but never graduated from Hogwarts because he was repatriated to the Muggle world. Granger Obliviated him. That's all I know. Now, I would appreciate it if you hand over the pictures of my daughter."

Dean narrowed his eyes and kept a hand firmly on the small stack of photographs. "You just called her Granger. Why would Malfoy refer to her as Hermione? Flint did the same with Katie Bell. Surnames and insults seem much more their style."

"If you are unwilling or unable to ask that question of Marcus or Draco, I ordinarily would tell you to ask Miss Bell or Miss Granger," Theo said with scrupulous formality. "Except asking them would be a violation of the Statute of Secrecy and several decrees of the Muggle-born Repatriation Commission, which I would be happy to enumerate for you. Unless of course this is an official MLE investigation?"

Theo smirked as the Auror tellingly refused to answer. That smirk transformed into an expression of outrage as Thomas scooped up the photos of Theodora.

"We'll try this again next week, Nott," Dean told him with a scowl, stomping out of the room.

Theo sneered at his retreating back. He was furious at the Auror's high-handedness, a feeling that was barely relieved by the fact that Cho already had sent him an album's worth of photos of their daughter.

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Draco held Hermione on their bed, relishing the way she snuggled in close to him in her current state of post-coital bliss. After lunch, she had continued her campaign to evict

Hadrian on their walk home by coyly informing him that nipple stimulation and the prostaglandins found in semen both could encourage the onset of labor. Draco had been more than happy to oblige by shagging her six ways 'til Sunday, particularly since he knew there would be a dry spell for several weeks after the baby was born while Hermione's body recovered.

"What are you drawing on my belly?" she asked drowsily.

"Just doodling, love," he told her. In fact, Draco was drawing runes. This time, the runes were for her, rather than their son, and 'love' was one of the runes he was tracing with a fingertip on her soft skin. Hermione said she loved him with a readiness that he wished he could emulate, but Draco had been raised to consider such words a vulnerability, an admission of weakness. It was easier for him to show her how he felt.

"Ready for another go?" he inquired, running his hands up her belly to her enlarged breasts.

"I'm knackered," she confessed with a yawn, and a shake of her head that caused her hair to tickle his bare chest. "You wore me out."

He smiled with self-satisfaction, planting a kiss on her shoulder. "How about I run you a bath instead, sweetheart?"

"Please do. You always manage to get the temperature and bubbles just right."

Draco hid a smirk. That was because he was a wizard. A warming charm on the water and a stasis spell to preserve the bubbles were child's play to him.

In the en suite bath, he took a quick shower to rinse off while the tub filled, rinsing himself off with refreshingly cool water. After toweling himself dry, Draco checked the temperature of the bath water, adjusted it by a few degrees with his wand, and then added handful of lavender bath salts, a capful of bubble bath, and a couple of charms to create the perfect bath. "Your bath awaits, princess," he announced, opening the connecting door between bedroom and bathroom with a flourish.

"Do you want me to order you some lamb vindaloo?" Draco asked. Hermione had informed him earlier in the day that eating spicy curries was another tactic to try to encourage labor.

"No thanks," she smiled and levered herself off the bed. "I'm not that hungry. Maybe just some fruit and a mango lassi for me?"

Draco's eyes widened as she walked towards him, naked. Throughout her pregnancy, she had carried high, but her belly had visibly dropped since lunchtime. He was intelligent enough to remember what he had learned in their childbirth class and apply that to her behavior today. Hermione's sudden burst of energy, her nesting instinct in finalizing the nursery, this afternoon's randiness, and now a loss of appetite all were signs indicating the onset of labor.

As the bathroom door closed behind her, Draco glanced at his watch. It was after seven. He frowned in annoyance, as he realized what tomorrow was. Unless Hermione had an unusually

quick time of it for a first-time mother, his son was going to be born on Harry Potter's birthday.

"Three hundred and sixty-five days in a year, and Hadrian has to be born on that one," he muttered to himself. "I wish it were any other day."

The Curse of Eve

August 1, 2004

Thirty-two hours later, Draco would have given his wand arm for Hadrian to have been born on Harry Potter's birthday. But the last day of July had come and gone, and Hermione still was in pain, struggling to deliver their son.

"Get the fuck out!" Granger screamed at him, her face red and her neck corded with rage and effort as yet another contraction hit its peak. "This is all your fault, you pointy-faced bastard!"

"Why don't you go and get yourself a cup of tea, while I check to see how things are coming along?" the nurse suggested in a soothing voice. She was a brisk, matronly sort of woman and seemed competent enough, but Draco was predisposed to despise her. Not only was she a Muggle, but she had red hair and looked like a Weasley.

Malfoys did not take direction from weasel-like Muggles. Draco was poised to tell her as much, when Hermione caught his eye, lifting her head off the pillow in the ever-briefer respite between her contractions. "Get out," she enunciated, with devastating clarity. "I can't stand to see you."

With that, he slunk from the hospital room. Draco leaned against the wall in the corridor, exhausted after a night and day without sleep, and pulled out his mobile, dialing Flint's number. He figured that Marcus had gone through this twice with Katie and might have some advice to offer.

"Hullo?" Marcus answered on the fifth ring, sounding groggy.

"Hi, mate. It's me."

"Draco? Why the fuck are you calling me at three in the morning?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize what time it was. It's Hermione - " he began.

"She had the baby? That's awesome!" Flint interrupted, enthusiastically. "Let's break out the cigars and champagne once it's daylight, wanker, to celebrate your son and heir."

"No, she hasn't had the baby yet. She's having a really rough time of it." Draco swallowed hard, but forced himself to continue. "I think she hates me again."

"Of course she hates you right now," Marcus said matter-of-factly. "Granger's in the worst pain of her life and your dick caused it. How long has she been in labor?" he asked with sincere concern for the Muggleborn witch.

"It's going on thirty hours since her contractions really started," Draco reported, trying to keep calm. "Hermione wanted to stay at home as long as she could, but we've been been at

the hospital since Saturday afternoon. It's been more than twelve hours since we got here."

"I dunno what to tell you, Drake," Marcus said uneasily. "That seems kind of long to me. Katie was in labor with Isabel seventeen hours start to finish, and Peter only took half as long. What do the doctors say?"

"Those Muggle fuckers won't tell me anything!" Draco exploded. "I swear to Salazar I'm going to use an Unforgivable on the next one who tells me things are going as they ought, but just a bit slowly!"

"How's your wrist feeling, mate?" Marcus asked.

"My wrist is fine," Draco answered, annoyed at the nonsensical question. "It's my hand Granger's been crushing and clawing, since she can't reach my bollocks."

"That's good, then," Flint said with an optimism Draco was far from feeling. "If your wrist is fine, she's fine. The Vow will let you know if she's in danger. That's what Theo always said with Cho, at least."

Draco slumped more heavily against the wall, this time in relief. "Thank Merlin!"

Marcus, however, was no longer listening. Draco could hear snippets of a conversation on the other end of the line, and then Katie's voice.

"Malcolm? Why are jabbering on the phone with Mark?" she asked with deceptive mildness.

"Sorry, Katie," he apologized. "I didn't mean to wake you. I honestly lost track of time and didn't realize it was the middle of the night."

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to," Katie said with unusual sternness. "I don't hear anything in the background, so I assume you stepped out to phone Mark, leaving Hermione alone while she's in labor?"

"Yes," Draco admitted, guiltily. "She told me to leave, though."

"She didn't mean it, you pillock," scolded Katie. "Hang up now and go take care of her."

"You don't understand, Katie," Draco tried to explain. "Hermione *really* doesn't want me in there."

But Katie was implacable. "Malcolm Draco Foy, get your arse back in that delivery room with Hermione *right now*. Offer her juice, ice, water, whatever she wants. Rub her back and her shoulders to help through the contractions. Agree with anything she says about you - it's probably nicer than the truth. And whatever else you do, don't you dare leave her alone until your baby is born. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal, Madam Bell," he acknowledged. In that moment, Draco realized that Katie was as much a force to be reckoned with as her *de facto* mother-in-law, the redoubtable Lucretia Flint.

"Fabulous," Katie said pleasantly. "Please do call us once Hadrian has arrived. If Hermione's feeling up to visitors, Mark and I would love to stop by the hospital and meet him."

Flint briefly took the phone back. "Sorry 'bout that bollocking, Drake, but you know Katie's right."

"Yeah, I know," he agreed.

"Er, one other thing you should know," Marcus said. Draco could tell he was choosing his words with unusual care, mindful of Katie now awake in bed next to him. "Hermione may call you some names, like Katie said. Katie called me every name in the book with our two, including my real name."

"I understand," Draco said, chilled.

"But it fades afterwards, okay? Katie didn't remember, once she had our babies, how much it hurt and shite like that."

Draco heard a sound on the other end of the phone, perhaps Katie registering her disagreement, but the Marcus was back on. "Good night and good luck, mate." He rang off.

With a sigh of reluctance, Draco pocketed his mobile and walked back to the closed door of Hermione's room with dragging steps, feeling like he had to go and face a lioness in her den.

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Hermione initially had thought that giving birth was tedious rather than painful. The contractions were uncomfortable, to be certain, but no worse than menstrual cramps, just spiking every several minutes.

After the contractions woke her in the wee hours of Saturday morning, she had labored at home for more than twelve hours, walking around the spacious flat, climbing the single flight of stairs, and spending an inordinate amount of time in the bathtub. In addition to his wizardry with the bathwater, Draco had kept her company, rubbed her back, and cajoled her into eating some fruit to keep her strength up.

She had finally given in to his urging to go to the hospital mid-afternoon, when her water broke. His money ensured they had the luxury of a private room, but it was rather small and terribly institutional.

In the early stages, her labor experience seemed to her rather like a long plane flight. She was uncomfortable and uneasy, unable to leave a relatively small space with tiny windows and stale air, and the entertainment options were poor. The perky bossiness of the nurses also forcibly reminded her of flight attendants. But at least she had Draco for company and could eagerly look forward to an arrival - not at a destination, but of their son.

If labor was like a plane flight, hers seemed interminable. Hermione could have flown to Melbourne and halfway back at this point, and Hadrian was nowhere close to being born. Her cervical dilation remained stalled at five centimeters for hours. Hermione eventually had

agreed to a pitocin drip, concerned that her labor had stalled and mindful of the risk of infection of Hadrian was not born relatively soon, now that the amniotic sac was no longer intact.

With pitocin, the contractions moved to the small of her back and intensified to the point of real pain. Still, Hermione stubbornly refused the nurses' offers of an epidural or painkillers, heeding Cho's advice. Draco was obviously unhappy with her choice, but he had not been so foolish as to argue with her about it.

Still, at this moment in her life, she *hated* him, hated him like before. Hermione remembered her violent urges when she first had met him - to slap the smirk of his handsome face, scratch his porcelain skin, and yank that baby-fine blond hair. Right now, she wanted to physically hurt him, like she was hurting, but contented herself with a death grip on his hand and demanding that he leave the room.

Once Draco left, the nurse conducted a quick cervical check. "The good news, luv, is that you're at eight centimeters," the red-haired woman relayed cheerfully. "The bad news is that the transition to get all the way to ten centimeters is the worst part of labor. I've had four babies myself, so I know it's true. Are you certain you don't want a little something to take the edge off?"

Hermione shook her head, her mouth set in an obstinate line. "No, thank you," she gasped out as another sharp contraction began.

"Alright, dearie. I'll send your young man back in. You'll want his help to get through this."

In truth, Hermione did not *want* his help, but she needed it. Logically, she knew two centimeters was a tiny distance, but this was the longest two centimeters of her life. She was drowning in a sea of pain, with Draco's hands kneading her back the only thing keeping her anchored. Even so, she feared she was losing her normally logical mind, as she found herself comparing the pain of these contractions to any number of fantastical experiences.

This hurts less than turning into a cat-human hybrid, her mind reassured her, as she cried out that it hurt. *More than being Petrified by a basilisk, however.*

It's not nearly so frightening as being chased by a werewolf and surrounded by soul-sucking Dementors, her subconscious counseled. *Not even a blip on the screen compared to flying by dragon or thestral.* Draco murmured some soothing nonsense into her ear as she whimpered, biting her lip to hold back a scream. She had hated his uppercrust drawl once, but his words now were comforting, not insulting.

Her inner monologue continued to reassure her. *The recovery will be easier than from Dolohov's curse. No nasty potions to drink!* She vomited into a basin and Draco handed her some juice to rinse out her mouth, saying something under his breath she couldn't quite catch. To her surprise, the vile taste in her mouth disappeared.

The contractions were incessant, and waves of pain roared through her body without pause. *At least it's not as bad as the Cruciatus Curse*, or so her mind claimed. Hermione had to concede that the pain was more localized, centered in her lower abdomen and back, rather

than in her entire body, but that only made the agony more concentrated. And this had gone on for hours, compared to the twenty minutes or so under Bellatrix's wand.

Hermione screamed, though she would have been hard-pressed to say whether it was from her labor pains or the awful memory.

"C'mon, Granger, you can do it," Draco coached in a voice husky with concern. "You've survived worse before."

Her eyes snapped open and met his, silver-grey and wide with fear for her. The last time, he had stood by frightened and silent, his fear entirely for himself.

"No thanks to you," she spat. Draco recoiled as though she had slapped him.

"You're fully dilated," the midwife confirmed at long last. "Time to push."

"Stay at my shoulder," Hermione snapped at Draco as the midwife positioned her towards the end of the bed, knees apart and legs splayed wide. Hermione did not want him to see her so vulnerable, though Merlin knew he had seen it all before.

He stayed obediently behind her, continuously massaging her neck and shoulders, pausing only to wipe the sweat off her face with his handkerchief. Hermione felt like an animal, a filthy animal, as she strained and grunted with effort, no longer in control of her body.

"Good girl," he softly praised her efforts, making the mistake of speaking.

"Fuck off, ferret," she panted back. After that, Draco prudently remained silent.

"He's crowning," the midwife announced, after what seemed like hours. "Take it nice and easy now, so you don't tear."

Hermione already knew the baby was crowning, as her most tender flesh was impossibly stretched. It burnt like Fiendfyre, and she felt an urge to expel the baby quickly that was close to irresistible. But she did resist, pausing to pant shallow breaths as the midwife worked, waiting until the next contraction to push Hadrian's head from her body with torturous slowness.

After that, the delivery was easy, and the baby slithered from her body into the midwife's waiting hands. Hermione could hear him crying, with surprising volume and strength, but could not see him. She felt battered and bruised, physically and mentally, and too tired to even open her eyes and catch her first glimpse of Hadrian. And part of her mind was silently screaming that she did not want to look upon the living proof that she had just given birth to Draco Malfoy's son.

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"Here's your son!" the midwife said, relief evident in her voice at the safe delivery after Hermione's long, hard labor. "A *big* baby boy!"

Draco could see him between Hermione's legs, red-faced and screaming, his little limbs flailing in rage at this bright, cold new world he had finally been delivered into. Despite the midwife's words, Hadrian looked impossibly tiny. For several heartbeats, Draco was too overwhelmed with emotion to even speak.

"Oh, gods, Hermione!" he exclaimed, finding his voice. "He's perfect! We made the most beautiful little person together!"

"Would you like to cut the cord, Dad?" the midwife asked him, holding out a pair of sterilized scissors.

Draco tore his eyes away from his son and looked to Hermione, seeking permission, but her honey-brown eyes were shut tight.

"It won't hurt either of them," the ginger-haired nurse promised, misunderstanding the reason for his hesitation.

"Alright," he agreed, uncertain if this was what Hermione wanted but desiring nothing more than to hold his son, to present him to his brave, exhausted mother.

The sharp blades easily cut through the umbilical cord. The midwife held Hadrian out and Draco took him, heedless of the blood and vernix still coating the baby's skin.

A scream rent the air, louder and more desperate than any Hermione had uttered over the past hours. Blood was gushing between her legs as her body arched off the hospital bed in pain. The midwife shoved him out of the way, yelling for assistance. Draco gripped Hadrian tightly, shifting the baby's weight to his right arm as a searing pain, comparable to taking the Dark Mark, encircled his left wrist.

Hermione's scream turned into words. "Malfoy, please! Help me! *Please!*" Brown eyes locked onto his, filled with terror and pain.

Draco could feel the malevolence of Dark magic as the curse ripped through Hermione's body. It made his skin crawl and tasted acrid in his mouth. His instincts screamed for him to shield the baby and shield her, but Draco knew this curse was too strong for him to overpower. There was nothing he could do to save her. He pushed Hadrian blindly into the arms of the red-haired nurse and groped for his wand, to cast some pain-numbing charms if nothing else.

Instead, his fingers connected with Hermione's betrothal ring. She had taken it off back at their flat, along with her charm bracelet, before they left for the hospital. Draco had pocketed them, uneasy about Cho's purported medical advice and the prospect of Hermione not wearing her enchanted jewelry throughout her hospital stay. He shoved the ring onto one of her fingers, heedless of which one, muttering the spell to hide it from Muggle eyes. "You'll be fine, Granger," he lied reassuringly.

Two orderlies sprinted into the room and the midwife jabbed a syringe into Hermione's hip. She twisted on the bed and screamed again. Blood continued to pour from her body, staining the midwife's makeshift compress a Gryffindor red. The Muggles left the room at a dead run,

the two men pushing the entire bed. The midwife ran alongside, holding towels between Hermione's legs, trying and failing to stop the hemorrhaging while calling out instructions and codes into some Muggle device that looked like a chunkier version of Draco's mobile.

The ginger nurse handed Hadrian back to him. "They are going to operate now, to try and stop the bleeding," she explained. "I need to join them. Wait here, and someone from the neonatal staff will be along to examine the baby and give him a bath."

Draco stared at her blankly. Just right now, he was beyond comprehension.

"Sit here and wait," the nurse instructed in simple words, pressing him down into a chair.

He did as he was told, clinging to a sobbing Hadrian and staring with anguished grey eyes at Hermione's blood, spattered scarlet across the walls and floor.

The Hand That Rocks the Cradle

Chapter Notes

A/N: There are nodding references to the works of Prince and Tolkien, with Narcissa channeling her inner Gollum. The italicized portion is a flashback to January 1999.

August 1, 2004 (afternoon and evening)

Hermione was surrounded by a diffuse white light, muzzily wondering whether this was the Limbo Harry had described to her after the Final Battle. No one came to greet her, however. She would have expected Harry at least to make the effort, and perhaps Tonks and Remus as well. And her deceased grandparents, if access to Limbo was not restricted to witches and wizards.

After some period of time, Hermione cracked her eyelids open, to discover the brightness was due to fluorescent lights on ceiling. They were shining directly into her eyes because she was lying on her back, slightly propped up by the tilt of the mattress. From the intravenous line inserted in the back of her hand, Hermione deduced she was in a Muggle hospital, but had no idea how she had gotten here.

She closed her eyes, trying to take stock of her injuries. While she felt exhausted, light-headed and sore throughout her entire body, her shoulders were especially strained, as though she had been twisting and struggling. Worse yet, even through the numbing effect of very strong painkillers, Hermione still could feel an ominous throbbing and a thick bandage between her legs.

She had been so careful, ever since the Death Eaters had gotten to Cho Chang, but it seemed she had not been careful enough. Hermione had no memories of being sexually assaulted, but assumed she had been Obliviated. Still, that did not explain how she had wound up in a hospital bed somewhere in the Muggle world, rather than dead and dumped in Knockturn Alley.

A sharp *crack* that Hermione recognized as the sound of Apparition broke through the soft humming and hissing of the Muggle medical equipment. Instinctively, she flattened herself into the mattress, reaching for a wand that was not at her side.

"Mipsy is bringing the Blood Replenishing Potion, Master. I is sorry about taking so long, but I is needing to go to the Manor to fetch it."

Behind the hospital's institutional pale blue bed curtains, currently shut tight, Hermione's eyes widened at the unmistakable diction of a house elf.

"Thank you, Mips," came the reply, in a gravelly male voice that Hermione struggled to place. Until now, she had not realized there was another person in the room on the other side of the curtain.

"How is Miss doing?" the elf asked squeakily. "And my youngest master?"

"She lost a great deal of blood, but she'll live," the wizard answered, relief stark in his voice. "Hadrian is well. The Muggles have him under observation. His body temperature was a touch high, but that's not unusual with such a lengthy delivery."

Hermione bit her lip in consternation. She recognized that voice now. It was Draco Malfoy, though he sounded rather hoarse. She thought perhaps he had a head cold, because she certainly could not picture him crying.

"Is they comings home soon?" the elf asked hopefully.

"In a few days, I hope," Malfoy told his elf.

"Mipsy is making sure the house is spotless," promised the elf. "I is going now to clean."

"Thanks, Mipsy." The words were barely out of his mouth when the elf departed with another *crack*.

As she lay prone on the hospital bed, Hermione struggled to make sense of the conversation and the entire situation. Perhaps Malfoy had found her injured and brought her to a Muggle hospital, although that sort of altruism - towards her, especially - seemed out of character. Or perhaps he had been one of the Death Eaters who participated in the attack that left her confined to a hospital bed with vaginal bleeding and memories that were fuzzy at best. Still, that did not seem to fit, either. Malfoy was a cowardly bully and a prejudiced git, but Hermione never would have pegged him as a rapist.

Even as she had that thought, giving the blond ferret the benefit of the doubt, she was assailed by a mental image of Malfoy poised above her, ramming himself into her naked body with such force that that headboard to which her hands were tied banged into the wall in time with his thrusts. Hermione bit her lip to keep from uttering a sound, as another *crack* announced the arrival of someone else into the room.

"Mother. What are you doing here?" asked Malfoy. To Hermione's ear, he did not sound pleased.

"Why, I'm here to see *him*," Narcissa replied, cooing the pronoun with reverent adoration, sounding uncannily like her older sister Bellatrix when referring to her beloved Dark Lord. "I followed Mipsy after she left the Manor. Weren't you going to tell me *he* had arrived?"

Hermione wondered who Narcissa was talking about. Certainly not Voldemort - he was dead and gone, defeated by Harry, and never coming back. But the Death Eaters still were out there, regrouping and growing stronger. Perhaps they had a prized recruit who Narcissa was anxious to meet.

"I want to see him!" Narcissa reiterated imperiously. "Where is he?"

"Hadrian's just down the hall, Mother," Malfoy answered wearily. "Please, keep your voice down."

"Why aren't you with him?" she demanded, but in a softer voice. "I can't believe you left him unattended!"

"I'm waiting for Hermione to wake up. The Healer expects she'll be out for another hour, at least," he explained.

At that, Hermione's eyebrows rose. Since when were she and Malfoy on a first name basis? And who was Hadrian? Why was Narcissa so upset at the idea of him being left unattended? Her normally sharp mind was too foggy right now to supply any sensible answers, to her growing alarm.

"She's still alive?" Narcissa asked. To Hermione's ears, the blonde witch sounded both surprised and disappointed.

"Is that a confession, Mother?" Malfoy asked, dangerously quiet. "If so, you're losing your touch. She survived."

"Oh no, darling. *I* didn't curse her," Narcissa said.

"Was it Father, then?" Malfoy asked. Hermione shivered on the bed. He sounded positively murderous.

"Not at all. Neither of us would ever act directly against Miss Granger in a way that puts you at risk of breaking your Vow to her. Hadrian triggered the curse, but it's really the fault of a witch dead for hundreds of years," Narcissa answered. "There's nothing you could have done to prevent it."

"What do you mean, Mother?" Malfoy growled. "And I warn you, I am not in the mood for your little games."

"Take me to Hadrian, and I would be pleased to explain on the way," Narcissa suggested. "I'm sure you don't wish to risk raising your voice and disturbing Miss Granger's recovery."

"Alright, Mother," Malfoy agreed, clearly unhappy.

Hermione lay still, listening to their footsteps recede down the hallway. She clutched the sheets, shaking her head as her memories continued to come back to her, including her meeting with Narcissa at Hogwarts, and just what she had agreed to with that hateful, double-crossing witch.

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Draco walked with long-legged strides down the hospital corridor, refusing to wait for or even look at his mother. To Narcissa's maternal eyes, he looked wretched, even paler than usual, with shadowed eyes and tousled hair.

"When was the last time you slept, my dragon?" she asked with concern.

"I don't really remember," he said with indifference. "Maybe a couple of hours when they brought Hermione back to the room?"

"You need to rest, Draco," Narcissa scolded lightly.

"Hermione bled out and nearly died after thirty-some hours of labor and all you care about is that I'm not well-rested?" Draco hissed as they reached the nursery, appalled at her callousness.

Narcissa did not bother to answer, pleased to see that the nursery door was locked and that Draco had to present some sort of charm on his wrist to gain access. He had to show it again to the attendant before he was permitted to take Hadrian from his bassinet. She still was aghast that her son had left his son - *her* grandson - alone with Muggles around, but at least the baby was not entirely unguarded.

Draco cradled the sleeping, swaddled newborn in his arms, pressing a feather-light kiss atop his head, covered with translucent white-blond hair so fine that it looked like down.

"He looks just like you did when you were born," Narcissa noted, overcome with emotion that her baby boy had a beautiful baby of his own.

"Would you like to hold him?" Draco asked.

"Please!" Narcissa said eagerly, reaching out her arms.

"Tell me about the curse, first," Draco said, pulling the baby away.

Narcissa arched a delicate eyebrow at her son's unsportsmanlike tactics. "The curse was placed by a Malfoy wife on her husband and all his male descendants more than five hundred years ago."

She held out her arms. "I'm certain that cuddling Hadrian will help me recall some more details."

Draco made a face, but handed the baby over.

"Lucius the First, your father's namesake, was going to set aside the witch he had married in favor of a Muggle, the so-called Virgin Queen of England, for all that she spread her legs readily enough for a married wizard," Narcissa began.

"His wife, Eve Gaunt, was a descendant of Salazar Slytherin himself and a powerful witch in her own right. She would not abide any woman taking her place, let alone a Muggle, so she cursed Elizabeth Tudor to be barren. When Lucius then turned his wandering eye to another red-haired chit, this time a Weasley, and got her with child, Eve cursed him and the entire Malfoy line."

"What is the nature of the curse?" Draco asked, grey eyes like steel.

Narcissa adjusted the baby in her arms. "It kills the mother of any illegitimate Malfoy with uncontrollable hemorrhaging that begins the moment the umbilical cord is cut. The Weasley witch died within minutes of giving birth to a boy, who Eve raised as her own. The curse killed several other women over the years before Malfoy men learned to use contraceptive charms if they valued their whores' lives. Or not, if they cared for their bastards more than their mistresses."

"Did Father know about this?" Draco demanded.

"I had to remind him," Narcissa admitted. "Knowledge of the curse is passed along from one Malfoy wife to another, since it ensures we can never be supplanted. I never did get around to telling Astoria because you were faithful to her until you took up with Miss Granger. The most important thing is that you were kept entirely ignorant of the curse, so you did not violate the terms of your Vow to her."

Draco looked disgusted. "I can't believe you did that, Mother. You set up Hermione like a lamb to the slaughter."

Narcissa sneered. "She was hardly a little innocent." She pursed her lips in thought. "I wonder how she survived. Perhaps the curse was weakened because you and Astoria are divorced."

"Or perhaps it was weakened because Hermione and I are handfast," Draco said coldly. "With Hadrian's birth well within a year and a day, we're as good as married."

"Oh, Draco, how could you?" Narcissa said in reproof. "There was no need for you to keep your dirty little pet now that she's served her purpose." She shook her head. "You always were such a sentimental boy. Your father will be so disappointed in you."

"Where is Father?" Draco asked in sudden alarm. "Tell me right now."

"Oh, he should be along any minute." Narcissa smiled fondly at the baby. "Lucius will trace my Apparition to get here, but I couldn't wait to meet my grandson."

Draco gave her a horrified look and dashed back towards the hospital room where Hermione was lying, unconscious and helpless.

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"How do you take your tea?" Hermione asked the icy blonde seated across from her in Professor McGonagall's sitting room, striving to keep this meeting on a courteous footing.

"Milk, one sugar," Narcissa Malfoy replied. She took the cup and saucer from Hermione's hands with no evident distaste and had even shaken hands upon her arrival at Hogwarts. Hermione noticed, however, that the older witch kept her lace gloves on to avoid any actual contact with a Muggleborn's skin.

"Would you like some shortbread?" Hermione inquired, maintaining the polite fiction that this was a social visit rather than a refined attempt at blackmail, triggered by Narcissa

sending her an owl with a newspaper advert for the dental practice of Monica and Wendell Wilkins in the suburbs of Brisbane.

"No, thank you," Narcissa shook her head. "Did you have a pleasant New Year?"

"Oh, yes," Hermione said with sarcasm. "My best friend died less than four months ago, I can't leave Hogwarts Castle for fear of being Snatched, my parents don't remember who I am, and the Wizengamot just passed a law that will pay me a paltry 7500 Galleons in exchange for Obliviating more than seven years of precious memories and taking my magic. Given those circumstances, I partied like it's 1999."

The reference to the Muggle song and its apocalyptic lyrics flew right over Narcissa's head. "But it is 1999 now," she coolly pointed out. "Things could always be worse. Your parents may not remember you, but they are perfectly safe and happy in Australia."

"For now," Hermione conceded. "Will they remain so if I refuse to undertake this Vow with Malfoy?"

"There are no guarantees in life," Narcissa said, with an elegant shrug of her shoulders. "The odds in their favor are sharply higher if you agree to accept my son's protection. Will you?"

Hermione was taken aback at the unexpectedly blunt question. "Perhaps, perhaps not. I asked you to meet with me so I could understand why you made this offer. Malfoy and I have never gotten along, to say the least, and I can't imagine he would have any desire to protect me, let alone my Muggle parents."

"Motives should not matter when you have the guarantee of an Unbreakable Vow," Narcissa deflected.

"When I am dealing with a family whose very name means 'bad faith,' and a Death Eater who wanted me killed when he was still only a boy of twelve, motives do matter," Hermione insisted. "What's in it for Malfoy?"

"Draco needs to take the Vow with a Muggleborn, and you are the best for his purposes." Once again, Narcissa sidestepped her question.

The two witches fenced over tea, Hermione persistently asking why she was the best for the Malfoys' purposes, and Narcissa refusing to provide a straightforward answer with equal obstinance.

Finally, Hermione threw up her hands in frustration. "Unless you tell me what Malfoy gets out of this, my answer is no."

"You do realize that this offer of protection extends not just to you and your parents, but to any children you may have?" Narcissa offered, sipping her tea and sweetening the deal. "It was tragic what happened last year at King's Cross . . . those little Muggleborns, so eager to go off to school, dragged away from the platform for stealing a wand. They were only eleven. I don't believe any of them survived more than a month in Azkaban."

Hermione's cup clattered in its saucer. She and Harry had been distraught about that, but there was nothing they could have done to save or even warn those unknown children. She made a mental note to go to Kingsley and extract a promise that no Muggleborns would be sent to Hogwarts while this repatriation law remained in effect.

"You are a powerful witch, despite your blood status, and your children will be magical as well, even if you breed with a Muggle," Narcissa continued. "When they are of an age to attend Hogwarts, you will not be in position to protect them in the magical world, but Draco and his heir will be."

There was faintest inflection in Narcissa's voice when she mentioned children, a hint that sent an alarm bell tinkling in Hermione's brain. The pieces clicked into place. "You want me to have a child with Malfoy," Hermione stated in a flat voice.

"To be clear, I do not want this to happen, but my son begetting a heir on you is better than nothing," the blonde answered candidly.

"Is Malfoy unable to reproduce with a pureblood witch? Too much inbreeding will do that," Hermione commented spitefully.

Narcissa's blue eyes turned even colder. "This has nothing whatsoever to do with Draco's lineage," she snapped. "There are rumors of a curse placed by the Dark Lord on his followers, to end the pureblood lines. You are nothing more than a contingency plan, should those rumors prove to be true."

Hermione pointed out a very obvious flaw in Narcissa's contingency plan. "You do realize that the Vow will prevent Malfoy from doing anything to me without my consent. He can't rape me."

Narcissa looked unconcerned. "He won't need to. Draco is an attractive young man, and quite charming when he wishes to be. While he tries to be discreet, I am well aware that he has no difficulties in persuading witches to go to bed with him. You'll be no different, once you've forgotten your history with him."

Hermione shook her head, now realizing where Malfoy's arrogance came from. "That would never happen. Also, he'll still remember his history with me. Do you really think your son wants to have sex with a Mudblood that he hates?"

Narcissa gave her a pitying look. "Do you really think sex is about love? For men, it's about power. Draco wants you precisely because you're a Mudblood he hates."

Hermione bit her lip. "You can't expect me to agree to sleep with Malfoy, not even to save my parents!" she protested, knowing it was probably in vain.

"I will never understand the self-righteous morality of Gryffindors," Narcissa muttered to herself. "Miss Granger," she said more loudly. "To be clear, I am not asking you to have sex with my son. Even if you gave me your consent today, it would be meaningless once you were Obliviated. All that I am asking is that you agree to accept Draco as the Death Eater responsible for your safety in the Muggle world and then let the chips fall where they may."

"Aren't you also asking me to hand over my first child to Malfoy, like he's Rumpelstiltskin?" Hermione asked with suspicion. Narcissa's proposal now sounded far too reasonable. She was certain that she always would recognize Malfoy as a viper, even without her memories, and would send him packing. But it wasn't like a Slytherin to give something for nothing, so there had to be a catch.

The blonde witch looked at her with clear calculation. "I am not asking you to hand over your child to anyone. You and Draco will work that out amongst yourselves. But is it so inconceivable that you would give a baby up for adoption, particularly if he were the unwanted result of a one-night stand?"

It was a fair question, and it shook Hermione to realize that was probably exactly the course of action she would take. Narcissa's offer now sounded almost too good to be true . . .

"I'll also want a magical contract with you, to make sure my parents aren't harmed," Hermione said abruptly. "And as part of the terms, I want you to modify their memories so they remember me as their goddaughter."

"Done," Narcissa agreed, with a pleased gleam in her eyes.

Hermione was shaking on her hospital bed, not wanting to believe that she had agreed to Narcissa's proposal and ultimately had a baby with Malfoy as a result. She hated to think that her judgement and instincts were so flawed that she had voluntarily engaged in an intimate relationship with Draco Malfoy, the youngest Death Eater ever Marked and the bane of her existence at Hogwarts. Still, her memories were rushing back, and there was no denying them or the physical evidence provided by her own body.

She held up her hands, tanned from the summer sun, but without the ink stains and raggedy cuticles she was used to seeing. Instead, they were well-manicured and her nails were even polished, something that only happened when Ginny insisted and did it for her. But while the redhead favored bright colors, Hermione's fingernails were painted a delicate shell pink. There also was a ring haphazardly shoved partway down her right index finger, and a white line on the fourth finger of her left hand, presumably where she normally wore it, even though she never wore rings.

She removed the ring and carefully examined it. It was stunning, with rubies running along the gold band and bezel, which was also encrusted with diamonds and a single pearl. Hermione did not know much about jewelry, but she could tell this was goblin-wrought and hundreds of years old. There was magic in the ring, apparent even without a wand to diagnose its precise nature. She could sense very old and still-powerful protective charms forged into the ring, as well as a new and makeshift concealing spell. Absently, she replaced the ring on her finger, in the usual place for an engagement ring or wedding band.

In doing so, Hermione noticed the bezel was hinged and pried it open with a fingernail, heedless of chipping her pretty nail polish, hoping to find some indication of the ring's provenance. Instead, she found herself staring at miniatures of herself and Draco Malfoy, both of them looking a few years older than she expected. It was becoming more and more apparent that she had been playing house with Malfoy for some period of time, and now was recovering from a traumatic childbirth rather than an attack by Death Eaters.

Hermione continued her investigation, untying the neck of her hospital gown and pulling it open to examine her tender breasts for further confirmation. There was a single love bite on the left one, but none of the bruises and imprints of teeth she would have expected if she had been raped by Death Eaters. Her breasts were larger than she could ever remember seeing them, the nipples several shades darker, and they felt very full. She remembered Ginny struggling through her depression at Harry's death to nurse little Jamie right after he was born, and her friend's breasts had looked much the same.

Looking around the curtained space encircling her bed, Hermione searched unsuccessfully for a newspaper or magazine, anything that would give her the date. She frowned in annoyance as yet another *crack* of Apparition disturbed her train of thought. Really, this was a hospital room, not King's Cross station!

Silently, she adjusted her hospital gown, not having the time to retie it, and lay back on the mattress to feign unconsciousness. As much as she hated playing possum, she was too weak and vulnerable without a wand to do anything else. She kept her eyes closed and her body limp as the curtains around her hospital bed were drawn back with a sibilant sound.

"Well, what do we have here?" drawled a male voice, almost like Draco's, but a shade deeper and with a nasty undertone.

Lucius Malfoy, Hermione's racing mind supplied. *Now I know why Malcolm Foy - Malfoy - refused to let me meet his father.* The pureblood's disgusting proclivities towards women of supposedly inferior blood status were well-known. Hermione had thanked every deity she knew of that Dobby had so quickly helped her, Harry and the others escape from Malfoy Manor. She had been tortured and carved up by Bellatrix Lestrange, but Lucius had not had time enough to rape her.

"Ripe like melons," Lucius observed, pulling down her unfastened hospital gown to grope at her exposed breasts. "My son is a *very* lucky man."

Hermione forced herself not to scream, retch, or flinch, though she felt like doing all three.

"Leave her alone, Father!" Malfoy commanded from the doorway.

"What's the harm, Draco?" Lucius inquired with nonchalance, but he did remove his disgusting hands from her person. "Your Mudblood's out cold. A pity, really. From what you've told me, she's ordinarily a responsive little thing." Hermione could hear the leer in his voice.

"Move away from the bed," Malfoy ordered. "She needs to rest."

Mercifully, Lucius obeyed his son, closing the curtain as he withdrew. Hermione tilted her head to listen, hoping the Malfoys' conversation would dislodge more of her memories and help her figure out what was going on, and - more importantly - what she could do about it.

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Draco loved his father, despite Lucius's many and varied flaws, but he had never in his life been closer to hexing him, painfully and permanently. "You are never to touch Hermione again. Understand?"

Lucius nodded. "What is this place?" he asked scornfully, oblivious to the magnitude of his offense.

"It's a Muggle hospital," Draco replied curtly. "This entire wing is for expectant mothers and newborn babies."

"It's cleaner than I expected," his father commented. "I should have thought a dirt floor and some filthy straw to lie upon would be sufficient for a Mudblood to give birth."

"Not when my grandson is the one being born!" Narcissa stated from the doorway in a icy voice, before Draco could even find the words to express his outrage. "Isn't that right, Hadrian?" she asked the baby nestled in her arms. "So bright, so beautiful . . . my *precious*."

"He looks small," Lucius said critically.

Narcissa rounded on him. "Hadrian's the largest baby the nursery - the Muggle Healer told me so! He weighs almost a kilogram more than Draco did when he was born," she stated with immense pride, as though she had pushed him out herself.

"Really?" Lucius said, sounding pleased. Draco watched as his father held out a pinky to Hadrian, chuckling when the baby grabbed it. "He's got a strong grip," Lucius said with approval.

"Shall we go?" he asked his wife. "Are you fine to Apparate with the baby?"

"Wait, where do you think you're going?" Draco objected.

"Back to the Manor, of course," his father said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Your mother will get Hadrian settled into his nursery with a nanny elf, and you can join me for a celebratory Firewhiskey once you've altered your Mudblood's memories. A tragic stillbirth, or perhaps have her in the hospital for some accident unrelated to pregnancy if you feel up to Confounding some of the Healers."

"I'm not going to do that to her," Draco protested. "Hadrian needs his mum." Uneasily, he noticed that his father had his wand out, and drew his own.

"I told you he'd be difficult about Miss Granger," Narcissa glared at Lucius.

"It would been much easier if she'd just died like she was supposed to," Lucius said, annoyed.

Draco thought quickly. He really had no desire to duel his parents, especially not with Hadrian and Hermione in the room, but he knew neither Lucius or Narcissa would balk at Stunning him or even placing him under the Imperius Curse if it served their interests. He knew, too, that his parents fought well as a team. Some Slytherin slyness was in order if he had any hope of keeping his newborn little family together.

"Really, Mother, I can't believe you're so willing to concede to Lucretia Flint," he drawled.

"Whatever do you mean, Draco?" Narcissa asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Why, I mean that she already has a grandson *and* a granddaughter, and I know for a fact Marcus is planning on having at least one more baby with Katie," Draco replied.

He turned to his father. "You've heard of the phrase 'a heir and a spare,' haven't you, Father? It seems a bit short-sighted to stop with just a heir, particularly since Hermione and I don't have the fertility problems that plague so many of the older families."

"Lack of purity aside, she is good breeding stock," Lucius conceded. "I'm sure you would find it no hardship to plant another baby in your leman's belly as soon as she heals." He exchanged a smirk with his son.

Narcissa sighed. "I suppose the damage already has been done," she said. Draco knew she was referring to the handfasting. "And I would like a little girl to dress up."

"I'll try to take your preferences into account with the next baby, Mum," Draco grinned cheekily.

"Hadrian needs to grow up knowing our world," Narcissa said, seriously.

"I'll bring him to visit the Manor as soon as next week," Draco promised, relieved that his parents had so easily come around. And next week, when Hermione and Hadrian were at no risk of being caught in the cross-fire, he would be having serious words with his parents about their plotting to end his love's life.

"Next week and every week," Narcissa insisted.

"I'll see you next week," Draco reiterated, eager to get his parents out of the hospital. Given their willingness to stand by and let Hermione die, he was making no promises about future visits.

Draco walked them from the room, his mother still carrying Hadrian, blissfully unaware that Hermione was awake behind the curtain, had heard every word that he said, and was incandescent with rage.

(x) (x) (x)

As soon as the Malfoys left, a nurse bustled into the room to check Hermione's vitals. "Good afternoon, ducky. Glad to see you're awake. How're you feeling?"

Hermione vaguely recognized the plump, red-haired woman. "Like I was run over by a lorry. Can you tell me what happened?"

The woman clucked sympathetically. "You had a lengthy labor and delivery followed by postpartum hemorrhage, one of the worst I've seen. When you were on the operating table this morning, I honestly thought you weren't going to make it, but the bleeding just stopped. It was like a miracle."

Or magic, Hermione thought, thinking of the protective enchantments built into her ring. "Why are my memories so hazy? I really don't remember anything." *Like being pregnant. Or shagging Malfoy to get pregnant.*

"That's only to be expected. Short-term memory loss is a common side effect of the anesthesia you were given," the nurse explained, fastening a blood pressure cuff around Hermione's arm.

"Is there anything I can do to help the memories come back?" she asked.

"Time and rest, dearie. Hmmm, your blood pressure's a bit higher than I expected, with all the blood you lost," she commented. "Did your in-laws get you upset?"

Hermione opened her mouth to deny that Lucius and Narcissa were her in-laws, but then shut it with a snap. She now remembered kneeling in the back garden with Draco, Kingsley presiding over their bonding. Even with an ordinary handfasting, she and Draco were effectively married with Hadrian's birth, and the Blood Rite made it permanent. She was a Malfoy now.

"Upset is an understatement," Hermione said wryly. She had not even held her baby yet, but maternal instinct was kicking in with a vengeance. She clenched her teeth in anger at the possessiveness Narcissa and Lucius had exhibited towards Hadrian and felt literally sick when she thought about their casual attempt to take him away from her. "How soon will I be up and walking around?" she asked, abruptly.

"You lost so much blood that I would say another day or two in the usual course, but you're healing much faster than expected. Why don't I help you to the bathroom now and change your dressing, and we'll see how that goes?" suggested the nurse.

"Fine," said Hermione. Her own magic would help her heal more quickly, and the sooner she could walk, the sooner she could run.

(x) (x) (x)

Draco came back into the room with little Hadrian shortly after the nurse left. She smiled tiredly at the baby and then flicked her golden-brown eyes up at him.

"The nurse said you were awake, and suggested that I bring him to see you," he said. "She also said to get you some juice, for your blood sugar and to help you stay hydrated. I brought you grape juice, since I thought you'd like it the best." The dark purple color also would hide the reddish Blood Replenishing Potion he had added.

Carefully, Draco placed the newborn next to his mother and handed her the cup before sitting gingerly on the edge of the hospital bed. Hermione seemed so fragile right now, and the last thing he wanted was to cause her any further pain.

Hermione stared at the baby, in awe. "He's beautiful," she breathed, taking her first real look at Hadrian. Instinctively, she reached out to hold him close.

"Of course he is," Draco joked. "He looks just like me."

She frowned at that, and he hastily amended his statement. "He has your eyes, though. Look!"

Draco tickled the drowsy baby with one finger and softly called his name until he opened his eyes with a little mewl of protest.

Hermione laughed, even though it hurt her still-sore body. "He's glaring at you!"

"I told you," Draco said. "He really does have your eyes. You give me that exact look sometimes." He smiled at her.

"That's so unusual for a baby to have brown eyes at birth," Hermione observed. "They're almost always blue and darken to brown later."

"Yes, well, he's your son and mine, so of course he's going to be special," Draco stated with pride. The baby opened his mouth, yawned, and began to cry. "Hadrian was fussing a bit, so the nurse thought he might need to eat," he suggested.

Hesitantly, Hermione pulled her hospital gown off her shoulder and nestled the baby's head to her chest. She seemed oddly self-conscious to Draco, even though he had seen and touched her breasts a thousand times before. He sincerely hoped that she had been too deeply asleep for his father's lecherous behavior to have registered, even subconsciously.

"I'm glad your parents are gone. Will they be coming back?" Hermione's tone was tart, and he momentarily wondered how much she had overheard.

"I don't expect them to," he answered. "Did you hear much of our conversation?"

"Just a minute or so, but it was very fuzzy. Still, it was rather clear that they think that I'm beneath you. No better than the dirt under your feet, and certainly not fit to raise my own son," she stated bitterly.

"I don't believe that," Draco reassured her, with true sincerity. "Any of that. I want to raise a family with you." He looked deeply into her eyes. "I love you, you know," he murmured.

"Do you?" she inquired softly, with a sweet, subtle curve to her lips. "I only know I've felt the same way about you for a long time."

Draco missed the dark look in her eyes as she dropped them to the baby, softly stroking Hadrian's cheek as he pursed his little pink mouth, seeking to latch onto his mother's nipple.

"Is there anything you need?" he asked anxiously.

"Something to read, please," she requested. "Today's newspaper and maybe a novel."

Draco grinned at her. "I'll pop downstairs to the gift shop and see what I can find, bookworm." His lips brushed across her forehead, making it clear that was an endearment. "If

you want to read, you must be feeling better, and I cannot express how relieved that makes me feel."

When he returned, Hadrian had finished nursing and was asleep on Hermione's lap, while she gazed down at him in awe. Draco wished he had a camera, because it was an image he wanted to capture forever.

They spent the rest of the afternoon quietly, Hermione alternating between reading, napping, conversing with him, and nursing Hadrian as she slowly recuperated. Draco took on a more active role in caring for the baby than he had ever anticipated, walking him around the room when he was fussy, burping him, and even changing a nappy, to Hermione's amusement.

After dinner, which was surprisingly good given the institutional setting, Draco handed Hadrian to his mum for another feeding. Hermione winced as she took the baby, an expression she quickly covered up with a smile.

"Are you in pain?" he asked with concern.

"Whatever they gave me before has worn off," she admitted. "Could you ask the night nurse for some painkillers? And maybe something to help me sleep?" Hermione requested plaintively.

"Of course," Draco jumped to his feet. Anything for his brave little witch. "What should I ask for?" He had no idea what was the Muggle equivalent of Dreamless Sleep.

"Two Percocet and a dozen or so Valium should do it," she replied.

"I'll be right back," he promised. She graced him with a tiny smile before returning her whole attention to Hadrian, now guzzling greedily. The baby had taken to nursing like a mermaid to water.

It took him a quarter-hour and an *Imperio*, among other spells, but Draco managed to get the pills. When he returned to the hospital room, Hadrian was asleep in the portable bassinet, pulled next to Hermione's bed, and the midwife was just leaving the room.

"Is everything fine?" he asked. He had come so close to losing her, and could not help being frightened that the curse might have some lingering effect. Dark magic cast by one of Salazar Slytherin's descendants was nothing to be trifled with.

"Perfectly fine," Hermione replied. "She just did a quick examination to confirm I'm healing as expected. She said I was very lucky to avoid a hysterectomy, but she also believes the bleeding was a one-time, freakish complication. There is no reason why I can't have more children in the future."

Draco looked at her intently, as though gauging the truth of her reassurance, before nodding once. "Good. That's *very* good." Despite his words to his parents, he had no intention of getting her pregnant again anytime soon, but he and Hermione both wanted more children eventually. He stroked her shoulder, very lightly, as though she were breakable. "Would you like something else to drink, to wash down your medicine?"

"Some hot cocoa would be nice, if you'd join me?"

"Sure," Draco agreed. As Hermione knew, he had a weakness for sweets, especially chocolate.

He went out to the pantry and began fixing two mugs using packets of brownish-grey powder and hot water before giving it up as a bad job. Stealthily, he closed the door and called for Mipsy.

"Two cups of cocoa, with whipped cream and cinnamon, if you please," he requested of the elf when she appeared. "And some Dreamless Sleep."

"Mipsy is very pleased!" she squeaked in delight, disappearing and reappearing again with two steaming, perfectly prepared mugs and a vial of purple potion. He thanked her and, using a bit of magic, transferred the drinks into hospital-issue styrofoam cups.

"Thank you, it looks delicious," Hermione said appreciatively when he returned to their room. "Would you mind terribly grabbing a creamer from the pantry?" she requested. "I like mine a bit more milky."

"No problem." The pantry was just down the hall. He was gone less than a minute, and Hermione handed him his still-steaming hot cocoa once he returned.

They sipped their drinks in a companionable silence, both admiring their now-sleeping baby, Hermione lying in bed and Draco on the hospital-issued recliner. Mipsy's hot cocoa was doing its job as a bedtime beverage. Hermione could barely keep her eyes open, and he was yawning uncontrollably, unable to keep his head up.

"Sweet dreams, love," he wished her.

She smiled back, a trifle pained, as if her medication had yet to kick in. "Same to you."

Ignorance Is Bliss (Alternate Ending)

Chapter Notes

A/N: Before you do anything drastic, like fling your phone while cursing my name, PLEASE read the author's note at the end. This is, as the chapter title indicates, an alternate ending.

August 2, 2004

It had just gone midnight when Hermione's eyelids fluttered shut and stayed that way.

With a rueful smile, Draco shook his head at her obstinacy. She was exhausted from hours of labor, massive blood loss induced by a Dark curse, and overall lack of sleep, yet it still had taken almost fifteen minutes for the dollop of Dreamless Sleep he had slipped into her hot chocolate to take effect.

He finished his own hot chocolate with a gulp. It was a touch sweet, even to his taste, but he supposed that was only to be expected with the addition of a dozen sugar pills. It was a stroke of luck, really, that the Muggle Healer had taken the time to condescendingly explain exactly why he was refusing to give Draco a dozen Valium and the effect that such an overdose would have. Otherwise, Draco would never would have known Granger was plotting something that involved drugging him into unconsciousness. He still had *Imperio'd* the Muggle and taken the pills Hermione requested - anything for his brave little princess. He left the two Percocet caplets as they were, since she clearly needed the pain relief, but he had Transfigured the Valium into harmless sugar.

Using two fingers, he gently pried one of Hermione's eyelids open. Her bright brown eyes were empty and unseeing, like a corpse. It sent a chill down his spine, how close she had come to dying, how close he had come to losing her forever. Shaking it off, he raised his wand and touched it to her temple.

"*Legilemens*." Technically, it was illegal for anyone other than an Auror to use Legilemency on someone without consent, but it was not harmful, per se. His Vow to Hermione provided no impediment. Being able to read her thoughts made it so much easier to find those that needed to be suppressed, altered, or taken away altogether. Draco wished he could have done it this way the first time he Obliviated her at the Ministry of Magic, but it would have been too risky.

At the outset, he spent several minutes examining the very elaborate revenge she had planned for him and others this afternoon, while pretending all the while she had not gotten her memories back. "Fuck, Granger. You're a ruthless little bitch, aren't you?" he asked her inert form, his lips curved in an admiring smile, before he destroyed those thoughts entirely.

Working with a surgeon's precision, Draco next moved her recovered memories of Hogwarts, the Dark Lord, and the wizarding world from the forefront of her mind to the deepest recesses of her subconscious and locked them up tight. He left Hermione's knowledge of magic - that it existed and there were spells to harness it - much closer to the surface of her mind. In the future, that should leave her much more accepting and open to the possibility of magic.

Draco then went to work on her memories from the hospital. He was surprised to see that her memories of the worst of the pain and bleeding already were fuzzy around the edges, just as Flint had predicted. He dulled them even further, deciding there was no reason to have her fearful and anxious about giving birth for the duration of her next pregnancy.

His last task was to alter her recollection of the conversations she had overheard between him and his parents that afternoon. When he was finished, she would remember that there had been a terrible scene due to his parents' snobbishness, but would have no inkling that they despised her on the basis of blood status, had connived at her death, and accepted her in his life only as a grandchild-producing concubine. He also erased her memories of Lucius's hands on her body and his threat to take Hadrian. Finally, Draco buffed up his own role - Hermione now would think that he had stood up for her against his parents, as he ought to have done.

Once finished, he cast a Healing Charm to speed her recovery. As he replaced his wand in his pocket, his fingertips brushed against a cool strand of metal, and he pulled out Hermione's charm bracelet. Draco's grey eyes narrowed in sudden anger. Cho Chang-Nott was lucky indeed that she had left wizarding Britain for parts unknown. To his mind, she had nearly killed Hermione, through her sheer, bloody-minded determination to force her to remember things that were better off forgotten.

Draco replaced the charmed platinum bracelet where it belonged, firmly fastened around Hermione's slender wrist. Tomorrow, or the day after, he would go to the goblins and commission a charm to commemorate Hadrian's birth. He rather liked the idea of using an authentic coin from the emperor's reign, but Goldnuk the goblin jeweler would know just what to suggest. Draco also would pay a visit to old Brocklehurst, who was acting as his solicitor until Theo was released from Azkaban, and have him draw up a restraining order against Cho. He certainly had grounds to allege that she was a threat to Hermione's physical and mental health.

Work done, Draco suppressed a yawn and gave the hospital's recliner a jaundiced look. As tired as he was, it still looked bloody uncomfortable. With a smirk, he cast an Extension Charm on the hospital bed, making it wide enough for two.

Draco's eyes, silvery-soft with an emotion he was only learning to own up to, rested on the perfect little baby asleep in his bassinet, lips pursed in sleep and a tiny thumb hovering by his mouth. Draco shifted his gaze to Hermione's profile. She looked tired but peaceful as she slept. His lovely, declawed lioness, who had no idea she had just given birth to the next Malfoy heir. A *pureblood* Malfoy heir, because his father was a wizard and his mother a witch, even if that knowledge had once again been Obliviated out of her.

Draco lay down beside Hermione on the still-narrow bed. He wrapped one arm around her, carefully drawing her in close, and buried his head in the crook of her neck, inhaling her

familiar smell.

He had her now, and he was never letting her go.

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Eleven years later . . .

Hermione Foy was tired. It wasn't just that she was midway through the third trimester of yet another pregnancy. It also was due to the fact that she had slept alone in a London hotel room, away from her husband, and had woken up early to prepare for a breakfast meeting with the head of a charitable foundation. Her family home in Wiltshire was not that far from London, but it was too far, as a matter of practicality, to take the train or drive into the city for such an early and important meeting.

The idea she had come up with as a graduate student - a serum that could alleviate the shortage of blood-based products for transfusion by increasing the ratio of white and red blood cells to plasma - had developed into a successful commercial product. The serum, which she had patented while still at UCL at Draco's suggestion and later trademarked as Pursang, was widely used by hospitals in the developed world and had earned her millions of pounds. However, Pursang was too expensive for most hospitals in the developing world, where higher rates of HIV and other blood-borne diseases made the shortage of blood available for transfusion all the more acute. If the foundation agreed to subsidize the serum's cost for hospitals in sub-Saharan Africa, it would result in a major contract for the pharmaceutical company she co-owned with her husband.

It was a way of doing good while doing well. While Hermione was more concerned with the former and Draco more concerned with the latter, both had pushed hard for this opportunity. Unfortunately, the philanthropist who backed the foundation had limited availability, so Draco had been forced to schedule the meeting on a Saturday morning - and their oldest son's birthday, no less. At least it was early enough that she would be home in plenty of time for Hadrian's party.

Once she was showered and dressed for the meeting, in an expensive sable-brown wrap dress that had earned its keep over six pregnancies, she ran through the notes of her presentation for the tenth time. Absently, she toyed with the charms on her ever-present platinum bracelet. While she took off her engagement ring and wedding band at night, or when she went to the gym, Hermione never took her bracelet off. Even the thought of doing so made her anxious.

The charms marked all of the important milestones in her adult life. There was a book, the first charm Draco had ever given her; a dragon and an otter from their first Christmas and Valentine's Day together; and a scroll marking her receipt of a doctorate from Oxford.

The charms dearest to her heart, however, were those representing her children. After Hadrian's difficult birth, Draco had given her two charms: a small Roman coin and a lioness with her cub, for how brave she had been. For the twins - conceived on a mini-break over Beltane when Hadrian still was an infant and while Hermione was on the mini-pill - Draco had given her a miniature platinum swan and a tiny dog with a bejeweled collar. He also had found a gem of a nanny to help Hermione manage three boys under the age of two and her

doctoral studies in biochemistry. Cecilia Black, who Hermione considered to be a veritable latter-day Mary Poppins, had been with the growing Foy family ever since.

When Hermione's older daughter was born, three years later and after her first *planned* pregnancy, Draco added a platinum eagle with a ruby and emerald rose in its beak to her collection of charms. Her youngest son, represented by a second lion charm, had been conceived five years ago on a vacation in Paris when Hermione forgot to pack her diaphragm.

She had thought she was finished having babies when her younger daughter was born. Hermione smiled as her finger touched the storm-tossed ship that so aptly represented the tempestuous toddler. But a condom had broken over their Christmas visit to her godparents in Australia. The baby she was carrying at present had been conceived as a result. Draco was delighted - he had been lobbying for another child, claiming seven was his lucky number. Hermione had to admit they made beautiful children, and certainly they could afford them, but she was *done* after this.

Now feeling much more relaxed and confident about the presentation, Hermione set aside her notes and picked up her mobile. Draco would be awake now, and possibly Hadrian as well, with the excitement of his eleventh birthday.

Her husband picked up on the second ring, clearly anticipating her call. "Good morning, lovely," he greeted her. "How're you feeling?"

They exchanged small talk about the children, who she had seen at dinner only the night before, and Draco offered a few last-minute tips for her presentation. Then she heard Hadrian come in and ask to speak with her. Draco handed over the phone so Hermione could wish their son a happy birthday.

On the other end of the line, Hadrian was unable to contain himself. "Mum! You'll never guess what came for me! It was a - "

He was cut off as Draco took the phone back. "Sorry, love," he laughed. "He's terribly excited. We'll tell you all about it tonight."

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Hadrian Foy was excited. It was his eleventh birthday, and he had been awoken by an owl tapping on his bedroom window. He was not entirely unused to Owl Post, since his grandparents used it, but he had never before received an owl with a letter addressed to him.

He tore open the parchment envelope with eager fingers.

Dear Mr. Foy,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on 1 September. A representative of the school will be at your home this morning at nine o'clock to answer any questions that you or your parents may have.

Sincerely,

Filius F. Flitwick, Deputy Headmaster

"Yeah!" Hadrian jumped up and down on his bed, pumping his fist in the air. "I got in! Now we can tell Mum!"

For as long as he could remember, Hadrian had known he was a wizard, like his dad and Grandfather, and that Grandmother was a witch, and his younger siblings all were magical, too. But his dad also had explained that his mum wasn't to know about magic, at least not until Hadrian was old enough to go away to school. His dad had told him, very seriously, that it was his job as the oldest child to help keep that secret. It seemed like a stupid rule, but a lot of adult rules were like that.

Hadrian raced into his parents' bedroom. There was no need to knock, since his mum was in London, so there was no risk of surprising his parents in the middle of something embarrassing. His dad was already dressed, with his blond hair still damp from the shower. He was talking on the phone, but greeted Hadrian with a congratulatory clap on the shoulder when he saw the parchment clutched in the boy's hand.

"Can I talk to Mum, please?" Hadrian knew it was his mum on the other end, because his dad never smiled like that for anyone else.

"Hermione, the birthday boy would like a word," his dad said, handing over the phone.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart!" his mother said. "I wish I were there."

"It's okay, Mum," Hadrian reassured her. She always felt guilty when work took her away from home for even a night. "You'll be home in time for cake, right?"

"Of course! I'll be back in plenty of time, I promise. Have you opened any presents yet?" she asked.

"Mum! You'll never guess what came for me! It was a - "

His dad snatched the receiver away and held his finger up to his lips in the universal sign for silence. Hadrian pouted, just a bit, as his parents wrapped up their call. His dad shook his head at him after he had rung off, but he was smiling. "I know you can't wait to tell your mum you're a wizard, but you can't break that kind of news over the phone."

Hadrian nodded in reluctant agreement. "Alright, Dad."

"We'll tell her together, tonight. Now run along and get dressed, because we've got a busy day ahead of us," his dad said. "One of your professors will be along soon, and then you and I are going to do some shopping in Diagon Alley before your party."

The two blonds, father and son, exchanged matching smirks of anticipation.

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Minerva McGonagall was nervous. For the first time in sixteen years, she was going to see her favorite pupil - the brightest witch she ever had taught. And she was going to see how Hermione was faring without her magic, living as a mere Muggle. The sheer waste of such potential saddened her, but that was the law.

The Muggleborn Repatriation Commission had softened its stance in some respects since Mandrake Brocklehurst had replaced Dolores Umbridge more than a decade ago. The fact of a wizard's or witch's Muggle birth now was treated as a cultural deficiency, one that could be overcome with education and effort, rather than an inherent, blood-based flaw. Hogwarts had introduced a mandatory curriculum in wizarding customs for Muggleborn students, while the Ministry sponsored a program where these students were encouraged to stay in the wizarding world with a foster family for their summer holidays. Upon graduation from Hogwarts, those students were given a choice: they could be Obliviated and return to their families in the Muggle world, or they could cut all ties and assume full citizenship as a witch or wizard. In a decade, only one Muggleborn student had chosen to lose his memories and live as a Muggle.

However, nothing had been done to bring back the Lost Ones, as Minerva thought of the forty-one witches and wizards who had been Obliviated and banished to the Muggle world back in 1999. A few had passed through the Veil from old age, but most were alive and well, living ordinary Muggle lives - at least according to the Death Eaters responsible for them.

Minerva's already thin lips narrowed further in displeasure. As worthless as the Order of the Phoenix's monitoring of the exiled Muggleborns had been, she still preferred it to the Ministry-mandated quarterly reports by Death Eaters. The thought of Draco Malfoy periodically spying on Hermione Granger, or the ogreish Marcus Flint doing the same to Katie Bell, made Minerva's skin crawl. But that, too, was a policy ushered in by Brocklehurst when he took over the Commission.

Kingsley Shacklebolt shared the Death Eaters' reports with the Order on a clandestine basis. Malfoy's curt reports were rarely more than three words, with "Granger is well," being the most common variant, followed by "Granger is pregnant." Minerva had noticed that the latter type of report was followed, with clockwork-like regularity, by the appearance of a new member of the Foy family on the Hogwarts scroll.

From the birth of the very first Foy child - Hadrian Harry, in 2004 - Minerva had suspected that Hermione might be the mother, even though the Hogwarts scroll did not list the parents' names. She hoped the middle name meant that Hermione still remembered a little bit about her martyred best friend. Her suspicion had only been reinforced by the names of the other Foy children as they were added to the scroll: twins Alfred Sirius and Cygnus George early in 2006, Rosalind Aquila in 2009, Severus Leo in 2011, and Miranda Helen in 2014.

To Minerva, it was apparent that Hermione remembered enough to name her sons after Order members - the twins after Fred and George Weasley! - while her daughters had names from Shakespeare like Hermione's own. The headmistress was intrigued, too, that two of Hermione's children had names connected to Hogwarts' Houses. Leo was an obvious choice for the former Gryffindor girl to choose for her youngest son, while Minerva supposed that the older daughter's middle name, after the eagle constellation, was a nod to Hermione's

Ravenclaw friends. Indeed, her choice of children's names made Minerva wonder just how much Hermione remembered.

Even though Filius was responsible for the visits with newly-admitted Muggleborn students these days, Minerva had exercised her prerogative as headmistress and insisted on meeting with the Foys herself. As she prowled through the wealthy Wiltshire village of Stepford-on-Avon in her Animagus form, searching for the family's home, Minerva had to admit that she was shaking with nerves, even in her normally insouciant cat form.

She peered up at a large but still charming half-timbered house on the outskirts of the village, verifying that this was the correct address. In cat form, it took her several minutes to amble across the well-kept grounds to some convenient shrubbery. There, Minerva transformed back into a formidable old lady, a fitting representative for Hogwarts. She brushed off her severe black dress, removing any dust or cat hair acquired in her tabby form, and tucked a copy of *Hogwarts: A History* under one arm. The Board of Governors provided a copy to every newly-admitted Muggleborn child, but Minerva hoped that Hermione would read it, too.

Thus prepared, she walked briskly up the flagged stone path leading to the front of the house and knocked sharply on the polished oak of the front door. It was precisely nine o'clock.

The door opened, revealing a tall, blond man with aristocratic features. "May I help you?" he drawled.

Minerva began her standard speech. "Good morning. My name is Minerva McGonagall and I am a professor and headmistress at the Hogwarts School of - "

"Professor McGonagall. It's a pleasure to see you again," the man smoothly interrupted her. "You don't look a day older than when I saw you at the Battle of Hogwarts, dueling the Dark Lord himself."

Minerva took her first real look at the man, who she had assumed was Hermione Granger's husband, Mr. Foy. Mouth agape, she forcefully reminded herself of the dangers of drawing assumptions.

"Draco Malfoy?" she asked, shocked.

"The one and only," he smirked, holding the door open. "Please come in. I know my son is very eager to meet you and ask all about Hogwarts."

(x) (x) (x)

Draco Malfoy was amused. He suspected that Minerva McGonagall wanted nothing more than to transform into her Animagus form and scratch his eyes out, yowling in rage, but Hadrian's presence constrained her to cold politeness.

When he ushered the old cat into the study, she spent several minutes studying the photographs on the mantel, dominated by a formal family portrait taken last Yule. In the picture, Hermione was seated on a settee, the only brunette in a family of blonds. She was

wearing a dark green velvet dress, one that Draco loved, with baby Miranda in her lap and Sev - not squirming for once - snuggled against her side. Rosie was seated primly next to her youngest brother, while Draco and the three older boys were standing proudly behind. Dennis Creevey had snapped the photograph at a telling moment when Draco, still looking at the camera, had leaned forward to stroke one of his wife's errant curls off her neck.

"You have a beautiful family," McGonagall observed bitterly. Draco suspected she would prefer to chew glass rather than compliment him, but she was too honest a woman to deny the truth.

"Thank you," he said in a bland voice. "Hermione and I have been very fortunate. Please, have a seat." Draco waved her into one of a pair of leather armchairs and took the other for himself, while Hadrian perched on an ottoman. "I realize it's early, but would you care for a drink? I have some aged Macallan," he added temptingly.

The Scot in the headmistress visibly wavered, but her Presbyterian rectitude won out. "No thank you, Mr. Malfoy," she refused crisply.

"As you will," he shrugged.

"I am surprise - surprised indeed - at some of the names you chose for your children," McGonagall commented. "Harry? Fred and George? *Leo*?"

"Compromise is at the heart of any successful marriage," Draco said piously. Really, after giving in and agreeing to name his firstborn after Harry Potter, everything else paled in comparison.

"And the last name?" she asked, giving him a hard look. "Why are your children listed as Foys rather than Malfoys on the Hogwarts scroll?"

"I imagine because that's the name that appears on their birth certificates. They all were born in Muggle hospitals, and Foy is the name I use in the Muggle world," Draco explained. "I'm a faithful husband, don't you know? The children are legitimate Malfoys and will go by that name when they come of age in the wizarding world, if they so choose." Since Lucius and Narcissa had conditioned each child's substantial trust fund on assuming Malfoy as a surname, he suspected it would be an easy choice.

McGonagall nodded, clearly relieved that her favorite student had not been living in sin with a Death Eater all these years. "I was looking forward to seeing your wife today. Very much so," the old witch said, with naked honesty. With Hadrian listening intently and the various laws still in effect, McGonagall was constrained in what she could say. She could not reveal, for instance, that she knew Hermione and indeed had been her teacher and head of House at Hogwarts.

"I'm afraid she has a very important meeting in London this morning. It couldn't be scheduled at any other time," Draco lied, glibly. He had actually proposed the date and time to the charitable foundation in order to ensure Hermione was out of the house when Hadrian's letter and a Hogwarts professor arrived.

"I should like to speak with her about Hadrian's admission to Hogwarts and his powers as a wizard. It is school policy," McGonagall said firmly.

"It is school policy for the parents of Muggleborns. It has no applicability to my family's situation," Draco replied, even more adamant. "You can trust me to break the news to Hermione gently." He smirked. "Particularly since she's expecting our latest little wizard next month."

McGonagall's face darkened. "I am surprised that you and your wife elected to have so many children. I seem to recall you incessantly making fun of the Weasleys for breeding like rodents because they had seven children."

"Unlike the impoverished Weasel clan, Hermione and I could easily afford twice as many children as we have," Draco said. "And Muggle birth control is so unreliable."

McGonagall blanched at the idea of her Gryffindor princess as the mother to a dozen or more children. Draco took mercy on the old hag. "But we're done after this baby," he added. "Particularly now that I'll be able to cast contraceptive charms."

"Ugh. Dad, that's too much information," Hadrian grimaced.

"You could have told Hermione you were a wizard as soon as you were married," McGonagall pointed out. "It would have been perfectly legal."

"Do you think she would be happy knowing there was magic in the world and she couldn't do it? Do you think she would want to live at Malfoy Manor? Why would I bring Hermione into a world where half the population despises her for who is, while the other half would hate her for who she married?" he demanded. "Of course I've put off telling her as long as I feasibly could."

"I still should like to speak with Hermione," McGonagall insisted.

"I'm certain you'll see her in the future, at parents' days and such," Draco said. "But she'll take the news that there is magic in the world much better if I'm the one to tell her, rather than a virtual stranger."

The headmistress visibly deflated at his refusal. "I'll have to inform the Ministry about this," she warned, in a last-ditch effort.

"Go right ahead. I've done nothing wrong. You should be pleased that Hermione is with me rather than some Muggle," he spat. "Our children will never have to choose between their mother and their magic. Were you planning to tell her about that policy?"

He looked her in the eyes and then drew back, startled. "You were going to tell her? You know you could lose your position for that."

McGonagall closed her eyes, looking tired. "I was," she admitted. "I was going to suggest that she send her children to Beauxbatons. Hermione is a special case."

Draco looked thoughtful. Perhaps McGonagall could be won over. "Well, since you're here, you might as well answer Hadrian's innumerable questions about Hogwarts. He takes after his mother with respect to his inquisitiveness."

McGonagall glared at him and his son in turn. She was naturally predisposed to hate any Malfoy, and Hadrian - except for his dark eyes - was the spitting image of Draco at age eleven. But when he opened his mouth, it was clear he was his mother's son as well.

"Excuse me, Professor?" Hadrian asked politely, if a touch eagerly. "I was wondering if . . ."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Foy, but first year students are not allowed broomsticks," she interrupted. "No exceptions."

"Unless you're Harry Potter," Draco muttered under his breath. Even after all these years, the special treatment meted out to the Chosen One still rankled.

"I understand, Professor," Hadrian said, a touch taken aback at her forbidding tone. "The letter was clear on that. What I wanted to know is whether there's a supplemental reading list? Or should I just start reading the second year textbooks once I've gotten through the first year curriculum?"

McGonagall gave him a look of reassessment, then a sad smile. "You're the first student to ask me that in nearly twenty-five years. I'll Owl you a list, with any new additions."

After a quarter-hour of enthusiastic questioning about supplemental reading, the first year curriculum, and the Sorting process, it was clear she had no idea what to make of Hadrian, but was slowly thawing towards him. Draco felt a sudden, surprising twitch of respect for the old witch. Unlike Professor Snape, who had a fixed hatred for Harry Potter because of his father, McGonagall seemed willing to overlook Hadrian's resemblance to him.

"But how does it *know* which House is best?" Hadrian queried anxiously.

"The most comprehensive account of the Sorting Hat's function can be found in *Hogwarts: A History*," she answered his latest question with surprising patience.

"Dad, can you add it to the shopping list for this afternoon?" Hadrian requested. "Please?"

"Actually, I've brought a copy with me," McGonagall offered. "It's the abridged version that we give to Muggleborn students and their families. If you would like it . . ." she trailed off awkwardly.

"Abridged? To gloss over the wizarding world's recent ugly history, I presume?" Draco smiled slowly and stretched out his hand to take the book. "As much as Hadrian will enjoy it, I expect my wife will enjoy it even more."

(x) (x) (x)

After the last party guest had left and Mrs. Black shepherded the younger children upstairs to get them ready for bed, Hermione gave her husband and eldest son a knowing look. "What's going on? I can tell you two have been bursting to tell me something ever since I got home."

After a quick glance at Draco, Hadrian answered. "I got a letter of admission from Dad's old school."

"Harrow? Oh, Hadrian, that's wonderful!" Hermione swooped up her not-so-little boy in a hug. In a year or so, he would be taller than she was.

Draco drew her over to kitchen table and sat her down in a chair. He stood behind her, keeping his hands on her shoulders in a comforting gesture. "Not Harrow. I went to a school called Hogwarts."

Hadrian excitedly shoved a piece of parchment in front of her. "Here's my letter, Mum!"

"School of witchcraft and wizardry?" she read, incredulous. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"It's not a joke," Hadrian said, looking mildly hurt. "I've got a wand and spellbooks and everything!" He pulled a wooden stick from his pocket, the polish already marred by a boy's sticky fingerprints. "Look, Mum! It's hawthorn, with a heartstring from a real dragon at its core. The wandmaker - he was a really strange old man! - said it was a paradoxical wand, equally capable of healing and cursing."

Hermione turned around to glare at Draco. "This is a very elaborate prank, even for you."

"It's not a joke or a prank," Draco said, looking her straight in the eye. "I'm a wizard, and so are all of the boys. Rosie and Miranda are witches."

She looked at him in silence, brown eyes wide and thoughtful. "And your parents?" Hermione asked, jaw suddenly tight. "Is your father a wizard and your mother a -"

"A witch, yes," Draco confirmed.

"That comes as no surprise," Hermione muttered. "Is that why they've always despised me?"

Draco gave her a warning look, his eyes darting in Hadrian's direction. For the children's sake, they tried to conceal the mutual loathing that existed between her and his parents. "You know my mother's improved over the years. She truly is grateful for her grandchildren."

Hermione sniffed. "She's tolerable for a holiday visit every six months or so," she conceded. Due to the general utility of Polyjuice potion, she had no idea that indispensable and beloved governess Cissy Black and her frosty mother-in-law were one and the same.

"You're being surprisingly accepting about this," he observed. "Marcus told me that Katie fainted when he told her he was a wizard."

"And when she came to, she probably smacked him," Hermione grinned, despite her shock. Katie's text message from earlier in the day, wishing Hadrian a happy birthday and offering to listen if Hermione needed to vent, suddenly made a great deal of sense. Katie was a true friend.

"She did," Draco replied. "I'm glad you're not that upset."

"Well, it makes sense, in an odd sort of way," Hermione said slowly, rationalizing it to herself. She was a scientist, and she would accept anything was possible so long as it could be empirically proven. "I mean, I've never believed that the house was haunted or that I'm prone to hallucination, so magic does provide a logical explanation for all of the flying stuffed animals and other things I've seen the children do over the years."

Her husband nodded, smiling. "That's what I hoped you would say."

"I would like to see some additional proof," she requested. "Can you perform some magic for me? Something real, not a conjuror's trick."

"Hadrian, would you please show your mother what I taught you this afternoon?" Draco asked.

"Sure, Dad!" Hadrian took one of the eleven discarded candles from his birthday cake and placed it front of him on the table. Pointing his wand at the green candle, he flicked it upwards. "*Wingardium Leviosa*."

Nothing happened.

Hermione's eyebrows knit together. "Try it again, Hadrian. It's Wing-gar-dium Levi-oh-sa." As she spoke, she flicked her finger in imitation of her son's wand movement, and the candle rose slowly above the table.

"Whoa, Mum!" Hadrian breathed, in awe. "That's wicked!"

"That's magic," Draco amended. "Wandless magic."

"I'm a witch, too?" Hermione asked, looking more shocked than ever.

Draco shrugged. "Clearly, you have latent magic. I've always thought that was the case, with how powerful all of the children are. Here, try it again with my wand." He passed her a length of hawthorn, darker in finish than Hadrian's wand and perfectly polished and maintained.

"*Wingardium Leviosa*." With the wand, the candle virtually flew off the table, and she was able to direct its flight around the kitchen. Cheekily, she brought it to land tucked behind her husband's ear. Draco grinned and kissed her soundly, ignoring Hadrian's disgusted complaints about his parents' unseemly display of affection.

"Can I get one of my own?" Hermione asked as she returned Draco's wand to him. "At the same shop where you took Hadrian?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, love, but Ollivander would not be permitted to sell a wand to you. You're not a Hogwarts student and you weren't born to a wizarding family. But can have free use of my wand anytime you wish," Draco offered, waggling his eyebrows.

Hermione blushed at the innuendo, furiously wishing she had managed to get over that habit after more than a decade of marriage, with six children to show for it. But Draco still enjoyed teasing her after all this time, probably because he knew he would get a reaction.

"Eew, gross," Hadrian commented on their byplay. "Knock it off, Dad."

Draco smirked and ruffled his son's blond hair. "Anything you say, sprog."

"What can you do with a wand?" Hermione asked her husband in a severe tone, attempting to head off any suggestive response.

"Virtually anything you ask me to." He smirked and dodged her elbow to the ribs. "In all seriousness, my love, I can do just about anything, short of bringing the dead back to life, turning lead into gold, or predicting the future," Draco said, with no indication he was bragging.

"Can you restore my memories?" Hermione asked.

"If you lost your memories as a result of magic, they can only be restored by the one who cast the spell," he said, looking regretful.

"Oh," she said, disappointed.

"Don't be sad, Mum," urged Hadrian. "You can still learn magic. I bet Dad would be happy to teach you."

"I would," Draco said. "Now, speaking of learning magic, why don't you try again to levitate that candle, now that your mum's shown you how it's done."

Hadrian grinned and picked up his wand. This time, the spell worked.

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With impeccable timing, the Foy family arrived at King's Cross station on the morning of September first twenty minutes before the Hogwarts Express was due to depart. Hermione was a touch nervous they had cut it so close, but Draco did not want to linger on Platform 9 and 3/4 for too long. He touched a reassuring hand to the small of her back. "It will be fine, lovely," he whispered.

"It's hard sending Hadrian off to school. How did your mother manage it all those years?" she whispered back.

"She just did, and I was her one and only." Draco smirked, knowing Hermione never backed down from a challenge. "She never cried when seeing me off, either."

His wife gave a derisive sniff, but Draco knew he had just guaranteed there would be no tears. These days, he hated seeing Hermione cry.

"How does this work?" Hermione asked skeptically when they reached the stretch of blank wall between Platform 9 and Platform 10.

"Hadrian, Fred, and Cyg, you three walk towards the wall. Keep walking," Draco directed. The three oldest boys, along with Hadrian's trunk and rucksack, disappeared into the wall as

Hermione and the younger children stared. "Rosie, you can go through with Miranda next. We'll be right there."

His responsible eldest daughter, a miniature Hermione at age six except for the honey color of her curls, nodded and pushed the toddler, restrained in her pram, through the barrier.

Then Draco hefted Sev in his arms and offered a hand to his wife. "Ready, Hermione?"

She gripped it resolutely. "We don't want to keep the children waiting on the other side."

The platform was crowded on the other side of the magical wall, with the scarlet Hogwarts Express puffing in preparation for departure as students streamed on board. Children still were a scarce commodity in the wizarding world. As Draco expected, their handsome brood, with hair ranging from platinum to gold, already had drawn a fair number of eyes. The expressions of the watching adults ranged from admiring to curious to envious, but that shifted to something darker when he and Hermione arrived. The whispers, mostly hostile, began as they walked towards the train and grew steadily louder.

" . . . Malfoy's brats!"

"Look at 'er! Bold as brass for a Mudblood . . . "

" . . . easy to see what she's been doing in the Muggle world. Spreading her legs for a Death Eater . . . "

"I can't believe him . . . "

" . . . six kids, and another on the way."

"Death Eater's whore!"

Draco drew his wand and the hecklers quieted. He scanned the platform, looking for possible threats and allies. Flint, with Katie and their three children in tow, began shoving his way through the crowd towards him, ready to help if needed. Further down the platform, Theo waved apologetically. He would be unable to make it through the press of people, even if Cho would allow him. The restraining order Draco had placed on Cho still was in effect, so she also could not come any closer to Hermione.

Ginny Thomas looked furious, but her Auror husband had a tight grip on her wand arm. Draco was relieved - he did not fancy having bats fly out of his nose. Her brother George was red-faced and shouting, but his sensible wife and the eldest Weasel brother were holding him back. Draco made a mental note to warn Hadrian about the Weaselette's twins, who would be in his year. If they were anything like their mother, they would be trouble.

A few other faces looked vaguely familiar, but none of them had been close friends or enemies of his. Pansy's little girl wouldn't start until next year - another little minx to warn Hadrian and the twins about - along with Tori and Lockhart's spawn and the little Creevey bastard Daphne Greengrass had pawned off on her unsuspecting husband. As for Shackbolt, the conniving and still popular Minister of Magic used his clout to send his two children to

Hogwarts by secure Floo connection, allowing him and his wife to astutely sidestep lingering prejudice against Muggles and Muggleborns.

Draco felt his wife's fingertips brush against his and looked over. Hermione was standing defiantly next to him, her chin up and cheeks flushed. She had read enough, and he had told her enough, so that she was not surprised by the hostile reception to their family. The younger children were oblivious to the undercurrents on the train platform, but Rosie looked uneasy, while the three oldest boys were angry on their mother's behalf. Draco placed one hand between Hermione's shoulders and slid it slowly down to the small of her back, in an unmistakable and intimate gesture of support. "Ignore them," he advised. "They're just envious."

She tipped her face up to his, with a tiny smirk. "Envy is such an ugly, small-minded emotion. I suppose it's only to be expected among people of the same sort." Hermione made sure her voice carried and Draco smirked back. In her forest-green cashmere sweater dress and little black half-boots, she looked - and could act - every inch the perfect pureblood wife.

He also suspected that she had her vinewood wand, the one he had "found" for her at the Manor, up her sleeve and ready to use if required. With only a month of tutoring, Hermione's magic was coming along nicely. Draco looked forward to teaching her how to duel in earnest once the baby was born. Perhaps he would have the old stables on their property converted to a *sallé*, with a potions lab on the upper floor.

Marcus and his family made his way to their side, with Katie liberally throwing elbows. "Finally, you're here!" Flint exclaimed. "Peter didn't want to board without Hadrian."

Katie glared at the people around them, causing more than a few to step back or look away. "When Isabelle started at Hogwarts, I felt like I was an animal in a zoo, with how they goggled!" she related to Hermione. "No manners at all," she added loudly.

"What else can you expect from such an insular people?" Hermione asked scornfully, making sure she was overheard.

Draco and Marcus exchanged mutually sympathetic glances at the fighting words from their feisty Gryffindor witches. Both kept their hands on their wands, just in case.

"Fred and Cyg, you two help your brother and Peter with their trunks," Draco directed. "But I want you back here in five minutes, understand? No hitching a ride to Scotland."

"Got it, Dad!" the twin troublemakers chorused, grabbing one of the trunks. After final hugs and kisses from their respective parents, Hadrian and dark-haired Peter followed, hefting the other trunk between them.

"It's awful saying goodbye, isn't it?" Katie said, patting Hermione's arm with a sympathetic hand.

Draco stared at her wedding band, featuring a pattern of diamonds, emeralds, and rubies, with a mix of fascination and horror. Flint's taste in jewelry had not improved with age. A few years back, he had whisked Katie away on a vacation to Las Vegas, where they had gotten

"married" in a drive-through chapel. Draco was fairly certain that bigamy was illegal in Muggle America and the marriage was a sham, but Marcus shrugged it off. Katie was happy, and he would leave the legalities to solicitors like Theo.

"The Christmas hols will be here before you know it, and you'll still have five at home - six again in a few weeks!" Katie consoled her friend. "I'm down to just one," she sighed, hugging her younger daughter Lucy tight.

"We could always try for another," Marcus suggested with a leer.

"You wish! Unless there's some spell that lets you carry the baby and go through labor," Katie shot back.

Hermione smiled at that, and her smile widened when Hadrian stuck his head out of the train window. "Bye, Mum! I'll miss you!" he yelled, over the whistle warning the train was about to depart. "You too, Dad!

The scarlet steam engine began to chug slowly out of the station, and Draco nodded his permission for Cyg, Fred and Rosie to run alongside, waving to their big brother. He held onto Sev's hand, not trusting the four-year-old to keep out of trouble on the crowded platform. When the three older children returned, slightly out of breath and laughing, the twins each took one of Sev's hands, swinging him between them as they walked towards the exit. Rosie, without being asked, pushed the pram with her younger sister.

That freed Hermione to take his hand. Gently, he stroked the inside of her wrist, underneath the charm bracelet that she never took off. After twelve years, Draco knew Hermione loved him and trusted him with all her heart. Probably she would continue to do so even without her charmed jewelry, but he saw no reason to take the risk.

Hermione swept the platform with one last glance and then looked at him with imploring brown eyes. "I don't want to be here anymore," she shivered, squeezing his fingers. "Please, Draco - can we go home?"

A/N: This is an ALTERNATE ending, and not my preferred one. When I first came up with the idea for this story, this ending is what occurred to me. I didn't like it conceptually (and I still don't), because it rewards Draco for truly reprehensible behavior. Still, this alternate ending was a plot bunny that would not die. It's a vicious little thing, like Monty Python's Killer Rabbit in the Holy Grail - so I've loosed it on all of you! Chapters 47-48 are my preferred ending, where Hermione gets to implement the revenge that Draco Obliviated from her mind in this ending.

What Goes Around, Comes Around

Chapter Notes

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

August 1-2, 2004

Throughout the afternoon and into the evening, Hermione had the surreal experience of Draco Malfoy waiting on her, hand and foot. Her recently restored memories from more than five years ago were fresh and raw in her mind, making the affectionate little touches, the endearments, and the way he practically fell over himself to make sure she had everything she needed all the more disconcerting. Hermione felt as though she had fallen down a rabbit hole and found herself in some alternate reality, and even found herself surreptitiously checking his forearm to see if this kinder, gentler Malfoy had the Dark Mark. He did.

Of course, Malfoy still was a manipulative bastard, one who would not hesitate to use magic on her without her consent if it served his purposes. Hermione tolerated the grape juice spiked with Blood Replenishing Potion only because she desperately needed it. She was still weak as a kitten from blood loss. Never in her life had she been in a more vulnerable position, trapped in a small room with a hovering Death Eater and without her wand or even the physical strength to do much more than haltingly walk to the loo. But that did not stop her active mind from plotting. As she rested and napped, Hermione remembered more, and the competing, jumbled sets of memories in her head began to arrange themselves into a cohesive whole. A plan began to form in her mind - not revenge, but retribution.

Watching Malfoy fumble through his first attempts to care for a baby brought some comic relief, though Hermione's laughter had a semi-hysterical tinge because it was *their* baby. She still couldn't quite wrap her mind around how that had happened. Oh, she knew how babies were made, and could remember now that she and Malfoy had a rather active and creative sex life. Some of what she had previously classified as harmless kinks, like her boyfriend's penchant for light bondage and otherwise dominating her in bed, took on a much more sinister cast in light of their shared history. Hermione was sickened at the way she unwittingly had played along with his Mudblood fantasies.

She still was finding it hard to believe that she had tumbled into bed with him so readily. But her own memories mocked her - she had been just as susceptible to Malfoy's charms as Narcissa had predicted. Hermione's instincts had not failed her, but she had allowed them to be overridden by logic, attraction, and the empirical evidence of Malcolm Foy's behavior as a first-class boyfriend, lover, and now fiancé. He really had been too good to be true.

Several troubling facts predominated in her mind. First, she had no doubt that Malfoy had deliberately sought her out in the Muggle world for the purpose of impregnating her with his heir, because she was - to use Lucius's degrading phrase - good breeding stock. Even though she had just nearly died giving birth to Hadrian, Malfoy apparently intended to get her pregnant again as soon as her body healed. Hermione knew, with chilling clarity, what her life would be like if she stayed with Malfoy. She would be a cosseted mare, ridden frequently for pleasure and put to stud as often as her body could stand it.

Second, Malfoy was married, or had been. Hermione remembered his wedding to Astoria Greengrass back in 1999, shortly before her own Obliviation. Based on the *Witch Weekly* article Malfoy had brushed off as an April Fool's joke, he still had been married to Astoria in January 2004. It stung Hermione - more than it should - that Malfoy had been unfaithful. She could only assume that he had divorced Astoria by June, when Kingsley Shacklebolt had presided over her handfasting to Malfoy. Kingsley would not blink at facilitating bigamy if it fostered his political agenda, but she was certain that a Blood Bond could not take place if there were prior impediments.

Third, and worst of all, Malfoy had exploited his magic - and her lack of recollection about magic - to take incessant advantage of her. The beautiful charm bracelet he had gifted her with back in September, mere weeks after they had "met" in the Muggle world, glittered with enchantments. Without a wand, Hermione could not tell their exact nature, but she suspected some type of mind control - perhaps a charm to lower inhibitions or incite lust. She had been able to use the intravenous port still in her hand as a reason to avoid putting on the bracelet, but that excuse would only be good for another day.

Malfoy also had used his magic against those around her, beginning with her ex-boyfriend Andy and the voice in his head - a textbook case of the Imperius Curse. She suspected that Malfoy had done something nasty to Seamus in Dublin, and to Dean after he visited their flat, and could only hope it was nothing irreparable in either case. Angelina had not been permanently harmed at the christening - Katie had mentioned recently that her friend Angie's pregnancy was going well and she was having a girl - but she *had* been neutralized as a threat to Draco's plans.

Hermione now recognized that Cho had been struggling against a curse for months, probably some variant on a babbling hex. In hindsight, she admired the Ravenclaw's dogged efforts to work around whatever compulsion Malfoy had placed upon her. She wished Cho still were here, so she could acknowledge what her friend had done for her, but Hermione could understand why she had left the country. Flight was a logical response, and Cho was an intelligent, pragmatic Ravenclaw to the core. Hermione, however, was a Gryffindor, and had decided to stay and fight. The Ministry's law was a travesty, and she would do what little she could to right that wrong.

Possibly the worst part of this lull before the storm was when Malfoy told her he loved her. Hermione was not a Legilemens, as he was reputed to be, but there was no doubt in her mind that he was sincere. Her more recent memories informed her that an overt avowal of his feelings was a rarity - he preferred to express affection physically, or through expensive presents. All that she could do when Malfoy said those three little words was to hastily cast her eyes downward, looking at Hadrian's perfect miniature features so that Malfoy could not read her thoughts, and hope that he mistook the flush on her cheeks for some emotion other than anger.

"Do you?" she asked, in the sweetest voice she could manage. "I only know I've felt the same way about you for a long time." Since the age of thirteen, when she had decided he was a bigoted, loathsome ferret, but one who was too cowardly to be truly evil.

A few minutes later, she began sniffing, and then tears began to fall. Before she knew it, Malfoy was holding her as she cried all over his shirt. "What's wrong, Hermione?" he asked with real concern.

"I'm just feeling overwhelmed," she managed to get out. She was sobbing because their entire relationship and much of her life for the last eleven months had been a tissue of lies, one that had now been shredded. Malfoy, however, was the last person she could confide that in.

"Shhh, it's okay," he murmured against her hair. "You're going to be a great mum, and I'll be here to help you with anything you need."

That only made her cry harder. His arms tightened around her and Hermione felt even worse, because his embrace felt so comforting. Eventually her sobs subsided into watery hiccups and Malfoy let her go.

"Better now?" he asked sympathetically. She nodded, not trusting her voice to lie. He took off his tear-stained shirt and replaced it with a clean, dry one from his overnight bag, utterly unselfconscious about stripping in front of her. She tried to ignore his bare, leanly muscled torso, but there was no denying that Malfoy as an adult was attractive, very much so.

Hermione felt much more awkward about exposing herself when Hadrian woke and needed to nurse again. She was grateful that the baby was a quick learner and latched on immediately, covering her breast. Afterwards, Malfoy walked the baby around the room, humming to him until Hadrian fell asleep. Hermione felt tears pricking at her eyelids again, but held them back before he could notice she was crying again.

She felt better after dinner, stronger both physically and emotionally, and ready to begin implementing her plan. She winced as Malfoy handed over Hadrian, awake and eager for his third feeding.

An alarmed expression flashed across Malfoy's face. "Are you in pain?"

Hermione admitted she was, not overplaying it, and asked him to get two Percocet and enough Valium to tranquilize a rhinoceros. She hid a smile as Malfoy trotted off in search of her pills. This was almost too easy.

The midwife came into the hospital room several minutes later and conducted a quick examination as Hadrian nursed. "I don't know what happened," the woman candidly admitted. "There is nothing that I can pinpoint as having caused you to hemorrhage."

"Will it happen again?" Hermione asked. Of course Muggle Healers would be at a loss to explain a Dark curse. "Was there any permanent damage?"

"No, you're healing quite quickly," the midwife shook her head in response to both questions. "My hope is that this was a one-time, freakish complication that won't occur in any future pregnancies."

"I hope so, too," Hermione agreed with determination. A freakish complication was a fair description for a Malfoy family curse which, from the snippets of conversation she had

overheard, Narcissa and Lucius both expected to kill her. Since Hermione had no intention of having children with Malfoy in the future, she should be able to avoid the curse if, years in the future, she decided to have another child or children with some nice Muggle man.

"Would you like me to put him in his bassinet?" the midwife asked about Hadrian, who was nearly asleep at Hermione's breast.

"Please," Hermione requested. She thought she was recovered enough to lift the baby, but she was not so foolish as to turn down help when it was offered.

As the midwife exited, Malfoy entered the hospital room, pills in hand. He inquired after Hermione's well-being with a concern that would have been touching, if it hadn't been keyed to her ability to bear him more children in the future. When he stroked her shoulder, she leaned into his touch rather than pulling away, trying to allay any suspicion. He then agreeably went to fetch some hot cocoa at her request, leaving Hermione alone to crush the Valium into powder.

Malfoy returned in short order with two styrofoam cups of elf-made hot cocoa. The whipped cream and cinnamon were dead giveaways. He handed her one of the cups and set the other on the table next to her bed.

"Would you mind terribly grabbing a creamer from the pantry?" she asked.

"No problem," Malfoy agreed, leaving to fetch her creamer. Hermione sniffed the rich, chocolate smell appreciatively, but frowned as her pregnancy-sensitive nose caught a whiff of valerian.

Somehow, she was not entirely surprised that Malfoy would try to drug her with Dreamless Sleep. The whipped cream on her drink was sprinkled much more generously with cinnamon, both because she liked it and probably so Malfoy could tell the drinks apart. Hermione knew she would have one chance to get this wandless Switching Spell right. She said the incantation with a soft intensity, and watched in satisfaction as the whipped cream from her hot cocoa and the whipped cream from Malfoy's cup rose up into the air and swapped positions. Then she added the half of the crushed Valium to his cup, the one with less cinnamon, which now held the hot cocoa laced with Dreamless Sleep. She wanted him unconscious, not dead.

Malfoy returned moments later, and she handed him his drugged hot cocoa with a smile. After that, it was a waiting game. Even without ingesting Dreamless Sleep, Hermione was so exhausted that it was a struggle to keep her eyes open. She tried counting even numbers backwards, reciting potions ingredients in her mind, and even mentally replaying Quidditch matches she had watched.

Malfoy wishing her sweet dreams and calling her "love," helped her stay awake, as the endearment sent anger flooding through her veins. She focused on remembering all of Voldemort's victims and, none too soon, Malfoy's silver eyes finally dropped shut, just after midnight. Hermione counted to two hundred to be safe, before tottering across the room. Holding her breath, half-expecting him to wake and grab her wrist, Hermione carefully drew his hawthorn wand from his left trouser pocket.

Once the wand was in hand, she smirked in triumph before sending Malfoy into a deeper sleep and casting the first of several healing charms on herself. The part of her plan that depended on luck - and Malfoy's cooperation - had been accomplished. Now that Hermione had a wand in hand, everything else was a matter of skill. And, if her memory served, she was a highly skilled witch.

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By the time dawn had arrived, Hermione was swaying on her feet with exhaustion, but also brimming with satisfaction at what she had accomplished and set into motion.

In the hours since midnight, she had retrieved the mirrored compact Ginny gave her and a few other essentials - like her passport and a baby carrier - from the flat she shared with Malfoy. After contacting Ginny by mirror and arranging a rendezvous, Hermione had used her mobile to contact Dennis, Justin, and the Gryffindor girl she had Obliviated.

The three of them had met her at an all-night café on Tottenham Court Road, the same one where she had fought off Death Eaters with Harry and Ron. It seemed fitting, and Hermione's restored memories made her feel nostalgic. After hours of explanation and demonstration to prove to them that magic existed, they were believers. Dennis and the Gryffindor girl now had their memories back, but Hermione had been unable to do the same for Justin, since she had not Obliviated him. Katie, too, would have to wait until Marcus Flint was safely off to work.

Then Hermione had gone back to the hospital to fetch Hadrian, stopping to alter their medical records and the staff's memories, and to check that Malfoy still was breathing. He was - in fact, he was so deeply asleep as to be snoring. Hermione's lips curved at the thought of a Malfoy doing anything so undignified.

Ginny, meeting her outside the post office on Russell Square, saw only the exhaustion, not the satisfaction. "Oh, Merlin, Hermione!" she scolded, after giving her a hug. "What are you doing to yourself? You just gave birth and the circles under your eyes are practically black! You and your baby both should be in bed!" The redhead peeked at Hadrian, sleeping in his sling. "He's adorable, by the way. Congratulations, but what in Godric's name is going on?"

Hermione pulled her into a secluded alley. "Can you Apparate us to your house? I'll explain everything there."

"Over breakfast," Ginny said in a firm voice. "With Blood Replenishing Potion instead of coffee or tea."

"Yes, Mum," Hermione agreed.

Hadrian was wailing by the time they arrived at the charming cottage Ginny shared with her family. "Not a fan of Side-Along Apparition, I see?" Ginny noted.

"Nor am I," Hermione said, swaying where she stood.

"Inside. Breakfast. Potion. Now," Ginny ordered.

Hermione followed her into the cottage, rubbing Hadrian's back to calm him. Even though it still was early, Dean Thomas was at the kitchen table, drinking tea and dressed in his Auror robes.

"Blimey!" Dean sputtered. "Hermione Granger! What are you doing here?"

"Do you know Occlumency?" Hermione demanded.

"Yes, it's standard Auror training," he answered.

"How good are you?" she persisted.

"I'm very good," Dean said, with no false modesty.

Hermione collapsed into a chair. "Good, because I expect you'll be getting a visit from a Death Eater later this morning looking for his little lost lambs."

She stroked Hadrian's white-blond hair, careful to avoid his soft spot. "Did you know that Voldemort put a curse on followers, the younger generation at least?" she asked Dean and Ginny, who were looking aghast. "They can only have children with Muggleborns or Muggles." Her lips twisted in a bitter smile. "So much for pureblood supremacy."

"Who?" Ginny choked out.

"Hadrian's father is Draco Malfoy, who I was living with in perfect contentment until yesterday, when I got my memories back during labor. Hadrian's his heir, and Malfoy's very eager to try for a spare. Katie Bell has two children with Marcus Flint. Cho and Theo have a daughter."

"I knew that," Ginny said. "The Notts had Cho's blood status reclassified. The *Prophet* had a whole article on her pregnancy."

Dean just looked at her, open-mouthed in horror.

"Damned vultures," Hermione muttered. "Pansy Parkinson persuaded Justin Finch-Fletchley to be her sperm donor. Dennis Creevey spent a weekend holed up with Daphne Greengrass a few weeks back, shagging her under the influence of a lust potion, though I don't know if she's pregnant," she continued. "And do you remember Eliza? Mousy girl, Muggleborn, a few years behind us at Hogwarts? She's still at uni, but she's been dating an older guy. Says his name is Adrian Percy, but she showed me some pictures on her mobile and it's Pucey."

"Pucey? He Chased for Slytherin, right?" Ginny asked, frowning.

"That's the one," Hermione confirmed. "She's not pregnant yet, though - thank Merlin."

"Oh, Hermione. I'm so sorry!" Ginny cried, wrapping her in an embrace.

"What can we do to help you?" Dean asked with resolution.

"Is there anything you can do as an Auror?" Hermione asked. "I would be willing to press charges."

She was unsurprised when Dean shook his head. "Nothing. The only thing I can do as an Auror is arrest you and have you re-Obliviated. Not that I'm going to do that!" he added hastily as both witches glared at him.

"This is utter bollocks!" Ginny seethed. "That ferret needs to suffer."

"And not just Malfoy," Hermione agreed. "Though he is on my list. Speaking of which, may I borrow some parchment and a quill, please?" she requested.

With those tools in hand, she wrote a short, pointed letter:

I have some information regarding Rita Skeeter that may be of interest to you. Meet me in Green Park, London at 10 o'clock this morning if you wish to hear it. Sincerely,

Mrs. Malfoy

Hermione anticipated that the recipient would be cautious enough to run various truth charms on the parchment and ink. The beauty of the letter was that every word - including her signature as a Malfoy wife - was true.

"Hey, Ginny - can you have this sent by Owl Post? You'll want to use an owl other than Pig, though." She handed the note, folded and sealed into a parchment envelope, to her friend.

"I'll send it from the Ministry," Dean offered. "Anonymity guaranteed."

He took it from his wife and blinked at the address. "Yes, I'll definitely send this in a way that can't be traced back to us."

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Draco woke with a splitting headache, drowsy and dizzy despite what his watch told him had been ten hours of sleep. He felt as though he had drunk a bottle of Firewhiskey instead of a mug of hot chocolate the night before. He was also incredibly stiff: the hospital-issue recliner for new fathers who elected to stay over was just as uncomfortable as it looked.

Despite his discomfort, he smiled as he stretched, grey eyes slanting to see Hadrian and Hermione. He expected the baby would either be sleeping in his bassinet or snuggled up against his mother, nursing. His smile widened at the thought of his lovely, declawed lioness, who had no idea she had just given birth to the next Malfoy heir. A *pureblood* Malfoy heir, because his father was a wizard and his mother a witch, even if that knowledge had been Obliviated out of her.

But the bassinet was empty, and so was the bed, save for a folded piece of paper.

"What the fuck?" he muttered thickly, struggling to his feet, the room swirling around him. Fortunately, there was too much equipment crammed into too little floor space, allowing him to navigate towards the bed like a drunken sailor, to read what was presumably a note from

Granger telling him she had taken Hadrian away for a quick walk or for one of the innumerable tests the Muggle Healers insisted running on newborns.

After only a couple of swaying steps, Draco stopped. What was wrong with him? He was a wizard, he could simply *Accio* the paper to hand. Except his wand was missing from his left trouser pocket, where he always kept it when amongst Muggles, hidden by a concealing charm.

Confusion was quickly turning to a raw panic he hadn't felt since the War. With his wand, Hermione could expedite her healing, Confound the hospital staff, and Apparate anywhere in the British Isles. She could change her appearance and the baby's appearance and literally make them both disappear.

Draco shook his head, annoyed at his muddled thinking. She could do none of that, because magic was a learned skill, not just an inborn talent, and she had forgotten everything she once knew. At worst, even if Hermione had found his wand, he just would need to come up with a convincing explanation or Obliviate her again. He decided he was simply out of sorts without his wand, just as he'd been for those few weeks after Potter had stolen it from him when escaping Malfoy Manor.

Until he saw what Hermione had written on the back of the hospital's one-page *Tips for Nursing Mothers*. To the untrained eye, it appeared to be nothing more than doodling. Draco, however, recognized the figures for what they were, having studied Ancient Runes at Hogwarts.

Through the cotton wool in his head, he squinted at the paper, trying to make sense of it. The third one was simple - it was a singular, first-person pronoun. He puzzled out the first rune - bad, evil, inimical - and the second - religion, belief, faith - until it clicked. *Bad faith*. Hermione had translated his last name into runes. His feeling of dread intensified at her use of his real name. It made the last rune less of a shock, though it still hit him like a punch to the gut. Or perhaps a slap across the face was the more appropriate metaphor, given that he was dealing with Granger.

Her runic message was short and pointed: *Malfoy: I remember*.

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"*Hem-hem*. Good morning, Narcissa," Dolores Umbridge greeted the blonde woman sitting on a secluded bench in Green Park.

"It's Mrs. Malfoy to you," the witch said in a mocking voice, before turning to face her. "*Stupefy!*"

Dolores did not even have time to scream before Hermione Granger Stunned her.

When Dolores came to, the first thing she noticed was that she had been dragged to a wooded copse and tied hand and foot. The next thing she noticed was that the Granger bitch's hair had returned to its normal muddy color and curly texture, and she had been joined by two men. The blond looked vaguely familiar, but Dolores was certain she had never seen the smaller,

dark-haired man with tattoos on his arms before. She tried to call for help, but she had been silenced.

Hermione gave the wand in her hand to the dark-haired man. "Go ahead and disarm her, Dennis. Her wand will respond better to you that way."

"*Expelliarmus!*" Dennis cried. "Ugh, it feels treachy," he complained, as soon as Dolores' stubby wand was clutched in his unworthy hand. He waved it, and red and gold sparks flew out. "Still, it's nice to do magic again."

"It is indeed," Hermione agreed, casting a *Muffliato* and lifting the silencing charm.

"Filthy Mudbloods! Stealing the wands of those with real magic. I'll see you both in Azkaban for this," Dolores threatened. She turned to the blond young man and addressed him sweetly. "You really don't want to be consorting with undesirables like this. I am a very important Ministry official. If you help me, I'll see to it that you're rewarded."

The three of them laughed at her. "'*I must not tell lies.*' Isn't that what you made Harry write in his own blood?" Hermione hissed. "You were forced out of office at the end of May. I'm only surprised that it took Shackbolt so long to put the information I gave him about your family to good use."

"Besides, I don't recall anything about this supposed Ministry," the blond said. "You had that knowledge taken from me." His face hardened with that statement.

"Azkaban? I already spent a year on the run with my brother because you would have sent me there when I was barely fifteen, for my blood status. Of course, it'll be hard for you to send us to a prison you can't remember," the dark-haired Dennis gloated.

"What are you going to do to me?" Dolores whispered, in real fear.

"I think I'll take everything except your knowledge that magic exists and you are a witch. And centaurs, of course. I want you to remember that," Mudblood Granger smiled, coldly. "But you won't remember any spells or how to do magic as a practical matter. In fact, when I'm done with you, you won't even know your own name and address. The Muggles who find you will think you're insane."

Dolores cowered. "You can't do that to me!"

"Ah, yes. According to your disgusting philosophy, I don't have any magic - I don't *deserve* to have magic, because my parents are Muggles. Do you believe your own ideology, Dolores? Then you should be perfectly fine," the younger witch said, anger staining her cheeks.

"Don't worry, Professor Umbridge," the blond said soothingly. "Muggles are much more advanced and compassionate than you give them credit for. They'll make sure you're institutionalized and taken care of properly."

"Maybe with your own Muggle mother, you hypocritical cunt," the dark-haired man spat.

"She's in a nursing home with senile dementia," the Granger bitch explained. "Rather a nice one, since your brother pays privately. I expect you'll be in a state-funded facility that's not nearly so pleasant." She leveled her wand.

In a few brief minutes, the former senior undersecretary in charge of the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission, the architect of the Muggleborn Registration Commission, and Hogwarts' High Inquisitor was no more. In her place, a vacant-eyed older woman dressed in pink rocked back and forth, gibbering to herself, wondering vaguely why the curly-haired young woman and two young men were laughing as they walked away.

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"What the fuck do you mean, there's nothing you can do?" Draco screamed at Dean Thomas. "I want to speak with Savage. Or Shacklebolt!"

The Auror suppressed a grin. "I'm sorry, Mr. Malfoy, but there is nothing the Auror Department can do," he repeated. "We have no jurisdiction over Muggleborns. You'll need to go to the Muggle police for assistance if Hermione Granger is missing."

"What about my son? Clearly, you have jurisdiction over him. He's a wizard!" Malfoy argued.

"Ah, yes. Bring me any sort of document identifying you as the father and I'll be happy to open an investigation."

"Here's his Muggle birth certificate." Malfoy slapped a piece of paper into the Auror's desk.

Dean looked it over. "I'm afraid I can't accept this as proof of paternity. Your name isn't Malcolm Foy."

"That's what I go by in the Muggle world. Imbecile," Malfoy added, under his breath.

"Ministry regulations require that I obtain some proof in your real name before opening a file," Dean said, in his most officious tone. Godric, this was *fun*.

"Come off it, Thomas. You saw me with Hermione, back in January," Malfoy said.

"I remember meeting Hermione and her boyfriend, but I have no recollection of you being there," Dean stated, meeting Malfoy's eyes so he could read the truthfulness there. That would teach the ferrety bastard to fiddle with his memories.

"Oh, fuck," Malfoy swore. "You really don't remember."

Dean raised an eyebrow. The blond wizard might actually be innocent, for once. He really could not bring himself to care. "If that's all, Mr. Malfoy, I have some very important paperwork I need to get back to."

"Auror Thomas, what if it were your wife and daughters who were missing?" Malfoy asked, almost pleading.

Dean allowed some of his anger on Hermione's behalf to break through his mask of bureaucratic indifference. "There's no comparison. Ginny knows who I am. Even when we broke up, we were always friends. We fought on the same side."

He glared at Malfoy. "If I were a Death Eater - someone like you, or Zabini - that fucker always had a sick obsession with Ginny - and lured her into a relationship under false pretenses" Dean trailed off, shaking his head. "There wouldn't be enough of me left to bury when she found out. Thank whatever gods you pray to that Hermione left you alive. For now."

"Thank you for your assistance, Auror Thomas," Malfoy said heavy sarcasm as he stood to go. "I won't forget how helpful you were."

Dean smirked at the frustrated blond wizard. "It was my pleasure."

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Draco still was smarting from his encounter with the self-righteous Auror when he left the Ministry to Floo to Malfoy Manor. Even the obsequious behavior of the middle-aged witch in the Portkey Office, who had happily expedited his request for an international Portkey to Australia, had failed to remove the lingering bad taste of his conversation with Dean Thomas.

Deliberately, Draco Floo'd through to his wing of the Manor. He was furious at his parents and had no desire to see them at the moment. While his parents were magically skilled and could be helpful in retrieving Hermione and Hadrian, he did not trust them not to hurt her. Besides, the object he needed was in his desk drawer, in his personal study.

As always, the vinewood wand felt sullen in his hand. "It'll go better for both of us if you cooperate," Draco said, speaking to Granger's wand as though it could understand him. "I prefer my own wand, and I'm willing to give you back to your witch in a fair trade."

He would need this wand, however, when he took the Portkey to Australia this afternoon, to help him control Hermione's parents. He had no desire to hurt them - indeed, his Vow precluded him from harming them in any way - so he planned instead to persuade them to take a vacation to one of the many Malfoy properties scattered around the world. They could stay there until their daughter saw sense and came back to him.

Hermione's wand twitched in his palm. Draco was not certain if it was a signal of assent or protest, and he certainly wasn't going to chance Apparating with Hermione's bitch of a wand. He was far too likely to end up in Patagonia by mistake, or Splinched with his favorite bits missing.

Instead, he grabbed a pinch of Floo powder. He would Floo to Diagon Alley and from there, he would cross to Muggle London, take a taxi to his flat, and pack the few things he needed before his Portkey activated this afternoon. He would get to Australia more than a day before Hermione could hope to, relying on Muggle planes, a thought that made Draco smirk.

His little Muggleborn was clever, but he had the full might of magic and the Ministry - except for that prick Dean Thomas - on his side.

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Katie Bell's mobile rang just as she had dropped off Isabelle with a neighbor for a play date. She answered the phone, continuing to push Peter in his pram one-handed.

It was Justin. "Hey, Katie," he said cheerfully. "Long time, no speak. Care to meet me for lunch?"

She hesitated, and Justin jumped in again. "No excuses, darling. You're still on maternity leave, so you can't claim you have to work. And I'm always happy to see your kids if you need to bring them along."

Katie smiled at his harmless pushiness. "Alright then," she agreed. "Where should we meet? It's just me and the baby."

"Oh, let's go to that nice little Thai place near Hermione and Malcolm's flat," Justin suggested. "I'm craving green curry."

"Done," Katie said. "Justin, did you hear about Hermione?" she asked.

"No, but you can tell me all about it over lunch," Justin cut her off. "Toodles!"

They never made it to the Thai restaurant. Justin met her outside, with Hermione and Dennis.

"Oh, thank heavens!" Katie exclaimed. "Where have you been, Hermione? Malcolm has been absolutely frantic. Let me give him a call." She pulled out her mobile, only to have it fly from her hand into Hermione's palm.

"What was that?" Katie asked fearfully. "What's going on?"

"I got my memories back," Hermione said, sounding miserable rather than happy. "I know how to restore yours as well. Come to my flat and I'll tell you everything."

"Where is Hadrian?" Katie asked when they entered the too-quiet flat.

"He's safe with a friend of mine," Hermione answered. "She's the mother of three, including nine-month-old twins, so she knows baby care."

"That's good," Katie said uneasily, still not understanding what had driven Hermione to leave the hospital so precipitously with a newborn.

"You're a witch," Hermione said bluntly, as soon as they all were seated in the lounge. "I'm a witch, too, while Dennis and Justin are wizards. So are Malfoy and Flint, for that matter, but they got to keep their memories of magic despite being on the losing side in the magical world's civil war."

"Who are Malfoy and Flint?" Katie asked cautiously. Names were sensible, safe harbors in the sea of nonsense Hermione had just spewed out. Katie would have blamed some sort of postpartum psychosis, except Dennis and Justin were nodding along.

Hermione laughed, without mirth. "Draco Malfoy, who goes by the name Malcolm Foy. And you know Marcus Flint as Mark Stone. They don't want to overtax their inbred brains with complicated aliases, you see."

"What about Cho and Theo? Are they - " Katie began.

Hermione nodded. "She's a witch, but Theo had her blood status reclassified so she legally could have her memories returned. He's a wizard, and a Death Eater like Malfoy and Flint."

"A Death Eater?" Katie echoed weakly. She should be laughing at the absurdity of Hermione's story, but she could feel panic welling up deep inside. Cho had sent Theo to prison when she remembered, and a murderous look flashed across Hermione's face whenever she mentioned Malfoy's name.

"It all started with an orphan named Tom Riddle . . . " Hermione began.

Almost an hour later, Katie felt a migraine coming on. "So, since I was the one who Obliviated you, I can return your missing memories, if you'd like," Hermione finished awkwardly.

"What am I missing? Do you know?" Katie demanded.

"You spent most of your last year at Hogwarts in a coma after touching a cursed object," Dennis said. "You nearly died after Malfoy gave it to you."

"You lived in south Florida for a year when you were playing Quidditch in the North American league - that's how you were able to stay out of prison when the Muggleborn Registration Commission took effect," Hermione added. "After the Final Battle, you came back and played for the Montrose Magpies until you had to leave for the Muggle world."

"I dream about flying. Quite a bit," Katie admitted in a soft voice. An awful thought struck her. "My parents - were they killed by wizards? These Death Eaters?"

Slowly, Hermione nodded. She opened her mouth, then shut it without providing any details on how Katie's parents had died. With a chilling sense of certainty, she realized it must have been horrific.

"Was . . . was Mark involved?" Katie had to know.

Dennis and Hermione exchanged glances before Hermione answered. "I don't believe so," she said carefully. "From what I read in the newspaper, you were out with him and several of your other teammates on the Magpies the night it happened. Staying out late probably saved your life."

And Katie could just imagine the crushing guilt she had felt, finding out her parents had been tortured and murdered while she was out partying. She closed her eyes, not wanting to meet their pitying stares. Justin patted her shoulder.

Katie opened her eyes and looked at Hermione. "The memories that you made up for me - about me growing up with Mark and reconnecting with him in London - who came up with

those?"

"You did. Before I Obliviated you, we met and you told me the outline of the story to create," Hermione replied.

To Katie's discerning eyes, the other woman looked utterly wretched. "Hermione, when did you get your memories back?"

"Just yesterday," came the whispered answer.

"And that's why you took Hadrian and ran?" Katie asked.

The younger woman nodded.

Katie reached a decision. "I don't want to remember," she said. "Some things are better off forgotten."

"But you won't remember your magic!" Dennis protested.

"I've lived without it for more than five years. I can't say that I've missed it that much," Katie shrugged. "It's not worth wrecking my life. The kids and Mark mean more to me than being able to wave a wand around."

"Well, it's your choice," Hermione said, sounding a bit disappointed,

Katie bridled. "Yes, it is my choice and I've made it." She gentled her tone. "Hermione, what are you going to do about Malcolm? He's going crazy looking for you and Hadrian."

"You mean Malfoy?" Hermione asked harshly.

"Yes," Katie nodded impatiently. "If he's really a Dark wizard, he's not just going to let you walk away, especially with Hadrian."

"I know that," Hermione agreed, a lethal look in her eyes.

"What are you going to do?" Katie asked warily.

The faint sound of a key in the front door lock prevented Hermione from answering. "Would you excuse me, please?" she asked politely, wand in hand. "There's a loose end that I need to tie up."

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Draco had barely stepped foot into his flat when he was ambushed.

"*Expelliarmus!*" The vine wood wand leapt from his hand, gleefully returning to its rightful owner.

His first reaction was one of relief, mixed with surprise. He thought his witch would have been halfway to Australia by now, not waiting for him at home. Perhaps they could work this

out. "Hermione! Thank Merlin you're here. Are you alright? Where's Hadrian?"

"I'm not alright, thanks to you," she replied, keeping her wand trained on him. "Hadrian is not here. He's safe, well away from you and your parents and your genocidal bigotry."

Three other people came into the foyer before Draco could protest he was no longer like that. Dennis Creevey was holding a wand like he knew how to use it, his face set in grim lines. Justin Finch-Fletchey looked as angry a Hufflepuff could be, and actually sneered at Draco. Katie Bell trailed behind them, clearly troubled and her eyes red from crying.

With a swish and flick of Hermione's wand, Draco found himself propelled into the lounge and seated on a chair.

"*Incarcerous*." The hissed spell came from Creevey, and Draco was bound at the ankles and wrists by a thin nylon rope. The dark-haired wizard kicked him under the kneecap, a hard blow made worse with his hipster steel-toed boots.

"Fuck!" Draco grunted in pain.

"Dennis, what are doing?" Katie shrieked.

"That's for setting me up with that Daphne bint," Dennis said bitterly. Still, at a look from Hermione, he stepped back.

"Would you like us to stay?" Justin asked Hermione.

"I can take it from here, if you'll wait in the kitchen," she answered. "Here, Justin, you'll want to hold this."

Draco felt a physical pang as she handed *his* wand to the blond Hufflepuff.

"Hermione," intervened Katie, "please don't do something you'll regret. You are not a killer."

In what felt like a lifetime ago, similar words from Dumbledore led Draco to lower his wand. Hermione's wand remained steadily fixed between his eyes.

"I won't kill him," she promised Katie, never taking her eyes of him. "He'll just wish he were dead."

Draco had always thought that brown eyes were warm. Hermione in particular had beautiful, expressive eyes, and he had gotten rather accustomed to having her look at him lovingly. Her eyes now were cold, in a way that made him think of Scotland in November, when the leaves were dead on the trees in the Forbidden Forest and the earth was frozen solid but not yet hidden by a blanket of snow.

The door to the lounge clicked behind them as Katie and the two other men left, leaving Draco and Hermione in ominous silence.

He broke it first. "Hermione, please," he began, making his voice a caress. Draco thought that if only he could get through to her, to the woman he loved, he could convince her to lower

her wand and release him, to give them a second chance as a family. "I know what you see in your memories, but I'm not the vile bully who tormented you at school. I'm not vicious coward who stood by and did nothing while you were tortured at my feet. I've grown up, Hermione, and I'm a better man now."

She began to cry, and he wished his hands were unbound so he could reach out and comfort her. "Please, love, I hate to see you so out of sorts."

"I wish to Godric I could believe you, Draco," Hermione said through her tears.

"You can, lovely," he said soothingly. If she was using his given name, the battle was nearly won. Hermione truly did love him, and Hadrian was a nearly unbreakable link in the chain binding her to him.

However, Draco wasn't dealing with the woman who loved him, the mother of his son. He was dealing with the girl who had hated him since she was thirteen, when he had so cruelly introduced her to the word that now scarred her arm.

"But I can't trust you, Malfoy," Hermione said implacably. "Not because you were a prejudiced little shite at Hogwarts, but because of what you've done since. You *used* me - used me as a sex toy and a broodmare - without any concern for what I wanted."

She gave him a glare that would have stripped the varnish from his wand, had he not already been disarmed.

"You sought me out in the Muggle world and told me lie upon lie, all in order to get the precious pureblooded heir you so desperately wanted," Hermione continued. "It wasn't an accident that I fell pregnant within a month after we became intimate, was it?"

Draco was not nearly so stupid as to try and deny it. She now remembered Switching Spells, such as he had used on her Muggle birth control pills. "You love Hadrian as much as I do," he pointed out instead.

"Yes, I do," she agreed. Her eyes softened momentarily, but hardened again. "Your parents would have taken him from me, raised him to be another selfish, spoilt, prejudiced monster like you."

"I stopped them, though," Draco protested. "I'm not a monster, either," he added. "And I'm not that prejudiced, not anymore. I've lived with you as a Muggle for nearly a year!"

"You stopped them by promising to get me pregnant again as soon as I healed enough for you to fuck me," Hermione hissed. "You didn't care that I had just nearly died giving birth to Hadrian."

"Hermione, losing you nearly wrecked me," Draco said with utter honesty. "I just told my parents what they needed to hear to get them out of the hospital. Slytherin, remember?" he smiled weakly. "We don't have to have another baby until you're ready, I swear."

She looked at him, appalled. "Do you really think I would willingly have sexual intercourse with you, now that I remember who you really are? Was my knee to your bollocks on Halloween not enough of a hint as to how I *really* feel about you?"

"I never did anything to you that you didn't consent to, or thoroughly enjoy. The Vow would have stopped me," he said confidently.

Hermione shook her head. "You don't get it, Malfoy. You obtained my consent, my trust, even my love," her voice hitched, "all under false pretenses. None of that exists anymore. None of it ever truly existed."

"Yes, it did," Draco contradicted. "It was real and I could earn it all back, Hermione. That was the real me you fell in love with. We could start over again and raise Hadrian together, take it slow. You'd keep your memories. We could even work together, behind the scenes, to try and reform the law so you could use magic openly."

She snorted with skepticism. "You would Obliviate me again the first chance you got."

"I'll take another Unbreakable Vow!" he offered in desperation.

"Oh, yes, because that worked out so well for me the first time," Hermione said sarcastically. "No, I'm afraid there is no other way."

She took a step closer, wand aloft, moving with purposeful intent. "Thanks for the memories, Malfoy."

"Please, Hermione," he asked, in a last-ditch plea, as she dug her wand into his neck, right at the jugular vein. "What are you going to do to me?"

She looked at him with those cold brown eyes and smiled. It was not a nice smile. "Something I think I'll enjoy."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The sex toy/broodmare comment is from a review by Colubrina on the fanfiction website, where this story was first posted. I really liked her phrasing (not surprising, since she's a great writer, and any of her stories are worth a read) and have used it in this chapter with permission.

A Certain Poetic Justice

Chapter Notes

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

September 1, 2015

With his pale skin still flushed from a hot shower, Draco Malfoy shaved carefully, standing with a towel around his waist in front of the fogged-up bathroom mirror. Then he moved to the walk-in closet to select a suit - black, the only color he ever wore these days. The cut nodded to wizarding fashion but would not draw a second glance from Muggles, except perhaps of admiration. He was indifferent to such glances, regardless of whether they came from Muggle women or witches. While his Blood Bond to Hermione had dissolved upon her death, he still felt as though he were linked to her - a dead woman who managed to haunt him without being a ghost.

Draco knew today was going to be a difficult one. If Hermione and Hadrian had lived, the three of them would have gone together to King's Cross station, to see Hadrian off to his first year at Hogwarts. Perhaps they would have been accompanied by other children, with Draco's platinum hair and their mother's golden-brown eyes. But Hermione and Hadrian were dead these eleven years, and Draco would be standing on Platform 9 and 3/4 alone, performing his duties as a governor of the school with the cold dignity expected of a Malfoy.

He slipped on the platinum ring he wore in place of a wedding band. After Hermione's death, he had her platinum charm bracelet melted down and remade into a simple band, engraved with the runes for love, family, and remembrance - what he had lost and never would forget. The bracelet's original enchantments had been broken when the metal was reforged, but it still provided Draco some solace to wear the ring.

Using his wand, Draco glanced in the bedroom's oval looking glass and touched up the Glamour Charms around his eyes, hiding the telltale redness and dark circles. As usual, he had slept poorly, his dreams haunted by the memory of being jolted from sleep by Hadrian's wails and lurching off the hospital's uncomfortable recliner, only to be brought up short by the unmistakable, coppery tang of human blood. He would never be able to forget the sight of Hermione dead and pale on the hospital bed, a thick pool of crimson between her legs, and her gold and ruby ring lying uselessly on the table next to her corpse. She had taken it off before going to sleep, and the Malfoy family's curse had finished her.

Nor would Draco ever be able to forget how Hadrian's skin was burning hot with fever when he scooped the newborn from his bassinet, instinctively seeking to comfort and be comforted. His screams brought the Muggle Healers running. Neonatal meningitis, they said. A devastating complication from prolonged labor and delivery. The Muggles reassured him that nine out of ten infants would survive, but the next time Draco held Hadrian, his little body was a rapidly cooling husk.

Draco did not remember what had happened after that. He knew that a dozen members of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, including four Obliviators, had to be dispatched to the

maternity ward to deal with the fallout from his berserker rage. Thankfully, no one had been killed - he would not wish the loss of a mother and newborn on his worst enemy, let alone hapless Muggles. The Obliviators had done their job efficiently - no record of the Foy family existed at the hospital.

With a frown, Draco eyed his image in the mirror and decided it was passable. This morning would be spent in the public eye at the train station, and he had no doubt he would be the focus of intrusive questions and gazes ranging from curious to hostile. As a Malfoy, he tended to garner that reaction.

Today, it would be amplified by the Wizengamot's decision late last night, after years of political struggle, to finally pass what was popularly known as "Granger's Law," abolishing the Muggleborn Repatriation Commission and repealing its decrees.

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Hermione was eating breakfast in the hotel's dining room when Ginny began speaking to her through the magical, mirrored compact they had used to stay in touch for the past eleven years, while Hermione was living in Australia and considered dead to the wizarding world.

"Yoo-hoo! Hermione, are you there? I really need to speak with you! 'Mione? 'Mione!" came her friend's voice, from her handbag.

Hermione's son eyed the talking handbag with a knowing smirk. "Is that a new ringtone, Mum?" he asked with a grin, knowing full well it was not, but also that she could not acknowledge magic in the presence of Muggles, specifically including Andy McLeod.

"Don't get cheeky with me, young man!" she mock-scoldded him. "Excuse me for a minute while I speak to Ginny."

"Don't worry, Hermione. I can mind Harry while you're gone," Andy offered cheerfully. He had been a good friend - and sometimes more - in the eleven years since she had shown up on his doorstep with a newborn, needing a place to hide until she had recuperated enough for the long plane flight to Australia to find her parents and restore their memories. Andy had asked her to marry him several times, but Hermione always said no. Even though her Blood Bond with Malfoy would not legally preclude her from remarrying in the Muggle world, she suspected that it made her emotionally disinclined to do so.

Still, Hermione told herself there were solid, non-magical reasons why she and Andy had never officially resumed their romantic relationship. In part, it was because they lived on separate continents. Andy lived and worked in London, while Hermione had chosen to settle in Brisbane with her parents after earning her doctorate from the University of Queensland, sacrificing her opportunity to attend Oxford in order to stay well away from the United Kingdom. She was a professor and senior researcher at the university's Institute for Molecular Bioscience, a position with sufficiently flexible hours for a single mother.

Upon arrival in Australia, she had legally changed her last name and that of her son to her mother's maiden name. "H. Jean Wilkins" was a respected biochemist, a frequent contributor to scientific journals who held a tenured university position and several patents, to boot,

while her son Harry Wilkins was a well-adjusted boy who earned top marks at his elite primary school while playing left wing for the local boys' rugby club. He also enjoyed making potions with his mother on weekends, one of the few magical activities Hermione still indulged in.

"I'm eleven," Harry pointed out, resentfully. "I don't need a minder. Especially not *him*."

That was the main reason she and Andy had never pursued a long-distance relationship. Harry disliked him, and always had. Even as an infant, he would fret when Andy tried to comfort him, and his disdain for the redhead only became more apparent as Harry's vocabulary grew. "He's like a ginger Labrador, Mum," Harry had complained during Andy's last visit to Brisbane. "Boundless enthusiasm and no brains to speak of. And his table manners are atrocious!"

Hermione sighed. "Why don't you just stay here with Andy and talk about football or rugby or *something* for a few minutes while I get in touch with your Aunt Ginny?"

"Alright, Mum," her son sullenly agreed, looking uncannily like his father when she had first met Malfoy all those years ago.

Harry was a fascinating if sometimes frustrating study in nature versus nurture. He had a quick intelligence and equally quick temper, attributable to both parents, but he also had unalloyed Malfoy arrogance rather than her own adolescent insecurities. However, having been raised in Australia, where the bulk of the magical community were descended from Muggleborns transported for the crime of "stealing" a wand, Harry thought - and would tell anyone who cared to listen - that blood purity was utter bollocks. Anyone using the term "Mudblood" around him was liable to get a punch in the nose.

Shaking her head at the oddities of genetics, Hermione took herself off to the ladies' loo and locked herself into a stall, removing the eyeshadow compact from her bag and flicking it open. "Gin? Are you there? What's going on?" she asked the mirror.

A bright brown eye, not her own and wide with excitement, gazed back at her. "Hermione!" Ginny exclaimed. "Thank Merlin I was able to reach you!"

What's going on?" Hermione asked anxiously. "Are you and Dean still able to take Harry to Platform 9 and 3/4?" As hard as it was to accept that her little boy was going to boarding school, it was even worse that she would not be able to see him off on the train. But such were the laws in wizarding Britain. Hermione knew that if she were seen at King's Cross station, she would be arrested, Obliviated, and remanded to Malfoy's custody. In order to remain in full possession of her magic and her memories, and escape the Malfoy family, Hermione had seen no option other than to fake her own demise.

It had been surprisingly easy. She had deprived Malfoy of a day's worth of memories, replacing them with modified memories showing her death and Hadrian's death. It was morbid, but child's play compared to making her own parents forget they had a daughter. Then it was just a matter of placing a handful of people and one house-elf under a Fidelius Charm, with Hermione as Secret Keeper. *Hermione Granger and Hadrian Foy are alive*, read

the slips of paper distributed to Ginny and Dean Thomas, Dennis Creevey, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Katie Bell, the Gryffindor girl Pucey had been sniffing after, and Mipsy.

When her son was old enough, he had been entrusted with the secret as well. Just last month, Professor Flitwick had been added to the circle when he showed up in Queensland bearing a Hogwarts letter for Hadrian Foy. Headmistress McGonagall had been there within an hour of her deputy's excited but cryptic Floo call, pulling strings within the Ministry of Magic to obtain an emergency Portkey. With misty eyes, the elderly witch had readily joined in the secret and acceded to Hermione's request that her son be enrolled at Hogwarts under the name Harry Wilkins.

"Of course we can still take Harry," Ginny said, waving off her concern and interrupting her thoughts. "We'll be at your hotel before ten to pick him up. But you'll never guess what I just read in the *Daily Prophet*!"

"Probably not," Hermione agreed dryly. "I haven't fed Skeeter any tips for a few years now."

It had been nearly four years since her last anonymous tip, when she passed the reporter a packet of materials exposing Lucius Malfoy's patronage of underage Muggle prostitutes, including photographic evidence. Those photos, courtesy of Dennis Creevey, amply documented the Death Eater's use of various charms to make the hapless girls resemble members of Dumbledore's Army, including Cho Chang and Hermione herself, as well as the magical and physical abuse he inflicted upon them. Through Ginny, Hermione knew Lucius still had another three years to go on his Azkaban sentence. The Hit Wizards had been predictably indifferent to Lucius Malfoy's depraved sexual practices, but had come down hard on his violation of the Statute of Secrecy.

"The Muggleborn Repatriation Commission was disbanded last night!" Ginny blurted out, wiping the reminiscent smirk off Hermione's lips. Her revenge on Lucius had been sweet indeed.

"What does that mean?" she asked, in shock.

"It means you and every other Muggleborn can get your memories back and do magic, and it won't be illegal," Ginny said excitedly. "And, for starters, it means that you're coming with us to King's Cross, to see your son off to school."

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Hermione was not so easily convinced. For a Gryffindor, she had a good deal of innate caution, and her wariness had only increased after her harsh experiences in the wizarding world and a year of living a lie with Malfoy in the Muggle world. She had therefore asked Ginny and Dean to bring not only the *Prophet* to her London hotel, but also Percy Weasley. He might still be a pompous prat, but he also was a solicitor she could trust.

"Yes, Hermione," he said self-importantly. "It's true. I spoke with one of MLE undersecretaries and he confirmed every detail. For once, the *Daily Prophet* got it right."

Percy handed her the newspaper and lowered his voice. "And since the Wizengamot repealed the former decrees, which identify Muggleborns by name, it fully applies to you even though almost everyone - including myself - thought you were dead." He sounded insulted that she had not let him in on the secret.

"Thanks, Percy. This is tremendously helpful," Hermione smiled.

Her eyebrows rose as she skimmed the article, carefully concealing the moving pictures with her hand. Harry was reading over her shoulder, while Dean - bless him for a West Ham fan - had distracted Andy with a discussion over football transfers.

By a narrow margin, the Wizengamot voted late yesterday evening to repeal the Muggleborn Repatriation Act and all associated decrees. The Act, which took effect in January 1999 in the aftermath of the Second Wizarding War, mandated the Obliviation of all forty-one Muggleborn witches and wizards then resident in wizarding Britain, as well as their resettlement in the Muggle world. Each Muggleborn was assigned to a former Death Eater, to ensure his or her compliance with the law and to provide protection whilst living without magic among Muggles.

"Protection? Is that what they're calling it these days?" Ginny snorted.

Hermione nodded absently and continued to read, frowning. As much as she deplored Rita Skeeter's sensationalism, this bloodless whitewashing of a disgraceful law and its consequences was even worse.

Mandrake Brocklehurst, the current head of the soon-to-be disbanded MRC, informed the Prophet that his last act as commissioner will be to arrange for all surviving Muggleborns to be brought into the Ministry of Magic to have their memories restored. However, since a Memory Charm can only be reversed by the caster or through torture, the MRC will be offering intensive, remedial classes in the use of magic for those Muggleborns whose Obliviators have since passed through the Veil.

"Justin and Katie will love that," Hermione said sarcastically. "And I suppose Dennis and Eliza will have to pretend they don't remember anything. You know, this is so typical of the wizarding world's arrogance, dragging Muggleborns into the Ministry without even so much as a by your leave. What about Muggleborns like Katie who don't want to remember?"

"Hey, Mum, we're mentioned in the article!" said Harry, who had continued to read while she fulminated.

Hermione glanced back at the *Daily Prophet*, her eyebrows rising even higher.

This includes several witches and wizards who were Obliviated by war heroine Hermione Granger, who died in childbirth at age twenty-four, along with her newborn son. These tragic deaths, which likely could have been avoided had Miss Granger, a Muggleborn witch, and her son received treatment at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries rather than a Muggle facility, sparked efforts beginning a decade ago to reform laws regarding the treatment of Muggleborns.

"The reports of our death have been greatly exaggerated," Harry quipped.

"Particularly since the treatment I received at a Muggle hospital saved my life," Hermione added.

Former Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was ousted from office in 2006 after the Prophet exclusively revealed his clandestine affair with a repatriated Muggleborn, Mary MacDonald Cattermole, praised the Wizengamot for its action from his home in Boston, Massachusetts, where he lives with Mrs. Cattermole and their two sons, both students at the Salem Institute.

"I am pleased that the MRC has finally been abolished. This misguided legislation made wizarding Britain a laughingstock, cruelly separated Muggleborn wizards and witches from their family and friends, and deprived our community of some of its best and brightest citizens," said the former Minister. Since resigning as Minister, Mister Shacklebolt has become a vocal activist on the subject of Muggleborn rights. He coyly dodged questions on any future plans to seek political office.

"Hypocritical wanker," Ginny observed.

"Took him long enough," Hermione muttered. "Better late than never, I suppose."

"If Shacklebolt had shown this sort of political courage from the beginning, none of this repatriation rubbish would have happened," Percy opined in his pompous way.

"Is that him?" Harry asked quietly, oblivious to Percy's callous comment. Harry's very existence, after all, was tied to the repatriation policy. Her son's finger was not pointing at Shacklebolt's picture, waving from the pages of the newspaper with a jaunty politician's grin, but to the photograph next to it, where a tall, fair-haired man kept trying to stalk off into the margins.

Hermione's eyes widened as she read the last sentence in the article.

Reclusive philanthropist Draco Malfoy, whose Galleons and behind-the-scenes political maneuvering were reportedly critical to the Wizengamot's decision to repeal the Act, declined to comment.

"Yes, that's him," she confirmed to her son, her voice soft and shocked. "That's your father."

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Marcus, Katie, and two of their three children were waiting for Draco at King's Cross station, between Platforms 9 and 10.

"Finally! You're here!" Katie said, greeting him with a hug and a kiss to one cheek.

"Plenty of time, Katie," Draco said. "The train doesn't leave for another thirty minutes." He ruffled Lucy's hair, but greeted Peter with a dignified handshake.

Over the years, Katie had become like the bossy but beloved big sister he had never had. When he had been prostrate with grief in the days immediately after Hermione's and Hadrian's deaths, she had been the one to arrange for their cremation and funeral. When he still had been mired in a deep depression more than a year later, Katie was the one to give him a metaphorical kick in the arse, providing the motivation to do what Malfoys did best - pulling the strings on their political puppets to gain their desired ends. The ultimate victory had come the day before, when the Wizengamot passed Granger's Law.

"So, what do you think about the Wizengamot's vote?" he asked her. For years now, ever since Isabelle received her Hogwarts letter, Katie had been very much in the loop on what was happening in the wizarding world.

Katie shrugged. "I don't really care, to tell the truth." She smirked at him. "In case you hadn't guessed, Mark gave me my wand back years ago. We go flying every weekend. So I don't see that it changes much for me."

Draco had suspected as much. "Are you excited to start school, Peter?" he asked his godson.

The dark-haired boy, who strongly resembled his father but with straighter teeth, nodded. "I can't wait! If only I could bring my broom, though."

"Next year," Marcus said. "You can join your sister as a Chaser."

"Where is Isabelle?" Draco asked curiously.

"She already went through the barrier," Katie said. "She made prefect this year and *said* she wanted to help with the younger students. Which means she's off flirting with Jamie Potter."

Flint's eyes narrowed. "That little runt better watch himself or I'll rip his hands off. And it would be a shame, too, because he's a damn good Seeker for Slytherin."

"Better a Potter than a Weasel, though," Draco comforted. "Freddy Weasley's a menace. And that little shite Teddy Lupin needs a permanent Sticking Charm on his zipper."

"Shall we go through?" Katie asked diplomatically, cutting short any further threats by Draco and her overprotective husband towards Hogwarts' wizard population.

It was controlled chaos on the other side of the barrier, with owls hooting, cats yowling, and parents calling out good-byes and admonitions as their children boarded the Hogwarts Express.

"Watch out for that trunk!"

"Send us an Owl as soon as you've been Sorted!"

"We'll miss you!"

"Mind that your Potions mark improves this term, young lady, or you'll be getting a Howler from me!"

Draco noticed a confused-looking family of three, clearly overwhelmed by the scene around them. His father would have looked down his patrician nose at the Muggle parents and sneered, but Lucius was no longer a school governor. He had been forced to resign by McGonagall following the prostitution scandal that the Rita Skeeter had reported upon with such relish. The headmistress claimed, quite rightfully, that Lucius's "licentious behavior rendered him unfit to be in proximity with young witches. Or any woman, for that matter!"

"Good morning. I'm Draco Malfoy, one of the school's governors," he greeted the Muggle family, holding his hand out.

Draco took his duties as a governor of the school much more seriously than Lucius ever had. His father would have scorned him as a Muggle lover and blood traitor, but Draco had not spoken to him in the eleven years since Hermione's death. He saw his mother three times a year, at Yuletide and on each of their birthdays, but their relationship was strained, to say the least.

"What's your name, lad?" he asked the boy, after an exchange of handshakes with his parents.

"William, sir, but I go by Will," the boy said nervously.

"Are you a football fan?" Draco inquired, eyeing the boy's shirt.

"Yeah- Yes, sir," he replied, with a prod from his mother. "Is there a football club at Hogwarts?"

"No, I'm afraid not, Will," Draco shook his head. "But we have Quidditch, which is kind of like football, except we play it on racing brooms."

Will's eyes widened. "That sounds brilliant!"

"If you'd like, I can introduce you to my godson, Peter," Draco offered. "He's equally mad about football and Quidditch."

Will nodded eagerly and his anxious parents looked grateful. With that introduction made, Draco looked around the platform for any other Muggles in need of his assistance. Instead, he saw Theo Nott and Cho Chang-Nott, in from Canada to see their older daughter off to school. Theo smiled and waved, while Cho gave him an icy nod. Draco tried to ignore the envy clawing at his heart when he saw the little boy in Theo's arms.

A crowd of redheads passed by to his left, jostling others on the platform in their heedless haste to reach the train. Draco suppressed a sneer. The Weasleys had arrived, in force. His grey eyes narrowed in thought as he watched them. Normally, the ginger clan was boisterous and exuberant, exchanging loud greetings with all and sundry. Today, they were moving in an almost military formation, with hands on their wands. He caught a glimpse of blond hair in the midst of all the red, as well as a woman wearing a light Muggle rain jacket with the hood up, appropriate for today's light rain - but not on the enclosed train platform.

Ginny Thomas caught him staring and raised her wand in a threatening manner, a movement echoed by her Auror husband and George Weasley. Draco held up hands in a universal

gesture of peace and looked away. According to the rumor mill, the Weasley family had a cousin who was a Squib. Probably that was the woman with her hood up, if her brat had shown enough magic to be admitted to Hogwarts. Draco decided that his duties to welcome non-magical parents could go as far as she was concerned. The Weasleys could take care of their own, and always had done.

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Harry shifted impatiently on his feet as the long line of First Years ahead of him were Sorted. His stomach growled, and, after a quick glance at the teachers' table to make sure he was unobserved, Harry dug in his pocket, hoping to find a forgotten Chocolate Frog. Instead, his searching fingers found the folded piece of paper that his mum had pressed into his hand at King's Cross station, right after she hugged him and kissed him farewell.

After checking again to make sure no one was watching, he unfolded it, expecting a quick note that she loved him, or maybe a reminder to send an Owl once he arrived.

It was something entirely different.

Dearest Harry,

As Secret Keeper, I hereby release you from any obligation to keep the secret that Hermione Granger and Hadrian Foy are alive.

With all my love,

Mum

Harry blinked twice in surprise. His mother was the most stubborn person he knew, as well as the most intelligent, and she had guarded their secret with the obstinacy of a mule and the cleverness of a fox. As he stood in line, he considered what this might mean, listening with half an ear as the other First Years in front of him were Sorted more or less quickly into one of the four Houses.

Harry had been four the very first time he asked his mum whether he had a dad. She told him that of course he had a father, but he lived far away, in the United Kingdom, the country she had to leave if she wanted to keep her magic. At age four, Harry already knew his mum was a witch and he was a wizard, and he could not think of anything worse than losing his magic.

Her response to that first question had been factual and delivered in a carefully neutral voice. Her responses to every question Harry asked about his father thereafter were the same. Harry grew up knowing his father was a wizard, an only child, and came from Wiltshire. He knew his father's hair was blond like his own and that his favorite subject in school had been Potions. His parents had been in the same year at Hogwarts, but in different Houses. His dad had played Seeker for the Slytherin Quidditch team. His name was Draco Malfoy.

But every time Harry asked why his father wasn't with them in Australia, his mum gave him a wholly unsatisfying answer about why she could not live in the United Kingdom. That didn't explain why his dad couldn't come to Australia, even if just for a visit. And whenever

he asked what his dad was like, his mum told him that someday, the law in wizarding Britain would change, and then he could meet his father and judge for himself.

Then, when he was eight and home sick from school with strep throat, he read his mum's copy of *Hogwarts: A History*. He had known, vaguely, about his mum's role in helping Harry Potter defeat the Dark wizard Voldemort, but it still was thrilling to read the words on the printed page. Until he got to the section of the book that recounted his father's role in the Second Wizarding War, which made him feel sick in a way that had nothing to do with a sore throat. That was the day his mother let him in on their family secret.

Peter Stone was sorted into Slytherin and Minnie and Mione Thomas had gone to Gryffindor before Harry figured out what his mum's note meant. Ultimately, it meant she was giving him options, making it possible for him to meet his father and judge for himself. Based on what Harry knew so far, and the way his father had looked at him and his mum at the train station, even through a powerful Notice-Me-Not spell, Harry didn't think his judgement would be a favorable one.

Finally, after Dominique Weasley joined her cousins in Gryffindor, it was his turn. "Wilkins, Harry," Professor Flitwick called out in his squeaky voice.

Harry walked confidently to the stool and pulled the raggedy old hat atop his sun-streaked blond head. His mum had told him what to expect, and he knew she would love him unconditionally no matter what House he was sorted into.

"Well, well, well. Harry Wilkins, is it?" the Sorting Hat greeted him in its rusty voice. "Or Hadrian Foy? Or Malfoy, to be precise? What shall I call you?"

"Honestly, I've always preferred Hadrian to Harry," the boy admitted.

"A good choice, particularly since we already have a plethora of students named Harry or Harriet running around Hogwarts," the Hat agreed. "Though your mother had a better claim to name you after Harry Potter than almost anyone else. They were best friends, you know."

"She told me," Hadrian said, feeling a touch guilty. "But Harry just sounds so *plebeian*!"

The Sorting Hat chuckled. "Ah, that sounds like your father."

"You know him?" Hadrian asked, curious.

"I know and remember all of the Hogwarts students I've ever Sorted over the years, but some stand out more than others. Like your parents. They say opposites attract, but that's not really true," the Hat commented. "They are very much alike. Both highly intelligent and so quick-witted that my first inclination for both was Ravenclaw. As it is for you."

"Oh?" Hadrian said, trying not to sound too disappointed. The 'Claws sounded like a group of humorless swots, to him.

The Hat chuckled again. "Your parents were equally unenthusiastic. Your mother wanted to be known as more than a giant brain, while your father's family traditionally were sorted into

Slytherin. He certainly had the ruthless ambition and cunning to thrive in the snake pit, so that's where I placed him."

"Now, your mother is at least as ruthless, ambitious, and cunning as your father, but I didn't think Slytherin was quite ready for a Muggleborn in the 1990s," the Hat continued. "She was willing to try though, which showed a great deal of bravery, so I sent her to Gryffindor instead."

Hadrian nodded. That made sense.

"You're a hard one to Sort, as I can see you thriving in either of your parents' Houses. So my question for you, Hadrian, is whether you'd like to shake things up in the wizarding world, like your mother?"

"Yes, of course," he assented. "So you'll put me in Gryffindor?"

"Oh, no, laddie. Despite some improvements, there are still more than a few blood purists in our society, and they raise their children to be the same. A Muggle-raised wizard like you, with your unique heritage, will make much more of a difference in -

SLYTHERIN!" yelled the Sorting Hat.

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Hours after the Hogwarts Express had puffed out of King's Cross station, Draco finally managed to extricate himself from Katie's well-meaning claws. He knew she was worried that he would go to some dodgy pub and drink himself into a stupor, trying to forget that his own son should have been onboard the train and that Hermione should have been by his side, waving good-bye to the students as the scarlet steam engine pulled out of the station.

Rather than a pub, Draco went to the same place he always did to mourn what he had lost. He Apparated to the Forest of Dean, to the Druidic tree circle where he and Hermione had celebrated their handfasting and where she had remembered magic, if only for a few hours. Draco had scattered her ashes here, along with half of Hadrian's. The remainder of his son's ashes were encased in a jeweled urn in the Malfoy crypt, next to the remains of little Scorpius.

With Hermione gone, being within the circle elicited no lustful feelings. Still, it was where Draco came when he wished to feel close to her, to remember his lost love. He sat down on the moss and talked to her and Hadrian, telling them about his day and the crowds on Platform 9 and 3/4, and how much he missed them and wished they had been there. And then, as the moon rose above the trees, he dropped his face into his hands and cried, regretting all that he had done and all that he had failed to do.

Even through his harsh sobs, Draco heard the crack from behind him. He stood and whirled, wand in hand, ready to attack the wizard or witch who had dared to disrupt his mourning.

He felt a sensation like a small, warm hand wrapped around his wrist, and he sucked in a sharp breath.

"Hermione? Hadrian?" he asked, not daring to hope, looking beyond the moonlit clearing into the shadowy trees beyond. But perhaps, just perhaps, the combination of his magic and atonement could conjure up his lost ones, and he would see a curly-haired witch walking towards him, holding their infant son. "Are you there?"

Silence answered him and nothing moved within the trees. Draco's shoulders dropped.

Atonement was an impossible task. Forgiveness, however, was possible. But not quite, not yet.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The last couple lines are a homage to the novel *Atonement*, by Ian McEwan.

Quite the Family Reunion

December 2015

Hadrian Wilkins, as he was known at Hogwarts, grinned when he saw his Tasmanian Masked Owl powering through his European counterparts during morning mail delivery in the Great Hall. Tito emitted a distinctive cackle as he approached the Slytherin table and, most importantly to the owl, the platter of sausages to Hadrian's left.

"Here you go, Tito. Take another," the boy urged the owl once he landed. It was a long flight from Australia to Scotland, even with the owl's ability to utilize the Floo network. As Tito scarfed down sausage links, Hadrian was nimbly untying the purple beaded bag tied to the owl's leg. His brilliant mum had charmed it with an Undetectable Extension Charm when she was still at Hogwarts. As a practical matter, it meant that she could include sweets, treats and Muggle books in addition to her twice-monthly letters.

With a flourish, Hadrian fished two large boxes of candy from the depths of the bag. His mum had sent a generous supply of his Muggle and wizarding favorites, both unavailable at Honeyduke's or even Diagon Alley.

"Oh, yeah! Caramel wallabies!" Peter Stone practically yelled in his excitement. "Can I have one?"

"Sure," Hadrian said generously, shoving the box across the table to his best friend. For himself, he took a bar of Violet Crumble, tearing into the purple wrapper. He held it in one hand and began to munch, searching the expansive bag with his other hand to see what else his mum had sent.

"Don't eat that Muggle shite at the breakfast table," a hefty third-year sneered. "It makes me sick to my stomach." Finn Rowle was one of the blood purists the Sorting Hat had warned Hadrian about, one who still believed in pureblood supremacy and detested Muggles and Muggleborns.

"Sod off, Rowle," Hadrian said to the larger boy, a bit recklessly. "Violet Crumble is delicious, and you could stand to lose a stone or two anyways."

"Could I try it?" asked Amelia Avery, a little blonde the year ahead of him.

Hadrian passed her a purple-wrapped chocolate bar with a grin. "It's brilliant!" he promised the pretty witch.

Rowle scowled but returned to his breakfast. Hadrian smirked to himself, knowing that his charm offensive with Muggle candy and books was much more effective than Finn's bigoted comments about Muggles and Muggleborns being nothing but dirty, stupid animals. As he rummaged in the beaded bag, Hadrian made a mental note to see if his mum could charm a laptop to operate within Hogwarts. He was pretty sure that Muggle films would be a big hit in the Slytherin common room.

"Ha! Here it is!" With a cry of triumph, Hadrian pulled the Sneakoscope he had requested from the depths of the beaded bag. "Now you lot won't be able to nick my socks!" he crowed at Peter and the other first-year boys. Clean, matching socks were a valued commodity in their dormitory, especially during the morning rush to get ready for classes.

An ugly look crossed Finn's face. "How come your mum can afford to get you such expensive presents all the time? I can only think of one way a Mudblood like her could earn that kind of money."

"What, by being a biochemistry professor at a Muggle uni?" Hadrian asked with mock confusion. "Because that's what my mum does for a living. Not like your mum, who has to work nights at the Leaky because she has no qualifications and your dad's in Azkaban."

These were facts, not insults, though Hadrian was quite intelligent enough to know that the truth - when properly delivered - hurt worse than any lie. Finn's mother, like many pureblooded girls, had been educated with an eye towards finding a wealthy husband rather than acquiring any marketable skills. With her husband in Azkaban, Mrs. Rowle had to take any job she could get, and was fortunate indeed that Hannah Abbott Longbottom had taken her on as a barmaid.

Finn's face flushed an ugly, mottled red. "At least I know who my dad is."

"I know who my dad is," Hadrian said, careful not to look away from Finn to the High Table, where the Headmistress was hosting several visiting dignitaries to the school.

Finn ignored the soft-spoken words, shouting his next in Hadrian's face. "At least my mum's not a dirty whore! Your filthy mum gives it out to any wizard or Muggle who can pay her!"

"She does not!" Hadrian yelled back, launching himself across the table and punching Rowle in the nose. Rationally, he knew that taking on the older and larger boy in a physical fight was foolish, and he would be better off hexing him when he was least expecting it, but Hadrian was too furious at the insult to his mother to care.

Rowle hit him back, hard enough for Hadrian's ears to ring, and then the two boys were tussling in earnest on top of the Slytherin table, swinging wildly and heedless of the platters of eggs and bacon or pitchers of pumpkin juice. Hadrian landed a lucky punch to the older boy's stomach that knocked the wind out of him, before Finn pinned him with his greater weight and began pummeling his face.

"Snotty little half-blood bastard! Don't you talk about my dad!" Rowle wheezed at him.

"Don't talk about my mum, then!" Hadrian shot back. He swung at Finn's mouth, but then yelped in pain when his fist connected with teeth - teeth that were already halfway down Rowle's chin and growing longer by the second.

Finn screamed and rolled off Hadrian, covering his elongated front teeth with his hand, just as Professor Slughorn waddled over to belatedly break up the fight. The portly Potions professor and Head of Slytherin House clucked in disapproval. "Off to the infirmary, Mr. Rowle, and then I'll see you in my office to arrange for your detention."

Then he turned to Hadrian, shaking his head. "Really, m'boy, I expect better from you, bright as you are. You'll need to learn to control that temper of yours if you want to make prefect or join the Slug Club in a few years. Though, just between us, that was quite a nice little *Densaugeo* jinx you cast on Mr. Rowle."

"It wasn't me, Sir," Hadrian truthfully denied. It had been sly little Dora Chang-Nott, casting it unnoticed from her seat at the Ravenclaw table. He would be giving her a free run through his stash of sweets later for that brilliant jinx.

"If you say so, m'boy," Professor Slughorn said. "Now, are you quite alright?"

"Yes, sir," Hadrian muttered.

"Well, go and see Madam Pomfrey just in case," Slughorn ordered. "Have her clean that cut on your hand carefully. Off you go!" He shook his head again and tut-tutted as Hadrian walked away. "Brawling like Muggle thugs, and during an inspection day! What will the Board of Governors think?"

(x) (x) (x)

"So, how is discipline at Hogwarts these days, Headmistress?" Draco Malfoy asked with just a hint of malice, watching Slughorn as he made his ponderous way back to their table.

"Better than it ever was during your time as a student, Mr. Malfoy," Professor McGonagall replied, not taking the bait. "A few pureblood malcontents linger in Slytherin, but they are now the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, majority of Slytherin students are half-bloods, which leads to some tension within that House."

"Indeed," Draco echoed tonelessly. Looking out over the rim of his coffee mug at the sea of children breakfasting in the festively decorated Great Hall made him feel old and not a little depressed. He tried to avoid Hogwarts as much as possible, but his duties as a school governor brought him to the school at least once a term.

His usual preference during those visits was to shadow Professor Slughorn. Potions had been Draco's favorite subject in school, and Horace was always good for some crystallized pineapple, excellent liquor, and choice gossip after classes were over. Today, however, Draco had drawn the short straw. Ancient Professor Tofty would be taking Slughorn's classes and enjoying his hospitality, while Draco was stuck with McGonagall.

The old cat eyed him coldly as he sipped at his coffee. "Come along, Mr. Malfoy," she ordered. "My classes start on time."

With no little reluctance, he abandoned his beverage and followed McGonagall up the moving staircases to the Transfiguration classroom on the third floor. He noticed that the staircases shifted to accommodate her passage. "I'm surprised that you still teach classes, with your duties as headmistress," Draco commented. "Professor Dumbledore never did."

"Yes, well, Albus had a great number of extracurricular activities. I focus on education, which leaves me ample time for my dual role," McGonagall said crisply.

"You may sit here and *quietly* take notes," she pointed to a drafty corner before striding to the front of the classroom.

Taking his allotted seat and casting a silent Warming Charm, he watched the students file in and swiftly take their seats, wands and textbooks out. Draco quelled the thought that the fragile little baby he had held in his arms only a few times assuredly would have been among them, had he lived, since this was a class made up of first-year Slytherins and Gryffindors.

"Today we will be Transfiguring snails into snuffboxes," Professor McGonagall announced. "This will be the first time you are attempting to Transfigure a living organism into an inanimate object. For that reason, we are starting with a small invertebrate, due to its relatively simple nervous system and lack of skeletal structure. Who can tell me some of the challenges that accompany the Transfiguration of a creature with a skeleton?"

A few hands rose, a couple of answers were given and expanded upon, and House points were duly awarded. McGonagall's lecture continued with its usual brisk efficiency, her students taking careful notes. Draco's notes were more of a formality. McGonagall was generally regarded as an excellent teacher and his notes confirmed that, only adding an occasional question or suggestion based on recent revisions to the curriculum.

The professor was passing out snails in trays when the door opened to admit a tardy student.

"Take your seat," Professor McGonagall ordered, not missing a beat in her lecture. "And take a snail."

"Yes, ma'am," the boy said, doing as instructed, sliding in next to Peter Stone, Draco's godson.

Draco recognized the smaller of the two blond boys who had been brawling in the Great Hall by his bruised face and bandaged hand. To his surprise, despite the green tie marking the boy as a Slytherin and McGonagall's rudeness in failing to address him by name, she did not dock any House points.

The reason for that became obvious a few minutes later. Even though he had missed the lecture portion of the class and had to rely on Peter's scribbled notes, the blond boy was the first in the class to succeed in Transfiguring his snail into a snuffbox, one with an attractive swirl in the silver top that mimicked the curve of the snail's shell.

"Well done, Mr. Wilkins," Professor McGonagall praised. "Take two points for Slytherin."

The boy smirked and Draco felt a chill run down his spine. He had disregarded the boy's blond hair which, though light, was a few shades more golden than his own, but he knew a Malfoy smirk when he saw one. And Lucius Malfoy had been the top Transfiguration student in his year.

The insults about the boy's mother that had been yelled in the Great Hall, which Draco had dismissed as fighting words, suddenly made a sinister sort of sense. Lucius Malfoy's predilection for Muggle prostitutes was well known; indeed, he was currently serving time in Azkaban for breaching the Statute of Secrecy by using various charms and curses on them,

making them resemble certain Muggleborns and blood traitors who had been thorns in his side over the years. Draco had always assumed that his father, given his beliefs on blood purity, had employed Contraceptive Charms as well, but it seemed that his father's stupidity knew no boundaries.

Watching carefully as the boy helped Peter with his snail, Draco became increasingly convinced that he was looking at his younger half-brother.

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Later that afternoon, Minerva McGonagall led Draco Malfoy to her office and shut the door.

"Well, Mr. Malfoy, have you anything to criticize about my teaching?" Minerva McGonagall asked sharply, operating on the principle that a good offense was the best defense. She had caught him staring at Hadrian Wilkins throughout her first period class, and was fully expecting to be questioned about the boy.

She also was determined not to answer. While Hermione had released the headmistress from any obligation to keep her secret shortly after the beginning of the school year, Minerva did not see it as her place to get involved in any Malfoy-Granger family drama. Moreover, from what she knew and could piece together from the timeline, Hadrian had been conceived at a time when her favorite former student was Obliviated, living as a Muggle, and utterly unaware that the father of her unborn child was a Death Eater. Minerva was a morally upright Scotswoman, raised by a Presbyterian minister. To her, that sort of deception was unconscionable, and Draco Malfoy had reaped what he had sown when Hermione Granger had left him, taking their newborn son with her.

"Not at all, Professor McGonagall. Your classes are exceptionally well-taught, as always," Malfoy replied politely. "I do have a few suggestions to offer as to the Fifth and Seventh curriculums, in light of recent changes to the OWL and NEWT examinations."

His suggestions were sensible ones. Minerva, during the course of the civilized academic conversation that followed, found herself lamenting the fact that such an intelligent and often charming wizard could be so lacking in moral fiber. She had felt that way about Draco Malfoy for nearly a quarter-century, ever since she had caught him bullying another first year, the Muggleborn Justin Finch-Fletchley. Personally, Minerva blamed his spoilt upbringing at Malfoy Manor. She supposed he had since done some good with his life, working to repeal the Muggleborn repatriation law, but if she were balancing the scales - like Justice - Malfoy's past acts still would tip him towards the Dark.

His sense of entitlement was fully on display with his next request, a surprisingly blunt one. "Your first year Transfiguration prodigy - Mr. Wilkins - what can you tell me of his family circumstances?"

"Nothing whatsoever, Mr. Malfoy," Minerva said repressively. "That sort of information about students is strictly confidential."

"Come now, Headmistress. I *am* a member of the Board of Governors. All I really want to know is the name of the boy's father."

"You should know that as well as I do," she replied coldly. With the exception of his mother's brown eyes, Hadrian Wilkins was the very image of Draco Malfoy at age eleven.

He looked at her with unreadable grey eyes. "The boy - is he well-cared for? Can his mother meet his needs?"

Minerva suppressed a snort of laughter. "Yes, she can."

When Malfoy looked doubtful, she elaborated, speaking in terms he would understand. "He has new, top-quality robes, a purebred owl for his familiar, and his mother regularly sends him mounds of sweets and treats. The last time I saw such excess was when you were a student."

"That's good," he said, doubtfully. "I know that my father preyed upon vulnerable Muggle women, so I had some concerns about the boy's home life."

"I shouldn't take anything that Finn Rowle says at face value," Minerva said acidly. "Mr. Wilkins' mother is not and never has been a prostitute. She is simply a young woman who was taken advantage of by an unscrupulous wizard but has since moved on with her life."

"I am sorry about that," Malfoy said, looking vaguely ashamed. "Please let her know that I have substantial resources and would be happy to use them to support my brother."

"I shall tell Professor Wilkins," Minerva promised, "but I doubt she believes the sins of the father should be visited upon the son."

After Malfoy took his leave, Minerva reached into her lower-left desk drawer and pulled out her emergency bottle of Laphroaig, reveling in the peaty, smoky flavor on her tongue. She was not sure if she felt like laughing or crying at Draco Malfoy's mistaken assumption that his son was his half-brother.

But, as Minerva reminded herself, an Obliviated mind protects itself, and Hermione Granger always did have a knack for Memory Charms.

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"Wotcha doing?" Peter Stone asked curiously, craning his head towards the sheet of parchment on Hadrian's desk. Several crumpled sheets already resided in the rubbish bin, while a few more littered the floor in the Slytherin boys' dormitory.

"Writing a letter, or at least trying to," Hadrian answered in frustration. It had been a fortnight since his father's visit to the school. Every night, after finishing his essays and revising for the now-ongoing end of term exams, Hadrian started a letter to the cold-eyed wizard who had subjected him to such unnerving scrutiny during Transfiguration class. He had yet to get beyond the salutation. *Dear Dad* was too casual and *Dear Father* was too unexpected, but *Dear Mr. Malfoy* seemed too formal. *Dear Sir* might work. Hadrian penned those two words with his quill and then stopped, unsure how to go on. He had wanted to send the letter before the holiday break, but that was looking less and less likely only two days before the Saturday

morning departure of the Hogwarts Express to King's Cross, taking students home for the Yule, Christmas, and New Year's holidays.

"Who're you writing to?" Peter inquired, preferring to put off his Charms homework by minding his friend's business.

"What's your godfather like?" Hadrian asked back. Maybe knowing more about the man would help him to figure out what to write to him.

"Uncle Draco? He's the best!" Peter enthused. "He took me out to a smashing tea in Hogsmeade when he was here last. Asked me about all the Chasers' brooms on each of the House Quidditch team and which I thought was the best - I think he's getting me a racing broom for Christmas!"

Hadrian felt the tiniest pang of jealousy, not for the broom, but for Peter's close relationship with a man who had not even given him a nod of acknowledgment during his last Hogwarts visit. "He didn't seem very nice when he was in McGonagall's class."

"He can be cold like that, but not with people he knows," Peter explained.

"Yeah, well, he doesn't know me," Hadrian muttered.

"The love of his life died. That's why my godfather's the way he is," Peter explained melodramatically.

"Oh?" Hadrian raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Yeah, you've heard about the Lost Ones, right?" Peter began. "My mum was one of them."

Hadrian nodded. He knew all about the forty-odd Muggleborn witches and wizards who had been Obliviated and sent to live in the Muggle world. His mum was one of them, too. But having seen how Jamie Potter and his Weasley cousins were always expected to live up to certain standards based on their relatives being members of the Golden Trio, he had let everyone assume his mother was an Australian witch, not a war heroine.

"Uncle Draco was in love with one of the Lost Ones. Not my mum, of course, but one of her friends. He found her after she had to leave the wizarding world and they lived together in Muggle London. She died having a baby, and so did the baby, and he's blamed himself ever since for not taking her to St. Mungo's."

"That's sad," Hadrian said, thoughtfully. This was a side of the story he had not previously heard. "How do you think he'd feel if he found out she and the baby were alive?"

Peter gave him a puzzled look. "He'd be chuffed, of course, but there's no way . . ."

Then his eyes grew comically wide as he looked between Hadrian's distinctive features and one of the crumpled parchments beginning with *Dear Father*. "Blimey!" he exclaimed. "I don't think it matters what you write, but you need to send that letter *tonight*!"

(x) (x) (x)

Draco Malfoy was in his office at Malfoy Enterprises the following afternoon when an unfamiliar owl began pecking insistently on one of the windows. Looking up from a quarterly report, he frowned in annoyance at the distraction. Post owls typically knew to go straight to the mail room, but this owl looked foreign - not to mention extremely determined.

"I hope this is important," he sighed as he unlatched the window. The owl fluttered to his desktop and looked expectantly at the remains of his sandwich. "Go on, then," he told the bird, who snatched at the crust as he untied the scroll on its leg.

It was sealed with a plain blob of green wax and addressed to him in unfamiliar, rounded letters. Draco opened it with every expectation of it being an unwelcome invitation or request from a charity to which he did not subscribe, but found himself literally open-mouthed at the letter's contents.

Dear Sir, he read, you may remember me from your visit to Hogwarts earlier this month. I'm the one who helped Peter (your godson) with his snail in Transfiguration. I'm also the one who punched Finn Rowle in the Hall for saying stuff about my mum. He's a ruddy liar.

I don't really know how to say this, but Peter says it doesn't matter, just that I should tell you straightaway. I'm your son. I didn't die, my mum just took me to Australia because the Ministry would have Obliviated her again and taken away her magic if we stayed in wizarding Britain with you. She didn't die, either (obviously), but just made it look like we did. I hope you're not too mad at her. Also, she changed our last name to Wilkins instead of Foy (for me) and Granger (for her).

We're going to be in the UK for the Christmas hols, visiting my Aunt Ginny. But I probably can have tea one afternoon, if you're free?

Sincerely,

Hadrian Wilkins

Draco shut his mouth with a snap and re-read the letter again, twice. Then he threw a handful of Floo powder into the grate, not wanting to waste another minute. "Horace Slughorn's office!" he shouted.

Luck was with him, as the elderly Potions professor was enjoying a free period, feet up on his desk as he gently snored.

"Mmmph," Slughorn muttered, stirring at the sound of the Floo. "Mr. Malfoy? What can I do for you?" he asked drowsily.

"I'd like to borrow one of your students for tea," he explained.

Horace looked uneasy, caught between his responsibilities as a teacher and desire to accommodate a school governor. "This is the last day of exams, you know. Is it urgent, or could it wait until this evening?"

Draco paused, stifling his initial impulse to immediately demand his son. If Hadrian was anything like his mother - that stubborn, swotty, vindictive *bitch* - he would not appreciate being taken out of an exam. "What is Hadrian Wilkins' exam schedule? I could wait until this evening if I had to, but it's a bit of a family emergency," he temporized.

Slughorn gave him a shrewd look before rifling through the student timetables arranged in piles on his desk. "Mr. Wilkins is finishing up his History of Magic exam. He'll be done in ten minutes, if you care to wait?"

Draco did not care to wait, not even a minute, but he could tolerate a brief delay. Sluggy was kind enough to escort him to Binns' classroom, puffing from the walk up to the fourth floor, his eyes shining with curiosity. "Hadrian's quite a bright boy, you know. I should have realized you were related - the resemblance is quite strong," he said, gently fishing for information as to the nature of the family connection.

Draco smiled, happy to use Slughorn's propensity for harmless gossip to his advantage. He wanted everyone to know Hadrian was his heir. "My son's a true Malfoy."

Slughorn nodded sagely. "I expect you'll be pleased with his marks. It's rare for a Muggle-raised student to adapt so well, but blood tells, I always say," he prodded.

"Muggle-raised?" Draco sneered. "His mother's Hermione Granger, brightest witch of her age. I damn well expect Hadrian to be at the top of his class."

The scrum of students pouring out of the classroom, liberated from History of Magic, cut short any response Horace might have made. "Hadrian, m'boy, come over here please."

The bright-haired boy readily obeyed the summons from his Head of House. "Yes, sir?" he inquired, with a quick glance towards Draco.

Draco answered, not quite believing this moment was real. "Congratulations on finishing your exams, son. I've come to take you out to tea to celebrate."

(x) (x) (x)

The short walk into Hogsmeade was filled with flurries of questions and answers, broken up by the occasional awkward silence. Hadrian could tell that his father wanted to find out all about him, but was sometimes saddened by how little he knew. But then some tiny, trivial commonality would brighten his grey eyes.

Like when Hadrian sat down the back room at Madame Puddifoot's - which, mercifully, was much less pink than the main tea room fronting on the village street - and ordered lemon cake and double-chocolate cookies.

"Those are my two favorites," Draco commented with a smile, doubling the order. "And a pot of your house tea," he requested of Madam Puddifoot, who had chosen to wait on the two blond wizards herself.

"I can't wait until third year, so I can come here for Hogsmeade weekends," Hadrian said enthusiastically.

"This tea shop, or the village more generally?" Draco asked. Hadrian was finding it hard to think of him as his father, let alone his dad, though they looked uncannily alike.

"The village, of course," Hadrian rolled his eyes. "I really want to go to Honeyduke's. And Zonko's, too. Madam Puddifoot's is more for girls, though they do have the best cakes."

"Ah, you may feel differently in a few years," Madam Puddifoot winked as she delivered their cake, cookies, and tea. "My shop is where all the boys take their sweethearts."

"Did you ever take Mum here?" Hadrian asked innocently.

His father choked on a stray crumb of cake, covering his mouth with his napkin. "She and I weren't friendly in school," he managed. "Rather the opposite."

"Oh," Hadrian said in disappointment. "Peter said you were in love with her."

"Who knew that my godson had such a romantic streak? Flint will be so proud," Draco smirked in amusement. "What has your mum told you about me?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"Just facts, mostly," Hadrian replied. "She told me I looked like you. She told me you were an only child and your family's from Wiltshire. My mum said you played Seeker for Slytherin and Potions was your favorite subject. That's about it."

"That's all true and surprisingly fair of Granger," Draco mused. "I doubt I would have shown such restraint in her place."

Hadrian was surprised at the use of his mother's surname. "How come you don't call my mum Hermione? That's her name!"

"So's Granger," his dad pointed out. "It's a habit, I guess. That's what I called her throughout school, or at least the nicest thing I called her."

Hadrian narrowed his eyes. "What else did you call her?"

"She didn't tell you?" his father seemed surprised.

"She told me I could meet you once the law changed, when we could go back to England, and I could judge for myself," Hadrian answered, jaw jutting out in challenge.

Grey eyes met brown. "I was a right little shite at Hogwarts, especially to your mum," Draco confessed. "The Malfoys are one of the oldest and wealthiest pureblood families in all of Europe, and I had been raised to believe that purebloods were superior. It was hard for me accept that a Muggleborn could beat me in every class. So I mocked her hair and her teeth and how she always had her hand up in class and knew the right answer. And I called her a Mudblood."

"Why'd you call her a Mudblood?" Hadrian demanded, shocked and outraged. "That's a horrible thing to say!"

"I know it is, now, and I haven't used that term in years," his father said, with what seemed like sincere regret.

"Did my mum ever forgive you?" Hadrian asked.

"We were very happy together," Draco said, in an evasive non-answer. "My gossipy godson told the truth - I was madly in love with your mother, and she loved me, too."

"But she didn't remember anything about what you had done," Hadrian accused. "She'd been Obliviated."

"Yes," his father agreed, tiredly rubbing his forehead. "But not very well. Hermione still remembered a lot, could even do magic on occasion. So I like to think she knew who I was and forgave me, at least on some level."

Hadrian munched on a cookie, thinking hard. "I could you give you my mum's mobile number," he finally offered. "She's pretty good about forgiving people."

"She's also got a temper," Draco observed. "But thanks," he added, jotting down the digits on a pink doily. "She and I do need to talk."

"You won't be able to reach her now, though, unless you manage to catch her on a layover," Hadrian cautioned. "She's flying from Australia to meet me at King's Cross."

"Is she now?" Draco purred. A mildly evil grin of anticipation crossed his face. "It just so happens I'll be at the train station myself. It should be quite the family reunion."

Letting Bygones Be Bygones

Chapter Notes

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

December 2015

Hermione shivered slightly and shook out her umbrella as she waited for the arrival of the Hogwarts Express. Platform 9 and 3/4 was enclosed, and London was enjoying a run of spring-like weather, but she had come from tropical summer in Australia. Even worse, she had gotten drenched by a careless cab driver when entering King's Cross station.

"Hermione!" Katie Bell squealed and grabbed her in a hug that had the force of a rugby tackle. "I was hoping you'd be here. It's so good to see you!"

"Katie! It's wonderful to see you, too!" Hermione returned her friend's embrace with interest. "Who's this?" she asked, smiling at a dark-haired little girl hovering shyly behind Katie.

"This is Lucy, my youngest," Katie introduced her daughter. "Lucy, *not* Lucretia," she added with a grin.

"Lucy's an adorable name," Hermione grinned back. She imagined that Voldemort and Satan would be ice-dancing together in hell before Katie agreed to name a child after Lucretia Flint.

"Is Mark around?" she asked, hoping for a negative answer. As much as she enjoyed reconnecting with old friends now that she was allowed back into the magical parts of London, there were some people she would rather avoid. That group included any ex-Death Eater and, specifically amongst that class, Marcus Flint and his boss.

"He'll come straight from the office, once Draco unchains him from his desk," Katie joked.

Hermione did not laugh. Instead, she twitched.

Katie narrowed her eyes at the telltale sign. "Hermione, please tell me that you've talked to Draco, that he knows you're alive and isn't going to stumble across you and think he's seen a ghost."

"I haven't spoken with him," Hermione admitted. "Honestly, I have no idea what to say. And I'm not sure I could get out even three words before he hexed me or I hexed him."

"You two," Katie shook her head in mock dismay. "Good thing it only takes two words to say 'I'm sorry.' You're going to have to co-parent with him, Hermione. Hadrian will want both of you in his life. That's going to require some forgiveness on both of your parts."

"I know," Hermione acknowledged. She craned her head, looking down the tracks for any sign of the scarlet steam engine. "They say time heals all wounds, but this is still pretty raw, even after eleven years."

"Let it go," Katie advised. "They also say time wounds all heels, and I can assure you Draco's been hurting ever since you left him."

Hermione made a non-committal noise, relieved to see the Hogwarts Express chuffing around the curve, still with no sign of Malfoy. With any luck, she would be able to make it off the platform without a confrontation.

Several meters down the platform, Ginny Thomas waved to get Hermione's attention. "We'll see you and Hadrian Christmas Eve at the Burrow," she shouted, "and then you're coming to stay with us at Lionsgate Cottage."

"Of course!" Hermione confirmed with a smile. She and Ginny had been exchanging owls about her plans for the holiday. After a few days in London with Hadrian, showing him the Muggle and magical sights, rural Devon would be a lovely escape.

After what seemed like forever to Hermione, the train finally drew into the station and to a halt. Students began disembarking, greeting their parents with varying degrees of enthusiasm. With a smile, she noted Jamie Potter and Teddy Lupin attempting to play it cool in the universal manner of adolescent boys everywhere, barely acknowledging greetings from Ginny and Dean Thomas or Andromeda Tonks.

Cho Chang-Nott fiercely hugged her pony-tailed daughter, as Theo stood by, carefully minding a spectacled little boy and younger, pig-tailed girl. Sensing someone watching her, Cho looked up warily and met Hermione's gaze with only a flicker of surprise. With a nod, and without bringing Hermione to Theo's attention, Cho and her family disappeared back into the crowd.

Then a blond boy in denims and a Slytherin green jumper was stepping off the train, and Hermione had eyes for no one but her son. Happily, Hadrian still was enough of a child to be thrilled to see her, squeezing back tightly as she hugged him. "Mum, I missed you. But Hogwarts is brilliant, just like you said! I want you to meet my best friend, Peter," he chattered. "And I was going to send an owl, but figured I would see you first. I had a really good tea yesterday in Hogsmeade with - "

A sharp crack, right behind them, barely interrupted his excited monologue. "Dad! You made it!"

Slowly, very slowly, Hermione turned around to face Malfoy, standing stone-faced next to a grinning Marcus Flint, his crooked teeth evidencing that Katie had yet to persuade him to take advantage of the wonders of Muggle dentistry.

"Hullo, Hadrian," Draco said with real warmth, giving his son a quick, manly sort of hug. "Let me get your trunk."

"Granger," he said, in a much cooler voice, eying her from head to toe. Hermione suddenly felt very self-conscious of her rain-frizzed hair and the bags under her eyes from yesterday's series of long flights.

Malfoy, of course, had not a strand of white-blond hair out of place. The years had been kind to him, and Hermione was disconcerted to feel an odd tugging sensation, both on her wrist and below her navel. She did not appreciate her own involuntary physical reaction, but supposed that it made sense. They still were linked by a blood bond, and he remained far and away the best shag she had ever had. She flushed, both at his continued scrutiny and in remembering some of the things he had done to her body.

"You look well," Malfoy concluded, "for the resurrected corpse of a woman supposedly dead these past eleven years."

Hermione's face turned an angry red. Then Malfoy leaned forward and whispered perhaps the only words that could have prevented her from retaliating and making a scene. "Skeeter's here. With a photographer."

Even as he spoke, a camera flash went off, capturing the reunion of the Thomas family on the platform. Flint moved slightly away from Katie, Lucy and Peter to stand in front of Hermione and Hadrian, blocking them from Rita Skeeter's sight. "Cheers, Hermione. I think Drake's touched in the head. You look a damn sight better than some Inferi."

"Thanks, Marcus," Hermione said dryly.

"Dean Thomas was appointed Head Auror this morning. That's why the *Prophet* is here," Malfoy continued softly. "If we leave quickly and quietly, we won't be noticed."

Hermione nodded, realizing that if there was a confrontation to be had, a public railway platform was not the place for it. "Shall we go?"

"You and Hadrian go first. I'll meet you outside the barrier, on the Muggle side," Malfoy directed.

Katie stepped forward, glancing uneasily between Hermione and Draco. "We'd like you to come over for New Year's Eve," she invited, "Nothing fancy, just a few old friends."

"Please, Mum, can we go?" Hadrian begged. "Peter's my best mate!"

"If your mum doesn't wish to go, I'll take you," Malfoy said with an air of challenge.

Hermione met it head-on. "I'll be there," she promised. "We'll all be there."

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Hadrian surreptitiously watched his parents as they made their way out of the train station, crowded with holiday travelers. His mother looked tense, while his father was ignoring her, tapping something on his phone.

Draco looked up at her huff of annoyance. "What, Granger? I just ordered a car for us. We'd be waiting forever in the taxi line." He led them to a side entrance, where a sleek black sedan was pulling up to the curb. While there was space for all three of them in the roomy backseat, his father - after a hesitant look at Hadrian's mum - sat next the driver in the front and gave the man an address.

"You still live at the same place?" his mum asked, surprised.

His dad - Hadrian was finding it easier to think of Draco like that - nodded curtly, staring out the windshield. "I bought the house from the owner several years back, but I still live in our old flat."

"That must have been a good investment," his mother said, trying to make conversation.

"I don't give a Kneazle's whisker about the money, Granger. I kept the flat because I wanted to be reminded of you. I thought you were dead, the both of you."

Hadrian bit his lip at the bitterness in his father's voice. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his mum biting her lip as well. The rest of the short drive was made in silence.

A loud crack broke that silence as soon as the front door closed behind them. A small, bat-eared creature, no taller than Hadrian's waist, bowed low to the three of them. "Mipsy is so pleased that Missy Hermione and young Master is coming home again, now with Master Draco. Mipsy is happy, so very, very happy!"

"What in the ruddy hell is that?" Hadrian yelped in alarm.

"Language!" his parents reproved in unison.

"That's a house elf, Hadrian. We don't have them in Australia," Hermione said with clear disapproval for their use in wizarding Britain. "Her name is Mipsy."

"House elves is not liking Australia, oh no. It is being too warm and sunny. We is liking cold and damp," Mipsy explained.

"I will never understand house-elf psychology," his mum muttered to herself.

Hadrian's father, in the meantime, had grown white-faced with fury. "What do you mean about Hadrian coming home *again*, Mipsy?"

Hadrian was reminded why he had waited months to contact him, even after his mother had freed him from keeping their secret on the first day of September. His father was an intimidating wizard when he was angry, and just right now, he was furious.

"Oh, shut it, Malfoy," his mum said, entirely unimpressed. "I put Mipsy under my Fidelius Charm. Don't you dare tell her to punish herself. If you're going to be angry at someone, be angry at me."

Hadrian thought that offer by his mum was rather foolishly brave, since his father rounded on her immediately. "Oh, I'm already beyond angry at you, Granger," he hissed.

"Mipsy is bringing tea to the lounge! Nice, British tea!" the elf frantically announced.

The stratagem actually worked, since Hadrian's parents, still glaring at one another, moved from the foyer.

"Is young Master wanting biscuits in the kitchen?" Mipsy asked, pulling Hadrian in there by the wrist without waiting for an answer.

The kitchen was warm and smelled utterly delicious. "What kinds of biscuits are you baking?" Hadrian asked eagerly, temporarily distracted from parental drama by the mouth-watering aromas.

"Mipsy is baking chocolate-cherry biscuits, and sugar angels, and raspberry-lemon bars," the elf said, arranging two plates with all three kinds. She handed one to Hadrian and placed with the other on a tray with the tea things and a steaming pot. Then, with a snap of her fingers, the tray disappeared.

"Young Master should sit here," she ordered, pointing him to a stool at the kitchen island. She eyed Hadrian critically.

"Mipsy is thinking that young Master needs to eat at least five biscuits. The Hogwarts elves is not too bad, but they is not Malfoy elves. They is not taking care of young Master as good as Mipsy would."

She poured out a tall glass of milk as Hadrian obediently began to munch. "Young Master is needing to drink this," she directed, passing it over.

"Why do you keep calling me your master?" Hadrian asked with curiosity. Mipsy was about the furthest thing from servile he had ever met.

"Because you is a Malfoy, and you is belonging to me," Mipsy explained. "Wizards is needing elves to look after them, so's they don't gets into trouble. Mipsy is minding Master Draco since he is a baby, and trying to keeps him out of trouble, and now Mipsy will mind young Master, too!"

Hadrian decided that his mother was right, and house-elf psychology was incomprehensible. Still, Mipsy seemed well-intentioned, and her biscuits tasted even better than they smelled, causing Hadrian to actually moan in appreciation. "These are *so* good!"

"Mipsy is thanking young Master." The elf permitted herself a small, closed-lip smile and took one sugar angel for herself.

"Er, are they going to be alright?" Hadrian asked about his parents. He had just realized it was awfully quiet in the lounge.

"Mipsy is not worried. Master Draco is never hitting Missy Hermione, and Missy Hermione, even if she is hitting, is not causing too much damage. Mipsy just is casting a Silencing Charm, so they is not disturbing us."

"What about magic?" Hadrian squawked. "They could be dueling in there!"

"Oh, no. Mipsy is also taking their wands!" The little creature held two wands aloft in her gnarled hand and smiled again, this time showing a mouthful of pointy teeth. Hadrian

recognized his mother's vinewood wand and assumed the other, darker and well-polished, belonged to his father.

"You can do that?" he asked, startled.

"Yes, it is house-elf magic," Mipsy said smugly. "We can takes our wizards' and witches' wands when they is misbehaving. But then we have to punish ourselves," she added.

"Please don't," Hadrian said.

"But Mipsy already is!" exclaimed the elf, her bulbous eyes wide and innocent-looking.

"Mipsy is taking *only* one biscuit, and not even chocolate, even though chocolate is being her most favorite."

Since Mipsy's sugar angels were delectable, Hadrian had no further worries that the elf was being too hard on herself. "I still think we should check on Mum and Dra- Dad," he said.

"Mipsy is thinking they needs privacy," the elf answered, but Hadrian - as the Sorting Hat had recognized - was as stubborn as his mother and as sly as his father.

"How will you know if they need help - need anything - if you aren't watching them? We can both look through a keyhole," he proposed, since the lounge had double doors.

Mipsy wrung her hands but agreed. "Mipsy is only makings sure young Master is not causing trouble," she said primly.

Outside the closed doors to the lounge, she gestured for him to stay back. "Mipsy is making sure there is nothing young Master shouldn't be seeing," she explained before pressing one eye to the keyhole and one bat-like ear to the wooden door.

Hadrian blushed at the thought. He thought his mum was very pretty, and witches like Madam Puddifoot seemed to think his dad was good-looking, but he really did not want to think about his parents being attracted like that to each other. Obviously they had been at one time, since he was here as a result, but he had no desire to see them snogging - or worse.

"Young Master can be looking now," whispered Mipsy.

Hadrian peered through his keyhole, to the depressing sight of his parents, seated opposite each other on the facing sofas, having a very proper discussion over tea. His mum had her back to him, but her back and neck were rigid, while his father's face was fixed in a cold sneer, looking at some point on the far wall rather than the woman he was conversing with.

" . . . all that I would like is some reasonable access to my son. There's no reason why you and I can't determine what that reasonable access is, Granger."

"I am willing to allow Hadrian to see you as much as he likes. However, I think it would be best to have our solicitors hammer out the details. You have a history of taking advantage, you see," Hadrian's mother said, her voice carefully controlled.

Hadrian saw his father's left eyelid flicker at that last sentence. Whatever his mum meant by that clearly had hit home. "I've already apologized for that. Repeatedly."

"Yes, as I've acknowledged," his mother said coldly. "Acceptance is a different matter."

"In that case, I'll send an owl to old Brocklehurst and ask him to contact your solicitor," his father said stiffly. "I can't see Theo wanting to touch this."

"I'm afraid Mandrake is already representing me, but you may have whomever it is you retain call on him," Hermione said, standing up and preparing to leave, but not even offering her hand to shake. "I do thank you for being so surprisingly civil about all this, Malfoy."

"I'm doing this for Hadrian, not for you," came the cold reply. Draco stood as well. "I'll show you out."

Hadrian and Mipsy scrambled away from the lounge doors back to the kitchen.

Once there, the elf pulled at her ears in distress and knocked her snout against a cabinet in frustration. "Mipsy is knowing she should have locked them in the bedroom!" she cried.

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"Draco, darling! It's so delightful to see you. Has it really only been a few months since your last visit?" Narcissa cooed, acid etched into her words.

"Happy Yule to you, too, Mother," Draco said with impeccable courtesy. His goals, as always on his thrice-yearly visits with his mother, were to keep from losing his temper and to evade her match-making schemes.

Lunch was an interminable affair, held in the dining room where meters of polished mahogany separated Draco and his mother. It featured all of his childhood favorites to eat and spiteful gossip about Narcissa's friends and their families for entertainment, the latter made bearable by excellent wine. Once the last course was cleared, Narcissa got down to business.

"For you, my dragon," she proclaimed, taking the seat next to his and handing him two silver-wrapped packages.

He opened the first, which was promisingly bottle-shaped, to reveal a bottle of premium, single malt Ogden's. "Thank you, Mother," he said sincerely. "I'll put it to good use."

"You drink too much," she sniffed. "Now open the other," she urged, with an eagerness that made him uneasy as he removed the wrapping paper from a heavy, hardcover book.

"*Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*," he read the title with disgust.

"It's been annotated and updated just this year," Narcissa said with enthusiasm. "It now includes half-bloods and natural children! I've looked through it and marked some likely candidates. You could handfast with any one of them and then dissolve the relationship if it doesn't produce a child within a year and a day, or we could proceed straight to a betrothal contract."

"No, Mother. Absolutely not," Draco shook his head. Randomly, he turned to one of the pages she had marked with an emerald-green serpent bookmark.

"Isabelle Flint? Have you gone mental?" he nearly screamed. "She's only sixteen! That's disgusting! And if you even floated this idea to her parents, Marcus would hold me down while Katie castrated me!"

"Perhaps she's a bit young," Narcissa conceded. "And Merlin knows you're not getting any younger and can't afford to wait. But there are some witches in here closer to your own age."

"Mother, get this through your head. I've been married twice, and the third time is not the charm! I am not going to go and shag some witch in order to fulfill your fantasy of having a pure-blooded grandchild."

Narcissa looked pained. "It's not just that I want to be a grandmother. As it stands now, the Malfoy line dies with you. You've mourned my precious little Hadrian and that Muggleborn of yours far too long."

Draco opened his mouth to tell her that Hadrian was alive, and Hermione too, which meant he still was bonded to her, but a sudden, sharp tweak to his wrist stopped him. "I don't give a flying fuck about the Malfoy line," he said instead.

"You've made that quite obvious," his mother said frostily. "Living like a Muggle for the last dozen years, agitating for Muggleborn rights and the repeal of the repatriation law You are not the man your father and I raised you to be."

"Thank Merlin for that!" Draco said fervently.

"However, you are still our son," Narcissa continued regally, as though he had not spoken. "Your father and I want you to be happy. Therefore, if you wish to breed with some Muggle woman, we will not disown you and we will recognize a half-blood as your heir."

"I truly appreciate that gracious concession," Draco replied with the cold sarcasm he had learnt as a small boy from observing Lucius. "And what about the Malfoy curse? I'd rather not see another woman bleed out before my eyes as a consequence of bearing my child."

His mother waved an airy hand. "You and Astoria have been divorced for years. Your marriage to Miss Granger lasted mere hours before you became a widower. I truly doubt the curse would have any seriously negative effect." More likely, she considered the probable death of any Muggle paramour of his a positive thing, or mere collateral damage so long as Narcissa got the grandchild she so desperately desired.

The minor ache in his wrist reminded him that his parents still were a potential threat to Hermione. "I'd like a promise from you and father not to harm any woman I may have a child with, regardless of her blood status. And I want that promise in the form of an Unbreakable Vow," Draco bargained.

"And then you'll try to give me a grandchild?" Narcissa asked, her blue eyes shining.

"You'll have a grandchild," Draco promised, though it was doubtful she ever would be allowed in Hadrian's vicinity. Perhaps once a year, but only if Hermione agreed.

"You know that means we'll need to visit your father in Azkaban. He'll be so happy to see you!" Narcissa clapped her hands in a girlish affectation.

Draco nodded resentfully. "Let's go, then."

"Now?" his mother exclaimed.

"No time like the present," Draco said. Since it was already mid-afternoon, they would get to Azkaban as visiting hours were ending, so he could minimize the amount of time he had to spend in Lucius's presence.

So it proved. "There are only ten minutes left before visiting hours are over," the bored-looking prison guard announced when Draco and his mother arrived at the wizarding prison.

"We only need five," Draco replied, slipping the man five Galleons. "The prisoner's name is Lucius Malfoy."

"Yeah, I know who you are," the guard said, pocketing the money. "One bleached blond toff, coming right up!" he announced, sending his rodent Patronus squeaking through the prison walls.

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Dean Thomas was whistling a Muggle Christmas carol in the elevator used to transport prisoners at Azkaban. Neither the dreary atmosphere of the prison nor having to work on the winter solstice, which many wizards considered a holiday, could impair his cheerful mood.

After more than a decade as a fugitive, Antonin Dolohov had been apprehended in Russia, extradited to wizarding Britain, and installed in the small, stark cell in Azkaban where he would be spending the rest of his miserable life. Dean, as Head Auror, had just finished interrogating the man, and had elicited quite a bit of useful information. Now he was heading home to his lovely wife and a house full of children back from Hogwarts, with a promise of his favorite dinner of bangers and mash and four days off, all the way through Christmas Day.

Idly, he wondered if Dolohov's capture meant Cho Chang-Nott would finally return home from Canada. Dean knew that her oldest child was at Hogwarts, although his girls did not know her well since she was a Ravenclaw while they were in Gryffindor. Even if Cho chose to stay in Vancouver, he hoped having the last of her rapists in prison would bring her some well-deserved peace of mind.

When the elevator doors opened on the minimum-security level to admit a guard and Lucius Malfoy, Dean grinned. The formerly-immaculate Death Eater was dressed in a baggy orange prison jumpsuit and his shoulders were stooped. Without his trademark cane, the elder Malfoy's limp was apparent. The now-pathetic Dark Wizard was a sight to warm any Auror's heart.

"Family visit?" he asked conversationally.

Lucius curled his lip, but the guard answered for him. "Yeah. His wife and son are here."

Dean's grin widened. He had been meaning to have a few *unofficial* words with Draco Malfoy, ever since seeing him with Hermione at King's Cross. Thus, when Lucius entered one of the small, secure rooms dedicated to visits between prisoners and their families, he was accompanied by the newly-appointed Head Auror as well as an Azkaban guard.

Narcissa glared at Dean. "I was unaware the Ministry had senior Aurors serving as prison guards these days."

He smiled with real satisfaction. "Two of my men just brought in your husband's old pal Dolohov. Caught him in Moscow after all these years. Then I heard you were here for a cozy family visit with Lucius, and I wanted a word with Draco."

"What a coincidence," the blond wizard raised an eyebrow. "I wanted a word with you as well, Auror Thomas. Shall we speak outside?"

As soon as they were alone in the corridor, Dean stepped into the blond wizard's personal space. "I saw you on Platform 9 and 3/4," he said.

"Yes, I saw you there as well," Draco coolly acknowledged. "Congratulations on your promotion, by the way."

Dean frowned at a response that was much milder than expected. "I want you to understand that Hermione is the closest thing my wife has to a sister, which makes her like my sister as well. I've already had the head of MLE confirm - in writing - that no kidnapping charges may be filed in the absence of an official complaint. You never filed one, as I recall."

"Oh, I recall that as well," Malfoy said, grey eyes suddenly hard. "But I would *never* bring charges against Granger. If nothing else, she is the mother of my son, and I have no desire to alienate Hadrian after just having met him."

Dean snorted at this typical example of Malfoy's self-centered arrogance. "If you try anything with Hermione, you'll have me to deal with," he warned. "And I promise you, I'll do everything within my considerable power to protect her."

"Do you really mean that?" Malfoy asked, more amused than impressed.

"Of course!" Dean said hotly.

"Excellent," Draco said. "I'd like to bind both of my parents with Unbreakable Vows couched in terms that will prevent either of them from ever doing anything to harm Granger. You can make yourself useful by acting as our Bonder."

Dean looked at the other wizard and nodded. Malfoy had changed, if his primary concern was protecting Hermione rather than getting back at her. "I would be pleased to do so."

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After taking a chilly leave from his mother and departing Malfoy Manor for his Knightsbridge flat with a sigh of relief, Draco spent the rest of his Yule evening in solitude with the bottle of Firewhiskey he had been gifted with, thinking depressing thoughts in keeping with the shortest, darkest day of the year.

Foremost in his mind was Granger - exasperating, prickly, formidably intelligent, damnably attractive. The witch who he still wanted, but could not have. It had taken every bit of Draco's self-control to maintain a facade of cold indifference to her presence back in his flat, when he alternated between wanting to snog her until she was breathless or shake her until her teeth rattled.

Then there was the knowledge that he had missed out on the first eleven years of his son's life - almost the entirety of Hadrian's childhood. His son was everything Draco had ever hoped for, and it hurt to have missed out on all of the events and experiences that made the boy who he was. Still, he had to admit that Granger had raised their son well.

Last and worst was the painful realization that he had only himself to blame. If he had played fair with Granger, she would have done the same for him. As he looked back on their months together - he had not even managed a year with her - Draco recognized that there were more than a few occasions where he could have come clean, or at least told her enough of the truth that she would have forgiven him and stayed even after her memories returned.

Still, no matter how much he had fucked up, Draco was grateful. At least he was not dead in the Dark Lord's service or, even worse, serving a life sentence in Azkaban for the crimes he committed at sixteen. His relationship with Granger might be fraught, and his relationship with his son might be awkward and tentative, but at least they were both alive and there something there to build upon. That was a good thought to fall asleep upon.

"Daddy, daddy! Wake up!" The little girl's piping voice was punctuated by surprisingly strong hands tugging at his wrist.

Draco cracked open one eye to the sight of his four-year-old daughter, her hazel eyes sparkling with excitement and her blonde curls bouncing as she hopped in place. "What is it, Clem? And be quiet, or you'll wake your mum."

"Sorry!" she took her hands off his wrist to clap them over her mouth. Then she removed them and giggled. "It's Christmas. I want to see what Santa brought me!"

"It's still dark outside, Clem," he tried to reason with her. "We don't open presents until the sun is up. And why are you wearing your brother's prefect badge?"

"Hadrian said I could!" Clementia said with indignation, in response to the implied accusation she had taken the badge without permission. "It has a 'P' for princess, and I want to be a princess."

"You're already my princess," Draco said indulgently.

His little girl, the accidental byproduct of too much champagne to ring in the New Year and a jet-lagged miscalculation with her mother's birth control pills, dimpled at the compliment. "If

I'm your princess, what's mummy, then?"

"She's my queen," he said softly. "She's the light to my darkness. She's my guiding star."

"Good answer," his wife said sleepily.

Draco rolled partway over, wrapping an arm around her non-existent waist and pressing a kiss against her temple. "Morning, lovely," he murmured.

"It's not morning. It's still the middle of the night," Hermione groused, her eyes firmly shut.

"It's very early morning," he contradicted, gently rubbing her belly. He could feel the latest baby, their third and last, kicking underneath his palm. "Seems like Leo's wide awake."

"He never sleeps. All he does is kick and punch," Hermione complained.

"He punches? Takes after his mum, then," Draco teased.

"Please, daddy, can we go and open just one present? One teeny, tiny little present?" Clem interrupted, wanting her parents' attention on her, not her baby brother who wasn't even born yet. "Then I'll be really quiet," she promised.

Hermione smiled with her eyes still closed. "Like how this little manipulator takes after you."

"C'mon, poppet," Draco urged, not bothering to deny the obvious. Instead, he led his daughter out of the bedroom so his wife could enjoy a bit more of a lie-in. "Let's see if Santa kept you on the nice list this year."

"Salazar's snake!" Draco sat up bolt upright in bed. After his visit to Azkaban, no matter how brief, he had expected nightmares - but nothing like the vivid dream he had just experienced. "What the fuck was that all about?" he muttered, rubbing his aching head.

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Christmas Eve at the Burrow was a raucous affair, with Molly and Arthur's children and grandchildren filling the crooked little house until it was splitting at the seams. Somehow, Molly had expanded her oven to roast multiple joints of beef and several Christmas geese, and the makeshift wooden table under the tent in the yard groaned under the weight of her side dishes.

After dinner, everyone had crammed into the lounge for the protracted process of opening the presents stacked high under the tree. Hermione had brought a box of gourmet Muggle chocolates for her hostess and a flashlight for Arthur, not expecting anything in return, but Molly had knitted her a pair of mittens and made one of her famous Weasley sweaters for Hadrian.

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley," Hadrian said politely. With a cheerful grin, he exchanged his green and silver striped cashmere jumper, purchased during an afternoon spent with his father in Muggle London, for the homemade red sweater with a golden 'H' knitted on the front.

"You look very handsome now," Dominique observed, with enough veela allure, even at twelve, to make Hadrian turn beet-red and stammer.

"I don't know about handsome, but he does look much better without his snaky stripes!" Minnie Thomas giggled.

"We all think you look better in Gryffindor colors, Hadrian," her twin teased. Hadrian's honorary cousinship trumped House affiliation, although all three Gryffindor girls had made exaggerated giggling noises at the colors of his original jumper when he arrived.

"A house-elf delivered these for you earlier," Molly said, pulling two presents elaborately wrapped in silver and gold from beneath the tree.

Hadrian eagerly tore into his large, square box, while Hermione eyed her own smaller package with trepidation. Given the cold terms on which they had parted, and her refusal to accept his apology, she had no idea why Malfoy was sending her a gift, particularly in a jewelry-sized box.

"Mum, look! Dad got me a deluxe Potions kit!" Hadrian exclaimed in excitement. Eying the contents, Hermione thought it was more likely custom rather than deluxe, given the rarity of some of the ingredients. She was surprised it was not a racing broom, though Malfoy was showing surprising deference towards her parenting style.

"That's very nice," she agreed, plucking a textbook from depths of the box. "What's this?" she asked with suspicion.

"Oh, it's Dad's old potions book from his first year. I told him you'd let me use yours, because it has all your notes, and he said he'd give me his, too, because his godfather gave him some tips that he wouldn't have shared with you," Hadrian explained.

"What, like Snape's Dark Arts spells for baby Death Eaters?" Ron inquired nastily from the shadows.

Hermione finished her inspection of the book and handed it back to her son with a smile. "It's just brewing instructions and methods for preparing ingredients," she said for Ron's benefit. "Professor Snape knew his subject. It should be very helpful."

"Aren't you going to open yours, Hermione?" Ginny loudly asked. The redhead had the curiosity of a cat, but much less subtlety.

"Honestly, I'm a bit nervous as to what Malfoy may have sent," Hermione admitted.

"Ooh! Maybe it's naughty unmentionables!" Ginny speculated.

"We're not exactly on those terms, Gin," Hermione replied. She ripped through the wrapping paper and opened the box to forestall any further speculation, revealing a folded sheet of parchment with Malfoy's distinctive handwriting.

Granger,

This is not a gift. As a matter of wizarding etiquette, the witch keeps her betrothal and/or wedding rings even after a relationship has ended. I am merely returning your property to you. The enchantments on the ruby ring in particular are very powerful - I hope you will wear it in good health.

Yours truly,

D.M.

Two rings were nestled in silk underneath the parchment. Hermione instantly recognized her distinctive ruby and gold engagement ring, having worn it on her finger for months. The platinum ouroboros from her handfasting took a moment longer to place, since she had worn it for only a couple of months and never as a ring.

"Whoa, Mum! Look at that snake!" Hadrian said with admiration. He reached out a finger to feel the gold-tipped scales on the ouroboros.

"Don't touch it!" Hermione said, her voice sharp with concern. "Why don't you and the girls go and play?"

"I have some new WWW products you might like to see," George helpfully suggested.

"Okay, Mum," Hadrian acceded to her request, despite the worry for her in his brown eyes. "Thanks, Uncle George."

"Bill, would you please check these rings for any curses?" she asked the eldest Weasley son as soon as Hadrian was out of the room.

He handed the platinum ring back to her after a short scrutiny. "This one has no charms, other than the standard protective spells against theft, loss and tarnish."

Bill held the gold and ruby ring between two fingers. "This one, however . . . I've never seen anything like it."

"Did Malfoy curse it?" Dean Thomas asked, looking grim.

"No, nothing like that," Bill reassured them. "It's all protective in nature, but the complexity of the spell work is amazing. I really do think this ring would counter any curse short of an Unforgivable. Would you mind if I took it to Gringott's? Ragnuk - my boss - would give his left dagger to see this."

"That's fine," Hermione agreed, and Bill reverently pocketed the ring. She slipped the platinum ring onto the gold chain around her neck for safekeeping, not wanting to wear it on any of her fingers. In her son's absence, Hermione settled into a comfortably worn armchair on the periphery of the Weasleys' holiday celebration, sipping on a glass of mulled wine George had earlier supplied with a wink.

Despite the cheerful setting and congenial company, her thoughts were unsettled. Hermione never liked to think of herself as a coward, but she had to admit that her Gryffindor courage had been notably absent since encountering Malfoy again. Since their frosty encounter at his

flat, Malfoy had seen Hadrian twice, but Hermione had arranged for him to pick up and drop off their son at Mark and Katie's house, so she did not have to see him. The slight weight of the ring around her neck was a reminder that she was evading Malfoy, and Hermione despised herself for it.

"Alright there, 'Mione?" Ron Weasley perched on the arm of her chair and grinned at her, sloppy from having imbibed several glasses of George's potent mulled wine.

"I'm fine, Ron," she forced a smile. "Happy Christmas."

His smile faded and he grunted in response. "It's not so happy with Lav and the full moon tomorrow."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Hermione said, making a mental note to continue to avoid her former roommate. While Lav was not a werewolf, the territorial aspects of her personality were exacerbated by the full moon. "Does the wolfsbane potion help at all?"

"We can't afford it," Ron said, his tone full of self-pity. "Not all of us have rich boyfriends," he added bitterly, glancing at the platinum ring barely visible under her blouse. "Though Lav certainly has a few who aren't so wealthy."

Hermione had seen Lavender earlier in the evening, her hair now an unnaturally bright and straw-like blonde and her robes shockingly low-cut for a family Christmas party - or really any event that did not involve a stripper's pole. "I'm sorry to hear that," she repeated, not sure what else to say.

"I'm sorry about you and Malfoy," Rob said, his blue eyes sincere, if bleary from too much of George's mulled wine. "I should have rescued you when I saw you with him at that park in London, but Lav was with me and she never would have stood for it. She's always been jealous of you."

"She has no reason to be," Hermione said, even though Ron was leaning too close. "Why didn't you tell the Order you'd seen me with Malfoy?"

"The fucking ferret blackmailed me!" Ron complained. "Said he'd have me up on charges for following you. He also wanted to send Lav to Azkaban for assaulting you."

"That was it?" Hermione asked, a note of disappointment clear in her voice. Ginny had never seen her with Malfoy, while Dean had been Obliviated, Dean and Angelina drugged, but Ron had no such excuse.

"Don't be in a snit like that, 'Mione," Ron said, annoyed with her. "It was too late anyways - Malfoy already had you preggers with his ferret spawn. Arrogant little shite takes after his father, doesn't he?"

Hadrian had just walked back into the room, laughing with one of the Thomas twins. He did look very much like his father as a boy, except that he was laughing with, rather than at, a member of the extended Weasley clan.

"Insulting my family by showing up wearing Slytherin colors, hitting on my nieces, thinking he's smarter than me . . . " Ron muttered darkly.

"Don't talk about my son that way, Ronald Weasley!" Hermione snapped. "Green and silver are Christmas colors, Hadrian's good friends with the girls, and as for the last - "

Ron held up his hands, placatingly. "I'm sorry, 'Mione. I'm acting like a right prat. I just wish . . . you should have had a son with me. It should have been me."

Once, Hermione had wished the same, but no longer. She stood up abruptly as Ron leaned towards her again. "If you'll excuse me, I want to catch up with Angelina. Happy Christmas to you and your wife."

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"Here, make yourself useful and pass these around," Katie ordered her partner, handing him a tray of canapés fresh from the oven for her guests on New Year's Eve.

"Yes, dear," Mark said with exaggerated humility, grabbing one for himself and swatting her on the arse as he left the kitchen.

"Gods, you two are so embarrassing," Isabelle complained, her delicate adolescent sensibilities offended by her parents' antics.

Katie unabashedly smirked at her daughter. "Just hope you're so lucky when you reach my age. Now, take this tray out. You can have one glass of champagne, but make sure anyone under sixteen gets the sparkling grape juice! And carry it - don't levitate it!"

Grumbling, Isabelle grabbed the tray and stomped from the kitchen. Katie followed her with a second tray full of champagne flutes, grinning to see the mix of witches, wizards and Muggles happily milling around the ground floor of her home on New Year's Eve.

She made her way over to Justin Finch-Fletchley and his current boyfriend. Stuart, a level-headed Muggle pediatrician, had lasted six months so far, a record for the flighty Hufflepuff. Katie was hopeful her friend had found a keeper. "Here you go," she said, doling out champagne to the men. "Only a few minutes 'til the countdown!"

"Justin, do you want to get some grape juice for Esmerelda?" Stuart asked. Another point in his favor, in Katie's opinion, was that he adored Justin's daughter. Esmeralda spent at least a weekend a month with her biological father while her mother went shopping in Muggle London and Paris. Tonight, Pansy was at a pureblood society ball with her husband and had once again left her daughter with Justin and Stuart - to their delight.

"I'll take one for her, but I think Esmerelda's too busy chasing Hadrian to come back to her dear old dad!" Justin chuckled. "She had the poor kid backed into a corner the last time I saw her."

"Did she really?" Katie laughed. "Like mother, like daughter, then." She walked away as Justin explained the joke to his boyfriend.

Making the rounds, she found Hermione deep in conversation with Dennis Creevey about the military conflict and humanitarian crisis in Syria. "This conversation is far too dreary for a party," Katie chided. "Take some champagne and live a little!"

"Pushy as always, Katie!" Dennis laughed with the ease of an old friend as he grabbed a glass. "But living - more than a little - sounds like an excellent New Year's resolution!"

Due to his ability to Disillusion himself and employ other magical protections, Dennis had obtained some amazing photographs for Reuters in al-Raqqa and other Syrian towns over the past year, but his job - even with magic - was a risky one. His collection of body art now included several tattoos in memory of journalistic colleagues who had been captured and killed working combat zones in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

"Just . . . be careful when you go back there, please," Katie implored.

Dennis shrugged. "If I survived Voldemort, I can survive Da'esh. They're like Death Eaters without the wands. But don't worry - I will be careful. I like my head where it sits on my neck."

"How're you holding up?" Katie asked, turning to Hermione. She knew it was not easy for her friend, adjusting to having Draco back in her life and to sharing Hadrian with him.

"I'm fine, Katie," Hermione answered. "Malfoy and I are being terribly civilized about the whole situation."

"That's certainly an accurate way to describe it," Katie agreed tartly. "I've seen ice sculptures with more warmth than you display with one another. You two really need to talk." Privately, Katie thought they needed to have a screaming fight and make-up sex, but she knew her well-intentioned advice to that effect would not be welcome.

Hermione just shrugged. "It's hard to have a meaningful conversation with someone who refuses to even look at you."

"Well, Draco's over there with Hadrian and Pansy's daughter if you want to join them," Katie said. "It's almost midnight."

"I think I'll stay here with Dennis. We're having a nice chat," Hermione declined.

Katie walked away with a sigh. At least she had tried.

"Any luck?" Marcus asked, winding an arm around her waist and snagging one of the two remaining glasses from her tray.

She took the last one for herself. "No. You?"

"I think my pep talk to Drake about growing a pair may have had an effect. We'll see," Mark said optimistically. "Let me turn on the telly so we can watch the fireworks over Big Ben."

Katie tapped a spoon against her glass to get their guests' attention. "Now that we're within a minute of midnight, Mark and I just wanted to thank you for joining us and our family to say

good-bye to the old year and welcome the new one. We wish you all health, wealth, success, love and happiness - "

"Not necessarily in that order," Marcus interjected with a smile. "And sex. We wish you lots of sweaty, acrobatic sex - unless you're a minor or a child of mine. In that case, I wish for chastity until you're at least thirty."

"Dad! I can't believe you just said that!" Isabelle moaned, hiding her scarlet face in her hands.

"Anyhow, new year, new beginnings," Katie gave her partner a mock-glare for his interruption. "It's a clean slate, a fresh start, and," she gave a significant look towards Draco and then Hermione, "a time to let bygones be bygones."

"Subtle, Bell, very subtle," Marcus said, his sarcastic comment drowned out by their partygoers counting down the final seconds of the year.

"That was me being brave, not subtle, Flint," Katie retorted, snuggling up against him. "Be nice, and I'll let you kiss me at midnight."

And he did, very thoroughly, but Katie still was aware of Draco standing alone in a corner, tossing back his champagne, while watching Hermione give their son a hug and kiss on his forehead to ring in the New Year.

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Ten minutes into the New Year, Draco decided to act on his resolution with regard to Granger, to be completely honest in his dealings with her, but her curly head was nowhere to be found.

"Are you looking for Mum?" Hadrian looked up from his game of Exploding Snap with Peter to ask.

"Yes, I am," Draco admitted, wishing he were not quite so obvious. Then again, Hadrian was an exceptionally bright boy. Sly, too.

"She's probably outside. The end of the year always makes her cry," his son offered. Hadrian and Peter began singing. "*Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind . . .*"

Draco winced at the din. Between their exaggerated Scottish brogues and tuneless butchering of the ballad, he had little doubt McGonagall would have had the two Slytherin boys serving weeks of detention for their rendition of her favorite song.

Gathering his courage, along two flutes of champagne, Draco stealthily let himself into the back garden. He did not see Hermione immediately, but as he walked further from the house, he heard soft, childlike laughter. He followed the sound to the furthest corner of the back garden, where he could barely make her out, seated on a bench.

As he got closer, he could see that Hermione had her wand out, controlling a flock of small grayish birds flying around her. She looked up at his approach. In the soft light that filtered

out from the house, Draco saw tear tracks on her cheeks and realized the birds' calls, which sounded eerily like children laughing, had covered the sound of her crying.

"What are you doing, Granger?" Draco asked, immediately regretting the stupidity of his question and how harsh it sounded.

"Conjuring birds," she responded, her voice tight. "These are kookaburras. Small, carnivorous, and indigenous to Australia. You'll have to pardon my tears. I'm afraid I get a bit emotional around this time of the year."

"It's alright if you need to cry," Draco assured her. Personally, he was relieved to see her expressing some emotion. When they had lived together, Granger had been a passionate woman in every sense, and he had been disconcerted to see her acting with a coldness that rivaled his own.

"Did you know I once loosed a flock of canaries on Ronald Weasley?" Hermione asked conversationally, ignoring his comment. "He ran away screaming as they pecked at his face and arms."

"I'm sure the Weasel King deserved it," Draco said, hiding his unease. The kookaburras' sharp little beaks that would hurt like the devil if Granger decided to unleash them on him.

She shrugged. "He snogged Lavender Brown in the middle of the Gryffindor common room. I was seventeen and fancied myself in love with him. I thought we were going to get married and have two kids with curly red hair. It's funny how life works out."

With a wave of her wand, the birds disappeared. Cautiously, he took a step closer and set the glasses of champagne on the broad arm of the bench.

"Is that why you're crying? Because you had a child with me instead of a ginger litter with the Weasel?" Draco asked, taking refuge in sarcasm to hide his hurt.

"I have *never* regretted Hadrian, despite the circumstances of his conception," Granger said vehemently. "Once I made the decision to continue with my pregnancy, I was all in."

Draco remembered that phone call, twelve years ago on New Year's Eve. "I have never regretted Hadrian either, but I do very much regret the circumstances. I never should have manipulated your choices like that." He spoke carefully, choosing his words.

"Yes, so you've told me - repeatedly, I might add - but why should I believe you when you can't even look me in the eye?" Granger seethed. "You made a better showing right after Hadrian was born, even though I *knew* you were lying and didn't mean a word of it!"

Draco looked at her blankly, then down at the ground. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, with utter sincerity. "But I can tell you *why* I have trouble looking you in the face."

He glanced back, to see that she was listening, then shut his eyes. "Every time I do, I see you lying pale and dead in a pool of your own blood. I see your eyes glazed over, with no life left

in them. I *know* it's not real, because you're right here and you're safe and alive, but I can't get that image out of my head!" he cried.

He took a deep breath to regain his composure. "It's not so bad with Hadrian, because he looks nothing like what he did as a newborn, but you look almost the same. And I can't stand to see you like that, Hermione!"

"Oh, Godric!" she looked horrified. "I never took that false memory away, did I? Here, sit down," she ordered, making room for him on the bench.

Draco did as she said, closing his eyes again.

"This may make you feel dizzy for a few minutes," she warned.

"It's a small price to pay," he replied.

The tip of her wand brushed against his left temple. Draco felt a tingling inside his skull, and then a cool rush of relief. "Oh, thank Merlin!" he exclaimed, looking down to meet Granger's familiar eyes, without his mind superimposing the image of her corpse.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There's so much I regret that I'm not sure where to begin, but I know now I should have told you the truth as soon as you knew me well enough to believe it. There were so many times when I wanted to tell you about magic, or who I was, or confess everything I had done, but I never quite found the courage. I was terrified you'd leave me. And I never should have used magic against you when you didn't remember it." He stopped, frowning slightly at the continued tingling sensation in his head.

"That's it?" Hermione asked, soundly vaguely disappointed.

"I know it's not very eloquent," Draco shrugged helplessly. "All that I can say is that I *am* sorry, and that I spent years trying to make up for what I had done. I thought there was nothing I could do for you, but I did my best to help other Muggleborns in your memory."

She blinked, and the tingling sensation inside his skull abated. "I believe you, Malfoy," she said simply.

Draco hesitated, and then remembered his resolution to be honest with her. "When did you learn Legilimency, Granger?"

"I taught myself the summer after our sixth year," she answered. "I had to, you see, to safely Oblivate my parents. But I thought you were an Occlumens?" she asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"I am," he admitted, "but one who is trying to be honest with you. I didn't do anything to Occlude you just now."

"I know. I could tell," Granger said with just a touch of smugness. With the acceptance of his sincere if inartful apology, she already seemed more relaxed in his presence. "I wanted to thank you, by the way, for sending Hadrian over to me as it turned midnight. The New Year always makes me a bit maudlin, but he never fails to cheer me up."

"He suggested that I would find you out here," Draco volunteered.

"Is that why you came out, Malfoy?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I was already looking for you. I realized we've never rung in the New Year together," Draco observed, a bit sadly, "and I wanted to rectify that. What Katie said made sense to me." He handed over one of the glasses of champagne.

"Thank you," she said softly. "But I'm afraid it's too late. It's almost half-past," she said. She gave him a smirk, with the tiniest flirtatious edge. "You'll just have to wait 'til next year, Malfoy."

"It's not too late," Draco insisted, referring to more than the time of night.

"I'm just stating a fact. Midnight was twenty-seven minutes ago," she pointed out, consulting her watch.

"In London, perhaps. But it's still 2015 in other time zones. It won't be 2016 in the States for hours," he argued, taking his own glass and raising it for a toast. "Cheers, Granger. I wish only the best for you in the New Year."

"Same to you, Malfoy," she reciprocated, taking a sip.

They sat and drank champagne and engaged in a surprisingly easy conversation, catching up on the past eleven years almost as if they were old friends who had lost touch. Hermione happily answered all of his questions about Hadrian and her life in Brisbane, and he willingly told her about the changes he had made upon taking over Malfoy Enterprises, including the Muggle pharmaceutical division. Draco did not mention his parents, and she did not ask, but she did tell him that she had restored her parents' memories years ago. They were considering selling their dental practice and alternating between their home in Brisbane and a London flat during their retirement.

Hermione hesitated. "I haven't told Hadrian yet, in case it doesn't work out, but I'm staying in London a few extra days after he goes back to Hogwarts to interview at UCL for a professorship," she confided.

"They would be mental not to hire you," Draco said. "Brightest witch of our age, and you're pretty brilliant in the Muggle world, too."

"We'll see," she said noncommittally. "If not, I have a few other prospects in the United Kingdom, so I will be moving back sooner rather than later."

"That would be nice," Draco said, trying not to seem too enthusiastic at the prospect. He and Granger still had a long way to go before she would consider him a friend, let alone anything else. Still, she seemed committed to having a cordial relationship with him, even if only for Hadrian's sake.

"Would you like to grab a bite next week, after your interview? Or maybe just coffee?" he asked, hesitantly.

"Are you asking me on a date, Malfoy?"

He opened his mouth to deny it, but then reminded himself, once again, that honesty was the best policy. "Only if you want me to be. Otherwise, consider it me just trying to learn more about Hadrian."

"I'll call you," Hermione promised. "Or send you an owl, if you prefer."

"Mobile's better. My number hasn't changed." Draco drained the last of his champagne, feeling absurdly light.

"We probably should head back in, before Marcus and Katie send out a search party," he added reluctantly.

"What's the rush, Malfoy?" Hermione inquired. "Katie's more likely to lock us out of the house than to send Mark to find us. Why not have another?"

Draco chuckled at the truth of that. "I'm afraid I only brought the two glasses, so I can't offer you a refill," he apologized, nodding towards her empty glass.

"As it so happens, I brought an entire bottle." With a smirk, Hermione reached under the bench and pulled out a chilled champagne bottle.

At that, Draco laughed outright. "Drowning your sorrows, Granger?"

"I told you New Year's makes me maudlin. I try to be prepared," she said, sounding swotty and just the tiniest bit tipsy.

"Granger, I don't think you should drink any more champagne," Draco warned.

"Why ever not?" she asked, cocking her head to one side, puzzled. "I've only had a glass of wine and two glasses of champagne all evening. Hadrian's planning on staying over with Peter, and I'm not driving. I'll take a taxi back to my hotel."

"I had a dream," he admitted, knowing it made him sound like an arse, but adhering to his new policy of utter transparency in his dealings with Granger. "A really, really vivid dream. You were in it."

"Malfoy!" she interrupted reprovably. "I have no desire to hear about your naughty fantasies."

"Liar," he laughed at her, hearing the huskiness in her voice. "But it wasn't that kind of dream, Granger. It was a prophetic dream."

"Oh, really?" Hermione raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I can't really imagine you as a Seer."

"Hush, you need to hear this, Granger," he plowed on. "In my dream, we had a daughter, named Clementia."

"Hmmm, after the Roman goddess of forgiveness and mercy," Hermione mused.

"It's also the name of an asteroid, discovered in 1885. I looked it up," Draco admitted.

"You have a very precise imagination, Malfoy, and an unusual obsession with naming your children after celestial bodies," Hermione teased.

Draco gave her a quelling look and continued his story. "Anyways, Clem woke me up at some ungodly hour because it was Christmas morning and she wanted her presents."

"Sounds like a typical Malfoy," Hermione giped.

"Granger, you're not taking this seriously! You were there in bed with me, snoring like a bear -"

"I do not snore!" she interrupted indignantly.

"When you're pregnant, you do," Draco insisted. "I had to cast Silencing Charms when you were in your last trimester with Hadrian in order to get even a wink of sleep. And you were pregnant in my dream, with another boy. I'd actually agreed to name him Leo."

Hermione laughed out loud at how his expression soured at that concession. "So we know it's just a dream. You'd never agree to that in real life."

"Granger, you would be shocked at the concessions you could wring from me," Draco admitted. "Especially if you asked nicely enough."

He winked and she shook her head at him.

"In this dream, I knew that Clem was conceived after we got smashed on champagne at New Year's, so smashed that we forgot to cast any Contraceptive Charms. So as much as I'm enjoying your company and Flint's champagne, and even though it was a *very* nice dream, I really think you shouldn't have any more," Draco concluded.

"As much as I appreciate your concern, Malfoy, I'm a grown woman and I think I can be trusted to know my own limits," Hermione said snippily. With a bit of wandless magic, she popped the cork on the champagne bottle. "Divination is a load of rubbish, anyways," she opined, refilling her glass and his.

Draco shook his head at the unceasing recklessness of his favorite Gryffindor, but accepted the champagne. At least he had tried.

"Happy New Year, Draco." She clinked her glass against his, the connection between the crystal flutes chiming out in the otherwise silent night.

Then Hermione stood on her tiptoes and brushed her lips against his. "To 2016, whatever it may bring."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Here's wishing all of you lovely readers a slightly belated Happy New Year! Thank you, as always, for your reviews and continued interest in this story.

I realize this story has been marked complete since September, but I was never entirely satisfied with the ending. Now, it really is done, other than fixing stray typos and the like. Please me know what you think, but I think it's a stronger story for having chapters 49 and 50. I leave it to your respective imaginations whether Draco's dream is just a dream, or whether it comes true in 2016 (or 2017, since Hadrian would be a prefect for at least two years, three if he's not eventually Head Boy.)

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