

A Marriage of Inconvenience

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A Marriage of Inconvenience

by [Beforetheralbook](#)

Summary

The Marriage Law and Procreation Plan has just one goal: to produce magical children.

Draco is preparing to wed before he is matched, until he changes his mind at the last possible moment. Now he's bound to follow a law that would take away everything he's supposed to want and give him the one woman he could never have.

How does Draco cope with a match who is not thrilled by the prospect? How does he work his way into her heart and also her pants by the Ministry-imposed deadline? And what on earth is he supposed to do about the fact that he's never actually done anything like this before?

Join Draco on his adventure to win over Hermione Granger, despite the marriage law she hates and every other inconvenience life throws at them. Marriage is never easy, but Draco is up for the challenge.

Featuring a BAMF Hermione Granger and a Very Good Boy Draco Malfoy who is only slightly (okay very) intimidated by his wife.

2024 Reddit Dramione Top Fics

Best Marriage Law Fics (Top 10)

Best Virgin Draco (Top 10)

Notes

► Posting, Binding, and Anti-AI Policy

- Translation into Polish available: [\[T\] Małżeństwo z niedogodności - A Marriage of Inconvenience](#) by [Cravedka](#)

Chapter 1: Wedding of the Season

30 August 2003

It was a Saturday, balmy and unseasonably warm. It was as though the weather knew that all around wizarding England today, weddings were taking place, and it decided to cooperate with clear skies and perfect humidity.

At the Malfoy estate, the gardens had never looked better. The musky scent of roses was heavy in the air, each bush perfectly pruned to display the blossoms at their peak. The lawn was a precise five centimeters high with not a single weed in sight. It looked like velvet, and three hundred white chairs were lined up in rigid rows, their spacing confirmed with a ruler.

Narcissa Malfoy presided over it all with a critical eye. Only a slight tightness around her mouth portrayed her stress in arranging an event of this importance and magnitude. Next to her stood Beatrice Greengrass who was not nearly as serene.

Beatrice had always coped with stress by talking too much.

Draco stared down at his mother and future mother-in-law from the window seat in his bedroom, his occlumency walls rising as he watched them dispassionately.

In tomorrow's papers the media would crown one of the events taking place tonight as the Wedding of the Season, and Narcissa and Beatrice were determined to win it. They had stiff competition, however: a double wedding that included the entire Golden Trio and Ginny Weasley was taking place elsewhere at approximately the same time as the Malfoy-Greengrass nuptials. Between the two, everybody who was anybody would be in attendance at one of them. Most of the other weddings that had occurred today had taken place that morning. The Malfoys had been invited to several others, though they declined due to Draco's own marriage that evening. Narcissa believed that Draco's wedding should be the *only* one scheduled for this coveted time slot on the thirtieth of August, and for the most part the rest of society fell in line when she made her wishes clear.

The Potter-Weasley-Granger double wedding, however, had not gotten the message. Narcissa, naturally, viewed it as a challenge, and for the last six months all she talked about was the color of the napkins and the species of birds that would be released upon the binding and whether candlelight white or ivory was a more appropriate color for Astoria's dress.

Draco had been fighting a low-grade migraine for months.

He cast a bored eye over the chairs that were slowly starting to fill with guests, and he wondered who they were. The list of people Draco truly cared about was very short: Theo, Blaise, and Pansy topped the list. Then came his mother and his father distantly from there. If Draco was honest with himself, that was his entire list. Not for the first time he had the

uncomfortable thought that Astoria did not rank, and he automatically raised his occlumency walls to stop thinking about it before it could really take hold.

The occlumency blocked it, as it always did, and Draco felt that comfortable numbness settle over him. Occlumency was his blessing and his curse. He had become so adept at it during the war that he used it instinctively. It was the only way he held it together when watching people get murdered. It was the only way he could cast unforgivable curses himself. It was how he survived his admittedly short stint in Azkaban while waiting for his trial after the war. It was the tool that enabled him to finish Hogwarts and then re-enter society with whispers of his past misdeeds haunting him like ghosts. He relied on occlumency like breathing, but it made him cold and distant. He had spent years watching his own life pass by as though it was somebody else's, and he was simply peering through a window as an outside observer.

His parents credited the maturity that comes with age for the self-control Draco had developed during the war. It was only his three closest friends who knew the truth: that occlumency was destroying Draco as much as it saved him. He turned to it like a drug to cope with his life and its pressures, the most recent of which was the marriage that would be taking place shortly.

Marrying Astoria Greengrass came as no surprise to Draco. They had been promised to each other as children in a nonbinding bethrothal, and Draco always knew he would marry her someday. He had dragged his feet with a formal proposal and engagement that would allow them to set a date because he really wasn't that fussed. She was pretty enough, but she was placid. She was well-bred. She was soft-spoken. She knew precisely which utensil to use when faced with a meal that was upwards of seven courses, and Draco had not seen her engage in any socially challenging conversations since she was fourteen years old. She knew how to keep relationships inoffensive and shallow.

In other words, she was utterly perfect and therefore entirely uninteresting.

Draco briefly considered other witches when he was fourteen and fifteen years old — namely, Pansy Parkinson. Pansy, however, was more like a sister and not a lover, and after a few fumbling kisses they accepted the inevitable. Then he was sixteen and plotting to murder Dumbledore. Then at seventeen he watched people be murdered in his home on a regular basis. At eighteen he was back at Hogwarts, fresh from a stint in Azkaban where he discovered that many of his classmates were thoroughly traumatized and wary of him. There were only a few witches who appeared interested, but they still held him at arm's length after some basic experimentation. He didn't get very far with them and found little emotional connection in any event. After all, who could really connect with the youngest marked Death Eater immediately after the war?

By nineteen he was back at the Manor and starting to accept his fate with his betrothed while Astoria was finishing Hogwarts too. He hoped a year apart would improve her, but once she was out Draco took one look at her and still found her so dull there was nothing he could do but occlude.

With both of their educations complete, there was every expectation that Draco would get down on one knee, but he didn't. His occlumency walls were working overtime as his father

was released from prison after a shockingly short sentence and began to ingratiate himself with society yet again. Draco's twentieth year passed behind a shroud of occlumency and then his twenty-first. His parents and the Greengrasses started making not-so-subtle noises about getting on with it.

Draco occluded and continued to ignore them.

It wasn't until the previous summer that the matter became urgent. With the wizarding population in England and Scotland dangerously depleted from the war and fewer marriages and births than the Ministry was hoping for during the years immediately following, they instituted the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan the previous summer. It was known as the MLPP for short.

The MLPP was wide-sweeping. The Ministry immediately outlawed all contraceptives. Then they announced that the first of September, 2003 would be the date of the first annual Matching Ceremony. The Ministry declared the first of September to be a traditional day of change and growth in the wizarding community. It was the ideal day to begin a new tradition.

Privately, Draco thought they picked it because it happened to fall on a Monday this year.

At the Matching Ceremony all unmarried witches and wizards between the ages of twenty and forty would be randomly matched and married, with the only avenue for divorce being the production of three live children. The couple would have three months to consummate their marriage bond after the ceremony took place, with monthly couplings required from there. Failure to consent to the marriage would result in an extended stay in Azkaban until the unwilling party agreed to it. Failure to consummate or couple on schedule would send both husband and wife to Azkaban together until they agreed to correct the problem. And use of any contraceptives on the prohibited list by that age group would also result in a visit to Azkaban, and both witches and wizards were subject to random testing of their bodies and wands.

Unsurprisingly, the MLPP had received quite a bit of pushback from the affected group of witches and wizards, but it passed anyway thanks to the outsized weight of the older generations who still controlled the Wizengamot. Most of them had not fought during the war so they were – in Draco's view – rather unfortunately still alive. That meant Minister Shacklebolt had only to say the magic word to get them to agree to his plan to repopulate wizarding Britain.

Grandchildren.

That one word had been a rallying cry, and it had greased the wheels for a swift approval. It was unsurprising to Draco that most of the witches and wizards his age had no immediate interest in children; after all, their own childhoods had been torn to shreds. But the gray-haired members of the Wizengamot had been dreaming of a do-over, and the moment Shacklebolt pointed out that babies naturally meant *grandbabies*, he received overwhelming support for his mad plan.

And not only that, he presented it as sensible. The first Matching Ceremony would not take place for a full year and a bit, and purportedly this gave the younger witches and wizards plenty of time to arrange matters themselves. Those who were married with a consummated bond before the deadline were exempt from the monthly couplings. Contraceptives would still be illegal and the requirement for children before a divorce was still applicable, but the Ministry would not force sexual proximity on those who voluntarily consummated a marriage bond before the deadline. The powers that be assumed that any couple who did it of their own accord would be attracted to each other well enough that nature could just take its course. To Draco's great surprise, the last year had proven that theory to be largely true, and couples who married early after the MLPP was passed were now starting to spread their *own* happy news.

Draco could only assume that most couples who were doing this on their own didn't occlude every time their spouse entered a room.

The enactment of the MLPP had penetrated Draco's occlumency shields just long enough to make him formally propose to Astoria and set a date for the wedding. So here he was, on the last Saturday before the deadline, finally making good on the betrothal his parents had arranged more than two decades prior. Draco found some dark amusement in the fact that the Golden Trio had also procrastinated with their own nuptials just as much as Draco did.

Draco was pulled away from his ruminations about his dreadful bride by his door opening, and his three best friends converging upon him. They never knocked. There was no need.

"Well?" said Theo, as he strode toward a small spread of food and drink the elves had preemptively laid out for them. "You're going through with this then?"

"It's not like I have much choice," pointed out Draco, as Theo rummaged through the selection of food and made a small plate for himself and Pansy, who sank down onto a nearby couch with a groan.

"Just as long as there will be no... gods, I can't even say the word without wanting to vomit..." she moaned.

Draco cast a questioning glance at Theo, who mouthed, "*shrimp*," and Draco felt a ghost of a smile cross his face at this. Pansy was newly pregnant, and Draco found himself a bit fascinated by the whole thing. He didn't know much about pregnancy and childbirth himself, having always been told that his only job was to perform on command. But Pansy was like a sister to him, and he had observed any number of odd things that seemed to be wrong with her in these early weeks. Draco had spent the last month watching her eat strange foods and avoid things she had always loved. Her nausea had been debilitating at times and not limited to the mornings. She even developed an aversion to Draco's cologne and told him if he continued to wear it she wouldn't be able to come within twenty feet of him. And she persistently fell asleep on the settee in Draco's room or Nott Manor at half past seven in the evening. She hadn't made it to eight o'clock in weeks.

"I'll tell the elves to get rid of it," said Draco courteously.

"Good. Hopefully Narcissa won't kill me, but I just can't abide..." she cut herself off with a yawn. "You know what, I need a nap more than I need snacks. Wake me up at the last possible moment please," she finished as her eyes fluttered shut.

All three wizards smiled at her fondly, and Theo tucked a throw around her as Pansy started to drift off.

"She's not going to make it to the end tonight," he whispered. "She's been exhausted. I've never seen anything like it."

"It's strange isn't it? I mean, she doesn't even look pregnant yet," said Blaise, as he eyed her curiously.

Theo gave a wolfish smile. "Oh there are some parts of her that *definitely* look pregnant."

"Merlin Theo, we did not need to know that," groaned Blaise, and Draco had to agree.

Draco believed that Pansy and Theo were perfect for each other, but that didn't mean he wanted to hear details. They had gotten married in the spring, having always intended to do it eventually. The contraceptive ban meant that their family was also growing a bit earlier than they intended. Still, Theo and Pansy had both come around to the idea of marriage and early parenthood fairly quickly. Draco was struck by how much they both loved each other and this baby they had never met before, even though pregnancy was a condition Pansy obviously detested. She was only ten weeks along, and she already declared it to be torturous.

Theo grinned for a moment before his face turned serious.

"I mean it, Draco, are you ready? Especially for tonight?"

Draco's walls started to go up, until Blaise's sharp voice stopped him. "Don't do that. It's a reasonable question. And you've told us before that occlumency... suppresses things."

Draco grimaced, but forced his walls back down. "Look, it will be fine. It's just sex."

Both of his friends gave him identically skeptical looks.

"It *is*," insisted Draco. "Besides, I've done... *things*."

"But not that thing," pointed out Theo reasonably. "And no other things for a very long time."

Draco sighed. "You know why I waited."

"Yes, because the Malfoy seed is something to be cherished, apparently," said Theo, rolling his eyes.

"And because I was betrothed," pointed out Draco.

"To someone you don't care about," added Blaise.

Draco slumped. “Maybe not, but I only have to do it one time, and then we’re home free. The Ministry won’t make us couple on any sort of schedule. And she’s pretty enough. It will be fine.”

“She’s going to be a cold fish in bed,” muttered Theo, and Blaise nodded his agreement.

“Well then it’s a good thing I’m done after one night, isn’t it?” asked Draco sourly.

Theo and Blaise exchanged glances.

“I don’t like this, Draco,” said Blaise.

Draco threw up his hands. “What’s the alternative? I don’t have a love match like Theo did. I’m not a citizen of another country like you are. We both know you would have found your own match if you hadn’t been able to renounce your British citizenship.”

Blaise dipped his head in acknowledgment. “Perhaps. I’ll admit being a dual citizen gave me an out. Italy would never dream of imposing something like this.”

“Exactly,” said Draco firmly. “And I’m very happy that you were able to exploit that loophole, but I had no such advantage. I’ve been promised to Astoria for my entire life and always knew I would end up here someday if I didn’t find someone better. I’m fine. She’s fine. It will all be just fine.”

His friends looked displeased by this, but Draco was already shutting them out, raising his occlumency walls higher than ever. They both noticed of course and just sighed resignedly.

“Well if it’s all fine, let’s keep it that way and get you downstairs. Narcissa will kill all four of us if you aren’t on time,” said Theo.

“I’ll take him,” offered Blaise, checking his watch. “You can give Pansy another fifteen minutes before it becomes dire.”

Theo nodded and placed a hand protectively on Pansy’s head as he began stroking her hair lightly. Not for the first time, Draco felt a pang of jealousy at the easy love his best friends shared. They were each others’ whole worlds, but they portrayed it in quiet ways: a light touch here, a knowing smile there. It had become a little more pronounced once Pansy told Theo she was pregnant. Theo had always spoiled Pansy, but ever since learning that news his attention never strayed far from his wife. It was both wonderful to watch and gut-wrenching whenever Draco considered the cold, formal relationship that would be his in the name of duty.

Duty.

It wasn’t that Theo and Pansy didn’t have their own duties to their families, but their love had grown despite it. Their families approved of their union – they were both Sacred 28 and very well-matched in terms of money and property. The Notts’ views of blood purity were traditionally more severe than the Parkinsons’ – and Theo and Pansy themselves were even softer than their parents – but ultimately that didn’t matter when Theo and Pansy picked each

other. Neither family could reasonably object when presented with their childrens' choice in a match because it fulfilled every criteria both sides could possibly desire. The Notts would remain Sacred 28 for another generation, and Pansy would be cherished as the bearer of future Nott heirs.

Draco knew that his own duty was no different than Theo's on paper, but his was to be a marriage of convenience and not love. In Draco's view, that placed his duty in a different category altogether.

Duty had become Draco's least-favorite four-letter word. It was beaten into his head from the moment he was old enough to know what it meant. It was so much a part of him that he had never thoroughly questioned it until he was in over his head during the war and couldn't find a way out.

He had a duty to make his family proud.

He had a duty to hate mudbloods.

He had a duty to serve the Dark Lord.

Duty.

Duty.

Duty.

Draco had eventually wised up and realized that some of his so-called duties were nothing more than constructs. But those constructs were still a part of Draco, and Draco was entrenched. That was especially true when it came to marriage. How was he to escape the ever-pressing duty to his name and his lineage? He had never sorted this out properly, so he did the only thing he *could* do and dragged his heels when it came time to marry Astoria. But then the Ministry of Magic took that option away as well.

Today he would finally fulfill one part of his duty that had never diminished with time and a dead Voldemort. The other part – an heir – would have to come later. Draco couldn't face *that* prospect just yet.

He wanted to wretch when he thought about it and forced his occlumency walls back up as he rose to join Blaise. That cool detachment settled over him like a balm. He was here, but he also wasn't. He had enough practice with this that he could carry on entire conversations for hours under occlumency and few would be able to tell he wasn't really present. Only his friends could guess, and even they didn't identify it all the time. He knew they would be able to see it today – he would have to occlude as hard as he ever had to cope with what was coming – but he thought they would give him a pass for it under the circumstances. He strengthened his walls so that nothing could penetrate them. It was the only way to survive the yoke of duty that was threatening to crush him.

Before he knew it he was in the garden with his mother and Beatrice, Blaise still by his side watching him warily. He could tell from Blaise's expression that he knew exactly where

Draco's mind had gone, but mercifully he said nothing about it.

"Ah Draco, you're here," said his mother briskly.

Draco said nothing, but just stared at her. She cleared her throat and gestured at the garden around her. "What do you think?"

"It's lovely, Mother, as I'm sure you know," said Draco cordially.

She made no reaction to this. Narcissa wasn't fishing for compliments. She knew her work was exemplary.

"Indeed," she said. "I only hope it will be declared the Wedding of the Season, compared to other... *events* happening this evening."

"There is no doubt," said Draco smoothly.

"Draco is certainly correct," said Beatrice swiftly. "Merlin knows that the Weasleys and a mudblood are not at all equipped to give you any competition Cissy, even if they have the *Chosen One* as a prop."

She gave an elegant sniff at this.

"True, true," said Narcissa thoughtfully. "A double wedding is a spectacle to be certain, but they would not have the resources to take the spotlight away from Draco and Astoria."

"Absolutely not," said Beatrice firmly. "In any event, I am surprised the Weasleys are celebrating it like they are. It's a sad day for them."

"Oh?" asked Blaise, and Draco's walls automatically thickened.

"Yes of course," said Beatrice with ill-disguised impatience. "Their youngest son Ronald was their last hope to stay in the Sacred 28 was he not? Six sons – five still alive – and I've heard that every one of them has married a half-blood or worse since the war. Ronald was apparently the holdout, but now he's marrying the biggest mudblood of them all. Today the Sacred 28 will lose another member."

The others raised their eyebrows at this pronouncement. Draco knew she was correct. He didn't keep up with the Weasleys exactly, but it was impossible not to hear about them through the papers. They had become nearly as famous as Harry Potter after the war. Draco knew that Bill Weasley had married a quarter-veela. Charlie Weasley had married another dragon tamer who was the son of a muggle and a foreign witch. Percy Weasley had married Penelope Clearwater, who was considered a half-blood through her muggleborn father. George Weasley had married Angelina Johnson, who was also a half-blood, and Fred of course was dead. Draco supposed Beatrice was correct that Ron was the last hope, but marrying Granger had seemed so inevitable that Draco never even considered an alternative.

"I rather think that decision was made many years ago," pointed out Draco. "Weasley has had years to get used to a muggleborn wife."

At that, Beatrice's eyes widened, Narcissa's mouth tightened, and Blaise struggled not to smirk. Even through his occlumency, Draco knew the source of their reactions: it was his use of the term 'muggleborn.' Nearly everyone in their circle still called them 'mudbloods,' though the term was considered impolite and was falling out of favor with the younger generation, having less patience for blood politics than their parents. Still, with a group like the one gathered in the Malfoy gardens today the use of 'muggleborn' was almost inflammatory. It was the one, small rebellion Draco had allowed himself once the war was over. The moment the Dark Lord was dead and buried, Draco had buried that word too. His parents had never approved of his shift toward political correctness, but they hadn't been able to stop it. Eventually they simply ceased talking about muggleborns in Draco's presence in an effort to bury their heads in the sand about the direction of their son's thoughts.

"You call them..." trailed off Beatrice delicately.

Draco just raised an eyebrow. "Granger is a muggleborn, is she not?"

Narcissa was looking paler than usual, and only now did Draco fully appreciate just how adept his mother had been at concealing Draco's own feelings from Beatrice and the rest of the Greengrasses. The talk of the "other wedding" had always been in reference to the Golden Trio as a unit. She had never singled out Granger specifically, presumably for this very reason.

Beatrice snorted. "Yes of course."

Draco shrugged. "She's been inseparable from Weasley and Potter since our first year of Hogwarts. I think the only question on anybody's mind was which one of them she would marry. Muggleborn or not, I expect the Weasleys are thrilled she chose their son and left Potter for their daughter."

Beatrice's jaw dropped. "You think a mudblood *chose*..."

Draco snorted. "Granger is capable of getting almost anything she wants. You don't have to know her at all to know *that*. If she had wanted Potter, she would have gotten Potter."

Beatrice just gaped as Draco gave her an impassive look. Narcissa used the brief silence to steer the conversation toward safer waters.

"Draco, my dear, I believe it's almost time. Why don't you and Blaise head to the front? We'll be starting in about ten minutes."

Draco gave a short bow from the neck and Blaise mimicked him. Then Blaise gripped his arm and forcibly steered him through the crowd up to the front.

"Bloody hell mate, that's one way to start," muttered Blaise under his breath.

Draco felt very little. "Did I say something incorrect?"

Blaise snorted. "Of course not. Frankly, I'm *shocked* Granger didn't marry Potter after the war. You know they lived in a tent together for *months*."

Draco shrugged. "I heard Weasley was with them too."

"Sure, but supposedly he left for a while. Merlin knows what Granger and Potter got up to once they were left all alone together."

Draco couldn't help a small smile escape at this. "I bet the thought drives Weasley mad. He was always far more interested in her than she was in him, at least in school."

Blaise grinned broadly. "No doubt. But it makes it more surprising than ever that she didn't just nab the Chosen One for herself. They were both raised by muggles, both only children, and he's loaded."

"Gryffindors were always too temperamental to seek marriages of convenience."

"Until now," pointed out Blaise.

Draco sighed. "Until now," he agreed.

They were silent for some time, and Draco watched dispassionately as the rows of chairs filled with guests. Before long, Theo and Pansy were heading down the aisle together, and Theo led Pansy to a place of honor to watch on the front row. Draco gave her a brief smile, and she flashed one back before grimacing a little and clutching her stomach.

"How is she?" muttered Draco as Theo approached him.

Theo sighed. "Pregnant. Miserable. But there's not much to be done about it. She'll manage through the ceremony at any rate."

Draco nodded and turned back to the front, his walls rising again.

"Draco," muttered Theo so quietly that Draco knew that only Blaise and himself could hear. "Are you *sure* about this?"

Draco barely spared him a glance. "What alternative is there?"

Theo hesitated.

"Exactly," said Draco, refocusing on the crowd.

"Well you could always try your luck with the Ministry," muttered Blaise.

This suggestion managed to penetrate Draco's walls, and he spun to stare at Blaise.

"Surely you aren't serious."

Blaise shrugged and glanced at Theo a bit helplessly. "I know it would be a risk, but this...."

"You aren't *here* mate," said Theo, jumping in. "You've barely been here ever since you proposed."

Draco huffed in displeasure at this. He *knew* he was overusing occlumency, but now was really not the time for his friends to point this out.

"You think I should just leave all this and enter the Ministry lottery next week? Are you both mad?" he hissed.

They shrugged and looked defeated. "Well it would certainly be more interesting than *this* ..." muttered Theo.

Draco didn't deign to respond to this. He just snorted and then turned back to the front. He had to rebuild his walls and quickly. The first strains of music were starting, and his father was leading his mother down the aisle.

They were the perfect pureblood couple: proper, aloof, and yet affectionate with each other. Their match had started as one of convenience, but love had grown between them over the years. Draco desperately hoped that the same thing would happen with Astoria, but their match had been promised so many years ago that he somehow doubted it. He had known her for most of his life and surely affection would have developed by now if there had been any room for it. Lucius and Narcissa, by contrast, had not known each other very well as young children. Narcissa was several years younger than Lucius. He had been betrothed to Draco's Aunt Andromeda as a child, who was the oldest Black daughter from that side of the family. When Andromeda ran off with a muggleborn instead, Draco's grandfather selected a different daughter to replace her. The family Narcissa had been betrothed to was not as high in the instep as the Lestranges, so she was the obvious choice. The Blacks would never say no to a match with the Malfoys, and the Malfoys felt that one sister was just as good as another. Eventually his parents were married and affection grew. Theirs was a story told over and over to the children of pureblood society, as an example of the happiness that could be achieved by doing one's duty.

As it so often did, thinking of his parents made Draco contemplate the sibling angle when it came to his marriage with Astoria.

Daphne Greengrass was unfortunately unavailable, having been betrothed and then married to Marcus Flint. Not that Draco had ever had romantic feelings for her, but he liked her more than Astoria. Draco often found himself longing for a third Greengrass sister so he could repeat his parents' success. But of course Draco was out of luck. It was Astoria or the Ministry at this point.

The music changed ever so slightly, and now Beatrice Greengrass was walking down the aisle, being escorted by her son William. Draco had never really cared for William, but he was the youngest of the bunch – he had only been out of Hogwarts for a year. He deposited his mother on the bride's side and then took his place next to Draco, at the far end behind Theo and Blaise.

Draco secured his walls yet again, and now Prudence Avery was walking down the aisle in a dress of blush pink that did little for her complexion. Prudence was Astoria's best friend. Her father was a former Death Eater, though unlike Lucius he was still in Azkaban. The Avery's did not have the same resources as the Malfoy's to secure an early release for him. Prudence, Draco knew, was exceptionally quiet, and her mother had died soon after the war.

She had a younger sister who was nineteen and an even younger brother who was about to start his final year at Hogwarts. Prudence had spent most of her time mothering her siblings rather than securing her own match ever since their mother's death.

The outcome of this was that Prudence Avery was unmatched and would be the only member of the Sacred 28 immediately affected by the MLPP, a fact which had spread like wildfire at the many weddings that had taken place over the previous few months. Her sister, Paulina, was a year too young for it and would not be matched until the following September, unless she could secure a marriage of her own before that time. Draco had always rather liked Prudence, and he felt sympathy for her predicament once he heard the news.

Now though, he was strangely jealous. How freeing would it be to just roll the dice?

Draco's occlumency walls quivered, and he took a deep breath to settle them back into place. He could not afford to have thoughts like that, not right now.

After Prudence came Paulina herself, who was selected not because of closeness, but as a way to keep the bride's side even with the groom's without causing offense. As Draco observed her through his occlumency haze, he had to admit that she was far more likely than her older sister to secure a match on her own. For one thing, she was much prettier than Prudence. For another, she still had another year for it, and Draco knew she was shrewder than her older sister. If Prudence's matching on Monday went poorly, Draco was sure Paulina would be developing a contingency plan for herself that would not fail.

After Paulina came Daphne as the maid of honor, the gentle swell of her stomach heralding the upcoming arrival of the Flint heir. Draco could not begin to guess just how far along she was, but she had reached a stage where she was pleasantly round, but not overwhelmingly so. She practically glowed as she approached the front, the chiffon from her gown whispering over her small bump. The Flints were seated in the first row on the bride's side and sent smug looks toward Lucius and Narcissa, clearly pleased that the House of Flint had secured their heir before the House of Malfoy.

Daphne gave Draco a soft smile when she approached, and something about it slipped under Draco's occlumency walls. He had never been as close to Daphne as his other friends from their year – he had always known he was betrothed to her sister, so he kept her at arm's length to maintain appropriate decorum – but he was still friendlier with her than most of the other attendees at this event.

Including the bride.

Draco's walls trembled, and he frantically patched the cracks and secured them once again. But before he could finish it, the music changed and everyone who was seated rose.

Astoria stepped into view on her father's arm, and Draco tried to block it out. She was objectively stunning: her figure elegant, the dress made of the most delicate lace that was perfectly tailored to her body to end in a subtle train, and her face set on an expression that appeared to be carved and carefully arranged for the moment. Beatrice and his mother had thought of everything. The roses in her bouquet mirrored those that had been planted around the garden – their color perfectly mimicking the blush on her cheeks. She wore drop earrings

from the Greengrass family and a tiara from the Malfoys, with a veil so sheer and delicate Draco could see every movement of her face. The few members of the media that had been invited to cover the Wedding of the Season immediately jumped into the aisle and began taking pictures of her as she and her father slowly approached Draco.

Duty.

She was perfect like this, utterly flawless.

Duty.

There would be decades of affable, shallow conversation with no heat and no love.

Duty.

Draco's life would be filled with boredom as he gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek each morning and each evening.

Duty.

He would cope with occlumency and drown himself in the frost of his own mind because it was still warmer than the coldness of his wife.

Duty.

His walls would be lowered just for tonight so that he could slip between her legs and...

Fuck.

Draco's occlumency walls started to crack in earnest. His heart began to race. His stomach flipped and churned. He was lightheaded, as Astoria and her father grew ever nearer. His entire future was laid bare before him, and it was the most uninteresting thing he could possibly imagine. Even the thought of bedding her gave him no joy at all. She was so perfect she was like a marble statue come to life. And though Draco had less experience in those matters than he cared to admit, he shivered with disgust as he contemplated touching her alabaster skin.

Could he even do it? Could he even become hard when looking at the most uninteresting woman he knew? It had never happened before, so why would it start now? Would being married and naked get him to the finish line tonight?

Duty.

Draco knew that duty certainly wouldn't help. He had never been one to perform on command, and yet that's what would be required of him for this. His father had assured him several times that bedding a pretty wife was no great burden, and Draco had clung to this scrap of wisdom. But now, in the face of what he had to do tonight his walls were falling.

The guests were still turned toward Astoria, who was halfway down the aisle now and growing ever closer. Draco felt himself sway, and then a firm hand gripped his jacket from

behind.

“You can do this,” hissed Theo’s voice.

But could he? Could he really condemn himself to his fate by marrying this woman?

He had no choice, he knew that. His only alternative was...

Theo’s voice floated back through his memory.

“Well it would certainly be more interesting than this...”

Something about those words made his occlumency walls totally collapse as he started to breathe hard.

Theo said it would be interesting, and he was surely right about that. It certainly wouldn’t be *uninteresting*. In fact, going through the Ministry matching would probably be the most interesting thing Draco had done since watching the Dark Lord die.

What an interesting idea.

“Theo,” he choked.

“What?” asked Theo quietly, but Draco heard the alarm in his voice.

“I have to go.”

“Now?” he hissed.

“Now.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere,” whispered Draco.

By now Astoria had approached Draco, and she was still giving him that cold, placid smile as her father tried to turn her over to Draco. Draco’s own hand dropped as he swallowed and stepped back before turning on the spot.

The last thing he observed before he apparated away was Astoria’s shocked expression, which cleared the final bits of rubble from his wrecked occlumency walls.

Draco thought it was the most interesting moment they had ever shared together.

Chapter 2: Room Service

A few seconds later

Draco landed with a *CRACK!* on High Street in Hogsmeade and promptly emptied his stomach.

With his occlumency walls gone and the strength of magic required to get from Wiltshire to Scotland in a single jump, the nausea that had been threatening him for the last several hours finally won.

“Ewww!” squealed a disembodied voice.

Draco looked up in confusion, pale and shaking. Some of the former contents of his stomach appeared to be floating in midair.

“What on earth...?” he muttered.

“Malfoy?” hissed the voice.

“What the fuck?” demanded Draco to the voice.

To his utter shock, Hermione Granger appeared from nowhere, shaking out a silvery looking cloak, which was dripping in sick.

“You couldn’t have aimed the other way?” she demanded, as she wrinkled her nose.

Draco was gaping, as he murmured an apology to her. She was wearing a simple, strapless wedding dress, magically hiked up a little to show the trainers on her feet. She was carrying an oddly worn beaded bag and was looking at him with disgust.

“*Tergeo,*” she hissed.

The sick vanished, and she threw the cloak back over herself to disappear again. Draco recognized the cloak of course – he knew Potter had one just like this, having covered him with it after breaking his nose on the train in sixth year.

“Wait!” cried Draco toward the place she had last stood.

He heard her footsteps halt.

“What?” she whispered.

“Aren’t you getting married?” he asked in confusion.

“Aren’t *you*?” she countered.

"I... think I might have jilted her actually."

Only now did the weight of Draco's actions at the wedding fully settle into him.

"Oh fuck, I jilted her!" he cried. "My mother is going to kill me!"

He heard Granger snort from under the cloak.

"You'd best hide somewhere else then," she advised. "I'd wager no place in wizarding Britain is safe for you now."

"I don't..."

"Go to muggle London," she said curtly. "There's an alley behind the Four Seasons, just off of Old Park Lane and Piccadilly. It's a good apparition point and their rooms should be poncey enough for you until you figure it out."

"But I don't have..." he started again.

"Just confund the muggles at the front desk to get a room. It will be fine," she snapped.
"Now I have to go."

"But what about you? What are you doing?"

"Same as you. And now I *really* have to go because Merlin knows I'll have the entire auror department and a whole pack of Weasleys after me at any moment. I'm not certain they'll believe the kidnapping note I left behind."

"What kidnapping note?" asked Draco in bewilderment.

"The note that said I was being held hostage by hostile parties, and they shouldn't go looking for me. Technically it was true — the Wizengamot and Molly Weasley certainly qualify as hostile in my opinion — but I am hoping they interpret it to mean Death Eaters. It's possible they'll be raiding Malfoy Manor very soon. Sorry about that, but it was all rather last-minute."

Draco just stared in disbelief as he heard her footsteps hurrying off, toward the direction of Hogwarts. He was torn between utter shock and bemusement at the mad conversation he just had, before turning to contemplate the one place in the wizarding world he was sure his parents would not look for him: the Hogshead. It was so dingy that he didn't believe his parents would think to check there before Monday.

Then again, Granger's advice resonated through his mind. If he hid in muggle London they would *never* find him until the deadline passed. As bizarre as it was to discover Granger running from her own wedding too, it was the most cordial exchange he had ever had with her. She was in such a rush that something told him she hadn't been lying to him when she suggested this Four Seasons place.

Draco debated for a full minute, but he knew he had to make a decision soon. No doubt there was already a search party out for him too.

He finally nodded to himself and stepped back to turn and apparate one more time when several more *CRACKS!* filled the air, and Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter both came barreling down the street. They skidded to a halt when they saw him.

“Malfoy?” asked Potter in confusion. Weasley looked like he was about to be sick, and Draco took a step back.

“Potter,” said Draco cautiously.

There was an awkward pause until Potter shook himself out of it. “Look, have you seen Hermione by any chance? She’s due... somewhere.”

Draco cast an eye over their matching dress robes, which were far nicer than he had been expecting. He idly wondered if Narcissa really *would* win Wedding of the Season, before remembering that there was no wedding taking place at Malfoy Manor any longer. She would lose by default.

He shuddered to think of her reaction to this.

“No,” said Draco automatically.

“You’re certain?” asked Potter, now narrowing his eyes at Draco. “Because I cast a tracking spell on her, and it said she came this way.”

Something about this little tidbit rubbed Draco the wrong way. He and Potter had become carefully cordial since the war ended and Potter testified in his and Narcissa’s favor. It had led them to a brittle tolerance of one another, which came in handy when they ran into each other at the Ministry or the odd fundraiser. They could exchange a few, non-hostile words and then move on. But now, Draco found himself slipping back into the mannerisms of his old self, as he stared at his childhood enemies.

“Lost her, have you?” he drawled. “What was it then? A lover’s quarrel? Or did she just jilt the Weasel and leave him standing at the altar?”

Weasley nearly growled at him. “Fuck you, Malfoy.”

“Are you offering then?” asked Draco politely. “I would have thought you were saving yourself for Granger.”

Weasley said nothing to this and just snarled as he shoved past Draco, now heading toward Hogwarts too. Draco narrowed his eyes and turned to find Potter watching him a bit coldly. Unlike Weasley, Potter had evidently learned to control his temper. Then again, Potter wasn’t the one who had just been jilted. Draco glanced down and saw a thin gold band on his left ring finger.

“You went ahead and got married then?” asked Draco, raising an eyebrow.

Potter shifted uncomfortably. “Ginny and I went first,” he shrugged. “We didn’t realize Hermione was missing until...”

“Let me guess. She never showed.”

Potter ignored this. “I’m asking you again, Malfoy. Have you seen her or not?”

“I already told you, didn’t I?”

“Well if you haven’t, what are *you* doing here?”

A muscle in Draco’s jaw twitched. “That’s my business, Potter.”

“Not if it involves Hermione,” he shot back.

Draco gave him an incredulous look. “What, you think she ran off with me? Is that it? Granted, I’m a far better choice than the Weasel, but surely even *you* aren’t that dense.”

Draco watched him deflate at this. “Fine,” he muttered. “But if you see her, please send her back to the Burrow alright? She left behind a note implying she had been kidnapped. I’m sure it was bollocks because the Burrow is very well warded, but if I don’t find her soon, I have to assume it’s a serious threat. Now that I’ve seen you here... well, let’s just say that Malfoy Manor is going to be the first place I look.”

Draco felt ill as he considered this. He was going to be in seriously deep shit with his parents thanks to his own behavior. He didn’t think his mother would ever recover if there was an auror raid too. Draco forced his childhood persona back in its box and decided to extend an olive branch.

“I think odds are good that she just panicked,” said Draco carefully. “Considering what’s coming up next week...”

Potter slumped and nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “You’re probably right.”

They said nothing more as Potter moved off to follow Weasley.

Draco waited a few seconds before ducking behind a nearby building and peering around it. He could see Weasley in the distance, nearly at the gates of Hogwarts and Potter rushing to catch up. Draco narrowed his eyes and drew his wand, aiming it carefully. He exhaled and muttered a quiet tripping jinx just as Potter reached Weasley.

“Yes!” he hissed. The spell connected with Weasley, who fell over, bringing Potter down on top of him.

Draco couldn’t very well warn Granger that the Dumb Arse Duo was in hot pursuit, but he figured he could make up for the time she lost when he delayed her. He doubted she would get very far if Potter had indeed managed to place a tracking spell on her, but at least she would lead them on a merry chase.

Feeling a bit more upbeat, Draco focused on his next destination and disappeared with a *CRACK!* A moment later he found himself in an alleyway that appeared to be a tunnel under a large building, connecting two sides of a city block with each other. He glanced around and saw that he was alone and then picked a direction at random and headed out of it. He was

pleasantly surprised to find he had chosen correctly, because as soon as he emerged he saw a large sign designating the building as the Four Seasons.

Draco's practiced eye took in the sight automatically. There was a uniformed bellman, several sleek-looking muggle cars, and an elegant woman making her way toward the front door, which opened for her automatically.

Despite popular belief, Draco wasn't *entirely* ignorant about muggles. He – like everyone – was forced to take remedial muggle studies as part of his final year's curriculum at Hogwarts once the war was over. Theo had been especially fascinated and had explored the muggle world more thoroughly than his other friends. Draco had been dragged along just often enough to be comfortable exchanging a few words at a restaurant and handling muggle money. It was true that Draco had never been in the muggle world *alone*, but it couldn't be worse than facing his parents.

Taking a deep breath, Draco gripped the wand in his pocket and strode forward. Granger had called this place poncey, and Draco assumed his most bored and arrogant expression as he approached the door. If there was one thing Draco had learned to do as a Malfoy it was to exert his superiority over everyone else.

The door slid open automatically, and Draco forced himself not to blink in surprise. He had seen it open for the woman too, but he assumed she had tripped some sort of... *switch*, if memory served. Instead, it opened as if by magic, and Draco faltered for a split second before squaring his shoulders and striding forward.

The lobby was a bit masculine, with black marble floors, a coffered ceiling, and dark walls. There were several sofas and chairs in rich fabrics, and there was even a piano in one corner, with a young man playing furiously to entertain guests. The whole thing was large and lush, and Draco was reluctantly impressed.

He took a moment to check himself, confirming that his countenance spoke of hundreds of years of apathy and wealth as he made his way toward the counter, where an attractive young woman looked up at him expectantly.

"Draco Malfoy, checking in," he said.

Then under his breath he whispered, "*Confundus*."

The woman, previously so sharp-eyed assumed a dreamy expression as she gave him a wan smile and handed over a small piece of rectangular plastic. "Room 412, Sir. The lifts are to your right."

Draco stared at the plastic with some confusion, but just pocketed it with a curt nod and made his way to join a short queue for the lifts. He followed several other muggles into a lift and saw one of them press the button for the fourth floor. He exhaled with relief. A few moments later he and an older man exited to the fourth floor, and Draco followed him from behind. Eventually the man found his room and waved the plastic in front of the door. Draco stared, but before he could understand *what* the man had done, he was inside the room and the door was shut.

Draco gritted his teeth, but there was nothing for it. He found Room 412 and began to wave the plastic too. Over and over again he waved it and nothing happened. He knew he could use a basic unlocking charm, but he also knew the Ministry had a way of tracking excessive magic. The odd confundus here and there wouldn't draw much attention, but if Draco could avoid using magic he should.

He began to grow frustrated when another door opened nearby, and a young woman exited, casting a curious glance at him. Draco's cheeks reddened.

"I can't get the door to work properly," he muttered.

She chuckled a little and approached him. "Mine's been getting stuck too. Here, let me try. I finally figured out a trick."

Draco gratefully handed over the piece of plastic, and he watched carefully as she pressed it to a small disk on the door and then brushed it smoothly. Suddenly a light on the door turned green, and Draco heard the sound of a lock opening.

"Ah, thank you," he said gratefully as he cracked the door open and shoved a foot into the jamb to keep it from closing again.

She just smiled and handed him the keycard. "No problem. I'm Jennifer."

"Draco," he said.

She raised an eyebrow. "That's a unique name."

"Unique family tradition," he quipped.

"Oh?" she asked curiously.

He shrugged. "My mother's family. Nearly everyone is named after a constellation or star."

Her eyes lit up. "That's fascinating. And how long has it been going on?"

"Oh five or six hundred years I'd say."

Her jaw dropped. "You can trace your family back six hundred years?"

"Ummm... yes?" Draco said nervously. Couldn't muggles do that too?

"Goodness, I couldn't even tell you the names of my great great grandparents!"

"Cygnus Black and Violetta Bulstrode," supplied Draco automatically.

Jennifer grinned. "I take it Cygnus was the constellation then?"

"The swan, yes," said Draco. "Bit of an unfortunate name for a bloke."

Jennifer let out a peal of laughter at this. "What's Draco then?"

“The dragon.”

“That’s much more manly,” she said, and only now did Draco see that she was giving him a rather appreciative look. “Well Draco, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I must run to join some friends for a late dinner, but I’ll probably be down by the bar in a couple of hours.”

Draco flushed. “Oh... thanks. I might see you around.”

She gave him a coy smile and then turned to head down the hallway, as Draco slipped into the room and shut the door with a sigh.

Muggles.

She was rather attractive, Draco supposed, but it had been so long since he had done anything like *that* he knew he wouldn’t be going down to the bar tonight to meet her. He was not at all prepared to break his years-long dry spell after the day he just had, and he certainly wouldn’t be doing it with a muggle. Merlin knew he would probably breach the Statute of Secrecy without even realizing it and end up back in Azkaban.

Draco raised his occlumency walls ever so slightly to push her out of his mind and then opened his eyes to look around him.

The room was nice – far nicer than any wizarding establishment he had stayed in previously and almost as nice as his room at Malfoy Manor. Draco peered around curiously and shook his head a little as he took in the luxurious finishes and fluffy linens. For all of the prejudice exhibited by his parents and their friends, he was certain that every one of them would enjoy staying in a place like this.

Draco’s stomach rumbled as he explored the room, and eventually he stumbled across a menu with instructions to order something called room service. It took Draco at least fifteen minutes to figure out how the fellytone worked and another thirty minutes before the food arrived. While he waited he played with the buttons on a black stick and made the large black box turn on, which Draco thought was a *TV*. He watched in fascination and continued to stare at it as the food arrived.

Bloody hell, Draco could do this all weekend, and he fully intended to do just that.

It was only when the owl tapped on his window that Draco allowed himself to remember what he had done earlier that evening.

He sighed as he turned off the TV and rose to let his father’s owl in. It swooped in and dropped not one, but *three* letters on the bed, and it was closely followed by a second owl he didn’t recognize that dropped a fourth. Both owls stuck around to see if Draco would respond.

Draco raised his occlumency walls as he surveyed the various letters delivered by his father’s owl Caligula. He recognized one from his father of course and ripped it up without reading it. He knew precisely what Lucius would say. He would berate Draco, threaten to cut him

off from the portions of the fortune that weren't already his, and tell him that any fees they now owed the Greengrasses would come from Draco's vault.

Fine. Draco didn't care.

He also ripped up the letter from his mother. She wouldn't be as cruel as his father, but she would still make him feel guilty. She had a way of expressing her disappointment that cut even deeper than Lucius. She would beg him to come back and make things right with Astoria, and Draco knew it was too late for that. He had made his bed here at the Four Seasons, and he fully intended to lie in it.

The third letter was from Theo, and this one he *did* open.

Draco,

Fucking hell you caused a scene. Right after you left, Astoria and her mother both fainted, Lucius declared you must be imperious or under some other evil influence, and Narcissa began to hyperventilate. Once it became clear you weren't coming back, we revived Astoria and Beatrice and then started the reception to distract the guests while your parents sent the elves through the Manor to look for you. I only just escaped your father's study after he interrogated me and Blaise. He seems to think we were the ones hiding you. I gave him free reign of Nott Manor to look for you – I assume you are smart enough not to go there, so I hope that's alright – and I expect he'll return empty-handed any minute now.

They're in a right state, but these things have a way of working out. You know how Blaise, Pansy, and I feel about your marriage to Astoria so I won't belabor the point, but I think you did the right thing. That being said, we also won't judge you if you change your mind and return to marry her before the deadline. We all know that decision was very spur-of-the-moment.

My only advice from here is to commit to whichever choice you make. Either return now to mitigate the damage or stay away and maintain a low profile until it's time for the Matching Ceremony on Monday. I have a feeling that if you show up at the Manor at any point between now and then you will be locked into a room and forcibly wed, whether you like it or not.

Hang in there mate and write back if you need anything.

Theo

Draco exhaled. It was what he was expecting, though he was glad that Theo confirmed it for him. His parents might never forgive him, but for the first time in years, Draco found himself functioning without meaningful occlumency walls to help. He was dreading seeing his parents again, and he wasn't even that excited about the Ministry matching. But he was

free of Astoria now, and he could finally *breathe*. Anyone – truly *anyone* – would be better than her.

It was the first time he had ever permitted himself to have that thought. He had been suppressing it for years.

As he allowed himself to think about it, Draco realized that Astoria embodied every single thing about his duty that he despised. It wasn't her fault – their parents were the ones who arranged it – but Draco couldn't help it. He associated that crushing weight with her and her alone. Draco didn't particularly care who his wife was or what she looked like, just as long as it wasn't Astoria. He felt a bit guilty for having these thoughts barely two hours after jilting her, but now that he allowed himself to really examine it he knew he was right.

He was free of her, and that was enough. He just needed to take Theo's advice and continue to stay away until the Ministry matched him with somebody else on Monday. Between room service and muggle TV, Draco was sure he could manage it.

He then turned to the second owl he didn't recognize and furrowed his brow. The note was short and in an unfamiliar, feminine-looking scrawl.

I have to know: did you make it to the Four Seasons or did you fuck it up en route?

Draco's eyebrows flew up in surprise. *Granger* was writing to him? She was the last person he expected to reach out. Then again, she was also the last person he thought he would see today, and yet here he was luxuriating in a fine muggle establishment based entirely on her recommendation. This was about a hundred times better than the Hogshead, and Draco figured he owed her the courtesy a response. He grabbed a small piece of paper and a... *pen* he thought it was called... and jotted out a short reply.

Obviously I made it. I would remind you that I am a Malfoy and my fuck ups have never been so mundane. I will acknowledge that your recommendation was on point. It's quite nice, and I plan to lie low until Monday. Are you still a Granger or are you a Weasel now?

Draco chuckled to himself as he handed the note back to the owl and watched it fly off into the night. He was sure he wouldn't have a response until the following morning at the very earliest. It took several hours to send a letter to Scotland, and he doubted she had made it out of the wards of Hogwarts with Potter's tracking spell in place. No doubt she was holed up there or else back at the Weasel hovel, wherever the hell *that* was.

Draco stripped out of his robes and padded to the washroom to take a quick shower and prepare for bed. He briefly considered transfiguring his dress robes into something more

comfortable for sleep, but eventually dismissed it. He wanted to avoid magic as much as possible until he was prepared to leave, and the hotel had provided a shockingly fluffy dressing gown he could use while he was waiting for Monday to roll around.

His nightly routine mostly complete, Draco emerged and came to a halt as he stared at the owl from Granger that was sitting calmly on the desk in his room. He cocked his head and studied it.

“What on earth?” he muttered as he pulled her note from his leg and opened it to read.

A few things:

First, you’re a git.

Second, I will always be a Granger regardless of whether I’m married or not.

Third, I am not married, and I fully intend to leave the country just as soon as my two ex-best-friends leave me the fuck alone. They are currently lying in wait outside of my door.

Finally, I’m glad you like the Four Seasons. If I had more time I would consider making this a Project and introduce you to the finer points of muggle life in an effort to deprogram you. Alas, there are more urgent things occupying my attention at the moment. That being said, I am presently at the Ritz down the street, and it’s quite nice as well. I recommend trying it the next time you need to hide from your parents.

Draco’s eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hairline as he read her response. Evidently she was nearby, and while Draco had no particular need to write to Granger, he had to admit that running into her had led to one of the most fascinating evenings of his life. He shrugged and scribbled a response.

Your utter disregard for wizarding customs when it comes to taking your husband’s name does not surprise me in the least. That is very on brand for you. Some would call it Progressive, others Distasteful. I will leave you to guess which camp I fall in.

The fact that Potter and Weasley seem to have you cornered does surprise me very much. I always thought you were better at that sort of thing than they were. However, as a gesture of goodwill and to return the favor you bestowed upon me by recommending my current lodgings, I will note that I ran into Potter and Weasley in Hogsmeade right after you left. I may have lied to Potter about seeing you, but he did tell me that he placed a tracking spell on you. He didn’t specify what or where, but if you flee he will be able to find you.

He gave it to the owl, and several minutes later it returned with another response.

I repeat: you are a git and a pretentious one at that.

I knew Harry must have pulled some stunt like that. Thank you for telling me, though now I'll be forced to do what Voldemort never achieved and actually kill him once I get around to escaping. I probably won't be able to remove the tracking spell without his wand. He uses some fancy auror version that's "extra secure" (gag).

I suppose that means I'm a sitting duck until Monday. I'm warded in, so they won't be able to get to me, but if I apparate out of here Harry will just track me again.

Fuck my life.

Draco snorted and read it a second time before having an odd thought.

Granger, if you are warded in, do you require sustenance? I recently became familiar with a concept known as "room service." It is surprisingly good. Do let me know if I should send snacks. We need you to keep up your strength so you have enough energy to murder Potter when the time comes.

Within five minutes he had a response.

Oh my God, please. I'd offer to pay you back, but I know you'll just confund the muggles during checkout so there's no point. Please, Malfoy, I'm so hungry I could eat a hippogriff. I always forget to pack food when I'm on the run.

Draco chuckled and placed another order for room service, and within thirty minutes he was sending her a filet with haricot verts and a rather nice bottle of red wine.

The haricot verts are a little under in my opinion, but the filet appears to be a perfect medium rare. Bon appetit Granger.

She replied several minutes later.

I like my green beans on the crunchy side, thanks, and the steak is delicious. In fact, I wafted the scent of it under the door to see if those prats were still out there, and sure enough I heard Ron's stomach growl when he smelled it. I think he actually cried.

I'm now preparing to drown myself in wine and rant about the fucking gerontocracy that has led me to this place. I imagine I will wake up tomorrow morning very hungover and grouchy. Therefore, I humbly request scrambled eggs and toast in the morning, along with an entire pot of coffee. I take it black.

Cheers, you git.

Draco didn't know why he was smiling as he put the note aside and allowed his head to hit the pillow. He had humiliated his family, wrecked several other relationships, and was now preparing to be randomly matched to a witch for years to come through the Ministry of Magic. And yet, as his eyes drifted closed, Draco couldn't help but grin at the image of Granger taunting the Weasel with a delicious meal from the Four Seasons kitchens. It served him right. With the notable exception of Potter, nobody had ever been able to direct Granger's fire, not really. Her penchant for rule-following and her admiration of authority figures had always been at the mercy of her inner drive to get the thing she wanted. She would break every fucking rule in the book if it meant she won, Draco had always known that about her. Granger might be trapped for now, but Draco was sure she would win the long game.

He made a mental note to place an order for eggs, toast, and coffee as soon as he woke up the next morning and then drifted off to sleep.

The Next Morning

Draco awoke to a tapping on his window. This time he recognized Theo's owl, who was hovering outside with another note and a copy of *The Daily Prophet*. Draco groaned as he got out of bed and let the bird in, which dropped a short note and the newspaper on his head with an indignant hoot.

Draco glanced at the note first.

Mate,

First, I assume The Daily Prophet is a load of bullshit, but I have to ask.

Second, your father is filing a missing person's report, and odds are good they'll begin looking for you shortly. I won't send you another owl before midnight, but consider this your warning to cease using magic until you're ready to be found.

Theo

Draco grimaced at this unwelcome piece of news, but he hadn't used magic in nearly twelve hours. He hoped they wouldn't be able to trace him with his apparition and a single confundus, even if Lucius showed up at the Ministry and threw his weight around. It was a Sunday and there would only be a skeleton staff there today. He just had to make it to midnight before the deadline passed, and then he would be in the pool of wizards matched the following day.

Still, Draco was determined to take Theo's warning to heart, and he put his wand in the nightstand so that he wouldn't be tempted to use it. Then he gave room service a call to order breakfast before unfurling *The Daily Prophet*. He gasped when he saw the headline on the front page.

Weasley and Greengrass Jilted! Malfoy and Granger Disappear Together!

by Rita Skeeter

*In a turn of events nobody saw coming, Ronald Weasley and Astoria Greengrass were both jilted at the altar yesterday evening, during what otherwise would have been the Weddings of the Season. Readers of *The Daily Prophet* will surely be familiar with the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan that goes into effect at midnight tonight. During the runup to the Matching Ceremony on the first of September, any number of voluntary weddings took place, including quite a few weddings scheduled for the last Saturday before the deadline. This reporter attended the Greengrass-Malfoy wedding yesterday evening, while her colleagues attended the Potter-Weasley-Granger affair in the next county over.*

While Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley did manage to complete their ceremony, the second wedding to occur – Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger – never came to be due to the absence of the bride who disappeared from her own wedding. And in the case of Astoria Greengrass and Draco Malfoy, Lord Malfoy waited until Miss Greengrass was being given away by her father before he apparaeted and left her there utterly humiliated.

If the surprise jiltings weren't enough, Miss Granger and Lord Malfoy were seen speaking to each other in Hogsmeade moments after they left their respective partners. Miss Granger was wearing a wedding dress, and Lord Malfoy was in formal dress robes. According to Aberforth Dumbledore, barkeep at the Hogshead, the couple appeared to be discussing their plans hurriedly before Lord Malfoy sent Miss Granger along first and then hung back to await the arrival of Mr. Potter and Miss Granger's former beau who were following her. Mr. Dumbledore states that Lord Malfoy appeared to distract Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley, who evidently were unaware that Miss Granger had been meeting with him only seconds before.

Miss Granger and Lord Malfoy have since disappeared, and the timing could not be a coincidence. This reporter is left to wonder if this is not a case of star-crossed lovers who have found each other in the eleventh hour of a law that has divided the public's opinion. Rest assured that in the event Miss Granger and Lord Malfoy have run away to elope, the Office of Marriage Records at the Ministry of Magic will be immediately informed of their union. They have until midnight tonight to engage in holy matrimony before they will be subject to the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan themselves.

Tomorrow we will have our answers. Is Draco Malfoy – heir to both the House of Malfoy and the House of Black – in love with muggleborn Hermione Granger? Did Hermione Granger choose Draco Malfoy over her lifelong friend Ronald Weasley? And with this unprecedented move, has Hermione Granger single-handedly eliminated three different family lines from the vaunted Sacred 28?

Draco winced as he put the paper down and flopped back on his bed while he waited for breakfast. There was no question about it, his parents would be out for blood – not only his blood, but now Granger's blood too. Skeeter called him Lord Malfoy over and over again. Technically she was correct, and it was not unusual to see him addressed that way in *The Prophet*. But it still made Draco cringe. It reminded him of his duty, and he knew it would remind his parents of precisely the same thing. The article was mostly bollocks of course, but Draco knew the implications would outrage his parents, at least until Draco showed up to the Matching Ceremony the next day.

Granger, he assumed, would successfully flee the country per her written plan. Draco was now giving this some serious thought as well, but deep down he knew he wouldn't do it. He would never be able to avoid using magic indefinitely, and that was the only way to escape his parents for more than a few days. At this point he preferred the Ministry's method of providing a bride over the things his parents might do. It would be much safer if he was wed to somebody else tomorrow. Besides, while the Ministry of Magic might not pursue Hermione Granger for fleeing the country, he could not trust them to treat *him* the same way. Draco would rather marry Astoria than risk going back to Azkaban.

Yes, Draco's plan was to hide at the Four Seasons for one more day and engage in muggle television and room service. Then tomorrow he would present himself at the Ministry in time for the Matching Ceremony. They would select a bride, he would be bound, and then he would consummate it before his parents could find a way to interfere.

Draco's stomach rolled at the thought of losing his virginity to a woman he had only met that day, but he was sure he could do it. Astoria was the person who triggered Draco's tendencies to occlude to a dangerous degree, but before she had pushed him deep into his own mind he had been able to pleasure himself and the occasional female friend. Granted, he had always felt guilty about engaging in those behaviors with anybody who *wasn't* Astoria so he never got very far with it. But he had done it a handful of times, and the witches seemed to enjoy it, as did he. It was only Astoria who made him instinctively occlude to the point of being unable to maintain an erection. As long as he didn't marry *her* he should be able to do it.

That's what he told himself at any rate.

The truth was, Draco hadn't pleasured himself since the MLPP was announced and he believed his fate to be sealed. Occlusion made it nearly impossible to feel any type of sexual desire, and eventually he stopped trying. But with his future open and no longer tied to the woman that personified the burdens of his duty for him, *surely* his cock would wake up and do what needed to be done.

Besides, Lucius had always said that bedding a Malfoy wife was no great burden. Evidently there was family magic that helped the couple perform. Thanks to his parents' tendency to speak in euphemisms, Draco had never been precisely sure what that meant. He knew he should have asked for details, but that would have involved acknowledging that Astoria was the wife he would be bedding, and Draco had never wanted to think about it.

Draco assured himself that between a different woman and the elusive family magic, he would be able to consummate his marriage. He just needed to avoid his parents for another seventeen hours, and he would be home free.

He was jolted out of his thoughts by a knock on the door, which heralded the arrival of breakfast for both himself and Granger. Once again, Draco found himself grinning as he accepted the offerings, retrieved the owl who had spent the night with him, and then sent it along its way to Granger a few streets over. He even included the article from *The Prophet* to liven up her morning.

Granger; do let me know if you would like to fulfill Rita's every journalistic dream by eloping before midnight tonight. I suspect it would cause at least four heart attacks – Weasley, Potter, and both of my parents. You would fulfill your fantasy of killing Potter, and I would fulfill my fantasy of getting my hands on my full inheritance before I'm thirty. I'll even split it with you. It could be mutually advantageous.

Alternatively, you can tell me which buttons to press on this stick that controls the TV and place an order for lunch and dinner while we wait for midnight to roll around.

Either option works for me.

Chapter 3: I Do But I Don't

Chapter Notes

I've enjoyed everyone's predictions about what happens next! I'm also very excited to say that nobody's guess was exactly right.

rubs hands in glee

Draco, my dear, hang on to your pants (for now).

TW: References to/discussions about institutionalized rape through the MLPP.

1 September 2003

Draco made it to midnight.

For better or for worse, Granger rejected his proposal of marriage, though for some reason her response prompted Draco to ask a second time before he gave up.

I made a pros and cons list, Malfoy, and while I'm tempted by both the destruction of my closest friends group and the considerable fortune you are offering (any woman who says she doesn't care about your money is lying, by the way), I am terrified of the type of children we would produce. I'm sure you would insist upon it at some point because of tradition and heirs and all that nonsense. Therefore, I'm afraid I must decline your generous proposal.

Granger, don't tell me you're intimidated by our future progeny? They would take after me of course and be both handsome and witty. Marry me darling, and let's see what happens.

I rather think they would have my brains combined with your arrogance and turn into annoying little shits, actually (yes, even more annoying than you are). Since you have now asked me twice, let me be perfectly clear: fuck off Malfoy. Your highest and best use at the moment is keeping me fed and watered, not arranging an elopement. In light of that, I would like to get back on track. I will teach you to use a remote control, and in exchange you will send me a BLT for lunch.

Yes ma'am, I would never dream of disobeying you.

It was odd reading 'fuck off' from Hermione Granger's hand, though it didn't irritate Draco nearly as much as he thought it should. Instead, he dutifully ordered lunch for her while she provided plenty of recommendations for muggle television. Draco watched a show called *EastEnders* before turning on something called 'pay-per-view,' where he watched a truly terrifying film titled *Terminator 3*. Then Granger insisted he needed to watch some movie about a fish called *Finding Nemo*. She explained it was very popular with muggles under the age of twelve. Draco supposed he could see the appeal, but he found it eerily similar to his current situation. He secretly hoped that Nemo's father would *not* find him, at least not before midnight.

Draco woke on the first of September, feeling more optimistic than he had in years. His entire future was now before him; he just needed the Ministry to marry him off first. Draco privately marveled at his own change of heart on this matter since the previous Saturday, but his panic at the wedding and relief at being free of Astoria had convinced him he was doing the right thing. He received an owl from the Ministry first thing in the morning on Monday summoning him for the Matching Ceremony, and some part of Draco was thrilled. It was now out of his parents' hands.

So here he was, sending Granger a final breakfast before he left for the Ministry and she fled to France. She told Draco the night before that she planned on taking muggle transportation to get there, which he thought was rather ingenious of her. The Ministry had restricted international travel by portkey and floo for the last year, but of course they could not track muggle methods nearly as well. It was true they had caught a few muggleborns and half-bloods who tried to leave by muggle train earlier in the year, but today most of the Ministry would be on call for the Matching Ceremony. By the time they realized she was missing it would be too late.

I wish you luck on your journey. If you need a place to hide in France, you can seek out the Malfoy chateau in the Loire Valley. Just provide the family motto ("Sanctimonia Vincent Semper") to the elf in charge, and you will be given sanctuary until this blows over. My parents haven't visited in years, and the Ministry will never figure out how to cross the wards.

Draco sent the note and breakfast off to her before checking his watch. He had an hour before he planned to arrive at the Ministry, and he ate his own meal before finally pulling his wand out of the nightstand. He made quick work refreshing his dress robes from the wedding and then confounding the muggle at the checkout counter before apparating to the Ministry's visitor entrance. He was twenty minutes early, and as soon as he arrived bulbs began to flash.

“Lord Malfoy, did you elope with Hermione Granger?”

“Lord Malfoy, have you spoken to Miss Greengrass?”

“Lord Malfoy, will you be matched today?”

Draco said nothing and pushed through the sea of reporters and made his way to the largest courtroom, which they were using for this event. Draco joined the queue to sign himself in, took a number, and then smirked a bit when he saw that Granger hadn’t signed in yet.

Hopefully she’s on the train to France by now, he thought to himself.

He certainly wouldn’t call them *friends* after the events of the previous weekend, but they had worked together surprisingly well. She kept him lodged and entertained, and he kept her well-fed. Draco had made a point to avoid Granger even more so than Potter and Weasley in the years since the war, and it was something of a relief to know that he didn’t need to do that anymore. Despite her rather colorful language, she obviously no longer despised him.

Draco made his way into a section of the courtroom that had been reserved for wizards being matched, and he looked around curiously as the seats slowly filled. The wizards were on one side of the courtroom and the witches on the other. In the middle were seats for family members, press, and high-ranking Ministry officials. The space was enormous, capable of holding several thousand people, and Draco suspected that several extension charms had been used to enhance the space.

“This is a fucking circus,” came a voice from his left. Draco turned to find a wizard he thought he recognized.

“Anthony Goldstein, right?” asked Draco.

The wizard nodded. “Yes, and you’re Draco Malfoy. I’m a bit surprised to see *you* here. I saw the articles in *The Prophet*.¹”

Draco just snorted. “I was supposed to get married on Saturday, but I just couldn’t go through with the arranged marriage bit. The paper is printing bullshit. I did *not* elope with Granger. She jilted Weasley by pure coincidence.”

Goldstein grinned at this. “Rita Skeeter is going to be so disappointed.”

Draco chuckled a little, and they fell silent as more people filed in. Draco’s stomach clenched when the doors opened and Astoria strode in, tears streaming down her face. She came to an abrupt halt when she saw Draco and then gave an almighty sniff and marched over to the witches’ section.

“Christ, what will you do if you match with her?” muttered Goldstein.

Draco’s mind came to a standstill. What *would* he do? Fuck, he hadn’t even thought about *that* scenario. He had been so relieved to get away from Astoria at the wedding that it completely slipped his mind that she would be matched too, and he might end up with her anyway.

Draco found his occlumency walls starting to go up, and he forced them back down.

No. It won't happen. I'll be matched with somebody else. Don't fucking think about it.

It was a struggle, but with each new witch that came in his walls lowered a bit more. Every witch was an opportunity to be matched with somebody else. Every witch could be an escape. He looked at them and wondered which one would be his. He didn't recognize most of them, but he was relieved to find that even the plain ones were more compelling to him than Astoria. As beautiful as she was, she was like ice. He would gladly take the homely, slightly frumpy witch to Astoria's left over Astoria herself. That told him he made the right choice for himself by going through with this, and he clung to it. His wife didn't have to be pretty. She didn't have to be intelligent. They didn't even have to like each other very much. Malfoy Manor was large enough that they could live largely independent lives. The only criteria she needed to fulfill was that she be somebody *other* than Astoria Greengrass. That was it.

Draco was pulled out of his thoughts as he caught sight of his parents, Theo, Blaise, and Pansy all entering the courtroom. They all looked like they had barely slept and Pansy in particular looked ill.

They skidded to a halt when they saw Draco. He didn't meet his parents' eyes, instead looking at his friends and basking in the relief he saw reflected there. He had not responded to either of Theo's letters, having been concerned that it would lead his father to his location. He was sure that Theo and the others worried he had fled like Granger, which would almost guarantee another visit to Azkaban. All three of them seemed to relax when they discovered him.

He then glanced at his parents' faces, and as he expected his father looked thunderous and his mother looked hurt. He slid his gaze away and started to occlude until they turned away and headed to the gallery, but not before Lucius stopped to have a whispered conversation with Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it.

Draco was sure he knew what Lucius was saying to Shacklebolt – he was trying to sway the matching so Draco would end up with Astoria anyway. But Shacklebolt gave a helpless gesture as though to say it was out of his hands, and Draco gave a sigh of relief. A major reason the legislation had passed was because the matching would be random and done in lottery form. It would be fair that way and above outside influence.

Draco was relying on them to keep their word about it.

Draco's attention was then pulled away again as Beatrice and Daphne Greengrass entered the courtroom. Beatrice threw a look at Draco that was so reminiscent of a basilisk, he found himself cowering.

"She looks like she wants to murder you," muttered Goldstein.

"That's because she's Astoria's mother," confessed Draco.

"Ah. That'll do it," said Goldstein delicately.

Beatrice and Daphne took seats as far away from the Malfoys as they could find. Draco sighed to himself. It had all the makings of a new family feud between the Malfoys and the Greengrasses. Draco idly wondered how many generations this one would last.

At precisely ten o'clock, the presiding witch banged a gavel, and the courtroom fell silent.

"Attention!" she cried. "We have before us, two hundred and eighty-seven witches and two hundred and seventy-two wizards to be matched. In accordance with the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan, we will draw a number from each pool to ensure the process is fair. As there are more witches than wizards, those witches who find themselves without a match during this round will be the first who are matched this time next year. In the event that these witches consummate a marriage in the next year, they will be exempt from next year's Matching Ceremony."

Draco heard some soft murmuring at this, and he saw quite a few of them straighten up eagerly, hoping to be one of the fifteen who walked out of here today without a husband. Draco had to admit he was surprised there was such a small number of participants today. Then again, the wedding industry had been positively booming for the last year. Nearly everybody he knew took advantage of a loophole like Blaise did or secured their own match – often marrying close friends or even the occasional distant family member to avoid *this*. Still, given that the age range spanned a full twenty years, Draco was stunned there were so few witches and wizards who were still unmarried.

"Now then, we shall start with –"

CRASH!

The presiding witch fell silent as the door to the courtroom flew open and a clearly irate Hermione Granger came striding in, being escorted by Harry Potter. Ron Weasley was following behind, glowering at her, and behind him came a trail of redheads and their spouses, all looking very put out.

Granger cast a glance at the wizards as she passed and caught his eye. He grimaced at her in sympathy. Evidently she didn't make it to France then. Her nostrils flared, and she raised an eyebrow before turning forward and heading to the other side of the room.

The witch who had checked Draco in came hurrying forward.

"Madam Marchbanks, we have two more."

The presiding witch narrowed her eyes, but said nothing as Granger wrenched her arm from Potter's grip and flung herself onto the bench on the witches' side. She was fuming. Draco glanced up to find Weasley taking a spare seat on the wizards' side, also radiating anger. He threw Draco a withering glare before turning forward to watch the proceedings. Potter was muttering to Granger hurriedly, but she put her nose in the air, crossed her arms, and very clearly turned her back on him in obvious dismissal. Draco glanced at Weasley and saw he was watching the spectacle too. He gave a mirthless laugh.

Potter gave a deep sigh and rubbed a hand over his face before heading toward the stands for family members.

Once he was seated, Madam Marchbanks cleared her throat. “Very well, if we are *all* present then... as I was saying, we have more witches than wizards. Those witches who are not matched today will have the next year to consummate a magical marriage, and any who do not will be in the first group who is matched this time next year. Now then.... Let’s begin!”

Draco had to admit that it was all rather interesting at first. A tiny, unnamed wizard who reminded Draco of Professor Flitwick stood at the front and simply selected a number from a bowl for the wizards and then a bowl for the witches before consulting a list.

“Number fifteen... Evan Mulligan! And number eighty-two... Adele Fairhope!”

The witch and wizard who were called rose and made their way to the front where the tiny wizard started to speak.

“Mr. Mulligan, do you consent to this marriage?”

“I do,” came the defeated voice of the man who appeared to be in his mid-thirties.

“And Miss Fairhope, do you consent to this marriage?”

“I do,” whispered the young woman who looked to be a teenager. Draco thought she must have barely made the age cut off.

“In that case, join your hands,” said the wizard.

They did so, glancing at each other and both looking a bit sick.

“I hereby bind you, in matrimony and magic, on this, the first day of September 2003. Take each other in honesty and integrity to grow your lives together from this day forward.”

There was a flash of magic, and the couple gasped before releasing each other.

“You are dismissed,” said the little wizard, and the couple moved out of the courtroom, along with a few other people from the stands who must have been their family members. Then he reached into the bowls to draw the next numbers from each group.

On and on it went. The bindings were short, efficient, and after the fifteenth one Draco found his attention wandering. The monotony was broken only by the occasional stifled sob, usually from the witches’ side. The wizards all seemed to be uniformly resigned to their fate.

They worked through eighty-five couples before they broke for lunch, though the unmatched participants were not released because they were deemed flight risks. Instead, the Ministry provided a rather nice meal, and after they had all eaten the Matching Ceremony resumed. The number of witches and wizards slowly started to dwindle.

As they were picked off one by one, Draco’s gaze continued to be pulled to Granger. Unlike him, she must have packed a change of clothes when she left her own wedding because she

was shockingly casual in muggle jeans, a tee-shirt, and the same trainers he had seen her wear under her wedding dress that day. Most of the other attendees had made *some* effort to dress up. At least a quarter of the witches were wearing white or ivory, and most of the wizards were wearing dress robes or muggle suits. Draco, of course, was still wearing the dress robes from his own wedding the previous Saturday, and he noticed his parents, Astoria, and Beatrice all glowering at his robes as though they were responsible for Draco's unwelcome behavior.

Granger had clearly run this morning or tried to at any rate. She was disheveled, her hair even more wild than Draco remembered, almost as though she and Potter had scuffled.

Draco went cold at the thought.

Why *was* she here? Surely Potter hadn't caught her and made her come? Draco knew that Potter could track her, but after the deadline passed the previous night there was no reason to try to force the issue any more. The Ministry would not recognize any marriages that took place between midnight the previous night and the beginning of the Matching Ceremony today. Potter must have dragged her here to make her comply with the law instead of letting her run for it.

Draco found his lip curling at the thought. Didn't Potter owe her *everything*? Draco certainly felt like he owed Granger for the tip she gave him in Hogsmeade, not to mention the years of cruelty he inflicted upon her before and during the war. He was more than happy to give her a leg up on her journey to freedom, which was why he had offered their chateau as a place to lie low. Why wouldn't Potter give one of his best friends the courtesy to let her go?

Granger generally ignored Draco, preferring instead to glare at the Ministry officials and occasionally Potter and Weasley, all of whom Draco could see were being added to her shit list one by one. Kingsley Shacklebolt, in particular, was the source of much of her ire, but he wasn't the only recipient of her disdain. She appeared to be committing them all to memory as she wholly ignored the ceremonies taking place at the front of the room. The Ministry representatives and the assortment of Weasleys and Potters held her entire attention.

It wasn't until Anthony Goldstein was called that Granger perked up and started to watch what was happening at the front of the room.

"Good luck," muttered Draco as Goldstein took a calming breath next to him. He couldn't recall ever exchanging a single word with Goldstein during Hogwarts, but the other wizard had been pleasant enough today. Perhaps Draco would owl him to meet for drinks when this was all over and they could commiserate.

Draco glanced at Granger and saw she was staring at Goldstein with her eyes slightly narrowed. Did Granger know him well? Was she hoping to be selected?

But before Draco could work this out, the tiny wizard called, "Number one hundred and twenty-two... Leanne Parks!"

A petite blonde witch that Draco distantly recognized straightened up.

“Oh God,” muttered Goldstein.

“What?” hissed Draco.

“Leanne... I had a huge crush on her at Hogwarts...” he whispered.

“Well that’s good, isn’t it?” asked Draco under his breath.

“No. She *hated* me... I was always such a prat trying to get her attention...”

“Mr. Goldstein! Miss Parks!” called the little wizard.

“If I go missing you can assume she killed me...” moaned Goldstein as he made his way down to the front. Draco found himself chuckling a little before catching his mother’s glare and clearing his throat to wipe the smile off his face.

Based on the look Leanne was giving Goldstein, Draco made a mental note to send that owl within the next twenty-four hours. He rather thought somebody should check on Goldstein to obtain proof of life.

“Now then. Mr. Goldstein, do you consent to this marriage?”

“Yes, of course,” said Goldstein quietly.

“Very good. And Miss Parks, do you consent as well?”

Leanne paused and said nothing, and whispers broke out. Draco glanced at Granger and saw her leaning forward a bit. Evidently she found this particular match to be just as interesting as Draco did.

“Miss Parks?” prompted the little wizard.

“If I must,” she ground out.

“I’m afraid that’s not –” he started.

“Fine! Yes, I consent!” she huffed.

Draco looked at Granger and saw she appeared to be faintly disappointed, and then he peered at Goldstein who looked defeated. Draco couldn’t help but feel sympathetic. Goldstein was marrying a witch he clearly still admired, but who obviously loathed him. What on earth would *that* be like?

They went through the short ceremony, and then Goldstein gestured for Leanne to go ahead of him to leave the courtroom. He caught Draco’s eye on the way out, and Draco gave him a small nod of encouragement. Goldstein just sighed and slunk out.

Several more couples were called, and Draco was just starting to get bored again, when the little wizard called, “Number two hundred and seventy-three... Ronald Weasley!”

Whispers broke out again, and Draco straightened up. He could see Weasley's ears had gone red, a sure sign of stress.

Pick Astoria. Pick Astoria. Pick Astoria

Draco prayed to every deity he had ever heard of that this match would kill two birds with one stone. Astoria *still* had not been called, and the number of witches was dwindling.

He glanced up at Potter and the enormous number of redheads surrounding him, and they all looked tense as they waited for the witch to be called. Then Draco glanced across at Granger, and she was chewing her lip. It was the first sign of nerves Draco had seen from her the entire day. Rita Skeeter too had perked up, her acid green quill hovering in the air eagerly. The entire press was on tenterhooks.

Was it just him or was the small wizard taking his time before calling the witch? He appeared to be enjoying the suspense.

Finally, his hand dove into the bowl and he pulled a number before consulting his list.

“Number seventeen... Prudence Avery!”

Draco let out a great “Ha!” and nearly everyone still present in the courtroom turned to stare at him. Weasley had an ugly look on his face.

“Have something to say, Malfoy?” he snarled.

Draco just gave a negligent shrug and looked up into the crowd to find Beatrice Greengrass, who had gone pale.

“Oh nothing much,” said Draco in a voice that carried all the way to her. “It just occurred to me that the Weasleys will be staying in the Sacred 28 for another generation after all. It’s a bit ironic, don’t you think?”

At this pronouncement, everyone’s eyes widened, and Rita’s quill burst into action. Weasley looked like he had been hit by a bludger, and now he looked at Draco uncertainly.

“Do you... know her then?” he asked under his breath.

Draco pursed his lips. There was no love lost between him and Weasley – none whatsoever. And yet, Draco knew he was at least partially responsible for Weasley being here today. Draco had, after all, assisted Granger with her escape and subsequent hideout. He decided to throw Weasley a bone so they would be even, and Draco could go back to despising him in peace.

“Yes. She’s a little shy, but very kind. Her father was a Death Eater, but she was never involved in the war. She blames blood politics for wrecking her family. Her father is still in Azkaban and her mother passed away a few years ago. She has two younger siblings and had to step up to care for them. She really likes kids.”

Weasley's eyes widened at this, but he looked relieved as he rose to head to the middle of the room. Draco saw Granger whispering quietly to Prudence on the other side. Prudence gave her a tight smile and rose as well.

"Ahem," said the small wizard. "Right then. Mr. Weasley, do you consent to this marriage?"

"I do," he said in a surprisingly confident voice. Prudence gave him a small smile.

"And Miss Avery, do you consent as well?"

"Yes, I do," she said softly.

"Very well."

The wizard performed the ceremony, and dismissed them both. Weasley bent down to say something to Prudence who nodded. Instead of leaving, they both made their way into the crowd. Draco watched Prudence hesitate for just a moment before following Weasley to join his enormous family. There were whispered greetings, and she shook several hands, before they both sat down and turned to watch.

Of course, thought Draco. The Weasleys and Potter were staying for Granger and Prudence was staying for Astoria. They were nearing the end anyway and would probably be done within the next hour.

Draco listened as names that were not his were pulled from the bowl. The mantra in his head continued to grow stronger with each coupling.

Pick Astoria. Pick Astoria. Pick Astoria.

But she wasn't picked. And by the time there were just ten wizards left, Draco had to raise his occlumency walls again to quiet the slowly growing panic that was starting to unfurl in his mind. Odds were still good he wouldn't end up with her, but those odds were narrowing with each draw.

He glanced at his parents and saw they were watching with rapt attention now, looking back and forth between Draco and Astoria. While Draco's hope dimmed, theirs seemed to grow as there were eight wizards left and then six wizards and then three wizards and then finally just two left, including him. Astoria still had not been called.

The mood from the witches had been steadily improving as well. At this point there were seventeen of them and just two wizards. Odds were in all of their favor that they would make it out of the Matching Ceremony without a husband, and if they didn't... well the remaining options weren't that bad.

Draco and the other wizard glanced at each other. He was a couple years older than Draco, but rather attractive with a square jaw and dark hair. Draco's knowledgeable eye swept over the cut of his robes and his polished shoes. He was clearly well-off, wearing clothes that were tailored almost as well as Draco's. Whoever he was, he had both looks and money. Draco knew that he did too.

Most of the witches seemed to feel there were no bad options at this point. Only Granger still appeared to be irritated. Even Astoria was looking optimistic, and Draco knew she was so placid that if they *were* matched she would probably give him the cold shoulder for a few days but then decide to do her duty anyway.

Duty.

He occluded the thought.

“Number two hundred and sixty-four... Michael Spencer!”

Draco nodded to the other wizard and then exhaled as he sank back into his chair.

Pick Astoria. Pick Astoria. Pick Astoria.

“Number one hundred and eleven...”

Draco closed his eyes and prayed.

“... Isobel MacDougal!”

Fuck.

They both rose and made their way to the middle of the room. There was an odd rushing sound in Draco’s ears, and he could barely hear what they were saying. He glanced up at his parents, who were clutching each other’s hands and then at Beatrice Greengrass who now looked ecstatic.

Of course, Draco thought bitterly. Either Astoria secures the Malfoy match they always wanted or she gets another year to find somebody else.

Draco knew Beatrice well enough to know that she was crafting a backup plan at this very moment. Sure enough, he saw her casting an appraising look at Blaise, who was chewing on his lip nervously as he watched Draco, wholly unaware that he was being sized up from afar. Blaise wasn’t Sacred 28, but he *was* technically a pureblood five generations deep and a rather wealthy one at that thanks to his mother’s many marriages. The Greengrasses needed *William* to secure the appropriate match that would keep their Sacred 28 status intact. That meant they could compromise with Astoria if they needed to, and Blaise would still keep her children pure. Draco could see Beatrice’s mind turning this over and over again as she waited for Draco’s turn.

Draco made a mental note to inform Blaise of Beatrice’s schemes the moment he was free of this place — assuming, of course, that he didn’t end up with Astoria himself. Blaise was a perfectly capable wizard, but Beatrice could be formidable when she put her mind to something.

Before he knew it, the previous couple had moved off, and then the small wizard glanced at Draco.

“This will obviously be our final pairing for the year.”

He pulled the last card from the wizards' bowl and cleared his throat. "Ahem... Number forty-nine, Draco Malfoy!"

Draco just stared straight ahead.

Not Astoria. Not Astoria. Not Astoria.

He had a one in sixteen chance of ending up with her. Surely, *surely* luck would be on his side this time. It just had to be. Draco was fighting the urge to occlude himself into an oblivion. He had to hear the name before he succumbed to that numbness.

The tiny wizard paused for dramatic effect, and Draco wanted to *crucio* him. Rita's quill was hovering eagerly, and it seemed like every person in the room was holding their breath. Slowly, the wizard lowered his hand into the witches' bowl and pulled out the final card. He glanced at the number and consulted his list before pausing for a full ten seconds.

He cleared his throat.

"Ahem... yes. Well, here we have Number Two Hundred and Eighty-Eight... Hermione Granger!"

There was silence for a split second as Draco's occlumency walls collapsed with sheer relief that it wasn't Astoria. Then the courtroom erupted.

"NO!" cried at least six voices. Draco glanced up and thought they came from his mother, his father, Potter, Weasley, Beatrice, and to his utter shock Kingsley Shacklebolt. He looked across the room at Granger, who was staring back at him with the most peculiar expression on her face.

Draco wouldn't have been surprised to find her looking at him with horror or disgust. Despite their interactions over the previous few days, there were years of negative history between them, and while she might not *hate* him anymore, she surely wouldn't want to *marry* him either. He had been joking when he proposed to her over the weekend, and he was certain she knew it. He never once considered the possibility that he might *actually* end up with her after all that. Even when she arrived at the Matching Ceremony he didn't really think of it, being largely preoccupied by his sincere wish to avoid Astoria. Any thoughts he had of her were simply ruminations about all the things that must have gone wrong to bring her to the Ministry today.

But she wasn't looking disgusted at all. Her expression could best be described as thoroughly *satisfied*.

Hermione Granger, it appeared, had gotten exactly what she wanted.

Things had just become very interesting.

Draco raised a single eyebrow at her and then tilted his head toward the crowd as if to say, *See? I told you we could kill the lot of them if we got married.*

The tiniest ghost of a smile crossed Granger's face at this, and she dipped her head ever so slightly in acknowledgment.

The protests from the gallery seemed to fade away as they stared at each other from across the courtroom.

Hermione Granger... my wife.

The notion was... compelling. Draco found he didn't mind it. He didn't mind it at all. In fact, compared to the available alternatives he was rather in favor of it. No doubt he would have to watch his back around her, but everything about her would be unexpected. Draco would never be bored again.

They both rose and made their way to the middle of the room, ignoring the sobs that were now coming from Narcissa, Beatrice, and Molly Weasley. The small wizard raised his hand for silence and after a long while the room quieted, with just the stray hiccup emerging from the crowd.

"Very well. Mr. Malfoy... do you consent to this marriage?"

"Yes, I do. Rather enthusiastically, as it happens."

Granger blinked in surprise, and he heard his mother's voice screech, "*WHAT?!*"

Draco ignored her and just smirked at Granger who cocked her head to study him a bit.

"And Miss Granger..." said the wizard, "Do you consent as well?"

"Hmmm, no..." she murmured. "No, I'm afraid I can't consent to this."

There was another stunned silence, and then whispering broke out. Ink was flying from Rita's quill, and disappointment bloomed inside of Draco from somewhere deep. He couldn't understand it. What on earth was she saying?

Was she *rejecting* him? Draco knew he had been a prat. He knew Granger didn't really like him, playful notes from the previous weekend notwithstanding. But she hadn't looked at him with disgust and she seemed *pleased* for the first time all day when her name was called.

What was happening?

"I'm sorry," said the wizard nervously. "Perhaps I wasn't clear. Do you –"

"No, I don't consent to this marriage. I do not consent to marrying *anybody* as a result of this *ridiculous* law."

Oh.

Draco's stomach eased. Granger was just Grangering. This sort of thing was her *modus operandi*. Of course it was. She wasn't rejecting *Draco*, she was rejecting the entire premise of the MLPP.

Draco settled in to watch the show.

“Miss Granger,” came Kingsley Shacklebolt’s deep voice. “I must inform you that failure to consent will result in an Azkaban sentence until you become willing.”

“Oh I’m very aware,” she said coldly.

Draco studied Shacklebolt. He appeared nervous and was glancing at the members of the press, all of whom were hanging on their every word.

“Miss Granger...”

“*Kingsley*,” she said, and Draco heard his mother and a few others gasp. She was calling him by his first name, completely ignoring his title.

“*Miss Granger*,” he gritted out. “It would behoove you to *consent*.”

“Let me be clear,” said Granger smoothly. “You wish for me to consent to marry a man who was my childhood bully. Presumably you also believe I should move to Malfoy Manor, where I was tortured during the war? Perhaps we should consummate the marriage in the drawing room where the entire Malfoy family watched me be tortured? Do you think Lucius and Narcissa would like to watch again?”

Shock.

There was absolute silence for a moment before it was broken by the furious scratching of Rita’s quill. Draco looked up at his friends, who were all watching him worriedly, and even his parents appeared to have no idea how to react to this.

As for Draco, he felt sick. He felt so sick he couldn’t even occlude. Her words cut straight through his attempts.

“Miss Granger, I –” started Shacklebolt. His face was turning gray, but Granger wasn’t done yet.

“You do realize that Draco here has the legal right to rape me if I consent to this marriage? The law provides that intercourse must occur on a monthly basis at minimum, or at any other time one spouse desires it. That means that he could rape me. Hell, I could rape *him*. And that is what every other couple who got married today will be risking. You have gutted the marital rape laws as part of this mad plan of yours.”

Draco’s stomach turned, and he forced the bile back down.

“We have built in three months for –”

“Ha,” Granger scoffed. “That means nothing, and you know it. You have taken away every bit of bodily autonomy witches and wizards enjoy, all in the name of *grandchildren*.”

Now Granger turned to address other senior members of the Wizengamot, who were listening to her with growing unease.

"Is that worth it? Are you pleased to know that your daughters and sons could be raped in order to provide you with your precious *grandchildren*? Was that a better plan than the one *I* proposed that involved financial incentives and tax breaks for marriage and children? Are you aware that the marital rape laws are uniform and don't just apply to those of us who are getting married today, but to *all* marriages? Perhaps your own spouse will pin you down to get a leg over before this mad law is repealed."

"Miss Granger!" said Shacklebolt in an angry voice.

"It's true, Kingsley, as I've been telling you ever since the draft legislation came out! Every bit of it is true. And not only that, but let's not forget that nothing about the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan demands fidelity, does it? You all want babies. You want babies from anybody who is willing to give them to you. Who is to say that your beloved *grandchildren* will really be yours? Perhaps the couples who are being forced to wed so expeditiously will seek comfort from people they know. Or maybe they will be abused by others who are now in close proximity to them. In my case, you are asking me to join the Malfoy family. It's conceivable that Draco would treat me fairly well. But if his father – a convicted Death Eater who once tried to turn me over to Voldemort – decides to put the little mudblood bitch in her place, he could impregnate me and there is nothing at all I could do about it."

Again, the room was stunned to breathlessness at what she was saying. Involuntarily, Draco looked up at his parents. His mother looked faint. His father... well, his father looked positively dangerous.

"Miss Granger, are you saying that Lucius Malfoy –" started Kingsley.

"I am speaking in hypotheticals," she said airily. "But that does not change the fact that witches everywhere are now at risk for such behaviors. Voluntary termination of any magical pregnancy has been forbidden except to save the life of the mother, and the penalties for sexual assault have been eased. It's almost like you all *want* it to happen."

She glared at the members of the Wizengamot who were all very pale now.

"Hermione," pleaded Shacklebolt. "I can't make an exception for you. It's the law..."

"I'm not asking for an exception," she said, and she appeared to be offended by the very suggestion. "I'm *asking* you to call an emergency session of the Wizengamot to *repeal* this ridiculous law! Offer a path for annulment for the marriages that took place today. I seriously doubt that *any* of them have been consummated in the last six hours. I sent copies of proposed legislation to every Wizengamot member this morning that would fix the mess you have created. That's one reason why I was... delayed this morning."

She glanced at Potter now and scowled, as Draco's eyebrows flew up. He looked at his parents again and he saw his father was now watching her with a calculated expression. As for Draco, he was utterly spellbound. He knew that everything she was saying was correct, but he felt such shame as she laid the Malfoy sins bare. She was holding his family up as an example of everything that could go wrong in an arranged marriage like this because they were easy fodder for it. They *had* treated her horribly. They *had* all watched as she was tortured. Hell, his father even tried to call the Dark Lord before Bellatrix did that day.

Draco's brief excitement at being matched with her withered and died as he realized why she was so pleased to hear her name called with his. He was the single worst choice in the entire group for her. He was a wizard that most in the room believed was capable of mistreating her. Even the few people who knew that Draco wouldn't behave that way still believed that *Lucius* would. Granger had been against this law for months — he had read her opinion pieces in *The Daily Prophet* now and then. But he didn't realize she had been fighting it from the inside as well, even going so far as to provide alternative solutions and legislation. Evidently she hadn't been able to make progress with it, so she needed a stunt that would resonate through the entirety of wizarding Britain. Between the jilting the Saturday before and the match with Draco now, he knew she had both the Wizengamot's and the media's undivided attention. Draco was sure she couldn't have planned this better if she had tried.

But how far was she willing to go with it? And where would it leave Draco? A sense of bitterness was starting to take hold in his gut.

"Miss Granger, I don't want to send you to Azkaban," said Shacklebolt in a defeated voice.

"But as you just pointed out," she said with false sweetness, "it's the law. It's the law that *you* wrote. And I will not consent to marry Draco Malfoy today. So there you have it Kingsley. Arrest me."

The entire room was gaping at her, and she just looked around imperiously.

"Well?" she asked, when nobody moved.

Shacklebolt swallowed. "Auror Potter," he croaked, nodding toward Granger.

Only now did Draco realize that Potter was the senior-most auror in the room.

"Kingsley, you can't be serious!" said Potter with dismay.

"Harry, my hands are tied," he ground out.

"Come on Harry," said Granger, again with that horribly sweet voice. "You were so eager to follow the law earlier today weren't you? What's stopping you now?"

Potter's Adam's apple bobbed, and he took a shuddering breath as he moved forward slowly.

Draco felt a jolt of fear as he stared at Granger's determined face. Azkaban was the worst place he had ever been.

"Granger," he said quietly. He didn't even bother to hide the note of desperation in his voice. She might hate him. She might even be using him in a terrible, public way. But he couldn't let her do *this*.

She glanced at him.

"Granger, just *marry me*. I swear I'm not as bad as I used to be in school. And nobody will do those... things to you. I won't allow it."

Her expression softened just a bit. “I can’t, Malfoy. Not today, at any rate.”

“You would really rather go to Azkaban than marry me?” he whispered. He truly had no idea how to feel about this. He was humiliated, disappointed, and very hurt. But he also felt a glimmer of respect for her convictions. All of it was warring in Draco’s head. He wished he could occlude, but something about Granger made him feel every single thing.

An apologetic look crossed her face. “No. I would much rather marry you. But I can’t do it. I have to go to Azkaban so Kingsley doesn’t win this,” she replied quietly.

Draco slumped. He supposed it was a small consolation that she preferred him over Azkaban. Then again, it made no difference. This was the very essence of Hermione Granger. He had no possibility of changing her mind in the next few minutes.

“Miss Granger, you and Mr. Malfoy are affianced,” piped up the little wizard as Potter approached them awkwardly. “Miss Granger, according to the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan, you may consent to marry Mr. Malfoy at any time, and you will be immediately released.”

Granger nodded placidly at this.

“Mr. Malfoy,” continued the wizard, and Draco snapped to attention. “You are still bound to Miss Granger and may not seek another wife while she is in custody.”

The smallest glimmer of hope sparked inside of Draco at these words. He would be leaving today unmarried, but also safe from Astoria. And he would have his freedom. It was truly a scenario he could not have foreseen.

Then he remembered that Granger would *not* be free, and he immediately felt guilty about the relief he felt.

“Is that all then?” asked Granger with a superior expression.

“Yes, Mr. Potter… you may… proceed,” said the wizard a bit hesitantly.

Potter approached Granger very reluctantly, as she cast a cold eye over him. But before she held out her hands to accept the magical handcuffs Potter produced, she raised her right middle finger to her lips and blew a slow kiss directly toward Shacklebolt. Fire danced in her eyes, and Draco watched as she started to burn with it.

The cameras flashed to capture every perfect moment, and Draco knew that Granger’s enormous *fuck you* was going to be a picture they would print over and over again in the coming days.

As Draco watched his fiancée be handcuffed and escorted out of the courtroom by her best friend, he couldn’t tear his gaze away. Her head was held high, and she gave him one last, piercing look with a small, conspiratorial nod as she swept out.

Don’t take it personally, she was telling him. *This has nothing to do with you, and it’s much bigger than either of us.*

Draco unconsciously nodded back. Somehow, he had found himself squarely in the middle of Hermione Granger's plan to object to the MLPP, and he was trying to communicate to her that he was here, and he was in.

All the air seemed to be sucked from the room as Draco's eyes tracked her, and he saw a small smile flit across her face as she turned from him. His anger, embarrassment, and frustration were swept aside as he watched her be led out of the room, leaving behind something so unfamiliar that Draco struggled to identify it.

But as he remembered her middle finger touching her lips to flip off the most powerful man in wizarding Britain, understanding arrived in a flash. Or rather, it came from below. Because in that moment his cock emerged from its years-long hibernation and actually twitched.

Well *that* was certainly interesting.

Chapter 4: Inmate 8724

Two hours later

Draco sat in the drawing room where Granger had once been tortured, surrounded by his three best friends and his mother as Lucius paced in front of them.

Upon Granger's departure, the courtroom had erupted into chaos once more, the press clamoring for a quote from Shacklebolt and from him. Draco was rescued by Theo's quick thinking, as he practically threw himself down the stairs to make his way toward Draco and gripped his arm to lead him firmly out the door before he could open his mouth and spill his feelings before the press.

Draco was grateful for his quick intervention, and moments later Blaise and Pansy were there too, blocking him off from view.

"We have to go back to the Manor," said Theo in a terse voice. "You're safe for now, and you can't avoid it any longer. Best to get it over with."

Draco just nodded mutely, knowing that Theo was right about this, and he was grateful for his friends' solid show of support behind him. Normally they would give the Malfoys privacy for something like this, but this was so far from normal that Draco knew that the typical rules didn't apply. They weren't going to leave him alone during this first meeting with his parents.

Draco had never been more thankful for their loyalty, as he sensed the heat from Blaise's body coming from his left and the light perfume Pansy always wore coming from his right. His friends were *his*. Sometimes they felt like the only things that were truly *his*. They all knew Draco was in for a tongue-lashing, but it would be four against one if Lucius dared to raise a wand. Lucius couldn't kill Draco — the family magic prevented it — but that didn't mean he couldn't make Draco hurt.

"IRRESPONSIBLE...UNBELIEVABLE...UTTERLY HUMILIATING...!"

As often happened when his father got started on one of his rants, Draco began to occlude, and the words washed over him. Once Lucius began, he was capable of going on for *ages*.

"...A COMPLETE DERELICTION OF DUTY..."

"Fuck duty," said Draco suddenly.

The words just slipped out, and Draco was barely aware he said anything at all until Lucius halted and gave him a baffled look.

"Excuse me?" he ground out.

“You heard me,” said Draco. “Fuck duty. I didn’t want to marry Astoria.”

There was silence for a full thirty seconds as his parents absorbed this news and exchanged meaningful looks with each other.

“My dear, you never said—” started his mother, and Draco just threw her an annoyed look.

“Please. When have I *ever* expressed even the slightest bit of interest in her? When has she expressed any interest in me? Never, that’s when. You two are so far up your own arses about fucking *duty* that I went along with it to keep the peace. But no more. I can’t do it. I *won’t* do it.”

“So you would marry a mudblood then?” asked Lucius coldly. “You would sully your family’s entire history with *that*? ”

Draco turned to face his father, a surprising trickle of fury pulsing through his veins.

“My *fiancée* is muggleborn, that’s true. She’s also famous, righteous, Order of Merlin, First Class. She’s a fucking legend. I would think that even *you* could see the benefits of aligning myself with somebody like her.”

“Draco, the things she said...” started his mother before she trailed off.

Draco now turned to her.

“It might have been uncomfortable for you to hear it, but every single thing she said was true. She doesn’t hold punches. I should know, she hit me once in third year and broke my nose.”

Narcissa’s eyes widened at this.

“This is unbelievable,” hissed his father. “I understand your views have... *softened* somewhat since the war. But there’s softening in the abstract and then there’s the destruction of a *millennia* of pristine blood! You must be out of your mind!”

Draco shrugged and began to occlude. “Perhaps if you hadn’t allowed a sociopath to brand me for the cause I would still believe in it.”

“Draco!” said his mother in a scandalized voice.

“What?” he asked, now turning his dull stare to look at her instead. “Why is that so surprising to you?”

“The war changed you, I’ll admit that,” said Narcissa slowly. “But it made you grow up. It gave you self-control. It taught you to moderate your temper and your... tendency toward rash behaviors. I can’t fathom what changed this weekend.”

Draco’s expression didn’t alter. “No, Mother,” he said. “The war didn’t teach me any of those things. It taught me to occlude. It taught me to cope by escaping into my own mind, where I have lived for *years*. It taught me that blood purity is a fucking farce, and the Dark

Lord – who was a half-blood in case we've all forgotten – was more powerful than any pureblood who came before him. Then he was brought down by a teenager and his two side-kicks, one of whom is muggleborn and has more raw magical power than any other witch or wizard in our generation. If my views haven't been *clear* to you these past few years, it's because you've been shoving that frigid bitch down my throat for so long that I turned inward to escape."

Narcissa looked stricken.

"But *why* Draco?" she pleaded. "Why is Astoria so distasteful to you? She's a lovely young woman. She's a paragon! She knows precisely what is expected of her, and she will uphold the Malfoy name and title beautifully!"

"She's the most uninteresting person I know," said Draco simply. "She doesn't care for me, and I don't care for her. I have no desire to tie myself to somebody like that for the rest of my life."

"So you'd pick the mudblood over the young woman who was made for you, is that it?" Lucius spat.

Draco shrugged and studied his father. "Say what you want about Granger, but she's certainly interesting, is she not? I find myself... intrigued."

Lucius got an ugly look on his face, and Draco saw his hand twitch toward his wand. The slight stiffening of Blaise and Pansy next to him told Draco that they had seen this as well, before Pansy surprised them all by groaning and collapsing into Theo.

"Pansy!" cried Narcissa, leaping to her feet and running to the witch.

"My apologies, Narcissa," said Pansy a bit faintly. "I'm not feeling my best."

Pansy's distraction successfully halted the conversation with Draco's parents. Everyone converged on her, and as Narcissa was calling one of the elves to bring water and some food, Pansy caught his eye and winked.

He mouthed "thank you," and she just smirked before groaning again.

Draco took advantage of the moment and slipped out of the drawing room to head back to his bedroom. He had made his position clear with his parents, and there was no reason to engage with them any further. He wouldn't marry Astoria, and that was all there was to it. He knew his father was irate, and Lucius was the type to be coming up with ways to subvert Draco's wishes. But Draco had no intention of letting his father win this one. The moment he broke free of Astoria his mind began to shake off the years of haze, and he got the faintest taste of freedom. He wouldn't, *couldn't* go back.

Draco turned to the sound of his door opening, and his friends traipsed inside.

"Well that was a fucking shitshow," Blaise declared, as he moved to the small sideboard Draco kept in his bedroom and poured himself a drink. He poured drinks for Theo and Draco

too and gave Pansy a sympathetic look as she shook her head and sighed.

"Thanks for the save, Pans," said Draco.

"No problem," she replied. "There was nothing more that any of you could have said."

Draco nodded in agreement, and he took a long sip from his drink as he contemplated his friends.

"So what are you going to do now?" asked Blaise.

Draco shrugged. "I suppose I'm going to marry Granger."

His friends exchanged glances with each other.

"And you... don't mind that?" asked Theo carefully. "I know what you told Lucius, but you can be honest with us."

Draco considered this. "No, I don't mind it. I was entirely honest. She's very... interesting."

"She's reckless is what she is," said Blaise.

"Maybe. But she's also witty. I didn't have a chance to tell you, but I really did run into her in Hogsmeade after I left the wedding. *The Prophet* got that much right at any rate. I puked all over her, and then she recommended a muggle hotel where I could lie low. She ended up at a hotel down the street, and we owled each other all weekend."

His friends gaped at him.

"You... *owled* each other?" asked Blaise.

"Sure," said Draco, shrugging. "Potter managed to land a tracking spell on her, and he and Weasley were camped outside of her door. I was sending her food so she wouldn't starve, and she was giving me muggle TV recommendations to pass the time."

Theo lit up at this. "What were her recommendations then?"

Draco opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by Pansy shoving her husband lightly. "Not *now* Theo. I need to hear more about this."

She turned back to Draco. "So what... you two are *friends* now? Is that it?"

Draco shrugged. "Not really, but I don't think we're enemies anymore either. She referred to me as a pretentious git all weekend, but she also taught me how to use a muggle remote control so I wouldn't expire from sheer boredom. We seemed to reach... *detente*."

"*Detente*," said Pansy skeptically.

"Yes, *detente*," agreed Draco. "Not friends, but not enemies either."

“So all that shit she said during the Matching Ceremony...” began Blaise.

Draco felt a lurch of embarrassment.

“She was speaking in hypotheticals,” he said quietly, as he turned to stare out the window. “I’ve never thought about it very much, but I suspect she is correct about all of it. The MLPP practically encourages spousal rape, doesn’t it? And it could put somebody like her in a very precarious situation given... certain political leanings. It’s not just asinine, it’s dangerous. She was pointing that out.”

There was an uncomfortable silence at this.

“Draco...” said Theo quietly.

Draco turned to look at him.

“Was she telling the truth? About being tortured in the drawing room, I mean?”

Draco went cold, and he could tell his friends saw his expression change.

“It was Bellatrix,” he said quietly. “She was dead after the war, so Granger never really spoke up about it until today. There aren’t many who know the details.”

“And you all watched?” prodded Blaise carefully.

Draco just nodded. “My parents asked me to identify her and the others, and I delayed a little bit... but I couldn’t do anything to help once Bella arrived. She recognized Granger immediately. She was crazy, you know that.”

“And your parents?” asked Pansy.

Draco hesitated.

“Tell us, Draco,” said Pansy. “I think we need to know.”

Draco sighed. “Yes, they watched too. In fact, they argued with Bella over who would get to turn over Potter to the Dark Lord. And I think Bella offered Granger to Grayback if memory serves.”

“Fuck,” said Theo quietly.

Draco just inclined his head.

“You’re going to have your work cut out for you then,” said Pansy.

Draco lifted his eyes to look at her.

“What do you mean?”

She gave him an incredulous look. “What do you think I mean? Even if you two have reached this *detente*, she’s still going to resist marrying into your family. And as annoying

and self-righteous as she is, I can't say I blame her if your parents really did *that* to her. My point is, if you want to marry her before Lucius finds a way to force Astoria on you, then you're going to need to work quickly. If I'm Granger, then I want some reassurance that I'm safe here. I want to know that my husband doesn't despise me. And I need some reason to go against every single instinct that's telling me this is a terrible idea and agree to marry you anyway. I thought she was being dramatic by choosing Azkaban over you, but she really might feel safer there than Malfoy Manor."

Coldness crept over Draco as he considered Pansy's words. She was right of course, except for one thing.

"I asked Granger if she preferred Azkaban over marrying me," said Draco quietly.

"And?" prompted Theo.

Draco shrugged. "She said no. But she said she had to do it so Shacklebolt wouldn't win."

Pansy opened her mouth to react to this, when she was cut off by a tapping at the window. An owl Draco didn't recognize was hovering there, waiting to be let in. Draco looked at it curiously, but he let it in and pulled the parchment off its leg. It took off without awaiting a response. His hands were shaking slightly as he opened it.

Dear Lord Malfoy,

This letter is to inform you that Miss Hermione Jean Granger (inmate number 8724) has arrived at Azkaban Prison and has been booked in semi-solitary confinement per the applicable provisions of the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan. As her legal next-of-kin, I must inform you that the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan permits you to exercise your conjugal rights with at least twelve hours' written notice. Additionally, you are to be given reports of any visitors she receives and any disciplinary proceedings that take place against Miss Granger. This is for informational purposes only in accordance with the Azkaban Reform Act of 2001.

In furtherance of the above, please note that on 1 September 2003 Miss Granger received the following visitors:

Harry Potter (designated auror in charge during initial booking)

Ginevra Potter

Kingsley Shacklebolt

Rita Skeeter

Arthur Weasley

Molly Weasley

Ronald Weasley

Miss Granger declined all visitors after she was brought into custody.

Additionally, the following disciplinary actions were taken against Miss Granger on 1 September 2003:

Physical contusion of the face and head due to failure to submit her wand during the initial booking process. Miss Granger was revived and healed.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to write.

I am, yours most truly,

Lawrence Boles

Head Warden

Draco gaped at the letter and read it twice. Then he spun to stare at his friends.

“Listen to this!”

He read it out loud, and all three of them looked as perturbed as Draco felt when he reached the end.

“She was right then,” said Pansy quietly. “They’re practically inviting sexual assault, aren’t they? I suppose you’re considered her next-of-kin because you’re affianced under this ridiculous law. Even if she can stop other visitors, she can’t stop *you* if you decide you want to have sex with her in Azkaban. They must have written it that way to encourage these ‘visits,’ even if one party was unwilling. Bloody hell, this is crazy.”

“And they beat her,” said Draco, as he read about the disciplinary actions, a dark anger coursing through him as he read about it. “I can’t believe they *told* me.”

“They have to,” said Theo. “I got similar reports for my father before he died last year.”

Draco glanced at Theo in confusion. Theo had never told him this.

“Wait. Really?”

Theo nodded. “It was one of Granger’s landmark pieces of legislation, actually. She’s the reason the dementors are no longer there and those who are designated as next-of-kin get reports about visitors and the treatment of inmates. Supposedly it’s all embedded with some novel spell she created so the warden can’t lie about it either. It’s meant to give family members insight about what’s happening to prisoners, and it gives them the opportunity to hire lawyers if things get too far out of line.”

Draco gaped. He had heard of the Azkaban Reform Act of course, but he had occluded most of the details. He didn't like to be reminded of that terrible place, and Lucius had been released a couple months before it passed.

"Is that why she wasn't afraid to go then?" asked Blaise suddenly. "She knew what it would be like?"

"Maybe," Theo shrugged. "At the very least she knew there would be a record of how she's treated."

"And maybe that's why Shacklebolt was so against it..." said Pansy slowly.

"Fuck," whispered Draco as he looked down at the letter again. Then his eyes met Theo's. "What else will they tell you?" he asked intently.

Theo shrugged. "They tell you whenever they're disciplined or injured by another inmate – though I suppose in Granger's case she'll be safe from *that* if she's mostly in solitary. There are weekly visits with a healer, but they let you know of any medical visits that aren't routine. They also let you know if the prisoner is making any special requests."

"Like what?"

"Books, newspapers, that sort of thing. They are permitted certain kinds of mental stimulation now, but it's limited and has to be provided by the next-of-kin. Azkaban doesn't supply those things."

"Bloody hell she's probably going to ask for the contents of my entire library," muttered Draco.

"Well if you really want to marry her, you should give her whatever she asks for," said Pansy firmly. "And after reading *this...*" and now she gestured at the letter, "I believe you when you say she was doing it to fuck with Shacklebolt."

"What do you mean?" asked Draco quickly. He knew that was what Granger said, but he needed to believe it. *Merlin*, he needed to believe she was telling the truth. If she really preferred Azkaban over marrying him, Draco would probably have to occlude again.

Pansy shrugged. "Evidently you have the legal right to force yourself on her whether she's married to you or not. You know what an enormous swot she is. Granger probably knew that when she told Shacklebolt to arrest her. She wasn't trying to avoid you, Draco. She *can't* avoid you, not really. This is just a stunt to make Shacklebolt look bad."

Draco remembered the satisfied expression on her face when her name was called, and something inside of him eased just a little.

Pansy was right of course. It was clear that Granger knew this law intimately. She didn't appear frightened or worried when she was matched with Draco. She wasn't scared of *him*. She decided to make an example out of him, it was true, but Draco sensed no real trepidation

from her. Draco knew he would *never* force himself on a woman, not ever. But how could Granger know that for sure? He *had* been a Death Eater...

“Erm, Pansy... can I ask you something?” said Draco quietly.

Pansy raised her eyebrow in invitation for him to continue.

“Do witches... know?”

“Know what?” she asked in confusion.

“Know when a bloke is dangerous? Or willing to do... *that* to them?”

She looked thoughtful. “Certainly not always, but sometimes, yes. It’s just... a feeling. Some blokes are creepier than others.”

“Who?” asked Theo immediately, his expression darkening.

Pansy hesitated.

“*Who* Pans?” he insisted.

She pursed her lips. “Well at school, Goyle gave me those vibes. So did Cormac McLaggen.”

“Granger went with him to some party once, didn’t she?” asked Blaise.

Pansy nodded. “Yes. I was patrolling that night and caught her hexing him so he would keep his hands to himself. I helped her, and she got away. It was the one and only time we were cordial to each other at Hogwarts.”

Draco felt his lip curl. Fucking *McLaggen*?

“So you’re saying her instincts about that sort of thing are bad,” said Theo.

“Not at all. She’s just willing to flirt with danger if she gets something out of it. Surely you all know that.”

Draco *did* know that, but it didn’t make him feel any better.

“What could she have *possibly* gotten from McLaggen?” he asked with consternation.

Pansy just rolled her eyes. “It made Weasley jealous, of course. Granger’s a big girl. I’m sure she thought she could manage McLaggen for one night if it meant taunting Weasley.”

“And her opinions about me...” said Draco quietly.

Pansy cast him a sympathetic look. “She’s not scared of you Draco, if that’s what you’re asking. You don’t give off creepy vibes. You never have. Granger’s comments about you being allowed to rape her were inflammatory because evidently they’re *true*.” Pansy pointed

toward the letter again. “But that doesn’t mean she thinks you would actually *do* it. She would have been terrified of you if that was the case.”

Draco huffed out a breath, feeling marginally better.

“So what now?” he wondered out loud.

“Now you exercise your conjugal rights,” said Pansy promptly.

Draco glanced at her in alarm. “Excuse me? We were just saying how I would *never*...”

“Not like *that*,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I mean you go talk to her. You are the only person she can’t turn away, and based on what I saw in that courtroom today, I don’t think she would mind a visit from you. She looked like she wanted to cruciate every other person on this list at one point or another, but she actually seemed pleased with *you*. Write to Azkaban for a conjugal visit. Show her that you won’t take anything from her she doesn’t want to give. Then listen to what she has to say. You won’t be able to convince her to marry you if you’re aiming blind.”

“Pansy’s right,” said Blaise. “You know Lucius is going to be working on some scheme to match you with Astoria again. You need to work fast, and this is your in.”

“Agreed,” said Theo. “Granger’s incredibly stubborn, and I don’t think an Azkaban stint by itself is going to sway her.”

Draco bit his lip and read the letter one more time, and then he checked his watch. He had to give them twelve hours’ notice.

“Fine,” said Draco, and he slipped out a piece of parchment jot off a quick note. A few minutes later he watched his owl grow smaller in the distance. His first conjugal visit would be scheduled for the following day.

2 September 2003

Draco was led into a small room with a basic bed and thin linens. It was shoved up against a wall, under a minuscule window that had magically enhanced bars on it. In one corner there was a tiny round table and a couple of chairs secured to the floor. Draco shook off the guard and lowered himself into one of them.

He looked around and tried not to shiver. Even though the dementors were gone, he could still feel their essence. It was in the very stone itself and made the whole place feel unnaturally cold.

The guards of Azkaban were a mixed bunch. While none of them had been Death Eaters or convicted criminals themselves, some were sympathizers. Others were firmly on the side of Harry Potter. And all of them were here because of the power trip it gave them to exert authority over their prisoners.

The guard who had escorted Draco here today seemed to be a Death Eater sympathizer, if his treatment of Draco was any indication. He didn't taunt Draco for his prior stay, and he gave Draco a knowing leer when Draco presented himself for a conjugal visit.

After depositing Draco into the room, the guard left to fetch Granger. Draco did his best to project an air of authority, as though this place of his nightmares wasn't affecting him. He raised his occlumency walls just enough to take the edge off. For some reason he didn't want to occlude around Granger, but he didn't think he would be able to manage this conversation with her without a leg up.

That morning, Draco had called an emergency meeting with his solicitors to get a crash course on the MLPP and the Azkaban Reform Act. He needed to know what his rights were and who would be watching when he visited Granger for the first time. He was certain that his father had spies, and this visit would be reported back to Lucius if it was monitored. To Draco's surprise the conjugal visit itself was private — evidently the drafters of the MLPP wanted to make sure there were no barriers to performance — but Draco knew that every interaction with a guard might make it back to his father.

He had spent the last few hours considering the message he wanted to send to Lucius.

He was pulled out of his thoughts as the door opened, and Granger was brought in, being led by the same guard who escorted Draco into the room. Her hair was loose and slightly damp, the curls heavy over her shoulders. She was barefoot, her toes oddly cheerful and painted hot pink, and she was wearing loose cotton trousers and a matching V-neck shirt. The shirt was too large for her, and Draco's eyes unconsciously roved over her. Evidently she had not been allowed a bra, and he could see her nipples peaking under the fabric.

Draco swallowed and forced his face to remain impassive as she was presented to him.

"Here's your *fiancée*," said the guard with another leer.

He pulled Granger's hair back over her shoulders to give Draco a clear view of what she was wearing. He touched her neck as he did it, and Granger shuddered ever so slightly. She was handcuffed and couldn't stop him.

"She's mine, not yours," said Draco in his best aristocratic drawl.

The guard glowered, but Draco just raised an eyebrow.

"Just having a little fun," he pouted. "She's only a mudblood."

"And as I said, she's *mine*. Once she comes to her senses, she'll be my Lady Malfoy. I strongly suggest you keep that in mind as you interact with her."

The guard gave him an ugly look. “We both know the Ministry’s only after one thing. What’s it to you?”

Draco stood up and strode toward the guard so quickly, he blinked in surprise and reflexively released Granger. Draco was several inches taller than him, and he committed the bastard’s face to memory.

“What’s it to *me*? You dare ask me that when the Ministry has determined that she’s to bear *my* heir? You’re young, so perhaps you aren’t aware of who I am or what I’ve done. But let’s just say that the only reason I’m not in Azkaban today is because I took the Dark Mark when I was underaged. I had to prove myself first, you know. He didn’t just give them to anybody. I lived with the Dark Lord in my home for two fucking years, and I rarely displeased him. I got out of Azkaban on a mere technicality and nothing more. So when I say that something is *mine*, I mean it. Do not touch her. Do not speak to her except to offer her meals or the books and newspapers I will be sending to her. She is here on a temporary basis, and I can make your life a living hell if you cross me.”

The guard went a bit pale, and he took a step back. He had an ugly look on his face, but Draco could tell he was nervous.

“Now why don’t you uncuff her? We all know why I’m here, and she’s going to need her hands for it.”

Granger flushed a bit at this, but she said nothing as a muscle in the guard’s jaw twitched.

“Fine,” he ground out. “You have thirty minutes.”

He released Granger’s cuffs and then moved toward the door. Draco and Granger stared at each other as the door shut and the lock turned.

She was watching him a bit warily, but she didn’t appear scared. She was massaging her wrists where the cuffs had been, and Draco reached into a hidden pocket of his robes and pulled out a tube of cream while he grabbed her hand.

“What are you...” she started, but she trailed off as he began to rub the cream into her wrists.

“I’ve been here before, remember?” he said.

Her eyes narrowed as he dropped her hand and stepped back.

“How did you get it in?”

He snorted. “Simple concealment charm in my robes. The guards are idiots.”

She nodded a little, and he gestured toward the table and chairs.

“So I’m to be Lady Malfoy, huh?” she said as she sat down. “And I’m bearing your heir now?”

He grinned. “What’s the point of being a Malfoy if you can’t be an arrogant bastard?”

She rolled her eyes at this. “Seriously though, why bother? We both know you’re getting a fantastic deal out of this.”

Draco sat back and considered her for a moment. “Let’s just say that my father has a lot of determination. I don’t know what he’s planning yet, but I’m sure he’s planning *something*. I’ve been betrothed to Astoria since I was in nappies, and he’s not going to let this go.”

“So you have to act like a caveman because...” she prompted.

He rolled his eyes. “Because every interaction I have with a guard will be reported back to him. And right now he probably thinks that I’m having second thoughts about my decisions over the last few days. I want it to be very clear that I am going to continue resisting Astoria. The Malfoys are rather famously territorial when it comes to their witches, so if I claim you publicly he’ll know I’m serious. And hopefully it has the added benefit of keeping those arseholes away from you.”

Her eyebrows went up at that. “You don’t have to pretend when it’s just us. These visits are private.”

“Who said I’m pretending? I don’t want them to touch you.”

Her eyes narrowed a little.

“Alright,” she finally said. “So to summarize, I’m a pawn in a pissing contest with your father. And now that you’re in it you’ve decided you actually *care* about how they treat me.”

Draco’s mouth thinned. This was not going how he had planned.

“Look Granger, I don’t want the guards treating *any* witch the way they treat you. The fact that you’re here at all is appalling, and you’re vulnerable. You and I both know it. If I can put on the ex-Death Eater act and get them to leave you alone, can you blame me for doing it? As it is, I *do* have a legal bond with you right now. It makes sense to use it to keep you safe while you’re here.”

She chewed on her lip a bit, but finally seemed to deflate as she nodded.

Draco exhaled. It was a small victory, he knew, but it was important that she learn to trust him if he was going to get her to agree to everything he wanted from her.

“Fine,” she said. “You can’t fix everything, but I’ll admit that the innuendos are unwelcome. I wouldn’t hate it if they stopped.”

Draco nodded. “And what can’t I fix?”

She gave him a wry look. “My lack of knickers for one thing. Evidently going without undergarments is a brand new Azkaban policy for conjugal visits related to the MLPP. They want to make sure there’s *easy access* in case you choose to exercise your rights. They even gave me a bath first to make sure I was nice and clean for you.”

Draco's mouth went dry, and he instinctively occluded so he wouldn't look where his eyes wanted to look.

She raised an eyebrow when she noticed his eyes didn't leave her face. "You have exceptional self-control."

He swallowed. "Yes, well, I'm an occlumens."

"Ah. That's right. I had forgotten. Well I'm not complaining. I've gotten my fair share of oggling today."

Draco felt distinct displeasure at these words. Somehow, over the last twenty-four hours he had come to think of Granger as *his*. He had always been selfish and wasn't the type to share very well. The notion that the guards were looking at her while she was dressed for a conjugal visit — or rather *not* dressed — was perturbing.

"I'll make it clear I don't appreciate that," he said.

Granger inclined her head in thanks.

"Is there anything else you need?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "Why? Are you hoping I'll stay in here indefinitely? That leaves you in a pretty sweet spot doesn't it? Unmarried but also safe from your ex."

Draco debated how much to tell her and finally decided he might as well be honest. He didn't have time for games.

"Actually, no. I want you to marry me, Granger."

The stunned look on her face was worth his candor.

"You still want that?" she asked.

"Yes," he confirmed. "But I also know how stubborn you can be, and I don't think you'll agree to it right away. So in the meantime, I can get you the things you need."

She frowned. "Why do you want to marry me?"

"Because I don't want to marry Astoria."

"But why *me*?"

He shrugged. "You're very... interesting."

"I'm interesting?"

"Yes, interesting. My world is filled with people who are decidedly uninteresting. Astoria's the worst of the lot. She's not a bad person, but she might as well be a mannequin or a pretty doll who plays dress-up. She has no fire, no passion, no real interests. She's absolutely

perfect, and I can't abide it. Any others my parents would choose are similar. You though..."

Draco allowed himself to survey her including her lack of undergarments he had thus far tried to avoid.

Fuck.

He gathered his thoughts.

"You are the opposite of that," he continued. "I would never be bored. Besides, the Ministry already matched us. When I left my own wedding I decided to make it work with anybody who wasn't Astoria. You were actually a pleasant surprise."

She looked incredulous, but he could see her mind swirling.

"We would kill each other," she finally said.

"I know. It might be fun, don't you think?"

She huffed a small laugh at this.

"I don't know anything about you except that your parents are bigots and you're a pretentious git."

"That about sums it up. Though I do have a title, and I'm in line for another one so you will be Lady Malfoy to start and eventually Lady Wiltshire if you marry me."

"God," she muttered.

Draco just shrugged a bit apologetically.

"Look," she finally said. "Even if I were to agree that it's not the *worst* match in the world... on a purely hypothetical basis I mean... I can't marry you. You know I can't. Kingsley would win if I did, and he can't win this. I probably owe you an apology for my behavior in the courtroom yesterday, but it was the first time I finally got through to some of the members of the Wizengamot. I need them to understand how terrible this is."

Draco felt another flash of disappointment, but he forced it away. He knew she would do this. And something told him it would work in his favor if he went along with it for now. If he fought her, she would become entrenched.

"I actually agree with you," he said, and he relished the moment of surprise he caught on her face. "It *is* a terrible law, and you identified the perfect opportunity to make it clear to them just how bad it can be. Don't apologize to me for it. I'm the one who owes you a dozen apologies. The only reason you could make an example out of my family was because of the way we've treated you. I certainly didn't enjoy it, but we must reap what we sow."

She blinked, clearly thrown off by his words.

“Alright,” she said slowly. “I’ll admit, you continue to surprise me, Malfoy. So why don’t you tell me why you’re here?”

He shrugged. “A few reasons. First and foremost, I wanted to make sure you’re okay. I wasn’t lying when I said I don’t like the thought of witches in this place, and we *are* affianced. I’m the type to take my responsibilities seriously, and I now feel some responsibility toward you. Second, I truly don’t know how this is going to play out, but I do know that my father and his friends are powerful. He and I are on opposite sides this time, and I want you to know that I plan to align myself with you. If it comes down to it and you think that marrying me is the best course of action to get what you want, I don’t want you to hesitate because you only know the old me. My loyalties are to my wife. Full stop. She comes before everybody else, including my parents. And finally, I need you to tell me how the *fuck* Potter got you to go to the Matching Ceremony in the first place. I’m surprised he didn’t drop dead from the looks you were giving him, and I’ve been dying to hear the story.”

Her mouth was slightly open by the time he was done, and he sat back and studied her with some satisfaction. He had discussed his approach with his friends late into the night, and they finally decided that being direct was best. It was the sort of thing Granger valued, and in any event there wasn’t time to play games. Draco had to make her trust him as quickly as possible in case his father tried to back Draco into a corner. He wanted her to work *with* him and not against him if that happened. So for the time being, Draco would work with her too and give her the things she wanted.

Based on her expression he thought they had called it perfectly.

“Well I suppose I can tell you...” she said slowly.

Draco perked up.

“So I did receive your final note, and I planned to head to the Loire Valley as soon as I was in France. I thought that if I didn’t show up to the Matching Ceremony I would be able to rally support from the continent. Thanks for the offer to stay at your chateau, by the way – I fully intended to use it.”

“But...” Draco prompted.

Granger sighed. “But Harry had that fucking tracking spell on me, and my train was late. He caught up to me.”

“And that’s it? He clearly didn’t want to arrest you yesterday.”

“No, it’s true he didn’t. But I was breaking the law by fleeing the country, and he was *supposed* to arrest me at the train station when I was caught. Instead of doing that he begged me to stay. He said I could put up a better fight if I was here and in a place of moral superiority. If it had become known that I ran, then Kingsley could always use that against me in the court of public opinion. Besides, I needed help mailing out copies of the legislation I drafted to repeal the MLPP. I really wanted it to reach the Wizengamot before the Matching Ceremony started. Harry offered to help if I stayed in England.”

“So Potter wanted you to make an example of yourself and go to Azkaban?” asked Draco incredulously.

“No, of course not. He wanted me to get married and just keep doing what I’ve been doing — you know, lobbying, letter writing, that sort of thing. I don’t think he’s ever thought through all the ramifications of the law when it comes to things like rape and sexual assault — most people haven’t because all we’ve heard for the last year is news about weddings and babies. It was the perfect public distraction so people wouldn’t look deeper, and Harry fell for it like everybody else did. He thought getting married through the MLPP was better than Azkaban.”

“But you saw the problems with the law,” pointed out Draco.

“Of course,” she said. “I worked for a think tank until very recently, and I’ve spent the last few years trying to influence legislation. I’m rather good at it, but the MLPP was different. I just couldn’t make any inroads using normal channels. Everyone was preoccupied by what might happen to *them* if they had a match they didn’t like, and then they became distracted by all the weddings and babies, and of course the Wizengamot itself was practically salivating over the possibility of *grandbabies*. It was like screaming into an empty room every time I tried to point out all the foul things they wrote into that law. By the time my own wedding rolled around... well, I was desperate. After Harry caught me at the train station I realized he was right and the point would be better made if I stayed here and objected to my match. Harry had no idea I decided to go to prison the moment I agreed to stay in England. He thought I would get married and just hex my husband if he put a toe out of line. I’m not a bad shot.”

“Then why were you so angry with him yesterday?”

She scowled. “Because that git put the damn tracking spell on me, and I had to hide from him and Ron for two sodding nights! He had no right!”

“And Weasley?”

She waved a hand airily. “The usual with him. He said some very rude things through the door at the Ritz. I spend half my life not speaking to him for one reason or another. This was just more of the same.”

Draco couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped. She scowled at him a little, and he just raised his hands in mock surrender.

“Fine! You’re right. Potter shouldn’t have done that, and Weasley is a git. But Potter must have at least *suspected* you would run. I’m happy to say that nobody saw mine coming. In fact, I only decided to do it about three seconds before I apparated away.”

She cracked a reluctant smile at this. “Mine was a bit more planned, that was true. I packed some essentials just in case I wanted to run for it.”

“Except for food,” he pointed out.

She rolled her eyes. "I told you I always forget food."

He grinned briefly. "So why didn't you just call it off?"

She sighed. "I probably should have, but I was going in circles about it and couldn't make up my mind. Everything about a Weasley wedding is loud and a *lot*, and I just didn't have the space to think it through. Once Ginny and her mother finally left for the ceremony I had a few minutes to myself, and it was the first bit of silence I had in weeks. I realized I was letting Kingsley win by going along with the mad plan to marry Ron. I'm the reason we were so late to do it, you know. Harry and Ginny wanted to do it as soon as the law was passed, but they also wanted a double wedding with us. I agreed to marry Ron if I had to, but I also kept thinking I would be able to get the law overturned so it would become a moot point. Then eventually I ran out of time, so I went along with it to avoid the Matching Ceremony. Once I could finally think properly, I knew I didn't want to marry Ron. I've never wanted to marry Ron. It was everybody *else* who wanted me to marry Ron. I'm sure Harry could tell I was reluctant, so that's why he tracked me."

"You felt duty-bound," said Draco knowingly.

"I don't know if it was a *duty* exactly, but it certainly felt like an obligation. I love the Weasleys. They and Harry are the closest family I have. And it seemed like everyone – not just them, but all my other friends and acquaintances too – expected it. Ron and I had a few dates and a couple of snogs over the years, but he always wanted it more than I did. He wasn't that subtle about his feelings and after all the things we went through together everyone thought we'd make a real go of it eventually. Then the MLPP was passed, and he was the obvious choice. When your whole world is telling you that a certain decision is the right one, sometimes it's hard to hear your own voice when it disagrees."

Draco was watching her in fascination as she spoke. She was so expressive, so passionate. He understood as well as anybody how easy it was to listen to the things other people were saying and eventually believe them to be true.

"That's how I felt about Astoria," said Draco quietly. "I've known for a long time that I didn't want to marry her, but we've been betrothed for most of my life. I couldn't imagine a different future, and then the MLPP forced my hand. My closest friends disagreed with the match for several reasons, but every other person in my life was telling me how perfect it was."

She nodded knowingly. "Yes, and I imagine it was the same reason you got in over your head with blood purity and the war too. You were indoctrinated. It's very hard to see a different path when you're in it. I couldn't see the situation with Ron clearly until I was about to walk down the aisle."

An odd feeling washed over Draco at her words. She was absolutely correct that he had been indoctrinated when it came to blood purity and then Astoria. And his parents were *still* indoctrinated. A part of him was embarrassed, but another part – the part that hoped she would agree to marry him sooner rather than later – was relieved that she understood this. Her own indoctrination when it came to Weasley might not have been as severe as his, but it sounded like she still personally experienced it at least some degree.

"You're right, of course," he said. "And in the spirit of being honest, you should know that my views have changed a lot since the war. My parents thought..."

She gave him a wry look. "I could tell."

He grimaced.

Draco then heard footsteps coming toward them to hover outside of their door, and he glanced at his watch. They only had a couple minutes left.

"Tell me if there's anything you need before they end this," he said quietly.

"A copy of *The Daily Prophet* as often as you can spare it," she said back. "Also parchment, quills, and ink. If I have those things I can make a proper list for you once I have a chance to think about it."

He nodded quickly. "I'll send those along this evening. I haven't even had a chance to look at *The Prophet* today, other than the picture on the front page."

Her face lit up in an impish smile. "Tell me. Did that picture feature my middle finger by any chance?"

"What do you think?" he asked wryly.

She looked positively delighted, and he chuckled a little before turning serious. "I also want to know if I can visit you again. I won't force you to see me unless it's urgent."

She bit her lip. "I... wouldn't mind seeing you whenever you're free to come by. The conjugal visits only require advanced notice because of the *preparations*."

She rolled her eyes at this but turned a bit pink. Once again, Draco forced himself not to look *there*.

"But they're also private," she added in a hurried whisper. "Regular visits don't have to be scheduled in advance, but they are monitored by guards."

Draco thought quickly. "How about this, then. If I have news that's private, I'll schedule a conjugal visit. If it's just to chat, I'll make a regular visit so you don't have to... *prepare* for me."

"I appreciate the offer, and I wish it were that easy," she said slowly. "But if I agree to see you outside of a conjugal visit then it looks like I'm softening toward you."

Draco thought about this for a moment and realized she was correct. She drew a line in the sand the previous day, and if Shacklebolt learned that she was accepting regular visits from Draco he might believe she was coming around to the MLPP. And if his *father* learned about it, he might expedite whatever plan he was surely brewing for Astoria.

"Fair enough. Conjugal visits only then unless circumstances change."

She nodded. "I think that's best... even if I'm a bit underdressed like this."

I can't say I mind it. Fuck.

"We can use it to our advantage," he said instead.

"Oh?" she asked.

"You'll see," he said under his breath.

Just then the same guard entered and cast a suspicious eye over them. Draco automatically assumed the customary, arrogant expression he used when he wanted to get his way. This time Granger was watching him a bit curiously instead of suspiciously. Draco decided to put on a little show for the guard, and he hoped she would play along.

They both rose and Draco quickly reached out to pull her toward him, cupping her cheek as he did so.

"Darling," he purred. "I thank you for your time today. I will keep trying to... *convince you.*"

To Draco's delight Granger seemed to intuit precisely what he was trying to do. She gave him a harsh look and shoved him back.

"Malfoy," she said coldly. "As I've already told you, I wish you would leave me alone."

"Ah, but I have rights, don't I? And those rights involved you and me. Together. I'll be back soon so we can continue our conversations darling. You'll come to see that being Lady Malfoy has many advantages besides being in my bed."

"In your dreams," she said.

"Oh I've been dreaming about you for years, Granger."

He smirked at her, as the guard stepped forward and cuffed her again. Then Draco turned on him.

"Don't forget, she belongs to me by right of law. I've already heard rumors that you and the others enjoy looking at her. Let me be very clear about something. All of this..." and now Draco finally allowed his eyes to rove over her hungrily, taking in every detail of her knickerless and braless body, "...is mine. That means she's mine to look at, not yours. The same goes for physical discipline. I'm her next-of-kin, so I'll be getting her reports. No more *contusions* or I'll happily castrate you and serve your balls to my peacocks for dinner. They developed a taste for human flesh when the Dark Lord was alive."

The guard blanched, and even Granger looked a bit disturbed by the threat. But he also saw the slight blush on her cheeks as the guard gripped her by the arm and started to lead her out.

"Handle her with care," Draco said in a mocking voice. "We wouldn't want to find any bruises on her the next time I visit. Isn't that right, darling?"

They both paused as Draco approached them one more time, and he tucked a curl behind her ear. “You’re mine to look at. Mine to touch. Remind the guards of that if you must.”

“Fuck you, Malfoy,” she said angrily, but Draco caught the glimmer of appreciation in her eyes.

He gripped her face tightly and said, “Oh I would love nothing more than to fuck you, darling. But I plan to be a good boy and marry you first. We must do these things properly if you’re to be my Lady Malfoy.”

On the surface she looked outraged, but again Draco saw a flash of something else in her eyes. He couldn’t immediately identify it, but he was sure it wasn’t anger.

He leaned in and gave her a slow kiss on the cheek. Through the harsh scent of prison soap, he could smell *her*; and fuck if she didn’t smell good.

“I’ll be back soon,” he breathed into her ear so quietly the guard couldn’t hear.

Then he pulled back and gave her a saucy wink as he released her. “I can’t wait until our next visit. You do know how to keep me entertained.”

She glared at him, but said nothing else as the guard nudged her along, and she turned to leave. With her back to him, Draco’s eyes immediately dropped to her arse, and he indulged himself in a long look. The cotton trousers were thin, and as she moved he tried to imagine what she looked like underneath.

This time Draco’s cock didn’t just twitch. He started to get hard for the first time in well over a year.

This was very interesting indeed.

Chapter 5: Monthlies

Chapter Notes

Some important disclaimers about this chapter, based on continued feedback:

(1) Hermione gives Draco a biology lesson in this chapter because he needs one. The things she says about the female cycle are based on ‘average’ women. I am aware that not all women have an average cycle. My own cycle is so far from average that it took science and medical intervention to conceive both of my children. However, this is fanfic, so for ease of writing this Hermione has an average 28-day cycle. When she talks about it, she is speaking from that perspective only.

(2) I can’t believe I have to say this, but PLEASE DO NOT USE FANFIC AS A RESOURCE FOR RELIABLE METHODS OF BIRTH CONTROL. Similarly, don’t use fanfic as a resource for trying to become pregnant if that’s your goal. This is fiction, and nothing in this chapter (or in the rest of this fic) is intended to be medical advice for readers.

(3) Finally, for my readers in the UK, there is an Americanism in this chapter that is intentional. It’s meant to be a joke because it doesn’t work without the American word. Please try your best to just roll with it. There is no need to tell me that it’s not called that in the UK...

TW: References to disordered eating and marital rape (not depicted).

Three weeks later

The Daily Prophet was having a field day, and Granger was at the center of it all. After the first bombshell piece was printed the day after the Matching Ceremony, several journalists evidently decided to dig. What they found — *The Prophet* could exclusively reveal — was a story of a young woman who had been trying for months to change the course of the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan.

She had been stymied at every turn, her usual fame and fire ignored because of the selfish whims of the Wizengamot. And now the crusader who had been trying to reverse this from the very beginning was locked in Azkaban and engaged to a former Death Eater. It was *not* a great look for Kingsley Shacklebolt.

The Prophet reached a new level of frenzy when Granger started using that parchment and ink Draco sent to her to write op-eds from prison.

The Guards Who Want Me

by Hermione Granger

I write this from my cell that is only a few meters square. It is nearing time for the ‘preparations’ for my next ‘conjugal visit’ with the man who was affianced to me against my will. That is the irony of this punishment course — as a woman who is engaged in name only, I am still nothing more than a warm body for some man to use for his pleasure in the hopes that he will impregnate me while he does it. Not even prison bars will stop the Ministry of Magic.

The conjugal visits can only be requested by my next-of-kin, who is presently Draco Malfoy thanks to the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan. These visits are buried in the footnotes and cross-references of the law and are clearly designed for a single purpose: to give the Ministry their babies, whether a couple has agreed to get married or not.

Lord Malfoy may request a visit at any time, and while I can refuse any other visitors I am not permitted to refuse him. During the ‘preparations,’ for these visits I am made to strip and bathe in front of at least four guards, all male. They don’t look away of course, blaming their ‘duties,’ as an excuse to glory in my humiliation. They offer to ‘help’ me. They speak of their fantasies about me. Those fantasies are brutal and violent, and I am certain it is only the Azkaban Reform Act, which provides magical documentation of prisoner-guard relationships, that keeps them from touching me.

Well that and the threats from Draco Malfoy himself. They struck me the moment I entered Azkaban.

Lord Malfoy is not shy about the fact that he views me as something that is now his, whether we are married or not. His behavior toward the guards who want me is perfectly in line with the sort of insidious thinking the Ministry is promoting by allowing the MLPP to stand. I am always brought to him in loose fitting prison garb, scrubbed fresh of the grime from my cell, and made to stand there before him without even the privacy that undergarments would afford me. The best thing I can say about him is that he hasn’t forced me to have intercourse yet. But he has the right to do it any time, and the Azkaban procedures for these visits are clearly intended to tempt him by giving him a prisoner who is clean and bare, available for the taking.

At what point does one break? Is it when the guards announce yet another conjugal visit and tell me they would rape me if they believed they could get away with it? Is it when my affianced lays claim to me by threatening those same guards because he already views me as nothing more than a possession to be kept? Is it when the guards ejaculate into my food and force me to ‘eat their cum’ in order to nourish myself? Or is it when my former fiancé Ronald Weasley — a man who has been a cherished friend for most of my life — shows up to visit and tells me I deserve to be treated this way because I failed to marry him when I had the chance?

Do I deserve it, when all I wanted from him was that innocent friendship we always shared? Did my desire to preserve my virtue and my reluctance to spread my legs for him warrant all of this?

Who is really to blame for the guards who want me, the conjugal visits with my childhood bully, and my former best friend who is capable of looking at a woman and telling her she brought it on herself?

The answer is simple: it's Kingsley Shacklebolt and his Marriage Law and Procreation Plan. At least we are still free to tell that truth.

Draco didn't know if he was impressed or enraged. These details had not been shared with him during the five other visits he requested from her, though he *had* received the report of her accepting a visit from Weasley. All of it made Draco see red.

"What the fuck has been happening to you?" he demanded the minute the door shut on their first conjugal visit following her article.

"I thought I was quite clear," she said as she moved to sit down.

"Is this true? They're tossing off into your food? They are seeing you *naked*? I told them I would —"

She raised a hand to stop him, and Draco could barely bring himself to do it. He was seething with outrage.

"Yes, it's all true, *including* your rather possessive tendencies that I wrote about. At first I thought it was an act, but now I'm wondering if you really do believe it when you tell the guards I'm yours every single time I visit."

"Those *possessive tendencies* are meant to help you and keep you safe! How can I help you if you don't tell me this is happening?"

"Are you being honest with them, then?" she retorted. "Do you really think I'm some sort of object of yours?"

"I *think* that you're far safer with me than with them!" he seethed. "And I think I really *would* like to murder every one of them for treating you that way! Not to mention the Weasel, who is apparently an even bigger fuck-up than I realized if he's telling you that you *deserve* to be fucking oggled like —"

He clamped his mouth shut when she reached across the table and gripped his hand.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?" he asked a bit rudely. His temper was barely under control.

"For making it clear you don't think I deserve it."

“Of course you don’t fucking deserve it! I can’t believe that wanker would even imply it! I mean, do I sincerely wish you would just take the easy solution and marry me so you can get the hell out of here? Of course I do. Please darling, marry me whenever you decide you’re ready. But it’s your choice to do it or not, isn’t it?”

Her eyes softened a little. “That’s one reason I’m going to keep writing these op-eds,” she said.

“I don’t follow.”

“Because if it ever gets to be too much... I don’t want Kingsley to win if I *do* take the easy solution. I want the world to know just how bad this law can be. I can tolerate a lot, but we all have breaking points.”

“Are you reaching yours Granger?”

Draco tried not to sound too hopeful. He didn’t want her to be miserable. He just wanted her to marry him and be done with it.

Her eyes looked haunted. “Aside from the guards and terrible living conditions, even without the dementors here, it’s... challenging. And you aren’t helping things.”

“What does that mean? I’m doing nothing *but* trying to help you!”

She glanced at him and blushed a little. “I mean you’re not as bad as I thought you would be. Unfortunate possessive tendencies aside, you continue to make the easier solution look better and better by comparison.”

Fuck, am I actually wearing her down then?

Draco knew it was too early to celebrate, and Granger had only been here a few weeks. She had a lot of fight in her, and he wouldn’t allow himself to become too optimistic yet. But he was buoyed by the thought that she was being tempted by the alternative he could offer her. And what she could offer in return was so very interesting that Draco had thought of little else since they were matched.

“What do you mean, ‘unfortunate possessive tendencies?’ Are you saying you don’t want a bloke who would burn the world for you?”

“Why, are you offering?”

“Well I don’t know about the world, but I’d happily burn Azakaban and all of the guards while I’m at it. I’ll throw in the Weasel too if I can find a reason to get him to come here before I light it all on fire. Surely that’s a decent start.”

A reluctant smile crossed her face. “And what about me, then? Am I to burn in this inferno of yours?”

“Of course not, darling. We’ll escape to the sea. I wouldn’t be worthy of those possessive tendencies if I let you burn too.”

“Maybe I want to watch.”

“Mmm you do have a violent streak in you, I’ll grant you that. And you’re doing a fairly good job of burning this place down all on your own.”

It was true. When Draco made himself ignore the hot anger that coursed through him when he thought about the guards and Weasley, he realized she was using her prison sentence strategically and building a very specific narrative that would undermine Shacklebolt and the Wizengamot. And when he read her article again after her confession about being tempted to take the easy path, he also saw what she was doing when it came to *him*. Her description of him wasn’t flattering, but he was arguably the least worst of the group. She also planted the idea that something might make her break. If she *did* choose him at some point, it wouldn’t necessarily undermine the story she was telling about the brutality of this law.

As much as he disliked it, Draco no longer objected as vehemently when she continued to write about the guards leering at her or the time they pissed all over her parchment and destroyed it or the subsequent visit with Weasley that also ended in a shouting match. In fact, Granger’s opinion pieces – which she told him were inspired by an American muggle who had once done the same thing when imprisoned during something called the ‘civil rights movement’ – were prompting others to share their experiences too. The other authors usually remained anonymous, but they were submitting articles to *The Prophet* that proved some of Granger’s darker predictions were coming true: the MLPP encouraged spousal rape.

I told him I didn’t want to have sex, and he took me anyway.

He cites the law when he says he’s allowed to have me twice a day. It doesn’t matter how sore I am or how little I wish it.

I lost my virginity to a stranger.

By the time the first week of October rolled around, Granger had been imprisoned for over a month, and the Minister was facing a true political crisis thanks to the media firestorm she had started. As irritating as her stubbornness could be, Draco was oddly proud of her.

“I have to admit, she might be onto something,” said Pansy as she threw down the latest copy of *The Prophet*. His friends were in his room, away from the prying eyes of Lucius and Narcissa.

“It’s true,” agreed Blaise. “Last year everyone was too distracted by the weddings and birth announcements to really dig into this law in depth. But now that the MLPP is in place there are none of the trappings of romance.”

“And she picked her target well, using you,” added Theo.

“That was just sheer dumb luck,” grumbled Draco. Her latest op-ed had reported some of the more covetous things he had said about her in front of the guards. Her article was scathing, though he was still a more sympathetic character than Weasley who evidently called her a ‘stupid slag’ and made her cry the last time they met. Draco was still angry about it.

“She does seem to loathe you,” added Pansy.

“She doesn’t,” said Draco quickly.

All of his friends looked at him skeptically.

“She *doesn’t*,” he insisted. “I mean sure, she tells me I’m a pretentious git every time I see her, but for the most part we’re perfectly cordial. We just play up the possessive boyfriend angle for the guards.”

“And being a territorial prat helps you how?” asked Blaise.

“Because I need to look bad enough in the press that if she ever *does* agree to marry me Shacklebolt still hasn’t won. It can’t look like he was right to insist on our marriage all along.”

“So you’re letting her wreck your reputation for –” started Pansy.

“No,” said Draco, cutting her off. “It was Father who wrecked my reputation. She’s just been given plenty of ammunition, and I’m inviting her to use it. If she ever *does* marry me, I’ll make sure the narrative starts to change. We’ll have some growing pains, but eventually she’ll be publicly adored as a Malfoy wife should be.”

“Unbelievable...” muttered Blaise, but Pansy was looking at him critically.

“What?” asked Draco.

She shrugged. “I was just thinking that Granger’s more shrewd than I thought, given the fact that she voluntarily went to prison. It’s true she’s making you out to be a misogynistic arse, but you are *clearly* a better choice than staying in prison or even marrying Weasley based on the things he’s said to her. She’s portraying herself as somebody who has no good options, but you are the least worst.”

“That’s right,” said Draco with some satisfaction. “That’s how I know she wants to marry me.”

“That seems like a stretch mate,” said Blaise delicately.

“No, no. Granger wants to marry me. She just can’t let Shacklebolt win. But I’m wearing her down, and she’s planting the seeds in the press to give herself an out. She’ll come around eventually.”

His friends gave him politely skeptical looks at this.

“And your parents?” asked Theo. “How are they coming along?”

“I wouldn’t know,” muttered Draco. “They’re giving me the Malfoy silent treatment. This one has broken our previous record.”

“They really haven’t said anything to you about it?” asked Blaise in amazement.

Draco shook his head. “Not since the day of the Matching Ceremony. Neither of them have said a word to me since.”

Draco had to admit, it was concerning. He was sure Lucius was working on something behind the scenes. The Malfoys held a hereditary seat on the Wizengamot, which Lucius currently filled as head of the family. Though he was only one vote out of many, his was an influential one. He had consolidated a reliable faction that nearly always voted his way, and though he had never been reticent about sharing most of his political maneuverings with Narcissa and Draco, this time Draco had been completely cut out of the conversation. Draco wanted to make his own inquiries, but he didn’t even know where to begin because his father had left him no crumbs at all. The only thing he could think to do was contact Astoria directly to see if Lucius had been in touch with her, but Draco couldn’t stomach the thought. Even now, the memory of her made him occlude *hard*.

“Do you really think they’ll want to force a match after the things you said about occlusion?” asked Pansy quietly.

Draco shrugged, a bit uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. “I don’t know. Mother is an occlumens, but I don’t think she’s ever over-occluded like I did. She doesn’t understand what it was like. And I suspect Father just thinks I’m being obstinate and childish. He probably thinks I’m using occlumency as an excuse.”

“It’s better with Granger though, right?” asked Theo with a piercing look.

Draco nodded. “Yes,” he said quietly. “I barely have to occlude with her at all. The little occlusion I use around her is entirely because of Azkaban. It’s still a terrible place, and I have to block it out when I’m there. But I don’t occlude anything about *Granger*.”

All three friends exchanged glances, and then Theo straightened up.

“Right then,” he said. “In that case, you should know I’ve heard a rumor.”

“What?” asked Draco, staring at his friend eagerly.

Theo’s mouth thinned. “Not much. Just that there may be an amendment to the MLPP. I heard it entirely by accident. I was waiting for Pansy at St. Mungo’s during one of her appointments and overhead a couple of older wizards talking about it. One of them was wearing Wizengamot robes. I didn’t hear enough to learn details, but it sounds like something is in the works.”

Draco felt an unpleasant lurch.

“It’s almost inevitable really,” said Pansy fairly. “Granger has caused a huge political issue with this. You *know* Shacklebolt and the Wizengamot have to respond somehow.”

Draco nodded slowly. He knew they were right. He had been expecting it. That was why he was softening Granger. He was preparing for the inevitable fallout.

“If any of you can press your contacts, I would appreciate it,” said Draco.

"I'll try," said Theo, "though I'm out of the loop since Father died. The Nott family seat on the Wizengamot has technically been open ever since that blessed event."

"When are you going to claim it?" asked Draco. "It's been nearly a year."

Theo sighed. "It's on my to-do list, but I've had more important things..."

"Like dealing with the blasted MLPP. Of course," acknowledged Draco.

"Yes. I can put in my notice that I'm officially claiming my seat, but it takes a few months, and I don't have that many connections yet. Father never brought me around before the war."

Draco sighed. "Well if you don't mind trying, I would appreciate it."

Theo inclined his head.

"And what if the MLPP is repealed?" asked Blaise.

Draco shrugged. "If that happens, I'll ask Granger out on a date once she's released from prison. I'm still not going to marry Astoria."

They all raised their eyebrows at this.

"You actually like her then," said Pansy. "And not just because she's the alternative to Astoria."

Draco thought back to the furtive looks he gave her during their conjugal visits whenever she was lost in thought and unaware that he was memorizing the sight of her in the loose prison top and no bra. He considered the intelligent banter, the one-upmanship, and the fiery temper that he loved to tease out of her. He remembered finally dropping his hands to his cock a few nights ago when he was showering, just to see if it still worked after such a long dry spell. To his great relief it did work once he allowed himself to imagine *her*.

A lifetime of pureblood indoctrination made Draco tempted to lie about this. But these were his closest friends, and the evidence was clear.

"Yeah, I do," said Draco. "She's not just interesting. She's fascinating."

It was the highest compliment Draco could pay her, and they all knew it. Their eyes widened simultaneously.

"In that case we'll try to help, mate," said Blaise.

"Thank you," said Draco. "I need to know anything you can learn about it."

Draco may not know what was being floated around the Wizengamot, but there was one thing he was sure about: it wouldn't be repealed.

Shacklebolt wouldn't allow it.

15 October 2003

Granger was wasting away.

It had taken a long time for Draco to notice it because he usually visited her at least twice a week. He was always at war with himself, torn between the urge to come more often and the knowledge that every time he did a group of guards would see her naked. She still did not want to switch to regular visits, and a small part of Draco didn't either. Their visits were just theirs, and they didn't have to perform for anybody.

Seeing her multiple times a week meant that Draco didn't notice at first as her weight began to melt off of her. It wasn't until Granger was escorted in for a conjugal visit by a new guard that he realized just how thin she had gotten.

"Here's your *fiancée*," he said in an arrogant voice. Evidently this guard had not yet heard about Draco's threats.

"Though why you'd want her, I couldn't say," he continued. "Skin and bones. I like a woman with at least a little meat on her."

The guard gave her a small shove toward Draco. She stumbled, and he caught her as he glared at the guard's retreating back. Draco didn't have a snarky response to this because as his arms wrapped around her, he could tell that the guard was right. It was the first time he had touched her like this since his initial visit.

He now looked at her with a more critical eye and saw the thin wrists and protruding collarbone. She smelled of the prison soap and *her* of course – she had been bathed for him as always – but as he gripped her waist he could feel her hip bones sharp under his hands. He moved them up slightly and felt her ribcage too.

"Granger, what are you doing?" he asked, now glowering down at her.

"What do you mean?" she asked in an airy voice as she slipped from his grip. Draco let her go, but examined the rest of her body closely now. Usually he only snuck glimpses at her, but today he didn't care if she caught him. She really *was* looking malnourished.

"You're not eating. That arsehole was right – you're skin and bones."

"I eat precisely the right amount," she said.

"No you don't. I've never seen you this thin except –"

He cut himself off, before he could say it.

Except for that day you were tortured at the Manor.

It was true. She had been this thin back then as well. Even under the ratty clothing he had been able to tell. The lights of the drawing room chandelier had thrown the angles of her face and arms into sharp relief while she was screaming on the Manor floor. Draco still had nightmares about it on occasion. Usually in those nightmares she died, her thin skin melting off her body to show the skeleton underneath.

Granger gave him a knowing look. "I'll admit that's what gave me the idea."

"Pardon?" he blinked.

She pursed her lips. "Not that it's any of your business, but I've decided to stop my cycles. It's a safety measure in case one of the guards decides to try something. It has the added bonus of making me unattractive to them. That one – Shepherd is his name – isn't the only guard who thinks I'm too thin."

Draco blinked in confusion. "Stop what cycles?"

Granger looked at him like he was dense. "My cycles? My... period?"

She turned a faint pink as she said this.

"I'm not following," he said.

Her eyes widened. "Oh my God, surely you've heard of a period? Menstruation? Code red?"

"Erm..." said Draco, feeling very foolish now, though he couldn't fathom why.

She narrowed her eyes and seemed to study him for a moment.

"Monthlies?" she tried again.

"Monthlies!" said Draco in relief. "Yes, of course I've heard of monthlies."

"Christ, you are such a sheltered ponce."

"Well it's not like *I* have them!"

"No of course not, but women all around the world do! Surely one of your girlfriends has familiarized you with the concept, since your parents obviously did not?"

Draco sniffed. "I have been faithful to Astoria for years."

"I'm sure Astoria has periods."

"Monthlies," corrected Draco.

"No, *periods*."

"Well she might," said Draco, "but that's hardly the sort of thing one discusses in polite company."

Her eyes widened at this. "Draco Malfoy, tell me what a period is."

"A type of punctuation mark that denotes the end of a sentence, as you very well know," he said with a scoff.

"Malfoy..." she warned.

"A *monthly*," he continued, "refers to a few days during the month when a witch can't perform her marital duties. It also makes her cranky and crave chocolate – generally Belgian chocolate over Swiss I'm told."

She just stared at him with mounting horror. "And?" she prompted.

"And what?"

"And what else happens?"

"How should I know?"

"Oh my God," she murmured, as an expression of true amazement settled on her face. "You're clueless aren't you? Do you know how children are conceived? Or how a woman's periods are connected to sex? Wait, do you even *know* about sex?"

"Of course I know about sex!" said Draco hotly.

She narrowed her eyes. "Alright, then. Prove it. Tell me how babies are made."

Draco was feeling flustered. "That's not appropriate—"

"Just tell me, Malfoy."

He huffed. "Fine. A couple engages in relations. The wizard deposits his seed inside of her. The witch takes it from there."

Granger just stared at him in disbelief.

"What?" asked Draco. "That's all there is to it! If you prefer to be crass, then cock goes into cunt. Cock is engaged while they fuck. He comes inside of her. Do it enough times and eventually a baby is made."

"That is the most asinine, simplistic, *ridiculous* –"

"Am I wrong? Does that not result in a baby?"

Draco was torn between annoyance and mortification. Of course he knew about sex in the abstract. At one time – before his years of occlusion – he had even wanted to experience it. His interest in it had gone on hiatus once he committed to Astoria, but it had finally returned

along with his now-fully-functioning cock. He had been between a few witches' legs with his fingers. One time he even got close with his mouth before she stopped him. He was now quite keen to find out what it would be like if he did it with his cock.

None of this had been remotely appealing with Astoria, and Draco really *was* the type to stay faithful once he fully committed to a witch. Draco had resigned himself to Astoria years ago, and now he was committed to Granger who didn't seem terribly interested in sleeping with him just yet. If she married him though...

Truly, the baby aspects of the act had always been secondary to wondering what exactly he had been missing all these years. Besides, up until very recently thinking about babies would have meant acknowledging his duties with Astoria. The Malfoy magic was supposed to help him with that, so he had never given it very much consideration.

"It *can* result in a baby I suppose, but —"

"Ha!" announced Draco in triumph.

She gave him a magnificent eye-roll.

"But it ignores all the other factors that go into it."

"Like what then?"

"Well like timing for one. A witch can't get pregnant all the time, you know."

"Right, like during her monthlies," agreed Draco.

Granger huffed. "Yes, but most other days too. There are only a few days per month when a witch is considered fertile. The rest of the time you might as well be shooting blanks for all the good it will do."

"Shooting blanks?" he asked in confusion.

"Nevermind," she muttered. "My point is, there is more to it than cock goes into cunt."

"Well sure. But there's magic to help with the rest of it."

Now she looked at him in confusion. "Magic?"

"Of course," said Draco, now feeling superior because he knew something about sex that *she* didn't. "The Malfoy family magic will help me... fulfill my marital duties."

"In what way?" she asked curiously.

Draco reddened a little. "From what Father has told me it will help me identify the most auspicious times for relations. It should also help me... achieve completion."

Granger gave an inelegant snort. "Somebody needs to write a book translating pureblood sexual euphemisms into plain English. I'm shocked that any of you can locate a woman's

vagina at all with those instructions. I'd wager the clitoris is a true mystery."

Draco glowered at her and ignored her jab. Assuming a 'clitoris' was another word for 'clit,' then he wasn't sure if he had ever touched one. According to the older blokes in Slytherin it was an elusive thing, but it made witches pant for it if it could be found. Draco's other partners had seemed pleased, but not exactly *panting*, so he was never certain if he had located it or not.

Still, he wasn't going to let Granger know that she was right about this.

"Well be that as it may, my point is that with magic it really *is* as simple as cock goes into cunt."

"But do you know *why* some times are more 'auspicious' than others?"

Draco shrugged a bit uncomfortably. "I was always just told to follow the marital magic, and it would guide me."

She huffed. "It's because a woman's period and her fertile window go hand in hand. Hence the term 'cycle.' So if you stop one..."

"Then you stop the other..." Draco finished.

Then his eyes widened as he realized what she meant.

"So you're starving yourself so you can't become pregnant? In case the guards..." he trailed off, feeling sick as he thought about it.

"Yes," she said. "I don't trust them, and I'm not allowed contraceptives. Nor do I think they would let me pick *inauspicious* times, so... this is my solution. It's not perfect, but it's the best I can do. With enough weight loss a woman's cycles can stop because her body can't sustain a pregnancy."

Draco knew his eyes were wide as he considered this.

"And it worked?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes. I started to cut food the moment I arrived. Fleur and Molly put me on a wedding diet anyway, so I had a decent head start. The only time I've cheated over the last six months was that weekend at the Ritz."

Because I fed her from the Four Seasons.

Draco's eyes swept over her again.

"So you've done this before," he said simply.

She shrugged. "It happened on its own during the war. We didn't have much food on the run. But yes, it's happened before, so I knew I could do it again."

“And you can get your... cycle... back?”

“Once I gain some weight, yes. It will come back.”

But she won't allow it to happen while she's here.

“Let me get you out of here Granger. Marry me.”

She considered this for a long while, but Draco didn't break eye contact.

“Malfoy, maybe we should talk about the other part of this. It's not just getting married.”

Draco's pulse ticked up.

“I assume you're talking about consummation?”

She nodded. “Is that... something you feel you could do with me?”

Fuck yes.

“Granger, I would consummate it right away if you let me.”

“But I'm a muggleborn...”

“Oh really? I wasn't aware of that,” he said, rolling his eyes.

Her lips pursed. “I mean it, Malfoy.”

“So do I, Granger. I'm well aware of who you are. Consummating it won't be a problem from my end.”

“I might want some time...” she said a bit nervously.

“I've already asked my solicitors about it, and we are still entitled to three months. The clock starts from the day we get married, not the day we were matched.”

“If I need more than three months, what then?”

Her eyes were boring into him now, and he knew what she was implying.

“Granger, you have every reason to hate me. I know I was horrible to you in school, and I ended up on the wrong side of history with the war. If we get married you'll be thrust into a world of bigots, because I have duties and responsibilities to my family and fortune I can't just ignore. But for all of my faults, I am not and have never been a rapist. I won't take anything you aren't willing to give.”

She looked a bit ashamed now. “I didn't mean —”

“You did,” he said, forcing himself to stay calm. “And I don't blame you for asking about it. But I mean it when I say I won't take it from you. That being said, I also don't want to go back to Azkaban. I despise this place, and it... does particularly foul things to my head. So

if you marry me, I will give you anything you want: money, property, privacy, an ally who will blow up the Ministry with you, I don't care. You can have it. The only things I want in return are fidelity and a promise that you'll at least meet the bare minimums of the MLPP so that I don't have to go back to Azkaban."

Her eyes softened at this. "That's a fair request. I would want fidelity from you too."

"You would have it," he said instantly. "I'm faithful. I was faithful to Astoria for years even though I didn't want anything to do with her, and I've stayed faithful to you from the moment we were matched. I will *certainly* stay faithful to my wife. Besides, the Malfoy family magic might not let me stray even if I wanted to. I've never looked into it."

She nodded a little. "And it would be stupid to marry you so I could get out of here, only to come back three months later because I refused to consummate it."

He inclined his head in acknowledgment as he watched her chew on her lip a bit, lost in thought.

Finally she said, "Alright, I'll make a deal with you, Malfoy."

Draco straightened up, heart pounding.

"I'm going to assign some reading for you about reproduction and contraception. I did a deep dive on it over the last year because of the MLPP, so I'm going to send you to my flat to read the same things I did so you can learn about it. And I want *you* to find everything in your library on this Malfoy family magic. I've never heard of such a thing, and I need to understand it better if it might affect me too. So you read my books, and I'll read yours. If you can do that, then I will *think* about marrying you."

"You'll think about it?" he said, feeling himself perk up at this news.

She smiled a little. "I'll *think* about it."

Chapter 6: Weaseled

20 October 2003

Draco dove into his homework right away because he wanted Granger to *think* about marrying him as quickly as possible.

He started with the family magic because that was something he didn't know much about either. He thought it best to be aware of what Granger was reading before he gave it to her, so he spent a couple of days scouring family records and journals to find everything he could about it.

The family magic was old, something cast hundreds of years ago and tied to the Malfoy line. Unsurprisingly, it was primarily aimed at securing an heir, but there were other factors in play too. Draco knew that the Malfoys weren't the only family with this sort of magic — it used to be fairly commonplace for purebloods — but breaking or changing it was complex and could only be achieved by the combined efforts of the master and heir together after the heir came of age. Lucius had never offered to break the magic, and Draco had never asked. As Draco learned more about it, he thought he understood why.

The precise details were largely wrapped up in more of those euphemisms that Granger disliked, but there were a few kernels of truth Draco managed to unearth. For the wizard, it did indeed assist with his marital duties because it helped him desire his wife, and it would help the wizard intuit the best times to perform to produce an heir quickly. That part of the magic would last until the heir's blood was added to the Manor's wards. The Malfoy magic ensured that the children were always boys until the direct heir's blood was added, and apparently the distinctive blonde hair was also a byproduct of the spell.

Draco snorted as he read about it. Evidently he needn't have worried about being able to get it up for Astoria if he had just gone through with his wedding as planned. Then again, if he had known that the magic would help like *that* he might not have panicked and been given the opportunity to have Granger instead.

Perhaps it was for the best that Draco had occluded himself to the point of ignorance.

Draco found several accounts in journals describing what the magic felt like, and it didn't seem to do very much when the wizard had those urges anyway. The marriages that were love matches or near-so described the magic as simply enhancing what was already there. The Malfoys thrust into loveless marriages wrote that the magic was a relief because it simplified their husbandly duties a great deal.

Draco decided he wouldn't mind feeling a magical inclination to bed Granger. He felt a non-magical inclination to do it already.

For the witch, the marital magic was more restrictive. It didn't make her want her husband, but it did make it impossible for another man who was of age to touch her unless she was pregnant. Any male who touched her while she was not pregnant would be magically repelled. The only exceptions were men who shared her own blood like a father or brother. It was a way of securing her fidelity, at least until the heir was born. This part of the magic could be broken once the heir's blood was added to the wards, but until that happened she would be untouchable by any other man unless she was pregnant with a Malfoy heir.

Draco winced a little when he realized the fidelity aspects of the magic were one-way. Evidently the Malfoys weren't *that* concerned about bastards — they just wanted to ensure the paternity of the heir.

Then again, there was a silver lining to it. Draco knew it would be a means of keeping her safe, at least for a time. Not even Lucius or the male Azkaban guards would be able to lay a finger on her while Draco was heirless.

And speaking of safety, the Malfoy family magic had thought of that too. Malfoys could not cause direct, life-threatening harm to each other. They could cause mild pain, but they could not kill each other. It applied to both sexes and all generations. That meant that Lucius would not be able to murder her, at least not by his own hand. He would die first. Likewise, Granger would not be able to murder *him*, no matter how many foul things he said to her. The family magic was intended to prevent eager heirs from offing their fathers or jealous siblings from ending their older brothers. In this specific instance, it might keep an unwelcome wife safer than she otherwise would be.

While the magic that affected their sexual relationship would break with an heir's blood, the magic prohibiting life-threatening harm did not. Once a Malfoy was born or married into the family, that magic only broke when the Malfoy in question left the family through divorce or magical disownment.

Draco hoped it meant Granger that would feel safe enough with him. Lucius could be a wily old bastard, but getting around that family magic would not be simple because it would naturally involve a third party who could rat him out. Besides, if anything *did* happen to Granger the Ministry would surely look to him and Draco first. Lucius was many things, but he wasn't stupid.

After Draco spent a few days buried in the library, he copied the relevant sections and brought them to Granger to read too. Then he turned to the next thing he had to study so that Granger would *think* about marrying him: human reproduction.

It took very little time for him to learn how much he *hadn't* learned about this critical subject. Evidently his seed wasn't as special as he had always been led to believe because he made more of it all the time. It was the woman who held the very special thing that produced babies: an egg, usually just one, that appeared for about twenty-four hours each cycle and then started to disintegrate if it wasn't fertilized in time.

Apparently his seed — no, *sperm* — could live for a few days and just wait around inside of the woman for the moment that fertilization became a possibility.

That was bizarre.

Yes, it was the witch's body who did nearly everything. He hadn't been *wrong* when he summarized conception for Granger, but he was chagrined to discover that it was far more complex and invasive than he realized, especially for the woman. Even more remarkable was that her body prepared for a baby all month long and then bled if one didn't take.

He was positively mortified to learn about the shocking, *awful* detail he had somehow missed whenever Pansy claimed to be feeling poorly because of her monthly periods. How on earth had nobody ever told him about it? Why did he think it was limited to mood swings and cravings? Draco had been under the impression that the only time his wife might bleed was in the marriage bed on his wedding night. Supposedly it was an indication that the witch was pure, but that was just a small detail his father had once mentioned in passing. There were spells to confirm virginity in advance if anybody really cared about that sort of thing. The notion that there could be blood every single cycle was dumbfounding to him. It was no wonder Granger looked at him like he had three heads.

Code red indeed.

When he moved to learning about contraceptive methods, he discovered there was far more to it than the charm his father taught him after his first year of Hogwarts. Witches could take potions — he had heard of this before — but they were detectable with blood work.

Historically most muggle methods were *not* detectable with standard blood work, but the Ministry had spent the last year developing a test for it that would be used during the health screenings. That meant muggle hormonal methods could now be found too.

Her notes were extensive, tracking the requirements of the law and all the ways she might get around it. Unfortunately there weren't many good options. Anything that might manipulate a witch's hormones could be discovered by the blood testing couples were subject to. The most reliable non-hormonal method was a muggle one that could be discovered with a pelvic exam, which was a possibility if the couple did not have a confirmed pregnancy after a mere three months post-consummation. According to Granger, that method was rather invasive and could be very painful to place, especially if the witch had never had a child before. It involved some small device that looked like a metal T, and Draco shuddered to think of Granger sticking *that* up her...

No. He didn't need to think about it because Granger had dismissed it in her notes. She concluded that its useful life before it could be discovered was too short to make the procedure worthwhile.

Furthermore, the wizard had to ejaculate inside of the witch to fulfill the terms of the Ministry's edict, which precluded using muggle condoms when meeting the baseline requirements. She speculated that something called a diaphragm or spermicide *might* work to get around the law, but there was no way to be certain without trying it and risking Azkaban.

No, the only two options she felt sure could work were controlling the timing of intercourse and stopping a witch's cycles entirely by reducing her body mass index. Neither were foolproof to prevent children, but they would allow the couple to meet all the requirements of the law and lower the likelihood of having a child while they did it. Draco wasn't shocked

that the Ministry hadn't considered starvation as a way of preventing children, but he was a bit surprised that they hadn't considered timing. Then again, with so many couples to monitor, odds were good that quite a few of them would end up in Azkaban if the Ministry had specified coupling during fertile windows only. Evidently identifying fertile windows could be challenging without medical assistance. Even then, cycles weren't always even and witches could skip entire months. Granger speculated that the Ministry created the once-a-month rule for administrative ease and was simply relying on most couples being ignorant about timing to prevent children.

His stomach clenched again when he remembered that Granger's two solutions for avoiding children had been reduced to one when she entered Azkaban. If one of the guards snapped and raped her, he might lose his job, but he wouldn't get more than a slap on the wrist unless Draco took matters into his own hands. The laws against rape and sexual assault were still on the books, but the penalties for doing it had been reduced to mere trifles.

Granger was right about that too. She was right about all of it. These laws were draconian and had horrifying implications beyond the obvious discomfort of marrying someone you didn't know well. It was no wonder Granger was fighting so hard against it.

Some part of Draco felt guilty for being complicit in it whenever he urged her to marry him, which he now did nearly every time he visited her.

"Marry me, Granger," he would always say.

"Not yet, Malfoy," she would respond with a smile and eye-roll.

It was the part of him that recognized he had no real autonomy either that kept pushing for it, despite the horrifying things he was learning. Draco was sure it had something to do with the indoctrination Granger liked to ramble on about, but Draco had *never* believed he could have a real choice in who he married outside of a vanishingly small pool of "acceptable" witches. Whether it was his parents or the Ministry, his wife would be selected for him. His small act of rebellion by jilting Astoria didn't change his underlying beliefs about that.

Intellectually the MLPP disturbed him. But emotionally he never thought he had much choice anyway, and the MLPP had opened up a possibility that could never have been considered before.

That powerful witch — though she was emaciated now and her fire was growing dimmer with each passing visit — was still the most fascinating thing that had happened to him in years. She made him wake up. She pushed away his occlusion. She was surprisingly pretty, or she would be with some weight on her.

He was sure he wouldn't be so eager to *marry* her right away if the law wasn't pushing them to do it, but he knew he was drawn to her despite the Ministry's interference. Gryffindors had always been the ones driven by idealism, and Granger was the perfect example of that. Slytherins, however, were far more pragmatic and simply looked for better outcomes. Now that Draco had discovered his better outcome, he no longer found the MLPP all that troubling as it applied to *him*. Granger was softening toward him with each visit, and Azkaban was

getting increasingly difficult for her. It was only a matter of time before she agreed to marry him, Draco was sure of it.

Yes, Draco knew he was making progress — *good progress*. She was thinking about it, and Draco believed that a few more weeks of patience was all it would take. But then a wrench was thrown into Draco's plans by none other than Ronald Weasley.

"What the fuck is this?" asked Draco, as he slapped the paper down in front of Granger, who pulled it to her curiously.

An Open Apology to Hermione Granger

by Ronald Weasley

I met Hermione Granger on my first day of Hogwarts when we were eleven years old. I was fortunate to share a compartment on the train with Harry Potter by sheer luck, and Hermione arrived half-way through the trip to tell us Neville Longbottom had lost his pet toad. I'll never forget how she looked that day: bright-eyed, bossy, and authoritative. She's always been much smaller than me, but I could tell her power was impressive, even back then.

It took some time for us to warm up to each other. I was a git and she was a know-it-all. But then Harry and I locked a mountain troll in the toilet with her by accident on Halloween night, and we saved her from it. Up to that point Hermione had been nothing but a scrupulous rule-follower. After we were caught with an unconscious troll, she proceeded to lie to three teachers so Harry and I wouldn't get into trouble. That was how the Golden Trio came to be.

Since that day we've spent most of our holidays together, we've fought a war, we've tied our lives together with our families and friends, and we've laughed and cried.

Hermione and I have always bickered and fought – I can be hot-headed, and she can be stubborn. But at the end of the day we have always found our way back to each other, and even though our lives are very different than I thought they would be just a few months ago I don't want that to end.

When Hermione jilted me, I reacted poorly to it. I was embarrassed, and I lashed out at her over and over again after it happened. Even seeing her in Azkaban wasn't enough to calm my temper, and I said some terrible things to her that I deeply regret. Since our last encounter she has refused all further visits from me, and I can't say I blame her for it.

Since I can't apologize in person, I am apologizing in writing. Hermione, I'm sorry for treating you the way I did. I'm sorry I didn't listen to you, and I will try to do better. I want you back in my life. I want to see you, laugh with you, argue with you, and help you. Please answer my visitation requests Mione. I love you too much to let you go.

Draco was desperately trying to keep his temper under control. He knew this wasn't Granger's fault. He received a report every time Weasley showed up to Azkaban, and she had declined his last three visits. But Draco was struggling to keep his anger in check. Granger was *his* now. She was *thinking* about marrying him. Draco had dutifully visited Azkaban two or three times per week for nearly two months to keep her company, even though it was terrible for his own mental health. He had sacrificed what little reputation he had recovered since the war so Granger could prove her point. Weasley had his chance with her, and he botched it. Now he was married to somebody else. So what the fuck was he playing at, saying "I love you" publicly to Draco's fiancée?

As she read it, Granger's face cycled through shock, sadness, anger, and hurt, and then it settled on something that made Draco's heart stall out: hope.

"What?" asked Draco angrily.

"He apologized," she breathed. "He's never really apologized like *this* before."

As she read the article, Draco sensed she was slipping away from him already. Weeks of effort and planning were being pushed aside for the *Weasel*.

Draco's anger started to build. He knew he should stop it. He needed to keep his feelings contained. He tried to occlude, but he couldn't do it around Granger. She always broke through his walls so easily, and usually that was welcome. Right now though, he felt his lips turn into a sneer and the vitriol poured out of him as though the years of emotional growth and maturation had never happened.

"Do you love him too, then? Do you regret being so rash that you didn't get your happily ever after with the Weasel? Do you wish you had opened your legs for him to give him a dozen red-headed brats all because he said *sorry* to his precious *Mione*?"

Her jaw dropped, and she stood up angrily. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What's *wrong* with me is the fact that you'll forgive him for two months of shitty behavior all because he wrote some sodding article for *The Prophet*!"

"Well I forgave you for seven *years* of shitty behavior all because you sent me a bleeding steak with green beans when I was staying at the fucking Ritz Carlton! You weren't even my friend when I forgave you, and it's not like you've ever bothered to apologize! Ron's been one of my best friends for more than half my life, and at least he said he was sorry!"

Draco faltered, and he knew he should back down, but he couldn't seem to do it.

"I've told you I owe you a dozen apologies before!"

"Saying you owe them to me and actually *giving* them to me are two different things! And then to imply that I'm some sort of baby-crazy *slag* because your fucking caveman complex can't handle the fact that I have male friends is completely unacceptable! I have *never* done that with Ron, I've never *wanted* to do that with Ron, and you... you..."

She gave a great shuddering breath and then dissolved into tears.

Draco just stared at her, his anger fizzling out of him and guilt setting in.

“Granger,” he said quietly.

“No! Go!”

“Granger...” he said more fervently.

“Get out, Malfoy! I don’t want to see you anymore!”

Draco reached forward and gripped her arm. “*Please, Granger, I’m –*”

She yanked it out of his grip and stumbled backward, tripping over the chair and falling to the ground. Draco winced as she cracked her head against the stone wall.

“Granger!” he cried, as he approached her, but she just scooted away from him and rubbed the back of her head gingerly as she sniffed.

“Don’t,” she said in a small voice. “Please just go away, Draco.”

The use of his first name froze him in place. It sounded so sweet and so sad coming from her lips. His gut twisted as he realized just how badly he had fucked up.

He slowly rose and backed away from her. She refused to look at him, though he was searching for any sign of forgiveness, anything that might tell him he could salvage this. He found nothing and slumped as he made his way to the door.

“Guards,” he called dully.

A moment later a cocky guard – it was Shepherd again – came strolling into the room. He took one look at Granger huddled in the corner and Draco standing over her.

“So you finally got tired of her, did you? She’s a mouthy little bitch, I don’t blame you.”

Draco snapped, and he shoved the guard against the wall, one hand holding his wand arm, and the other choking him. The guard made a strangled noise, and he heard Granger gasp behind him.

“Fuck you,” Draco growled.

The guard could hardly speak. His eyes were wide, and he was starting to turn blue.

“Malfoy!” cried Granger. “You have to stop!”

She sounded frantic, and instinctively Draco’s grip loosened. The guard took a deep, shuddering breath and he slumped, glaring at Draco with fury.

“I could have you thrown back in here for that,” he hissed.

Draco leaned toward him, all of his hatred for Weasley and himself flooding him as he did it.

“Try it and see what happens to you,” he said.

Something in the guard’s eyes changed ever so slightly as he looked at Draco. Then his eyes slid to Granger, who was still on the floor. Draco’s blood went cold at the look he saw there.

“If you so much as fucking *breathe* near her, I’ll end you,” he said quietly. “Call somebody else to collect her. She needs a healer, and I need to go.”

Draco and Shepherd engaged in a staring contest for a few more seconds until Shepherd broke it and turned to fetch another guard. Draco turned to look down at Granger, but she just stared straight ahead, looking furious. A muscle in Draco’s jaw twitched.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” he said stiffly.

She gave him no reaction, and he didn’t press his luck further. When the door opened, a second guard was standing there, leering down at Granger just a bit.

“The little lion is learning her lesson, isn’t she?” he crooned, as he pulled her to her feet.

Draco’s temper started to spark yet again, but Granger finally met his eye and shot him a warning look that told him this would end poorly for her if he couldn’t get it together. He bit his tongue and forced his anger back down, instead taking note of the name badge on the guard’s uniform.

Owen Fry

He gave her one last glance, but her eyes were downcast now as she was led down a hallway deeper into the prison and Draco followed Shepherd toward the exit. Shepherd said nothing, but Draco felt hate radiating from him, and only now did Draco realize the kind of danger he had put Granger in by rising to his taunts. His stomach churned as they passed the familiar hallway that included the Head Warden’s office, and before Shepherd could stop him Draco ducked into it without knocking and locked the door behind him.

Lawrence Boles looked up at Draco in surprise. He was a bit older than Lucius, but they used to run in the same circles, and Draco had seen him at the Manor a time or two. His son Lucien had been an acquaintance of Draco’s in Slytherin House. Draco was certain that Lawrence was the one reporting everything to his father.

“Lord Malfoy,” he said a bit warily. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Draco got straight to the point.

“I’ll give you fifty thousand galleons to fire those wankers Henry Shepherd and Owen Fry. You can have half the money today and the other half when you send me a copy of their termination letters.”

Lawrence barely blinked. Draco knew that bribes were his bread and butter.

“And if anybody asks why they have been terminated without notice...?”

“You can tell them the truth. They are disrespectful to prisoners and their guests.”

Lawrence cocked his head and studied Draco. “I’m surprised at you.”

Draco shrugged. “Whatever Father has told you is a load of bollocks. I was matched with Granger, and I’ll not have my future wife be mistreated. It’s not becoming.”

“There are other things not becoming...” started Lawrence, but Draco raised his hand to cut him off, affecting a bored expression. He needed Lawrence’s cooperation for this. Draco knew he was a blood purist, though not as rabid as Lucius.

“Save it. I’ve heard it a thousand times from Father, but what’s done is done. I jilted Astoria because frankly, she’s a fucking cold fish. I certainly didn’t expect to be matched with Granger after I did it, but here we are. I’m doing the best I can with it under the circumstances.”

“And...” prompted Lawrence.

“*And* disrespect is disrespect. It doesn’t matter how I feel about it, she and I are engaged. That gives me certain responsibilities toward her. Besides, say what you will about Granger, but at least she’s fiery. There’s not a single thing about her that’s cold.”

Lawrence pursed his lips a little, but Draco sensed him wavering. Finally, he nodded to himself, as though conceding the points Draco just made. Draco gave an invisible exhale of relief.

“Very well. Send half as soon as you return to the mainland, and I’ll fire them at the end of their shifts. I’ll expect the other half to arrive within a day or it will be the last deal we do together.”

Draco nodded. “I’ll send an elf with proof of funds. And make sure they are assigned to other prisoners during the rest of their shifts today.”

Lawrence waved him off as though this was obvious and then pulled a slip of paper out of his desk and handed it to Draco. “My account information. I trust you know what to do with it.”

Draco suppressed a snort as he realized Lawrence had these small slips of parchment ready to go. For all of Granger’s reforms, Azkaban was still incredibly corrupt.

“Expect my elf,” said Draco, as he pocketed the paper and headed back into the hallway, coming face-to-face with an irate-looking Shepherd.

“Shepherd!” called Lawrence’s voice from inside the office. “I have a new assignment for you!”

Draco just smirked as Shepherd scowled and slunk off.

Despite the wretched fight with Granger, Draco exited Azkaban with a bit more spring in his step. He had a bribe to fulfill.

6 November 2003

Two weeks.

It had been two full weeks since Draco last saw Granger.

After bribing Lawrence Boles to fire those guards, Draco's pleasure at resolving at least one of Granger's issues started to evaporate when he remembered how he left things with her. He gave her a couple days before writing a letter to her, asking if she would be willing to see him again. She didn't respond.

Draco decided to give her a few more days until he received one of Granger's reports stating that Ron Weasley had requested a visit with her, and she accepted it. Draco had no way of knowing what happened during that visit, but he found his stomach rolling as he thought about Weasley worming his way back into her good graces while she was completely ignoring Draco.

He waffled about scheduling a conjugal visit to make her see him, but he really wanted her to invite him to do it first. He worried that if he made her show up for him it would make things even worse than they already were. He wrote her another letter instead, and that also went unanswered.

He started to occlude again.

Then Draco got a *second* report about a visit from Weasley, and he decided he had enough.

If she could see Weasley after all the shit he had said to her, then she could bloody well see Draco too. Draco *had* to talk to her. He had to apologize and bring her back around to him. It wasn't just about Astoria anymore. Draco couldn't believe how empty he felt without those visits to look forward to. They had become a welcome diversion, something enjoyable that shattered the monotony of his life. He couldn't stand this emptiness he was living with.

Still, Draco hesitated about scheduling a conjugal visit. He wanted something – *anything* – from her that told him she was receptive to hearing him out. So Draco showed up to Azkaban the day after Weasley's second visit and checked in as a regular guest.

"You're not here for a conjugal?" asked the guard in confusion. His name was Brian Maywood, and he was one of the few guards Draco didn't despise. He had always been entirely professional whenever Draco arrived and left the premises.

"No," said Draco. "Last minute decision. I couldn't provide notice."

Maywood nodded. "Alright then, suit yourself. I'll check to see if she's willing to visit with you."

Draco nodded and sat on a metal chair in the waiting area, which was a new experience for him. Usually he was taken straight back to their room. He chewed his lip and bounced his leg nervously as he waited for the guard to return. At long last he came back with an apologetic look on his face, and Draco's heart sank.

"I'm sorry sir, but she's refusing your visit."

"Please..." begged Draco. "Please tell her I'm so sorry, and I just want to apologize to her in person and..."

"I wish I could," he said simply. "But she has a right to refuse you and not be disturbed again for twenty-four hours. You can try again tomorrow or..."

Maywood trailed off.

"Or?" prompted Draco.

"Or schedule a conjugal so she *has* to see you."

"I don't want to *make* her!" he said in dismay. "I just want her to listen to me!"

"I know," said the guard, and Draco was surprised by how sympathetic he sounded. "But she's got her rights. She's also stubborn. I've refused more visitors for Miss Granger these last two months than the rest of the prison combined."

Draco knew this of course. She received visitor requests several times per week, and she accepted a surprisingly small number of them.

"You, though, are the only person who can *make* her show up," said the guard. "And you've been doing it for two months, so I'm not sure why this time is any different."

"I know that," said Draco quietly. "I just... the things they do to prepare her for me... she hates it. *I* hate it. And it will make her even angrier than she already is. We still argue a lot, but I thought we were finally getting somewhere. Then we had a huge fight the last time I was here, and..."

Draco sighed. He didn't know why he was telling the guard all of this. It was stupid and could wreck their carefully crafted narrative.

To his surprise Maywood started to chuckle.

"What?" asked Draco in confusion.

The guard just shook his head. "That witch is head over heels for you lad."

Draco blinked. "Pardon?"

“You heard me. She pretends to hate you, but she doesn’t.”

Draco knew she didn’t hate him — or at least she didn’t before he fucked it all up — but he thought “head over heels” was a bit of a stretch.

“How do you know?”

The guard waved a dismissive hand. “The number of times she’s threatened us with you? That’s half the reason her guards dislike you. She never shuts up about you.”

“Really?” asked Draco in slight disbelief.

Maywood rolled his eyes and started to speak in a high voice, in a credible impression of Granger.

“Carter! If you don’t stop looking at me this instant I’ll tell Malfoy about you the next time he summons me! Bradshaw! Mind your fucking manners! Malfoy gets very angry when you lot are rude to me! Paulson! You think that’s an insult? Maybe you should hang around Malfoy and ask him for some lessons. Or perhaps you shouldn’t bother. Your intellect is barely a fraction of *his* after all...”

Draco felt a bit faint. “She says all that?”

Maywood snorted. “Of course she does. When she showed up, we all thought we would be answering to Potter. But instead, it’s all about you. It’s Malfoy this and Malfoy that. I doubt she’s said another bloke’s name the entire time she’s been here. She’s made it clear enough she belongs to you.”

“But she hates it when I’m a possessive arse!” he said in confusion.

“Nah, she just *wants* to hate it. She’s stubborn, I’ll grant you that, but she’s flattered by the attention.”

“The attention?”

“Of course the attention! How many next-of-kin show up two or three times per week, every single week while a prisoner is incarcerated?”

Draco stared blankly at him.

“Just you,” he supplied. “And Miss Granger knows it too. She wrote that reform law, didn’t she? She did her research. That’s one of the reasons she drives us all mad — she likes to throw that bloody reform act in our faces whenever she’s not talking about you, not to mention all the things she’s written in *The Prophet*. Truly, that woman is an utter menace. But my point is, she knows how often most prisoners receive visitors. She knows she’s getting special attention.”

“It’s just because it’s Granger though,” said Draco. “You said yourself that she gets a lot of visitors.”

"That's part of it, but it's also because of you. Even Potter and Weasley only visit every other week or so. From what she's said, you two hadn't spoken in years until right before you were matched by the Ministry, and yet you're still here all the damn time."

Draco was silent. "So you really think she doesn't hate me?"

"Not at all. But if you fought with her worse than usual the last time you were here, that would explain a lot. She's not been looking well, and her temper has turned vicious ever since you disappeared."

Draco sighed. "So what do I do?"

"Schedule a conjugal. Tell her you're an idiot. Let her shout at you and slap you around a little bit. She needs to get it out of her system. Then grovel for whatever bullshit you said to her."

Draco thought about this. He really had no other choice if she was refusing regular visits from him. Merlin knew he couldn't stand the silent treatment much longer.

Draco finally nodded and rose. "Alright then. Let me put in my notice for a conjugal visit tomorrow."

Maywood smiled a little. "Right you are, sir. And now that I've done you a favor, you can do one for me too."

"Oh?"

"If she ever agrees to marry you, drop me a note about the date. There's a betting pool among the guards about how long it's going to take you to wear her down. I want to win it."

Chapter 7: The Conjugal Visit

6 November 2003

Draco called an emergency meeting of his best friends the night before his conjugal visit with Granger.

“I need you all to think back and tell me every time I’ve been an arse to Granger or to somebody who was Granger-adjacent.”

“By Granger-adjacent does that include Potter and Weasley?” asked Theo.

“Ugh, I suppose. But also anybody else. Lovegood, the Weaselette, those sorts.”

They stayed up late into the night collectively brainstorming – Pansy’s pregnancy-driven narcolepsy had now been replaced by pregnancy-driven insomnia. By the time they were done with it Draco surveyed the enormous list with some dismay.

“Damn,” he muttered.

“Mmmm,” agreed Blaise. “I’d say you’re fucked.”

“It’s not like *you* were that much better,” grumbled Draco.

“I was just an arrogant prick,” said Blaise loftily. “I didn’t even bother to engage most of the time. But *you* were a cruel bastard. There’s a difference.”

“Pansy then,” said Draco a bit desperately.

“I was bitchy, that’s true,” she acknowledged. “But most of it was because I was trying to get your attention. Besides, it’s not like *I’m* the one trying to marry one of the many...” she peered down the list again, “...many people I tormented.”

“Well I was perfectly pleasant to nearly everyone,” chimed Theo most unhelpfully. Draco glared at him before crumpling a bit.

“Fine. Obviously I need to grovel.”

“I can’t believe you haven’t already,” pointed out Pansy.

“She seemed fine around me? I don’t know – she said she forgave me when I sent her that filet from the Four Seasons.”

His three friends had equally skeptical looks on their faces.

"Well she's a bleeding heart," said Theo slowly. "She probably decided to let bygones be bygones. I doubt she thought she would ever have to see you again when you two were exchanging television recommendations."

"But if you want to marry her," added Pansy, "you *do* owe her an apology for... a lot. In fact..."

She narrowed her eyes as she thought about something.

"In fact what?" asked Draco, and he winced to hear the note of desperation in his voice.

"In fact, I'd wager your lack of an apology is a big reason she hasn't agreed to marry you already. You know how principled she is," and Pansy rolled her eyes at this. "You said she was *thinking* about it but she hasn't made up her mind yet."

"I—" Draco cut himself off as he thought about this possibility.

Could it be? Was this the reason there had always been a bit of a wall between them with every visit? It was subtle, but it was there – some impenetrable thing that Draco could never seem to fully identify, let alone break through. He had always thought it was the Ministry of Magic – and yes, that was part of the problem too – but was it also his lack of an apology? Granger clearly made a distinction between Draco's comments about knowing he owed her an apology and an apology actually given. Perhaps this had been his achilles' heel all along.

"You're probably right," he said in a defeated voice.

Pansy's eyes softened. "Draco, you can fix this. Just go in there tomorrow and give her this list. Then grovel. Be honest with her. It's the best you can do."

"Grovel. Right," said Draco.

His friends left and Draco stayed awake late into the night, as he practiced his apology to the woman he wanted to marry over and over again.

7 November 2003

Draco woke the next morning feeling remarkably clear-headed given the thing he had to do today. He had spent hours examining it from every angle and concluded that Pansy was right: all he could do was throw himself on her mercy and beg for forgiveness. He didn't believe that this would be enough to make her come around to marrying him, but if they could reach detente again then perhaps he could continue to work toward it.

He wasn't looking forward to their meeting exactly, but he also wasn't dreading it as much as he thought he would. He had been going mad without her, and he didn't think he could get

any lower than this.

He showered, dressed, and then made his way to the breakfast room, fully expecting to be alone again as he had been for every meal since the Matching Ceremony.

“Draco,” said his father as he walked in and came to a halt. Both of his parents were sitting there, enjoying breakfast as though the last two months of silence hadn’t happened.

Alarm bells immediately went off in Draco’s mind.

“Father,” he said cautiously. “Mother,” he nodded to her.

Narcissa met his eyes and gave him a tight smile before glancing at Lucius and then focusing back on her breakfast.

Draco watched them both out of the corner of his eye as he made a plate for himself. His father was reading *The Daily Prophet*, and his mother was picking at her food daintily. Draco brought his plate over to the table and lowered himself into his chair, waiting for the inevitable confrontation as he started to chew slowly.

But it didn’t come. Lucius made his usual noises as he read various articles in the paper — he had always been the type to react out loud to whatever he read. Narcissa moved some food around her plate before pushing her chair back and rising.

“I’m afraid I must run. I have an appointment in Diagon Alley.”

“Of course, my dear,” said Lucius cordially as he and Draco rose too.

Narcissa swept out of the room, and Draco sat again, the tension building as his father did not speak. He appeared to be totally absorbed in his paper.

Draco took advantage of his father’s distraction and ate quickly before glancing at his watch. He needed to move along if he was going to make it to his visit with Granger on time. He rose to leave and was stopped by Lucius’s voice.

“Have a pleasant day, Draco,” he said casually.

Draco stopped and turned back to his father. “You too.”

Lucius nodded and then looked back down at his paper as Draco slipped out.

He leaned against the wall outside of the breakfast room, heart pounding for some inexplicable reason. This wasn’t entirely out of the norm. When he and his parents gave each other the silent treatment in the past it was usually broken this way: just a few words at a time over the course of several days before things were back to normal. As a rule, Malfoys did not apologize — a characteristic that Draco was now viewing as a deep flaw in light of his immediate plans. But still, the timing of this struck him as suspicious, and Draco just *knew* his father was plotting something.

Draco checked his watch and swore. He only had a few minutes before he *really* needed to leave for Azkaban to be on time. He hurried up the stairs to his room, grabbed his list of indiscretions, and then hurried back down the stairs where he saw his father again.

“Draco,” he nodded again. “Heading out?”

“Yes,” said Draco. “I have an appointment as well.”

Draco didn’t elaborate. He was certain his father knew where he was going.

Lucius inclined his head. “Very well. Best not tarry.”

Draco narrowed his eyes for a moment, as he waited for his father to chastise him, but it didn’t come. He hesitated a moment longer and then nodded in agreement as he turned to leave through the front door to head to the apparition point at the foot of the lane. As he left he could feel Lucius’s eyes boring into his back as the front door slammed shut behind him.

Draco started to head to the apparition point, but something made his feet slow and then halt.

It was odd – too odd, really... breaking the silence this morning, confirming that Draco was going for his first conjugal visit in more than two weeks, watching to be sure he left...

Draco hesitated and checked his watch. He *really* had to leave soon or he would be late, but his curiosity was piqued. Perhaps he could spare just five minutes.

Without taking the time to second-guess himself, Draco tapped his wand on his head and disillusioned himself. He walked around the side of the house and slipped in through one of the side doors near the kitchen and crept up the servants’ staircase to his room. He made quick work of searching the drawers in his dresser for the thing he was sure he still had and... *there*. He found a pair of very old extendable ears that he had acquired during the war. Draco wasn’t certain if they still worked, but it was the best he could do given his time constraints.

He shoved them into his pocket and slipped back down the stairs to the foyer, before darting behind a statue in a niche just as the fireplace in the foyer turned green to announce the arrival of someone via floo.

Draco peered around the statue to find Kingsley Shacklebolt stepping out onto the rug. A moment later the fireplace turned green again and Beatrice Greengrass arrived. Draco began to creep forward to follow, but then it turned green a third time, and his jaw dropped to find Ron Weasley stepping out and following the other two to a room that Draco recognized was his father’s study.

Draco waffled for a split second. He was due to see Granger very soon, and she would surely be outraged if he stood her up. He absolutely *hated* the thought of her going through the preparations for him without even seeing him. But then again, this was suspicious as hell. Neither Draco nor any of his friends had deep enough ties at the Ministry to learn what was going on. Lucius had an absolute chokehold there, and they were waylaid every time they

tried to discover whether the MLPP would be amended. This opportunity was too good to miss.

He crept toward the study and pressed himself into another nearby alcove while he fed the extendable ears under the door. To his great relief, the volume turned on as though he was standing inside the room with them.

“...gone to see her?” asked the voice of Weasley. Draco scowled.

“Yes, he left a few minutes ago,” said Lucius.

“She’s properly hacked off at him,” said Weasley, and Draco could hear the satisfaction in his voice. “I’m guessing she’ll try to make him leave as quickly as possible.”

“Then we’d best not linger,” chimed Shacklebolt. “It’s been several weeks since we’ve been able to meet. If she’s really that angry with him, he may not push for another visit for a while.”

Draco went cold as he realized the implications of this: his father was meeting with these three whenever Draco gave notice of a conjugal visit because he was sure to be out of the house.

“In that case, let’s jump right in. I believe we have the necessary votes,” said Lucius smoothly. “The amendment will pass.”

“Then do we really have to wait until the three months is up?” asked Weasley’s voice. “I’d prefer to just marry her now.”

“We need to wait,” said Shacklebolt. “The original couples were given three months to consummate. We can’t change the rules about that, and in any event you aren’t the *only* one who hasn’t consummated your marriage, Ron. There are quite a few others who seem to be waiting until the last minute.”

“But –” he objected.

“*No buts*,” insisted Shacklebolt. “The amendment is going to allow the Wizengamot to select a new spouse for any matched couples who have refused to wed during the first three months. Their new spouses will be selected from the pool of witches and wizards who were originally unmatched because of uneven numbers or who have marriages that are unconsummated within that time frame. Given what she has written about you in *The Prophet*, it is best if you are the Wizengamot’s *only* choice, Ron. There will be some couples who wait until the very last day to consummate.”

Draco’s heart was thudding, and he forced himself not to occlude. He couldn’t afford to miss a single thing.

“The open apology worked though,” said Weasley. “My reputation has improved.”

“Of course it has,” Lucius scoffed. “Because I practically wrote it for you.”

Draco's jaw dropped.

"You're right Ron," said Shacklebolt smoothly, ever the politician. "But she still did plenty of damage before Lucius intervened. This needs to be spun as a romantic thing. You'll say that you failed to consummate your marriage because you love her, and you decided to brave Azkaban with her, rather than be bound to anybody else. It's a huge gesture, and the media will eat it up. You'll say that the amendment took you by complete surprise, but you are pleased with the softening position of the Ministry because it allowed you to marry the love of your life. You will also say that the Ministry is being generous to your former wife, who is a dear friend of yours now – since the Wizengamot is annulling your marriage by edict, she will simply be put back into the pool of the unmatched instead of being forced to go to Azkaban too. They'll forget the things Hermione wrote, and she will be released from prison wed to the person she should have married all along."

"And Astoria?" came Beatrice's voice for the first time.

"I have no doubt that Astoria will be selected for Draco," said Shacklebolt calmly. "We have multiple witnesses who say that Draco simply panicked at the altar. They've been betrothed for years, and the Wizengamot is allowed to take those factors into account when selecting a more appropriate match under this amendment."

Draco felt sick as he continued to listen, and he forced himself not to occlude as he heard them casually discuss his coming match with Astoria.

You knew Father would do something like this, he told himself. Don't put up any walls. Listen to everything.

"It had better work, Lucius," said Beatrice. "You assured me two years ago that if the Ministry instituted the MLPP it would make Draco propose."

Draco blinked, wholly unprepared for this turn in the conversation. He tried to process this.

Father had been behind the MLPP in the first place?

"Yes, and it did," said Lucius hotly. "But the boy has an independent streak, he always has. He just got cold feet Beatrice, and now he's stuck in a Ministry-mandated match that he can't get out of. I would remind you that the only reason he *can't* get out of it is because the Ministry put in no time limits for those who refused their marriage. As the law is currently written, Miss Granger could waste away in Azkaban for years, and Draco could not seek another match while she's doing it."

"Well we didn't think anybody would actually *choose* to go to Azkaban," muttered Kingsley. "Let alone last as long as she has..."

Beatrice harrumphed. "Draco and Astoria should never have been at the Matching Ceremony in the first place, Lucius!"

"I know," said Lucius in a weary voice that told Draco they must have had this same conversation a dozen times. "But they were, and we should focus on the silver lining here.

Astoria is unmatched. And Draco managed to match with the one witch who is apparently stubborn enough to prefer prison over the marriage bed. It's given us a perfect opportunity to amend this law and *force* a match between them, Beatrice."

Don't occlude. Don't occlude. Don't occlude.

"And I'll get Hermione," added Weasley happily. Draco's stomach soured.

"You'll get Hermione," agreed Kingsley. "And I'll appear to be responsive to the public's complaints about the law because it softens some of the penalties for noncompliance. Everybody wins here."

Except for me and Granger.

"I still have some concerns," said Beatrice.

"And what are those?" asked Lucius in a tight voice.

"These conjugal visits. He keeps scheduling them."

"According to my contacts there, it appears that all they do is talk. Miss Granger has given no indication that Draco has tried to exercise his rights."

"But you can't be *sure*," added Beatrice.

"Hermione would have told me," said Weasley in an arrogant voice. "She's angry at him because he's a right tosser – no offense – but if he had... done *that*... she would have said something by now."

"And she probably would have written about it in one of her articles," pointed out Shacklebolt.

Draco checked his watch and saw that he was officially late. There was no way he would be able to see her today. He closed his eyes, wishing more than ever that he could be there with her, but this was more important. He had to stay and remember every single word.

There was silence for a moment when Beatrice said, "But what about their emotional connection?"

Weasley scoffed. "Emotional connection? She hates him."

Draco's stomach dropped. Had she told Weasley that? Or had it been an act to convince the guards?

"But he doesn't seem to hate *her*," said Beatrice coldly. "He continues to visit her. He's there right now."

"I won't deny that he seems to have a certain... fascination with her. But I've explained how the Malfoy magic works," said Lucius curtly. "The moment he's wed to Astoria, his attention will shift to his wife until an heir's blood is added to the wards. That is more than enough

time for this little interest of his to burn itself out. He will be eager to consummate their union, and there will be no getting out of the marriage for either one of them until three children are born. The same goes for Weasley and Granger.”

“And what about Miss Granger?” asked Beatrice. “Will she also be *eager to consummate?* Do the Weasley’s have similar family magic?”

Draco held his breath as he waited for an answer.

Weasley snorted. “Our family magic is just tied to fertility. Why do you think my mum had seven kids? They didn’t add Bill’s blood to the Burrow until they finally had a girl.”

Draco’s stomach froze at this.

“So she will produce your children quickly then,” said Beatrice. “But will she *want* to?”

Weasley shrugged. “Does it even matter, as long as Malfoy and Astoria consummate theirs? They will be just like everybody else once they consummate. Besides, Hermione and I have done some things. Once she adjusts, she’ll want to shag me.”

Draco felt sick as he imagined it. Weasley sounded so sure of himself.

“You’ll be given thirty days since you’ll be operating under the amendment,” said Kingsley sternly. “And she *must* do it, Ron. I can’t afford the political fallout if we send her *back* to Azkaban until the next Matching Ceremony. With Draco wed to Astoria there will be no other wizards to choose from. I can’t have this fight with her for another eight months.”

“I’ll get it done,” he said. “Whatever it takes, I’ll make sure it happens.”

Fuck no. She’s better off in Azkaban than this.

“Good,” said Kingsley. “See that you do.”

“I still –” started Beatrice, but she was cut off by Lucius.

“It will work, Beatrice. We’ve been over this. Draco *will* consummate with Astoria. She’s dutiful, and he will desire her.”

Beatrice sniffed. “I was *going* to say that I am still concerned about the next few weeks. He has until the end of November to change her mind.”

“But he won’t,” said Weasley in a comforting tone. “She’s seeing me again. She’s resisted Malfoy this long, she will resist a few more weeks. She’s probably shouting at him as we speak.”

“And we will pass the amendment in a closed session the night before the three months is up,” added Kingsley. “As Minister I can call an emergency session with no public notice. She won’t have any warning that it’s coming, as long as Weasley doesn’t tell her about it. They will be rematched at midnight and married immediately after that.”

"I haven't breathed a word," confirmed Weasley.

"There you go then," said Kingsley. "They won't marry each other, Beatrice. She's lasted this long."

Draco heard some shuffling and melted away, moving quickly to the staircase to get to his room before they saw him. He was thinking quickly. His father would surely receive an alert that Draco was a no-show today. He had to have some explanation for his absence.

He got into his room and grabbed a sheet of parchment and scrawled a quick note, which he sent off with his owl.

Lawrence,

My apologies for failing to arrive today. I got food poisoning at breakfast and didn't make it onto the boat to Azkaban. I've been laid up for the last hour. Please go ahead and reschedule my conjugal visit with Hermione Granger for tomorrow morning instead. I should have recovered by then.

Regards, Draco L. Malfoy

Then he started digging through his drawers to pull out one of the things he had noticed when searching for the extendable ears: a very old puking pastille.

He grimaced as he stared at it. It was surely past the expiry date, but there was nothing for it. He moved to the bathroom where he ate one end of it, and then promptly felt his stomach turn. He emptied it into the toilet, forced down the other half, and then gasped, "Patsy!"

The little elf that typically cared for Draco appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Yes Master Draco?"

"Patsy, I'm ill," he groaned, gesturing to the evidence in the bowl of the toilet. "I was feeling off right after breakfast."

Patsy's eyes widened and then she started to fuss over Draco, gently scolding him as she settled him into bed.

"Master Draco must be telling Patsy he is sick before he is getting this ill!" she chided.
"Patsy is getting a potion for Master Draco!"

He groaned his thanks. "Please tell Mother and Father I was hoping to eat lunch with them today, but I'm too ill. I saw them at breakfast. I don't want them to think I'm still cross with them when I don't show up."

Patsy's eyes shone with unshed tears. "Of course, Master Draco. I is telling Master Lucius and Mistress Narcissa that you is sick and is not angry with them."

"Thank you," he said as he rolled over.

Draco knew that Lucius would be by for a visit once he heard the news to confirm that Draco hadn't eavesdropped. For once, Draco was ready for him. He knew exactly what his father was plotting now, and Draco had no intention of letting him win.

Draco was more determined than ever to marry Hermione Granger.

8 November 2003

Draco had never been this nervous as he made the short, frigid trip across the sea in the tiny magical dinghy. The twenty minute trip felt like a lifetime as he prepared himself to see Granger for the first time in weeks.

As Draco expected, his father had shown up to his room a few minutes after Patsy left with a stomach potion. Draco made a credible effort to moan and groan and told his father he didn't even make it to the boat before he was vomiting in the bushes near the apparition point. Lucius appeared wary, but seemed to accept Draco's explanation when he appeared for dinner, acting for the world as though he was pleased to be back on speaking terms with his parents.

It was all an act of course. But Draco had to play the game because he had to get this news to Granger without his father suspecting.

She was bound to be furious with him, and he knew he deserved every ounce of her anger. But Merlin did he hope he could talk some sense into her today. The amendment they were facing was catastrophic, and Draco had been up most of the night teasing out various hypotheticals in his mind.

There was one thing he had settled on. Draco would not, under any circumstances, consummate a marriage with Astoria. If he couldn't convince Granger to marry him before the amendment was passed, then he would be matched with her for thirty days. Surely he could resist the Malfoy magic that long. *Surely*. At that point his bond with Astoria would dissolve and then... what? Would he go to Azkaban? Would he be matched with one of the other fifteen witches who left the Matching Ceremony that day?

Draco didn't know for sure, and he didn't want to find out. He wanted to marry Granger so he would *never* find out. But if she wouldn't agree, then Astoria would be a detour on the way to someone else or prison. It wasn't just the occlumency problem anymore — it was the principle of the matter.

Draco had to acknowledge that he had never been principled before. It made him think of Granger.

He needed her to forgive him. He needed her to marry him. He just needed her.

The dinghy hit the dilapidated pier, and Draco looked up at the ugly prison, its thick stone walls covered in moss from the sea. It was always gray here, and his occlumency kicked on instinctively. He checked in, exchanged a brief word with Maywood, and then was escorted into the familiar room where he waited impatiently.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and Draco's breath caught as he stared at her.

She had deteriorated. There was no other word for it. She was thinner than ever, her skin was nearly translucent, and her hair hung limply over her shoulders. She gave him a look that was filled with pain, mixed with anger. She said nothing as she stared at him.

"Here she is," said the guard. "Heard you were ill. Try not to be sick, will you? We just got her clean."

Draco nodded curtly, and the guard left the room, locking it behind him, and Draco made his way slowly toward her, as though approaching a skittish animal.

"Granger..." he said quietly, but he was stopped by the look she cast at him. She looked deeply hurt.

"Why didn't you come?"

Draco furrowed his brow. "Pardon?"

"Yesterday! Why didn't you come? You don't look ill... and I had to... they made me..." she choked back a little sob.

Draco's stomach sank, and he reached out to grip her arms. She looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Granger, I'm so sorry. Please know that. You're right I wasn't ill. I was eavesdropping on a meeting about an amendment to the MLPP. Apparently Shacklebolt and my father have been meeting at the Manor whenever I visit you. Father was acting a little odd yesterday morning, so I hung back and saw Shacklebolt arrive. I've been trying to find out what they're up to for weeks, and I couldn't let the opportunity go. I had no choice. *Please forgive me.*"

She blinked. Clearly whatever she expected him to say it was not this.

"Oh," she said softly, looking taken aback. "Well then can you tell me -"

"Yes," said Draco firmly, "but I need to say something else first."

A wary look crossed her face now, as though she knew what was coming.

“Granger,” he said. “I need to apologize to you for so much. I was an utter prick to you for years all because of something that doesn’t matter at all. I made this list...”

Here he pulled out the roll of parchment he brought through security – Maywood barely checked him anymore – and he unfurled it.

Her eyes widened when she saw it.

“This is every single thing I can remember that I should be sorry for. I’m sure I have missed a few things, but it’s a lot. Theo, Pansy, and Blaise even helped, and I realized just how cruel I was when I wrote all of this down. I am so sorry. I’m sorry for all of it. I’m especially sorry for that name I used to call you. I want you to know I haven’t said that word since the day the Dark Lord died. And fuck, I am *so* sorry for that day at the Manor. I know I hesitated to identify Potter, but I *did* identify you. That day haunts me, Granger. It’s haunted me since the moment it happened. And most recently I’m sorry for the way I reacted to Weasley’s apology in *The Prophet*. You’re right that I have a bit of a caveman complex. I truly wasn’t aware of it until recently—nobody but you has ever drawn it out of me before. Astoria could shag a hundred men, and I wouldn’t give a shit. But you? Just the thought of it makes me sick, and I think it was the declaration of love at the end that just made me see red. But that’s really no excuse. You have male friends, and having male friends doesn’t mean you’re doing... things with them. Even if you were, it’s none of my business, not yet. I promise I’ll work on my jealousy.”

Draco realized he was rambling and bit his lip as he stared down at her face. She wasn’t making eye contact with him, but was reading through the list as he spoke.

He waited for her to finish, and at long last she looked up, and Draco thought she was peering into his very soul as she seemed to weigh his words.

“There’s one thing you forgot on this list,” she said quietly.

Draco’s stomach clenched. “Tell me.”

“Buckbeak,” she said simply.

Draco’s face fell.

Buckbeak. Of course. That hippogriff his father had arranged to be executed. Then he realized she was still speaking.

“...and I had to rescue him and...”

“Wait,” Draco interrupted. “He wasn’t killed?”

“No, I was just saying that,” she said impatiently. “I spent *all year* working on his appeal and of course your father intervened so they sentenced him to death anyway. I had to go to his bloody execution to rescue the poor thing, all because *you* were being a whiny little git about it! You were warned, and you baited him anyway. Then you blew the whole thing out of proportion just to hurt Hagrid.”

“But it didn’t die?” Draco breathed.

Draco hadn’t forgotten about the hippogriff at all, he just didn’t know that Granger cared that much.

“No, of course not. Harry and I rescued him and then used him to break Sirius Black out of Professor Flitwick’s office, and they went into hiding together. Last I heard, Buckbeak’s living in the Forbidden Forest again.”

Draco gaped at her for a moment, before easing into a surprised smile. “Father told me he was killed... I’m *so* happy he wasn’t.”

Then he looked down at her. “I’m sorry for that too, Granger. Truly.”

Her eyes softened, and she nodded. “Alright then.”

His heart leapt. “Alright? Does that mean you don’t hate me?”

She pursed her lips. “Unfortunately, you’re rather difficult to hate. Believe me, I’ve been trying. But you insist on writing to me and visiting me... and I find myself unable to do it.”

Draco was smiling so broadly now he thought his face might split. “Never say so, Granger.”

“You’re still a pretentious git.”

“Always, darling.”

She rolled her eyes, but Draco thought she was struggling not to smile. “Alright. I forgive you. Though as for the caveman thing...”

Draco quirked an eyebrow.

“You probably shouldn’t be giving out bribes to have guards fired if you really are trying to turn a new leaf. You could have just had them reassigned to a different prisoner.”

Draco flushed. “Ah. You heard about that,” he said delicately.

She just gave him a knowing look.

“Well they disrespected you and...” he sighed, seeing the look on her face. “Fine. Caveman. Noted.”

She hesitated before turning a little pink. “Well if I’m being honest, I might like it more than I let on. It’s come in handy around here, I can admit that. But bribes to ruin people’s careers are a step too far. So is implying that I’m complicit in whatever thing is making your instincts go haywire. I have never shagged Ron, nor will I ever shag Ron. I jilted him and went to Azkaban for many reasons, but one of them was so I wouldn’t have to shag him.”

Draco swallowed, knowing that she might not be getting that choice very soon. But instead, he just nodded.

“I’ll... try to reign it in then.”

“Thank you,” she said, as she reached down to tug on his hand to lead him over to the table.
“Now we should talk about this amendment.”

They settled themselves into their usual seats, and he watched as she seemed to brace herself.

“How bad is it then?” she asked.

“Bad,” said Draco. “Very bad.”

Granger slumped. “An extended prison sentence then? True solitary where I’m no longer permitted visitors or mental stimulation? Just tell me, Malfoy. I can take it.”

“None of the above,” said Draco, trying to stay more calm than he felt. “If we don’t get married by the time the first three months is up then we will both be rematched and forcibly wed to somebody of the Wizengamot’s choosing. It sounded like there would be no opportunity to object this time.”

Her eyes started to widen. “But who...”

“The eligible pool will be witches and wizards who were unmatched originally due to uneven numbers and anybody who has not consummated their own marriage by the deadline. The Wizengamot will have discretion to pick from that group.”

Draco fell silent as he watched her absorb this. He wanted nothing more than to excoriate Weasley in front of her, but after their last fight he couldn’t risk it. Not yet. Besides, the thing about Hermione Granger was that she was truly brilliant. She was the type who could make connections herself and draw conclusions – usually the correct ones. Draco was learning that sometimes it was best to just let her arrive there on her own.

“So your match will be Astoria,” she said quietly. “If your father has the political capital to get the MLPP instituted in the first place, then he can certainly arrange *that...*”

This was sufficiently diverting that Draco said, “Wait. You knew about his involvement?”

“You didn’t?” she asked in confusion.

Draco shrugged, looking bewildered. “Not until I overheard them talking about it yesterday. I know he’s involved in politics, and obviously he’s on the Wizengamot himself, but I had no idea the MLPP was *his* idea until I eavesdropped.”

Granger looked at him oddly. “That’s... comforting, actually.”

“What? Why?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess some part of me has always wondered if you supported it too.”

Draco looked at her squarely. “Granger, I’ll be honest with you. I’m pretty pleased with my match, and that has made my feelings about the law complex in recent weeks. You never would have been a possibility without this mad law, and I like that you’ve become a possibility. I like it a lot. But no, I didn’t support it when it first came out. I still don’t support the idea of it – I’ve read all the things you assigned me to read, and it’s dangerous. Besides, according to Beatrice Greengrass – she was at the meeting too, by the way – one of the reasons my father cooked up the plan in the first place was to strong-arm me into finally marrying Astoria. As I see it, he promoted a dangerous law purely as a means of manipulating me and finding a solution to one of Shacklebolt’s problems after the war, which put the Minister in his debt.”

She was flushing a little at this, but her eyes started to shine. “Well... that’s good, Malfoy. I’ve worked on the other side of your father for years, you know. The think tank I used to work for was usually in direct opposition to the things he wanted.”

“Was it now?” asked Draco, smiling a little. “Then it’s no wonder he’s so intimidated by you.”

She gave a light laugh at this before trailing off. “Yes, well... he did soundly beat me when it came to getting the MLPP passed. But if he was trying to strong-arm *you* as part of it, I can see why he was so determined to get his way.”

Draco inclined his head. “Yes. And that means you’re also correct. My match will be Astoria. They discussed it yesterday.”

“But mine...” she trailed off, as she furrowed her brow to think.

Say it. Say it. Say it.

“I suppose mine would have to be somebody who hasn’t consummated,” she said slowly. “There were no wizards leftover.”

Draco said nothing, and she looked at him and narrowed her eyes. “You know.”

Draco bit his lip but stayed silent.

“Draco Malfoy, there’s something you aren’t telling me.”

He sighed. “Let’s just say there were four people at the meeting, Granger. Not three.”

She studied him, and Draco willed her to see the truth so he wouldn’t have to tell her.

“But who...” she whispered. Then her eyes widened. “No. Surely not.”

“I don’t want to hurt you again.”

“Malfoy... tell me if it’s true. I need to know. Tell me all of it.”

He sighed as he nodded slowly. “Fine. I’m sure your suspicions are correct. Weasley was there. He hasn’t consummated his marriage to Prudence, nor will he. Evidently there are still

some other holdouts, but they think every other couple will do it before the deadline to avoid Azkaban. They intend for him to be the last man standing, and if he is then he will be rematched if we aren't married, instead of being sent to prison. He will be the only choice for you, and they are in the process of rehabilitating his reputation so that when you're wed it undermines everything you've been writing. That's why his apology was in *The Prophet*. It was partially to get back into your good graces, but also to make him sympathetic when you marry him. They plan to spin the whole thing as a romance. He's going to claim that he was so in love with you he was willing to go to Azkaban instead of betray his feelings and consummate a marriage with somebody else. Then *you* get to avoid marriage to the evil ex-Death Eater and live happily ever after with the man who pined for you."

At this she crumpled, and Draco was struck by how small she suddenly looked.

"Granger," he said gently. She looked up at him, and Draco saw her eyes were starting to water. His heart broke for her, and he quickly stood and walked around the table. He knelt in front of her and cupped her cheek, swiping back the tear that had just spilled from her eye. She started to shake, but she wasn't resisting his touch, so Draco took the opportunity to pull her to him, off the chair, until she was cradled in his lap on the floor.

He held her while she cried, rocking her ever so slightly. She was so small now, so frail. It had been her against the world since the day the day the MLPP was announced, but everybody had limits. Draco wondered if this betrayal had finally broken Hermione Granger.

"I'm surprised you believe me," he murmured.

She gave a giant sniff. "I knew something was off," she said in barely a whisper. "He's visited me a couple times, and it's been different. He's been more confident than usual and very careful not to argue with me. He's been one of my best friends for twelve years, and he's never *once* acted like that. Our entire relationship is filled with bickering, but there hasn't been *any* the last couple of visits. It felt wrong, but I didn't... I couldn't... oh God..."

She dissolved into tears again, and Draco tightened his grip on her.

As if on instinct he dipped his face and found the top of her head. He inhaled and smelled that same prison soap and unique scent that was distinctly hers. But it was mixed with grief and exhaustion too.

He said nothing as he waited for her to cry it out, preparing for the next part of this. He knew what he was going to ask, and he was not optimistic about his chances. Even though Weasley had betrayed her, he was still Weasley. There were years of positive history there, some of which was romantic. Draco's years of history with her were overwhelmingly negative. But he had to try. He decided to say it as soon as she gave him an opening.

At long last she started to quiet, and she still hadn't pulled away. Draco took this as a good sign.

"Granger," he said. "Marry me."

She lifted his head to study his face.

"So you won't have to marry Astoria?"

She looked defeated and a little hurt.

He shook his head. "I don't want to marry Astoria, that's true. But if I don't consummate within thirty days, I'm guessing I'll be matched with yet another witch. Please understand this isn't just about avoiding Astoria for me. I *know* I can avoid Astoria. But I don't *want* to be matched with anybody else. I want somebody who's not just interesting but utterly fascinating. I want to be matched with you."

"Really?" she said in a quiet voice.

"Really," said Draco firmly. "And Granger, you *will* be married in a few weeks one way or another. If you pick Weasley and don't consummate with him within thirty days then you will be back in Azkaban until the next Matching Ceremony because there will be no other options for you. They talked about that yesterday, so I know that would be the outcome for you. The next Matching Ceremony is months away. We both know you don't want to be here. It's a terrible place, and getting released for thirty days only to come back again is not a fate either of us wants for you. That means you need to marry one of us and consummate it to stay married until you can get the MLPP overturned. I know you can do it, darling, but you need more time, and Azkaban has served its purpose. You need to leave this place."

She was silent for a long while.

"I do hate this place," she whispered. "I never want to come back here... I..." She trailed off, seemingly unable to finish. Draco's heart leapt. The admission that she didn't want to come back to Azkaban was the first step. Now he had to lock her down.

"I'm glad you don't want to come back to Azkaban. You have been so strong and have done so well, but you can do more outside of these walls now that you have the world's attention. And that means you only have two real options here: me or Weasley. I know I'm pretentious. I know I bullied you. I know I'm asking a *lot* of you to face my parents and a whole world of prejudiced arseholes. In a few weeks you could be with the man you've loved as a friend since you were a child. I know all that. There's truly not a single reason why you should pick me over Weasley. But please darling... *please* choose me."

She was quiet for a long while. Finally she said, "Well I can think of one pretty big reason why I should choose you."

Draco's heart started to race. "And what's that?" he whispered.

"If I choose you, then Kingsley and your father both lose... not to mention Ronald, that absolute *git*..."

Draco felt his face split into a broad smile, and she gave him a watery smile too.

"You're right darling. If the Golden Girl marries the scary ex-Death Eater then all of them lose. Every last fucking one of them."

She looked up at him, and Draco's entire attention was captured by her eyes. They reminded him of warm honey, almost molten and rimmed red from her tears moments ago. Something about them made Draco raise his hand to her cheek again.

"Marry me," he whispered, kissing her on her forehead.

"Marry me," he said again, now kissing her on her cheek.

"Marry me," he said as he kissed her on the nose.

"Tell me what I have to do so you'll marry me," he said as he kissed her ear.

Her eyes had fluttered closed, and she gave a soft sigh. "Help me blow it up," she said.

"Done," agreed Draco, kissing one eyelid.

"Make an unbreakable vow that says –" she started.

"Alright," he agreed, kissing her on the other eyelid.

Her eyes opened, and she frowned a little. There was a small wrinkle just above her nose that Draco kissed too. Now that he started he could hardly stop. He was thrilled she was negotiating with him. *Him*. Not that absolute tosspot the Weasel, but *him*, Draco Malfoy. And fuck, she was letting him kiss her too. Granted, they were just pecks but still... this was unprecedented.

"You don't know what it's going to say."

"Doesn't matter," said Draco easily. "I'll do it."

"But –"

"Surprise me, darling," he said, kissing the corner of her mouth. "Call it my wedding gift."

She smiled a little at this. "Alright."

"Anything else?" he asked.

Her expression turned serious. "We'll need Harry."

Draco paused and debated this. If he said no, she might say no too. But fucking *Potter*... then again, she was so close to giving him this.

"Fine. Can you tell me why?"

She looked surprised that he wasn't fighting her, but pleased. "Because if we do this, I want the amendment to pass first."

"But why?"

"Because I want the world to know exactly how they are trying to manipulate us. And I want to watch the egg fry on Kingsley's face when it doesn't work."

Draco sat back to study her. "They're going to do it at the very last minute."

"Oh I'm sure they will," she said knowingly. "Let me guess. It will be a closed session the night before the three months are up. Then they'll send Ron to me at midnight once the deadline passes."

Draco's eyebrows flew up, both surprised and impressed.

"Precisely."

Granger nodded. "It's been done before when there is emergency legislation. Harry's allowed in the Wizengamot sessions because he's a senior auror. He can get himself assigned as security. Procedurally, they have to read the entire law out loud when it's done that way. He will be able to hear the whole thing and let us know if there are any last minute issues."

Draco cocked an eyebrow at her. "Alright, I'm listening. Go on."

She shrugged. "They have to pass it before midnight don't they? And then they'll wait around until midnight to match us. Harry can send a message to let you know if it passed or not and whether there are any complications we need to be aware of. If it passes then you'll come here, and we'll get married."

Draco frowned. "That's cutting it a bit close."

"Yes, but I know Kingsley. The print deadline for *The Daily Prophet* is eleven the night before. It will be passed before then to make it into the papers the next morning. Then he'll plan to announce my marriage to Ron in *The Evening Prophet* later on that day."

"Bloody hell," he muttered. She was brilliant.

She shrugged. "I told you I did this for years. Up until recently Kingsley and I were usually on the same side. He's fairly predictable."

"Alright, so we'll have at least an hour to get married," he said a bit nervously.

"Yes. It's best if Harry doesn't leave the session. Frankly, I would guess Kingsley will want him to stay so I'm not warned."

"Then how can he send a message to me?"

"I have a way," she said simply. "I'll send him to you, and he can arrange it. I suppose you could seek him out yourself, but he's more likely to listen to everything you say if it comes from me first."

"You really think Potter is going to cooperate?"

She looked at him squarely. “He will. He feels terrible about following me after the wedding and trying to push me into an unwanted marriage with Ron. He’s actually suggested I marry *you* instead because... well, I’ve spoken rather highly of you... while making it clear you really annoy me of course.”

Draco’s eyes widened at this.

“But how will you tell him so my father doesn’t hear? He has supervised visits with you.”

She gave him an impish smile. “Surely you can trust me to convey a confidential message to Harry?”

“But –”

“Trust me, Malfoy,” she said. “Harry and I talk in a language the Azkaban guards don’t understand. We’ve been doing it for years around the Weasleys because they don’t understand it either.”

“And what language is that?”

“Disney movies.”

Draco let out a surprised laugh at this, remembering that Nemo movie she suggested and marveling at her cleverness.

“Alright, I’ll trust you. Anything else?”

“We’ll need a couple witnesses and somebody who is certified by the Ministry to marry us.”

Draco frowned as he thought about it. “Witnesses aren’t a problem, but somebody certified to marry us could be a challenge...”

“There’s an official registry you can check. They loosened the rules a lot last year when there were so many weddings taking place. The list is fairly extensive.”

Draco nodded. “Alright, I’ll look into it. Anything else?”

She worried her lip a little. “You aren’t going to like this, but I think you should stay away for the rest of the month. I’ll keep meeting with Ron, and I’ll try to pretend like I don’t want to wring his neck. But when the guards come in here, we need to be fighting. I want them to think that you have no chance with me. I want everyone’s defenses lowered so they don’t try to stop you when you come to me that night.”

Draco looked at her closely. “You’re certain?”

She nodded. “I’ll be here, Malfoy. Come for me on a surprise visit once the amendment is passed, and I’ll agree to see you and anybody else you bring with you. We’ll do it then.”

He huffed an exhale. “Fine. I’ll arrange it all with Potter then. It should be the last day of the month.”

She nodded and looked down for a moment before giving him one last, piercing look. “Just one more thing... you’re sure you want this? That you want *me*? ”

He gave her a soft smile. “Tell me Granger... how many times have I proposed to you?”

“Eleven times at last count,” she admitted.

He smiled a little as he tucked his hand under her chin and raised her face to look at him.

“Then allow me to make it a round dozen. Hermione Granger, will you marry me?”

She broke into a small smile and nodded. “I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but yes Draco Malfoy. I’ll marry you.”

Draco thought his chest was going to erupt as he leaned down. He hesitated for only a moment before he gave her a soft, tentative kiss.

When was the last time he had kissed a woman? It had been years. He knew he hadn’t done this since Hogwarts. It was unfamiliar and yet wonderful all at the same time. Despite her condition her lips were pliant and warm. He could feel her breath on his face, and his heart was racing as his lips mapped hers. It was chaste, but perfect.

She sighed into him, and he was just about to deepen the kiss when the echo of footsteps came down the hall, and she gasped and scrambled off of his lap. Draco got to his feet too, heart still pounding from that kiss as she started to shout.

“I’VE TOLD YOU TO STAY AWAY! DON’T COME BACK! I DON’T KNOW HOW MANY TIMES I HAVE TO SAY IT! I DON’T WANT YOU!”

“Granger –” he started, but he was cut off as the door opened.

“FUCK YOU MALFOY!” she screamed, and she reared back and slapped him so hard his vision popped.

There was a noise as the guard strode forward and restrained her, and Draco just stared at her in amazement as she was cuffed, rubbing his cheek absently.

She cast one last look at him as she was escorted out of the room, and Draco’s eyes tracked her every movement. The moment she and the guard were gone Draco broke out into a wide grin.

Fucking hell I can’t wait to marry her.

Chapter 8: The Nott Pot Plot

15 November 2003

Draco had kissed Granger. He had kissed her. And she kissed him back. If they hadn't been interrupted she might have let him open her mouth and explore it with his tongue and then maybe her neck and...

Fuck.

It defied all reason that such a small thing could have sent his senses scattering like this. It had been the softest thing — so soft it could even be interpreted as friendly if he hadn't just locked down an engagement with her a moment before. It didn't speak of all the things he had begun to fantasize about. He had started seeing her in his dreams and in that hazy place between wake and sleep when his body became hard. No, the kiss had no heat, but it was so much more than that. It was the sealing of a promise. It was his commitment that he would do anything and work with anyone to make sure they got married on her terms. He would come for her. His father would not thwart him.

He had two weeks until they got married, and his father started bringing Astoria around again. Draco made a point to mope a bit after the slap, and Lucius seemed convinced that Draco was truly on thin ice with Granger, even if he hadn't given her up.

"Astoria, my dear, Draco has something to say to you," said Lucius sternly at a family dinner soon after his last visit.

She turned a cold eye toward Draco.

"I... apologize for causing a scene at the wedding," he said through gritted teeth.

She sniffed. "When did you decide to ignore your duty?"

Oh fuck you.

"About three seconds before I did it."

"But you didn't return," she insisted.

"No, I... wasn't sure how to salvage things."

She pursed her lips but nodded in acknowledgment of this.

"Have you been seeking another match since you're unbound?" he asked lightly. Part of his plan was feigning ignorance.

He saw Astoria and Lucius exchange glances. To his surprise, his mother's mouth tightened just a little bit.

Now that was interesting.

Narcissa was speaking to him again, but she refused to talk about Granger, Astoria, the wedding, or even the Ministry. It was as though she didn't want to think about any of it. Draco had no idea how to interpret her expression.

"I'm certain Mother is considering several options. I have every hope to secure a marriage before the Matching Ceremony next year," said Astoria primly.

"That's excellent news," he said cordially.

"And yourself? I understand Miss Granger is still in Azkaban."

"She is," said Draco simply. "She's determined to make her point."

"It's rather common of her, is it not? She clearly has no appreciation for authority or duty," said Astoria.

Draco felt his anger building, and he leveled a fierce look at her.

"She's extraordinary. The Malfoys would be fortunate indeed if a witch like her agreed to imbue our line with her brilliance and determination. We could only be so lucky."

There was a resounding silence at this, and Lucius looked furious while Narcissa appeared perturbed. Astoria's facade started to crack.

"Well," Astoria hissed, "unfortunately for you, she doesn't want you does she? You keep trying to get her attention like a lost puppy, and yet you find yourself rejected by that nasty little mudblood over and over again."

That's what you think, you bitch.

Lucius and Narcissa were both opening their mouths to intervene, but Draco cut them off.

"I don't appreciate that sort of rudeness Astoria," he snapped. "In any event, I'm patient. I'm giving her a little space right now at her request, but I would happily spend years working to convince her if that's what it takes. I could never seem to stay away from her at Hogwarts either, you know. I still remember how utterly divine she looked at the Yule Ball. Every bloke in the room wished he was Viktor Krum that night. When she finally comes to her senses and decides to marry me, I'll be the envy of wizarding Britain."

This was a deep dig at Astoria, he knew. The Yule Ball had been a sensitive subject for years because Draco asked Pansy instead of her. She got an ugly look on her face as Draco implied there was yet another witch he would have preferred to be with.

"Draco," said Lucius sharply.

“What?” asked Draco innocently. “I would think it’s a good thing that I’m so intrigued by her. She’s my fiancée is she not?”

Lucius’s nostrils flared, and Draco took a perverse pleasure in his predicament. Lucius couldn’t very well object without showing his hand.

“Astoria, how is Daphne faring?” asked his mother, providing an inelegant shift in conversation.

Astoria raised her hand to tuck her hair behind her ear as she began to respond, and Draco caught a glint of something unexpected.

“Astoria, why are you still wearing that?” he interrupted.

Astoria and his mother fell silent.

“Wearing what, Draco?” she asked.

“That ring.”

Again there was an awkward silence as everyone looked at her left hand as one. Astoria raised her eyes to Draco, and she went pale.

“Force of habit.”

“Well let’s break it then, shall we?” he said, holding out his hand for it.

“Draco!” said his father, standing up.

Draco gave Lucius a stony look. “We aren’t engaged, father. And I rather think that if she wears this ring around other suitors they will get the wrong impression.”

A vein was throbbing in Lucius’s temple, but Astoria said nothing as she slowly slid the ring off and handed it to Draco.

“Thank you,” he said, before he raised his wand and vanished it.

“Draco!”

This time it was Narcissa who was looking at him in shock.

“That was a Black family heirloom!” she cried.

“We have others,” he said, shrugging. “I certainly have no more use for it.”

Then he rose and nodded cordially at his parents and Astoria. “I’ll bid you all good day.”

He caught Astoria’s lower lip trembling, but he felt nothing as he swept from the room. He was internally seething that she had been wearing the ring all this time. It was large, old, a true family heirloom with emeralds and diamonds. Draco absolutely hated it.

He also hated the fact that he hadn't given a ring to Granger. She deserved to have one, but she was in prison and the guards would never allow her to keep it. Besides, it would have given away their secret. The only thing he could give her to commemorate that moment was the kiss, and he tried to console himself with the fact that he had *not* kissed Astoria when she said yes. His proposal to Granger was special. It would have to be enough.

Draco was brooding. It had been a week since he last saw her, and Merlin did he miss her. Weasley had visited once more, no doubt to confirm that Granger still hated Draco. Potter had finally dropped by for a visit the previous day as well, and Draco was hoping he would reach out soon. If he didn't, then Draco would have to work it out himself. He couldn't leave it up to Potter to ensure their marriage occurred.

As if his thoughts summoned him, there was a *CRACK!* and an old, wizened house elf was staring at Draco with rheumy eyes. He was wearing a tea towel like a loin cloth and a locket on his chest.

"Master Draco, it is an honor," he croaked, bowing low.

"Who are you?" asked Draco warily.

"I am Kreacher. I serve the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black and Harry Potter."

Draco blinked. "Erm... how...?"

"Master Sirius Black bequeathed his home and me to Master Harry when he died, Sir," the old elf said.

Draco's eyes widened. He remembered Bellatrix complaining bitterly about the house that had passed into Potter's possession. Draco eyed the elf curiously now.

"And you can still pass the wards here?"

"I is helping Mistress Cissy and Mistress Bellatrix during the war, Sir. They is allowing me through. They is forgetting to keep Kreacher out."

"Bloody hell," breathed Draco. This was brilliant and far more secure than owls.

"My master is wishing to meet with you tonight Sir. He is asking Kreacher to learn if there is a place where Master Draco may go where he will not be followed or overheard."

Draco sat back and contemplated this. He supposed Potter was right to be cautious. Draco didn't think his father was having him tailed, but if he showed up with Potter at the Ministry or even at a pub it could make its way back to Lucius. And perhaps Potter had his own reasons for not wanting Draco in his home.

He bit his lip as he thought about it, but there was only one sensible answer. His parents wouldn't think it suspicious at all. He just hoped Theo wouldn't kill him.

"Nott Manor. I'll let Theo Nott know that Potter should be allowed to visit. Everyone who will be there is trustworthy. Let's plan to meet at eight."

Kreacher bowed low, his nose nearly touching the floor, and a moment later he disappeared with another *CRACK!*

Draco sighed and pulled out some parchment to let Theo know he would be hosting guests tonight.

At precisely eight o'clock, Draco took a deep breath and made his way to the foyer. He pinched some floo powder in his fingers and threw it in the fire. The door to his father's study opened just as Draco was crying, "Nott Manor!"

He wooshed away, but managed to catch the look on Lucius's face as he was spinning away. To Draco's great relief he didn't appear suspicious at all, nor should he be. Draco went to Nott Manor a couple times per week and had for years.

He stepped out onto the hearth on the other side and peered up to find Blaise, Pansy, and Theo already waiting for him, giving him equally skeptical looks.

"You really think he's going to help?" asked Theo as he moved forward to hand Draco a drink.

Draco shrugged, trying not to look as worried as he felt. Granger seemed certain, but then again Weasley *was* Potter's best friend. It seemed unbelievable that Potter would help Draco take Granger away from him.

The floo flashed green, and Potter stepped out of it, looking around a bit warily at the four Slytherins.

"Malfoy, Nott, Zabini, Parkinson..." he said.

"I'm a Nott too," said Pansy, as she unconsciously touched her stomach.

"Of course," said Potter. "My mistake."

There was an awkward pause and Theo stood and walked toward him. "Where are our manners? Potter, come on in. Grab a drink. There's much to discuss."

Draco couldn't help but notice that Potter opted for a butterbeer instead of something harder.

He doesn't trust us either.

He popped the top and settled down to look at the four of them before running a hand through his hair. Then he settled his gaze on Draco.

"Alright, Malfoy. Hermione tells me it's time for Belle to escape from Gaston and marry the Beast. Tell me what you know."

Draco blinked in confusion, though he heard Theo let out a thoughtful, "Huh..."

"What the fuck are you talking about Potter?" asked Draco.

Potter rolled his eyes. "*Beauty and the Beast*. Haven't you ever seen it? Belle's father is captured by the Beast and she trades places with him. She falls in love with the Beast while she's imprisoned, but Gaston is jealous and wants to kill the Beast so he can marry Belle instead. I always said Hermione was a dead ringer for Belle. She's brunette and bookish. Hermione never liked the movie though until very recently."

"Why not?" asked Theo curiously.

Potter shrugged. "I used to joke that the Beast was Ron and Gaston was Cormac McLaggen. Hermione never seemed to like what that implied. But she seems to have come around to it now that the Beast is somebody else."

He gave a knowing look at Draco now, who was still having trouble following, though Theo gave a thoughtful nod as though he understood perfectly.

"Anyway," Potter said, waving his hand dismissively, "my point is she sent me to you. Tell me what's going on so I can help her."

Draco exchanged glances with his three friends but then started to speak. He told Potter everything: how they had been staging their conjugal visits for the press, Lucius's involvement with the MLPP in the first place, and the meeting Draco overheard at Malfoy Manor.

As he spoke about the meeting, the color drained from Potter's face, and by the end of it his head was in his hands.

"...and I actually proposed to her the last time I saw her," finished Draco. "She accepted, but she wants to get married in that short window between the time the amendment passes and the deadline."

Potter let out a groan. "Of course she does. Merlin, this is going to be a shitshow."

"But you'll help," said Pansy firmly. "Weasley is..."

"Yes, yes, obviously I'll help," said Potter. "Ron is just..."

He threw his hands in the air a bit exasperatedly.

"What's their relationship then?" asked Theo, and Draco shot him a grateful look. "How much of this is Weasley actually wanting her versus Weasley having some misplaced notion of 'saving' her from Draco?"

Potter sighed. “A little of both, I’d wager. Ron’s always had stronger feelings for her than she had for him. But then again, he’s also the only bloke who has ever gotten a second date from her — and I mean the *only* one. Hermione has never had a serious romantic relationship, not really. Ron is the closest she’s ever gotten to one. And he’s comfortable with his life, and Hermione fits into it seamlessly. You have to understand, the Weasleys are... a lot. They’re my family, and they’re Hermione’s family too. They even added us to their family clock after the war. But their whole world revolves around the Burrow, and anybody they adopt gets pulled into it as well. I think there were times Ron believed he and Hermione were together when she didn’t think they were... but whether they were or not was somewhat irrelevant because they would still go to Sunday lunch at the Burrow since that’s what Weasleys do. It always made their relationship very undefined, and it led to a lot of misunderstanding and miscommunication, especially when Ron would push for more and Hermione would pump the brakes.”

“But she still agreed to marry him,” pressed Pansy.

“Well sure,” said Potter. “Ron was the obvious choice for her because who else would Hermione marry? Some bloke she’s been on one date with? Me? We’ve always thought of each other as siblings, that would have been way too weird. Besides, I was with Ginny.”

“But then she ran from her own wedding,” pointed out Blaise. “And you chased her.”

Potter slumped. “Yes, and I shouldn’t have done that. She’s just never shown a very strong interest in *anybody*, and I thought Ron was a safer choice than risking the Matching Ceremony. We all did. She loves him, she’s just not *in* love with him. Trust me, she’s made it very clear that I really fucked up when I did that.”

“So you’ll help Draco then,” said Pansy. “Even though it’s not what Weasley wants.”

Draco felt so grateful for his friends in that moment. They were asking Potter all the questions he needed answered before he trusted Potter to help with this.

Potter glanced at him and sighed again. “Yes. It’s going to be bad if Ron finds out I helped, but he’s going behind Hermione’s back on this. It’s not the first time I’ve been caught between them, and it won’t be the last. I have no idea how Malfoy broke through her walls, but she’s made it clear what she wants.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t warning me off,” said Draco cautiously. He wasn’t displeased by Potter’s support, but he was very surprised.

Potter gave a mirthless laugh. “Have you met her? Hermione’s scary, and she’s exceptionally hard to bullshit. She doesn’t need me running off blokes for her. If she wants you, then I may not understand it but it’s good enough for me.”

Draco’s eyebrows flew up.

“Now Ron *will* warn you off or worse,” he added. “You’ll want to watch your back.”

Draco snorted. “Weasley could *never* — ”

Potter cut him off with one look. “Ron is a lot more strategic than you think. He’s also an owner of Wheezes and has access to plenty of experimental products that aren’t safe enough to sell to the public. Don’t underestimate him.”

Draco clenched his jaw, but said nothing more to that. Truthfully, he was shocked that Weasley had the sense to put aside his differences long enough to work with Lucius. Perhaps Potter had a point, and Draco should tread carefully.

“Fine. So where does that leave us?”

Potter rubbed the bridge of his nose and then looked at Draco. “What are the odds Lucius will leave you alone that evening?”

Draco snorted. “Nonexistent. I’d put money on a late family dinner with Astoria invited along. She and her parents will be welcomed to spend the night. It’s happened before. I’ll have to sneak out.”

Potter and his three friends all wrinkled their noses at this and fell silent as they thought about it.

Then Theo spoke up. “Maybe the three of us could be there too...” he said slowly, as he gestured toward Pansy and Blaise.

“Why, to provide some sort of distraction?” asked Draco. “I was counting on having a couple of you come along as my witnesses.”

Theo inclined his head at this. “Yes, but there are three of us right? Two witnesses and one of us to take your place once the evening concludes.”

Draco’s eyes widened, and he shot a look at Potter. “Could you arrange that?”

Potter nodded. “Polyjuice? It’s unauthorized of course but... yeah. I have some. Hermione does too. We’ve always kept a stash around since the war.”

“It needs to be me,” said Theo, looking at Draco. “We can polyjuice into each other, and you can leave with Pansy and Blaise after dinner.”

“I don’t love the idea of Pansy coming to Azkaban...” said Draco slowly, though he saw Pansy roll her eyes at that.

“There’s no choice,” said Theo. “It *has* to be me.”

“Why?” asked Draco in confusion.

“Well Pansy *can’t* because she’s pregnant. It’s not safe for the baby.”

“Why not Blaise then?” asked Draco curiously.

“Because he’s not married,” said Theo simply. “If this all goes tits up and they try to force polyjuiced you to marry Astoria right at midnight...”

“It won’t work because you’re already bound,” breathed Draco, as Theo nodded.

“Brilliant,” muttered Potter. “I assume Nott can impersonate you?”

“Good evening, Mother,” said Theo in his poshest voice, “and you, Father. Your hair is looking particularly blonde today. Ah, and here is Astoria. I can’t wait to marry you and be magically tied to your bitchiness for the rest of my natural life.”

Everyone but Draco laughed, as Theo took a little bow. Then he turned serious. “Don’t worry about that, Potter. I’ve seen Draco around his parents and the Greengrasses for years. I won’t fuck it up.”

Potter nodded. “Alright. And I’ll make sure I’m assigned to the Wizengamot session for security. I probably won’t be able to go with you to Azkaban, but I can send you messages to let you know how it’s going.”

“How?” asked Blaise curiously.

Potter shrugged. “Hermione and I have some paired galleons with protean charms on them. She adapted them to be wandless so I can just stick my hand in my pocket and send messages that way. I may not be able to read yours while I’m with the Wizengamot, but I can send them to you.”

Draco’s eyes widened, as he remembered the galleons Granger and Potter used in fifth year. He did the same thing when communicating with Madam Rosmerta under the imperius curse.

“Alright,” he said simply. “That should work.”

Potter nodded. “I’ll send Kreacher with a galleon and some polyjuice directly to you later on tonight. I’ll send enough for twelve hours for two people.”

Draco nodded gratefully. “Then all we need is somebody who can marry us.”

They fell silent, then Potter said slowly, “There should be a registry. It’s not that hard to get on it, but it would be best to use somebody who is already authorized.”

“I’m sure Mother has a copy of it,” said Draco.

Potter, however, shook his head. “No. Let me get it. I can request it easily enough from the Ministry archives. On the off-chance Lucius hears about it he will assume I’m getting it to help Ron. You should stay as removed from this as you can. The window for you to do this the way Hermione has requested is very narrow. There can’t be a single mistake.”

Draco sighed, but nodded. He felt... *grateful*?

It was a very odd feeling when it came to Potter, but he realized Granger was right. He could help in ways that even his friends couldn’t because it would raise no serious suspicions that Draco was going to intervene. Lucius would be watching Draco carefully, but he would be off his guard with Potter’s assistance.

"So that's it then," said Draco.

Potter just snorted. "No, it's just the start. I have a feeling that bringing you around the Burrow is going to be even harder than getting you into Azkaban."

20 November 2003

True to his word, Potter sent Draco twenty-four small vials of polyjuice, each good for one hour, via the old house elf that same evening. Draco locked them in his dresser with a blood ward for protection and then examined the galleon Potter had sent along too.

Hold the edge and focus on the message you want to send, it said.

He did as he was told and thought, *Testing.*

The letters rearranged themselves and then several minutes later his galleon heated up and a new message appeared.

That worked. I will have a list of officiants soon.

Potter said nothing more, and Draco waited impatiently for several more days before Kreacher returned again with a long list of individuals who were registered to perform Ministry weddings. Even better, Potter had already been through it and circled the names of people who were more loyal to him or Granger than to Weasley.

Try to pick one who doesn't hate you if possible. I can vouch for you to any of them, and they will trust me.

The number of people who both didn't hate Draco and also trusted Potter was, unsurprisingly, extremely small. However, it did narrow the list considerably, and there was one name that jumped out at Draco.

Anthony Goldstein.

Draco raised his eyebrows at this. In the aftermath of the Matching Ceremony he had completely forgotten to owl Goldstein. Draco couldn't be sure of Goldstein's feelings toward him, but he certainly hadn't been rude that day. He also recalled Granger's attentiveness when his name was called. It was clear they knew each other.

Draco debated the best way to go about this. Should he reach out to Goldstein or let Potter do it? As much as he hated to lean on Potter for anything else, he *knew* Potter would need to vouch for him. Given that he hadn't reached out to Goldstein on his own, it would suspicious for him to do it this close to the deadline in case Lucius found out.

Sighing a little, he picked up his galleon and sent a message to Potter.

Can you contact Anthony Goldstein and see if he will officiate? I haven't met him recently, but we sat next to each other at the Matching Ceremony. He was cordial.

Draco waited anxiously, and within a couple hours he had a response.

I'm getting drinks with Anthony tonight. I'll ask him then.

Draco's stomach was in knots as he paced his room that night. His galleon was clutched in his hand, and he reviewed every other name on the list in case Goldstein wouldn't agree to do it. There were a couple others he suspected would be bribable, but he really hoped it wouldn't come to that. This was the last piece of the puzzle, and he needed it to fall into place. They were running out of time.

It was late when Draco's galleon finally burned.

Anthony is in. I told him the basic plan. He will floo to Nott's house at 9 pm on 30 November.

Draco collapsed onto his bed with relief and held the galleon over his face as he sent a message back.

Fantastic. Please convey my thanks. I'll let Theo know.

He tossed the galleon aside and thought through their plan. It was not exactly foolproof. There were any number of things that could go wrong. Lucius could notice the polyjuice. Potter could change his mind and side with Weasley. Anthony could no-show. The guards could be uncooperative once they arrived....

The guards.

Draco grimaced as he identified an obvious hole in their plan. What if Lucius got in front of it and bribed Lawrence to tell the guards to deny Draco entry that day? That would make all of their effort for naught.

Draco thought quickly and then pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill. It was a risk, but one he would have to take.

Mr. Maywood,

Can I ask if the bet is still on? If so, what's the pot?

Draco L. Malfoy

He sent it off into the night and started to pace again. He knew he needed to sleep, but he also knew it was pointless to try when he was this worked up. He had to marry Granger. He just *had* to. She seemed agreeable to his insistence on fidelity and meeting the bare minimums of the MLPP so neither one of them would go back to Azkaban again. That meant that in three months he'd be able to touch her and part her legs and finally...

He groaned as he thought about it.

Fuck.

Being this distracted by his fiancée was *not* helping. But their last encounter had ended with a kiss and then a slap. Draco replayed it over and over in his mind as he imagined everything he wished he could do to her.

Soon. Soon.

But he had to marry her first.

He paced for nearly an hour, as his mind oscillated between fear that Lucius would learn of Draco's plan and fantasies about Granger and her lips.

Draco turned to look out the window, and his eyes widened to find his owl heading back. He nearly ripped the message off of his leg, which was short.

Lord Malfoy,

The pot is approaching 1,000 galleons. Do you have a suggestion for me?

B. Maywood

Draco chewed on his lip and he jotted off a quick response.

Mr. Maywood,

I have a few suggestions.

First, I suggest you ensure that you are the welcome guard on duty the night of 30 November, specifically during the time from 10 p.m. until midnight. I suggest you follow the official rules of your job during that time, including permitting authorized visitors. I suggest you ignore any last-minute changes or orders that arbitrarily exclude specific visitors for certain prisoners. Finally, I suggest you put down no wager and send me a multiplier of the pot that you would find satisfactory to take these suggestions.

Draco L. Malfoy

Within an hour Draco had his response.

Lord Malfoy,

These are excellent suggestions. I think a 10x multiplier would make them worth following.

B. Maywood

A slow smile crossed Draco's face as he read it. He jotted off one last response.

Mr. Maywood,

Let's make it 20x and consider ourselves friends. Send me your account information by return owl, and I'll make sure you get it. I hope we can see each other soon.

Draco L. Malfoy

Draco sent it off into the night, feeling like he had finally covered all of his bases. Yes, it required another bribe, but he hoped Granger would give him a pass for this one. He wasn't out to ruin anybody's life with it, he was just making sure he and the others would be able to get in. Lucius had always been the type to bribe those in positions of authority. But Draco's approach was different: he would bribe the one person who could actually deny him entry when the time came.

It would be enough. It would have to be enough.

Ten more days.

Chapter 9: A Marriage of Inconvenience

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience 😊

30 November 2003

Much like Draco's first wedding day three months earlier, the thirtieth of November dawned bright and clear. The air was crisp and cold, but the sky was cloudless and promised near-perfect weather for the remainder of the day.

Draco and the others had a plan. It was a good plan. And it was a plan they had started to execute a couple days earlier.

Just as Draco predicted, Lucius and Narcissa decided to host the Greengrasses for dinner that evening, and Draco was informed it was to be a command performance.

"It would be inadvisable to have a feud with the Greengrasses Draco. We are going to host them to make sure that they know the Malfoys and the Greengrasses will always be allies, despite your deplorable behavior toward Astoria."

Lucius had made his position clear the week before, and Draco immediately communicated this to Potter and the others. Draco agreed to attend the dinner of course, but asked if his friends could attend as well.

"You know how close we are, father, and Astoria has been irritating me of late. If you want me to behave myself around her it's best if they attend."

It took Lucius a couple days to become convinced, but Narcissa was supportive of it.

"Draco wouldn't dare be rude in front of them, Lucius."

So Lucius agreed, and the plan was set into motion.

The thirtieth of November fell on a Sunday, which was an unusual day for the Wizengamot to conduct its business. It played directly into Draco's hand, however, because Shacklebolt was forced to arrange security with the aurors in the week leading up to it. Potter messaged Draco the moment he heard the news.

Kingsley is going to give them the required 24 hours' notice for the closed session on Saturday afternoon. It is scheduled from 4:30 to 10:30 Sunday evening.

That was precisely what Granger had expected. It would be just enough time for the announcement of the amendment to be sent to *The Daily Prophet* to make the papers the next morning. The wizarding world would find out about it after the three-month deadline expired.

Ninety minutes.

Draco was only guaranteed ninety minutes to get to Azkaban and marry Granger before the Ministry showed up with Weasley in tow. His stomach churned every time he thought about it, but he was determined to give her this. He was sure she was marrying him against her better judgment, and he wanted her to believe him when he said his wife came first. Besides, exposing the amendment for what it was would undermine Shacklebolt and hopefully Weasley as well.

Speaking of Weasley, he had made several visits to Granger while Draco was waiting for the end of November to approach. She accepted his visits, which made Draco exceptionally nervous. What if he had changed her mind? What if she was listening to him? Potter had not visited her again since she sent him to Draco, so he had no way of being certain she would still marry him. Draco had sent her a couple of letters that mirrored the ones he sent when she was *actually* not speaking to him, but of course she hadn't responded. And Draco had only sent them to maintain the fiction and to make sure she knew he hadn't forgotten her. He wasn't able to say the things he really wanted to say.

Draco was growing paranoid and couldn't shake the fear that she might reject him at the last moment. He had no idea how she felt about their kiss, and as the days rolled by Draco grew less and less confident in her commitment to marry him as she promised.

But he had to try.

And that meant he had to make arrangements as though the wedding was going to occur, including acquiring a pair of wedding bands.

Draco knew he wouldn't risk going to their vaults for a piece like he had for Astoria. Granger would have access to anything she might want if Draco actually managed to pull this off, but he refused to go anywhere near Gringotts while he was waiting for his wedding day to roll around. He was a relatively infrequent visitor and knew his father would sense something was off the moment he walked through those golden doors.

So instead, on the Friday before he was due to get married he apparated to London after his father left the Manor for Ministry business and checked into the Four Seasons again, this time using a real reservation Potter had made for him earlier in the week. The room was a backup plan in case something went very wrong and he needed to lie low either before or after the wedding. He was tempted to try the Ritz this time, but Draco derived some comfort in the familiar. He wasn't even sure if the room would be used, and he had never told his parents where he hid after jilting Astoria.

Besides, he really liked their room service.

He took a moment to drop off some clothes for both himself and Granger, which Potter had smuggled to him via Kreacher. Then he conjured a camp bed for himself in case he and Granger ended up here together. Finally, he placed a ‘do not disturb’ sign on the door at Potter’s recommendation and then returned to the lobby and asked the concierge for recommendations for nearby jewelry stores.

“What is your budget sir?”

“I have no budget.”

That was how Draco found himself staring down the offerings of several high-end muggle jewelers. They were surprisingly nice, much better than he was expecting having heard his whole life that goblins did it the best. He spent a couple hours going from store to store, but it wasn’t until he entered a shop called Cartier that he found what he was looking for: coordinating bands with similar designs to each other, though Granger’s would be dotted in diamonds and his would be plain gold. They were part of the “Love Collection,” and while Draco knew that love was overly optimistic for the situation they were in, he thought the history of the design was fitting. The salesperson explained that the design had been around for several decades and was meant to represent free love and fidelity to a chosen partner, regardless of social expectations. The rings were modern and wildly different from most of the heavy, traditional pieces that comprised the Malfoy and Black collections.

They were perfect, and Draco finally made use of a muggle plastic card Theo had insisted he acquire years before so he could easily transact business in the muggle world, with Gringotts making an exchange for galleons behind the scenes. It was surprisingly simple: one swipe, and the rings were his. Draco wondered how on earth wizards hadn’t developed something similar. Sacks of galleons were *not* convenient.

Purchases in hand, Draco made his way back to the Manor and placed them in the same drawer as the polyjuice.

His last task – which was a mere diversion – was to send a request for a conjugal visit the following Monday. It would be after the deadline, and Granger would be out of prison by then one way or another, but he was sure Lucius would get a message about it. He only hoped it was enough to convince Lucius that Draco was ignorant about what was going on.

On the wedding day itself, Draco was careful to make sure his parents saw plenty of him. He was there for breakfast and spent the morning flying around their garden in the brisk air in a futile attempt to calm his nerves. By the time lunch rolled around he was pink-cheeked and windswept.

“Draco,” said his father cordially as he entered the dining room.

“Father,” greeted Draco, as he made his way to the sideboard. “I hope it’s good. I’m starving.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow at that, but said nothing until Draco came to have a seat.

“What are your plans this afternoon then?” asked Lucius in a too-casual voice.

Draco shrugged. “Theo, Pansy, and Blaise are coming over after lunch so I imagine the blokes will play billiards while Pansy complains about being pregnant.”

Lucius chuckled indulgently at this. He had always had a soft spot for Pansy in particular.

“And what are your plans for the upcoming week?”

Draco shrugged as he took a bite. “I’m going to make Granger see me tomorrow afternoon. She’s ignored me for too long. Then I’m due for a fitting at my tailor on Wednesday. I’m probably going to visit Granger again on Thursday before heading out for a long weekend at Theo’s hunting lodge in the Highlands.”

Lucius’s eyebrows raised at this. “You’re still determined to win her over are you?”

Draco shrugged. “Not much else I can do, and she does intrigue me. She’s terribly stubborn though.”

Lucius made a slightly impatient noise at this but said nothing more about it, and by the time lunch was concluding Draco felt certain that Lucius was off the scent. Draco began to occlude ever so slightly to keep his nerves at bay, and as his friends began to arrive through the floo he ratcheted it up as much as he could stand while still being mentally present enough to perform. The next step was critical.

“Pansy dear, how are you?” inquired Narcissa as Pansy and Theo stepped into the foyer. Lucius was milling about nearby, speaking to one of the elves.

“Surviving,” she muttered. “Not that I’m getting much help with it,” she added, throwing Theo a dirty look.

Theo rolled his eyes at this.

“Narcissa, could I trouble you for a chat? No offense to Draco, but I’m not in the mood for wizards at the moment,” she sniffed.

“Of course dear,” said Narcissa, hurrying her along and casting a slightly disapproving look at Theo as she and Pansy disappeared into a nearby parlor. Lucius raised a knowing eyebrow as he watched Theo give another eye-roll at Pansy’s dramatics, before grabbing Draco by the arm and heading toward the stairs.

“Come on,” he said loudly enough for Lucius to hear. “I need to sample your best bottle before Blaise gets here for billiards. She’s driving me bloody mad.”

Draco chuckled at this as he dutifully followed Theo up the stairs. Together they made a beeline for Draco’s room, and he locked it and silenced it the moment they entered.

“What did she do this time?” asked Draco, as he headed toward his dresser to retrieve the vials of polyjuice. He pulled out twelve that already had his hair and carried them over to Theo, who was pulling out a chunk of his own hair.

"Oh we're not fighting," said Theo, as he quickly unbuttoned his shirt and stripped it off. "We just thought it would be easier for you to act annoyed with her than in love with her. Besides, it should give you an excuse to leave at a reasonable time tonight. She will make sure you aren't good company, and once you two leave Blaise will be able to make his excuses as well."

"Brilliant," muttered Draco as he also stripped down and threw his clothes toward Theo. He dropped Theo's hair into each of the remaining vials and watched as they bubbled and frothed. They turned pale periwinkle blue.

"Huh," said Theo in mild surprise. "Reminds me of Granger's dress at the Yule Ball."

Theo frowned at the color of his own polyjuice. Draco's hair made it the precise color of firewhiskey. Then he shrugged as he looked at Draco questioningly.

Draco gave a mirthless laugh. "Let's just hope that's a good sign," he said as he tipped a vial back and drank. Immediately he felt his features start to bubble and melt, and he watched as Theo did the same thing. Within a few seconds he was staring back at himself, and Theo began to dress quickly in Draco's clothes, while Draco did the same in Theo's.

"Well at least they should be easy to slip into a drink," said Theo. "I know you favor firewhiskey. I just have to make sure I don't get pissed while I do it. Now then, time check?"

Draco unstrapped his watch and passed it over to Theo, looking at the face as he did so.

"Precisely two o'clock," muttered Draco. "Remember, you need a dose every hour on the hour."

"Got it," said Theo as he shoved the extra vials into Draco's coat pocket. "This will get me past midnight, and at that point the game is up, right?"

"Right," agreed Draco, "but don't remind me, please."

Theo snorted, and Draco thought it was a rather inelegant sound coming from him. "You'll be fine. I assume they'll be seeing you after it's done?"

Draco shrugged. "Possibly. Or possibly not. I have a room at a hotel booked through tonight. I'm going to play it by ear after I see how she is. I suggest slipping out no later than eleven if you can manage it. Earlier would be better though, in case everything runs ahead of schedule."

Theo nodded. "I took a leaf out of your book and brought a fever fudge with me. I'll fall ill soon after you lot leave, and then I'll make my escape once the elves tuck me in bed. It's been years since I've climbed that tree outside your window, but if you don't mind some ripped trousers, I should be able to manage it. Once I'm on the grounds they'll never find me. I've brushed up on my disillusionment charms."

Draco frowned in confusion. "Wouldn't a broom be easier?"

"Much easier, but much less fun," replied Theo. "I'll be fleeing on foot."

Draco chuckled a little and then reached out and clapped Theo on the shoulder.

"Don't fret the trousers, then. And seriously, thank you for this."

Theo brushed him off. "Of course, mate. This is the most exciting thing I've done since impregnating Pans."

"Merlin, spare me," muttered Draco as he straightened up and handed Theo a small measure of firewhiskey while picking up a small gin and tonic for himself. Now that they had successfully transformed, Draco felt sure they could impersonate each other for as long as required. They were practically brothers and knew everything about each other. Draco would choke down some broccoli at dinner tonight since it was Theo's favorite, and Theo would have a second helping of roast chicken because Draco always did. They would play their parts perfectly.

By the time they descended the stairs and made their way to the billiard room, Blaise had already arrived. He took one look at them as they entered and raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Draco could tell he was wondering if they had already made the switch. Draco just gave a slight nod, and Blaise exhaled but seemed to shake himself out of it. He would treat them no differently than he usually would. Even though it was just the three of them, they had already decided to stay in character as much as possible. They could be interrupted at any time.

An hour into it Narcissa and Pansy arrived, and Pansy lowered herself onto a delicate sofa while she glared at Draco.

"Oh excellent shot Draco," she said to Theo.

Draco threw her an irritated look. "You could cheer for your husband you know."

She put her nose in the air. "When my husband decides to be a supportive pregnancy partner instead of a git, then I'll consider it. Until then... *brava* Draco."

Draco huffed in mock irritation as he watched his mother for her reaction out of the corner of his eye. She glared at Draco, clearly taking Pansy's side. She appeared unaware of the switch, and Draco breathed a sigh of relief.

They played until the late afternoon, with Lucius dropping by a couple of times as well. Billiards was an activity they did together often, and it was also something that didn't demand much conversation. That was ideal given their deception. The only thing they hadn't considered was how challenging it would be to play the game in somebody else's body. Theo was several inches shorter than Draco, and it caused both of them to play poorly. Thankfully, Blaise seemed to realize this after winning his second game in a row, and Draco was certain Blaise threw the games immediately after so the others could win instead. Lucius and Narcissa were not paying close attention, but they knew that all three wizards were fairly evenly matched.

During the course of the afternoon Draco and Theo managed to excuse themselves for follow-up doses of polyjuice or else spike their own drinks with it, and Lucius seemed none the wiser about what they were doing. By the time billiards was ending, Draco was feeling more comfortable and was allowing his shields to lower. But then the Greengrasses arrived, and Draco tensed again as he watched Theo's face transform.

Theo in Draco's body looked cold, disinterested, and standoffish as Astoria approached.

Bloody hell is that what I've always looked like?

He glanced at his parents and saw that his father appeared annoyed and his mother a bit strained, but neither of them seemed at all suspicious by Theo's acting. Draco was a bit taken aback by just how angry he felt as he realized that his parents must have always known about his deep dislike for Astoria. And yet, they pushed the match anyway all for the sake of blood purity. Draco vented his feelings by snipping at Pansy who huffed and turned her back on him. Only then did Draco tune in to listen.

"...luck with your next match," said Theo in a detached voice.

"Yes, I have every hope something will materialize soon," said Astoria, as her parents looked on.

"And Daphne? Where is she tonight?" asked Theo in a slightly brighter voice.

Astoria scowled. "She's feeling unwell. She will try to join us later."

"Oh she shouldn't bother," chimed in Pansy. "Merlin knows I won't be staying late. Theo promised me a foot massage earlier, and then he reneged. I fully intend to make him go twice as long tonight to make up for it."

Draco made a show of rolling his eyes as Astoria looked faintly uncomfortable with this personal anecdote. She gave a tight smile and then abruptly shifted the conversation to small talk, as Lucius bid the group farewell.

"I'm afraid I have urgent business tonight," he said blithely. "It's very last minute, and I do apologize. But I hope you all will stay the night, and we can have a proper visit in the morning."

The Greengrasses gave him gracious smiles, and Draco and the others tried to look confused about Lucius's sudden need to leave the Manor. Draco couldn't decide if he was relieved or more nervous by this turn of events. He hadn't been certain if his father would go to the Ministry and be part of tonight's vote, but evidently he felt he was needed. On the one hand, that should make Draco's escape – not to mention Theo's – easier. On the other, he was sure to hear about Draco's deception as soon as possible. There would be no putting it off.

They chatted for another hour or so until something in Draco's pocket burned. He forced himself to wait until the group began to head into the dining room for dinner, and then he slowed to fall back.

“Loo,” he muttered as he waved Pansy on in. She looked at him curiously but said nothing as Draco stepped away and then pulled the galleon out of his pocket.

Amendment is being read. No major surprises. It gives them 24 hours to rematch and marry you, not that they will need it.

Draco breathed a sigh of relief that there were no major complications. He loitered for another five minutes to dose up on his polyjuice. As he approached the dining room, he saw Theo exiting to do the same thing.

“News?” whispered Theo.

“So far so good,” replied Draco, as he headed to the dining room.

He seated himself next to Pansy and assumed an irritated expression, which was not difficult to fake. He was eager to get out of here and back into his own body. Now that Potter had sent him an update, he was sure more would be coming throughout the evening, and it would drive him mad if he couldn’t read them in real time.

Still, he had no choice except to sit through course after tortuous course. Narcissa had pulled out all the stops this evening, and it was approaching nine by the time they all rose for after dinner drinks in one of the parlors.

“Narcissa, I must beg off,” said Pansy promptly. “I’m afraid it’s growing rather late, and Theo does owe me.”

Narcissa gave her a knowing look. “Of course dear, think nothing of it. I’m pleased you were able to join us.”

Draco exchanged a look with Theo who gave him an imperceptible nod, and then to Draco’s great relief he was approaching the floo and... *he was gone.*

He stepped out onto the threshold at Nott Manor and collapsed on the nearest sofa with a groan.

“Merlin that took forever.”

“Any news?” asked Pansy eagerly.

Draco’s galleon had burned several minutes earlier, and he pulled it out of his pocket and read it.

Still in a Q&A, but should wrap up soon. They have the list of recorded marriages and the list of the unconsummated marriages in the chambers. Lists are magical and are being updated in real time.

“Ugh,” said Pansy. “They’ll know as soon as it’s done then.”

Draco swallowed with nerves. That meant his father would learn about it the minute it happened. There wasn’t anything they could do about it, but Draco had been hoping for a

little time to relish the experience of being married before the Ministry was after them to demand explanations.

He sighed.

“We’ll make it work,” said Draco, trying to sound more confident than he was feeling.

Draco felt another burn, and he glanced down.

Anthony just consummated his marriage. Lucky bastard.

Draco chuckled in amusement and read it out loud to Pansy who had an unholy glint in her eye. “Well that should break the ice when he arrives, shouldn’t it?”

A moment later the floo turned green, and Blaise was stepping through.

“Theo was looking peaky when I left,” he said without further preamble.

“Fever fudge,” supplied Draco.

“Ah, that’ll do it,” agreed Blaise.

Just then Draco felt the polyjuice begin to wear off.

“Pans, where –”

“The yellow guest bedroom. Your clothes are on the bed,” she said.

Draco nodded his thanks and hurried off. Theo’s frame was smaller than Draco’s, and he could feel the stitching straining as he grew.

He hastened into the bright bedroom and quickly changed, relieved to be back in his own body and with his wand. It was the one thing he and Theo had not switched, and they had managed to make it through the entire evening without having to reveal that they were each carrying the wrong wand.

By the time he rejoined Pansy and Blaise, Anthony Goldstein was just arriving, and Pansy was closing the floo behind him to cut off any other visitors.

“Goldstein,” said Draco, striding forward to shake his hand. “I can’t thank you enough for this.”

Goldstein just gave him a bemused smile.

“Anything for Harry and Hermione of course. We were in the D.A. together, and they’ve helped me out a time or two professionally. Harry explained everything, and it’s utter bullshit what they’re trying to do to both of you. Then Harry told me you actually proposed, and she accepted. I’ll admit it surprised me at first, but after thinking about it a little I realized it made sense.”

Draco raised his eyebrow in question.

Goldstein shrugged. “Oh just that you tormented her in the same way I tormented Leanne. Teenage wizards never know what the fuck they’re doing with witches do they?”

“I –” said Draco, before he cut himself off, now considering this angle.

Pansy and Blaise both laughed at his expression as Pansy strode forward to shake Goldstein’s hand too. “We never spoke much at Hogwarts of course, but I must say I agree with your point about teenage wizards. Bloody imbeciles, the lot of them.”

“Hey!” said Draco and Blaise in unison. She just smirked at them.

“Also,” she added, “I hear congratulations are in order. Your name was just removed from the list of unconsummated marriages.”

“Merlin,” muttered Goldstein as he turned bright red. “How did you know?”

“According to Potter, they have the list in the chambers. I assume they’re making sure Weasley stays on it.”

Goldstein snorted. “I ran into Ron on Friday. He mentioned he was taking the weekend away. More like hiding somewhere until midnight so his wife doesn’t climb him herself. Then again, Leanne was prepared to pull a Hermione and go to Azkaban instead of shagging me so maybe Ron’s wife is complicit in this mess.”

“What changed her mind?” asked Draco curiously.

Goldstein gave a small smile. “I told her about the amendment and what I was doing to help you tonight. It finally won her over. I was going to say that you owe me for this, but seeing as how you got my wife to proposition me I’m fairly sure I now owe you.”

They all chuckled at this, but then the galleon burned again.

The voting is starting. Every damn member has to cast a vote live. Should be over within the hour. The press has just been admitted and given a copy of the amendment.

Draco read this out loud to the group, feeling a bit more upbeat. They were slightly ahead of schedule.

Pansy made small talk, which Draco mostly tuned out until she asked, “So why did you get registered to perform weddings?”

Goldstein shrugged. “A favor for Michael Corner. He got married the last Saturday before the Matching Ceremony, and there were so many weddings scheduled that day he couldn’t find an officiant he liked. I got certified and served as both best man and officiant. This will be the second wedding I’ve officiated.”

Draco grinned. “It’s going to be a bit unusual.”

“No doubt,” said Goldstein. “And once it’s done we shouldn’t linger.”

Draco nodded in agreement, his stomach starting to churn for the next step. Would it pass? Would they be able to get through the doors at Azkaban? What would Granger look like after more than three weeks apart?

Finally, at long last, the galleon burned.

Amendment passed. The press is questioning Shacklebolt now.

Draco sent his first message back to Potter all night.

On it. We are assembled and ready to leave.

Draco checked his watch. It was nearly ten.

“Let’s do it then,” he said. “The journey isn’t that far, but between the antiapparition wards at Nott Manor and the damn rowboat we have to take to get to the prison it’s going to be at least half an hour before we are there.”

The other three nodded, all looking a little pale. Draco confirmed he had the rings, the galleon, and his wand, and Pansy led them toward the front door.

“Theo tightened the wards a lot in preparation for this,” she said simply. “You’ll all have to touch me when we get to the perimeter to pass through them.”

Draco was relieved to hear it. He was certain his parents would try to check Nott Manor as soon as they discovered Draco’s marriage or Theo’s use of polyjuice. They wouldn’t be able to get in unless Theo or Pansy let them in.

They walked for nearly fifteen minutes through the large house and to the outer boundaries of the property.

“Let’s cross here,” said Pansy simply. “It’s more remote than the front gate.”

She held out both arms and all three wizards gripped her as she led them through. Draco felt the wards shudder a bit as they passed.

“Alright,” said Draco. “It’s probably best for me to side-along you all to Azkaban. There’s a place that’s fairly discrete nearby. We should be able to see if anybody is waiting for us.”

They all nodded and now Draco held out his arms and felt all three of them grab him. He concentrated with all his might and turned into the darkness to arrive a moment later behind a small maintenance hut set apart from the dock where the boats were kept.

He cautiously peered around the edge of the hut and saw nobody on the docks.

“The boats are magical,” he whispered. “They’re captainless. We’ll probably need two.”

The others said nothing, but stuck close to Draco as they approached, the rickety boats illuminated by a single dim lamp on the dock. Blaise and Pansy got into one boat while Goldstein and Draco got into another, and then they were off, heading toward the island that Draco knew was about twenty minutes away.

It was different at night. It was so dark on the water that Draco could see nothing without his wand, which he immediately lit. Behind him Goldstein did the same thing, and he could see two other pinpricks of light from Pansy and Blaise nearby. Even the stars were dull here, shrouded in the persistent fog and gloominess that perpetually surrounded the island.

The twenty minute journey seemed to crawl, and as their boat bumped the dock on the other side Draco felt his galleon burn. He pulled it out and aimed his wandlight at it.

Most of the press has left the building to make the morning paper. Rita Skeeter is hanging back until midnight to see what comes next. Tell Hermione I wish I could be there.

Draco sent a message back.

Will do. We just arrived at Azkaban. Wish us luck with the guards.

Draco shoved the galleon back in his pocket.

“It’s time,” he said. “The press will be printing an article about the amendment tomorrow.”

“Then let’s get you married,” said Pansy with a false cheerfulness. Draco could hear the slight fear in her voice, and he couldn’t blame her. Azkaban at night felt positively dangerous.

“Let’s just hope my friendly guard is here tonight as promised,” muttered Draco as he lifted the old knocker and rapped on the front door three times.

A small window at the top opened a moment later.

“State your name and business,” said the familiar voice of Maywood.

Draco felt nearly faint with relief.

“Draco Malfoy, Pansy Nott, Blaise Zabini, and Anthony Goldstein are here to visit Hermione Granger.”

The window slid closed and then the door opened. All four of them walked inside, shivering a little.

“It’s rather creepy,” muttered Blaise under his breath.

Draco knew it was creepy. But he also remembered it with the dementors in residence, which was infinitely worse than this. He forced his occlumency walls down as much as he dared.

Maywood led them over to the waiting area, which was lit with a couple of torches.

"You don't have a conjugal visit on the books tonight," said Maywood conversationally.

"No, Sir," said Draco. "I am requesting a spontaneous visit. All four of us at the same time."

Maywood eyed them. "The visitor policy..." he started.

"Allows up to five visitors at once," said Draco. "At any time of the day. It was part of the Azkaban Reform Act of 2001."

A ghost of a smile crossed Maywood's face. "Right you are. So silly of me. I'll go see if Miss Granger is willing to see you."

Draco nodded and started to pace as he waited for Maywood to return.

"Merlin, Draco, sit down," said Pansy.

"Can't," he muttered. "What if she says no? What if she declines? What if—"

"She *won't*," insisted Pansy. "Just breathe."

"Unless you need to do another runner?" asked Blaise.

"Don't even suggest that," snapped Draco.

Blaise held up his hands in mock surrender. "Just checking mate."

Draco threw him a glare. He was so worried that she had changed her mind, and his stomach was churning. His head shot up when he heard footsteps and realized Maywood was returning.

"She'll see you all," he said. "She's already in the visitor room. Please leave your wands here."

"Sir," chimed in Goldstein, "I'm officiating their marriage. I will need my wand to perform the binding."

Maywood considered this, and then nodded slowly. "Very well. Please give your wand to me, and I will hand it to you for the binding if this is indeed a wedding."

Goldstein handed Maywood his wand, while the others placed theirs on the counter at the guard's station.

"Mr. Maywood," said Draco as he led them through the corridors to a visitation room Draco had never seen before.

"Yes?"

"When Granger is married, her sentence will be complete."

"That's correct," said Maywood blithely. "We will no longer have any authority to hold her."

"Excellent," said Draco. "I was wondering... her clothes and wand from when she entered...?"

"Ah, I think you'll find that they are behind the desk at the guard's station. As is the paperwork processing her release. They should take only a moment."

"Brilliant," said Draco.

Maywood smiled a little. "We'd best hurry. I'm only on duty until eleven. Lawrence gave himself the shift that starts at that time. There wasn't anything I could do about it."

Draco's stomach plummeted, but he nodded and increased the pace. The moment they were married it wouldn't matter who was on duty.

They said nothing more to each other as Maywood opened the door to the visitation room and led the group inside. Draco's heart was beating out of his chest as he saw Hermione sitting behind a table, still shackled. She was thinner than ever, with dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was unwashed and lank, though Draco noted she was wearing undergarments this time. Pansy actually gasped when she saw her.

"Merlin Granger, what happened to you?"

Granger arched one eyebrow. "Azkaban," she said as Maywood stepped forward to release her bindings. She was rubbing her wrists again, which looked raw. Draco's winced a little.

"Erm, right," muttered Pansy. She looked uncharacteristically ashamed of herself.

"Granger," said Draco. "Will you still marry me tonight? The amendment we discussed has passed, and most of the press has left the premises to make the morning paper. I have to warn you that once it's done we shouldn't linger. The magical record of marriages is in the chambers with the Wizengamot, so they will know the moment it happens."

A broad smile lit her face, and it transformed her.

"In that case, perhaps our unbreakable vow first?"

Draco faltered for a moment. In light of all the preparations he made he had completely forgotten about the vow. But then he shook himself out of it and looked at the guard.

"Sir, I did promise her an unbreakable vow as part of this. Could either you or Goldstein serve as our binder?"

Maywood looked surprised by this, but he nodded slowly. "Mr. Goldstein may do it. I will need to keep my wand on you all while magic is being performed."

"Of course," said Goldstein cordially as he took his wand from Maywood. In return, Maywood trained his wand on Goldstein as Draco reached out to clasp Granger's thin hand in his.

What am I about to promise?

"Ready?" asked Goldstein.

"Ready," said Granger. "Do you, Draco Malfoy, promise to remain faithful to me for the duration of our marriage?"

"I do," said Draco firmly. That was an easy promise to make. He would always be faithful to his wife. A small band of gold wrapped their hands.

"Good. Then I, Hermione Granger, do promise to remain faithful to you for the duration of our marriage as well." A second gold thread emerged.

Draco blinked in surprise. What was this? He wasn't expecting her to promise anything in exchange. He knew the Malfoy magic would keep her faithful until they had a child together, but she was promising to extend it until their marriage dissolved.

Then she continued to speak.

"And I, Hermione Granger, do promise to meet the minimum consummation and coupling requirements that have been set by the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan, until such time as the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan has been repealed in full."

Draco could feel himself gaping as yet another gold thread wrapped their hands.

"So may it be," she finished, and the threads seemed to dissolve into their skin.

"Now then, shall we get married?" she asked brightly.

Draco was struggling to find words.

"Why?" he finally asked.

"Why what?" she responded.

"Why make a vow about... that?"

She rolled her eyes. "Because the Malfoy magic is sexist. I have to be faithful for some period of time to ensure the paternity of the heir, but it's not permanent. And *you* don't have to be faithful at all. I'm just evening the score."

Draco felt his mouth twitch, and he looked around to find his two friends staring at Granger as though they had never seen her properly before.

"Well then," interjected Goldstein, "are you ready to be wed?"

Granger turned a little pink, but nodded, and Draco reached up to grasp her other hand in his.

"We're doing a very short version in the interest of time," said Goldstein.

They both nodded.

“Draco Malfoy,” continued Goldstein, as he looked at Draco. “Do you consent to this marriage?”

“I do,” said Draco firmly.

“And Hermione Granger, do you consent to this marriage?” asked Goldstein.

Involuntarily Draco’s stomach clenched. This was where it had all gone wrong three months ago.

“I do,” she said, with a small smile on her face.

Draco couldn’t help but smile broadly at that. Goldstein placed his wand on their joined hands.

“Let it be known that this marriage is witnessed by Mr. Blaise Zabini and Mrs. Pansy Nott. The bride and groom have consented. Therefore, I hereby bind you, in matrimony and magic, on this, the thirtieth day of November, 2003. Take each other in honesty and integrity to grow your lives together from this day forward.”

They were nearly the same words spoken at the Matching Ceremony, and Draco knew in an instant it had worked. There was a small flash of light, and he was immediately flooded by warmth and...

Fuck.

If Draco hadn’t already had his eyes on Granger, the Malfoy magic would have ensured it. As it was, it gave him a nudge to slowly look her up and down. Objectively, he knew she looked terrible like this. But something about her was still the most compelling thing Draco had ever seen.

Draco shuddered and forced the feeling aside. There was no time for it.

Instead, he slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out the rings. She gasped in surprise as he slid hers onto her finger, and then he allowed her to slide his on as well.

“My wife,” he said, tugging her to her feet. His magic gloried in that word. “Shall we?”

He crooked an elbow toward her, and she let out a light laugh as she took his arm, and he escorted her out of the waiting room, led by Maywood, with his friends and Goldstein following behind.

Just then Draco’s galleon burned, and he pulled it out to read.

Congratulations. The marriage records were just updated. They’re all shitting themselves.

Draco laughed as he handed the galleon to Granger to read. She looked positively gleeful as she winked and clutched it in her hand. Draco didn’t ask for it back. It had served its purpose.

It took no time at all to make their way back to the security desk, where Maywood started handing back wands before pulling out a large bag.

"As you know, I took the liberty of cleaning out your cell when my shift started," he said to Granger. "Everything is shrunk down and in the bag already. You can take the time to change into your old clothes, or you can wear your prison-issued clothing home, and we will bill you."

"Bill me," said Draco quickly. "We shouldn't linger."

"Very well," said Maywood. "Then here you go. Congratulations on your marriage."

Granger smiled gratefully as she took her bag, and Draco made a mental note to send Maywood a bonus. He had truly made this as seamless as possible. Finally, Maywood handed her discharge papers that were marked 'complete,' magically time-stamped for what must have been the moment they were bound together.

10:52 PM. A perfect time if I do say so myself.

And then she was free, walking out of Azkaban. The door was closing behind them just as Draco heard a voice that sounded much like Lawrence Boles say, "Maywood? What's going on?"

Draco gripped Granger's arm and led her deeper into the dreary night that now felt much brighter because she was in it. Their two boats were still moored at the small dock.

"Goldstein and I took one together," he said in her ear. "You're tiny. Come squeeze in with me."

She dipped her head so Draco couldn't gauge her expression, but she didn't object. She handed her bag of personal items to Pansy and Blaise to take, but kept her wand with her as she gingerly stepped into the boat. Draco could see she was shivering in the thin cotton prisoner garb, and he tucked her into his chest both to keep her warm and to make room for Goldstein behind them. He wrapped his cloak around them both as they sat down. She shuddered a little, but she sank into his chest and warmth, and Draco's magic hummed to have her there.

"You'll want to light your wand for the boat ride," he whispered in her ear.

The tip of her wand emerged from Draco's cloak. "*Lumos!*" she said quietly before gasping.

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

"Magic," she said simply. "I haven't done any since I arrived."

Draco gave her a little squeeze before lighting his own wand. He remembered that sensation all too well when he had emerged from Azkaban after the war.

The moment Goldstein was settled in behind them, the boat was off, and Granger's hair was whipping him in the face as the salty water misted them and the boat bounced across the waves. Granger seemed to shrink away from it, and Draco instinctively held her tighter than

ever as the small point of light that was the dock on the other side started to grow larger and larger.

When the boat finally bumped against the dock, Draco reluctantly released Granger to help her out, before gathering her bag from Pansy and Blaise who had just arrived as well.

“Thank you all,” he said to his friends and Goldstein.

“Yes, thank you,” agreed Granger.

“Of course,” said Pansy.

“Always,” said Blaise.

“That was the most interesting wedding I’ll ever officiate,” said Goldstein.

They were all chuckling at this and just turning to apparate, when a series of *CRACKS!* broke through the night air.

Draco’s heart sank a little as he stared at the wizards in front of him.

The Ministry of Magic had arrived.

Chapter 10: Beauty and the Beast

Chapter Notes

This is probably the point at which I should formally apologize to my boy Draco for putting him through his paces... but he is a Malfoy, and he will persevere!

One second later

FLASH!

It was pure instinct as Draco raised his wand and tried to shove Granger behind him. He was foiled, of course, by her attempt to do the same thing to him.

One breathless second later another *FLASH!* clued Draco into what was going on.

The press was here. And Rita fucking Skeeter was having her photographer take pictures of his wife while she was still in her prison clothes.

Draco grabbed Granger and *made* her move behind him the moment he realized it.

Protect her from this.

His magic thrummed happily at the brief moment of contact as he hauled her behind him.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded in his best Malfoyesque voice.

“Hermione!” came a shout from the back, and a tall wizard emerged from the small crowd.

Fucking Weasley.

Draco’s face split into a snarl. “Stay the fuck *back* Weasley.”

“Mr. Malfoy,” came Shacklebolt’s voice now, as he moved forward. He, at least, appeared to be wary of Draco and his temper. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Pansy and Blaise slowly drawing their wands. He shook his head ever so slightly to tell them to stand down, but he wasn’t sure if they got the message. His focus was on Shacklebolt and Weasley before him.

FLASH!

“Rita, would you *mind?*” asked Shacklebolt. “I told you the press is not invited for –”

“But this is *news* Minister!” came her sickly sweet voice. “The Golden Girl and the Death Eater? My my, what will the public think about that?”

“She didn’t marry him, it’s just some mistake,” said Weasley in an irritated voice.

Draco felt a form dart around him, and he internally groaned. Great. Just great. He was certain Weasley had just triggered Granger’s compulsive need for Grangering in situations like this.

“It’s no mistake, Ronald Weasley!” she said shrilly. “The Ministry of Magic passed a last-minute amendment to force me to marry *you!* I know you’ve been working with them on it, don’t deny it! You were going to be the last unconsummated marriage of the lot weren’t you? It was all designed to manipulate me! You absolute *git!*”

She pointed her wand directly at him, and he gulped and backed away. Draco snorted. He glanced at Skeeter, who was watching the fight with wide eyes, and even in the darkness Draco could see her quill writing on some parchment in the air at warp speed.

“Hermione,” said Kingsley, as though talking to a cornered animal. “We were just –”

“Manipulating me!” she seethed. “This was all some elaborate ploy to make me and Malfoy fall in line and improve the public’s perception of the MLPP! You never wanted me to find out about it until the deadline had already expired, and that’s why you passed that amendment in a closed session! But I did find out, and that left me with two options: choose to marry an ex-Death Eater or my ex-Best Friend who worked with you behind my back! Well congratulations Kingsley, I’ve made my choice. Death Eater it is!”

Draco’s jaw clenched at the reminder of his past transgressions, but he didn’t stop her ranting. Kingsley’s reputation would surely be in shreds by the next day, as the photographer turned to him.

FLASH!

“Hermione we can fix this,” he said a bit desperately. “I’m sure we can –”

“It’s done,” she snarled. “It’s all fucking done because of *you*. If you want to fix it, then you know what you need to do: repeal this *ridiculous law* and let people choose when they want to marry and reproduce!”

“We can do that Hermione,” said Weasley quickly. “We can get you away from –”

“Do not *dare* speak to me!” she cried. “I’ll admit I was holding on to some hope that Draco was lying when he told me you were working with them. But he was right. Here you are, betraying over a decade of friendship with me for what? A guaranteed shag? I’ve never slept with you Ronald, and after years of turning you down whenever you tried I thought you would take a bloody hint!”

FLASH!

This time the cameraman was aiming at Weasley’s face. He was gaping at Granger.

“Ms. Skeeter!” cried Shacklebolt.

“Ah ah ah Minister,” she tutted. “No closed sessions here. This is public property and *very* newsworthy.”

Shacklebolt looked around a bit desperately. There were a couple of aurors behind him, along with the small wizard Draco recognized from the Matching Ceremony. The aurors were watching warily, and for a moment Draco thought they might converge on Granger. But they didn’t: they appeared to be stunned by the exchange taking place on the small dock like everyone else.

“Hermione,” he said urgently. “Surely this can be undone. You don’t have to be bound to Draco Malfoy. You can just –”

“At least he was honest!” she screeched, and Draco winced a bit at the pitch of her voice. “An honest Death Eater! How fucking rich is that? And do you know what? He was the *only* one who told me the truth about what was going on out there! He was the *only* one who visited me without any false pretenses! He told me on his very first visit that he wanted to marry me, and he’s been coming back for months to persuade me! I’m not saying this is ideal, and I would *never* be in this position if it weren’t for *you*, but at least I’m married to somebody who isn’t going to stab me in the back! At least *he* would have the balls to look me in the eye while sliding the knife between my ribs, unlike *you*,” she spat. “I can’t say much else about him, but I can say *that*.”

She finally lowered her wand and then turned her nose up at them both.

“Hermione, I have to see your discharge paperwork,” said Kingsley, now grasping at straws. “You can’t leave here until we confirm that –”

“Oh for *heaven’s* sake!” she snarled as she pulled the paper out and shoved it under Shacklebolt’s nose. “There! Proof that we’re married! Not that you need it, because you had the Ministry’s official marriage record in the closed session with you, and that’s why you’re all here! It’s valid, and I’m released.”

Shacklebolt stared down at it, and swallowed hard, before nodding once.

“Very well, but we can still –”

“Save it,” she snarled. “Unless you’re planning a complete repeal of the MLPP, I don’t want to hear it. What you’ve done tonight is corrupt Minister. You and I both know it. The public will know it too. I have chosen to marry Malfoy for the simple reason that he didn’t lie to me like you and Ronald both did. If you had gotten your way, I would have been forced into a marriage with a man who has been lying to me for months at the stroke of midnight!”

Shacklebolt’s face fell, and then he turned to Draco. “Mr. Malfoy, you should know –”

But Draco interrupted him.

"The next time you plot with my father, you should do it someplace the Dark Lord did not use as his headquarters. Weasley would do well to remember that too. There are eyes and ears all over Malfoy Manor. Not all of them are loyal to Lucius."

Even in the torchlight Draco could see Shacklebolt turn pale, and Skeeter's eyes bugged.

FLASH!

Draco smirked as he felt Granger's hand slip into his. His magic hummed happily at the touch.

"Malfoy, I'm sure we have other places to be," she said imperiously.

Draco raised an eyebrow at this, but nodded as he squeezed her hand. Her ring glittered in the torchlight.

"Lady Malfoy, may I ask about your ring before you go?" called Skeeter.

"I am Lady Malfoy now it is true, but my surname name will remain Granger," she said curtly. "And the ring is muggle. It's a rather famous design from a prominent muggle jeweler called Cartier."

Draco's eyebrows flew up at this, but he supposed he shouldn't be surprised she recognized it. He looked around to find his friends and even Weasley gaping at him.

"Come along my darling," he said. "We do have places to be."

"Hermione, no!" cried Weasley as he rushed forward and tried to grab her arm. The moment he made contact, there was a *CRACK* and Weasley was thrown back several feet. He groaned as he tried to sit up, and Draco's magic trilled.

Protect her. Make sure her children are yours. Claim her.

The aurors drew their wands as one, but Draco held up a hand to stop them.

"It's just the Malfoy magic," he said calmly. "She is my wife, and she can't be touched."

Then he looked down at Weasley. "The next time you lay a hand on another wizard's wife, you'd do well to remember that not all family magic functions like yours. She has made it *very* clear that she doesn't want you touching her, and thanks to you I'm now the only man who gets that exquisite privilege. Stay the fuck away from her if you know what's good for you."

He turned to look at Granger, and she had an odd expression on her face. But then she looked down at Weasley and turned her nose up once again.

"Shall we?" she asked.

Draco turned to look at Pansy, Blaise, and Goldstein, all of whom had been silent through this entire exchange. He nodded to them slightly, and they all turned and apparated on the spot.

Then he squeezed Granger's hand again.

"Allow me," he said, as he turned and apparated them directly into the hotel room Draco had reserved for them.

"Here?" she asked, looking around. He saw her eyes sweeping over the small bag Potter had put together for her and the camp bed on one side of the room, as far away from the real bed as Draco could position it.

Draco shrugged. "I reserved it. Not for... you know. We still have three months to consummate. It's just to rest. I figure after all that we deserve a short break before facing anybody else."

"You mean your parents," she said, nodding knowingly as Draco released her hand. His magic protested the loss of contact.

"Sure," he said, in a casual voice.

She bit her lip, and Draco nearly groaned.

"Well I'll admit a night here would be welcome. I know it's late, but can we order something to eat while I get cleaned up? I would happily commit murder in the first degree for a steak."

Draco felt himself relax into a grin at this. "Absolutely," he said as he moved to the bed and picked up her bag and handed it to her. "Potter's elf gave this to me. He said it had everything you needed. Take your time getting cleaned up, and I'll call in an order right now."

She smiled gratefully and moved to the large loo. The door behind her clicked shut, and a moment later Draco heard the water start.

Go to her. Take her.

Draco's family magic was taunting him, drawing his attention to the fact that his wife was naked just on the other side of that door.

Fuck off, he told himself. *She's just been released from months in prison you horny bastard.*

It was odd, this family magic of his. He discovered with some relief that he could distinguish it from his real feelings about her. He wasn't being compelled to be in love with her or even infatuated with her. But it seemed to reward him whenever he touched her – it made him feel effervescent like crisp bubbles from the finest champagne. And when he *wasn't* touching her, it seemed to take note of it and point out that she was *just right there*.

He could control it though. He could clearly delineate his own thoughts and feelings from the magic that kept dangling her in front of him like a ripe piece of fruit waiting to be plucked. He wondered how this would have manifested itself if it had been Astoria who was the object of his magic's attraction. He supposed he would have leaned on the urges to get through their consummation, but it would not have built a true fondness for her because he

still knew his own mind. That was consistent with what the journals had written about it, of course: it simply eased the duty.

His father had been lying or simply incorrect when he implied that the family magic could build feelings for Astoria. It would take a love potion for something like *that*, and even then the feelings wouldn't be real.

Draco sighed and put it aside as he called room service for some dinner. He had eaten hours ago but had been so nervous that he barely choked his food down, and now he was famished too. He ordered two of everything, along with some wine, tea, fruit, and soup. Despite Granger's insistence upon steak Draco was concerned it would be too rich for her after months of practically starving herself.

As he waited he settled a bit awkwardly on the camp bed and tried not to listen to the splashes from the other side of the door.

She's in there naked. She's ready for you. Take her.

Draco groaned and in a fit of desperation grabbed the black stick and pointed it to the TV, pushing the same buttons Granger had taught him. He flipped through various channels, until he landed on something he couldn't help but watch.

Beauty and the Beast.

He selected it and watched in slight disbelief as a French brunette named Belle began to sing a song about wanting to escape her boring life. Evidently the villagers considered her odd because she liked to read. And before long, a tall, dark and strapping man was trying to garner her attention.

He's supposed to represent Weasley? Ha!

Not only was the hair color entirely wrong, but this Gaston fellow seemed far more confident than Weasley had ever been. Draco scowled as he tried to woo Belle, who – much to Draco's chagrin – was rather like Granger, except less angry and with fewer curls.

He was utterly captivated and barely even noticed as the door to the adjoining loo opened and Granger herself stepped out. It was only when she said, "Really?" in an amused voice that Draco looked up.

He immediately wished he hadn't.

Her hair was washed and damp, her cheeks pink from the heat, and though she was far too thin she was wearing a loose shirt and muggle athletic shorts as she made her way toward him. His eyes roved over her on their own accord.

"*Beauty and the Beast?*" she prompted.

Draco shrugged uncomfortably. "Potter might have mentioned it. I don't see the parallels to Weasley though, and surely I'm not *that* bad," he said as he pointed to the Beast on the screen who was having an absolute tantrum.

Granger laughed lightly. “See where it goes and then tell me what you think.”

Just then there was a knock on the door, and Granger moved toward it and opened it to find an entire cart of food. Her eyes widened as a staff member rolled it in, arranged a couple of things, and then gave a small bow before backing out and shutting the door.

“Merlin,” she breathed as she stared at it.

“Help yourself,” said Draco in amusement.

Granger pulled out her wand and conjured a couple of chairs for them, and she and Draco settled around the cart to eat, while continuing to watch the movie. A magical candlestick and clock were just beginning to sing a truly baffling song about French food as Granger took her first bite.

The sound she made as the food hit her lips drew every ounce of Draco’s attention to her.

“What?” she asked when she realized he was staring.

He cast around desperately for something to say, so he just gestured at the TV.

“Muggles are mad. Dancing forks?”

“Did we or did we not make egg cups do cartwheels for our Charms O.W.L.?” she countered.

“True,” said Draco. “But they didn’t *sing*.”

She rolled her eyes, but said nothing more to that as she ate another bite. Draco watched out of the corner of his eye.

“You’ll want to slow down,” he cautioned her.

“Can’t,” she said. “I’m so hungry. I’m...”

But then she trailed off as the food seemed to hit her all at once.

“Oh God,” she muttered, and then she was up and sprinting to the toilet. A moment later Draco heard sounds of retching.

He sighed as the toilet flushed, some water ran, and then she emerged again, shaking just a little.

“It was delicious but –”

“Too rich,” he finished for her. “I thought it might be. Try the soup and bread instead. And for Merlin’s sake, take smaller bites, Granger. You need to work back up to heavy things.”

She gave him a disappointed look, but then sighed and sank back down. “Fine,” she grumbled. “I suppose that’s another thing you learned from experience?”

He inclined his head. “It took me a couple weeks to eat red meat again. Yours might take longer. You’re a lot thinner than I was.”

She wrinkled her nose at this, but finally slowed down as she sipped on the soup and nibbled on the bread. She slowly made her way to the bottom of the bowl without further incident.

“Can you take more?” asked Draco.

She sighed and shook her head. “No. Shame about the steak though. I hate that it’s gone to waste.”

“Who said it’s gone to waste?” he asked as he speared it with his fork and put it on his own plate.

“Excuse me!” she demanded.

He just grinned and sliced off a piece before popping it in his mouth. “I’m merely asserting my husbandly privileges, Granger,” he said.

She scowled at him, and he couldn’t help but chuckle at how irritated she looked. She was lovely like this with her cheeks flushed.

Imagine her pink cheeks if you can make her come.

Draco roughly shoved the errant thought aside, as he turned back to the movie. The Beast was just showing Belle his library. Belle exclaimed in happiness. Granger sighed wistfully. Draco scoffed.

“What’s your problem?” she asked.

He gestured toward the library on the screen.

“That. The Beast’s library isn’t that bad, I’ll grant you, but it’s not *that* amazing. She’s falling all over herself.”

Granger’s jaw dropped. “Are you saying that she shouldn’t be awed by it?”

He arched an eyebrow. “I’m *saying* that some libraries in real life are better than that one. And since this is all made up you would *think* the creators could have come up with something more impressive.”

“More impress... Malfoy. Are you telling me your library is better than the Beast’s?”

“Obviously,” he said, as he rolled his eyes.

It might have been the first time Draco had ever rendered Granger speechless.

Take her to your library. Push her against a bookshelf. Suck her neck, then her tits, then her...

FUCK. OFF.

Draco really needed to get this family magic under control. The suggestions and stray thoughts were not helping matters.

They continued to watch for a few more minutes, and soon the Beast and Belle were dancing together in the ballroom.

“His ballroom is adequate,” commented Draco. “Better than the library at any rate.”

Granger snorted next to him. “Don’t tell me you took dance lessons as a child.”

“Of course I did.”

“Ponce.”

“Swot.”

They fell silent again, until the Beast released Belle because he loved her.

“He’s a fucking idiot,” declared Draco.

“What? Why?” said Granger with consternation.

“Because he didn’t fight for her! Why did he just let her go? He’s a *beast* isn’t he? He should have kept her in the damn castle where she was safe and then gone to free her father *himself*. ”

“You don’t like this movie either then,” she pointed out.

“I don’t appreciate the suggestion that my library is substandard or that I would ever be stupid enough to let the woman I love go like that. It’s asinine.”

There was a slightly awkward silence as Draco realized what he just said.

“Maybe she wants to be free,” whispered Granger.

“No she doesn’t,” insisted Draco. “Look at her. She’s obviously miserable without him.”

And sure enough, Draco’s theories were proven true when Gaston led the villagers to take over the castle, and Belle came from behind to save the day. Draco frowned as he watched Belle try to get to the Beast before Gaston did.

“You see?” he said. “They need each other. He was an idiot to let her go, especially with the wolves in the forest and that Gaston fellow lying in wait for her.”

“He didn’t know about Gaston,” pointed out Granger.

Draco rolled his eyes. “She’s pretty isn’t she? Of course there’s some imbecile who’s fantasizing about getting into her knickers.”

They both fell silent as Draco watched the end: with true love's kiss, the spell was broken and the Beast transformed into a handsome prince.

"Hmmm," he said. "At least his hair isn't too bad."

"It looks like Lucius's," she pointed out.

"Circe, you're right. I take it back."

She laughed, and Draco found himself grinning too as a couple of owls pecked on the glass. Draco sighed and rose as he let them in. He saw one letter from his father, which he ripped up without reading. Granger raised her eyebrow curiously at this. Then he saw a short missive from Theo, which he opened to read.

"Excellent. Theo managed to escape without putting my trousers beyond magical repair. He's at Nott Manor, currently declining to see my father. It sounds like my mother and Astoria went to bed just as Theo fell mysteriously ill, though I suppose they're aware of everything by now."

"Theo?" she asked.

Draco nodded. "We had a big family dinner tonight with the Greengrasses. Theo and I polyjuiced into each other so I could escape, and he could stay behind. After Pansy and I left, he took a fever fudge and then climbed the tree outside my bedroom window to make his escape. It sounds like he got out before we got married."

Granger's eyes widened. "And you don't want to hear what your father has to say?"

"I know what he has to say. 'Dereliction of duty, a stain upon the Malfoy name, perhaps we can find a way to fix it, blah, blah, blah.' I'm not interested."

She studied him for a moment before pushing the cart of food back into the hallway. When he returned she looked at him squarely.

"You really don't mind being married to me?"

"I wouldn't have asked you if I did," he said.

She turned a light pink, but said nothing more as she made her way back to the loo to finish her nighttime routine.

"It's late," she said after she emerged.

"Let's sleep," said Draco as he started to walk toward the cot.

"What are you doing?" she inquired.

He gestured toward the cot. "Sleeping. You can have the bed."

She bit her lip and seemed to debate something before she huffed out a breath. “Oh bloody hell, just share it with me. We don’t have to touch.”

Draco’s heart skipped.

Take her to bed. Strip her naked. Make her yours.

“Why would you want to do that?”

“I assume we’ll be doing it soon anyway, won’t we? Like... tomorrow? When I move to the Manor?”

“You’re moving to the Manor?”

Draco was nonplussed. He certainly didn’t mind it. No, he didn’t mind it at all. But it had never occurred to him that she would.

She looked at him like he was dense. “We’re married aren’t we? And besides, the Manor is the safest place for me.”

“What makes you say that?”

“No Malfoy can seriously harm me directly, right? And none of the elves can either because it would be against their bond. I’m sure Lucius never freed them. I still think it’s best if we share a room until your father gets used to it just to have an extra layer of security at night, but if I’m alone at my flat he could send somebody to break my wards and dispose of me while I’m sleeping. My flat’s muggle, and I can’t ward it like the Manor.”

Draco stared at her.

“You want to... share a room?”

Share your bed with her. Share your body with her. Share your seed with her.

She looked a little uncomfortable. “I mean, I suppose we can sleep apart, but I thought –”

“No,” said Draco quickly. “No, of course not. You’re absolutely right. You’re safest at the Manor, and it’s best to be in my room at night. Nobody could get in without waking me too.”

“Then maybe we should just accept the inevitable and...” she trailed off as she gestured toward the bed.

“Alright,” said Draco carefully as he moved toward the bed, scarcely believing that his wife was Hermione Granger, and she was inviting him to sleep with her.

Sleep. Not fuck, but sleep. Bloody hell.

He slipped under the covers on one side of the bed and watched carefully as his wife did the same thing on the other side. She started to raise her hand to turn off the light on her side of

bed, when she stopped. She was staring at the ring that she was still wearing on her left hand. It glittered in the lamplight.

“How did you know?” she whispered.

“Know what?”

“About these rings.”

“I didn’t,” he said. “I spent a couple hours shopping in London and stumbled across them.”

She was silent for a long moment. “Do you happen to know what they represent?”

Draco’s stomach twisted a bit uncomfortably. “They represent the freedom to love whomever you wish.”

She nodded a little and put her hand down.

“How did *you* know about them?” he asked. “I wasn’t aware they were that popular.”

“Oh they aren’t, I suppose. But the design has been around for a long time.”

“You must have seen it before then.”

“Mmmm,” she said in agreement. But she didn’t elaborate, so Draco didn’t ask.

She shut off the light and settled into her side of the bed. Draco had a brief moment of panic when he realized there *was* a ‘her side of the bed,’ but it quickly subsided as his magic flared at the thought.

Her side of the bed. Roll over and pin her to it. Kiss her lips, her neck, her tits, her stomach, her cunt. She’s your wife, and you should worship her body. She will accept your seed and grow your heirs. Take her. Claim her. Make her yours. Keep her body for yourself. Let no other man touch her.

Draco allowed the thoughts from the marital magic to linger in his mind, as he heard her breathing slow and the scent from her shampoo drift over to his side.

He was jolted out of it by a whisper. “Malfoy.”

“What is it Granger?”

“Thanks for getting me out of that place.”

Protect her. Claim her.

“I’ll never let you go back there,” he said.

They were silent again.

Give her pleasure. Make her scream. Cherish her womb. Spill your seed inside of her. Complete your marriage bond with her.

“Granger,” he whispered.

“Hmmm?”

“Do you think Belle knew that the Beast was nothing more than a flawed man before she kissed him? Did she realize he was trapped in a nightmare of his own making?”

There was a long silence.

Kiss her; hold her; adore her; devote yourself to her.

“I’m pretty sure she figured it out, yes.”

“When did she figure it out?”

“Isn’t it obvious? It was the moment he decided to save her from the wolves.”

Chapter 11: Inlaws and Not in Love (Yet)

1 December 2003

Draco woke up slowly. Something was different this morning, but he was in that hazy place between wake and sleep and couldn't quite put his finger on it. He allowed his mind to drift a little as he confronted the sensations one by one.

There was softness under his hand.

There was also something a bit hard and pointed.

He smelled a pleasant floral scent in his nose.

Something on his finger was hard and cold.

His magic felt like it was *purring*.

Touch her, wake her, fuck her.

Draco's eyes flew open as the events from the previous night slammed into his memory. He had done it. He was married to Hermione Granger. Now he was in bed with her — at her suggestion no less — and evidently she planned to do this at night going forward.

He stayed completely still as he took stock. She was asleep with her back toward him. Somehow they had both migrated to the middle of the bed. Draco supposed that wasn't terribly surprising, at least on his part. He had never once slept in the same bed as another person, and he was accustomed to sleeping in the middle. With Granger though, this had somehow translated to Draco's arm draped across her, and his hand under the hem of her top. That softness he was feeling was her skin, and the hard thing her ribs.

He inhaled and cataloged the scent of her shampoo with that familiar scent that was all hers before turning to himself. He was a little sore, having been in the same position for too long, but his magic was so *happy* that he was touching her. His hand was splayed across her stomach and itched to move higher to explore his wife more thoroughly.

And he was hard. Merlin, but he was hard. When was the last time he had woken up like this? He could scarcely remember.

He was debating about what to do next. He wanted to touch her, kiss her, try... *things* with her. But he also didn't want to scare her off. He wanted to get into bed with her again tonight, this time his *actual* bed at the Manor. If he moved then she might wake up and have second thoughts.

But fuck he was hard. And he wanted to see her.

Never in his life had he considered the intricacies of being the first person to wake up with a complicated bedmate. The fact that it was his wife and she had just left prison and they had shared nothing more than a chaste kiss made the issue infinitely more puzzling.

He felt her move, and he squeezed his eyes close.

Pretend to be asleep.

He forced his breathing to slow and prayed that she couldn't feel his pulse thudding through his hand. He knew the moment she realized what was going on because she stiffened and then relaxed again.

She's about to pull away.

He waited for it, disappointment already filling him at the anticipated loss, but then she... didn't.

Instead, he felt the lightest, barest whisper of one finger reach up to touch his hand that was covering her abdomen. It was as though she was tracing something, and it took him several harrowing seconds to realize what it was: his wedding ring. She was touching his ring curiously, innocently, and then he felt a small clank of metal as her ring brushed his.

Another moment, and then she stretched a little, and Draco's eyes flew open as he felt her bum brush his erection before pulling away quickly. His heart was racing, but he didn't move. He couldn't move, not if there was even the slightest chance she might do it again. He waited, the seconds ticking by, and then...

Another prod, softer this time, almost experimental. Draco had to bite back a groan. No witch had ever... and now he was thinking.... and his magic was....

"Fuck," he said in the faintest whisper.

She froze, and he almost swore again, but if he stayed very still then maybe she would think she had been imagining it.

But it was too late. He felt her slip away, and he was mourning the loss of her body heat and soft skin. He made a show of 'waking up,' stretching himself as he rolled onto his back and finally allowed himself to look at her.

"Morning," he said roughly.

Her cheeks were a little pink, and her curls were tousled. She looked freshly fucked like this, and Draco's cock twitched so hard he was certain she would see it under the covers. It was as different from the perfectly coiffed Astoria as he could possibly imagine. Every time he had pictured Astoria emerging from his bed, she never had a single hair out of place. But Granger... she was all wild curls and wrinkled clothes and smooth legs.

Smooth legs.

Draco realized he was looking her up and down, and yes her legs were smooth. They were magically smooth, in fact. He gulped as he realized she must have done this last night. Surely she hadn't been allowed hair removal charms in Azkaban or even a muggle razor. That meant she had come to this hotel and the first thing she had done was showered and... prepared? Perhaps for him?

The thought made his magic spark.

He snapped out of his reverie as she raised an eyebrow.

"Good morning to you too. What's the agenda for today?"

"Agenda?" asked Draco in confusion.

She nodded. "Yes. Now that we are here and rested... do you have a plan for what comes next?"

Draco opened his mouth to respond and immediately shut it. He just shook his head.

To his relief she seemed more amused by this than annoyed. "Let me guess: your entire focus was getting me out of Azkaban, and you didn't think of anything past that."

Not true. I did think about the consummation part quite a bit.

"Erm, right," he said instead.

"In that case, I propose breakfast here and then we face the music with your parents. Part of me is dreading it but another part can't wait to see Lucius's expression."

Draco cracked a grin at this. "Fair enough. Whatever it is, we'll face it together. He's going to be far angrier with me than you. Why don't you get dressed, and I'll order some breakfast."

She nodded agreeably to this, and he called up room service again for a little of everything: he ordered a full English along with porridge, several pastries, and even a bagel with cream cheese and smoked salmon. It arrived surprisingly fast, and Granger just stared at it in slight disbelief.

"Hungry are you?"

Draco shrugged. "You should eat whatever you can eat. I'll eat the rest."

She eyed it, and then she surprised him by saying, "What do you think I should eat then?"

"The porridge should be fine. If you can stand the bagel with salmon that would be very good too. You need some fats, and it won't be as hard on your stomach as the filet from last night. Maybe nibble on a sausage too and see what it does for you, but *small* bites please."

She hesitated, but nodded, and Draco watched as she tucked in to the suggested items. She ate half of the porridge, the entire bagel, and then choked down a couple bites of sausage

before shaking her head.

“Good, you did really well,” he said encouragingly.

“I like smoked salmon,” she admitted.

“I’ll make sure the elves know. We need to get some weight on you.”

She cast a slightly annoyed look at him.

“It’s not that bad being thin.”

“Granger, there’s thin and then there’s skeletal. You’re currently the latter.”

She turned pink. “Usually I’m ‘curvy.’”

She said this a bit bitterly, and Draco stared at her in bewilderment.

“Why is that a problem?” he finally asked.

“It’s not,” she said quickly. Too quickly.

“Granger,” he insisted. “Tell me.”

She pursed her lips and then sighed. “It shouldn’t be a problem. I know that. But... there have been comments over the years. That’s all.”

“Your wedding diet,” Draco suddenly remembered.

She said nothing to this and just looked away.

“Granger,” said Draco, and he reached for her wrist. His magic hummed as he touched her. She turned to look at him in confusion.

“What?”

“Fuck them.”

“*Pardon?*”

“I said, fuck them. Fuck the people who put you on that wedding diet. Why should they care what you look like?”

She was silent for a long while.

“Ron prefers thin,” she finally said. “Obviously not as thin as I am now, but thinner than I was. We got together briefly after the war, when I had lost a lot of weight while on the run. He made it clear he liked me on the smaller side. I didn’t really keep up with it once the war was over because I could actually *eat* again without rationing. I was back to my normal size soon after eighth year started. When I was getting ready to marry him, I... tried to get back to where I was that summer after the war. The wedding diet wasn’t Fleur’s or Molly’s idea. I

just asked them for help with it. He and I had never done certain things together, and there were a lot of reasons for it but part of it was the fact that I felt self-conscious after I went back to normal. I thought maybe if I finally looked right I could actually bring myself to..."

Draco didn't know that he could hate Weasley more than he already did. He was nearly quivering with anger as he listened to her tell him this, but he forced it down because she didn't deserve to deal with his own feelings about it. He chose his next words very carefully.

"Well you aren't married to him, you're married to me. Personally, I don't care how thin or how curvy you are — just as long as you're healthy, which currently you are not because you've lost so much weight your body has literally shut down normal functions. And for the record, I don't mind curves. Not at all."

"But Astoria is —"

"A frigid bitch," he finished. "She was selected for me, against my will. You should never consider her to be any sort of standard. I've never felt an ounce of attraction toward her. In fact, the thought of having to bed her was the thing that finally broke me and convinced me to jilt her in the first place."

She considered this.

"You don't mind curves," she finally said.

"No, I..." he trailed off, a bit worried he might say too much.

"You what?"

"I like curves, Granger. I like them a *lot*."

She was staring at him seriously. "Do you... happen to remember what I looked like? In eighth year I mean?"

Draco nodded slowly. He couldn't tear his eyes away from her face. His memories of her body in those too-short skirts with her shirt buttons straining from the size of her tits had fueled any number of fantasies for him over the previous months.

"And?" she whispered.

"You were really attractive," he said. "You came back from the war looking like a fucking *woman*, and I tried not to look at you because I was sure I'd never get within ten feet of you. It was unbearable at times, and the fact that Weasley didn't even appreciate it... he's a damned idiot. I am truly struggling to understand how he could have looked at you and wanted anything different."

She started to smile a little, and Draco exhaled in relief.

"I know that what I think about it shouldn't matter to you," he added. "But since we will be doing... certain things eventually... then please know I won't mind at all if you go back to your normal size. You certainly shouldn't maintain any sort of diet on my account."

"So you're saying I should eat the steak," she said.

"Granger, the minute you can keep it down I'll feed you filet basted in butter for dinner every single night if you want it. I'll even add a poached lobster tail on top. I would love nothing more than if you were back to normal."

She grinned broadly at this. "I may take you up on that, Malfoy. And... thanks. It's comforting to know you won't be totally disappointed when we finally fulfill the Ministry's edicts."

Put your cock in her now and show her just how much you want her.

Draco shoved his magic down.

"I will be the opposite of disappointed. I already told you that the minute you want to consummate, just say the word."

She chuckled a little and then stood to shrink their bags. Then she held out a hand for him to take.

"Before we do that, there are a few other milestones we should cross."

Draco sighed dramatically, feeling quite pleased with himself for pulling her out of her mood about her body.

"But talking to Lucius isn't *nearly* as fun as staying here and... *you know...*"

He wiggled his eyebrows at her suggestively, and she just laughed again and smacked him on the arm.

"Ouch, bloody hell Granger, *why* must you keep hitting me?"

"Shut up, you know you like it."

Draco couldn't stop the smile from crossing his face at that. "Yes ma'am."

"Shall we then?"

"We shall," he said, as he gripped her hand and pulled her through the darkness.

Hermione Granger was a brave witch, Draco had never doubted that. But it wasn't until they were staring at the long drive from the gate of Malfoy Manor to the front door that he fully appreciated just *how* brave. He waited for a moment for her to get her bearings while she swallowed hard.

“The Snatchers brought us through here,” she said quietly.

Fuck.

It wasn’t that Draco hadn’t considered this – he *had*. And it was the entire reason he was sure she would want to continue living at her flat. He was so sure about it that he never gave the alternative a great deal of thought. Then the previous night he was so distracted by getting into bed with her that he hadn’t fully considered what this would be like today. But before he could say anything about it, she just squared her shoulders and nodded to herself.

“Right then. You said you’ll back me up when it comes to your parents?”

“Always,” he said.

“Then let’s go.”

She strode forward like she owned the place, and Draco followed a step behind, marveling at the determination that was rolling off of her in waves. They approached the front edifice, and he could see her tilting her chin up ever so slightly. As she made her way up the steps to the portico the doors automatically opened for her.

Of course they did. She was a Malfoy now, in magic if not in name.

Draco hurried to stay close behind her, their footsteps echoing in the marble-covered foyer. A tiny elf then appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Master Draco!” cried Patsy. “You is returning!”

“Patsy, this is my wife, Hermione Granger,” he said.

Granger sank to her knees and held her hand out to the elf.

“Patsy, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said.

Patsy’s eyes were huge as she tentatively shook Granger’s hand.

“You is my Mistress now?” she said in confusion. “Patsy is thinking her new Mistress is Miss Astoria. She is still sleeping upstairs. They is planning a wedding this morning with a wedding breakfast to follow.”

Shit.

This was worse than Draco was expecting. He assumed they would force a marriage at midnight like Weasley and Granger, but obviously he was incorrect about that. Potter did tell him they had twenty-four hours to do it. And of *course* his mother and Beatrice would insist on a sodding *wedding breakfast* if they were waiting until daylight hours.

Draco scowled at this, but glanced down at Granger and saw she was actually smirking.

“Yes, well, I’m afraid Malfoy here had other plans about that.”

Draco smiled at this a little before turning to the elf.

"Patsy, Granger is my wife, and she wishes to move into the Manor. She will be in my room. Could you please arrange for her things to come over from her flat? She can provide any details about it you may need."

Patsy looked at him in confusion. "You is calling my new Mistress 'Granger' Sir? Where is your manners?"

Draco flushed, and Granger smirked again. "Old habits," he said. "We generally refer to each other by surname."

"But Mistress must be a Malfoy then."

"No, I'm the Lady Malfoy now, but I've kept my maiden name," said Granger gently. "I'm rather... well known. It just seemed sensible."

Patsy looked a little confused by this, but gave a small curtsey.

"Then if Mistress is telling Patsy her address she is arranging for Mistress's things to be moved."

Granger smiled and gave Patsy some instructions about her flat. After Patsy disappeared Draco looked at her curiously.

"I'm surprised you aren't trying to free her already," said Draco.

"Perhaps I'm just biding my time."

Draco snorted. "That's not like you."

She shrugged. "I've been forced to confront some hard truths about house elves over the years. I wish they were all free, but I know that's not realistic. I got the law requiring payment passed, and that was a huge win. I've learned not to force freedom on those who don't want it. That being said, if I discover that Patsy or any others are mistreated here, you should prepare yourself for a personalized S.P.E.W. campaign."

He smiled a little at this. "I consider myself forewarned."

"Draco!" came the sharp tones of his father. Draco tried not to groan as he looked over Granger's shoulder to find Lucius striding toward them, with Narcissa following close behind. Based on his father's expression and his mother's concern he was sure they knew everything by now. It was just the Greengrasses who were still in the dark.

You knew this was coming. Breathe.

"Father," he said, as he stepped next to Granger. "May I present my wife? Hermione Granger, my Lady Malfoy. She says you two know each other professionally."

He heard a faint bubble of laughter come from Granger to his right.

“Lord Wiltshire,” she said with excruciating politeness. “It’s a pleasure. And Lady Wiltshire of course – I don’t believe we’ve seen each other since the war.”

Lucius went pale and seemed to be at a loss for words. Narcissa was holding a copy of *The Daily Prophet*, and Draco saw her hands were trembling.

“I demand an explanation,” said his father in a dangerous voice.

“An explanation about what?” asked Draco carelessly. “Shall we discuss how you convinced the Wizengamot to pass a truly horrendous law in some mad effort to get me to marry a woman I have no interest in? Or should we talk about the meetings you had with Shacklebolt and Weasley to amend the law to force the issue a second time? Tell me – have you heard whether Weasley went to prison for failure to consummate his marriage on time? Because when we left him last night he had less than thirty minutes to do it.”

“You have *no respect for*—”

“I’ve made myself very clear,” said Draco coldly. “I don’t want Astoria. I’ve never wanted Astoria. But in a surprising twist of fate, the law you helped create matched me with a woman whom I do quite like and have enjoyed getting to know over the last few months. We got married last night, and it’s done.”

At that moment Astoria appeared at the top of the stairs, along with her mother. Based on their expressions he could tell they heard every word.

“Lucius!” hissed Beatrice, who was looking down at them with wild eyes.

“We can fix this,” said his father a bit desperately.

“Beatrice, Astoria, allow me to present my wife, Lady Malfoy,” said Draco cordially.

Astoria looked to be nearly in tears, while Beatrice’s rage was clearly building. Draco decided to get out in front of it.

“Astoria, I do hope you have some other matches lined up because this plot with my father has clearly failed for you. And Beatrice, you should know that Blaise Zabini will not be cooperative. I’ve already warned him that he’s your backup plan. You might as well save yourself the time and consider the next wizard in line.”

Now Lucius spun around to look at a spluttering Beatrice.

“Back-up plan?!?” he demanded.

Beatrice pulled herself together and glared at Lucius, as she gestured toward Draco and Granger.

“Clearly I needed one!”

“Well Blaise isn’t going to do it,” said Draco shortly. “You’ll be wasting your time with him. And since Granger is now *my* wife, you’re wasting your time with me as well. I

suggest you scurry on. The clock is ticking, is it not?"

"You *ungrateful*—" she started, but Draco gave a bored yawn which cut her off, as he looked down at Granger instead.

"Tell me my dear, do you wish to make use of the wedding breakfast my mother and Beatrice have planned for this morning? Or was our meal sufficient?"

"Oh, our breakfast together was quite sufficient, thank you," she said cheerfully. "There's no need to belabor the point is there? We're married, and there's nothing more to say about it."

Astoria was sniffling now, though Draco couldn't help but notice she *still* hadn't said anything at all. This drove the point home for him: she was so fucking placid there was barely any life in her.

"Nothing more to say!" exclaimed Lucius.

"Nothing more to say," agreed Draco, now turning back to his father. "She's a Malfoy by magic, if not name. That means you can't touch her. Nor can you harm her or me for going against your wishes. I do hope you'll come to your senses at some point and recognize that this scheme of yours has resulted in a daughter-in-law who is vastly superior to the one you originally chose for me. But you've always been so blinded by your so-called blood loyalties that I'm sure you will remain woefully ignorant about the extraordinary witch before you."

Astoria and Beatrice both looked deeply offended by this, but Draco ignored them.

"I could have it annulled!" cried Lucius.

"No you can't," chimed in Granger, now stepping forward to face his parents and the Greengrasses. "Not without changing the law *again*. And we both know that the public is not going to stand for another closed session amendment. You had your chance and lost. It's done."

"You can't *possibly* believe I will allow this," he hissed.

Granger gave a disinterested shrug. "For the time being you don't really have any choice. Get the MLPP repealed, and then we can talk about moving me out of the Manor. But until then, Draco?"

Draco's heart skipped to hear his first name on her lips.

"Yes my darling?" he said, looking down at her fondly.

He saw his parents and the Greengrasses gaping at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Why don't you give me a tour? Feel free to skip the drawing room though, I feel as though I know it rather intimately."

She started to walk forward, and Draco took a moment to admire the sight of her walking away from him. But then she turned and actually crooked her finger at him.

“Come, Draco,” she said.

Merlin but that made him hard.

Come Draco. Come inside of her. Make her come for you. Please her, adore her, worship her.

“Yes ma’am,” he muttered and hurried after her. His father looked appalled, his mother gobsmacked. Astoria finally came to life as jealousy flashed across her face, and Beatrice was staring at Lucius with poison in her gaze.

“Mother you aren’t using this are you?” he asked as he passed her. He plucked *The Daily Prophet* out of her fingers. “I’m sure my wife would like to read it. At her leisure of course.”

“Draco, come along,” called Granger from up ahead.

“Right away darling,” he cried as he hurried toward her.

When he reached her she slipped one hand into his and gently patted his cheek with the other. His magic thrummed, and he sighed contentedly.

“You’re so obedient. Now give me that tour, please.”

He thought he heard his father choke at this, but Draco ignored it. Warmth unfurled inside of him at her praise. It was intoxicating.

Obey her. Show her how good you can be. Touch her, kiss her, fuck her until she tells you that you’re the best she’s ever had.

“This way,” he said, tugging her hand and leading her up the stairs. “Let’s start with the bedroom, shall we?” he added in a voice that carried down to his parents and the Greengrasses.

He heard a light giggle next to him, and he couldn’t help but grin broadly. Granger was here, and nobody could do a damn thing about it.

The “tour” started and ended with Draco’s bedroom, where Granger snatched the paper from him and began to devour it after taking a moment to admire the space.

“This will be lovely,” she said simply, as she looked around and then seated herself near the small fireplace and curled up to read.

Draco let her have at it, relishing the novelty of having her in his room. He flipped idly through a quidditch magazine while she hummed to herself and dropped the occasional nugget of information.

“Well the amendment made the front page of course,” she said. “Nothing about us yet, but I suppose that will come with the evening issue. We did get married after the print deadline. The editors don’t seem thrilled that it was passed behind closed doors.”

He hummed in agreement.

“Oh goodness, they published the list of unconsummateds as of the moment the amendment passed. There is plenty of speculation about which one will end up with me.”

He chuckled at this.

“Oh and here’s a section about which one will end up with *you*. Ha! They interviewed Astoria for it.”

“Pardon?” asked Draco.

“Yes,” said Granger. “She said, and I quote, ‘I have always cared about Lord Malfoy a great deal, and I hope the Wizengamot will take our history and compatibility into account when they make their selection for him.’”

“What a load of bullshit,” he said.

“Not compatible then?” she inquired.

“Seeing as how I occluded years of my life away to avoid thinking about her, I’d say not. I truly don’t know if the Malfoy magic would have been strong enough to help me get it up for her.”

She lowered the paper and quirked an eyebrow at this. “There’s a lot to unpack there.”

“Hmmm, perhaps. But we can unpack it later. You’ll need to *actually* unpack any moment.”

Sure enough, a few minutes later Patsy appeared, carrying the first round of things from Granger’s flat. Granger flung the paper aside and began to supervise, while Draco picked up the paper and scanned it. He saw Granger was right: nearly the entire paper was devoted to the amendment to the MLPP and speculation about how it would affect him and Granger. Their marriage, however, had taken place after most of the press left for the evening. He was sure it would be on the front page of *The Evening Prophet*.

Granger and the elves continued to work on moving into Draco’s room, and after a few hours he called for lunch. After their discussion at breakfast, he requested some high calorie things with healthy fats – nothing so heavy her stomach would reject it, but things her body would need to bring her curves back.

Merlin, but he wanted her curves back. When he first encountered her in Hogsmeade he thought she had simply grown and her curves diminished naturally. He told her the truth that

he had barely allowed himself to look at her during eighth year because she was the very epitome of every soft, voluptuous fantasy he wasn't allowed to have. And he hadn't seen her closely in the years that followed so he had no real notion of what she looked like these days. But now that he knew the body he barely permitted himself to look at would return if she just ate normally... he was more than eager to encourage it.

Astoria had always been tall and slender. There was barely a curve on her. Granger, however, would have flesh a man could sink himself into once she was back to her normal weight.

Knowing that she had tried to change the natural shape of her body for *Weasley* made him so angry he could scarcely breathe when he thought about it. But she had run, and now she was paired with a man who would appreciate it, adore it, fucking bury himself into it if given half a chance. Draco was very aware that his virginity had an official expiration date now, and he wondered if she would let him touch her before then. Would he be able to touch her tits? Fuck, would he be able to *see* her tits? He'd never seen any before, not in real life. He'd only seen tits in Blaise's naughty magazines, but seeing them on a glossy page versus on his *wife* were two completely different things. All of his experiences with tits in the past had been teenaged fumblings under a witch's shirt. He'd never gotten a witch fully topless before.

Or maybe he could touch her *down there*. Maybe she'd even let him taste her down there. He knew some blokes didn't like it, but Draco was more than willing to shove his face between her lush thighs and find out what that was like. He was sure she would be pillow soft, and he'd be able to grip her arse, and he wouldn't fucking *break her* while he did it.

He buttered some bread for her as he thought about this. Then he considered his work and added an extra swipe of butter on top for good measure.

Draco wanted Hermione Granger back.

The afternoon wore on, and by the end of it Granger was fully moved in. On the very last trip the elves brought what could only be described as an orange beast.

"Crooks baby! I've missed you!" she cried as she nestled herself into his fur.

This animal – *Crooks* – glowered at Draco while he was draped inelegantly in Granger's arms. He was enormous, nearly half the size of Granger herself. He had a squished face that very clearly told Draco to fuck right off.

"This is Crookshanks," she said simply. "He's my world."

Well that told Draco everything he needed to know about it. He walked forward cautiously and tried to shake the beast's paw in greeting. The beast recoiled and swiped at him.

"Charmed," said Draco, as Granger smiled.

"Crooks buddy, Malfoy and I are married. I'm afraid you can't smother him or I'll be rather cross."

The animal gave her a skeptical look as he hopped out of Granger's arms and then padded out of the room, evidently already aware that he was now the master of Malfoy Manor. He did not seem to be terribly impressed by this news.

"What now?" asked Granger, as she watched her familiar slink out.

"It's nearly time for tea," replied Draco. "Shall we?"

He put out his arm, and she gripped it as he escorted her back downstairs and into the parlor they typically used for tea. Draco was slightly surprised to find both of his parents there.

He pulled out a chair for Granger, who sank down into it before he settled himself.

"Tea? Do you take milk or lemon?"

"Lemon please," she said, as Draco poured for her. He eyed the tiered tray of sandwiches and skipped the cucumber in favor of egg salad as he placed two on her plate. Then he plucked a scone and added a generous layer of clotted cream as well. She just gave him an amused look.

"You are rather determined, aren't you?"

He smirked. "I'm considering it a Project."

"Hmmm, yes. Like my Project to deprogram you. Speaking of which, could I borrow your owl this evening? I need to write to Minerva McGonagall."

Draco's parents were silent as they listened to this exchange, but Draco just nodded. "Yes of course. What for?"

"Oh nothing," said Granger. "I just need to inform her that I can return to work whenever it's most convenient."

There was a clatter of a fork on the other side of the table.

"*Work?*" demanded Lucius.

Granger looked him in the eye. "Of course I work."

"You left the think tank this past summer," he said sharply. "You gave the impression it was because you were about to get married."

She gave a small smile. "Did I give that impression? Or did you just make assumptions because your own world view is so narrow?"

Lucius glowered.

"What is it you plan to do then?" he demanded.

"Oh, I'm the new Muggle Studies professor at Hogwarts," she said brightly.

Lucius looked horrified, while Draco started to laugh. He tried to cover it up with a cough.

“Draco, your manners!” chastised his mother. Granger thumped him on the back.

“It was a shame I had to miss most of my first term,” she said, “but Minerva assured me she would find a substitute while I was gone.”

“Is that why you were in Hogsmeade that day?” asked Draco, now looking at her. “I never did ask what you were doing there.”

“Yes,” said Granger. “I had to let Minerva know that there was a slight timing conflict. She let me borrow a school owl to write to you.”

Lucius’s eye twitched.

“Do you plan to move there then?” asked Narcissa. Draco couldn’t gauge her tone of voice.

“No, not at all,” said Granger. “Only the heads of house have to live there. I plan to floo in each day. I imagine Minerva will ask me to wait until next term to come back since there are only a few weeks until Christmas, but it will be up to her.”

“And why, may I ask, are you teaching *Muggle Studies*?” said Lucius with a look as though something had died right under his nose.

Granger raised an eyebrow. “Why, it’s all because of people like Draco of course. And you, I suppose.”

Lucius gaped. “*Excuse me?*”

“Yes of course,” said Granger blithely. “Muggle Studies has been mandatory for the older students since the end of the war, you know, but the curriculum has never been very good. It occurred to me that if I could improve it, then I could help reverse biases when wizards are children. Their grandparents may be hopeless, but quite a few witches and wizards in my generation are more tolerant – Draco is an excellent example of that – and my students will surely want to introduce their parents to muggle innovations. Some of them are quite incredible. My hope is that once the grandparents are dead, we will end up with a population of voters who aren’t bigoted pricks.”

Draco spit out his tea, and his mother chastised him again.

“Aren’t bigoted...” echoed Lucius, “you *cannot* be serious! We care about tradition and duty and...”

“The definition of a bigot is one who will not listen to the beliefs or ideas that are different from their own and perpetuate biases against other populations of people who do not include them. You, sir, are a bigot. So are many of your friends and colleagues. I’ve decided to fight it at its source, rather than do it law by law.”

She calmly ate a sandwich while Lucius spluttered.

"You have *no respect!* No *manners!* No *hope* of achieving any sort of place in our world!"

"Well I did marry a Malfoy, didn't I?" she asked. "That seems like a good place to start."

And then to Draco's delight she held Lucius's gaze as she slowly placed both elbows on the table, picked up her cup of tea, and *slurped*.

Lucius's eyes bugged out, and he stood abruptly. "You are going to regret this!" he hissed to Draco. "Marrying this... this..."

"I think the word you're looking for is 'mudblood,'" supplied Granger calmly, and Lucius just gritted his teeth and stormed off. The moment he was through the doors, Granger removed her elbows from the table and began to drink her tea with perfect etiquette.

She caught Draco's eye with a twinkle, and he was sure he was looking back at her like she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He didn't care though, she *was*. He couldn't believe he had been lucky enough to be matched with her and now actually *married* to her.

"Granger," he said suddenly, as he reached across the table to take her hand.

"Hmmm?"

"You're extraordinary."

She turned a little pink at this, but seemed pleased. Draco caught his mother's eye, who was watching him intently. He gave her a slightly challenging look.

"What is it, Mother? You've been very quiet."

Narcissa narrowed her eyes. "I'm adjusting, Draco."

"Hmmm," he said. "Surely this didn't surprise you."

"That you wished for Ms. Granger to be your wife? Of course that doesn't surprise me. You made that very clear over the last few months. That you outsmarted your father though? Yes, I'm very surprised."

"Well I suggest you adjust quickly."

She inclined her head, before studying Granger.

"I have always been more practical and less idealistic than my husband. I can see that you are both very determined to get what you want, and I'm not inclined to stand in your way now that you're here. However, you will need lessons," she said shortly.

Granger raised an eyebrow.

"Family history, etiquette, dancing, that sort of thing."

"Pureblood finishing school?" asked Granger wryly.

"In a manner of speaking," said Narcissa. "If you wish to change anyone's opinions about mud — *muggleborns* or muggles, you must know how to exist in a world without them first. If not, you will be immediately dismissed as a witch who is ignorant of our ways and who only found herself in this position out of pure happenstance. Even your efforts at Hogwarts will be unsuccessful if the children of the pureblood Houses don't take you seriously. Softening views or not, I can assure you they have all been raised to identify those who fit into their world from the cradle. There are not many who would break from it even if they *are* intrigued by muggle innovation."

Granger narrowed her eyes. "So I need lessons in order to fit in. I see."

"I can arrange a tutor," offered Narcissa.

Draco knew his mother wasn't thrilled about this, but she was also right that she was more practical than Lucius. She always had been, and she was extending a hand to Granger because of it. He hoped Granger recognized the olive branch for what it was. To his relief her voice softened a little.

"I can see that you may be right, and I appreciate the offer for a tutor. However, I think I know somebody who is very well-equipped to help."

"And who is that?" asked Narcissa with ill-disguised curiosity.

"You'll see," Granger said.

Chapter 12: Caught With His Pants Down

1 December 2003

The Evening Prophet did not disappoint.

It arrived just as tea was wrapping up, along with at least a dozen owls, all of which fought for attention to get to Granger or Draco first.

Draco hastily collected the mail and set it aside while he leaned over Granger's shoulder and watched her unfurl the paper.

Granger and Malfoy Wed in Last-Minute Ceremony to Subvert MLPP Amendment!

by Rita Skeeter

Readers of this paper have already learned of the MLPP amendment, which was passed in a hush-hush closed door session yesterday evening by the Wizengamot. Due to short delays in print times, The Daily Prophet reported on the amendment this morning, with much speculation about the fates of Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy, the couple to whom the amendment would immediately apply. It was thought that Lady Malfoy – née Granger – was most likely to end up married to Ronald Weasley and Lord Malfoy married to Astoria Greengrass. After all, the Wizengamot was given license to consider options such as prior romantic history, and in the case of Lady Malfoy, Mr. Weasley may have been the only possibility left before the deadline.

However, the couple surprised the Minister of Magic when they wed late at night in a visiting room in Azkaban. The marriage was properly performed by Mr. Anthony Goldstein and witnessed by Lady Pansy Nott and Mr. Blaise Zabini. According to the marriage records, they were wed with just an hour to spare before the deadline expired.

When Lord and Lady Malfoy appeared on the dock after Lady Malfoy was officially released from Azkaban, they encountered the Minister of Magic himself, along with Ronald Weasley, several aurors, and an officiant who was, no doubt, summoned to perform a wedding between Lady Malfoy and Mr. Weasley at the stroke of midnight. This reporter was also present to observe the encounter. The presence of Mr. Weasley lent credence to Lady Malfoy's claims that the entire amendment was passed as a way of manipulating her – and to a lesser extent Lord Malfoy – so that they would fall in line with the Minister's plan, and the public's perception of the MLPP would improve.

Lady Malfoy has not been shy about her feelings toward Lord Malfoy in her opinion pieces over the last few months. She has described him as possessive, domineering, and selfish. Indeed, this reporter witnessed these tendencies herself when Mr. Weasley attempted to touch

Lady Malfoy, and he was thrown backwards by Lord Malfoy's own marital magic. Lord Malfoy's words left no debate about his position on the matter.

*"...She has made it very clear that she doesn't want you touching her, and thanks to you I'm now the only man who gets that exquisite privilege. Stay the f*** away from her if you know what's good for you."*

It is true Lady Malfoy has aligned herself with a harsh man, but she claims he was the only one who was honest with her.

"He was the only one who told me the truth about what was going on out there! He was the only one who visited me without any false pretenses!... I'm not saying this is ideal... but at least I'm married to somebody who isn't going to stab me in the back!"

Lady Malfoy also made it abundantly clear that her feelings toward Mr. Weasley have always been more platonic than his own. In fact, she cleared up a great many rumors about their relationship over the years with a single sentence.

"I've never slept with you Ronald, and after years of turning you down whenever you tried I thought you would take a bloody hint!"

It is obvious to this reporter that Lady Malfoy – who has been beloved by the wizarding community since the end of the war – was backed into a corner by the Minister of Magic and the Wizengamot. Her Gryffindor sensibilities were no doubt severely hurt when Mr. Weasley was complicit in the act. She chose to wed Lord Malfoy instead of her lifelong friend based solely on the fact that he hadn't lied to her about the amendment.

What kind of marriage will it be between the muggleborn Golden Girl and a former Death Eater, when the only thing they have in common is the lack of a lie? It is obvious Lady Malfoy has been sacrificed upon the altar of the MLPP, and the only question that remains is what comes next. Will she be forced to bear the child of a Death Eater before Minister Shacklebolt comes to his senses and repeals the MLPP?

Draco exhaled as he read it and glanced at Granger. She was staring at a picture of herself, looking gaunt and wild-eyed as she stepped onto the dock. He watched as a smile slowly emerged, and he nudged her a little bit.

"Well, darling?" he asked, "is that what you were hoping for?"

"Yes," she said simply. "I really don't like disparaging you, Malfoy, but I also don't want our marriage to come across as some sort of star-crossed lovers thing."

"No, of course not," he said quickly.

He glanced at his mother, who rose to read it too, and she narrowed her eyes a bit as she considered it.

"So that's your plan then? Get the law repealed? And then what?"

Granger hesitated a moment. “Then I’m free to choose, as is everyone else.”

“And what *will* you choose?” she insisted.

“I’m still figuring that out.” said Granger in a soft voice.

Draco’s stomach lurched at this. He already knew what *he* would choose – he would wish to stay married to her. She was already firmly entrenched in his head and had swept away any fears about matrimony. But he couldn’t be certain she felt the same way. He had been the one to push the marriage, not her. He only hoped that she would come around to the idea, and if she was ever given a real choice that she would choose him anyway.

“And you?” asked Narcissa, now looking at Draco.

“If our marriage is annulled, I plan to ask Granger out on a date and see if I can talk her into marrying me again,” he said simply.

The shocked look on Granger’s face was almost worth the heartache Draco felt as he considered this possibility.

“So Astoria...” started his mother.

Draco looked at her sternly. “Astoria is *never* going to happen. Not that it’s any of your business, but I would have struggled to consummate a marriage with her, even with the family magic. I’m not sure it’s strong enough to overcome my distaste for her.”

His mother’s jaw clenched at this, but then she sighed and nodded. “Very well. I will... communicate that to your father.”

“If you must,” said Draco carelessly. “It’s time you both understand that I’m an adult and can make my own choices in these matters. I think I’ve been very clear about what and who I choose.”

Granger’s cheeks were aflame as he said this, but Narcissa just pursed her lips.

“Fine. I will leave you both now. Your father needs tending.”

She swept out of the dining room, and Draco chanced a glance at Granger.

“You’re serious?” she asked quietly. “You would try to marry me again?”

Draco snorted. “Granger, I know our union has been unconventional, but I didn’t have to visit you as often as I did in Azkaban. I didn’t have to alert you to the amendment. I didn’t have to take fucking polyjuice to turn into Theo last night so I could escape the Manor to marry you. I don’t agree with the MLPP – I think it’s a shitty law. But it also resulted in you being here with me, and I’m pretty happy about that. So yes, I would try to marry you again if our marriage was annulled. I don’t think I could stay away from you now.”

“Because of the marital magic,” she insisted, almost desperately.

Draco rolled his eyes. "No, I can distinguish between the magical urges and the real thoughts in my head. The magic isn't that strong."

He was watching her carefully, but she was not meeting his eye. She fiddled with her napkin as she thought about it, and Draco's stomach sank.

"Look," he said shortly. "I don't expect you to feel the same way. You've made it very clear that there are a lot of things about me you don't like, and much of it is deserved. I'm just being honest with you. The MLPP aside, you intrigue me. You always have in a way, I just wasn't allowed to want it. But I've grown up, and now I'm getting a taste and... I want more. But if you don't, that's the answer I suppose. I've earned your revulsion, and there's nothing I can do about it."

He said this last part a little bitterly. She still said nothing, and Draco sighed. He started to rise, but she stopped him with her hand.

"Wait," she said. "I just..."

He said nothing as he stared down at her.

"Just give me some time," she whispered. "I'm just so *angry* about the law, and especially this amendment because it was so personal. I haven't been able to sort my own feelings outside of it yet. I didn't have room for them in Azkaban because I was just trying to survive."

Draco felt himself softening a bit at this. "Of course. I can understand that."

"Will you stay?" she asked hesitantly.

Draco nodded slowly and sank back down into the chair.

They were quiet for a long while as Granger continued to survey the paper. Draco reached over to the stack of mail and began to open it.

"The wizarding public seems to be on your side," he said carefully. "They are worried about you, being here with me."

She grimaced a bit. "Please know that I don't enjoy giving them that impression."

"But it's necessary," he said. "I'm not thrilled about it either, but if I'm not a big bad Death Eater anymore then it becomes that star-crossed lovers narrative we're trying to avoid."

She looked at him guiltily. "Still, I may have overdone it."

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I consider it a long-overdue penance. I got off fairly light after the war. Besides, there are no reporters here at the Manor. I can handle being feared in public as long as you aren't afraid of me in private."

"I'm not," she said quickly. "Not at all."

"Then don't worry about it," he said firmly. "We can change the public perception of our relationship at any time, you know that. For now, let's leave it. I suspect it's really eroding trust in Shacklebolt."

"It is," she said quietly, as she pointed to a different article. "And Rita's really leaning into the scandal of the Minister meeting with Lucius. That's going to make it worse for him."

Draco snorted. "Half the Wizengamot meets with Father."

"But still," she insisted, "this time it was corrupt."

Draco nodded in acknowledgment. "And Weasley? Any more mention of him?"

Granger flipped open the paper and scanned for a moment as she sipped on the dregs of her tea before spitting it out all over the paper.

"What?" asked Draco in surprise. Her face had transformed into a look of pure glee, as she looked down at the article and summarized quickly.

"Ron went to Azkaban because he failed to consummate his marriage on time. Rita stuck around long enough to hear Shacklebolt remind him that he had to consummate his marriage before midnight now that the amendment no longer applied - it was only for us of course, and once we married it became ineffective - so he rushed back to the Burrow to find Prudence. Rita followed. Knowing her she probably turned into a beetle to listen to the whole thing and hid her photographer in the bushes. Evidently there was a brief shouting match between Ron and Prudence in the front yard because he did *not* let her know about his plans to trap me with the amendment. But eventually she pulled him into a broom shed for privacy, and Ron didn't finish in time. It's unclear if she refused or if he was just too slow."

Draco stared at her in disbelief. "Rita wasn't warded out?"

Granger shrugged. "The house is warded, but the last time I was there the wards had been loosened around the grounds for the press due to the wedding. Maybe they forgot to put them back in place."

"Bloody hell, that's incredible," said Draco, leaning back to relish the thought.

"Even better," added Granger, now with a distinct sparkle in her eye, "Ron was arrested with his pants down, though Prudence was completely dressed."

She flipped the paper around to show him, and sure enough there was a photo of a clearly nude Ronald Weasley who was handcuffed, with his manly bits blurred out. Prudence was glaring at him in the photo, but she didn't have a single button out of place. Draco gaped at it.

"I thought our wedding was the best moment of my adult life thus far darling," he said reverently as he stared at it, "but I'll admit this might have it beat."

She laughed at that and flipped the paper back around, her brow now furrowing as she continued to read. "It says they arrested Prudence too. Rita reports that Ron tried to argue

that they just needed a few more minutes, but they were both arrested anyway. The aurors said the law was clear that they had to go to Azkaban for at least a brief stay if they didn't complete consummation by the deadline."

"I wonder how long they'll be there?" wondered Draco.

Granger shrugged. "Probably be less than a day if one of them requests a conjugal visit with the other. They'll have to shag it out in Azkaban though before they're released. Similar to getting married there."

Draco frowned at this. "Granger, you should have had a real wedding with a dress and everything."

"I did have a real wedding with a dress and everything. You even saw me in it."

"But still..." he said.

She shrugged. "Weddings have never really been my thing. I've gotten to have the experience of planning one, and I have no strong desire to do that again. Ours was quite memorable. I suppose Ron's first time with his wife will be similarly memorable."

Draco decided to let it go. It was stupid to feel guilty about not marrying her with a real wedding, because there wasn't anything to be done about it. Thankfully she didn't seem as bothered by it as Draco was.

"Well it's unbelievable," muttered Draco. "You couldn't have planned it better if you had tried."

"It's true," she acknowledged. "It's a shitshow."

"A shitshow of Weasley's own making though," pointed out Draco.

Hermione inclined her head in acknowledgment just as Patsy popped in.

"Mistress," she said, addressing Hermione, "there is a mediwitch at the gate requesting your presence."

Draco watched in confusion as a shuttered look crossed Granger's face, but she just nodded and rose. Draco automatically stood as well.

"Should I come?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Up to you. It won't take long."

That wasn't a no, so Draco followed behind her. Patsy led them into a different parlor they often used for guests, and Draco saw a healer in the traditional lime green robes waiting for them, with a satchel in her hand. Narcissa was there as well.

"Mrs. Malfoy," she said as Granger approached.

“Granger,” she corrected.

“Pardon?” asked the healer.

“You should address me as either Lady Malfoy or Ms. Granger. I have a title now, but my surname has not changed.”

The healer sniffed in apparent disapproval of this, but she motioned for Granger to come toward her.

“We will need to run the standard health checks under the MLPP.”

Granger said nothing to this, but just rolled up her sleeve and held her arm out to the healer in a bored manner.

Draco watched as the healer drew some blood and placed it on a small card, which shimmered for a moment and then turned green.

“There you go,” said Granger, rolling her eyes. “No contraceptives here.”

Draco’s eyes widened as he realized what this was: one of the random health checks.

“Very well,” said the healer, as she pulled out a portable scale. “I will need to check both of your wands too.”

Granger held out her wand, and the healer performed *priori incantatum* to show the last several spells that were used. Then she did the same thing to Draco.

She seemed faintly disappointed when no contraceptive charms were cast.

“I’m not sure what you were expecting,” said Granger. “We haven’t consummated yet, so we would have no need to cast any of those spells. The Ministry must be aware of that.”

The healer’s nostrils flared a little. “Yes, well, one can never be so sure. Now then, we’ll need to weigh you too and —”

“No,” said Granger shortly.

“Excuse me?” asked the healer.

“I said no. The MLPP permits random blood draws of the witch, examination of the wands of both the witch and wizard, and pelvic exams for the witch after the consummation period has ended if there have been no confirmed pregnancies within three months of that date. You are not permitted to do anything else to me. You are not my healer.”

The mediwitch straightened up. “Ms. Granger, I must *insist* ...”

“I said no,” she said coldly.

“But you are *clearly* violating the law,” countered the mediwitch. “One need only look at you to see that you are too thin to sustain a pregnancy! Contraceptive methods are not—”

“The MLPP prohibits all hormonal and magical contraceptive methods. There isn’t a single thing in the law about losing weight because a witch has been imprisoned for several months and opted not to eat food that was spoiled when her guards ejaculated onto it. Or haven’t you read my op-eds?”

Narcissa and the healer both went pale.

“I’m afraid I’ve been told...” said the witch.

“Tell Kingsley I said that he can sod right off,” said Granger. “And if you do a single thing to me that is not expressly permitted by the law, I’ll turn your name in to the St. Mungo’s ethics board for medical malpractice.”

“And we will also sue you for assault,” added Draco.

Granger turned to look at him, and he smiled to see the approval on her face.

“Yes, that too. And I will be writing about it in *The Daily Prophet*,” she added.

The mediwitch swallowed, but finally nodded and rose. “Very well. I will... communicate this... to my superiors.”

Granger snorted. “You do that. I assume I’ll be seeing you next week then?”

Draco looked at her incredulously.

“It’s possible,” acknowledged the mediwitch.

“Then you might also want to communicate to Kingsley that I have made notes of every ‘random’ medical exam I have been subject to since the Matching Ceremony. I’m sure you have my file, and you will see that they are all negative. I am *much* too smart to be tripped up by something as common as a muggle morning after pill. You might also want to let him know that if the random checks continue as often as I had them in Azkaban, I’ll be writing about that too. Somehow I doubt most witches are being subjected to weekly blood draws.”

“Weekly!” exclaimed Draco, now looking at her in disbelief.

“Weekly,” confirmed Granger calmly. “They arranged one every time I had the standard weekly health check in Azkaban, which is why you weren’t informed. I didn’t write about it in Azkaban because I had other lower-hanging fruit. But if it continues now that we’re married, I might find myself less inclined to hide that truth from the public.”

“That’s bullshit,” snarled Draco, now turning to the healer. “Tell Shacklebolt to go fuck himself and leave my wife alone. She’s part of my household now. I will not tolerate it.”

Draco was feeling positively dangerous now that he knew Granger had done this every single week for the last three months. He didn’t bother to hide his anger from the healer, and she

quickly stood and nodded. “Yes, I will... let him know. Thank you.”

She practically fled the parlor, and then Draco took a deep breath to compose himself and looked at Granger again.

“I wish you had told me.”

She shrugged dispassionately. “As I said, their tests will never trip me up. I was saving it to use later if I needed more ammunition.”

“Did the guards really do that to you Ms. Granger?” asked Narcissa, looking a bit shaken.

“Yes,” she said simply. “A few times.”

Narcissa’s eyes narrowed. “But not *all* the time.”

“Of course not,” said Granger.

“So you really did...”

Granger just smirked. “There are ways around certain physical aspects of the MLPP. I know all of them.”

Narcissa cocked her head to study her for a moment. “I don’t doubt that. But don’t you *want* children?”

Draco felt his heart stop. They hadn’t talked about this. He assumed she wouldn’t have children with him, and he had told himself he was fine with that. He really was. But now that his mother raised it, he was desperate to hear her answer.

“I want to choose my children. And I can’t imagine the Malfoys would welcome a half-blooded grandchild.”

Draco’s stomach soured at this. *He* would welcome one, certainly. But he knew she was right about his parents.

Narcissa, however, was quiet for a long while.

“If my alternatives are half-blood or none at all, then I would take the half-blood,” she finally said.

Draco’s jaw dropped at this, and even Granger looked startled.

“Lucius –” started Granger, but Narcissa just rolled her eyes.

“He’s a lot of hot air, my Lucius. He will tell you he doesn’t want it until the moment the child is in his arms. Then he will melt. You would do best to ignore everything he says.”

Granger narrowed her eyes now. “Well seeing as how I was just married yesterday, I’m not quite ready for babies yet, MLPP or not.”

"No of course not," said Narcissa smoothly. "But please – don't avoid them on the Malfoys' account. Draco really must have a legitimate heir at some point."

"Mother..." muttered Draco.

She just shot him a knowing look, but waved him off. "I'm sure Ms. Granger is intelligent enough to know the truth of that Draco. Now then, why don't you run along and seduce your wife? It's not likely to result in a child at this point anyway."

Narcissa cast one last meaningful look at Granger's figure as she rose and swept out of the room. Draco knew his face was burning when Granger turned to look at him, her cheeks pink too.

"Well?" she said in an attempt at bravery.

"Well what?" he muttered.

"Are you planning on seducing me?"

"My mother is meddlesome," he muttered.

"I'll take that as a no, then," she said. "In that case, I have some correspondence I need to attend to."

He couldn't quite identify the tone of her voice, but he said nothing more as she left the room.

Draco had no idea what to do next.

Several Hours Later

Draco's first full day of marriage had been an odd one, constantly vacillating between the intrusive thoughts from the Malfoy magic, an urge to present a united front for his parents and the mediwitch, and bouts of awkwardness. He was willing to admit to himself that he wanted her. He just didn't know how to go about getting her, especially in light of her confession that she hadn't sorted her own feelings yet. Draco knew he shouldn't be discouraged or disappointed by it – he had been to Azkaban too and knew how much effort it took to stay mentally present and save face there. Teasing apart real feelings of affection from the anger caused by the MLPP was surely low on her list of priorities, and he couldn't blame her for needing some time. But it left him in an odd place, suspended somewhere between hope and despair. He caught moments when he was certain she liked him, but she was also so principled that Draco was sure she would view it as a violation of her commitment to the cause if she let herself truly enjoy the time with Draco.

That, more than anything, was the reason he was willing to proceed with the reputational harm he was enduring in public. Some part of him hoped that if Granger castigated him enough in the press, she would allow herself to ease into a real relationship with him in private. It would be worth it if it meant she wanted him for more than the physical minimums imposed by the MLPP.

Still, their first full day together had ended awkwardly once Narcissa told Draco to go seduce her. Draco wished he could do it, but he didn't know *how*. He had no real practice or experience, and Granger was an anomaly at times. She could be hot then cold, confident then cautious. Her persona and moods could change in an instant, and Draco struggled to keep up. They didn't talk very much for the rest of the day as Granger retreated to her correspondence before joining Draco and his parents for a late dinner. The meal was stilted, and Granger appeared to be lost in thought as she studied her food though she ate little. Soon after that they retired to bed, and Draco slipped into one side while Granger slipped into the other.

"Night," she whispered.

"Goodnight," he said.

And that was all. Draco stared at the ceiling for a long while, contemplating the witch next to him while he felt the magic.

Talk to her, touch her, coax her. She liked your obedience so show her you can do even better. Tease her clothes off and give her whatever she asks for. Fill her up and make her yours.

Draco eventually drifted off to the feeling of the magic nudging him, until he woke with a start in the middle of the night.

He hadn't moved to the middle of the bed yet, nor had Granger. But she was thrashing around, whimpering in her sleep, and Draco sat straight up to stare down at her.

Her jaw was clenched and her eyes squeezed tight, and though she wasn't saying much, he could tell she was in the middle of a nightmare. As he watched, a tear emerged and tracked her cheek.

"Granger!" he hissed.

She didn't respond, so he gripped her arm gently, his magic jumping as he did it. "Granger!" he said a bit more loudly.

Still nothing, so he started to shake her. "Granger. Granger! GRANGER!"

She gasped as she sat straight up, looking around wildly. For a split second she shrank when he saw him, fear flooding her eyes. Draco thought his heart was breaking, but then her eyes cleared, and she slumped forward, gripping his arms too. She was shaking like a leaf.

Comfort her. Cherish her.

Draco had no idea what he was doing, but his magic was prompting him to do *something*, and for once it made sense.

“Hey,” he said softly as he pulled her closer. “You’re alright. It was just a nightmare.”

She took a shuddering breath and then exhaled. She breathed in and out, several times, as her forehead was bent toward his.

“Sorry,” she croaked.

“Don’t apologize,” he insisted. “I’ve had my fair share. I’m sure coming to the Manor triggered it... or seeing Father today.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. I dreamed about Nagini.”

Draco’s eyebrows flew up. He wasn’t expecting that.

“Oh?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I had nightmares quite a bit in Azkaban. It was just a lot today. Sorry again, I can go, I –”

She started to swing her legs over the edge of the bed, and Draco gripped her wrist.

“Stay,” he said.

She hesitated and looked back at him. “I might have more.”

“Then I’ll wake you up.”

“Seriously Malfoy, neither of us will sleep and –”

“Granger, do you know what I do all day long?”

She blinked at this apparent non sequitur.

“Erm, no, actually. You’ve never told me.”

“Not a fucking thing. I have no job, no responsibilities. Most of my schedule revolves around meal times and a few close friends who also have no jobs or responsibilities. Occasionally I have meetings with my solicitors or join Father in meetings at the Ministry, but that’s it. If I don’t sleep well at night, I can nap as much as I want during the day.”

He thought he saw a shadow of a smile cross her face. “I married a wastrel then?”

“A very rich wastrel, yes,” he agreed.

Now she really did smile as she eased back into bed.

“I suppose I can’t argue with that.”

She looked at him like she was waiting for something, and she bit her lip. Draco's heart started to race, but he just decided to do it. This sort of thing was easier in the dark when he couldn't see every microexpression on her face.

"Come to the middle with me," he said, tugging on her wrist.

She looked a little surprised by this, but nodded slowly and moved toward him. He pulled her down with her back against him, just like they had woken up this morning. His hand was around her waist but on the outside of her shirt this time.

"Is this alright?" he asked hesitantly.

She just nodded, and he felt her idly tracing his ring again with her hand. Draco let her do it for several long moments before catching her hand in his and lacing their fingers together.

"Are you planning on seducing me now?" she whispered.

His stomach lurched, and the words just slipped out. "You're probably going to have to start it."

She twisted around to look at him in confusion. "Really?"

He shrugged a bit nervously. "I have no idea what I'm doing."

She narrowed her eyes. "I heard rumors for years about your Slytherin sexual prowess at Hogwarts."

He frowned. "So... what? You've been waiting for me to..."

"To do *something*, yes. I'll be honest, I'm surprised you haven't, and it's really throwing me off. You had a reputation there."

"Ah. Yes. Well, as to that reputation..."

He trailed off, not really wanting to tell her the truth about his very limited experiences.

"I'm listening," she prompted.

He sighed. "The truth is, my reputation at Hogwarts was a load of bullshit. Pansy fabricated most of it and spread all sorts of rumors about me. We thought it might make Astoria look elsewhere if the school believed I was some sort of manwhore, and it had the side benefit of making Theo jealous enough that he finally made a move on her. But you should forget whatever you've heard about me. Most of it wasn't true."

Her eyes were wide. "Oh! Well... alright then."

She turned back around, but Draco felt her nestle in a bit closer, and he sighed deeply as he inhaled her scent.

This was progress.

He had gone from waking up like this and pretending it didn't happen to *asking* her if he could hold her like this, and she allowed it. He wondered if he had the balls to kiss her again, but his heart stuttered as he thought about it and decided not to push his luck. He had made a start tonight. She didn't know her own feelings yet. A chaste kiss in a prison to celebrate an engagement was one thing. A hot snog in his bed was entirely different.

My virginity has an expiry date.

He reminded himself of this firmly as he squeezed her hand one more time and closed his eyes behind her. He could do this step by step, little by little. He would focus on the wins: marrying her, sleeping in the same bed as her, now holding her.

Draco Malfoy was determined to win this. He just had to be patient.

Chapter 13: Special Powers

6 December 2003

How does one kiss a wife?

This had become one of the Most Important Questions in Draco Malfoy's life during his first full week of marriage. He had seized his moment in Azkaban, but he hadn't found it again, despite the fact that the wife in question seemed to enjoy burrowing herself into his arms at night. Draco, ever the opportunist, continued to invite her to do it without saying much about it. But all the burrowing in the world didn't translate to lips and tongues and hands and... *things*.

Draco thought he might be going mad, as the urges continued to urge him and the thoughts continued to think for him.

Kiss her, lick her, strip her.

Over and over again, on repeat, his magic sought more from her. Draco thought he deserved a trophy for resisting the thing he wanted so badly.

His friends were no help, either. He escaped to Nott Manor one afternoon after the third night with Granger in his arms, and he clutched at his drink as his friends eyed him cautiously.

"So how is it going?" asked Theo carefully.

"Wonderfully. Dreadfully. I don't fucking know."

"Ah," said Blaise. "That clears it up."

"No, I mean... I kissed her in Azkaban, yeah? Right after I proposed. And she sleeps with me at night. But ever since..."

"Don't tell us you haven't kissed her again?" asked Pansy.

Draco's face gave them the answer.

"Why not?" asked Theo in confusion.

"I don't know *how*," exclaimed Draco.

"It's pretty straightforward, really, you approach the witch, lips first, and then –" started Blaise as Pansy and Theo laughed. Draco just glared at him.

"I mean I don't know the right moment. She said she's still working out her feelings about our marriage, and she hasn't said anything else. I'm supposed to wait, right? Until she decides she likes me?"

"I thought you said she likes you," said Pansy in confusion. "Before we went through that mad plan of yours to marry her."

"No, I said she wants to *marry me*. I also said she doesn't hate me. I have never said she likes me."

"That is so fucked up Draco," said Pansy.

"I know!" he groaned.

He left that time with his friends with one piece of clear advice: Just Fucking Do It. But Draco still wasn't sure the best way to go about it, though Pansy's suggestion to start with the neck seemed to have some merit.

So for the next couple of nights Draco held his sleeping wife in his arms as he stared down at her neck, watching the pulse point thud in time to her heartbeat. He wanted to kiss her there. He wanted to see if she liked it as much as he liked the idea of it. But the moment was never quite *right*. What if she said no? What if she decided she only wanted some friendly comfort at night and the bare minimum physical relationship to satisfy the Ministry? What if she transformed into Angry Granger again and hexed his balls off? He was sure there would be a spell for something like that and Granger would know what it was. The word "anger," afterall, comprised two-thirds of her last name.

Or – worst case scenario – what if she sicced her orange beast on him?

Draco's relationship with the beast was tenuous, at best. Much of his first week of marriage had been spent in a staring contest with it, trying to assert his dominance, and losing. He got the idea from his mother who quickly reached some sort of agreement with it, though he wasn't certain how she achieved such a feat. But however she had done it, the beast seemed to largely ignore Narcissa, while it kept Draco under surveillance. With Lucius he was viciously underhanded, and when Draco caught the animal pissing on his father's favorite loafers, Draco knew he was right to be wary of it.

So no, Draco hadn't kissed Granger yet. Any number of things could go terribly wrong if he did, and he was reluctant to shatter their fragile union.

Granger herself seemed to keep busy during her first week engaging in something she called "lesson planning." As predicted, McGonagall had asked Granger to return to Hogwarts in the new year to not disrupt the students at the very end of term. Granger had floo'd to Hogwarts several times to observe the classes being taught in her stead, and she inevitably returned each afternoon huffing in annoyance about the standards being set by her substitute.

Other than her lesson planning, Granger mostly kept to herself, except at mealtimes when she seemed to take great delight in antagonizing Lucius. Draco was torn between humor and dismay after every meal. He really *did* want his parents and his wife to get along eventually,

but he also had to acknowledge his father was a giant arse and Granger was delightful whenever she baited him. The most surprising discovery – and something Draco was still processing – was the realization that his wife and his father were actually very much alike. They were both interested in politics, they were both magically powerful, they could verbally spar with the best of them, and they were not afraid to do almost *anything* to get what they wanted. If they hadn't been on opposite sides of virtually every issue that had ever come between them, Draco thought they would be a formidable team. But as it was, neither of them were willing to bend on their principles for the other, and Draco thought it unwise to point out their similarities to either one of them.

By the time Saturday rolled around, Granger had exhausted her list of insults for her substitute teacher, Lucius was prowling around the Manor randomly hexing things in annoyance, Narcissa was coolly unruffled, and Draco was very sexually frustrated. In the outside world some intriguing things were happening too: namely, Weasley and Prudence were still in Azkaban. Evidently Prudence hadn't forgiven him long enough to shag him and decided to pull a Granger and stay, complete with op-eds to *The Daily Prophet* and everything.

It was causing an endless number of headaches for Kingsley Shacklebolt because it was now drawing the ire of the purebloods who had previously written off Granger.

Minister Being Taken to Task for Failure to Safeguard the Sacred 28!

MLPP Amendment Did Not Go Far Enough to Halt Unreasonable Azkaban Stays!

Prison Conditions in Azkaban Worse than Ever!

Will Shacklebolt Face a Vote of No Confidence?

Draco really didn't know how things could get any more interesting — short of finally kissing his wife, that is — until said wife announced at breakfast that her mysterious etiquette tutor would be arriving at the Manor that morning.

"You still haven't said who it is," chided Narcissa.

"Consider it a surprise," said Granger sweetly, as Lucius harrumphed.

It wasn't long after that when Patsy arrived, announcing Mistress Hermione's visitors, and Draco found himself following his wife out of sheer curiosity to discover who it could be. He couldn't help but notice that his mother and father were trailing behind as well.

The group entered the foyer, when a childlike shout echoed through the hall.

"AUNT MINNIE!"

His wife was nearly bowled over by a small boy, who came careening down the hall and attached himself firmly to her midriff.

"Teddy bear!" she laughed as she dropped to her knees and gave him a firm hug. For a split second Draco was wondering why the magic permitted it, but then he remembered it only

prevented Granger from being touched by wizards who were of age. This little boy clearly was not.

“Aunt Minnie! Aunt Minnie! Gran said you were on a trip!”

“That’s one word for it,” muttered Granger, as she ruffled the little boy’s hair. Draco peered down at him curiously and saw a familiar nose and chin and wild curls that were softer than Granger’s but just as unkempt. He had sparkling hazel eyes and a large smudge of dirt on his cheek.

Then Draco looked up and thought his heart might be failing him.

For a split second he was sure he was looking at Bellatrix. But then he blinked and realized the woman he was staring at had softer features. Her hair was lighter. Her eyes were not quite as hooded, and her cheeks were more rounded. But she still had the sharp nose and haughty features that all of the Black women possessed.

He spun around to look at his mother, and saw that she appeared to be at a loss for words. It was such an odd expression that he did a double take. Narcissa was hardly ever truly ruffled. Then he glanced at his father, who looked faintly ill.

“Andy,” said Granger, and she stood and then *hugged* the woman Draco now knew must be his Aunt Andromeda.

“Hermione,” said the woman in a voice that again sounded so similar to Bellatrix’s, except that it was warm. “It’s been too long my dear.”

“Well you know me. Stubborn until the end.”

Andromeda laughed, and Draco couldn’t tear his eyes from her. She sounded like his mother when she laughed. She was such an odd blend of both of her sisters.

“Andy, have you met my husband? This is Draco Malfoy.”

“My nephew, of course,” she said with a sly grin, as she approached Draco to hold out her hand. Draco’s manners instinctively took over as he bowed over her hand. “Charmed, Draco. It’s been far too long since I’ve seen you.”

Draco furrowed his brow in confusion and shot his mother a look. He couldn’t recall *ever* meeting his Aunt Andromeda. He was shocked to see Narcissa turning a bit red, as though embarrassed by something, and Lucius was narrowing his eyes as he studied her.

“Aunt Minnie!” demanded the small boy, who evidently felt he had been ignored long enough.

Granger dropped back to her knees to be on the same level as him.

“Yes, buddy?”

“Did you really get *married*? ”

He said the word as though it was a swear word, and Draco found himself chuckling a little at this. Andromeda and Granger both were too, and even his mother cracked a small smile.

“Yes, I really did get married.”

“You didn’t *kiss* him did you?”

Well fuck.

Granger glanced up at Draco, looking inordinately amused. “Hmmm, not at our wedding, no.”

Then the boy frowned, as though Granger had just said something puzzling, but then his expression cleared, and he mercifully changed the subject.

“Aunt Minnie, show me your special powers!”

Granger chuckled and then to Draco’s surprise she held out her hand, palm up. She whispered something low under her breath and then bubbles emerged from her palm, which caused the small boy to whoop with glee as he tried to catch them.

Holy fuck, wandless magic?

Draco blinked at his wife in amazement, but she didn’t seem to think anything was unusual. He glanced at his parents and saw they both appeared to be gobsmacked as well. Then she whispered something else and the bubbles stopped.

“No fair! I want more!” he whined.

“Not now, Teddy. Maybe somebody else wants to show you their special powers.”

The little boy now turned expectantly to Draco and his parents.

“Well?” he demanded, looking at Narcissa. “What’s your special power? Aunt Minnie’s is bubbles and fire and Gran’s is storytelling.”

Draco made a mental note to explore whatever *fire powers* his wife evidently possessed at a later date. He couldn’t decide if the notion was terrifying or arousing.

By now Narcissa seemed to have collected herself, because she stared down at him imperiously before raising one eyebrow. “Ballroom dancing,” she said.

“I can dance!” cried the boy, and then he started doing what could only be described as an inelegant sort of wiggle. “Aunt Minnie does dance breaks with me!”

“It’s true,” agreed Granger, very seriously. “We’ve recently discovered boy bands.”

Draco had no idea what she was talking about, but he was saved from having to ask when the little boy turned to Lucius. “What’s *your* special power?”

Lucius snorted, and the boy frowned. “Aunt Minnie says *everybody* has a special power!”

“His special power is finding bad guys,” supplied Granger.

Draco started to laugh and tried to camouflage it with a cough. He glanced at his Aunt Andromeda, who was wearing a truly Slytherin-worthy smirk at this comment, while Lucius glowered. Teddy, of course, was deeply impressed.

“Whoa...” he breathed, his eyes huge. “You can find *bad guys*? ”

“He has found *so* many bad guys,” confirmed Granger seriously. “More than I can count.”

Teddy was staring at Lucius like he was some kind of hero, and Lucius shifted uncomfortably.

Then Granger nudged Teddy, and nodded toward Draco. “Why don’t you ask him? He’s your cousin, you know.”

My cousin.

Draco blinked, realizing Granger was mostly correct. He knew he had a cousin he had only met a handful of times during fifth year who had died in the war. This was her son.

“First cousin once removed,” clarified Draco automatically.

“No need to be pedantic,” said Granger, rolling her eyes. “Teddy has always wanted a cousin.”

“Yeah, only Victoire has cousins!”

“Teddy, all of Victoire’s cousins *also* have cousins,” said Granger.

“No they don’t, it’s only Victoire!”

Even Lucius almost cracked a smile at that.

“Well Draco is *your* cousin. And look at that, you have a *big* cousin, and all of Victoire’s cousins are little. Go on, ask him about his special power.”

Draco thought frantically while the boy’s large eyes were turned to him. Then the answer slipped out.

“I can read minds.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “Wicked...” he breathed. “Can you read mine?”

He glanced at Andromeda, whose eyes were narrowed a little and Granger who was watching him cautiously.

Draco knelt down and placed a hand on Teddy’s shoulder. “Look me in the eye and don’t blink,” he said.

Teddy's eyes were boring into Draco's as he reached out with some very surface-level legilimency. Almost immediately a couple of Teddy's secrets swam to the surface before he blinked and Draco dropped the connection.

Then he reached into Teddy's pocket and pulled out a rather squished chocolate frog. "I believe you took this from your gran's handbag."

Teddy gulped and ducked his head as he bashfully handed the chocolate frog back to Andromeda. Then he turned back to Draco with his eyes wide.

"Flying is also one of my special powers," added Draco.

Teddy furrowed his brow. "Flying is Uncle Harry's special power!"

Draco scoffed at this. "Please. I am a far better flyer than your Uncle Harry."

He saw Granger rolling her eyes at this and giving him a look that clearly said, *drop it*.

"Teddy, why don't you show cousin Draco *your* special power then?" she said instead.

Draco stared down at the little boy curiously, and then to his utter shock he screwed up his face and turned his hair the precise shade of blonde as Draco's. In fact, he appeared to be a Draco in miniature.

He spun around to look at his parents, who were both gaping.

"He's... he's..." said Narcissa faintly.

"I'm a mettymogas!" announced Teddy proudly.

"A metamorphagus, yes," corrected Granger gently. "You sure are."

Andromeda gave Narcissa a slightly challenging look. "Surely you recall that Nymphadora was a metamorphagus too. She also mimicked Draco when they met as young children, don't you remember?"

Draco turned and stared at his mother again, who was turning red.

"It's been a long time, Andy," said Narcissa stiffly.

Andromeda rolled her eyes. "Yes, and it seems some things never change. You have always been very good at making use of selective amnesia when it suits you. Very well. We shall pretend for the sake of your domestic bliss that you never sought me out after Mother and Father disowned me and our children have never known each other. It is no great matter to me if that is how you wish to behave. I may have few blood relatives left, but I have an extended adopted family that fills my time very well."

Narcissa was pale, but said nothing as Andromeda turned to Granger. "Now then, Hermione. Why don't you explain this etiquette nonsense to me. Am I to understand you really feel like you need lessons?"

"It has been implied that they would be helpful," said Granger demurely.

Andromeda snorted and then turned to the Malfoys as a group. "You should know that she's aware of the histories of the Black and Malfoy families in intimate detail. I'd wager she could name the birth and death dates of each ancestor going back seven hundred years without making an error. In fact, she can do it for every family in the Sacred Twenty-Eight. She made a point to learn it while working at the think tank. Furthermore, her manners and etiquette are sublime *when she wishes to use them.*"

She gave a knowing look at Granger. "Let me guess, you've been pretending to be common just to get under their skin."

Granger smirked. "I do like to fulfill expectations."

Andromeda rolled her eyes and looked back at her sister. "Hermione's paternal grandmother was from a noble muggle family, Cissy. Had she been a boy, her father would be titled. I can assure you, Hermione knows how to take tea."

Narcissa's eyes widened, and then turned to give Granger a scandalized look. "What happened then?"

Granger shrugged negligently. "Oh you know how it goes. Granny Granger married somebody she shouldn't have, and she rather lost touch with that branch of the family. She decided to give up things like titles for love."

She exchanged a fond look with Andromeda as she said this, and Draco was struck by the parallels. It was no wonder Andromeda was aware of this story.

"Anyway," continued Granger, "it's true I've been a bit naughty..."

Oh fuck, be naughty.

Draco shoved the intrusive thought away.

"...but I promise I'll start using the correct utensils, provided I can continue to visit Teddy here on the weekends. It's easier than going to his home."

"Of course," said Draco instantly, before his father could disagree.

Granger gave him a genuine smile before she led the small boy and Andromeda into a nearby parlor. They arranged themselves on a sofa, and, not knowing what else to do, the Malfoys settled on a different sofa on the other side of the room. Then Granger reached for a tiny backpack the boy was wearing.

"Alright Teddy, let's spend twenty minutes practicing your reading, and then you can pick a story for me to read to you."

The little boy nodded agreeably and climbed onto Granger's lap as he started to sound out the words in a simple book. He still looked just like Draco, and Draco felt his magic react to it.

She should be holding your son. She should be filled with your seed. She should be the mother of your children.

Fuck, but the image was a powerful one, and Draco turned to find his parents watching too. A whole host of emotions flashed across his mother's face as she watched. Narcissa seemed to realize that regardless of her blood status, Granger would make an *exceptional* mother. She had no trouble at all connecting to the little boy. Her patience was endless as she explained the concept of the silent 'e' in an age-appropriate way at least six times. She gave encouragement and high-fives, and after ten minutes of practice they took a 'wiggle break' where she flicked her wand toward the wireless and danced it out with Teddy for one song before settling down for more practice.

She was so much softer like this and so different from the snarky, Angry Granger that had been floating around the Manor since they got married. Draco couldn't find a single fault with her like this, and he suspected his mother couldn't either.

After watching for about fifteen minutes, Narcissa suddenly stood and threw a look toward Lucius that clearly said he was expected to follow too. Granger glanced at them briefly as they moved out of the room but then refocused on Teddy. Draco hesitated, but eventually stood as well and followed his parents. He came to a halt when he heard their voices arguing in Lucius's office.

"I'm going to see my sister, Lucius," said Narcissa firmly. "You've stopped me for years, but I'm done."

"Narcissa, she's—"

"I know what she is, Lucius! But this is ridiculous! Our son is married to a muggleborn for Merlin's sake, and we haven't disowned him! There is no reason in the world why I can't see my sister who did exactly the same thing!"

"It will be tacit approval of Draco's match if you do that, Cissy," said Lucius sternly. "You cannot! I am putting together a plan and—"

But Narcissa interrupted him, and Draco's eyebrows flew up in surprise. His mother rarely lost her temper.

"This whole plan of yours has been ridiculous from the start! Draco is obviously *infatuated* with the Granger girl, and fighting it is just going to drive them both away from us!"

"He will move on!" insisted Lucius. "We can get the marriage annulled and—"

"Enough!" she cried. "Give it up, Lucius! The world is changing! I want grandchildren, and Merlin help me but that young woman in there would mother them *far* better than Astoria ever would! I'm not saying that I'm thrilled about her blood! And I don't expect you to change your mind about that either! But I do expect you to take a hard look at your only son's very obvious feelings and *behave!* And you will not keep me from my family any longer! Andy's husband has been dead for years, and that darling little boy in there may be my only chance to be involved in a child's life again if Ms. Granger decides that she doesn't

wish to bear *your* grandchildren. Frankly, after the appalling way you treat her I wouldn't blame her if she decides to avoid it!"

Draco's stomach lurched at this.

"She can't avoid it," scoffed Lucius. "Not unless she's willing to go to Azkaban again!"

"You're being foolish," said Narcissa harshly. "First of all, she's perfectly capable of avoiding a pregnancy in natural ways. That law of yours did not capture every possible method of prevention, and I know for a fact that Ms. Granger has identified its weak points. Furthermore, don't you think she *will* be willing to return to Azkaban if she decides she doesn't wish to have marital relations with our son? And this time she will take Draco with her. I'm telling you right now Lucius, you need to straighten up and start treating her with minimum cordiality if you can't manage affection. Because grandchildren aside, I will *never* forgive you if you are the reason our son goes to Azkaban for a second time, and perverse inlaws do not inspire positive marital relationships!"

Draco was very still as he listened to his parents argue. He wondered if he should assuage his mother's fears about Azkaban. He knew Granger would consummate with him, but he hadn't told his parents about their unbreakable vow. Then again, if it would persuade his father to accept the marriage, Draco knew he would never breathe a word about it.

Draco heard his mother striding out of the room, and he ducked into an alcove so he wouldn't be seen. His father didn't follow, and Draco slowly made his way back to the parlor where Narcissa was now conversing cautiously with Andromeda. Granger was reading Teddy a story with plenty of dramatic voices and hand gestures.

As he watched the small boy giggle in her arms, Draco could only think of one thing.

I really want to kiss my wife.

Granger's good mood lasted for about an hour after Andromeda and Teddy finally departed with the promise of a visit the following Saturday. And then she got quiet and became practically morose by dinner. She was dwelling on something, Draco was sure of it, and dinner was a remarkably silent affair as Granger and his father both brooded separately. Draco and Narcissa tried to carry the conversation, but it was futile, and eventually they just hurried to finish and make their separate ways upstairs.

It wasn't until bedtime that Draco finally decided he had enough, and when he pulled Granger to him in their usual arrangement of arms and legs, he pressed the issue.

“What’s gotten into you this afternoon?”

“Hmmm?”

“You’ve been acting like Crookshanks died, but I know for a fact he deposited a hairball on my father’s desk not even twenty minutes ago. So tell me what’s wrong.”

She huffed a mirthless laugh at this before quieting. “Tomorrow’s Sunday.”

“And?” asked Draco in confusion.

“It’s my first Sunday out of prison.”

“That’s a good thing, yes?”

She just shrugged.

“Granger, I’m not as smart as you, and while it’s true I’m a rather proficient legilimens I usually make a point not to do it unless I’m asked. So please, tell me what’s bothering you so I don’t have to read your mind to find out.”

She sighed. “I go to the Weasleys’ home on Sundays for lunch.”

Ah.

Draco thought about how he should react to this. “And have you heard from any of them?”

She shrugged. “I turned down most of their visits in Azkaban. I did see Ginny a few times and George and Ron of course. But I never saw any of the others. I just couldn’t bring myself to face them with the way the wedding ended, and they only tried a couple times.”

Draco knew this of course. He had gotten her reports.

“Were Ginny and George cross with you?”

She shrugged. “George didn’t seem to care at all. Ginny was a little annoyed that the whole Matching Ceremony and Azkaban thing overshadowed her wedding to Harry and delayed their honeymoon, but I can’t really blame her for that. Besides, she got over it fairly quickly once I explained I just didn’t have those feelings for Ron and really didn’t mean for it to be so last minute. But now Ron has gone to Azkaban, and I don’t know where I stand with any of them.”

“You think they’ll resent you.”

“I’m *certain* Molly will, at least a little bit. Ginny’s fairly blunt and told me I was smart to avoid her mum when she tried to visit Azkaban. Molly was a lot angrier with me than Ginny was. But eventually Molly got used to Prudence, and Ginny said she would probably scold me the next time she saw me, but she was starting to come around. Of course, that was before Ron went to Azkaban too. I’m sure she will blame me for sending her precious son to prison.”

"It's not your fault though," insisted Draco. "It was Weasley's fault he went in the first place. And now I suppose it's Prudence's fault that he's still there."

Granger shook her head. "I'm certain that's not how she'll see it."

"Well you don't have to go tomorrow," said Draco reasonably. "You can wait until Weasley is out. It's not going to last forever. Either Prudence will cave or Shacklebolt will. The press she's generating is almost as bad as yours was."

Even though they were lying down, she seemed to slump a little. "It's just... they're practically my parents. With the exception of Azkaban and a few vacations I haven't missed Sunday lunch at the Burrow since the war ended."

Draco was still for a moment. "Your *actual* parents though..." he started.

"We don't really speak," she said shortly. "I... obliterated them to remove myself from their memories during the war and sent them to live in Australia for their safety. I was able to reverse it and they eventually moved back to England, but what I did to them was truly unforgivable. They are angry at me, Harry, Ron, the Weasleys, everybody. They blame everyone else for pushing me to do it, even though that wasn't the case – I obliterated them all on my own without telling anybody else about it first. I've never been able to make them see reason though, and it's easier not to try. These days we exchange holiday cards, but otherwise we don't really keep in touch. Molly and Arthur Weasley are my parents now."

Draco's heart broke, as he realized just how much she had given up because of him and others like him. She lost her real parents to keep them safe during the war. And now she might have lost the Weasleys too because she picked Draco.

"Listen," he said. "None of this is easy. But if you want to go see the Weasleys tomorrow you should. I'll even come with you if you want some moral support."

She turned around to look at him in surprise. "Really?" she said.

"Sure," he said, shrugging. "They'll probably be so pissed off to see me they'll forget all about you."

Her face softened at this as she turned to face him fully. Draco's heart started to pound. She was so, *so* close like this.

She studied him for a long while as she reached up and traced the lines on his face. Draco was holding his breath, not daring to move at all lest the spell be broken.

"Where did you come from, Draco Malfoy?" she whispered.

"Wiltshire," he said, and he was pleased to see a small smile cross her face at this.

"That's not what I mean. I'm wondering *how*. Your father can be an arse. Your mother's not so bad, but she's still rather cold. Then there's you..."

Draco said nothing as her finger trailed down his nose and then touched his lips hesitantly.

"You are just surprise after surprise," she acknowledged.

Draco felt her pulling her hand away, and on instinct he reached up and clasped it to his face for a moment before turning to kiss her palm.

Yes, keep doing that.

His magic hummed contentedly as he moved to kiss her pulsepoint on her wrist and then turned it over to kiss the back of it. It was like that day in Azkaban when he kissed her face. Once he started, he couldn't seem to stop. He kissed each knuckle and then the pad of each finger, and then her palm one last time before opening his eyes and staring down to find her watching him with huge eyes.

"I hope I'm interesting, at the very least," he whispered.

She said nothing but just nodded slowly as she laced his fingers in hers and then moved their hands to *her* face.

Draco looked down at her and gathered every bit of courage he had. This was it. This was a moment he could catch.

He leaned down slowly, cautiously, and she didn't pull away. And then her breath was on his face as his nose nudged hers to the side, and his lips finally connected with hers again after weeks of being apart.

Her lips were so soft, and Draco felt his head swim as his magic practically sighed in relief to have his lips on hers. Like the first time they kissed it was slow and chaste at first. But unlike their kiss in Azkaban, they weren't on any borrowed time here. Nobody would be disturbing them.

The realization made Draco's heart race as he disentangled his hand from Granger's and cupped her face all on his own. He felt her hand move forward to grip his shirt, as though trying to pull him closer.

And then, as though they had the same idea at precisely the same time their mouths opened, and Draco's tongue flicked out to taste her.

Years of coldness fell away as their kiss deepened, and tongues explored each other. He hadn't snogged a witch since his final year of Hogwarts, but he was certain it had never been quite like *this*. She was both soft and strong, supple and firm. It made his head swim as he lost himself in this kiss.

She started to pull back ever so slightly, and he chased her, demanding more, his own feelings and his magic inexorably entwined for the first time so that he didn't know where one stopped and the other began. She allowed it for a moment before she moved her head, and now Draco's lips were grazing the corner of her mouth and heading toward her neck.

Draco must have kissed other necks before, but he could scarcely remember doing it. Granger's neck, however, was calling to him like a siren, that pulse point he had stared at all

week fluttering. He kissed lightly at first and then harder, and then instinct took over and he licked her there too. His brain was being flooded with pheromones and marital magic that begged him to *suck*.

Mark her. Claim her.

For once he couldn't resist the prompts from the magic, and he did precisely that.

The sound she made when he started to suction her neck was somewhere between a gasp and a groan, and it went straight to Draco's cock. He was clutching at her, his hand moving down her side, desperate for more as she arched toward him. But the moment he released her neck to move to a different part of her she pulled back, breathing hard as she stared at him in shock.

Her eyes were dark, her hair mussed, and her lips were swollen. Her tongue darted out to lick her lower lip, and Draco's eyes automatically tracked it. He wondered if he looked as desperate as he felt. He was hard, his magic was demanding more, and she had never looked this shaggable, not even when he remembered her with all of her curves intact. But something on her face made him pause, and then she leaned forward and gave him one more, very chaste kiss. It was lovely, but effectively halted his progress.

Draco forced his face to stay passive as she turned her back to him and nestled against him like normal. Draco tried to adjust his hips away so she wouldn't feel just how eager he was for her. She was pressing pause, and Draco would accept it. It certainly wasn't *ideal*, when all he wanted at this moment was to be buried into her body, but he forced himself to look at it rationally. They had been married not even a week, and he finally kissed her – no, *snogged* her – and she enjoyed it. He was sure of it. Perhaps she was still working out her feelings about their marriage. Maybe she was just the type who needed several rounds to build up to more. Whatever the explanation, Draco wouldn't push her, not yet.

Still, as she settled against him, Draco couldn't resist dropping a kiss on the top of her head and then another light one against her ear as he whispered, "We'll go together tomorrow."

She nodded and didn't pull away as Draco gave her several more light kisses on her hair and cheek before closing his eyes.

He had done it. He had finally kissed his wife.

Chapter 14: A Prudent Visit

7 December 2003

Draco was clutching Granger's hand as she apparated them to a slightly unkempt front yard with a tall, but narrow house that appeared to be leaning precariously to one side. She was clearly nervous, anxiety rolling off of her in waves. She had put on a brave face when they woke up that morning, even lingering in bed a bit as Draco brushed the bare skin of her stomach where her top had ridden up at night. She didn't kiss him again, but she didn't appear to mind his wandering touch either, as he traced circles on her abdomen.

At breakfast she had been determinedly chatty with his mother, in stark contrast to the night before. But then she grew increasingly quiet and lines developed around her mouth as the morning wore on and the time for lunch approached.

Now she was here, clinging to him like a lifeline. Draco gave her an encouraging little squeeze, as they stepped forward and crossed the wards.

Immediately a caterwauling charm went off, and Granger stiffened in surprise.

The front door to the home flew open, and a round, squat witch with red flyaway hair streaked with gray came marching out, her wand in the pocket of an enormous apron. Behind her trailed an older man whom Draco vaguely recognized as Arthur Weasley, George Weasley with his distinctive gold ear, an older Weasley with a scarred face Draco didn't immediately recognize, and both Potters. He heard the shout of small children spilling from the house before the door slammed and cut it off.

Molly Weasley was leading the charge, and she was glowering while she did it.

This was the witch who had killed Bellatrix Lestrange, and for a split second Draco thought she might want to do the same thing to Granger. Instinctively he stepped in front of her.

"Mrs. Weasley," he said smoothly, relying on manners to get them through this. "Granger tells me that Sunday lunch at the Burrow is a weekly tradition."

The witch's eyes flashed, and she drew her wand on Draco, which caused both Potters to scramble forward.

"Mum!" cried Ginny, while Harry drew his too.

"Don't 'mum' me!" said the witch. "These two... *THESE TWO!*"

"Molly, we were just –" came Granger's voice from behind Draco, and he was alarmed by how small she sounded.

"You were just what! Leaving my Ronnie to rot in Azkaban like a common criminal? After you led him on for *years* and then jilted him at his own wedding? At my *only daughter's* wedding?"

"Mum, I told you it's fine," said Ginny in a long-suffering voice.

"It is not fine!" screeched Molly. "Your brother is in Azkaban because —"

"His wife refuses to consummate their marriage," interrupted Draco.

There was a deadly silence as the witch glared at him. "You have *no idea what* —"

"I do," said Draco calmly. "I know precisely what happened. Ronald played a game with my father and Minister Shacklebolt and lost. While he did it he failed to communicate his plans to his wife, and now she's decided she is more comfortable in prison than the marriage bed. Granger has nothing to do with it."

The witch snorted in disbelief. "Oh *please*. None of this would have happened if she hadn't *run!*"

"Molly," said Granger, now stepping aside. "I'm sorry I didn't work out my feelings about Ron until the last moment. Truly, I know I should have backed out before jilting him, but I wasn't certain until I was about to walk down the aisle. I swear I never meant to ruin the wedding day. But I realized I don't have those feelings for him, and I would rather be in Azkaban than married to somebody chosen for me — regardless of who does the choosing."

"But you're *not* in Azkaban any longer are you?" she said nastily. "My *Ronnie* is there instead!"

"Because he forced the issue!" cried Granger. "I would still be there if the Ministry hadn't passed the amendment!"

"And yet you chose a Death Eater instead of my son!" cried Molly. "You chose *him* — some man you barely know who did nothing but torment you for years instead of the young man who has loved you since you were children! The young man whose family practically raised you!"

Granger was clutching his hand so hard he wondered how his fingers weren't breaking. He could feel her shaking, whether with embarrassment or rage he couldn't be certain. The others around them were looking deeply uncomfortable, clearly in private agreement with Molly Weasley but not willing to verbalize it in quite the same way.

"I chose Draco because he asked me to," said Granger in a quivering voice. "Ron has... never really asked when he's wanted something from me. Over and over again he's assumed I would be there, and he just took things from me without checking to see if I was comfortable first. At least Draco *asked* me to marry him! Ron has never proposed — not even when we were engaged! You were the one who just told us we would marry each other!"

Draco blinked and stared down at his wife in slight disbelief that it had happened that way. At least Draco had put forth the minimum effort to propose to Astoria. And her words hinted at something else: constant pressure for a physical relationship that she didn't really want. Draco doubted Weasley ever gotten to the point of actually *assaulting* her – Granger would surely have cut him out of her life if he had done *that* – but had Weasley ever started slow and gauged her reactions while he built up to more? Had he ever checked in with her while they were together to see if he was crossing any lines? Had he ever felt her pull away and then not let her do it?

Thinking back to their brief encounters, Draco was realizing he hadn't behaved perfectly either. He had started slow and checked in with her once or twice. But the previous night he chased her a little when she started to pull away. He marked her without asking her first. And listening to her now, he was ashamed of it. He wouldn't be somebody who *took*. She didn't owe him a damn thing, and marriage or not he knew he had no right to her body.

"HE EARNED IT!" screeched Molly. "YOU MADE HIM BELIEVE FOR YEARS THAT YOU WERE HIS! HE NEVER LOOKED AT ANOTHER WOMAN BECAUSE OF YOU!"

Granger was shaking harder than ever, and Draco's mood was quickly turning dark.

She took a shuddering breath. "I can see we aren't welcome. I'll leave you in peace then."

"GOOD!" shouted Molly. "GO! GO LIVE YOUR LIFE WITH A DEATH EATER THEN! YOU SELFISH, SELFISH GIRL! FIRST YOUR PARENTS AND NOW –"

"MOLLY!" shouted Potter and Arthur at the same time.

Draco felt his own rage building, but his full attention was pulled to Granger, who gave a small sob and then released his hand to apparate away on the spot. Draco was left standing there alone, and the moment she was gone he rounded on Molly Weasley.

"Now you listen here," he snarled. "Whatever *claim* you think your son has on my wife is utter shite. She is a living, breathing *marvel*, and she was given an impossible choice in large part thanks to *him*. I want to be very clear about something: he is not entitled to her. She does not owe him a fucking thing, especially not after he betrayed her like this. He met with my father and Shacklebolt behind her back and never informed her he was doing it. And if he had been successful he would only have thirty days to consummate with her. Please, take a moment and think about what he would have had to do to her to get her to cooperate given that she would rather go to Azkaban than consummate a marriage with him in the first place!"

The entire group was shocked into silence, and Molly's mouth started to open and close as though she couldn't find words.

Draco stepped back, breathing hard.

"You all can hate me all you want, I truly don't give a shit. But believe it or not, this Death Eater actually cares about his wife. I will not allow you to hurt her any longer. Stay away from her until you're ready to be reasonable and recognize that the person who has been

wronged in all of this is *her*. Your son is in Azkaban because he fucked around with a shitty law in an effort to trap Granger into an unwanted marriage with him. It didn't work, and surprise surprise! His actual wife isn't too happy about it either. He only has himself to blame. If he had just stayed out of it and shagged Prudence when he had the chance we'd all be eating lunch together at this very moment."

He cast one last, disgusted look at them all, though the look he gave to Potter wasn't quite as hostile. Potter stepped forward.

"Malfoy, let me go see her."

"Not yet," said Draco shortly. "Not until she's calmed down. It's not like you can touch her anyway – the Malfoy marital magic won't allow it. I'm the only one who can do that. I'll tell her to owl you when she's ready to talk."

"Me too please," said Ginny softly.

Molly was looking mutinous, but also disturbed. Draco just gave a curt nod to Ginny and turned to leave. As he was about to apparate away, he heard Ginny say, "Mum you crossed a huge line."

An imperfect defense, but better than nothing, he thought. He would tell Granger the Potters seemed to be on her side as soon as he could find her. It was time to fulfill his husbandly duties and comfort his distraught wife.

It took Draco nearly twenty minutes to locate Granger in a spare bedroom, door locked and sobbing. He tried to get in, but the bloody witch had warded him out, and she refused to answer when he knocked or called for her.

Not knowing what else to do, he called for Patsy and told her to keep Granger company and to make sure she had anything she needed. He had never encountered so much heartbreak, and he didn't know what else to do. Maybe she was the type who needed to be alone for a couple hours before accepting comfort. He decided to give her some time to herself and try again before dinner.

When he knocked a few hours later, she still wouldn't answer, and Patsy reported that Mistress had cried herself to sleep. Draco sighed, but just nodded. He couldn't blame her for needing some rest after that encounter, and he wouldn't disturb her. But he instructed Patsy to bring dinner to her the moment she woke and to ensure Granger ate every bite. He would give her space if she needed it, but he wouldn't let her go off of food. The week of real meals had already been transformative, and she no longer looked emaciated. But she was still far too thin.

He didn't see her at all that evening, and when bedtime rolled around he was starting to get worried.

"Patsy!" he called.

Patsy appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Yes Master?"

"Is Granger alright? I would have thought she would let me see her by now. She prefers to sleep with me."

Patsy twisted her tea towel a bit uncomfortably. "Mistress is asking Patsy to bring her some things so she can sleep in the other room, Sir. I think she is wanting to be alone."

Draco's heart stuttered, not at all prepared to give up sleeping with Granger now that they had been doing it for a week. But he just swallowed and nodded once, knowing that he had no choice but to accept it. After that disaster at the Burrow he told himself he wouldn't be like Weasley. He wouldn't just take. He wouldn't act entitled to *anything* when it came to Granger. He was damned lucky she had married him at all, and if she wanted to sleep alone he would let her. As much as Lucius might dislike her, Draco had never believed she was in any real danger by sleeping alone. Perhaps she had come to the same conclusion after living there for a week.

He sighed and prepared for bed, feeling her absence more keenly than he thought possible. Just one week and already she was under his skin and habits had formed. It was like a phantom limb missing her at night, and his magic protested vehemently. It wanted his wife in bed with him. *Draco* wanted his wife in bed with him. But it was no use, and Draco eventually fell into a light, fitful sleep.

16 December 2003

Granger was avoiding him.

For the past week and a half she had reverted to a version of herself that could only be described as coolly professional. She joined Draco and his parents for breakfast the day after the Weasley fiasco with her mask in place. She no longer seemed to be upset. She didn't seem to be feeling much of anything. Draco idly wondered if she was occluding.

Her voice never wavered, as she generally ignored his father and made small talk with his mother, her manners for once exceptional. Draco was certain now that Andromeda had been telling the truth, and Granger had simply been fucking with his parents at the beginning when she pretended like she didn't know how to behave. The Granger he saw now was flawless.

She always ate quickly and left without telling any of them where she was going. She only reappeared in the evening just in time for dinner, where she adeptly steered the conversation away from anything about herself. Then she disappeared into the same room she had slept in ever since the fight at the Weasleys, barely sparing Draco a glance.

It was excruciating, and Draco felt his magic wilt at her obvious intent to stay away from him.

This she had done for an entire week, her newfound veneer only cracking when Andromeda and Teddy showed up for another visit. Granger appeared to be genuinely fond of Teddy, and Draco made a point to sit in on their lessons, as he listened to her regale the small boy with stories of his parents and, to Draco's slight surprise, "Uncle Harry's" parents too. Who knew that James Potter and Sirius Black had been best friends with each other along with a werewolf? His mother had never spoken of her cousins very much, but it did explain any number of things – for instance, why Harry Potter had inherited the ancestral Black family home and why Teddy Lupin was his godson.

After Teddy and Andromeda left, however, Granger reverted to her new, detached self. She was practically morose on Sunday, though again Draco only caught glimpses of her around the Manor, and then she was back to disappearing again on Monday. Draco had assumed she was going to Hogwarts and perhaps that was partially true – but when she returned Monday evening he happened to be in the foyer when she arrived and discovered her coming through the front door and not the floo. She was utterly bedraggled, as though she had been caught in the sleet that was coming down in sheets outside.

"What on earth happened to you?" he demanded.

"I was outside," she supplied unhelpfully.

"Why?"

She gave him an annoyed look. "Because I was coming back from Azkaban."

"*Azkaban!*" asked Draco in shock. Surely she wasn't visiting *Weasley*?

"Yes, to see Prudence," she said, as she shook off her cloak and then swept past him to head to her new room.

Draco was so surprised, he was frozen in place while he processed this. Before he could think to ask her anything else, she was gone.

She didn't appear for dinner that night, and at breakfast the next morning she was largely silent as the post was delivered. She read *The Daily Prophet* quietly, as Draco looked sideways at a small envelope that had been addressed to her, with a return address in Hampstead Garden Suburb. He frowned. It looked to be a muggle address. She seemed to sense him staring at it, however, because she slipped it into her pocket and cast a fierce look at him that told him he wasn't supposed to ask. Draco didn't press her about it because he suspected he already knew who lived there.

He just sighed and ate in silence as he waited for her to disappear yet again, and sure enough it wasn't long before she was sweeping out of the room to go do whatever it was she was doing all day *without* Draco.

He pushed his eggs around moodily with his fork.

"What on earth have you done, Draco?" his mother finally asked.

Draco shrugged. "I don't know. I went with her to see the Weasleys a couple Sundays ago, and it went horribly. She's barely spoken to me since."

"You didn't do anything, did you?"

"I threatened them a little, but only after she was gone. No, I think she's second guessing everything."

Lucius perked up at this, and Draco scowled at him.

"*Don't*, Father. I still want her very much. She's just sorting her own feelings."

Narcissa opened her mouth to speak, but Draco couldn't stand to listen to his parents question him about it any further. He shoved his chair back from the table.

"I'm going out," he said curtly, and he strode out of the breakfast room and into the foyer, where he left through the front door toward the apparition point. He wasn't sure *why* he was doing this, other than the fact that he wanted to get to the bottom of whatever was going on in Granger's mind, and she seemed very reluctant to share it with him directly.

He made it to the apparition point and turned with a *CRACK!* soon appearing at the familiar dock. The air was colder than the last time he had been here. Winter was fully setting in, and Draco cast a warming charm as he climbed into one of the small boats and launched off.

Twenty minutes later he found himself staring at the door to Azkaban once again, and he raised his hand to knock. He wasn't terribly surprised to find Maywood on duty at the front, though Maywood seemed surprised to see Draco there.

"Mr. Malfoy, it's been too long," he grinned as he let him in.

"I hope everything worked out well for you after our last encounter?" asked Draco.

Maywood waved him off. "The boss wasn't happy, I can tell you that much, but I took your advice and followed protocol strictly. There wasn't anything he could do about it without exposing his own little racket."

Draco nodded in satisfaction. He had hoped that was the case.

"Well I'm here to see Prudence Weasley," said Draco. "If she'll allow it, of course."

The guard raised an eyebrow. "Just like your wife then."

“Pardon?” asked Draco in what he hoped was a casual voice.

Maywood snorted. “Your wife. She’s been visiting Mrs. Weasley every day for the last week and a bit.”

Draco blinked, feeling both surprised and foolish.

“Well Prudence is an old friend of mine,” he said carefully.

Maywood gave him a knowing look, but said nothing more as he went back to check on Prudence. To Draco’s relief she consented to the visit, and soon Draco found himself back in the small room where he got married.

“I said my vows here,” he muttered, as he walked in to find Prudence already sitting at the table.

“Draco,” she said cordially, though there was some frostiness in her tone.

“Prudence,” he said. “I hate to see you like this.”

She gave an inelegant snort. “Yes, well, between your father, my husband, and my best friend it seems that most everyone forgot about *me*.”

There was an awkward pause as Draco absorbed this. It was true he had hardly spared Prudence a second thought when making his plan to marry Granger. He didn’t think about what would happen to her if Draco successfully intervened.

“I heard my wife’s been by to visit,” he said in an effort to switch the subject.

Prudence raised an eyebrow. “Yes. I’ll admit I was not keen to see her the first time, but I’m afraid my curiosity got the better of me.”

“And?”

Prudence sighed. “And I wish I could hate her, but I don’t. It’s not her fault Ron did what he did.”

“And how is he?” asked Draco carefully. “I haven’t heard.”

Prudence rolled her eyes.

“Trying to find out if your wife has been visiting him? She’s not. I get his reports, and he gets mine.”

Draco exhaled with relief. He wasn’t exactly proud of it, but he had to acknowledge that was one reason he came.

“I’m not a fan of Weasley’s,” said Draco. “He hurt Granger.”

“And me,” pointed out Prudence. “He really hurt me.”

Draco gave her a sympathetic look. She appeared troubled.

“You really had no idea then?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. None. In fact... we were getting along. He was kind to me. He said he wanted to take things slow, and I appreciated that. It was all rather new for me of course, but he seemed to be making an effort to make the marriage work. I actually...”

“You actually what?”

“I fell for him,” admitted Prudence.

Draco stared at her in slight disbelief. Prudence caught his expression and scowled.

“Don’t look at me like that Draco, I did. And Merlin help me, but I thought I had actually gotten luckier than Astoria for once. She was always so confident in her match with you. Not that she cared about you very much...”

Draco snorted in agreement.

“...but she never worried about finding her person because she had you. Then you jilted her – I still have very mixed feelings about that by the way – and suddenly we were on the same page. Of course, my name got called and hers didn’t, and for a while I thought she was the lucky one *again*. She had lost you, but she still had her freedom to find somebody else and Merlin knows Beatrice is relentless when it comes to that sort of thing. But after a few weeks I realized Ron was funny and was trying hard to be kind. His family did what they could to embrace me. I knew I wasn’t *Hermione*, but the fact that she jilted him made several of the Weasleys very angry. It opened a door to give me an in. After a couple months I was smitten, and I thought that luck had turned in *my* favor for once. No, I hadn’t picked my husband, but I really liked who had been chosen for me. I thought I could even fall in love with him, which was more than I ever dreamed to have.”

“Prudence,” sighed Draco.

She grimaced. “I know. Believe me, I know. It was stupid of me. Then he went behind my back to get Hermione anyway. It broke my heart.”

“That’s why you’re still here then,” said Draco.

“No, I’m still here because the law is terrible, and Hermione was inspirational. I wanted to hate her, but I couldn’t. She told me she’s never felt that strongly for Ron, and she thinks he never felt that strongly for her either. She was just the comfortable choice, the easy choice. That and there is so much history there that he felt the need to save her from you in some misguided way. She was actually shocked to hear that he seemed to try for me, at least at the beginning. She says he never really did that for her.”

Draco frowned. He had to admit that it *was* out of character for Weasley to try to adapt. If he really had then perhaps hope wasn’t lost for Prudence.

“If you really want him Prudence...”

"I do, but not like this," she insisted. "That's what Hermione and I have been talking about for the last week – her history with Ron, and the ironic fact that she and I have found ourselves with an identical problem."

"Which is what?"

"Wanting our husbands, even though we shouldn't."

Draco's heart seized. "She wants me?" he said carefully. At one point he thought she must, but her behavior since that disastrous meeting at the Weasleys had shaken his self-confidence. He had never met somebody who could swing between hot and cold like Granger.

Prudence laughed a little. "She does. Very much. And it's messing with that enormous head of hers. She told me about the meeting with the Weasleys and the things Molly said."

"It was cruel," said Draco.

"I agree," said Prudence, "but not entirely wrong either. You *were* a Death Eater, and your parents hate the kind of people Hermione represents. By all rights, Hermione shouldn't want you. She should want Ron and the security his family could give her. It's confusing for her. Plus that dig about her parents..."

"She told you about that?"

"Of course. I've spent hours talking to her this past week."

"Molly shouldn't have mentioned their obliviation," said Draco hotly. "That was way out of line."

"Oh I don't think that's what Molly was referencing," said Prudence.

Draco looked at her in confusion.

"No, Molly was referring to the fact that Hermione never told her parents she was marrying Ron. And she also hasn't told them that she went to prison and then married you instead. She feels exceptionally guilty about it, but she doesn't know how to bridge that gap with them after so much has happened. Apparently her failure to confess her engagement to Ron was a sore point between her and Molly for months. The family was split about it. Some of the Weasleys and Harry supported Hermione's silence about it, but some of the other Weasleys didn't. They felt it was dismissive of their family – like she was in denial about her impending marriage because she couldn't be honest with her parents about it."

Draco just stared at Prudence. He had no idea.

"She wants them to know though?" he asked slowly. "Everything?"

Prudence nodded. "Yes, but her parents really resent Ron and Harry. She told me they resent most wizards. The few times she has interacted with them since the war was over, she has pretended the wizarding world doesn't exist and underplayed her own role in the Dark Lord's

defeat. But they're her parents, Draco. She loves them and wants them in her life. How is she supposed to tell them about her failed engagement to Ron? And now she's supposed to tell them that not only did she marry a *different* wizard three months after her engagement fell apart, but she married a former Death Eater whose agenda was the entire reason she Obliviated them in the first place? She told me she's always held out hope that they would be able to patch things up eventually, but I think Molly's comment reminded her of just how much she hasn't told them. She doesn't think she will ever have them in her life now."

Draco's stomach sank as he realized Prudence was probably correct.

"And as for *me*," added Prudence bitterly, "how am I supposed to work it out with a husband who went behind my back like that? I understand why he wanted to save Hermione. She's exceptional, and they were the closest of friends. But she rejected him at their wedding, and he *still* couldn't let it go. Whether he really wants her romantically or not is a bit of an open question, but it appears that he never imagined anything else because she has been such a fixture in his life since they were children. Regardless of his motives, he betrayed me just as much as he betrayed her. Between that and the fact that my being here is continuing to highlight just how lousy the MLPP is, I'm not inclined to shag him any time soon. It doesn't keep me from wanting him though, even though I shouldn't."

Draco gave her a sympathetic look. "This is a damned mess."

"It is," she agreed. "It's all an enormous tangle with far too many hurt feelings and competing desires. Hermione wants you, but she also wants her parents. She wants to be friends with Ron and his family again, but she wants some retribution for what he did and the things Mrs. Weasley said. I would like to shag Ron's brains out, but then Shacklebolt wins, and Hermione and I both agree that is the one thing that *can't* happen. And most of all, I want to be able to enjoy a Sunday lunch at the Burrow with my husband, his family, and my new friend Hermione and her husband Draco – whom I always liked much more than Astoria did, by the way. Ideally that Sunday lunch would happen after the MLPP has been repealed."

She gave him a kind smile at this, and Draco smiled back. He had always liked Prudence too, and it occurred to him that this was probably the longest conversation he had ever had with her. Most of their encounters over the years had involved Astoria as well.

"It sounds like a pipe dream doesn't it?" he acknowledged.

"Yes," she sighed. "And I truly don't know what should be done to get us to that point."

"The MLPP is where we begin," said Draco slowly. "That and some groveling too. I assume Weasley has groveled?"

"Extensively," she confirmed, her eyes twinkling.

"Well that's a start," said Draco. "But don't let him get off too easily."

"Oh I won't," said Prudence firmly. "There's a long way to go before I trust him again."

Draco rose and Prudence did too.

"Hang in there, Pru," he said. "I'll come by to visit again, unless you take pity on Weasley and jump him during your next conjugal."

Prudence laughed lightly. "Thanks, Draco. You should assume I'll be here at least until the new year, if not longer – I plan to keep him hanging."

"And he hasn't... forced himself on you in any way?" asked Draco carefully. "During a conjugal, I mean. I assume he can request one with you."

She looked at him askance. "Of course not. Ron would never do that."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "He told Shacklebolt he would do whatever it took to make sure Granger consummated with him in the time limit if he married her."

Prudence frowned. "Perhaps he said that, but I really don't think he would *force* a woman to have sex with him. Coax and cajole... sure. But force? No, he's not capable of that, Draco. He would have done it to me already if that were true. He *hates* it here, even more than I do. I'm sure he just meant that he would try his best to convince her and would say anything or promise anything to get it done."

Draco felt a squirm of guilt, as he remembered the thing he had said to the Weasleys about him. It wasn't *false* exactly, but it implied he would commit certain acts Prudence believed him incapable of performing.

What a fucking mess.

It was. The whole thing was an enormous mess, and Draco scarcely knew how to begin cleaning it up. He knew he had to try though, because he would never have his wife the way he wanted her if things continued to be this broken.

Draco smiled tightly at Prudence as he turned to leave, nodding at the guard who had been in the room silently the whole time. By the time he left the prison and made it to the small dock on the other side, Draco was nearly frozen but scarcely noticed due to the thoughts swirling in his head. Things were bad. Things were messy. Things were decidedly not right.

Draco apparated back to the Manor and shut himself in his room. He sat down at his desk and began to craft a plan to fix it.

Chapter 15: To Woo A Wife

Chapter Notes

I must confess this is one of my favorite chapters in this fic. I hope you enjoy reading it as much I enjoyed writing it.

Several hours later

Draco stared down at the words scribbled on his piece of parchment. Prudence's insistence that Granger wanted him had given Draco hope again, but he knew she was fighting herself about it. And she was stubborn — *very* stubborn — so Draco determined he had to win her over.

What was the appropriate word for this? Wooing? Seduction? Enticement? Temptation?

He wasn't certain, but he knew he could no longer sit back and let Granger's stubbornness and hyper-rational tendencies drive their relationship. She would never make the first move if things continued like this, and that meant Draco would be waiting forever if he didn't do *something*. Nailing down that something, however, posed a bit of a challenge.

Draco was still committed to his earlier decision not to *take*. He also had no great urge to *cajole*. While it was true he had asked her to marry him repeatedly, Draco really wanted his wife to come to him. Besides, now that he knew Weasley had done that to her for years, it rather put him off of that tactic for future efforts. Draco was a Malfoy and should be naturally better at this sort of thing than a Weasley, after all.

No, Draco wouldn't take or cajole. He would woo. He would convince that beautiful mind of hers that he was good for her, despite their history and family issues. He would draw her back to him so he could kiss those lips and neck and tits and...

Just find her and fuck her you imbecile.

Draco shoved his magic away. It had become more ornery since Granger put up her walls.

Draco doubled down on his plan to make Granger come to him, and knew he would have to be intentional and methodical. He could do this. He just had to figure out *what* to do.

His first order of business was organizing his thoughts, so he started by making a list of things he knew she did and didn't like.

Likes

That mad cat of hers

Books

Snuggles (maybe?)

Winning

Steak

Fucking with my parents

Disney movies

Teddy & Aunt Andy

Politics

Potter(s)

Smoked salmon

Dislikes

My parents

The MLPP

Bigots

Weasleys (temporary)

Shacklebolt and the Wizengamot (likely permanent)

Relationship with her parents

When I turn into a caveman (possibly neutral?)

Health checks

Azkaban

The fact that she's attracted to me

Draco frowned as he stared down at the lists. He'd been seeing her frequently for more than three months and married for more than two weeks, and this was all he could come up with. Shouldn't a husband know his wife's favorite flower or her favorite color or whether she prefers Belgian to Swiss chocolate for her monthlies (Draco was no longer certain if Pansy's preferences were universal)? How had he failed to learn these things?

He narrowed his eyes as he read over them again and decided that he had to find some way to move the relationship with her parents and the fact that she was attracted to Draco from the 'dislike' to the 'like' list. Those were the things that were critical if he was going to be allowed to sleep with her and touch her again, beyond the Ministry-imposed minimums.

Draco also hoped he could find a way to move his parents from 'dislike' to 'like,' because he sensed this was the key to long-term domestic bliss given their living arrangements. He wrinkled his nose and concluded the Weasleys would probably need to move too since they had the capacity to hurt her, and she would be Angry Granger until that issue was resolved. But Draco privately assigned them the lowest priority because he himself was still very angry with the lot of them too.

Ginny was a Potter now and no longer counted as a Weasley of course. Granger still had a couple of friends from her old life, and Draco sighed as he realized he might need to lean on that a little. He and Potter were capable of behaving around each other. They had proven that already. And perhaps if she saw that Draco was making an effort with her friends her brain would rewire itself a little and become less resistant to him. In any event, he needed Potter at least one more time to help with a certain Project he had in mind...

He grabbed a piece of parchment and jotted a note off to Potter before he could second guess himself and sent it off with his owl.

Then he scanned the list of 'likes' again, and his eyes landed on two other things he could work with while he waited for Potter to respond. He called an elf and requested some preparations, and then he went hunting for the creature that could truly make or break his marriage with Granger.

Draco found the beast performing what could only be described as barrel rolls across his father's prized Persian rug in the study. With each rotation he left behind a trail of thick, orange hair that he then turned and walked across several times to grind it into the rug.

Draco allowed him to complete his chores before drawing his attention.

"Beast," he said.

The animal gave him an unimpressed look.

"I have come to propose a truce. Nay, an alliance."

The beast studied him and cocked his head at this suggestion. Draco took this as an invitation to continue. He snapped his fingers and an elf immediately arrived with several plates that he placed in front of the beast.

"Let's see what we have here. This is a perfect foie gras made from goose liver of course. Then a beautifully marbled cut of Kobe beef. Here is our Atlantic bluefin tuna. Over there is our pule cheese, which I'm sure you know comes from the milk of Balkan donkeys. Then we have brownlip abalone harvested from Australia, and finally some almas caviar from an albino sturgeon."

The beast approached and surveyed Draco's offerings.

"I will call you by your name, provide you with a collar befitting your position in this household, give you access to my father's bedroom and closet, and feed you any of these delicacies once a day provided you do two things for me in return."

The beast met his eye as if to say, *do go on*.

"First, I want you to show affection toward me in front of Granger. And second, I want you to sleep in my room."

The beast stared at him, narrowed its eyes, and then meowed.

Draco started to smile slowly. It was just as he suspected: this animal wasn't a Granger, not really. It was a Malfoy. And that meant it could be corrupted. He sat back on his heels and gestured toward the offerings.

"Well then, Crookshanks," he said cordially. "Please make your selection."

Draco bided his time until dinner that evening, where he made sure to arrive early.

As soon as his wife walked in, he rose and moved swiftly toward her chair to help her into it. She blinked in surprise, but lowered herself into it. He dropped a kiss on top of her head and then moved to his own chair.

"How was your day darling?" he asked, totally ignoring both of his parents whose mouths were hanging open.

Her cheeks were pink at the sudden attention, but she seemed to focus on him for the first time since that disaster at the Weasley's.

"Productive. I spent some time at Hogwarts and visited Prudence again."

Draco hummed at this. "I saw her this morning myself," he said. "She mentioned she has become rather fond of you."

Granger narrowed her eyes at this. "Did you now?"

“Yes, of course. She’s an old friend. I always liked her more than Astoria.”

Lucius choked at this, and Granger’s mouth twitched. For the first time in days the twinkle of mirth lit her eyes, and Draco relished seeing it.

This is what I should have been doing for the last week instead of sitting silently by and letting her put up walls.

Granger’s voice was warmer as they chatted about Prudence and the next article she would be publishing in *The Daily Prophet*.

“She has a true flair for it,” said Granger. “Once she’s out of Azkaban she said she may try to work for *The Prophet*. Other than the very poor living conditions, she’s rather enjoying herself in Azkaban.”

It was the most animated Draco had seen her since that terrible afternoon, and his parents were largely silent as they watched Draco engage her. A glance at his father told Draco that Lucius was watching the play by play, as though wondering if the rules of the game had changed yet again. Narcissa, however, looked oddly approving.

Before long dinner was served, and Granger raised one eyebrow when she saw what Draco had selected: it was steak of course, but hers had a lobster tail on top while the others were bare.

“Let’s try this again,” said Draco. “It’s been a few weeks now.”

“And why does she get lobster?” sniffed Lucius, as he looked at his own plate askance.

“Because I like her more than I like you,” said Draco without missing a beat. “Start behaving, and I’ll tell the elves you can have some too.”

He glanced at Granger as he said it, and she turned crimson but nearly cracked a laugh while Lucius scowled. Draco just gave her a conspiratorial smile.

“Go on, darling. Let’s see if you can eat it. Small bites until we know.”

Granger took a deep breath but then nodded and tucked in, slowly but surely working her way through the meal. By the time she was finished, the others had completed their own meals too, and Draco studied her as he watched her reach the end. Again, her manners were flawless, and he could see from her face that she was savoring her food. She glanced at him, and though she was still a little guarded her expression warmed. Draco thought he might be chipping away at those walls by reminding her of their wedding night.

“That was delicious, thank you,” she said.

Draco gave her a slow smile. “I’ve ordered the elves to prepare it twice a week until you tell me to stop.”

She gave him an exasperated look, which he relished.

“Malfoy, that will —”

“Bring you back,” he said softly, as he reached for her hand and raised it to kiss the back of it. As he lowered it, he allowed his eyes to rove over her and for once he didn’t try to hide his interest. He didn’t care that his parents were watching. He *wanted* her to see how badly he craved her.

“I can’t *wait* to have you back,” he added. “You know I take my Projects seriously.”

She blushed at this, but he thought she looked pleased as her eyes dropped to her empty plate, and she just nodded slightly.

Draco shot his father a challenging look as they all rose, silently telling him to keep any snarky comments to himself.

“I’m going to spend some time in my room,” Hermione then said.

Draco just nodded cordially and held the door for her, but internally he was eager to see if his next trick would work. He made his own excuses and headed to his room to read for a couple of hours, and sure enough as night was falling Crookshanks came sauntering in.

Draco smirked and fastened a collar around his neck, and then gestured toward a luxury cat bed he had asked the elves to purchase that afternoon that was placed on Draco’s window seat. Crookshanks hopped up to investigate and kneaded biscuits for several minutes as though testing its plushness. Once satisfied, he turned in a circle and sank down with a contented purr.

Draco himself prepared for bed too, and just as he was settling in, he heard a knock on his door.

“Come in,” he called, trying to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

“Malfoy, have you seen —” started Granger as she opened the door. Then she came to a complete halt as she stared at Crookshanks.

“Have I seen what?” he asked innocently.

She said nothing, but just looked at her familiar, a mixture of annoyance and confusion on her face.

“What is this?” she finally asked, gesturing toward him.

“A cat bed,” said Draco. “I apologize it’s taken me so long to acquire one, but the Magical Menagerie was out of their luxury line, and I had to wait for them to be restocked.”

This was not, of course, strictly the truth. But what was a little white lie if it got his wife to share his bed again?

She gaped as she approached the cat. Only then did she seem to notice the thing around his neck.

"Is that a *diamond and emerald collar*?" she gasped, as she spun around to look at Draco in horror.

Again, Draco schooled his face into an innocent expression. "Of course, darling. Only the best will do for our pet."

"*Our pet?*"

"Well yes," said Draco, now affecting some concern. "What kind of husband would I be if I didn't accept your familiar as my own? And he's a very good boy, aren't you Crooks?"

Crookshanks purred contentedly and blinked in confirmation.

"But... but..." she said weakly.

Draco ignored her and climbed out of bed to scratch the cat behind the ears. "Yes, he's certainly an excellent companion. It took us a few days to become acquainted, but now we're the best of friends, right Crooksy?"

The beast glared at him as if to say, *you're laying it on too thick*, but he did raise his chin for a scratch so Draco thought he probably got away with it.

Then he turned back to Granger.

"Now then... what were you looking for... *Hermione*?"

This was purely experimental on his part, but her jerk of shock told Draco he had struck gold. Her head whipped up to look at him, her eyes huge. She was thrown totally off kilter, and Draco could practically see her walls crumbling as she tried to make sense of all the abrupt changes that had taken place that day.

Then she seemed to shake herself out of it. "I was looking for Crookshanks," she said cautiously. "I was about to head to bed."

Draco gestured toward his own bed. "Me too."

He didn't invite her in, but he climbed in and watched her debate something with herself. To his credit, Crookshanks was putting on a very good show of lazing comfortably in his brand new cat bed, and he could tell Granger was reluctant to make him move. Then again, she also didn't want to leave him with Draco all alone.

"I... I guess I could sleep in here tonight?" she asked tentatively.

"Of course," said Draco instantly, utterly thrilled that his scheme had worked.

Take her to your bed. Touch her. Cherish her.

He scooted to the middle, and soon Granger was joining him. Draco slipped an arm around her waist and whispered, "Is this alright, Hermione?"

She hesitated for a moment, but then nodded, and Draco tightened his grip on her in response. Slowly, he felt the tension drain out of her, and his magic seemed to sigh with relief to have his wife back in his arms.

He was hesitant to press his luck, but he couldn't help himself when he dropped a small kiss near her ear. "And that?" he whispered.

Again, she nodded slowly, and Draco took the opportunity to pepper small kisses around the shell of her ear and column of her neck.

"What's all this then?" she asked a bit breathlessly.

"I told you downstairs. I want to bring my wife back."

She said nothing to this, but she laced her fingers into his and settled against him more securely. Draco thought – or maybe he just hoped – that she wanted to come back too.

20 December 2003

"This is the worst idea you've ever had," said Potter and he and Draco stared at the handsome muggle home.

Draco just snorted. He had a mission that required Harry Potter's help. So here they were, once again working together, though this time nobody was aware of it except for the two of them.

"I have to try," he said. "Most of it is my fault."

Potter gave him a shrewd look. "That's not really true."

Draco shrugged. "I'm more at fault than anybody else in her life."

Potter said. "Perhaps. Though I'm guilty of it too."

Draco inclined his head. He suspected Potter felt this way, even if it wasn't entirely fair. It was precisely how Draco felt – guilt by association. And Draco wasn't above leveraging Potter's insecurities if they helped Granger – no, *Hermione*.

The past few days had found Hermione in his bed each night, just as she was at the beginning of their marriage. She was trying to resurrect her walls again, but Draco wasn't letting her do it. He flirted with her outrageously, lavished attention on her, and was picking his *own* fights with his father in front of her simply to make a point that he chose her over him. Between his new behavior and the alliance with Crookshanks, she couldn't seem to stay away even if she wanted to. He could see that she was both baffled and frustrated by it.

But Draco wanted to take it further than that. He wanted to convince her that she didn't need to try to put up walls at all. He may not deserve her – but then again, who did? And whether he deserved her or not, he *wanted* her very much. The war and the years following it had wrought many changes in him, but it had not burned out Draco's sincere belief that he was as good or better than most everybody else. He was still a *Malfoy*. So no, it didn't particularly bother him that he didn't *deserve* Hermione because nobody else did either. That simply evened the playing field, as far as he was concerned.

Draco just gestured toward Potter, and he grimaced as they approached the front door together. Potter reached out to press a button, and Draco listened curiously as something that sounded like a bell rang inside the house.

Several seconds later, the door opened, and Draco was staring at a woman who appeared to be Hermione thirty years from now. She was attractive, with curly hair piled on top of her head, dressed casually in muggle jeans and a jumper. She looked at the wizards questioningly for a moment, before her eyes narrowed in on Potter, and she started to close the door in their faces.

Draco shoved his foot in the door to stop her, and now she glared at him.

“*Excuse me,*” she hissed.

“Mrs. Granger, I was hoping to speak with you about something,” said Draco quickly. “Potter is here to vouch for me.”

“*Vouch* for you? What on earth are you talking about? Who are you?”

“If we could come in for just a few minutes?” Draco asked hopefully. “It’s about Hermione.”

Mrs. Granger went pale, and Draco saw fear in her eyes as she looked at Potter again. Finally she swallowed and nodded as she opened the door and gestured for them to come inside.

Draco’s stomach was in knots as he followed her into a surprisingly spacious and well-decorated sitting room. A man who must have been Hermione’s father stood and looked at them both questioningly.

“Helen,” he said. “What is this?”

“They said it’s about Hermione.”

The man swallowed hard, and cast the same suspicious look at Potter, before nodding briefly and lowering himself into a chair. Draco waited for Helen to sit as well before he did the same thing.

“First,” said Draco, “I wish to apologize for ambushing you like this. I wasn’t raised by muggles you see, and I wasn’t sure of the best way to get in touch with you.”

“Is Hermione alright?” asked Helen, ignoring Draco’s opening gesture.

Draco nodded quickly. “Yes, of course. She’s healthy... for the most part. But there are some things that have happened over the last several months, and we... well, *I*... thought you should be made aware of them.”

“Another war?” asked the man nervously. Potter had told Draco he was named David.

“No Sir, rather the opposite in fact... though it does relate to the war we had a few years ago...”

“Malfoy, just spit it out,” said Potter in exasperation.

The Grangers glanced at Potter, and then at Draco.

“Malfoy?” asked Helen. “That name...”

Draco scowled at Potter who gave him an apologetic look.

“Yes, my name is Draco Malfoy,” he said quickly. “I went to school with Hermione. We were... on opposite sides of the war.”

Both Grangers’ eyes were huge now, and they started to look fearful.

“Please,” said Draco, “just let me tell you the whole story, alright? I don’t mean any harm to you or any other muggles, I swear it. That’s one reason why Potter is here.”

The Grangers were looking at him cautiously now, but they had fallen silent so Draco took a deep breath and began.

“About eighteen months ago a law was passed in our world to encourage marriage and procreation. You see, the war left our population decimated, and those of us who survived and were of childbearing age were shell-shocked and not that keen to get married and have children. The Ministry of Magic concluded that something had to be done, so they gave the unmarried witches and wizards between the ages of twenty and forty a year to get married themselves before they would be matched with somebody else. Hermione was engaged to marry Ron Weasley at the end of August.”

The Grangers’ jaws dropped.

“She was going to marry *Ron*?” asked Helen. “But she never said...!”

“She was trying to get the law overturned,” said Potter, jumping in. “I’m not sure if you’re aware, but Hermione worked for a think tank and was deeply involved in writing laws and policy until very recently. She didn’t tell you about her engagement because she didn’t agree with the law and thought the whole thing would become moot once the Wizengamot – that’s our law-making body – got their heads on straight. She didn’t want to marry Ron, he was just the best choice at the time. I had a girlfriend, and she’s always been like my sister.”

The Grangers turned a bit pale at this, as they studied Potter cautiously.

"In any event," continued Potter, "by the time she finally gave up and realized the law was *not* being repealed, the wedding date was so close she felt like she *couldn't* tell you because she had lost her chance to do it. We told her that wasn't the case, but Hermione's stubborn and still felt very guilty for... you know."

This reminder seemed to snap the Grangers out of it.

"That was *your* fault," insisted Helen.

"It wasn't," said Draco, now jumping in. "It wasn't Potter's fault, and it wasn't Hermione's fault either. It was *my* fault, and others like me."

The Grangers now turned to look at Draco in disbelief.

"But that war..." said David.

"...was started because purebloods like me tried to push muggleborns like her out of our world. It was wrong, I know that now, but it formed the very backbone of pureblood society for a long time. I was raised to believe it from the cradle, as were others like me. It's not an excuse, simply an explanation. And that sort of thinking gave Hermione no good choices. She could have fled the magical world, but then it would have meant the purebloods won. But staying in the magical world meant she had to fight for something that should have been hers all along. If she hadn't Obliviated you, odds are very good that you two would have been tortured and killed. She did it because she loves you."

"Taking our memories was not an act of love," insisted Helen.

"It was," said Draco softly. "And I know that Hermione still feels guilty for it, though she had no choice if she was to save you. I also had to do terrible things to save the people I loved. She took your memories for a year to save you. I tortured innocent people – including children – to save *my* parents. The wizard who was at the center of it all cared for nobody but himself. Even those of us who were supposedly aligned with him were at risk. I watched many, *many* muggles die at his hands. I intervened for none of them because it would have meant certain death for my own family. Hermione's solution to save you was ruthless, but utterly brilliant. You two would have been a prize if you had been found, and you would not have survived it."

The Grangers were staring at him wide-eyed.

"You have to understand that Potter here was made a target through no fault of his own, and Hermione became one too. It wasn't just her association with him and the Weasleys that did it. She was... *is*... one of the smartest witches in our generation. The Dark Lord couldn't abide a muggleborn who was so brilliant, and it put a target on her back. She's also a good person and a fighter. She would not stand by and let others fight without her. You two raised an incredible, *strong* woman who has continued to fight for the rights of marginalized people and creatures ever since the war concluded. The one fight she couldn't win, however, was the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan."

"So she married Ron," said David in a resigned voice.

“No, actually,” said Draco. “She jilted him.”

Now her parents were staring at him incredulously. “She *jilted* him?” cried Helen.

“She did,” said Draco calmly. “And as it happens, I jilted my partner as well.”

Both of the Grangers’ eyebrows flew up, and Draco hurried to justify himself. “You have to understand, I was betrothed to Astoria from the time I was a young child, and she was just... bad for me. She’s not a bad person, but she was bad for *me*. I couldn’t stand the thought of actually marrying her, so I left her at the altar. Hermione had a similar realization about Weasley.”

At this, Helen’s eyes fell to Draco’s hand, and she furrowed her brow as she saw the wedding ring on his finger. Almost unconsciously Draco looked at her hand too and was jolted by what he saw there: a ring, very much like his own, was gracing her left hand. Draco glanced at David and saw a matching band there as well. Draco could scarcely believe it. He had inadvertently selected the same rings as Hermione’s parents. Hermione’s own ring was a bit more elaborate than her mother’s, being dotted with diamonds, but Draco’s ring was a perfect match.

It was no wonder Hermione had recognized them and knew all about them. And he could see that Hermione’s mother also recognized the ring on Draco’s hand, and her eyes started to get wide as the truth hit her. Draco hurried to finish it.

“She and I both ended up in the Ministry’s Matching Ceremony a couple days later, and we were matched together. But she objected to the match and opted to go to prison instead of marrying me.”

“*SHE WENT TO PRISON?*” shouted Helen, now standing, so Draco did too. She was pacing. “Are you telling me my only daughter was in *prison* and nobody thought to inform us? Nobody wrote? Aren’t we her next-of-kin?”

“You would have been,” said Draco quickly, “except the law made *me* her next-of-kin, and I’m afraid I was so preoccupied by trying to convince her to marry me so she could leave prison that I didn’t think to reach out. I sincerely apologize for that.”

“Is she still there?” asked David worriedly, and Draco shook his head.

“No, she came around a few weeks ago. Hermione used her prison time to cause a shitstorm for the Minister of Magic. It was her platform to try to get the MLPP repealed. She’s very popular in our world, you know – she helped Potter here take down the Dark Lord. She’s known as the ‘Golden Girl’ and the ‘Brightest Witch of Our Age.’ She’s *famous*. And she used all of it, along with her prison sentence, to cause so much trouble for the Minister that they passed an amendment to the law behind her back. It would have forced her to marry Weasley to get her to shut up. Her match with Weasley was a popular one, and the Ministry believed they could undermine her if they forced it. She married me at the last minute both because Weasley had gone behind her back to get the amendment passed and also because my... history... means she stays a sympathetic figure in the public eye. The public is horrified that the Golden Girl married a former Death Eater.”

Both of Granger's parents looked stunned by this, but then resigned.

"I missed her wedding..." said Helen in a small voice.

"Mrs. Granger, we got married late at night in a prison visitation room. There was an officiant, two witnesses, and a prison guard. My parents also weren't there, nor were any of her friends," said Draco. "The entire ceremony took less than a minute. I can assure you that you didn't miss very much."

Draco felt a bit dishonest as he said this because the truth was it *did* mean something to him. But he didn't want her parents to have another reason to resent her. He could tell the Grangers thought this was a small consolation, but neither of them said anything more about it, and Draco breathed a mental sigh of relief.

"Hermione doesn't know I'm here," he continued. "She feels tremendously guilty that you two were unaware of everything, but so much happened so quickly that she wasn't sure how to tell you. I do know that she wants you in her life, and I wanted to meet you since I'm technically your son-in-law. I wish I could have asked for your permission to marry your daughter, but there really wasn't time. All I can say is that I'm deeply sorry for the role I played in the war. I wish Hermione never had to make such a difficult choice when it came time to save you both. And now that she's my wife, I will protect her and cherish her, despite what the papers may write. I'm quite... taken with her. And if there is anything I can do to help mend fences, please consider it done."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Potter looking at him in shock. The Grangers also appeared to be at a loss for words as they considered everything Draco had just said.

Finally David took a deep breath and opened his mouth to speak.

"Tell us about yourself, then."

Draco faltered for a moment, but then cleared his throat. "Like I said, I'm a pureblood. My family is an old one — we've been in England since William the Conqueror came over. I'm an only child, and I was in Hermione's year at Hogwarts in Slytherin House. She and I... rather despised each other."

Potter snorted. "Malfoy really despised *me*."

Draco laughed a little. "It's true. We were school enemies."

"He was jealous that I'm better on a broom than he is."

"Bullshit," said Draco. "Half of your catches were just luck."

"He was also jealous of Hermione's brilliance."

"Now that I *will* admit," acknowledged Draco. "She was ranked first in our class, and I was ranked second. She would never give me the time of the day. It was maddening. And I'll admit, I bullied her because of it. I did grow up though, and I deeply regret it."

"But you're fond of each other now?" asked Helen carefully.

"I certainly am," said Draco. "I think she is too, but she's stubborn. I'm trying to bring her around."

"And do you plan to fight this law with her?" asked David shrewdly.

"Yes," said Draco instantly. "I've told her she can use me and my resources in whatever manner she requires. And if the law is repealed, I'll do everything in my power to get her to marry me again. I want her as my Lady Malfoy, marriage law or not."

"Lady Malfoy?" asked Helen, with eyebrows raised.

"Yes, my father is the hereditary Earl of Wiltshire," said Draco. "I'm the Viscount Malfoy."

David looked at him sharply. "The person who currently holds the title of Earl of Wiltshire is a marquess."

Draco smiled a little, remembering that David Granger would be titled himself if his mother had been a boy. Draco nodded in agreement.

"You're right, as far as muggles go. My family held the title before muggles did though, and after the Statute of Secrecy went into effect the title was split. The king was... prompted to hand the title that was known to muggles to someone else to keep the magical secret, but his portion of Wiltshire is missing quite a bit of land. My family's ancestral lands still surround the manor where I grew up. Quite a few pureblood families claim titles that have either disappeared or been split with muggles."

The Grangers were looking thoughtful now.

"So she jilted Ron and married a lord," said Helen thoughtfully. "Well I don't suppose she'll do better than that..."

Draco almost choked as David rolled his eyes. "Christ, you sound like my mother..." he muttered.

Then he turned to Draco again. "And your parents? The Lord and Lady Wiltshire — how have they taken this?"

Draco hesitated, but decided he owed it to them to be honest.

"They had trouble with it at first, though Mother has come around. Father though... well he's a bastard. He's the reason my family swore allegiance to the Dark Lord in the first place, and then he fucked it up — pardon my language, but it's true — and I was forced to take his place. He's not at all pleased that Hermione is my wife, but we have family magic that prevents him from harming her, and in any event she's rather well-matched against him. She enjoys making him squirm."

Both Grangers looked a little overwhelmed by this.

"And I don't suppose you two can get divorced?" asked David.

Draco shook his head. "Not until we have had three children or the law changes. And Hermione isn't that keen on kids yet."

Both of their eyebrows flew up at this. "Children?"

Draco shrugged. "It was the entire point of the law."

"You will need at least one child," pointed out David. "A boy."

"Yes, but I can be patient. Our family magic guarantees a boy first, so if Hermione ever comes around to it we will have one. I hope she agrees to it eventually, but if she doesn't..." he shrugged again.

For some reason, this seemed to reassure the Grangers more than anything else. Seeing their hesitant approval, Draco stood.

"Hermione wants you in her life, and I want her to be happy. If you can find it in yourselves to forgive her and me, we would welcome you at Malfoy Manor at any time. Potter has a number he says you can call to get in touch with us. And I also brought you this...."

Now he pulled out a book titled *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Lord*.

"This is the best book on the last war that either of us has found. If I know Hermione, I suspect she has underplayed her role in it when she had told you about it. This book is not at all flattering for my family of course, but I think you deserve to understand the kind of woman you raised and the challenges she was up against when she obliterated you. She's extraordinary, and this book tells her story, alongside Potter's of course."

The Grangers looked stunned as they accepted the book with slightly shaky hands.

"Thank you for hearing him out," said Potter. "And for what it's worth, I'm sorry Hermione got pulled into the war because of me. I'm not sorry she's my friend, though. She stuck with me through some really rough years, and I'll always love her for it."

The Grangers looked like they didn't know what to think, and Draco gave them a tight smile as he and Potter left them in their sitting room, staring down at the book a bit nervously.

"Still think it's the worst idea I've ever had then?" asked Draco.

Potter sized him up for a moment and then slowly shook his head. "No. I mean, she's probably going to kill you if she ever finds out you did this, but it was overdue. Ron and I should have done this years ago."

Draco inclined his head. He happened to agree.

"If it brings them around the Manor, it will be worth it."

"And I'll come if they do," said Potter. "Since your father..."

“Yes,” said Draco shortly.

He turned to face Potter, who looked like he was warring with himself for a moment before finally raising a hand and extending it toward Draco.

Draco was surprised, but he grasped it and shook it.

“I’ll let you know if I hear from them,” he said. “This was good, Malfoy.”

Draco smiled a little. “Thanks Potter.”

Chapter 16: Progress Report

25 December 2003

Draco woke on Christmas morning to his wife in bed with him and a dusting of snow that had fallen overnight. She was still asleep, and Draco took a moment to relish the stillness that surrounded them. They wouldn't be disturbed on Christmas morning. His family traditionally held a late breakfast before gifts were exchanged, though over the last few years the gifts had noticeably dwindled because what could the Malfoys possibly get each other that they didn't already have? Draco wasn't sure what to expect this year and almost hoped they would skip the whole thing. He had had no ingenious brainwaves for a physical gift for Hermione... no, the thing that was her real gift would come later in the day. He just hoped she would like it.

For now though, he felt peace as he held her and inhaled her scent. She was still trying to put up walls with him, but her efforts had been half-hearted over the last few days. Draco was cautiously optimistic that she was starting to accept him and any feelings she might be harboring for him. As for Draco, his feelings seemed to be growing stronger with each passing day, and he felt his magic slowly destabilizing as he continued to tamp down on the physical urges. It was becoming increasingly difficult as her mood slowly improved and her figure did too. After nearly a month of fattening meals she was still not back to normal, but she was trending in that direction. As Draco watched her curves emerge he found himself growing truly weak for her.

Just two more months and a bit.

He continued to remind himself of that. By the time their consummation deadline arrived he would surely be desperate, but he *could* wait if he had to. He swore he wouldn't push her. If it happened before then it would be because she came around on her own.

And Merlin but Draco wanted her to come around. It wasn't just his need for her. He wanted to know she chose it, chose *him* and wasn't being pressured into it because of the law and their vow.

He felt her stirring, and instinctively he tightened his hold on her, and his hand slipped under the hem of her top and gripped her stomach. He had no interest whatsoever in leaving bed this morning. To his delight she seemed to have a similar idea, because instead of rolling out of bed like normal she stretched back into him and settled her bum firmly against his morning erection.

Draco tried not to groan, but he also didn't move away. It wasn't the first time she felt it, and what was the point of trying to hide it from her? The moment she was willing, Draco would happily shag her into the mattress.

He nuzzled his face into her neck, and he felt her give a little sigh as she relaxed back into him.

“Happy Christmas darling,” he murmured.

“Happy Christmas,” she said softly.

They were quiet for a time and then Draco asked, “What is your tradition?”

She seemed to shrug a little and said, “Christmas morning at the Burrow. It was always really loud. And most years I would visit my parents for dinner.”

There was a slightly awkward silence at this until Draco asked hesitantly, “Is this... okay?”

She nodded a little. “Yes. It’s different, but I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and the situation with Ron really isn’t my fault. Molly will come around eventually or she won’t. If she doesn’t, then that’s the answer. Harry and Ginny reached out so I still have them. I also have Teddy and Andy of course.”

“And you have me now,” he added, “and Mother. I really do think Father will get on board too. He just needs more time.”

“That’s true. It can be enough for now.”

Draco was determined that she would have more than that, but he was relieved that she seemed to be settling into the idea that the Weasley’s might be distant for a time.

“If there’s anything you need from me to make it easier, don’t hesitate to ask.”

She was quiet for a long while as she considered this. Finally she said, “Would you give me a real tour of the Manor then? There are so many places I haven’t seen yet... several parlors and the study and the library and —”

“Wait,” said Draco, “you haven’t seen the library yet?”

She just shook her head.

“Why on earth not?” he asked in confusion. He was sure that would be the first place she visited upon her arrival.

“I didn’t know if it was safe.”

“Why wouldn’t it be safe?”

“Because I’m muggleborn... I’ve heard there are spells...” she trailed off a bit awkwardly.

At this Draco nudged her until she rolled over to face him.

“Hermione, there’s no way a spell like that exists. It’s true there are parts of the Manor warded to keep non-family members out, but you’re a Malfoy.”

“I’m a Granger,” she insisted.

Draco rolled his eyes at this. “The family magic and the wards don’t give a fuck what your surname is. You’re a Malfoy for all magical purposes. You can go anywhere you want.”

“But antimuggleborn spells...”

“There aren’t any,” he said. “If such a thing existed it would mean that there was a true difference between purebloods and muggleborns, wouldn’t it? And we both know there’s no difference.”

Her eyes widened at this. “I suppose I never thought of it like that.”

Then a look of excitement started to cross her face. “So I can really go anywhere?”

Draco reached up and cupped her cheek. “Of course darling. If I had known you hadn’t explored yet I would have rectified it immediately. Why didn’t you say anything?”

She shrugged. “No reason.”

He frowned a little. “Hermione, please tell me when you want something or if something is not right. I know our situation is unconventional, but we’re married. That means a great deal to me, and I want you to feel at home here.”

She softened a little at this and leaned her cheek against his hand as he stroked it with his thumb. “I’m still... adjusting. But I’ll try.”

Draco desperately wanted to kiss her, but he settled for a peck on her forehead. She sighed a little and snuggled in, and Draco enjoyed the novelty of feeling her facing toward him for once.

“Malfoy...” she started.

“Hmmm?”

“What does the family magic feel like to you?”

Draco paused as he considered this. “There are... urges. But they’re fairly mild most of the time. It’s a bit like being prodded. Small jolts, some intrusive thoughts, that sort of thing.”

She was quiet for a long while.

“Does it make you... want me?”

“Not really. It’s more like it draws my attention to you if I look away too long. And when I touch you...”

“What?” she whispered.

“It rewards me. My magic feels pleased.”

“You’re sure it’s not manipulating your feelings?”

“Positive,” he said firmly. “I can almost always distinguish my own thoughts from the magic.”

“But if it rewards you when you touch me isn’t that a sort of... I don’t know... training? Like a Pavlovian response or something?”

Draco wasn’t entirely sure what she was talking about, but he got the gist.

“I don’t think so. Like I said, I can separate it from my own thoughts.”

“So you would want to touch me even without the magic then?” she asked, frowning a little.

Draco looked at her incredulously. “Hermione, I think I’ve been fairly obvious about that. I told you I have no idea what I’m doing, and I don’t want to push you for something you’re not into... but to answer your question, yes. I wanted to touch you in Azkaban. I’ve wanted to touch you every time I’ve done it. Me. Not my family magic, but me.”

She studied him intently, and he was struck by a thought.

“Hermione... this whole time... have you thought it was just my family magic making me want... this?”

She made an indistinct noise. “I don’t know. Maybe? The journals weren’t very clear. And the thought of you being magically compelled to want... you know... doesn’t exactly thrill me.”

“Well it doesn’t, not really,” he said firmly. “I told you before I don’t think it would have been strong enough to make me want Astoria, and it wasn’t active at all while you were in Azkaban. Don’t think about the magic, Hermione. I’m certain it’s not making me want something I didn’t want on my own.”

She gave him another long look, and he willed her to see the truth of this on his face. At long last she nodded slowly.

“Well then... that certainly gives me something to think about.”

Then she leaned in and gave him a lingering kiss on his cheek. Draco’s breath caught. It was the first time she had initiated, the first hint that she might be open to...

Kiss her, touch her, fuck her.

Draco shoved the thoughts away.

Patience, man. Be patient.

It had never once occurred to him that the family magic might be putting her off, and now that he thought about this he felt foolish. Of course she wouldn’t want to shag him if she thought his interest in her was magically compelled. What woman would find that remotely

appealing? He was frustrated that he had never thought of this. If he had he could have reassured her before now and perhaps be further along. But there wasn't anything he could do about it, and he tried to put it aside and enjoy the first time she had sought to kiss him.

As she pulled away, she seemed to be searching his face for something. Perhaps she found it, because her eyes warmed before she disentangled herself.

"How about you show me that library of yours then? I must admit I'm exceedingly curious."

Draco found himself smiling at this suggestion, and he hurried into the loo to complete his morning routine before holding out his arm for her to take. She gripped it, and Draco sensed a nervous excitement coming from her as he escorted her through the corridor, down the stairs, and through a gallery to reach the double doors of the library, which was its own wing of the Manor.

"Ready?" he asked.

She started to smile slowly as she nodded, and Draco pushed the doors open and gestured for her to go inside.

He couldn't tear his eyes from her face as her jaw dropped to see it. The library was large, ancient, and practically hummed with magic from the texts it housed. Much like the Hogwarts library it was filled with a maze of stacks a person could get lost in for days. Unlike Hogwarts it was a couple stories tall, and there was an upper level with a catwalk that took the collection deep into the second story of the Manor. It was large enough that there was even a bridge connecting both sides of the upper level. As they watched a few books drifted through the air to be reshelfed.

"Fuck me," she breathed as she saw it, and Draco's magic and cock both jumped to attention.

Fuck her hard. Fuck her right here.

Draco tried to ignore it.

"So? Was I right?" he asked instead.

She turned to look at him, and Draco saw her eyes were sparkling.

"Right about what?"

"That my library is better than the Beast's."

She let out a peal of laughter at this and nodded.

"Yes... you were right... Draco."

Draco felt something dislodge inside of him at the sound of his name. He had taken to calling her Hermione, but she still stuck with Malfoy for the most part, unless she was trying to distinguish between him and another member of his family. Hearing it like this was...

different. And good. Draco was struggling to prevent his optimism from getting the better of him.

“Draco?” he asked in what he hoped was a casual voice.

“You’ve been calling me Hermione.”

“I have...” he said as he started to approach her. She had an odd expression on her face. Draco struggled to identify it.

“And we *are* married,” she added.

“You are quite right,” he said as he slipped an arm around her waist.

“Let’s just say I’m becoming... accustomed to the idea.”

Joy leapt inside of Draco. She was giving him some assurance and hope that he was truly making progress with her.

Draco bent down to kiss her cheek.

“Good. And you know that means this library is yours just as much as mine, right? You’re a Malfoy, darling. I don’t care what you say about it, you know it’s true.”

She smiled prettily at this. “I’ll confess, I might be able to get on board with an unofficial name change if it means this library is mine. I do think this is the best Christmas gift you could have possibly given me.”

I hope that’s not true.

“Hmmm we will have to see about that, won’t we?”

She raised an eyebrow in challenge, and Draco couldn’t help but grin.

“Come along,” he said. “Let’s have breakfast and gifts, and then I’ll give you the full tour.”

Draco started to hold out his arm again, but shifted tactics at the last second. He reached for her hand and entwined his fingers with hers as he led her toward breakfast. His heart stuttered, but she didn’t pull away. Draco couldn’t help but think that perhaps a Christmas miracle was unfolding.

Hermione Granger, it transpired, was rather good at giving gifts to people she didn’t know very well. Whether it was a cashmere scarf and glove set for his mother in a tasteful shade of cream or a specially magicked television for Draco that could play something she called a

‘DVD,’ she knew what she was about. Draco was almost relieved she decided to fuck with Lucius by gifting him a fine bottle of liquor that was of muggle and not wizarding origins. It told him the professional coldness she had assumed around his parents after the Weasley fallout was thawing and returning to normal.

His parents had surprised him by gifting Hermione a gown for the annual New Year’s Eve party the Malfoys traditionally hosted. Draco’s mouth went dry when he saw it, and he could tell that Hermione was a bit thrown off but not displeased. It was a gesture from at least one of his parents that they were bringing her into the fold to make sure her first truly public appearance as his wife went smoothly.

As for Draco, he knew her real gift was coming later, but to give her something to open he found a kit that allowed her to create her own tea blends. The idea had come after a truly disastrous tea with his parents when she decided to mess with Lucius by requesting two different kinds of tea from the elves and mixing them together. Lucius had looked on in dismay as she drank it, but she told Draco later on that it was surprisingly good. To his relief, she laughed when she saw his gift, clearly understanding his reference, but then a look of interest crossed her face as she seemed to consider giving it an honest try.

Draco sensed she liked his gift more than the gifts that arrived from nearly every other acquaintance of hers: books.

“Why books?” sniffed Lucius. “The Malfoy library is extensive. There is no need for people to give you books.”

Hermione shot him an annoyed look. “I would wager most of my friends believe I haven’t been allowed in. And besides, several of these are muggle.”

Still, Draco thought that a book was a lazy gift for Hermione, and that’s why she received so many. She was a keen book lover to be sure, but giving them to her as a gift was almost impersonal. And the books she received didn’t just come from the usual suspects; she received quite a few from fans she had never met in person, because her love of books had become almost as famous as she was.

“It’s been like this for every birthday and Christmas since the war,” she told Draco with a shrug, as she stared around the small pile. “I usually donate the ones I don’t need.”

“Well let’s find space in the library for the ones you wish to keep,” he replied. “I’m certain our muggle book collection is almost nonexistent, and we should certainly expand it if you wish.”

This was how they spent the afternoon once the promised Manor tour was complete and Draco had shown her every room of significance she hadn’t visited yet. And of course, it naturally meant that Hermione had to learn precisely how the Malfoy library was organized.

“This is absolutely senseless,” she declared. She was surveying a shelf of books about hydra. Immediately next to it was book titled, *Hydrangeas in the Wild*.

“It’s alphabetical by topic,” sniffed Draco. “Hydrangea comes after Hydra.”

"The book on hydrangeas should be shelved with 'flowers,' if that's the case. Or is it 'flora?' You see? You can't find *anything* this way. In fact, I think I have a new Project."

Draco looked at her warily. "And what is that, my dear?"

"I will rearrange the library usig the Dewey Decimal System. Libraries all around the world use it."

Draco narrowed his eyes at her. "They do?"

"Hmmm, yes. Though it's muggle so I may have to take some liberties with it. But it is far more sensible than *this*."

"I don't know that it's sensible at all," he objected.

"But you said it's my library, isn't it?" she asked with mock sweetness.

Draco weighed his options here, but his Slytherin instincts came to the surface as he recognized the opportunity to make a deal. "Fine," he said. "You're right it's yours, but only as long as you're married to me."

Her eyes seemed to burn into him as she contemplated this statement.

"So you're saying..."

"I'm saying if our marriage is dissolved for any reason, you will no longer have the right to reorganize the library, unless you marry me again. And there are several hundred thousand books, so we both know it's going to take you longer than a few weeks to achieve it. You are going back to Hogwarts soon, and I know the MLPP requires your attention too."

She huffed an exhale as she narrowed her eyes at him, but he thought he saw the glint of a challenge.

"Fine. But as long as I'm married to you, I'm organizing *my* library *my* way."

"As is your right, my darling," he said blithely.

Secretly, Draco was thrilled. While he had serious doubts about her proposed organizational methods, he knew Hermione was not the type to abandon a Project. Now that she had taken this on it might be *years* before she finished it. It would give him some leverage in case the MLPP was repealed and their marriage dissolved.

"I'll start tomorrow," she announced.

"Excellent plan. And now, it's time to head to dinner."

Again, Draco grabbed her hand, rather than offering his arm. He saw a faint smile play about her mouth as she let him take it and tug her toward the dining room.

"You said there would be guests?" she asked.

“Mmmm,” he responded. “Pansy, Theo, and Blaise join most years, and I know my mother reached out to Aunt Andy and Teddy too.”

Hermione brightened at this, and Draco’s heart started to pound as they made their way down the long hall toward the dining room. He had second guessed this a hundred times, but he had his mother on board. It would have to be enough. And even if it went poorly, hopefully Hermione would understand the intent of the gesture, even if the execution was questionable.

“Hermione,” he said, coming to a halt just outside of the dining room doors.

“Yes?” she asked in confusion.

“Please don’t hate me for this.”

She furrowed her brow and opened her mouth to question him, but before she could say anything he pushed the door open.

“Happy Christmas, darling,” he said quietly as she came to a complete halt.

Her parents rose from the table and started walking toward her.

“Mum? Dad?” she asked in a voice Draco could scarcely recognize. There wasn’t a trace of Professional Hermione or Snarky Hermione or Confident Hermione or even Angry Hermione that he could hear. Instead, she sounded like a little girl, overwhelmed and a bit scared.

“Hermione,” said Helen, pulling her in for a hug, which Hermione returned stiffly. “Happy Christmas. Draco invited us for dinner, along with the Potters.”

Now Hermione looked past her parents and saw Harry and Ginny Potter both there, who were smiling a little at her stunned expression. Inviting the Potters had been both a necessity and a wish of Draco’s. It was necessary because if Lucius put a toe out of line with Hermione’s parents there, Harry Potter could subdue him. Potter could perform magic against his father that Draco, his mother, and his wife could not. But Draco also wanted them there to prove to Hermione that she hadn’t lost them. He knew the Potters had reached out, but he didn’t think they had seen much of each other since that terrible afternoon at the Burrow. The Potters had opted to skip Christmas dinner with the Weasleys and spend it with Hermione instead.

She spun to look at Draco, and he saw her eyes were huge.

“How?” she asked weakly.

He shrugged and gave her a small smile. “I thought I should meet my in-laws. Potter and I went to see them a few days ago. After that it was just some tweaking of the wards around the Manor so they could visit, and here we are.”

That was not, of course, strictly true. Inviting the Grangers had taken an enormous amount of research to modify the muggle repelling wards to accommodate them, and of course he had to plead his case to his mother who then pleaded his case to his father. Lucius’s expression was cold, but he wasn’t saying anything and Draco prayed he would just stay quiet for this. He knew the Grangers were now aware of who and what his father was, so

they would be expecting some hostility. They had read the book Draco left them, and there was an entire chapter on the Malfoy family sins.

“I brought wine,” said David Granger, now pulling out a bag that had several sleeves to keep wine bottles separate from one another. “And I have a non-alcoholic delight as well. Draco tells us one of the guests tonight is expecting, and I would never presume that everybody likes to drink.”

Draco glanced at Pansy as he said this, and he saw she looked surprised, but also rather gratified that she hadn’t been forgotten.

Hermione took a shuddering breath, and Draco saw she was steeling herself a little, as she nodded and led her parents back to the table. “That’s great, Dad.”

Then she looked at Draco. “Dad became a sommelier after he... retired from his dental practice. He has certifications for it and everything.”

“Yes, I’m studying to become a Master Sommelier,” said David. “It’s far more rigorous than my dental degree ever was, but the study is truly gratifying. It’s a wonderful way to spend retirement.”

Blaise perked up at this, and he drew the Grangers into a conversation about wine as an elf decanted the offerings and poured.

Draco swirled, sniffed, tasted and...

“Holy mother of Merlin that’s good,” said Theo.

“It’s a bordeaux,” said David. “Full-bodied with notes of red currant, plum, and clove. The vineyard that produces it is small, but exceptional.”

“And it’s muggle?” chimed Lucius’s cold voice from the head of the table.

There was a slightly uncomfortable silence, but David Granger raised an eyebrow in a manner that was so reminiscent of his daughter that Draco couldn’t help but gape a little.

“It is. And far more interesting than the elf made wine Hermione gave me to try a couple years ago. They were some of the best bottles in the wizarding world, she said. And yet, they couldn’t hold a candle to this.”

Draco held his breath, but before his father could respond, the door opened again and a tiny tornado known as Teddy Lupin came sprinting in.

“UNCLE HARRY! AUNT GINNY! AUNT MINNIE! COUSIN DRACO! I GOT A BROOM FOR CHRISTMAS!”

Andromeda followed him, looking slightly worse for the wear. She just gave an exhausted sigh and sank down on a free seat near Hermione.

“Christmas with a five year old is magical, but truly exhausting,” she said.

This had the effect of breaking the tension as Hermione laughed, introduced her parents to Andromeda, and then poured her some wine too.

“Bloody hell this is wonderful,” she sighed as she sipped. Then she seemed to catch Lucius’s scowl at the head of the table. “Honestly Lucius, no need to be a stubborn bastard on Christmas. Try it.”

Lucius grumbled, but after a stern look from Narcissa he assumed a grim expression while he sampled a taste. His eyes widened a bit and he said nothing, but Draco couldn’t help but notice his father took a second sip and then a third. David Granger’s smirk was worthy of his daughter as he watched out of the corner of his eye.

The room settled into several smaller conversations as dinner was served. Draco said little, but observed Hermione closely as she spoke with her parents. Every so often she glanced at him and Harry, and he thought – or maybe just hoped – that they seemed to be warming to each other as the evening moved along.

Draco’s friends also appeared to be making an effort, and Theo was exchanging movie recommendations with Hermione’s mother, who was apparently a bit of a movie buff. Draco marveled at the similarities he noted between Hermione and each of her parents. She was such a fascinating blend of them both.

It was only as the dinner plates were being cleared that he heard Hermione ask, “Gin, don’t you want some wine? I know you favor red.”

Ginny Weasley had spent most of the evening talking to Pansy, which came as a great surprise to Draco until this question from Hermione pulled her away.

“Oh... well...” she started as she turned crimson.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed and then widened, and then she positively *squealed*.

“You aren’t!” she cried.

“I am,” acknowledged Weasley. Potter assumed a smug look, which Draco didn’t understand at all.

“She’s what?” he asked. “What is all this?”

To his consternation, every woman in the room looked at him and gave him an identical eye-roll as though he was missing something incredibly obvious.

“Mrs. Potter has some good news, Draco,” said Narcissa primly.

“And what is it?” pressed Draco.

“Bloody hell, Malfoy, I’m pregnant!” said Ginny.

Draco’s eyes widened, and he stared at Potter in disbelief.

“You... she... *really*? ” he asked weakly.

“Yeah, Malfoy, we’re married, remember?”

Draco just gaped, as the table laughed at him. He could scarcely make sense of it.

“But you don’t *look* pregnant,” Draco finally insisted.

“You prat!” said Pansy. “Have you forgotten *everything* from my early weeks? Of course she doesn’t look pregnant! It will be some weeks still before she’s showing!”

Draco glanced at Pansy’s very obvious bump. She was more than halfway done and getting larger by the week, not that Draco would ever dare say as much to her face.

“Erm... right,” said Draco uncomfortably, rubbing the back of his neck.

“We can find a book for you to read if that would help,” said Hermione with a sly grin. “Like that time I assigned you reading about –”

“Thank you!” he said, cutting her off. “Yes, of course darling.”

The looks on his friends’ faces told him he was not going to get away with this, and he would be forced to divulge his truly mortifying lack of knowledge about human reproduction. He just prayed they would drop it while his parents and in-laws were at the same table.

Thankfully, with Ginny’s secret revealed it occupied the entirety of dessert, and the tension only returned when everyone rose and Hermione said, “Mum, Dad, could I talk to you both? And maybe Harry too?”

They smiled tightly at this, but nodded, and Hermione led them out of the dining room but not before casting Draco an inscrutable look. Ginny also made her excuses and lifted a very tired Teddy in her arms to take him back to Andromeda’s place. Once they were gone he turned back to find the others staring at him.

“That was exceptional, Draco,” Andromeda finally said.

“I hope so,” he said worriedly.

“I liked them,” declared Theo. “Her mother knows film and her father knows wine. What is there not to like?”

“Their background,” snapped Lucius.

The whole table turned to scowl at him. To Draco’s surprise, it was Pansy who spoke up.

“Honestly, Lucius, can’t you give it up already? A meal with them a few times a year won’t kill you, and if Draco can fix this relationship then maybe she’ll finally shag him and continue the Malfoy line. It’s a small price to pay.”

Everyone just stared at her.

“What?” she said irritably. “I’m pregnant, hot, exhausted, and worrying about a couple of muggles – who were perfectly lovely by the way – is about the last thing I wish to do on Christmas.”

“I quite agree,” said Narcissa firmly. “I appreciate your silence, Lucius. The next time you see them perhaps you can find it in yourself to complement David’s wine choice. I notice you drank three glasses.”

Lucius turned crimson at this, and Draco failed to hide his smirk as everyone rose.

“We must be off,” said Theo, and Blaise and Andromeda made their excuses as well.

Draco didn’t linger, not wishing to listen to his father’s opinions any longer. His nerves were mounting as he made his way to his room and hopped in the shower in a futile attempt to relax.

It could have been much worse, he assured himself as he allowed the hot water to pour over him. Nobody had said anything truly offensive, not *really*, and Hermione’s parents seemed to hold their own against a room full of witches and wizards. Hermione herself had clearly been wary but seemed cautiously optimistic by the end of the meal. Draco just hoped that whatever they were talking about in private wouldn’t undo any progress they had just made.

He shut off the shower, dried himself off, and wrapped a towel around his waist as he left the loo to get dressed. He pulled on some boxers and joggers and was rummaging through his dresser for a T-shirt when the door opened, and he spun around to find Hermione staring at him.

Her eyes widened as she took in the sight of him without his shirt on, and Draco stilled as he watched her survey him.

She looked at him slowly, from top to bottom, and his magic roared to life.

See how she wants you? Show her how good you can be for her.

Unconsciously Draco flexed, and he saw her throat bob.

“Draco,” she said. Her voice sounded rough, almost gravely, and he felt a lurch of fear that it had all gone horribly wrong.

He said nothing, but just stared at her.

“You reached out to them. You told them... everything.”

He nodded slowly.

“Why?”

She looked overwhelmed again and confused.

"Because you missed them. I know I was overstepping by going to visit them without you, but Prudence told me how much you wanted to reconcile with them. I hoped that if they heard about the war from somebody on the other side they might finally understand the predicament you were in a little better. That and I had the idea to bring them around the Manor for Christmas. It's only right we see them too. The necessitated an introduction."

She took a shuddering breath and nodded slowly.

"They... still have some concerns. But they want to meet again and talk. They said they want to know everything that's happened since I obliterated them."

The knot in Draco's stomach eased ever so slightly.

"That's wonderful."

"And you brought them here... convinced your parents... your *father*..."

Again Draco said nothing. He was transfixed as he stared at her. He wasn't sure if she was talking to herself or to him. But she approached him slowly, and Draco's magic hummed as she reached out one hand and traced a scar on his chest.

"I know there are a lot of reasons I shouldn't want you," she whispered.

The knot in Draco's stomach immediately returned. Was that it then? Had he royally fucked this up by going directly to her parents without involving her in the decision?

"A lot of reasons..." she said again, "but I can't seem to remember what they are anymore."

Draco's breath caught. She looked up at him, and he was spellbound as he stared into her golden eyes. She pressed a hand to his chest, and he allowed himself to be pushed back so he was sitting on the small sofa. She stood over him and cupped his face in her hands.

His heart was racing, and his eyes fluttered closed at her touch, as she tilted his face up.

"You've been so good to me Draco."

Be good for her. Show her you'll do anything.

Her fingers slid into his hair, and his heart started to pound as he felt her move into his lap. His eyes opened, and he found her staring at him with a look of determination on her face.

"Do you still want this?" she asked quietly.

Draco inhaled, as he nodded slowly.

She leaned toward him, and Draco felt lightheaded as she whispered in his ear.

"Then maybe you'd like to get a progress report on your Project."

Draco's eyes widened as she pulled back and yanked her jumper over her head. Then she started to unbutton the shirt she was wearing underneath. His gaze immediately dropped to track the progress of her fingers, scarcely believing this was actually happening to him. She went slow, and as each button was unfastened Draco caught the plunge of her cleavage and the hint of pale blue lace appeared beneath.

She shrugged out of the shirt, and then Draco was staring at her breasts mounding over her bra. Merlin but her tits were larger than he realized, and he gripped her waist to keep himself from reaching up and touching her there without her permission.

He thought she might be studying his face, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from her tits that were just inches from his nose. She let out a low chuckle and then reached behind herself and unfastened her bra but didn't remove it.

Draco's self control was nearly gone. He reached up and touched the bra straps on her shoulders.

"May I?" he asked roughly.

"You may," she said.

Draco knew his hands were shaking as he pulled the straps off her shoulders with the lightest brush.

The moment her bra fell forward, Draco groaned and squeezed her shoulders, though he wanted nothing more than for his hands to be lower than that.

Her tits were fucking glorious. Round and large with dusty pink nipples that were tightening as he watched. This was so much better than Blaise's naughty magazines. They were real and warm and in his *face*.

"Fuck Hermione," he breathed. "This is... you are..."

He finally looked up at her expression. Her eyes were dark, and she was studying him.

"Draco," she said with a small smile. "You can touch them."

Draco groaned again as his hands fell from her shoulders and gave the lightest brush along her breasts with his thumbs. He watched her nipples respond to his touch and goosebumps erupt, and then he was lost.

He tore his gaze away and back up to her face, only to find her lowering her mouth to his, and in a moment she was snogging him senseless.

Draco truly had no idea what he was doing, but his magic and instincts seemed to take over as he opened his mouth and then gripped her tits with both hands. She whimpered in his mouth, and her hips thrust over him. Draco gasped as he felt her moving over his erection.

Fuck but that feels good.

His wife was here and topless and kissing him and *grinding* on him, and no witch had ever been this perfect. He couldn't remember the last time he had been this hard. He was desperate for her, desperate to be *good* for her.

He wrenched his mouth away and moved to her ear.

"Hermione..." he gasped. "Tell me what you want. Let me give it to you, *please* darling..."

"Make me come," she breathed, and Draco's heart nearly stalled out.

He had thought about this moment approximately ten thousand times since the day he was matched with Hermione. He had told her that he was inexperienced but had never told her just how much. He had turned this problem over and over in his mind. He had done some clandestine research in the library but had so little practical knowledge he was terrified he would bollocks it up. But his wife was asking him to get her off, and there was only one correct response to that. The words he had carefully selected for this situation came tumbling out.

"Show me how you like it," he murmured.

That was safe. That was fair. Draco wasn't admitting to her that he had no fucking clue *how* he was supposed to get her off. He was simply giving Hermione the opportunity to instruct him about *her* body, as opposed to applying lessons she assumed he must have learned on other nameless lovers. Draco thought this was a reasonable question in any event. He didn't care what other women liked, he only cared what Hermione liked. Draco was determined to be a quick study so that if he did it once he could do it again with less instruction. His heart was racing as he felt her reach up and grasp one hand.

She slid it down her abdomen as she said, "Kiss my breasts."

Oh fuck he was going to be allowed to *kiss* them? How was he supposed to kiss her there and do whatever she was about to show him with his hand at the same time? He had been fantasizing about her tits for months — had noticed them years ago in fact — and Draco was worried that this would require far too much coordination.

He found himself distracted as he pulled a nipple into his mouth for the first time, and his wife *groaned* for him the moment he did it. Oh gods, the sound of it was going to make him come in his pants like a fucking teenager. He was kissing, sucking, *licking*, and it was becoming sloppy because his attention was pulled to her hand guiding his into her pants.

She lifted her hips ever so slightly and he felt the fabric of her knickers and then some trimmed hair, and then finally...

Look how wet she is for you.

Draco thought he might actually be dying as all of his magic became laser focused on her arousal, and she guided his fingers to it.

"My clit," she gasped. "Small circles. Like this."

Thank Merlin she was showing him, because Draco learned in that moment he never *did* find the clit of the few witches he had fingered before. It was a little buried in her folds, but the moment she guided him to the firm bud and swirled it like she asked, her hips jerked, and she moaned again.

Panting for it.

That was what the other blokes in Slytherin had said about this elusive body part and Circe but they were right. She was mewling, twitching, and instinctively Draco moved his thumb to stay on it while he slipped two fingers inside.

She started to rock on his fingers.

“Let me fuck your hand,” she said, and Draco almost died again.

“Do whatever you want with me,” he groaned in response before latching back onto her nearest nipple and swirling his thumb in that special place down low.

It was so wet and so crude and so fucking perfect. Draco focused every ounce of attention on her so he wouldn’t come early, and before long she started to jerk again.

“Draco... I’m close... I’m gonna...”

Draco knew the moment she broke because his magic told him.

Look how beautiful she is when she comes for you.

Draco obeyed his magic and released her tits from his mouth so he could look up at her face. He was breathless as he saw her head thrown back and her eyes closed, with her face screwed up. The moan she released nearly sent him over the edge himself.

He immediately moved to extract his fingers, but she placed a hand to stop him.

“Slow,” she coached. “Draw it out for me first... there... that’s perfect.”

Draco and his magic both preened at the praise.

Perfect. She said it was perfect.

Draco followed her lead and after several long moments she deemed herself satisfied as she tugged on his hand to remove it from her pants. Draco didn’t know what to do next, but she made the decision for him as she placed his fingers in her mouth and sucked.

Fucking hell.

The blood rushed straight to Draco’s cock as his jaw dropped in disbelief, and he was perilously close. A few pumps was all he would need to finish.

“May I?” she asked.

Draco had no idea what she was asking about, but he didn't even think to clarify it with her. She could do anything she wanted to him. Anything at all.

He nodded, and she gave him a sweet smile as she leaned down for another deep kiss before breaking away and kissing down his neck before reaching his chest.

Draco's head fell back at the odd but delicious sensation as she slowly worked her way lower.

"You're far too handsome for your own good," she murmured.

"I've got scars," he countered.

"So do I," she retorted. "And yours are hot."

Did she have scars? Draco scarcely noticed, so distracted was he by her bare tits. But he supposed whatever scars she had weren't nearly as serious as his, and in any event he thought she was beautiful. *Perfect*. Perhaps she was right that things like scars could be hot. He certainly had no complaints.

He was contemplating this as she continued to kiss down his abdomen and it was only when she was kneeling on the floor between his legs that he realized with a lurch what she was intending to do.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck...

How was he supposed to last for her like that? He figured she would *maybe* give him a hand job if he was very lucky. He had never imagined this...

Well okay, he had *imagined* it certainly, but he had never once believed she would actually do it.

She was tugging on his trousers and peeling them down his legs. Automatically Draco lifted his hips to help, and before he knew it his cock was springing free. It was pulsing, almost painful with how much he wanted her.

He stared at her face as she saw it for the first time, and her mouth dropped to a perfect O. Draco heard himself whimper.

"That is... a *gorgeous* cock..." she breathed.

Oh fuck, that might make him come too. She had to stop complimenting him, it was going straight to his head — both heads, in fact.

Draco knew he was trembling as he waited for whatever was coming next. Her eyes flicked up at him, and she *smirked* at him like she knew she owned him.

Gods, but did she own him. Draco was fully willing to admit it. She had him by the balls, and he hoped she would never let go.

"I'm not going to last..." he warned her. "It's been... a long time."

The truth was, he had never done this before in his life. But Hermione just twinkled up at him.

“Then I had better make it good for the time we’re doing it.”

At that she proceeded to wrap her hand around the base of his cock and lean forward to draw the tip into her mouth.

Draco gasped at the sensation. It was so wet, so warm, so *soft*. He had never felt anything like this in his life, and the fact that it was Hermione Granger... his wife, his *witch*...

Tell her what you’re thinking.

“Merlin Hermione, you’re perfect,” he groaned, as he instinctively threaded his fingers through her curls to hold her head in place. She was teasing the tip of him with her tongue, and then she opened her throat and took him in, all the way down to her hand.

“*Fuck!*” he cried, and she did it again and again.

“*Fuck I’m gonna...*”

He thought she would release her mouth, but she didn’t. Draco tried to hold back, but he was too far gone, and then he found himself squeezing his eyes shut and spurting down her throat.

The moment it was done he wrenched his eyes open to stare down at her, and she sat back, still nude from the waist up and swallowed.

Draco’s brain shorted out.

Had he *ever* thought something like this might happen to him? No. Not ever. And yet here she was, and she had just done that...

“Come here,” he said roughly as he pulled her up and back into his lap. He caught her lips and kissed her like his life depended on it. He could taste himself on her — something musky but not entirely unpleasant — and it prompted his magic.

Always spill your seed inside of her.

He knew he had to end this or he would be hard again in a moment.

He wrenched his mouth off of her and stared at her eyes for a moment. They were that dark caramel color that held so much promise for him. Then he looked back down at those glorious tits of hers. He couldn’t help himself. He brushed a nipple lightly and sighed with satisfaction as it pebbled under his thumb.

“Well?” she asked. “How was that progress report?”

A broad smile broke out on his face at that. “Excellent. Spectacular. You have truly stunning tits my darling.”

“I lost a cup size in Azkaban,” she said. “They’ll get a little bigger.”

“Salazar save me,” he murmured. “That might actually kill me, Granger.”

She laughed lightly at that, and Draco pulled her in closer, placing his head on her chest to breathe in her scent. He wanted to suffocate himself against the pillow of her breasts. He nuzzled them as he considered it.

“You are rather like an enormous cat when you do that,” she commented.

“Take that back,” he retorted. “Crooks is a good boy to be sure, but I should be your *best* boy. And these are the most gorgeous breasts I could possibly imagine.”

She reached down to lift his head so he was looking at her face. He complied with a slightly forlorn sigh.

“You really don’t mind the curves then,” she said seriously. It wasn’t phrased as a question, but Draco heard the note of nervousness in her voice.

Fuck Weasley for giving her body image issues.

Draco wasn’t entirely ignorant. He knew this was common for witches. But this witch — *his* witch — was utterly perfect. He could happily *crucio* Weasley for whatever he said to her to make her believe she was not.

Draco was determined to fix this.

“I am fucking obsessed with your curves,” he said. He ran his hands over her breasts and down the soft swell of her stomach and hips before wrapping them around to grip her arse. “Seriously, this is what I fantasize about. This and... even more.”

She blushed a little, but seemed pleased.

“So I should keep eating the steak.”

“Please Hermione, eat *all* the steak. Every last damn bite, I’m begging you. And don’t hide your body from me.... I mean, obviously you shouldn’t do anything that makes you uncomfortable, but all this... it will make me feel like the luckiest bloke alive if I get to see it and touch it. I’m already hard again.”

She said nothing to this, but gave him a truly beautiful smile as she leaned down and kissed him once more. Draco sighed into it, riding on the high of making his wife come, getting his first blowjob, and assuaging her doubts so she would remain topless for him.

There was no question about it: this was the best Christmas ever.

Chapter 17: Marital Magic

Chapter Notes

So you know how I said I should apologize to Draco for the marital magic when he first married Hermione in Azkaban? Well, I take it back. THIS is when I should be apologizing to Draco...

Sorry to do this to you my darling, but look on the bright side: when you behave yourself, you impress your wife.

31 December 2003

Draco's magic was acting up.

For the last week, he had experienced the exquisite joy of having his wife in bed with him at night, and for the first time he felt the freedom to kiss her at his leisure. He still wasn't comfortable initiating much more than that, but Hermione herself had initiated more amorous activities several days after she blew him for the first time, and Draco got to experience it again. This time he lasted more than a few thrusts into her perfect mouth, and he was able to locate her clit without any instruction from her.

He knew where this was leading, and he was thrilled. His magic was thrilled. Or it had been, until something odd happened during the last few hours that made him start to feel agitated.

His magic, which had always felt like nudges and guidance, had turned insistent and demanding.

Find her and fuck her. Find her and fuck her. Find her and fuck her.

On and on, over and over, Draco couldn't seem to get it under control. It started as a whisper, but it built with a slow crescendo until it felt like a drum beat echoing in his mind relentlessly. And not only that, but he started to have an odd physical reaction too. He felt taught, almost ill. He was feverish and sweating. The need to find her and finally have her the whole way was becoming almost unbearable.

But they weren't ready for it. He knew that. What he didn't know was why the marital magic had shifted so suddenly. Up until now the urges had always been avoidable and separable from his own feelings. But this was so persistent that he was quickly losing his grip.

To make matters worse, he couldn't really enjoy Hermione today even if he wanted to. His parents were hosting their New Year's Eve party, and even Hermione had pitched in to help prepare for it in a rare show of familial unity. The festivities started in the late afternoon and ran well past midnight. As Hermione's husband, he would be escorting her – she couldn't even shake hands with a male guest, so she planned to be on his arm all night – and he just knew that having her in such close proximity was going to be torturous.

He was right. The navy gown his parents had given to her for this event hugged her breasts and traced the flare of her hips. Her hair was swept up, exposing the length of her throat and shoulders, and all evening Draco had been sneaking glances down the front of her dress to the faintest hint of cleavage she was bearing. His fingers were itching to pull the bodice down a few more inches so her tits would spring free, and he could explore them again.

Over the last few hours it had become an obsession that was bordering on madness. He had barely spoken to a single person all night, so distracted was he by the neckline of his wife's gown.

"Lady Malfoy," said the voice of an old warlock Draco thought was on the Wizengamot.

"Lord Darby," Hermione murmured, as she inclined her head.

Draco was sweating.

"How is married life treating you, m'dear?"

Hermione tensed, and Draco tried not to groan.

"Lord Malfoy and I have had our differences, as I am sure you can imagine," she said coldly.

At least she wasn't saying that she despised him.

"Yes..." he murmured. "Yes, well... I must say, my dear, your speech at the Matching Ceremony was rather striking."

"And yet you voted in favor of the amendment in any event, did you not?"

"Well, as you see... you must understand... I spoke with Lord Wiltshire and..."

"Bah," said Hermione dismissively. "My father-in-law had a single motive, as I'm sure you must know. But his efforts were fruitless, and now he is stuck with me."

Take her away and fuck her. Take her away and fuck her. Take her away and fuck her.

A bead of sweat trailed down Draco's temple, and he took a shaky sip of champagne. He didn't mind discussing politics now and then, but he couldn't find it in himself to care when his magic was telling him to take his wife to a spare room and ravage her.

"Well yes, that's what I wanted to speak to you about m'dear," said Lord Darby. "There are murmurings that perhaps the Wizengamot was too hasty in its passage of the MLPP. I expect some members could be persuaded to reconsider their positions in another few months."

"You mean after their own grandchildren have been conceived?" said Hermione in a cold voice.

"Ah. Yes, well, I'll not deny that it's a helpful fact. I expect another six or twelve months and you may have the majority you would need to overturn it."

Draco's stomach sank a little at the thought of his marriage being annulled, and his magic was starting to shout at him over the din of guests and champagne flutes.

Take her and fuck her. Put a baby inside of her. Now's the time to secure your heir.

Draco completely lost the thread of the conversation as the reason for the change in his magic suddenly crystallized: Hermione was fertile. She had gained enough weight after weeks of very high calorie meals that her cycle had returned. She still wasn't back to her full weight yet, but apparently she had gained enough for *that* to reemerge. He wondered if she was aware of it.

The moment he had the thought, his magic told him he was right. And then it flared as the fantasies settled deep inside of him.

Plant your seed inside of her. Come inside of her over and over again and keep it there. Fill her to the brim with it. Lock it between her legs so it never runs out.

Oh fuck, he was fully erect and wearing tailored trousers in the middle of a three hundred person party. He couldn't do this. He had to get out of there.

"I'm sorry," he said, interrupting Hermione and Lord Darby, who were still talking about the MLPP. "We have to go."

He gripped Hermione's hand and practically dragged her through the Malfoy ballroom.

"Draco, what on earth are you...?" she protested, as he flung open a side door and pulled her down the corridor to a nearby parlor that was empty. He maneuvered her into the parlor and then shut the door behind them, locking and silencing it as he pushed her against the door.

"I need you..." he groaned as he dipped his head and kissed her roughly. She sank against the door a little, but didn't turn him away and allowed her head to fall back as he started suckling her neck.

"What's gotten into you?" she breathed.

"You. The magic. I'm just... fuck, Hermione, I'm going mad..."

"What happened? What's different?"

She sounded concerned, confused, and a bit dismayed. Her tone of voice managed to penetrate the urgency in Draco's brain as he remembered that she didn't want him to be magically compelled to desire her.

He gathered every ounce of self-control and broke away as he cupped her face with his hands and stared down at her. Her eyes widened at the expression she saw.

“You’re fertile,” he whispered.

She blanched. “Already? But it’s only been a month since Azkaban... I was going to wait until my period came back to track everything and...” she trailed off, looking slightly panicked.

“I won’t do it, Hermione, I swear I won’t. I know you aren’t ready for that. But darling, I feel like I’m on fire. Can I touch you in other places? I just... I *have* to.”

“Because of the magic,” she said in a small voice. She sounded disappointed, and Draco shook his head firmly.

“No. I’ve wanted to fuck you since the first time I saw you in Azkaban.”

Her eyes widened at this, and he made himself continue. “The magic though... it’s demanding I do it *right now*.”

“So it’s a timing thing, more than a desire thing?”

“Yes,” said Draco, because he didn’t know how else to explain it to her. “It’s making me feverish because the magic senses you’re fertile. And Merlin, Hermione, the thought of it... it’s driving me around the bend.”

Draco closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe as he placed his forehead against hers to compose himself.

“The thought of sex you mean?” she asked in a small voice.

He opened his eyes and stared down at her. “Yes. But specifically the thought of filling you with... you know. And the magic is making me think I could do it three or four times before I’m fully spent.”

Hermione’s eyes widened at this.

Fuck a baby into her.

Great Salazar, but did he want to. And he knew he was a bastard for even considering it because she had no interest in children, let alone children with him. But it was a notion that had taken hold of him. He had to admit that this was one instance in which the magic really might be thinking for him – because it wasn’t just sex he wanted right now, but reproductive sex. He wanted her to be growing his baby in her belly at this very moment.

“Draco...” she said in a choked voice.

“I know,” he said. “I know, darling, and I said I won’t do it. But please... can I touch you in other places? Can I make you feel good? It might help... burn some of this magic out of me. It’s unbearable.”

She swallowed and seemed to hesitate for a moment, before nodding. “Yes. Of course, I’m sorry I’m hesitating, I’m just... I don’t have contraceptives and...”

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “I should be the one apologizing. I swore to myself I wouldn’t beg you or ask you for anything, but I didn’t know it would be like this and...”

She put a finger to his lips, and he quieted.

“I like it when you beg,” she said.

Something eased inside of him, as he dropped his face to her neck again. “Oh fuck... then please, *please* darling... let me touch you... let me taste you... I’ll do anything... give you anything...”

“Yes,” she murmured.

Draco needed no more invitation. The fact that he had lasted even this long was astonishing as he reached up and pulled her dress down so her breasts sprang free.

“Fuck me, I’ve wanted to see these all night,” he groaned as he bent down and lavished them. His hands fumbled with her zipper as he released it, and soon he was shoving the whole damn dress off of her. It was beautiful, but there was far too much fabric, and it would only get in the way of what he was craving.

Her knickers were small tonight, and she was without a bra, evidently opting to use the sewn-in support from the dress itself. And this, Draco thought, was sheer perfection as his fingers immediately moved down and pushed the scrap of fabric aside so he could see how wet she was.

She is sodding for you. It’s her body calling for your seed.

And it was true. They had barely gotten started, and already she was wetter than she had been the previous two times they did this. The consistency felt different too, and Draco pushed his fingers into her to feel it.

She gasped a little, and then she said, “Can you get on your knees for me?”

Without hesitating Draco dropped to his knees, and now her cunt was at eye-level. He could see her slick as he teased her knickers down, and he thought her legs might be shaking a little.

“I want to taste it,” he said.

The words just slipped out, but he did. He had always wondered what it would be like, and this was the perfect opportunity. Merlin knew when she would let his mouth get this close to her again.

“Yes,” she breathed, as she leaned against the door and parted her legs even more for him.

Draco groaned as he placed a few kisses on her inner thigh and then tentatively reached out with his tongue to give her center a lick, and immediately her hips bucked.

“Just like that...” he muttered.

He gripped her waist to help hold her up and then did it again, this time swirling his tongue a little until he found that special bud. Hermione moaned, and Draco felt her knees shaking as her fingers laced through his hair and then pulled his face *in*.

Message received, he thought as he began to lick and flick and suck in earnest, Hermione quivering and making noises that Draco was sure would end him at any moment. She tasted incredible, and her reaction to this was better than he could ever have imagined. She seemed to love it, and Draco caught desperate words from her, broken between gasps and groans.

“Yes... God... please... I’m gonna...”

Draco’s magic, already unstable from her fertility, flared the moment she broke, and Draco reacted on instinct.

He wrenched his mouth away and shoved two fingers inside of her, coating himself with her. As he drew her orgasm out he made sure to gather as much of her wetness as he could before quickly unbuttoning his trousers with his other hand and then slipping the hand with her slick down into his pants and around his cock.

His magic sang, as it recognized his wife’s arousal. He barely noticed as Hermione herself sank against the wall in front of him.

“I can... with my mouth if you want...” she said hesitantly.

Draco’s eyes were closed, and his head thrown back as he pumped.

“It wants your cunt,” he groaned. “I think the magic knows the lubrication is your...”

He only opened his eyes when he felt her tug at his wrist and pull his hand out, before guiding it between her legs for another swipe.

“Then take it,” she whispered. “If this is helping, use it...”

“Oh fuck me,” he groaned, as he did what she said, and then coated himself again, sighing as the magic seemed to settle at the feeling of it.

It was astonishing, really. The magic could tell it was *hers* and it was hers during that perfect time of the month. Did it think he was inside of her? Draco couldn’t be certain about that, but some of the feverishness seemed to be diminishing as he coated himself twice more. He was covered in her, and it was perfection.

“Gods I can’t wait to get inside of you,” he sighed as he pumped.

He sensed her freeze a little, and he forced his eyes open to look at her. Her cheeks were pink.

"I'd say I'm sorry, but it's true," he said, closing his eyes once more as he focused on the wetness around him. "Fuck, I'm close..."

He grunted, and then felt the hot liquid spurting from him. On and on it went, and it felt like his fever was finally breaking as he opened his eyes to stare down at the mess. Hermione was staring at it too.

She licked her lips a bit awkwardly. "That is... quite a lot."

Draco nearly collapsed onto the floor and flung his arm over his face, not even bothering to tuck his cock away.

"I think that's twice what I normally produce."

"The magic then?" she asked, and this time she sounded more intrigued than dismayed.

"Must be," said Draco. "The feverish feeling is gone, but I'm still very aware that you're fertile."

"If I really am, you might be like this for a while longer. It wasn't clear from the journals if the family magic kicks on before ovulation or during. Technically I'm fertile for a couple days before the egg actually drops."

Draco groaned. "So this could get worse?"

"It's possible," she said, not without some sympathy.

"I'm going to go insane."

She sighed. "We can do more of that if you want. To help you get through it."

Draco moved his arm and finally looked at her. "You're sure about that?"

"Yes," she said. "I really appreciate that you're not pushing for a full consummation yet, but neither one of us was prepared for your magic being this severe during my fertile windows. I can get some supplies that might help for the next one, but I have to go into the muggle world to do it, and I need to be careful about it because it's against the law. I'm starting back at Hogwarts in a couple days, and I won't have time to do it for this cycle."

Draco waved her off. "Don't worry about that. I'm just grateful you let me touch you at all. I truly don't want to pressure you, darling, and I know you aren't ready for sex or children yet."

She gave him a thoughtful look at this but fell silent as Draco sat up and finally righted his clothing and vanished the rather astonishing mess he had made on the floor. She stood and began to dress too, and Draco spun her around to zip her up. It was strangely intimate, as he trailed his finger up her spine first before dropping a kiss on her bare shoulder. She shuddered just a bit.

"Shall we return?" he asked softly.

She nodded, but turned first and gave him a sweet kiss on the lips.

"That was very sexy, Draco. I really liked it."

Warmth and pleasure flooded Draco one more time at her words, and he smiled broadly as he reached up and stroked her cheek.

"I liked it too. You are exactly what I want."

She flushed a pretty pink but smiled at this before grabbing his hand and tugging him through the door to return to the party. As they reached the side door to the ballroom, his magic jolted him again.

Fuck your heir into her tonight.

Draco tried not to groan.

Two days later

The magic was finally tapering off after reaching a nearly unbearable peak the previous evening. According to Hermione this answered at least one question: the magic kicked on a couple days before she ovulated and lasted until she had moved beyond that point in her cycle.

Draco had truly thought he was dying by the end of it. The fever came back only a few hours after they took care of it during the party, and then it reached a nearly unbearable pitch by the end before receding. Draco was loath to admit that his father may have been right about the family magic after all. If Draco had married Astoria the compulsions to do his duty at the correct time became strong enough that it probably would have penetrated his occlumency walls and enabled him to perform.

The fact that his magic was focused on Hermione, of course, made the experience all the more torturous because he wanted nothing more than to spend three days buried between her legs, filling her up over and over again. The magic practically demanded it, and on the final day even using her arousal to cheat the magic didn't work as well as they had hoped. It seemed to sense that his wife was empty, and the magic punished him for it. And though Draco came close to begging Hermione to let him do it several times, he refused to cave to his baser instincts. He knew it was a test of his will and a commitment to building trust with her. Besides, she was still offering up her body in a way that Draco could only have dreamed of a few weeks prior.

That final day of what he came to think of as his heat was spent in a tangle of sheets and sweat. It was a Friday, and Hermione was expected to spend most of the weekend at

Hogwarts to prepare for the students' return. Draco was sure she wished to be planning her lessons or organizing the library that day, but given the state of him she didn't. Instead, she allowed him to strip her naked and spend most of the day in bed with his hands and his tongue exploring her every crevice. It felt shamefully decadent, but it was the only way to keep the fever low enough to function. The moment she left him for any reason, it came rushing back, and he was reduced to a quivering mess.

She gave him her body that day in every way that she could, and in exchange Draco did not ask her to consummate, despite the magic practically screaming at him to do it.

They spoke little that day, other than with whispered praises and groans. But when Hermione finally rolled out of his bed the following morning, the fever had passed. Draco felt like he had learned some things about his wife that he had dreamed of knowing since their reunion. He discovered and kissed every mole on her body. He reveled in the exquisite pleasure of burying his face between her thighs and gripping her arse while he did it. He watched her face scrunch whenever she orgasmed. He learned that she liked to be demanding in bed, but she also seemed to melt when he took the reins from her. It was a give and take, a dance between partners that felt surprisingly even in light of the fact that she held every bit of power in Draco's eyes.

As for Hermione, a full day spent naked in Draco's bed in which he did not ask her for the thing she could not give seemed to collapse the last of the walls around her. She no longer looked at him warily or with reticence. Instead, he found her studying him, and there was a softness to her that he had never sensed before. Draco discovered that beneath her prickly exterior was something subdued, but truly beautiful. She was a woman, with every bit of feminine strength and grace that had attracted men like him for centuries, but she kept it hidden behind a strong exterior that she no longer tried to keep intact around Draco. With her armor finally gone, he could see every part of her, and he thought it was a bit like looking into the sun. She blinded him with her generosity, her wit, and her kindness. And Draco tried to be worthy of it as he devoted himself to her pleasure and tried to make her feel as beautiful as he believed her to be.

It didn't come as any great shock when he watched her sleeping in his arms after the worst of the fever had passed to discover that he was falling in love with her. It was the only explanation for his mad behavior – his insistence upon marrying her, his efforts to woo her, and now his willingness to fight his own magic to be with her on her terms and not his. The moment Draco had the thought, he knew it must be true. And while under normal circumstances he would be thrilled to be in love with his wife, in this particular instance the thought absolutely terrified him: because Hermione was only his wife because of the law, and Draco sensed the law would be crumbling before he knew it.

Draco didn't want the law to go away, not anytime soon. The law had given him Hermione, and at some point in the next few weeks it would give him the key to ridding himself of his virginity forever. But perhaps it was because his wife was Hermione Granger, Draco knew there was only one path forward.

He had to get the law repealed.

It wasn't just because of the promise he made to her in Azkaban. It was because she was Hermione, and she would rather burn the Wizengamot to ash than exist in a world with the MLPP. And because Draco was falling in love with her, he took it upon himself to act against his own self-interest in this matter.

That, more than anything, proved just how much he cared about her.

"Father," he said, as he approached Lucius in his study the day the new Hogwarts term began.

"What is it Draco?" asked Lucius shortly.

Lucius had spent the last couple of weeks brooding. His hostility toward Hermione had become less overt. Narcissa even reported that he was a bit defensive of Hermione at the New Year's Eve party when certain Wizengamot members made snide comments about her. But as far as Draco was aware, he still had not said a kind word to her face, and he only seemed to emerge from his brooding to snip at her while she taunted him back.

Draco wanted a gesture – not just from him, but from his father as well – because he sensed it was the only thing that would truly make her come around to his parents. And as Draco thought back to the lists he created about her likes and dislikes, he knew his parents needed to become something more than just tolerable to her if he stood a chance of their marriage surviving the destruction of the MLPP.

"I need to ask you for a favor," said Draco.

Lucius raised one eyebrow in question, but gestured for Draco to sit.

Draco lowered himself into the chair on the opposite side of his father's desk and considered how he should say this, but he knew his father would see right through him if he wasn't blunt about it. He sighed and steeled himself.

"I need you to help me get the MLPP repealed."

Lucius was quiet for a long moment as he studied Draco. Finally he asked, "And why is that? Do you not wish to be married to your wife any longer?"

"I want nothing more than to be married to her. But the law is wrong, Father, and you were a major reason it came to be in the first place. Our family is the reason Hermione and so many others are in this mess. We need to fix it."

Lucius looked unimpressed. "The morality argument? Try again Draco."

Draco pursed his lips. He wished his father could be convinced in this manner, but he should have known better than to expect it. Lucius had, after all, helped bring a man to power who would happily commit genocide to get what he wanted. Lucius had never been terribly interested in morality.

Draco sighed and gave his father a serious look. "Fine, how about this then? I want Hermione. I'm falling in love with her. And I think the MLPP is going to be repealed within

the next year regardless of what you or I do about it. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Shacklebolt is out of office by the time the next Matching Ceremony rolls around. But if the MLPP is repealed then my marriage to Hermione will either be automatically annulled or there will be a simple mechanism for her to divorce me. I don't want her to do it. I want her to stay married to me and continue the Malfoy line. If I – if *you* – help her repeal the MLPP, it will prove to her that I'm serious about my commitments to her. It will make her understand that I really do choose her, regardless of what some damn law has to say about it. And maybe it will convince her to choose me back when the time comes."

Lucius was silent for a long while as he absorbed this. His gray eyes – identical to Draco's – were piercing him, as though searching for some truth on his child's face. Draco refused to flinch.

"You haven't consummated your marriage," Lucius finally said. "I am on the small list of people who would be immediately informed if you had."

Draco frowned, a bit thrown off by this apparent non sequitur.

"No, but we have nearly eight weeks to do it. I'm working on it."

"Let me say it another way: you've been married to her for over a month and have not... succumbed to the marital magic."

Draco felt his face turn crimson, but he refused to break eye contact with his father.

"No," said Draco shortly.

"And why is that?" asked Lucius. "Does she have a fertility issue?"

Draco swallowed hard. "No, she doesn't. Her natural bodily functions halted temporarily while she was in Azkaban due to severe weight loss, but they have come back."

Lucius's eyes bored into him now. "So they have come back... and yet you still have not consummated. Explain."

"What business is it of yours?" asked Draco uncomfortably.

"I'm the Earl of Wiltshire. You are my son. The moment I am dead, you will take up my mantle and Merlin-willing your eldest son will become the Viscount Malfoy. I am struggling to understand how it is that she is not already pregnant or at least recovering from your best efforts to put her in that state. The Malfoy family magic is strong in this respect, and until recently I thought it was wholly unavoidable without breaking it altogether. It only took your mother and me one month to conceive you, and I remember being absolutely ravenous for her when the magic prompted it."

Draco was quiet for a moment as he considered this. He really did not wish to give his father a window into his sex life, but then again, he needed his father's cooperation with the MLPP. And if he was concerned that Draco's marriage to Hermione had somehow damaged the family magic, it could put any possibility of a relationship between them totally out of reach.

"It was absolute torture, if you must know," he finally said. "I simply resisted it. Hermione and I found a way to satisfy the magic enough so I wouldn't go mad from it, but I still suffered a great deal while it was happening."

"Then why did you not simply take her?"

Draco sensed his father was testing him somehow, but the implication made him so angry he couldn't work out what the test could be. His jaw was clenched when he next spoke.

"Because it would have been *rape* if I had, Father. Her fertile window caught both of us off guard, and she wasn't prepared to consummate yet. She's coming around to the idea, and we have done some things together, but she's not quite ready for that final step. And if you think I'm going to rape *any* woman, let alone my wife – who again, is somebody I am actually falling in love with – all because of some fucked up family magic then you've lost your damn mind. I would rather be caught in that fever forever than touch her in a way that makes her uncomfortable. I refuse to behave like an animal even if the family magic is telling me to rut her until she's breeding."

Lucius studied him a moment longer. "I take it you want to, though?"

"Of course I fucking *want* to. I've wanted to for months – ever since she was arrested, in fact – but she's a woman. She's my wife. Her comfort has to come first, not mine. And I..." he trailed off, wondering if he was about to say too much.

"You what?" he prompted.

Draco was silent for a long moment. "I think she might be a virgin."

Lucius's eyebrows flew up in amazement. "You don't know?"

"She's never told me, no. But Potter once mentioned that Weasley was the only person who ever got a second date from her, and I know she never went that far with him."

Draco registered that this was the first time Lucius had looked truly surprised by the things Draco was telling him. Then he looked thoughtful.

"A true virgin bride then," he murmured. "I don't think the Malfoys have had one of those in a couple of centuries."

Draco winced at the implications regarding his mother and grandmother.

"Yes well... we have a virgin groom too, if you must know," he muttered.

Draco had no idea why he was confessing this to his father, other than the fact that it was the first time he could recall *ever* speaking to his father about these sorts of things in detail. Except for a single conversation in which Lucius described the mechanics of sex and the contraceptive charm, along with a few unhelpful comments over the years about following the family magic, they had never talked about it. Ever.

To Draco's chagrin, Lucius's face assumed a look of near-horror.

“Tell me you’re joking.”

“I’m not,” said Draco curtly, as his face burned.

“Draco, you were betrothed to Astoria for your entire life, and your mother and I were clear that you could seek other alternatives if you found somebody better.”

Draco scowled. “And when, exactly, should I have lost my virginity father? Was it when I was fourteen and fifteen years old and still practically a child? Or when I was sixteen and trying to murder Dumbledore? Or seventeen when the Dark Lord was living in my home? Or after the war when the witches could barely look at me because of what I had done? Or when I had finally lost hope and thought I would have to be with Astoria, who never attracted me in the slightest? Did you know that it’s physically impossible to feel sexual desire or pleasure when you are occluding? And what do you think I’ve been doing since I was sixteen years old to manage my life? When I jilted Astoria and met Hermione again, it pulled me out of my occlumency haze, and I was shocked to discover that years of my life had passed and my cock actually still functioned. So yes, I’m a virgin trying to woo my wife who I’m pretty sure is another virgin. Believe it or not, that takes some time and warming up. I truly have no idea what the fuck I’m doing, but I’m trying my best to make sure she’s pleased and comfortable. That means I will ignore the family magic until she’s ready.”

Lucius was pale as he listened to Draco’s rant. Then he took a shuddering breath and his face collapsed a bit, as though finally accepting something he was only now discovering was entirely inevitable.

“You really do love her then,” he said quietly.

“I think so, yes. And if not yet, I’m sure I will very soon. She’s just... she’s everything, Father. She makes me whole. She makes me *feel*. I’ve been trapped in my own head for years. Occlumency is cold, you know. I can carry on conversations while I’m occluding but I’m barely aware of what I’m saying or who I’m interacting with. It just pushes everything away and leaves me numb. The last few months with Hermione have felt alive again, and I want her to stay with me. I *need* her to Father.”

Lucius was staring off into space, but Draco was sure his father was listening to every word. Finally he spoke.

“Draco, if I help you with this, I don’t think we can expect it to be repealed within the next eight weeks. That’s not enough time to pass legislation outside of a closed session, and your wife is correct that we used our one chance to do that when we passed the amendment. The public will not accept it again.”

Draco nodded. “I know, Father.”

“That means you *have* to convince her to consummate this marriage. Neither your mother nor I want you to go to Azkaban, and you *will* if you don’t get it done soon.”

Draco weighed his father’s words, wondering if he should admit to the vow, but he finally decided to keep that to himself for a bit longer. Besides, it could give him some leverage.

"We've gotten close, Father. Neither of us want to go back to Azkaban. We know what's at stake."

Lucius's gaze pierced Draco's, and finally he nodded once.

"Very well. In that case, this is what I am willing to do."

Draco held his breath as he waited for his father's verdict.

"I will help you and your wife repeal the MLPP in full, on two conditions. First, you stay out of Azkaban by convincing her to consummate with you before the deadline. Second, you agree to shadow me to prepare to take over the family seat."

Draco blinked in surprise.

"The family seat?"

"On the Wizengamot, yes," nodded Lucius. "I know you have little interest in politics, but you know we have a hereditary seat on the Wizengamot, Draco. It can be filled by either one of us. I would like to see you take it over from me as soon as you are able. Getting the MLPP repealed would be an excellent way to learn about it, and I daresay your wife would be more than happy to help you."

Draco's breath caught at this. In truth, he never *had* been that involved in politics because Lucius was so controlling. Draco had not been interested in watching his father browbeat and bribe his way to get what he wanted since he was a boy. Then again, Lucius had never taken the time to really train Draco in it. He didn't select Draco to be his proxy while he was in Azkaban. Draco wondered if he could find more purpose in this aspect of his duty if he was properly trained and had his wife by his side while he did it. For all of Hermione's talk about teaching the next generation of voters, he was sure that marriage to a Wizengamot member would be compelling to her. If Draco could learn the ins and outs of it from Lucius then he could take those lessons and build his own coalition. He could place a voting bloc at Hermione's feet to command as she wished.

He could help her change their world.

Draco stared at his father, who was looking back at him with something like approval on his face as he watched Draco come to a decision.

Finally, Draco smiled and nodded once.

"I accept your conditions, Father. Please tell me how we should begin."

Chapter 18: Liftoff

9 January 2004

“Sodding Dewey Decimal System,” muttered Hermione as Draco peeked his head around a bookcase in the library.

He found his wife, nearly buried in a pile of old books, looking totally overwhelmed by the task she had set for herself. Draco chuckled a little, and she whipped around at the noise to glare at him.

“It’s not funny!”

“It’s hilarious, darling. The library was organized perfectly well before you started this new Project.”

“It was *not!*” she insisted. “I couldn’t find a damn thing in it.”

She huffed, and blew a curl out of her face as she scowled at the enormous pile of books.

“Have you thought about asking for help?” he teased.

She glared at him. “I *did* ask for help, but the House Elves have been ordered *not* to help me by a certain someone...”

“Well darling, you can always order them to ignore me. They have to answer to you as well.”

“I most certainly will *not* be giving them orders!”

“In that case, I’m afraid you’ll be stuck here for years,” said Draco seriously, but he couldn’t help the smile that flitted across his face.

“Watch it or I’ll free them,” she threatened.

Draco grinned. “By all means. But I’m still not going to rescind my order.”

“And why is that?” she asked irritably.

Draco approached her and pulled her toward him.

“Because the longer it takes you to finish your Project, the longer you will stay married to me.”

At this her eyes widened for a moment before narrowing again.

"Is that your angle then? You're going to make me so busy I won't divorce you if the MLPP is repealed?"

"That's one angle, certainly," he said seriously. "I'd really like to convince you myself, but I'm not above such underhanded tactics."

A ghost of a smile crossed her face. "Well, you should know that I have promised O's to every student who helps me get the MLPP repealed. We're doing a unit on civil disobedience to start."

Draco grinned at this before reaching up and tucking a curl behind her ear. "You're enjoying your classes then? You haven't talked about it much, darling."

At this, her face fell a little. "Actually... it's not what I was hoping for."

"Oh?" asked Draco in concern as he pulled the book she was holding out of her hand and tugged her over to a nearby couch to sit. She sighed as she sank into him, and Draco's magic purred contentedly to have her in his arms. "Tell me about your first week."

She was quiet for a moment, as though she was deciding what to say about it.

"They're just... *teenagers*."

Draco chuckled, and she turned and smacked him lightly on the arm.

"Shut it, I'm serious. I like children, but teenagers are just *awful*. I mean, I look at Prudence's little brother Edward— you know he's in my seventh year class – and he's a Slytherin of course, but he bullies this one muggleborn Gryffindor girl relentlessly. Her name is Annie Gray. I swear the two of them remind me of us. Edward is clearly infatuated with Annie, but he doesn't know how to deal with his feelings, so he's just cruel to her. Then she turns around and gives it right back. They actually drew wands and started to duel each other on Wednesday before I could disarm them and give them both detention. It totally derailed the class."

Draco snorted at this. "I can talk to Edward if you wish. I've known him for most of his life."

Hermione sighed. "Don't bother. I already pulled him aside and explained that if he fancies Annie he needs to stop being such an idiot and just *tell* her. I've already drawn the obvious parallels for him."

Draco chuckled a little. "Well teenage boys are hopeless, darling. I certainly was. There were a lot of reasons I was so cruel to you when we were younger, but I won't deny that part of it was a certain... fascination. That and a total inability to act upon it."

"Well the war also got in the way," she acknowledged. "In Edward's case, he's just being immature and swayed by the sort of blood purity drivel I'm trying to stamp out."

"Edward will come around."

“But Draco, *teenagers*.”

Draco laughed. “Does that mean this will be a one-term job for you?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. I had these grand ideas about inspiring the next generation and molding model citizens, but I may have been a tad ambitious. I didn’t take into account how difficult they could be.”

“You’re wonderful with Teddy though.”

“Yes, but he’s five, not fifteen. I’m starting to dread knowing him ten years from now.”

Draco smiled at this a little. “Well, it’s only been one week. Take the term to decide.”

“I will. I just want to enact change, Draco. I’ll admit the MLPP discouraged me, and that’s why I ended up leaving the think tank and taking the job at Hogwarts instead.”

Draco stilled as he considered his next words. He had not yet told her about his plans with Lucius.

“And I assume you plan to continue working to overturn the MLPP? At the New Year’s Eve party it sounded like there could be momentum for it.”

“Yes, of course. Like I said, I hope to get my students involved, especially the seventh years. It will affect them if we don’t do something about it soon. It will be a lot of work though.”

Draco set back to study her. She looked so earnest, but also frustrated, and Draco thought he knew why. Her attention was split.

“What if I told you I was going to help?” he said carefully.

Hermione looked intrigued by this. “Oh?”

Draco shrugged. “You know I don’t have anything else to do, not really. I did promise you I would help you blow it up.”

“That’s true. You have no experience with it though,” she pointed out.

Draco smiled a little at this. “Perhaps not. But Father does.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me...”

Draco nodded slowly, and she gasped as she sat up and grabbed his hands.

“Really?” she asked. “Lucius is willing to help?”

“Yes,” he said. “And as part of it he plans on training me. He wants me to take over his seat on the Wizengamot.”

Her jaw dropped at this, and Draco chuckled as he clasped her hands in his. “I told you darling, I would help you. Father will show me what to do. Theo’s claiming his seat and will be installed in a matter of weeks. He is working to ingratiate himself with his father’s old friends while he waits. He and I have already discussed it, and we are going to do what we can to bring some of the older, more conservative members into the twenty-first century with us. Our family names will still command loyalty from certain parties, even if our views are different from our fathers.”

“Draco...” she whispered, and Draco smiled.

“What do you say, darling? Would you like to command the Malfoy and Nott blocs?”

Her eyes were shining, as she started to smile slowly. To Draco’s delight she climbed onto his lap and cupped his face in her hands.

“That would be beyond my wildest dreams,” she confessed. Draco smiled broadly at this.

“In that case, I would tell you to let me do the legwork on the Wizengamot while you give Hogwarts an honest shot. If it’s not for you, there’s no need to stay, but I imagine it’s one of those things that will get easier year after year. You may have trouble swaying some of the seventh years with only a single term of instruction. But the younger the student, the more moldable they are. Teenagers will always be awful to each other in some respects, but just think... maybe in a few years there won’t be another Draco and Hermione or Edward and Annie. Perhaps purebloods and muggleborns will be dating each other without putting up such a fuss. Do it long enough, and there’s your population of model citizens, darling.”

“So what... you work internally at the Wizengamot while I work externally at Hogwarts?”

“If that’s what you want,” said Draco simply. “If you choose to leave Hogwarts and rejoin the think tank I will fully support it. But your idea about influencing voters while they are young has a lot of merit. I can’t think of anybody better suited for it. Besides, once I’m on the Wizengamot there will be no lobbying required to get my vote or anybody else in my bloc.”

“Even if your father disapproves?” she asked shrewdly.

Draco stared at her squarely. “What did I tell you about that? My wife comes first, always. Besides, Father would have to be an idiot to believe that I would follow him and not you once he has turned his seat over to me.”

“Why is he willing to give it up then?” she asked curiously.

Draco shrugged. “Father is coming around to you. He has spent more than twenty years training me to think a particular way, and he failed. At this point, I think he’s more interested in making sure the title is secure than forcing any particular legislation through the Wizengamot again. Maybe he’s mellowing out. Or maybe he’s weary and wants to retire. Maybe he just wants to see me do *something* he had always planned for me – and taking the Wizengamot seat was always something he intended for me to do eventually. I think he’s finding that when faced with you and me together, he needs to take what he can get. I agreed

to take the seat from him if he helped repeal the MLPP. We both think it will be excellent practice.”

Draco considered telling Hermione the other thing his father demanded: consummation of their marriage. But ultimately he decided it wasn’t necessary. He didn’t want her to consummate before she was ready just to secure Lucius’s cooperation. Besides, their vow guaranteed it that it would happen within the next several weeks.

Hermione exhaled and looked at him seriously. “Alright then. I’ll give Hogwarts an honest shot, and I’ll let you do the political maneuvering for me. I’ll always have my finger in it, but if I don’t have to actively lobby...”

“You won’t,” Draco assured her.

She gave him a swift smile. “Well then that gives me time to sort out teenage drama, doesn’t it? Though I still want my students to learn about it.”

Draco leaned in and gave her a small kiss. “You are the best person to teach them all about it,” he said.

She leaned in and deepened the kiss for a long moment before pulling back and studying him.

“I like this, Draco.”

“You like what?” he said with a small smile.

“Being on the same side as you. Playing to our strengths. Being a team.”

Draco smiled broadly at this. “I like it too, darling. The Malfoys have always been formidable, and with you as part of the family... I think we can be unstoppable, truly.”

She gave him such a beautiful smile at this that Draco’s heart skipped. She leaned in and kissed him slowly, deeply, as Draco pulled her close and allowed his hands to drift. When they finally pulled apart, she was looking slightly dazed.

“Tell me,” he said quietly. “How long will it take you to organize the library?”

Her expression cleared, and she snorted a little at this question. “Years, I’d wager.”

“Well then,” he said, pulling her close so he was speaking in her ear. “Imagine how much change we can accomplish in those years. Anything you want, darling. Say it, and I’ll try to get it for you.”

“Draco Malfoy, are you trying to seduce me?” she said with a dark laugh.

“That depends. Is it working?”

“Mmmm, perhaps. You once asked me if I wanted a man who would burn the world for me. I’ve thought about it quite a bit, and I think I would rather have a man who will build the world I dream of instead.”

Later that evening

Draco descended the stairs to dinner and was surprised to find his father deep in negotiations with Crookshanks. As he watched, Lucius pulled out a collar studded with rubies, and Draco's jaw dropped.

"You must be joking," he said. "Crookshanks prefers emeralds, don't you boy?"

Crookshanks cast one imperious eye over Draco and purred.

Lucius scowled. "The cat can be reasoned with, I know he can. He's ruined my last pair of shoes, and I caught him scratching the armchair in my study. It's from the seventeenth century Draco!"

Draco approached Crookshanks and gave him a pet before narrowing his eyes at his father.

"If I arrange this for you, then you will be *polite* to Hermione. Deal?"

Lucius snorted, but then his face fell as he stared at the cat.

"Fine," he grumbled.

Draco held out his hand for the collar, and Lucius gave it to him as Draco crouched to stare Crookshanks in the eye.

"Now then, what say we have an amendment to our original bargain? A collar in rubies *and* a collar in sapphires," and here he glanced at Lucius who nodded in confirmation, "in exchange for a more cordial relationship with my father. He will also be kind to your mistress going forward."

Crookshanks narrowed his eyes as he considered this, and then purred. Lucius exhaled with relief, and Draco gave him a scratch behind the ears.

"There's a good boy. Now then. Rubies tonight since it's new? Or emeralds since green is a better color?"

Crookshanks nudged his nose against the new collar, and Draco chuckled as he changed it. "Well your mistress will surely approve at any rate."

He stood and turned to give his father a fierce look. "You *will* behave yourself or I'll take the new collars away and sic him on you myself."

Lucius gulped, but nodded, and they made their way to the dining room where Narcissa and Hermione were already seated.

"Good evening darling," Draco said as he dropped a kiss on the top of Hermione's head and brushed the nape of her neck with his fingers. She shivered a bit, but smiled at him before her expression froze as she stared at her cat.

"You cannot be serious," she said.

"Serious about what?" asked Draco blithely.

"*Another* one?" she replied, gesturing to the collar.

Draco shrugged. "He has excellent taste, and you refuse to let me spoil you. I'm forced to spoil him instead."

Crookshanks gave a helpful purr at this, and Hermione rolled her eyes while Draco gave her an innocent smile.

He waited until she was taking a sip of her wine before saying, "Besides, this one was from my father."

It had the desired effect as Hermione spit her wine out, directly into Lucius's face. He scowled as wine dripped from the end of his nose, and Draco snorted with laughter. Even Narcissa was struggling not to smile.

"I'm sorry," said Hermione. "What?"

"Father picked it out," said Draco. "He's trying to make amends. Right, Father?"

Lucius looked like he was smiling through a stomachache as he said, "Yes of course. That's right. I have been... too hasty in my objections to your marriage, Hermione."

Hermione looked suspiciously between Lucius and Draco, and Draco gave her an encouraging nod.

"Alright..." she said slowly. "I'll admit I have no idea what has changed, but Draco did say you were willing to help repeal the MLPP so I suppose I can give you a chance."

"That's all I ask," said Lucius cordially. "And Draco is correct, I'm willing to push for a full repeal."

At this, Hermione and Lucius launched into the longest conversation that Draco had ever heard exchanged between them, comparing thoughts about approach and who would be in favor of a repeal and precisely how to go about it. Draco found himself more interested than he ever had been in politics, likely because it was his wife doing much of the talking.

"Draco, we should start with Lord Flint, Lord Fawley, and Lord Selwyn. I assume Theo will be voting with us, and he can get Lord Parkinson on board."

Draco inclined his head.

"And Kingsley?" asked Hermione. "What about him?"

Lucius pursed his lips. “It will be delicate, but he can be managed.”

“I’d rather see him out of office,” said Hermione bluntly. “He’s had a decent run, but he’s too beholden to the conservative bloc on the Wizengamot these days. It’s getting worse and worse.”

Lucius’s eyes narrowed. “Who would you have then?”

“Maribelle Marchbanks.”

“A woman?” asked Lucius in surprise.

“Wasn’t she the one who ran the Matching Ceremony?” added Draco.

“Yes and yes,” said Hermione, looking at both of them in turn. “Yes, she’s a woman, and don’t you think it’s time we had a female Minister again? And yes, she ran the Matching Ceremony, but I have it on good authority that she volunteered to make sure it adhered to the law and nobody was coerced. She didn’t vote for it in the first place, nor did she agree to the amendment. Her voting record is middle-of-the-road. She’s not as progressive as one might wish, but she also won’t alienate the conservative bloc.”

Lucius sat back, considering this for a moment.

“She’s not a bad choice,” he finally said. “Though getting a woman installed is going to be a challenge.”

Hermione raised one eyebrow. “The muggles have done it before, and so have we for that matter. Or have you forgotten Millicent Bagnold?”

Draco smirked at the irritated look on Lucius’s face.

“I’m simply saying that it will take some convincing.”

“Then let’s convince them,” said Hermione firmly. “She’s a perfect choice, and if there is one person whose career needs to end over the MLPP it’s Kingsley.”

Lucius raised one eyebrow. “Very well. Draco?”

Draco inclined his head. “Your wish is my command, darling. I say we do it.”

Hermione looked inordinately pleased with herself and settled into her meal. It ended late, and as she finally rose to leave the table she brushed Draco on the shoulder.

“Draco, could I speak to you privately?”

Intrigued, Draco nodded his agreement and rose to follow her. She led him into the room they had been sharing for the last several weeks, and she finally turned to look at him with a determined expression.

“I’m ready to consummate our marriage. If that’s alright with you.”

Draco blinked, both shocked and thrilled, and his magic roared to life at her words.

Make her yours. Give her everything. Complete your bond with her.

Draco just nodded dumbly.

She looked a bit nervous and was twisting the hem of her shirt in her fingers. “It’s just that I’ve been thinking about it, and now that we know where I am in my cycle we can be pretty sure that I won’t get pregnant, and it’s something we need to do soon anyway and I thought before my next—”

Draco placed a finger on her lips, and she fell silent.

“I’m ready if you are,” he said simply. “And just so we’re on the same page, I should tell you: I’m a virgin.”

Hermione looked relieved by this. “Oh thank God. I thought you might be, but I couldn’t be certain. I am too.”

Draco smiled a little. “I’ll admit I suspected it and rather hoped you were.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you value chastity before marriage.”

Draco shook his head. “Not at all. But I would be lying if I said I didn’t care about being the one to take it from you. I’m pretty sure I would despise any bloke who got there before I did.”

This made her blush.

“Well since we’re both inexperienced...”

“We’ll do the best we can with it,” said Draco, trying to project a calmness he absolutely did not feel, “but no pressure to make it perfect this time. We’ll have plenty of opportunities to get better at it. Let’s ease into it, yes?”

Hermione finally relaxed at this, and Draco pulled her to him and started by kissing her.

“Like this,” he whispered as he kissed down the column of her throat. “I know you like this...”

Hermione’s head fell back, and Draco took his time sucking on that spot where her neck met her shoulder that always made her shudder. He tugged on the hem of her jumper, and she raised her arms to let him pull it off of her before returning to her neck and moving to the buttons of her shirt. Draco swiftly unfastened them and then pushed her shirt off to find her breasts clad in a lacy bra. It was prettier than some of the others he had seen, and he groaned as he realized she must have been planning this.

“You must know I love every encounter with your tits, darling. Every single one...”

He maneuvered her to his bed and pushed her back gently, before quickly stripping off his own shirt and then hovering over her.

“Fuck, your curves are going to be the death of me...” he murmured as he buried his nose between her breasts and licked.

Hermione gasped and arched a little, and Draco took the opportunity to reach under her to unfasten her bra before slipping it off.

“I’ve been waiting for this...” he muttered. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought about this...”

“It might not be very good...” she warned.

“I don’t care,” he said as he popped one nipple in his mouth and sucked. “I’ll get you like this first. Just in case I don’t last this first time...”

Hermione nodded her agreement with this, and Draco grinned as he sat back and stripped off her trousers in a deft move. Merlin, but he couldn’t believe she was doing this now. Their deadline was still weeks away, and it hadn’t gotten urgent yet. That meant she wanted it. She wanted *him*. She wasn’t just doing it because she had to.

“Tell me darling, what inspired this?” he asked as he hooked his fingers through her knickers and pulled them off so she was finally naked for him. He almost groaned to see her like this: all soft and wet. Draco spread her legs and settled between her thighs as he started kissing up to her core.

“You’ve given me everything,” she said a bit breathlessly. “I decided it was time...”

“And do you want this too?” he asked. He knew she must, but he wanted to hear her say it. “Do you want this with me?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes... I want you, Draco...”

Draco’s magic roared with approval at this, and he rewarded her confession by giving her flat tongued lick over her cunt before finding her clit. He was becoming an expert at finding it now and knew exactly what she wanted. The swirls with his tongue always drove her mad. She was tugging on his hair and writhing against his face, and Draco pressed into her further to give her the pressure he sensed she was craving.

“I’m close...” she gasped. “I’m gonna...”

“Come all over my face,” he said, and she groaned and then spasmed. Draco’s magic hummed as she broke, and he felt that tiny gush of wetness release that told him he had gotten her there. He raised his head to find her watching him with dark eyes, her chest heaving. He reached up and flicked one nipple just because he could. It made her groan and arch again, and Draco smiled to see it.

He stood for a moment and shoved his pants down, releasing his cock, which was as hard as it had ever been. It was throbbing for her, and she eyed it cautiously.

“Do you think it will fit?” she asked a bit faintly.

Draco smiled slowly. “It’s going to be a perfect fit, I just know it.”

Hermione looked a bit nervous again, and Draco furrowed his brow.

“Are you sure, darling? We can wait a bit longer if you wish.”

Her eyes softened. “Thank you for offering, but I don’t want to wait. I just get anxious the first time I ever do something.”

He smiled and moved over her.

“No need to be anxious about this. We’ll figure it out together.”

She nodded and exhaled. “Alright then.”

Draco leaned forward to kiss her deeply as he positioned himself at her entrance. He was in disbelief that this was finally happening, and his heart was racing.

He pushed forward just a little, and they both gasped as he started to intrude. This might be even better than oral sex, he decided. She was so wet, but so *tight*, and he could feel her muscles clamping down on him.

“More...” she whispered.

Draco took a shuddering breath but nodded and pressed forward a bit more before dropping his head to her shoulder. “Fuck, you feel incredible...” he murmured.

Hermione swallowed hard and nodded. “More then... please.”

Draco lifted his head to stare at her. He knew this next push would probably hurt, and sure enough she seemed to be stealing herself.

“Breathe,” he said as he started making shallow movements before reaching between them and rubbing on her clit again.

“Oh God...” she groaned, and her eyes rolled back in her head. Good. That was good. He gritted his teeth as he continued to do it for a few more moments, trying his very best to distract her from what was about to occur.

As she started to arch again, Draco thrust forward hard, and they both gasped at the same time as she flinched.

He immediately stilled. “Alright?” he said tightly. He needed to move. He *needed* to. But he knew that he had just hurt her, and he was determined to give her a moment.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, I think I’m okay... I think I want...”

This was all the permission Draco needed to begin moving in earnest. Gods but she was tight. He had never felt *anything* like this, and he knew he wasn't going to last much longer.

"How close are you?" he gritted.

"Close..." she groaned. "So close, I..."

"Fuck," he muttered. He started to count backwards from one hundred in his head to try to distract himself from the feeling of having her all around him.

"Come for me darling..." he begged. "Please, I want to feel it..."

"I will... I am... I..."

Draco reached between them to press into her clit one more time as he took the nearest nipple in his mouth, and moments later he felt her flutter all around him.

His magic soared.

She's coming for you.

Merlin help him, but it was the most amazing sensation, and Draco no longer tried to hold back. He never thought he would last long this first time, but he didn't need to. He just hoped that she would come first, and now she had. It was his turn as he thrust into her once more, then twice, and then his balls tightened as he felt himself release inside of her.

Give her all of it. Keep it in her.

Draco pulled out and stared down in amazement as he watched his cum, tinged pink, start to leak out of her. Instinctively he gathered it in his fingers and pushed it back in.

Yes, just like that.

Hermione looked at him in surprise, but he tried to play it off as though he was giving her more by fingering her gently and rubbing her clit with his thumb.

"Do you have one more in you?" he asked, hoping she would believe that *this* was the reason he was touching her right now and not because his magic was tingling at the thought of keeping her full.

"I don't know..." she breathed. "That was..."

"Not terrible?" he supplied, with another rub.

Her hips jerked a little, and he smirked down at her.

She huffed. "I was *going* to say quite good... I can't believe you got me to come."

Draco felt his head inflating at this, and she rolled her eyes at him but a small smile was lingering about her mouth.

“Just imagine how good it will be after we practice a little,” he said.

She laughed lightly and then moved away from his hand, much to his disappointment.

She reached for her wand on the nightstand, and Draco put out a hand to stop her. “Don’t,” he said. “Leave it.”

She looked at him askance. “It’s messy.”

“It’s really fucking hot,” he countered.

She turned crimson, but dipped her head and placed her wand back down on the nightstand. “Alright, if you say so. But I *will* have to clean it off eventually.”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Sleep just like that for me tonight.”

“You’re incorrigible,” she replied.

“And you’re wonderful. My beautiful wife. Merlin, I’m going to be hard again in fifteen minutes...”

She laughed. “I’m a bit sore.”

He turned serious. “Shall I fetch a potion?”

She shook her head. “No. But I think I’ve had enough for tonight.”

Draco pouted, and she laughed. “Fine, fine... I’ll give you a few minutes to recover, and then we can use my mouth. How does that sound?”

Draco sighed happily at this suggestion. “It sounds like I’m the luckiest bloke in the world.”

“I think I’m pretty lucky too,” she said seriously.

Draco smiled at her before pulling her on top of him and kissing her again.

Later on that night, after she had given him one her delightful blow jobs and fallen asleep in his arms, Draco snuggled his very naked, very exhausted wife who still had remnants of him drying on her inner thighs.

He had never been happier, he thought, not ever. It wasn’t just because his virginity had finally expired. It was because she had taken it from him, and he had taken it from her. She was perfect. *They* were perfect together. He hoped it would always be like this.

He hoped she felt the same way.

Chapter 19: Confrontations

10 January 2004

Draco woke the next morning to a pounding on his door.

“Wha—?” he asked groggily as he nudged Hermione awake too. She blinked owlishly.

“Master Draco, may Patsy come in?” squeaked the little elf.

Draco looked down and saw that he and Hermione were still naked. She yelped a little and scrambled out of bed to pull some pajamas on, and she threw him his underwear from the previous night, much to his amusement.

“Come in,” he finally called once they were at least partially covered, and the elf apparated in with a *CRACK!*

“Mistress,” she said, looking at Hermione. “A healer is here asking for a health check,” said Patsy nervously.

Hermione groaned and Draco scowled at this. Of *course* the Ministry had been informed that they finally consummated. And of *course* they were now butting in to make sure they had used no type of contraception.

“Darling...” he said.

“It’s fine,” she said curtly. “I don’t like it, but they’ve left me alone for the last month. It’s not unexpected.”

Draco’s mouth thinned, but he nodded.

“Take your time getting dressed,” he said. “If they are in any rush to see you they can go disturb some other couple while they wait.”

She flashed a grin at him and nodded firmly as she moved to the loo. He heard the shower start a moment later.

“Patsy,” he said to the little elf, “go tell them we were asleep and have just been woken up. We will be down when we are able, but they will need to wait.”

Patsy bobbed and left a moment later, while Draco heard the telltale splash that told him his wife had just entered the shower.

He debated it with himself for a split second, but after the previous night he decided he could no longer resist. He crept toward the bathroom and pushed it open to find Hermione’s naked silhouette moving on the other side of the shower glass. His breath caught as he stared at her,

and he quickly discarded the underwear Hermione had thrown to him before approaching the shower door and finally cracking it open.

“This shower is big enough for two people, you know.”

She didn’t appear surprised to see him, but just blushed a little and smiled. “Come on in, then.”

Draco stepped in, the heat and scent of her shampoo immediately engulfing him, and he felt himself hardening in an instant.

“Allow me,” he said softly as he pulled the washcloth from her hands and began to move it over her body. She sighed happily and let him do it.

“You’re far too good at that,” she murmured.

“It is a husband’s greatest pleasure to serve his wife,” he said simply.

She raised an eyebrow at this and moved into his arms, giving him a lingering kiss.

“I’m afraid we don’t have the time this morning,” she said. “We have a guest waiting for us.”

“Fuck them,” said Draco easily. “They should be happy we’re finally banging. Isn’t that the entire point?”

Hermione huffed a laugh, but seemed to concede because she let him touch her as the water poured over both of them.

“Still sore?” he murmured, as he bent down to suckle her neck.

“Only a little...” she said. “I could probably...”

“Mmmm,” agreed Draco happily, and he led her to the large shower bench.

A long while later, after she straddled his lap and impaled herself on his cock any number of times – just to ensure she stayed in control and didn’t overdo it of course – he reluctantly moved her off of him and spent some lingering moments cleaning between her thighs.

“I suppose it’s time,” she sighed.

“If we must,” he agreed as he turned the water off and stepped out before handing her a towel. “I must say though, I’m thrilled with this next stage of our relationship. Shagging Hermione Granger... it’s a fucking dream come true.”

She laughed lightly at this as she took her time toweling off, dressing, and then drying her hair.

It was nearly an hour after Patsy had first woken them up that Draco threaded his fingers through hers and walked down to one of the front parlors where the healer was sitting impatiently. They both came to a halt as they saw him.

Because it was a him. And that meant...

Draco exchanged a glance with Hermione, and he could see they were thinking precisely the same thing. She just smirked a little and Draco bit his tongue to stay silent. He couldn't wait.

"Mrs. Malfoy," said the healer irritably.

"It's Lady Malfoy," she corrected. "I'm a viscountess."

The healer blinked and looked thrown off for a moment as Draco just smiled fondly at her. He would never get tired of hearing her title because it meant she was *his*.

"Very well," he said stiffly. "I've been waiting for over an hour."

"Perhaps next time you will make an appointment," she said sweetly. "As I'm sure our elf told you, we were asleep when you arrived."

The healer glowered at this, but seemed determined to move on.

"Fine," he said curtly. "If you could come here for the blood test?"

"Of course," said Hermione demurely as she approached him. The healer reached out a hand and touched her arm for a split second before an enormous *CRACK!* sent him flying across the room. He crumpled against the wall and looked at her askance.

"What on earth?" he demanded.

"Oh dear," said Hermione with mock innocence. "I'm afraid I forgot all about the family magic. No man but my husband can touch me, you know, not until I'm pregnant."

Draco's magic stirred at this.

Give her a baby and keep her here with you.

For once Draco didn't try to shove the thought away because he was in full agreement.

"You... you..." the healer spluttered, but Hermione just gave him a sweet smile.

"I do apologize. It just slipped my mind, of course. You're welcome to check my wand, but I won't be able to submit to a blood test for you. If the Ministry is really that worried about it, they are welcome to send a woman next time, though truthfully I wouldn't bother."

"And why is that?" he demanded.

"Well first of all, I'll never be tripped up by a health check. I've made that very clear to every healer who has examined me since the MLPP went into effect. And secondly, I'm not fertile at the moment. There's nothing to prevent against."

The healer's face darkened.

“Not fertile because –”

“Oh honestly,” said Hermione, rolling her eyes. “Surely they teach you about fertile windows? You know, the fact that women can only get pregnant a few days per cycle? Well guess what. Today is not one of those days. Nor was last night, for that matter.”

“You’re preventing,” he declared. “You’re doing it intentionally!”

“Of course,” said Hermione smoothly.

“I’ll report you,” he hissed.

Draco started to step forward, but he stopped when he felt Hermione grip his arm gently.

“I hope you do,” she said seriously. “In fact, you should inform the Minister that I’ve been teaching my students at Hogwarts all about the various *legal* ways to prevent pregnancy under the MLPP. I’m thinking about writing about it in my next op-ed.”

The healer glowered at her, but Hermione just smirked as he rose to his feet and dusted off his robes. “Minister Shacklebolt will be informed,” he said harshly.

“I certainly hope he is,” she said cordially. “Please give him my regards, won’t you?”

The healer turned and strode out without another word. A moment later they heard the front door slam shut.

Draco turned to face her.

“You’re brilliant,” he breathed, as he pulled her to him and cupped her face.

She smiled a little. “It was rather satisfying, I must admit.”

He grinned. “I think you should write that op-ed, darling. It would be a public service to any witches who haven’t become pregnant yet.”

“You know what? I think I’ll do that.”

“Then allow me to fetch you a quill and parchment,” he said. “You can get started before Teddy and Aunt Andy arrive today.”

She smiled at this, and he strode to the study to grab supplies before hurrying back to her. “Here you are,” he said with a flourish. “Father’s best parchment. Made from magical willow bark. Also, a lap desk for your exclusive use.”

“You are all unbelievable,” she muttered as she settled next to Draco on a nearby sofa and spread the parchment and other supplies on the small lap desk so she could write.

Draco read over her shoulder for a time before he began kissing it, eventually moving to her neck as he did so.

“You are awfully distracting,” she muttered.

“Mmm, that means I’m doing it right,” he said.

“And when did you get like this?” she asked. “You’ve been ravenous.”

“Of course I’m ravenous,” he said. “And I got like this the moment you let me touch that sweet cunt of yours for the first time.”

His words had the desired effect. She gasped a little and dropped her quill, as her skin heated beneath his lips.

“I could spend the rest of my life naked with you, darling, and it would never be enough.”

“You’re mad,” she sighed, though she tilted her head to the side to give him better access as he traced the line of her top with his fingers.

“I’m not mad, I’m smitten. There’s a difference.”

“I never pictured you the type to become smitten over a girl,” she said.

“Mmm, nor me. But then again, I’ve been starved for affection like this for years. Perhaps it was inevitable once I met a witch worthy of it.”

“You say such pretty things,” she sighed.

“Only because I mean them,” he said, raising his mouth from her neck to look at her seriously. “I mean every word. You do know that, right?”

She studied him for just a moment before dipping her head in acknowledgment of this.

Draco’s expression cleared. “Good. Don’t ever doubt it.”

He resumed his attentions, and she made an exasperated noise.

“Draco, I’m supposed to be writing.”

“The print deadline isn’t until eleven at night, remember? Plenty of time for a shag.”

“We’ve already had a shag today… and last night, in case you’re forgetting.”

“There’s time for another.”

“Draco…”

“Darling… ”

She rolled her eyes, as she said, “Alright *fine*. Just one more shag… ”

Thirty minutes later Hermione’s parchment was crumpled on the floor, underneath Draco’s knee as he sank in front of her and ate her out on the sofa while she moaned for him.

That's alright, he thought. She can write the op-ed tomorrow.

A few hours later

“AUNT MINNIE I HAVE A QUESTION!” came the shout of Teddy Lupin as he ran into the entry gallery at top speed.

“Just a moment Teddy,” she said as she turned to wait for Andromeda.

“BUT IT’S IMPORTANT!” he cried.

“Inside voice,” she reminded him.

“BUT –”

“Inside voice,” she said again.

Teddy huffed and practically danced as he waited for Hermione to greet Andromeda before finally turning back to him. Draco watched in amusement as Teddy’s patience quickly ran out.

“Alright Teddy, what is your question?”

“Is Draco my cousin or my uncle? Because you’re my aunt right? But he’s my cousin too... and now you’re married... and Gran said I had to ask you!”

He looked at her expectantly as Hermione threw a slightly irritated look at Andromeda who just gave her a gesture of surrender.

“Perhaps he’s both?” she posed.

“No, you can only be *one*,” said Teddy. He seemed quite certain.

“Very well,” she said before turning to Draco. “Draco, are you Teddy’s cousin or uncle?”

“In the Black family tree, you will find that you *can* be both,” said Draco very seriously. Andromeda’s eyes twinkled with amusement as Teddy frowned for a moment before his expression cleared.

“That means we’re special!” he cried.

“Or inbred,” muttered Hermione under her voice. Draco glared at her.

“Erm, right. But you can call me whichever you want. Or you can swap off if you want,” said Draco.

“What does ‘swap off’ mean?” asked Teddy curiously.

“It means taking turns,” said Hermione.

“Oh...” said Teddy, as he contemplated this. Then he furrowed his brow. “I married Victoire yesterday. So are you her cousin now too?”

Draco cast a helpless look at Hermione, who gave him a small nod. “Erm, yes, I suppose so. And... how did you marry her?”

“I just did!” he said. “And then I married my neighbor Caroline and Victoire married Louis!”

Draco cocked an eyebrow. “And who is Louis?”

“Her brother,” said Teddy seriously. “He’s a baby.”

“Ah,” replied Draco. “So I take it the Weasleys are like the Blacks then?”

Hermione smacked him lightly on the shoulder and he just grinned.

He could get used to this extended family thing.

11 January 2004

“Darling, are you sure you want to do this?” said Draco, as he stared up at the imposing grey monstrosity that was Azkaban prison.

“Yes, I think it’s time.”

Draco’s jaw clenched, but he nodded once. “Very well.”

“And Draco, you *cannot* lose your temper.”

He scoffed. Between the two of them, Hermione was the one with the temper. Then again, Draco had been known to lose it a time or two. Especially with him.

“You’re *sure* we need to visit the –”

“Yes,” she said. “I need to know where I stand with him before he’s out of prison. You know Prudence is thinking of shagging him soon.”

It was true. Hermione had visited Prudence the previous afternoon and told her all about Lucius’s support getting the MLPP repealed. It was enough to make Prudence give real thought to giving Weasley what he wanted so that they could both get out of there.

"There's no guarantee he will even consent to see us," muttered Draco as they approached the prison.

"Oh I think he'll see us," said Hermione. "Or me, at any rate."

Draco gave her a sideways glance. "Darling... if I could make a request?"

She sighed. "What is it?"

"Don't see him unless he agrees to let both of us be there."

"And why not?"

"I want to hear what he has to say for himself," said Draco. "And besides, I'd like to present a united front."

She chewed on her lip for a moment, but then nodded before raising the knocker for the door. A moment later the window opened, and the familiar voice of Maywood floated through.

"Both of you today?"

"Yes sir," said Draco.

They heard the door being unbolted, and it opened to reveal the familiar waiting room.

"We're both here to see Ronald Weasley," said Hermione. "And if you could please tell him... I will only visit if he consents to see Draco too."

Maywood cocked an eyebrow at this, but nodded once. "Alright. I must say, this will make for a lively afternoon if he agrees. I'll be back in a moment."

They both sat in the waiting room, watching the minutes tick by until Maywood returned. Draco glanced at Hermione and noticed she appeared to be uncharacteristically nervous as she jiggled her foot.

"It will be fine," he said under his breath.

"Oh *now* you're saying it will be fine?"

He sighed. "Because it will be. You're strong enough for whatever he throws your way. And if you don't reconcile, then you are no worse off than you are today, right?"

"I suppose that's true," she said quietly.

"Then don't worry about it. Do whatever you need to do."

She swallowed hard but nodded, as Maywood came back into the room. "He'll see you both," he said. "Give me just a moment while I call a replacement. I don't want to miss this."

Hermione rolled her eyes a little, but Draco saw a small smile crack her veneer, and he exhaled with relief. She would be fine. *He* would be fine. Nobody would have a wand, and Weasley still couldn't physically touch his wife. The very worst thing that could happen was some minor muggle fighting between Weasley and Draco before Maywood would surely intervene.

"Alright," said Maywood as another guard entered the lobby and settled himself behind the desk. "You know the drill. Wands stay here."

Hermione and Draco both turned over their wands before following Maywood down the hall. He led them into the same visitation room Draco had now been to a few times.

Weasley gave them both sullen looks as they entered. There was silence for a moment as they took in each other's appearances.

Weasley did not look well. His hair was too long and appeared a bit greasy. He wasn't nearly as thin as Hermione had gotten, but he clearly lost some weight. His eyes had dark circles under them, and he slumped in his chair. He looked both defeated and resentful.

"Why are you here?" he finally ground out.

Hermione weighed his question for a moment. "Draco and Lucius will soon be working to get the MLPP repealed in full. If that happens, I need to know where we stand."

Draco thought he saw the faintest flash of interest cross Weasley's face at this before it disappeared.

"Why? You've made it pretty clear you choose the Death Eater," he said.

"Yes," she replied. "But you never really wanted me, Ron. We both know it."

Draco blinked in surprise at this and studied Weasley's reaction. Weasley just rolled his eyes.

"It wasn't like there was a better option," he muttered.

"Maybe not a year ago," she conceded, "but now? Is there really not a better option now?"

He didn't respond to this, but just stared moodily at the table.

"I think," she said slowly, "that you owe your wife an apology. Not to mention me."

His eyes flashed. "Don't you think I've apologized to her over and over again?"

"Do you regret it then? Scheming with Lucius to come up with some mad plan to save me from Draco?"

"You were my friend!" he exclaimed. "And I had *some* feelings for you... I mean I always thought I did... can you really blame me for trying?"

“Yes!” she insisted. “Yes I can blame you! Because your feelings for me were lukewarm at best! They were only there because I was the easy choice, the comfortable choice! But now you’re with a woman who could actually love you, and you bollocksed it all up because you think I can’t handle myself with Draco sodding Malfoy!”

An array of emotions flashed across Weasley’s face. “He’s a Death Eater,” he said, and Draco thought he sounded almost desperate as he said it.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “No he’s not.”

“He is! He’s –”

“Wonderful to me,” she said quietly. Weasley blinked in surprise “He treats me like a damned queen. He’s incredibly respectful. He fought his own family magic that was compelling him to shag me so that we consummated our marriage on my terms and not his. He grew up, Ronald. It’s time you did the same thing.”

Draco turned to look at her, affection for her threatening to make his persona crack.

“I don’t –” he started, but she cut him off.

“You cut a deal with Lucius. He is far more Death Eater than Draco ever was.”

Weasley’s jaw clamped shut at this, and there was silence for a long while.

Finally, Weasley broke it.

“I... regret what I did. And not just for the obvious reasons,” he said, gesturing around the visitation room. “But you have to understand, I thought I was saving you from Azkaban and marrying the git right in front of me. I cared about you. I still do. And I was willing to put aside whatever... *feelings* I might have been developing for Prudence and choose you instead.”

Draco sensed Hermione starting to waver, and he jumped in. He had never shared this with Hermione, but Draco finally decided it was time.

“You told Shacklebolt you would do whatever it took to make sure Hermione consummated within thirty days.”

Weasley’s expression hardened as he turned to glare at Draco.

“And?”

“And it sounded like you were willing to rape her to do it,” said Draco bluntly.

At this, Weasley blanched, and his jaw dropped in horror. “Of course I wouldn’t *rape* her! That’s not what I meant... That’s not what Kingsley was saying... he...”

Hermione’s eyes were narrowed, as she held up a hand to stop him. “I get it,” she said. “Perhaps it was a poor choice of words on your part... or maybe testosterone speaking? But

you need to understand that marital rape is *precisely* the sort of thing the MLPP encourages. That's what you would have had to do to get me to consummate a marriage with you. I would never have done it on my own, so if you weren't willing to rape me you would have ended up in Azkaban anyway... only it would have happened a month later and *after* I hexed you into oblivion for forcing a marriage behind my back."

Weasley looked sick as he considered this, and then he seemed to deflate.

"Mione," he said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, truly. I would never do that to you or to anybody."

She was quiet for a long while as she absorbed this, and then she finally nodded once. "Fine. I believe it because you are still here and haven't raped Prudence yet to get released."

He looked hurt. "You don't believe me because we're friends?"

"I don't know if we're friends right now, Ron," she said softly. "I honestly don't know how to come back from this. It was a huge betrayal, and it resulted in me marrying Draco before I was ready to do it."

Draco's stomach clenched at this.

"But you would have married him eventually?" asked Weasley shrewdly.

Hermione hesitated, but then nodded a little. "Yes. Eventually."

The knot in Draco's stomach eased as he decided to take her at her word. She was telling Weasley nothing less than the truth. Draco knew the amendment was the only reason she had consented to marry him when she did. That didn't mean she would have stayed in Azkaban forever to avoid him.

"Why?" asked Weasley, looking both pained and bitter. "Why him? Why after everything..."

Hermione gave a deep sigh. "Because he grew up. We all grew up, Ron. The war changed us – you know it did – why couldn't it change him too? Draco was – *is* – loyal to me. He puts *me* before himself or his family. I'm not expected to just fix his problems or go out of my own way to fit into his life. He has accommodated me over and over again so that I wouldn't have to be the one to do it. The MLPP is a terrible law, and he has done everything he could do to make it as easy as possible on me."

Draco felt his cheeks heating up at the praise.

"I would have accommodated you, Mione! You know that!"

"No you wouldn't have," she said, almost gently. "That's not what we do, Ron. We bicker and argue because we *don't* bend for the other. We never have. And I'm not saying that's necessarily a bad thing, but it makes a poor basis for marriage. Draco though... he's changed a lot about his life over the past few months so that I can fit into it, and in doing so it means that I've changed too."

"How?" he asked miserably.

She looked pensive, and Draco started feeling a bit nervous again.

"He's made me... more willing to seek compromise. He's made me see that sometimes I need to accept help. He has given me my self-confidence back. He makes me feel wanted, beautiful, unstoppable. I'm not just a nagging know-it-all."

Draco's stomach eased again.

"You're not a nagging know-it-all," grumbled Weasley.

She rolled her eyes. "You have called me that so many times over the years the words have almost lost their meaning. Draco though... never. Not once."

They fell silent for a long while.

Finally, Weasley sighed deeply. "What do you want from me? I've apologized. I've gone to fucking prison. I'm not sure what else I can do."

Hermione sat back and studied him, lips pursed.

"Prudence would like reconciliation," she said slowly.

"And you?" asked Weasley.

"Perhaps," said Hermione. "Though I will need to see that you truly mean it when you say you're sorry. I need to know that you understand just how much this hurt me. The only reason I would consider reconciling at all is because it backfired and convinced me to marry the correct man. I'll admit it cut through my own stubbornness on that front."

At this, Draco felt himself start to smile, and he turned to grab her hand. He raised it to kiss the back of it, and he relished the slightly discontented sound Weasley made as he did it.

"And how do I do that?" he gritted out.

"Own your mistakes with your family and make your mother understand that this was all on you. Apologize to Draco as well. Treat Prudence with dignity going forward. Allow yourself to have feelings for her and *date* her. Spoil her. Bend for her. Do all the things for her you would never do for me."

"And then?"

"And then... maybe... someday... we can have a group lunch where I won't hex you. There's a long way to go before we're to that point, though. And just in case you haven't figured it out, you should know that Harry helped Draco and me get married. He's on my side with this, as is Ginny. If you get out of Azkaban and start treating *any* of us poorly again because of this mess that you helped create, then I'm going to consider our relationship totally beyond repair. There are no more chances, Ronald."

Weasley chewed on his lip for a long while, but finally nodded glumly, and Hermione and Draco stood. Draco laced his fingers through Hermione's and said, "Come along, my darling. We should go."

Weasley's eyes bugged out slightly at the term of endearment, and he turned red again as he watched them move toward the door. As they approached he called, "Malfoy."

They both stopped, and Draco turned back to Weasley, with one eyebrow raised.

Weasley was silent for a time as he seemed to struggle with the words. "I'm... sorry. For everything."

Draco contemplated this weak apology. He didn't particularly care what Weasley felt or didn't. They would never be close, not even if Hermione forgave him someday. Then again, he had gotten the girl, and he was now working on his own plan to keep her after the MLPP was gone. He knew Hermione well enough to know exactly how she would wish him to behave.

"Thank you. And I'm sorry for treating you, Potter, and Hermione poorly as a child. There was no excuse for my bullying. I do understand why you wished to 'save' her from me. Now that I know her, I would honestly be inclined to do the same thing. Just know that there's nothing to save her from when it comes to me, not anymore. Even my parents have come around. It's impossible to hate her for too long, you know. It's much easier to love her."

He sensed Hermione's eyes widen at this, but he decided to stare at Weasley to catalog his reaction instead of turning to her. As expected, Weasley went red and started to splutter a bit in disbelief, but he said nothing coherent that Draco had to counteract.

Draco just nodded to himself and tugged on Hermione's hand to lead her out of the room. As soon as the door shut, he pulled her into a hug and felt her sink into him.

"Alright?" he asked softly.

She nodded into his chest, and he thought he felt a wet spot growing, but if she was crying she was doing it silently. They stayed that way for a moment before she pulled back and sniffed a little.

"That was hard."

"I'm sure it was," said Draco with as much sympathy as he could muster. Truthfully, he had never understood what Hermione saw in the Weasel, but he supposed shared history counted for something.

"I do feel better though... more settled," she said. "And I don't think he's going to exit Azkaban with guns blazing either. I was trying to head that off."

"No, I think he'll emerge with his tail between his legs," agreed Draco.

"Do you think I gave in too easily? Or should I have been more forgiving?" she asked pensively.

Draco reached down to cup her chin and tilted her face up toward his.

"The only person who can answer that is you, darling. It doesn't matter how somebody else would react to this – all that matters is that you do what is right for *you*. I know you two have a long history together, and you went through a lot. Ending a friendship like that so abruptly would be a shock, and if you don't wish to do that, I certainly won't criticize you for it. I also think it's fine to give it time, and if you two are never as close to one another as you once were, that's reasonable as well. It's perfectly possible to be cordial with one another in the future without being very close friends again."

She furrowed her brow as she listened, nodding slowly.

"You're right. I don't know if I can cut him off forever because my history with Ron and Harry was such a big part of my entire wizarding identity. But I also don't think I'll ever be as close to him as I once was, nor to Molly if she ever bothers to apologize."

"Perhaps not, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. You've gained some new relationships through this and rekindled old ones," he reminded her. "Friendships are meant to evolve. Sometimes that means a little distance is warranted."

"That's true," she said, smiling a little. "Thank you for coming.... And for being the bigger person."

She blushed a little, and Draco leaned down and gave her a light kiss.

"I meant what I said. It's far easier to love you than hate you."

It wasn't precisely the declaration Draco had been dreaming of, but he knew that would come when the time was right. As it was, Draco caught a small smile on her face that lingered for the rest of the day, and when they came together that evening it was with a renewed fervor. He didn't just love her, he was *in* love with her.

Eventually he would find a way to tell her.

Chapter 20: Oops

14 January 2004

Hermione had turned angry again.

Or perhaps *angry* wasn't the correct word. Perhaps a better description would be *mooody, irritated, and overly sensitive*.

Admittedly, it took Draco a couple days to notice, since she was back at Hogwarts teaching during the day. But there was no mistaking it when her muggle toothpaste failed to squeeze out on the first try, and she vanished the entire thing in annoyance.

At first he thought it must be Weasley's release from Azkaban. Prudence had finally agreed to do the deed, and soon they were both out. The press gave them more fanfare than was necessary, but Weasley had simply said "no comment" to every question thrown his way. Draco had to begrudgingly admit that he seemed to be chastened, at least for now.

In any event, Hermione didn't comment on it, so Draco wondered if it was really Weasley after all.

"It's fucking PMS," she growled when he asked her what had gotten her knickers in a twist.

Draco, who was not precisely sure what this acronym stood for, merely nodded somberly and tried to make comforting noises while sending a very confused Patsy out to acquire more muggle toothpaste.

"She's not your fucking *servant*, Draco," snarled Hermione as she stomped into the room and overheard this order.

Patsy *was* his servant, actually, but Draco did not feel it in his best interest to remind Hermione of that fact just now. She looked ready to bite his head off.

Instead, he settled tentatively into bed, held his breath, and said a little prayer that both of his bollocks would be intact by the following morning.

The next morning brought with it an even more surprising sight: Granger, turning weepy over a photo album of Crookshanks while the cat in question looked on imperiously.

"He was just so... so... *smart!*" she gasped, as tears streamed down her face.

"Darling," said Draco cautiously, "he's right there. And I'd wager the old chap is just as smart as ever, aren't you, Crooks?"

Crookshanks deigned to honor him with a brief purr at this compliment, and Hermione sniffed hard then wiped her tears away.

"Oh it's not *Crookshanks*, truly... I just feel *terrible!* I'm never going to make it through class today!" she moaned.

Draco furrowed his brow. "If you're getting ill..."

"I'm not ill!" she snapped.

Draco closed his mouth and surveyed his wife. She was prettier than ever, though her curls were tangled and her nose a bit red from her tears. He truly had no notion about what was happening.

He gathered every ounce of courage and tried again.

"Darling... I'm afraid I'm a bit out of my depths. Please tell me what's wrong so I can fix it."

"It's my bloody period!" she exclaimed. "And unless you can give me a hysterectomy I'm stuck with it until menopause or..."

She trailed off and groaned as she sank back into bed.

The lightbulb in Draco's brain mercifully went off.

Periods. Her period has returned.

Gathering everything he could ever remember from Pansy's vague hints and complaints over the years, Draco said, "Fear not. I will be right back."

He ducked out of their room and called Patsy for a few supplies, and then returned moments later with his offerings: a hot water bottle, a scented candle, and Belgian chocolate.

She looked at it and sniffed.

"Erm... do you prefer Swiss?" he asked tentatively. "That can be arranged, darling, we will only need a moment to..."

He stopped talking as she grabbed the chocolate and took a bite, groaning in satisfaction.

The sound made his cock wake up.

Draco was momentarily overcome, and some distant part of his brain wondered where, exactly, his Slytherin sense of self-preservation had gotten to. He placed his other gifts on her nightstand as his hand drifted under the covers and moved across her breasts.

Her eyes shot open.

"You cannot be serious," she said, through the chocolate.

Alarm bells should have gone off in Draco's brain, but something inside of him was no doubt broken. Instead of sensing danger, his brain was flooded with endorphins as he palmed those

luscious breasts that were now back to their full glory. His virginity was gone, he had made his wife come on his hands and tongue and cock. He was now Very Sexually Experienced and felt certain he knew precisely what she liked.

And she *did* like having her breasts played with. She made the most delicious little noises whenever he did it. It was endlessly fascinating.

He tried again, and she smacked him on the hand.

“*Excuse me,*” she growled.

Draco’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“Darling, you love this... *I* love this...”

I love you, he added quietly to himself.

“I’m on my period.”

“So? How does that inhibit pleasurable activities?” he asked, as his hand drifted down to her stomach.

She looked at him in confusion. “Well my breasts are more sensitive than usual for one thing—”

“Ah, I was handling you too roughly then. My apologies dearest, I’ll be gentle.”

His fingers started to drift back up, and she slapped him on the hand again.

“I said *no*,” she stated firmly.

Draco blinked, all the endorphins evaporating on the spot. He removed his hand of course, but now he was terribly confused. She hadn’t spurned one of his advances in weeks.

“Okay...” he said slowly, “but why?”

“Because I’m on my period!” she said, looking at him like he had three heads.

“And why is that a problem?” he insisted. “It’s just a little blood isn’t it? You bled our first time together, it wasn’t that much.”

“Just a little...” she started, before closing her eyes as though asking for patience. Finally she exhaled and looked up at him seriously. “For me? No. It’s not just a little blood, at least not for the first couple of days. It is... well, a deluge might be a bit of an overstatement, but it’s not that far from the truth.”

“A deluge,” he repeated, trying to wrap his mind around it.

“Yes, it’s quite rough, and it makes me feel like my ovaries are being ripped out. I know that some people... are into that,” and she turned crimson at this, “but not me. I’m bloated,

peevish, *bloody*. And I have to wrangle smelly teenagers in approximately ninety minutes. That is *not* something that turns me on.”

Draco sighed and nodded. “My apologies, darling. I had no notion.”

Her gaze softened. “It’s alright. It’s different for every woman. Mine is what you might call fast and furious. It’s rough going for a few days, but it will be over soon.”

He nodded firmly. “Well then… the moment you are feeling up to it, do let me know. I might be addicted…”

He leaned down and gave her a chocolatey kiss.

“Delicious,” he murmured, and she gave him a reluctant smile before it dropped from her face, and she slumped back in bed.

“What is it, darling?” he asked.

“Teenagers. Why must it be teenagers?”

He chuckled a little. “Just go in there and boss them around like you do to me. Half the blokes will be in love with you, and the other half terrified of you. And the witches will have a perfect role model to emulate.”

Her eyes opened, and she smiled again.

“Alright, *fine*. But if they fuck with me for the rest of the week I’ll probably end up hexing them.”

“That’s the spirit, darling.”

24 January 2004

The worst of Hermione’s symptoms subsided within the first few days, and by the following weekend she was back to shagging him again.

“Just another day or two bare, and then we’ll have to take certain precautions,” she said seriously, as she guided him inside of her.

Draco didn’t know what these precautions were, nor did he care. He just knew that his daily wanks while she was out of commission were a truly poor substitute for the feeling of her mouth or cunt.

He was insatiable.

A lifetime of suppressing his sexuality had bubbled up over the past month, once Hermione finally let him into her body. It was hard to believe that it had only started on Christmas, and yet he felt he knew her intimately now.

He told himself that a healthy sex drive was a good thing, especially in light of the meetings his father had lined up for the first couple of weeks of February. Lucius took the position that nothing useful ever happened right after the holidays, and everyone needed a month to recover from that much togetherness before business could get underway. The negotiations to repeal the MLPP would therefore begin on the first business day of February, and Draco would be with his father through the entire thing.

That meant Draco had a few more days of freedom before he would be crusading to overturn the thing binding his wife to him – and he fully intended to get his fill of her while he did it. Surely he could convince her that he was her other half. She would have no need to seek another match once she was no longer obligated to be bound to him because Draco could give her everything she wanted. He was the only wizard who knew her body so well. She would never even be tempted to try it with somebody else.

That was his plan, at any rate. And it had the lovely side effect of giving him a perfect specimen of a wife whose body and sounds positively enthralled him.

He thought he was making rather good progress too, because Hermione herself seemed to have a healthy sex drive and continued to initiate now and then. Sometimes she took control, and Draco loved it. Other times she wanted him to lead, and he brought her to completion over and over again. It was a heady, powerful feeling to make a witch as assertive and strong as Hermione Granger practically weep with need for him.

He wouldn't have been surprised to discover his head no longer fit through the door to their bedroom, so inflated was it whenever she begged.

It wasn't until they were approaching the end of January that Hermione threw a slight curveball into their sexual relationship, though it ended up being a brilliant thing indeed.

"What is that?" asked Draco, as she pulled out a small, flat, shiny packet and tossed it to him.

"It's a condom," she said.

"Pardon?" asked Draco.

She rolled her eyes. "I thought you read all about contraceptives!"

"I did," he insisted. "But I've never *seen* one."

She huffed. "I'll show you in a minute. But you need to wear it for the next week or so if you want to... you know."

"Be inside of you?" asked Draco, watching her intently.

Hermione turned a little pink, but nodded. "Yes. I've been tracking my cycle now, and I'm guessing I'm still a few days away from being fertile, but we shouldn't risk it. Sperm lives

up to five days, you know.”

“And this foil thing will what... capture my seed?” he asked in confusion. He had no notion of how this could possibly work.

She suppressed a laugh. “It’s not the foil, but the thing inside of it that does that. Go ahead and open it.”

Feeling slightly foolish, Hermione showed Draco how to tear the packet open. Inside was a round, whitish thing that was oddly soft and stretchy.

“Explain,” said Draco.

Hermione just gave him a coy smile and climbed toward him. “Tell you what,” she breathed. “How about I put it on you this first time, yes?”

His breath hitched, as he looked at her golden eyes, darkening a bit. He nodded mutely, and she kissed him before pulling back and sighing a little. “Always so good for me.”

Draco flushed at the praise. At times he felt ridiculous for just how much it affected him, but he couldn’t help it. She could be so sarcastic and biting that hearing her tell him he was *good* simply made his insides turn to honey. It was so warm and gratifying.

She settled into his lap and tugged his shirt off over his head before running her hands down his chest. Before he knew it she was unbuckling his belt and unfastening his trousers. Draco lifted his hips to help her, and his breathing grew shallow and she slid them off and then palmed him.

“Let’s see him, shall we?” she asked with a bit of coyness that made his pulse scatter.

She pulled down his underwear and his cock sprang free, already weeping for her.

“He’s so pretty,” she sighed with contentment as she gripped it and softly stroked.

Fucking hell she was personifying his cock.

This was...

Draco closed his eyes and exhaled.

Self-control man.

This woman, this witch, continued to surprise him. He would never get enough of her, he was absolutely certain of it.

She stroked him a few more times until she deemed him ready, and then she pulled out that... *condom* she called it... and centered it on the top of his cock.

“You just roll it down like this,” she said, and to Draco’s surprise it unfurled itself to cover his entire length in a sheath. “I did some research, and this one is thin. Hopefully you can

feel enough sensation through it. Also, you're supposed to leave some room at the end," she added, now pinching it a little to position it correctly. "We have to leave space for your release."

Draco swallowed hard and nodded.

"And now you can come inside of me," she said simply. "It's not a perfect method of contraception, but none are. This will let us enjoy each other even through my fertile periods."

Draco pulled her in to kiss her deeply. "You're perfect, you know that?" he murmured.

She turned a little pink, but didn't contradict him and just smiled knowingly.

"Well I should remind you that we are absolutely breaking the law this time, so you shouldn't say a word about it to anybody. Though *why* the Ministry of Magic thinks they can prevent condoms from proliferating in the wizarding world is beyond me. They are widely available at muggle shops. I simply paid in cash for these so it was untraceable. I assume they are relying on most wizards being ignorant about the muggle world to stop it."

"We can keep them in my dresser, and I won't say a word," said Draco. "That's where I stored the polyjuice when I married you. Nobody would look there."

She gave him a relieved smile and leaned in to kiss him again before opening herself to him.

"Now then," she said against his lips. "Make me come."

"Yes ma'am," agreed Draco as he pressed himself inside of her. It felt different, to be sure, and it dulled the sensation for him quite a bit. But he was still here, shagging his wife, and it was pleasurable enough. He could feel her heat and tightness through the odd device as he began to move. He soon decided that he much preferred going bare to using a condom, but he was still grateful for it and would not trade this invention for the world. This muggle contraption was going to enable him to be intimate with his wife through her fertile period. And the fact that he couldn't feel her quite as well meant that he lasted longer for her too. He wrung an extra orgasm out of her before he reached his own end with it.

His last thought, as they both approached their final peak, was a keen appreciation for muggle ingenuity.

Muggles really know what they are about.

27 January 2004

Draco's second heat started much like the first.

Find her and fuck a baby into her. Find her and fuck a baby into her.

The urges turned insistent and then painful and finally feverish as he did his best to resist. He told himself he was ready for it. The last one had taken them both by surprise, but Hermione had started tracking her cycles as soon as the MLPP was first announced, and she gave Draco advanced warning of when she thought her next fertile period would be. Sure enough, she was correct within a day, and Draco marveled at his wife's ability to predict such things.

Or he would have marveled at it if he hadn't been so bloody uncomfortable.

Even knowing what was to come, both of them had forgotten a critical detail from the previous fertile period: Hermione had been at the Manor with him through the entire thing. This time, the onset of it began during the middle of the week, and Draco was forced to go many hours without her while she was at Hogwarts teaching. The moment she stepped through the floo each day, Draco practically hauled her into their room and devoured her. She let him do it, and a combination of tricking the magic with her need and using condoms so he could actually shag her this time helped stave off Draco's urges, at least when she was with him.

The final day of it, however, was so bad that Draco was nearly burning with fever by the time she arrived home.

"Thank Merlin you're here," he gasped. "Last time we spent the whole day in bed together, remember?"

"Mmmmm," she hummed, because she couldn't speak. Draco was pressing her against the wall in the gallery, right next to the floo, his tongue shoved down her throat.

"Draco!" cried Narcissa's sharp voice. "Take it upstairs!"

Draco's mouth made a rather obscene sound as he came up for air and glared at his mother. "We are heading there, Mother," he insisted.

She raised one, skeptical eyebrow.

"Faster, please. Nobody wants to see it."

Hermione's face was crimson, but Draco was in no state to care. He grabbed her hand and tugged, taking the stairs two at a time as he pulled her after him until they turned the corner into the hallway with his room. Here, out of the sight of his mother, he pushed her against the wall again and resumed what he was doing.

His hands were eager, his lips desperate, as he nipped and tugged and sucked down her neck and toward her breasts.

"Please..." he groaned. "Please, Hermione..."

"Yes, but not *here*..."

"Room's too far," he said as he dropped to his knees in front of her and shoved her skirt up.

“Christ,” she muttered, but she didn’t resist further as she spread her legs and let Draco disappear under it.

The scent of her made him lightheaded, and his magic surged as he shoved her knickers to the side and buried his face into her.

She made desperate, keening sounds while Draco gripped her waist and pulled her down on him harder, deeper. If only his tongue was twice as long to fit all the way inside of her.

The taste of her did little to help and simply stoked the fire inside of him. He knew there was only one thing to do. He had to get inside of her. He had to get inside of her *right now*.

Hermione seemed to sense his frustration, because she was trembling, but her voice came out firm.

“We have to get to your room,” she said. “Right now. Before we do this without any protection.”

Who needs protection? his magic asked, but Draco didn’t dare to say it out loud. Even in his haze he knew she was right. He wouldn’t cross that line with her. He *wouldn’t*.

She would let him do it with a condom on though, he knew that by now. The previous few days had seen them burning through their supply, but she still had several left, enough to make it through this fertile window. Then there was the promise of going bare for a couple more weeks while she restocked.

Draco forced his face away from her, feeling like he was going to be ill as he moved back.

He swallowed back the bile and tried to wrestle with the magical fever taking hold as he stood to grab her hand and pulled again.

“Come on then,” he said roughly.

He couldn’t say anything else. He started to run.

His room was at the end of the very long corridor on the second floor of the east gallery. Most of the time it meant that he and Hermione had ample privacy, not to mention a lovely view over the gardens and small Quidditch pitch. He had moved there after starting at Hogwarts as a way to give himself some space from his parents. It had always served him well until very recently. Now, however, it was *so bloody far away* from the damned floo on the first floor that he found himself cursing it.

At long last, they made it, and he wrenched the door open.

“Out,” he barked at Crookshanks, who for once seemed to sense the seriousness of Draco’s order and streaked out of the room, making his way down the same wretched hall before disappearing around a corner.

Draco yanked Hermione through the door, shut it, and barely took the time to lock and silence it before turning his attention to her clothes.

Her professional blouse and skirt – which were objectively lovely – were in the way of what he wanted.

Without taking a moment to think about what he was doing, he reached down and ripped her blouse open, as buttons went scattering across the floor.

“Draco!” she scolded, but her eyes were dark.

“It's fine,” he said, now sweating with the effort of maintaining what little control he still had. “I'll buy you a new one.”

The skirt, fortunately, had an elastic band, so this did not require ripping, and a sharp yank pulled it down over her hips and arse, where it pooled on the floor.

Her undergarments were lovely today, prettier and lacier than usual, as though she was certain he was going to see them. He forced himself to step back and look at her as he quickly disrobed himself. She had made an effort for him, he was sure of it, and he knew he should take the time to savor it. But the few seconds it took him to strip too was all the attention he could give. He was too eager for her.

“Beautiful,” he said, as he cupped her breasts and then quickly unclasped her bra to let it fall free. “But I need you. I feel like I'm about to die.”

Hermione gave him a look that clearly said, *Stop being dramatic*, but Draco felt like he was telling her the truth. He *was* about to die if he couldn't get inside of her in the next ten seconds.

Mercifully she did not make him wait as she hooked her fingers inside her knickers and pulled them down, while Draco scrambled to pull a condom out of the warded dresser. His hands were shaking badly as he tore the packet open, and he moved back toward her to reach between her legs for her wetness before coating himself with it. His magic settled ever so slightly as he shoved the condom down on his cock and rolled it to the bottom with now-practiced hands before turning to his wife.

“On the bed, legs open,” he said, and her eyes went wide, but she didn't object.

She did as he asked, and Draco leaned down once more to ensure that she still had some lubrication for herself before positioning himself at her entrance and pushing in.

His magic trilled, seeming to recognize both the want he had spread over himself and the tightness of her channel. It seemed to think he was inside of her, barrier-free.

“Thank Merlin,” he gasped as he started to rock.

It was only now that his attention truly drifted to his wife beneath him. He had been feeling feral, animalistic, and totally unable to focus on *her*.

It was abominable, and Draco determined that he would make it up to her.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “It was so much worse without you today and-“

She put her finger to his lips to cut him off.

“That’s alright. I rather like it when you manhandle me. It’s sexy.”

Relief bloomed inside of him. He hadn’t frightened her or made her uncomfortable, then.

“Still. Tell me what you want, darling. The magic is still potent, but this is taking the edge off.”

“Make me come, Draco,” she said. “Maybe...”

“Maybe what?” he prompted.

“Maybe from behind? I’ve wanted to try it like that.”

She looked hesitant and shy, but Draco gripped her face so she would look at him.

“Hell yes,” he groaned. “I’ve fantasized about that so much.”

She smiled, and he pulled out for a moment before flipping her over on her stomach and pulling her to her knees.

“Circe this is hot,” he muttered as he brushed her arse with his hand. “Arch your back for me darling, let me see it...”

She did, and Draco groaned.

“Fucking perfect,” he muttered, as he found her entrance and pushed.

Oh Merlin, this was tighter than anything they had done before. And the angle gave him all the leverage to go balls deep inside of her.

Fuck a baby into her just like this.

Draco didn’t even bother to tell the magic to stop, because he knew it was no use. Besides, the part of him that was flooded with hormones and marital magic – in other words – nearly every bit of him – actually agreed.

I want to fuck her and fill her just like this.

But he knew he couldn’t do it today. It would have to wait. Just a few more hours, and she would be out of her fertile window, and he could give her what his magic so craved.

Instead, he thrust, hard and fast, and Hermione cried out as her chest sank to the bed. She began to shake and it wasn’t long before he felt her break. His magic roared with triumph to see his wife spread out before him like that, awash in her own pleasure.

Draco could have come too, but he resisted a moment longer. Something about the way she had come so beautifully made him want to kiss her and cherish her and watch her do it again, but this time he wanted to see her face.

He pulled out and flipped her over again before settling back on the bed and pulling her into his lap. She seemed to sense what he wanted, because she draped her legs around him and brushed his sweaty hair out of his face with her hands before leaning in to give him a deep kiss and sinking down on his cock again. He hissed at the sensation, already so close to the edge.

He wanted her to carry him over it.

“Ride me,” he grunted. “Use me. I want you to come for me one more time darling.”

Hermione gave him a truly decadent smirk as she accepted the control he was turning over to her, and then she began to move, swirling her hips and then pulling her legs under her so she could bounce up and down on him.

His jaw dropped, and he stared in her face. Her golden eyes were alive, warm, and Draco thought something big was happening. He didn’t know why it was different this time, but they seemed to be on the precipice of something. There was no hesitation, no shame as they took everything they wanted from each other. Draco’s magic seemed to heat as it sensed them both approaching the end.

She climaxed with a gasp, and the expression on her face was transcendent. It unraveled him, and he was utterly at her mercy, this extraordinary witch who was his, at least for now.

Draco felt that telltale moment of release right before it happened, and he captured her lips as he fell into it. His magic sang, and tiny lights seemed to burst before his eyes as he spurted long and hot, the quantity enhanced thanks to the family magic.

Draco didn’t release her when he was done, but just held her close as they slumped into each other. They stayed that way for a long while, Draco’s magic finally sated as the fever fell away, and he softened inside of her.

Tell her what she means to you.

His magic was more of a whisper than a demand this time, and perhaps he was feeling reckless because he decided to heed it. That was the thing that had changed between them moments earlier. He was certain about how he felt. And this was the time to tell her, while they were naked together, after she had just given him everything.

“Hermione,” he said, and he watched as her eyes opened to look at him. She was almost delicate like this, absolutely perfect. “I’m in love with you darling. And I know you might not feel the same way, but I need to tell you. Because this... us... it’s everything I want.”

She looked surprised, and then a little shy as she smiled slowly and gave him a soft kiss.

“I am... heading that way myself,” she said. “I’ll admit I’ve fought it, but I don’t think I can anymore. It seems utterly mad, but I can’t help myself.”

Draco’s chest expanded, and he found himself beaming at her as he pulled her forward for another deep, languid kiss. She was falling in love with him. She might not be quite as far as

he was, but she was surely just behind him. A few more weeks or months, and her feelings would be there too. His wife would be his, not because of the marriage law but because she loved him.

Draco was on an emotional high as she gave him one last sweet kiss and then started to move away. He smiled at her, but then frowned in confusion as he watched her face change.

It went from happy to perplexed to terrified in a matter of seconds, and then her eyes dropped to look between them.

She had finally pulled herself off of him, and it took Draco's brain a full three seconds to process the fact that something white was leaking out of her. Then he glanced down at his now-soft cock, and the truth hit him like a bludger.

The condom was broken.

Chapter 21: A Very Big Decision

A few hours later

Draco was in bed, hands folded behind his head and staring at the ceiling as he contemplated the events of the last few hours.

Within seconds of noticing the broken condom, Hermione practically launched herself off of his lap and sprinted to the bathroom, where she took a long, hot shower. Draco assumed she was washing herself *thoroughly*. Meanwhile he just sat there in a daze, his skin vibrating slightly, as he tried to absorb what had just happened.

He didn't know condoms could break. He was *sure* he had put it on correctly. It had still been intact when she sat on his lap, he was almost positive. But somehow it *did* break, and Draco hadn't noticed. He was so wrapped up in his wife and the delicious confessions of love and falling in love that his attention was entirely diverted.

How long had they been sitting there with his seed inside of her, lost in the bliss of each other? Five minutes? Ten? Was that long enough for the sperm to swim up to parts unknown and disappear inside of her, never to be flushed out by aggressive showering?

Draco couldn't remember the answer to this, but he knew in his heart that five minutes was plenty of time. Even if it wouldn't be long enough for muggles, it would surely be long enough for Malfoy sperm, enhanced by the family magic. He was certain that while she was showering several hundred, if not thousands, of Malfoy sperm were already trying their damndest to fertilize her egg.

And he also knew with certainty that it had worked. Perhaps it was his family magic fucking *preening* or the fact that the urges had totally evaporated within minutes of completion or maybe he was turning prophetic. Regardless of *how* he knew, he knew. He was certain.

Hermione, of course, was much less certain.

"I washed it all out," she snapped. "I knew that could happen *in theory*, but I can't believe our luck... that sort of failure is not that common and..."

She closed her mouth at the look on his face.

"Anyway, we won't know for a couple weeks."

"Right," he said, though Draco knew now.

"I can't take a morning after pill. They might test me. But I'll do some research on... other methods. If it comes to that."

Draco's stomach turned at this. "Right."

"Because that would be crazy. We aren't ready for this. It was an *accident* for heaven's sake!"

"Right," said Draco. Because what else could he say?

He knew what he *wanted* to say. He wanted to tell her that this was a dream come true for him. He wanted to say that he *needed* a son for his title, and he wanted his son to also be hers. He wanted to say that he loved her, and he already loved their little zygote who was surely subdividing away as he started his slow journey to her uterus to find a nice squishy place to implant himself for the next nine months.

But he couldn't say any of that. She didn't want a baby. She had made that very, *very* clear.

For the first time in months Draco started to occlude heavily. She gave him an odd look when his face changed, but she didn't ask so he didn't offer an explanation. He needed to feel that numbness again because he couldn't stand the panic in her voice, the *distaste*.

After that brief exchange she left for her flat, claiming she needed to do some urgent research in the muggle world. She even skipped dinner. He didn't know if he would see her tonight.

Draco himself had eaten quickly and silently and then gone back to his room to brood. He only lowered his walls halfway – just enough to have a rational conversation with himself, not enough to really feel it.

He knew he couldn't ask this of her. He knew she didn't want it. It was her body, her choice. He believed that, he really *truly* did. But Merlin, he wished he could have just a little input on this issue without crossing any lines, and if he was being entirely honest with himself he resented her a little bit for the fact that she didn't even pause to *talk* to Draco about keeping the baby before she ran off and started researching. Their entire relationship had been at her pace. The marriage had been on her terms. The consummation had been her idea. Draco had bent over backwards to earn her affection and trust. He was about to embark on months of work to overturn a law he didn't particularly want to overturn. All of it – *all* of it – was for her, and he had done it her way.

This would be done her way too, which meant it probably wouldn't be done at all. She would find some way around the pregnancy that was about to take place. She would land upon a muggle method she could use to terminate it, and then Draco would suffer through however many more heats until the MLPP allowed them to get divorced and the family magic would be broken. That was where they were headed, declarations of love or not.

But why did it have to be that way? Why couldn't Draco have this *one thing*? He knew it would be a huge burden for her in the short term. He knew she didn't want it. But *he* did. Could he not get his own way just this one time? She could give the baby to him and divorce him once the MLPP was repealed and never have to bother herself with the child again if she didn't want to. Draco would adore their son. Draco already adored him. And Draco had all the resources in the world to raise the boy as a single father. As long as Draco and Hermione

were married when the baby was born, Draco would have secured the legitimate heir he needed for the title, even if their marriage fell apart soon after.

He would never have to seek another wife if she left him. He would never have to compare another wife to the one he had lost.

Yes, Draco needed this. He needed their baby *badly* for so many reasons, but he couldn't ask her to give this to him. Because her choice trumped his wishes. He *knew* it. He even *believed* it. But in that moment, he hated it.

Draco heard the door open, and he turned a dull eye toward Hermione, whose hair was frizzed. She looked like she had been studying frantically, but she had an exultant look on her face.

"I've got it," she breathed. "I know just what to do if... you know."

Draco said nothing, his walls already going up again. He settled for an eyebrow raise.

She frowned a little, but then seemed to brush it aside. "Yes. Well... there's this muggle medication I can take that will terminate it. It shouldn't be detectable with magical testing, at least I don't think it would be... it will simulate a miscarriage."

Draco struggled to lower his occlumency walls to ask the questions he needed to ask. Because regardless of her decisions about this, she was still his wife and her safety and security took precedence.

"Is it safe?" he asked.

"Extremely," she said promptly.

"And you're certain the Ministry can't detect it?"

She hesitated.

"Hermione..." he prodded.

"I'm pretty sure," she said, now sounding a little less confident. "Like I said, it should be indistinguishable from a miscarriage."

"Magical miscarriages are rather rare," he said.

She swallowed. "Well I would take it as soon as I find out one way or the other. The Ministry would never know that I *was* pregnant..."

"Unless they test you in the next two weeks," he pointed out.

She scowled. "It won't show up right away. I'm sure I can work around their schedule."

"And if you're wrong and they find out you're pregnant, only for you to tell them you had a miscarriage a few days later, then what?"

She threw her hands up in the air. “Then I’ve had a miscarriage! You said yourself they’re rare for witches, but that doesn’t mean they never happen!”

“And you don’t think they would investigate it when it was *you*? ”

“There would be no proof that I did anything wrong! ”

“But what if they find something? Are you *certain* their tests won’t pick up on whatever drug does this to you? ”

Her jaw clenched. “I’m fairly certain.”

“How certain? ”

“Maybe eighty percent.”

“And what happens if you are wrong, and they catch you terminating a magical pregnancy? ”

He knew the answer to this already, having run across it in her notes a few months ago. But he wanted to make her say it.

“Azkaban.”

“For how long? ”

“Ten years,” she gritted out.

“Precisely,” he said. “That’s too risky for only eighty percent certainty.”

She threw the papers she had been holding on the bed and tossed her hands in the air in exasperation.

“Then what is *your* solution? It’s not like you’re helping! ”

A muscle in Draco’s jaw twitched. He wasn’t precisely sure what to say.

“I don’t have a good answer for you,” was the thing he settled on.

She glared. “Well unless you’re prepared to become a father, I suggest you help! We need to find a way to get rid of it on the offchance I’m actually pregnant! ”

“Him,” corrected Draco automatically, looking away from her.

“Pardon? ” she asked.

“Him. You said it, but if you are pregnant then it’s a boy.”

He chanced a glance at her, and her face was turning pale.

“I need to think of it as an it,” she whispered.

Draco narrowed his eyes at her. “Why? It’s not like you to ignore facts. All of my sperm is male until an heir’s blood is added to the wards. You know this.”

She was looking sickly and worried now.

“Because... because I can’t *personify* it! It’s not a person! It’s just some cells at most, and we aren’t keeping it!”

“We aren’t keeping it,” he repeated dully, raising his walls again and turning away from her.
“Right.”

Perhaps she was right, and he needed to think of their boy as a bundle of cells too. Losing cells wouldn’t be nearly as painful as losing a person. But Draco had already spent the last few hours imagining a life he would never have. He was envisioning curly hair and tiny fingers and a cupid’s bow mouth like Hermione’s.

He couldn’t conjure a picture of cells in his mind’s eye, even though he knew that was all they had at the moment.

She was right that their boy wasn’t a person yet, not really. He would never become a person. He would never develop thoughts and feelings and expressions and habits.

He hated that too.

“You *know* we can’t keep it,” she insisted. “It would be impossible.”

At this, something penetrated Draco’s occlumency haze, and he stared at her again, lowering his walls ever so slightly to observe her. She looked anxious, wringing her hands, and she had started to pace a little. He promised himself he would let her decide this. He would resist the urge to get on his knees and beg her to keep it. He wouldn’t interfere unless she was preparing to do something that could send her back to Azkaban – and he rather thought this muggle drug suggestion of hers could do just that. But she had just stated something that was factually incorrect: that it was *impossible*. It wasn’t impossible at all, and Draco decided to press her on it.

“Why would it be impossible? You would be pregnant, have a baby, and then he’s here with us. That seems *entirely* possible, given the things that happened earlier today.”

She had a slightly wild look about her now as her pacing became more frantic.

“It’s impossible because Kingsley would win! I’ve already married you, and now I might be reproducing with you? I can’t do it! You *know* I can’t do it!”

Draco fell silent as he absorbed this. He knew how principled she was, and it was something he had always admired about her. But right now, in this moment, he felt pity for her. Couldn’t she see that the world wasn’t black and white? Didn’t she understand that not everything was a win or loss? Couldn’t she ever accept a compromise when it came to this sort of thing? And even if she was right and Kingsley won this time, why did it matter so

much? Why would she sacrifice something that could be so wonderful just to prove her point?

Her pacing halted as she stared at him. “What?” she demanded. “What is it you want to say?”

Draco furrowed his brow and looked down at his lap to collect his thoughts. He wanted to be fair to her. He didn’t want her to make a decision she would truly regret. But it also saddened him to hear that *this* might be the reason she would give up on a family with Draco.

“I think...” he said slowly, “that you are viewing this in absolutes. If you have a baby, then Kingsley and the MLPP wins. But I wonder, why can’t you *both* win? Why does it have to be zero sum? Why is his win your loss? And why in the bloody hell are you letting *Kingsley Shacklebolt* have any influence whatsoever on your choice in this matter? The man has one foot out of office already. In six months none of it is going to matter. And you are talking about making a very large, *very serious* decision because of a man who will soon be stripped of power anyway?”

Her eyes were huge as he spoke.

“But... but it will look bad,” she said weakly.

“And why’s that? Because I’m a Death Eater?”

Draco felt a stirring of resentment. He had played along with her publicity stunts. He had allowed her to say terrible, awful things about him in the press. The entire time he told himself that she didn’t really believe it. Her feelings for him might not be as strong as his were for her, but she didn’t really, *truly* mean the things she wrote about him.

Now he wondered just how foolish he had been.

“I don’t... it’s not...” she trailed off weakly.

Draco gave a mirthless laugh. “No, really, I get it. I’m a big bad Death Eater. I always have been, haven’t I? All the times I thought they were just words to craft the image you were trying to maintain... I never objected to it. But now... well I understand it now. You would rather risk ten years in Azkaban than have a child with me. You’re the Golden Girl. You would never reproduce with a man like me, not ever. That’s the real problem here, isn’t it?”

Her lips were parted, and she looked like she wanted to object, but nothing came out.

“Right,” he said, deflating. “I need a little space. I’m going to go to Theo’s for a few days while you think about it. Don’t worry, I won’t say anything to them.”

He stood and started to move out of the room.

“Draco!” she said. He turned around, his heart squeezing at her beautiful face. It was a mixture of pain, anger, hesitation, and fear. “Draco, it’s my choice.”

He swallowed and nodded. “I know it is. And I love you, Hermione. I meant it when I told you that earlier today. Regardless of what you choose, that will not change, and I will support your decision one way or the other. If you choose to terminate, then all I ask is that you be really fucking careful about the way you do it so you don’t hurt yourself or go to Azkaban. I also hope you can be honest with yourself and with me about the reasons why you’re doing it. And...” he hesitated for a moment.

She looked stricken, but she prompted him in a tiny voice, “And?”

“And if you choose to keep him, I don’t want him to become another one of your publicity stunts. You can drag my name through the muck all you want, but you aren’t going to do that to him. He is *not* going to be known as a miniature Death Eater before he’s even born, and I won’t have you using him as leverage to get the MLPP repealed. If you choose to keep him, I’m going to protect him from that because I know how shitty it feels, and I owe him that much as his father.”

All the blood drained from her face at this, and Draco just gave her a grim nod.

“Right. Let me know what you decide to do.”

14 February 2004

Draco was staring moodily into the fireplace in his bedroom. It was frigid outside, with snow falling in flurries. He hadn’t seen or heard from his wife in over two weeks, and he was mentally preparing himself to go to Azkaban if she didn’t reappear soon.

They hadn’t shagged during the month of February yet, and as far he knew the Ministry was unaware that Hermione was pregnant — or *had* been pregnant at one point. He had no idea if she still was, and the clock was ticking.

He couldn’t bring himself to care.

After that day the condom broke he went to Theo’s and stayed for several days, claiming that Hermione was just very busy, and he missed his old friends. It wasn’t the first time he had crashed at their home for more than a few nights, and he tried to play off Hermione’s absence. Perhaps he had been successful, or maybe his friends knew him even better than he thought they did because they didn’t press him about it, for which he was grateful.

He had intended to stay until Hermione contacted him with her decision, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Pansy was due at the end of March, and watching her waddle around Nott Manor with her swollen belly and Theo’s eyes trailing softly after her had been too painful. Every time she struggled to tie her shoes or placed a hand on her stomach from a small kick, Draco’s heart broke just a little more.

He would never get that with Hermione. Regardless of her true reasons, she didn't want a baby, and she certainly didn't want a baby with him.

Draco idly wondered why he had been fine with this until the condom broke, but he had no good answers. Maybe it was a bit like their marriage: he never would have considered Hermione Granger as a wife until the MLPP assigned her to him. And similarly, he never really thought he would have a child with Hermione until the condom broke. The moment it became a possibility though, he wanted it. He *craved* it.

But she didn't want it, and that would be her answer. Draco would respect it. Of course he would.

Draco returned to Malfoy Manor after four days, fully prepared to hear her tell him that it was already done, only to discover that his wife was now missing. She had left two days after Draco did and hadn't communicated with any of them. Narcissa and even Lucius were worried about it – though Lucius assured Draco that he had reached out to McGonagall, and he had it on good authority that Hermione was still teaching. So she hadn't been abducted, she had simply *run*.

She had run from him.

She had run from him after he drew a line in the sand.

Draco thought he might be sick every time he thought about it.

Had he been too harsh with her? Had he said anything untrue? Had he made her remember that he *was* a Death Eater and now her distaste for him had resurrected itself?

Draco didn't know, but he couldn't take it back. And truthfully, he didn't want to take it back. He loved her – he loved almost everything about her – but she could be brash and headstrong and uncompromising at times. And Merlin, if some miracle occurred and she actually agreed to keep their son, then Draco would stand between him and Hermione to keep him from becoming another tool in her arsenal. He would not let his son be used, even if Hermione was well-intentioned about it. Out of all the things he had said to her that day, this was the one thing he would never be able to regret.

He wanted Hermione to *want* their baby – not for publicity or leverage – but because he was theirs. Full stop.

During the last two weeks Draco had been forced to attend meeting after meeting with his father to begin negotiations repealing the MLPP and ousting Shacklebolt from office. Mercifully, Lucius seemed willing to let Draco observe silently for now. But Draco knew he would have to participate sooner rather than later. He just didn't know how to browbeat his brain into it. He found it impossible to pay attention during their lengthy meetings and constantly found his mind wandering to Hermione.

Had she taken a test yet?

Had she ordered those pills?

Had she confessed to any of her friends?

Did she hate Draco now?

His mind was filled with her and the choice she would be making soon. It made him distracted, irritable, and generally terrible company.

And now it was Valentine's Day, and she was still missing. Draco had considered writing her a letter, but he didn't know what to say except, *I miss you, I love you, and everything I said to you the last time we spoke still applies.*

That was the crux of the issue, wasn't it? He really *wasn't* that sorry for the things he had said to her. Perhaps his approach could have been better — Draco acknowledged that he had been occluding heavily and may have managed it poorly in the moment — but the overall message still remained true. He did love her. He would *still* love her if she terminated. He wanted her to be very careful if she did it. And he didn't want her to use their son if she decided to keep him.

He couldn't bring himself to apologize to her for *that*.

But apologies or not, she was still his wife. She was still the love of his life. And it was fucking Valentine's Day, and Draco would be a piss poor husband if he allowed it to pass without any acknowledgment. Not knowing what else to do he sent her some flowers and her favorite pastries from the elves with a short note.

I don't know where you are, but I love you today and always. Please come home when you're ready darling. I'll be here.

His owl had flown off with the package and returned several hours later empty-handed, so he knew she received it. There was nothing more that he could do.

His thoughts were interrupted by Patsy, who appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Pardon me, Master, but this note was just delivered for you."

Draco furrowed his brow and accepted it. Then his stomach dropped when he recognized Hermione's handwriting.

Meet me at 6 Hamilton Place, Mayfair at 7 p.m. It's across the street from the Four Seasons. We need to talk.

Draco's heart was pounding as he stared at it, and he checked his watch. He needed to leave in thirty minutes to be on time. Her note was short, terse, and had no declarations of love or softness to it whatsoever. The missive *we need to talk* told him everything he needed to know about what was coming.

Sighing, he finished his drink with a large gulp and welcomed the burn that went down his throat. Then he rose and moved to the loo to start the shower. He wouldn't be late.

30 Minutes Later

Draco pushed open the doors to 6 Hamilton Place and immediately wondered how many muggles Hermione had to confund to manage this. The place was absolutely packed. Evidently muggles celebrated Valentine's Day just as ardently as wizards did because there wasn't a spare seat to be found.

He approached the hostess and asked for his wife, who directed him toward a small table in a corner. It was surprisingly private given the number of people who were there, and Draco's stomach clenched harder when she looked up at him. Her eyes seemed to be rimmed red, as though she had been crying not that long ago.

"Sit," she said as the hostess moved away.

Draco sat. Immediately a waitress came over to take their drink orders, but Hermione just shook her head, so Draco did too. He could already tell this wasn't going to be celebratory. The waitress looked disappointed, but said she would be back soon to take their orders.

The moment she was gone, Hermione seemed to steel herself and looked at him. "I need to tell you something."

Draco nodded, saying nothing.

"I'm pregnant."

Draco nodded again. He already knew this. There was never any question in his mind about it. The only slightly surprising news was that she was *still* pregnant. Draco tried to eye her stomach across the table, but couldn't get a good angle to see if she looked any different. It sounded like the baby was still in there, though. She hadn't done anything about it yet. He tried not to allow his hopes to rise too much.

"You're not... surprised?" she asked hesitantly.

"No?" said Draco, his confusion pulling his attention away from her stomach. "I knew you were the moment it happened. The family magic is really strong in that respect."

For some reason Hermione's face fell at this. "Oh."

They were quiet as they stared at their menus, and several minutes later the waitress came over to take their orders.

This was turning into one of the most stilted dinners of Draco's life.

"Have you... decided then?" he finally asked. It was best to get this over with.

Hermione was quiet for a long while.

“I actually have some questions for you.”

Draco looked at her in confusion. “Okay?” he said. He had no idea what was going on.

“Are you ready to be a father?”

Draco gave a mirthless laugh. “Of course not. Is anybody ever ready the first time?”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “But you still *want* to be?”

Draco frowned. “I don’t want to sway any decision or –”

“Just answer me, please. Do you want it?”

“Yes,” said Draco simply. “Very much.”

“How much?”

“Enough that I would happily raise him myself if you wanted nothing to do with him.”

Hermione went pale at this suggestion.

“Why would I want nothing to do with him?”

Draco was perplexed. “Isn’t that what we’re discussing? Terminating him? Because you don’t want him? You asked if I want him, and I do. You asked how much. I’m telling you that I want him enough that I would raise him without you if that was your preference.”

Hermione closed her eyes as though praying for patience. “I’m really bollocksing this up.”

Draco prayed for his own brand of patience. It would do them no favors if they lost their tempers with each other. He reached across the table and grabbed her hand.

“Hermione, just tell me what you’re thinking, darling. If I’m failing some sort of test I’d really like to know before I say something I can’t take back.”

She deflated. “You’re not failing any test. I think... I think *I* failed the test.”

“What test?” he asked in confusion.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. The test of our relationship? Of my potential to be a good mother? All of it?”

“I’m still not understanding.”

She made a frustrated sound. “I’m just... I’m *scared*, Draco! I like older kids... once they start to talk, you know? Teddy was rough as a baby, and he’s the only practical experience I have. What if I’m bad at it? What if I fuck him up? What if I don’t love him? You are acting like you already love him, but honestly... I don’t! Not yet, at any rate. I don’t feel any different except for a little queasy now and then, and it’s hard to believe he’s even *in*

there, let alone some tiny person I'm going to fall head over heels in love with in nine months! I'm already a bad mum, and I'm a bad wife too," she added sadly.

"You're not," he insisted, and despite her having obvious dismay his heart started to lift ever so slightly. She was finally, *finally* talking to him about it.

"I am," she said miserably. "I... well I owe you an apology. A huge one. I should never have used you the way I did for publicity. It was cruel of me. Heartless."

Draco squeezed her hand. "I invited it."

"Perhaps, but I still shouldn't have done it," she insisted. "You have to know, I *never* would have married you if I believed you were still a big bad Death Eater. Never. I would have stayed in Azkaban or married Ron. I treated you horribly, Draco. I'm sorry. And also... that really *wasn't* why I was thinking of terminating. I thought I had our contraception under control, so when the condom broke, I panicked. It's easy to blame Kingsley and the MLPP for every single thing that goes wrong in my life, but this time it really *wasn't* because of that stupid law. We didn't have to have sex that day for the MLPP. I shagged you because I wanted to. I knew I was fertile when I did it, and I knew condoms could fail. I did it anyway, and that's all there is to it. I'm sorry I made you believe that I would never have kids with you because of your past. That's not the case at all."

Draco stared at her in amazement. He had not been expecting this at all.

"Hermione," he said slowly, "it's alright. Frankly, I earned some public shaming for what I did to you all those years. I'm not angry about it. And I really wouldn't blame you if you didn't want to have kids with me. It would probably be deserved."

She was shaking her head hard, and now tears filled her eyes.

"It's not deserved. But..."

"But what, darling?" he asked softly, his stomach twisting again.

"But the thing you said about using our son that way—" and Draco's heart leapt because she said *our son*, "—you were right! It was the first thing I thought of when I considered keeping him... *using him* to repeal the MLPP, just like I've used you. And when you pointed it out I realized what a terrible, *horrible* mum I would be!"

Tears were streaming freely down her face, and she swiped at them impatiently. But Draco now felt almost lightheaded with relief that she had finally articulated this to him. She was afraid. She feared failure and coming up short. That had always been one of her greatest fears, hadn't it? But now that Draco knew her initial instinct to terminate was driven by her own insecurities and not because of *Draco*, he had a better grasp of the things he needed to say so she would stop spiraling.

"Hermione," said Draco firmly, "look at me."

She raised her eyes to his face. She looked utterly miserable.

"You wouldn't be a terrible mum, not at all. You're brilliant and brave and so bloody strong minded. Hell, the little bugger would probably run roughshod all over me if I didn't have you there too."

She gave a watery laugh at this.

"I mean it," he insisted. "I get that it's scary. You think I'm not scared of fucking him up? There's a title and money and that doesn't even touch on the fact that I *was* a Death Eater! He's going to learn all about the shitty things I did someday, and I'll have to watch whatever respect he has for me die when he finds out. I already know it will happen, and I am going to dread it every single day while I wait."

She seemed to soften a little. "We're both scared then," she said.

"Bloody terrified," agreed Draco.

"But..." she prompted.

"*But*, I think that we could raise an extraordinary person. I think we would love him, and even if you don't feel that way now, it will come in its own time. You love Teddy don't you?"

Hermione nodded.

"See?" said Draco, "You love him even though he's not yours. You love him even though he was a difficult baby. I obviously know very little about children, but one thing my mother has said over the years has always stuck with me."

"What's that?" she asked curiously.

"That you can love the child and not the phase. Apparently I went through any number of distasteful phases. My mother is not a baby person either. She's never tried to hide it from me. She has always told me that one of the happiest days of her life was the day I started walking, and she no longer had to worry so much about all the dirt on the floor while I crawled around."

Hermione started to smile a little at this. "My mum said something similar," she said quietly. "She *is* a baby person. She likes slightly older kids too, but toddlers are not her thing. She says they have all the willpower to be independent and none of the skills necessary to do it."

Draco felt his optimism slowly coming back. "There you go, then. I can't say which phases I will and won't like, but everything comes to an end eventually, right? Surely we can love him even when he's in a phase that drives us crazy."

She nodded slowly and then got a cautious look on her face. "You know... I told my parents. That's where I've been the last week."

Draco's eyebrows flew up.

"Oh?" he asked nervously.

She nodded. “Both of them... well, they both really like you. I told them everything – the things I’ve done to you in the papers, the way you fought your family magic for me, all of it. Well... I suppose I haven’t told them I’m *actually* pregnant yet — I took a test this morning and thought you should be the first to know — but I did tell them everything else and that I was trying to decide what to do about it if I was. They told me they would respect my choice, but...”

“But?” he whispered.

“But they also pointed out that we are married, and you need a son for the title. And they both thought you wanted a baby regardless of your duties. You gave them that impression when you visited them before Christmas.”

Draco swallowed and nodded. “Yes,” he said a bit hoarsely. “I... it was a dream. Obviously I never meant for it to happen this fast. I told myself I was fine with it *never* happening at all, and truly darling I would have been. But... yes. I want him. I want *you* to be the mother of my children. I think you would be extraordinary, and I love you. There isn’t anything I want more than that.”

Her eyes had turned soft and she stared at him in the low light. “Then promise me something,” she said.

“Anything,” said Draco instantly.

“Promise me that you’ll keep me in check. I know I have a tendency to get wrapped up in my own ideas. I can be arrogant and inconsiderate of the way other people feel. If you ever think I’m crossing a line with him *or with you*, please keep telling me. I think... I think I need that. And in return, I promise not to run again. I just... I didn’t know if you were coming back.”

She looked down at her plate, and Draco reached across the table to grip her hand again.

“Darling, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to leave you, not at all. I was just afraid I would be on my knees begging you to keep him if I didn’t give us some space. I didn’t want to influence your decision too much. I really, *truly* do not want you to do this all for me. I don’t want you to regret it.”

She seemed to relax at this. “I can understand that,” she said. “And... thank you.”

Draco swallowed and then gathered his courage. He wanted to make sure he knew her answer. He needed her to say it.

“So... does that mean you *do* want this? You want to have a baby with me?”

She met his eye and nodded slowly. Draco thought he was going to levitate from happiness.

“Truthfully, I’m ninety percent terrified and ten percent excited. But that’s a noticeable improvement from a few days ago, so I think we’re trending in the right direction.”

Draco grinned broadly at this. “I love you enough to work with ten percent, darling.”

She finally gave him her brilliant smile. "Thank you Draco. We'll do this together."

Chapter 22: Little Star

20 February 2004

“Are you proposing full annulment as a matter of law or a path to divorce?” asked Lord Fawley, as he frowned.

“Divorce,” said Draco firmly. “No fault, instituted by one spouse.”

“But wizards rarely get divorced,” pointed out Lord Selwyn. “Doesn’t that create poor precedent? Are we saying that *all* married couples can have a no-fault divorce?”

“It can be limited to those who were married as part of the MLPP,” said Lucius smoothly. “For everyone else the normal rules can still apply – requiring infidelity, violence, and so forth.”

“But tying it to the MLPP creates its own problems, doesn’t it?” asked Lord Fawley. “Quite a few marriages took place *before* the MLPP went into effect as a means of avoiding it. What about all of those couples?”

“What about them?” asked Lucius, rolling his eyes. “They chose to get married outside of the Ministry’s matching program. The only rules of the MLPP that apply to those couples are those that apply to *all* couples – no contraception and so forth – the MLPP is otherwise nongoverning for them.”

Lord Flint had a pensive look on his face. “If you want to repeal it Lucius, it would be far simpler to do just that – enact a full repeal. The marriages that were performed through the Matching Ceremony would be automatically annulled, would they not? They would never have existed in the first place.”

Draco exchanged a look with his father across the table. It was staid and carefully blank, but Draco knew they were thinking the same thing.

Don’t let them annul it.

It was actually an open question if an annulment would dissolve Draco’s and Hermione’s marriage, since theirs had taken place *after* the MLPP went into effect, and they had technically opted to do it on their own. This was something their solicitors had scratched their heads about, until Lucius, in a fit of frustration, demanded to know *why* he was paying them seven hundred galleons an hour if they couldn’t even answer a simple, hypothetical question.

But they couldn’t, and so the ‘conservative position’ – to use their words – was to assume that any wholesale repeal of the MLPP would cause automatic annulment of all matched marriages, including Draco’s with Hermione.

Draco was willing to get the MLPP overturned. He was *not* at all pleased by the notion that his marriage might be annulled without any say so from either one of them. Lucius had been less bothered by it, but he agreed to support the divorce route if that was what Draco wanted.

It *was*.

With a divorce, Hermione would have to actively *do* something. There would be a court date and asset division and other things that would slow the process down. An annulment would be automatic, for whatever date the Ministry selected.

It made Draco very nervous. Hermione had agreed to stay married to him at least until the baby was born, and he was clinging to this.

“We can see how we feel after that, but I know you need a legitimate son. I won’t divorce you before then, I promise.”

It was a promise Draco was depending upon because if their marriage was annulled, then Hermione would have to *remarry* him before the baby was born – and that would then mean they were stuck together forever unless they could divorce for those traditional reasons Lucius had implied.

Draco, of course, was more than happy to be stuck with Hermione forever. He hoped that over the next eight months he would be able to convince her of the same thing. But there was no question that things would be easier, *simpler* if he could give his wife an option for divorce that she could take whenever was most convenient instead of being at the mercy of the Ministry’s schedule – meaning *after* their baby was born.

Draco was prepared to fight for it, and he was certain his father would too once he learned Hermione was pregnant. He may not be personally invested in having Hermione Granger as a daughter-in-law, but he *was* quite interested in grandchildren, if less overtly so than his mother.

They still had not told either set of parents that Hermione was expecting. It still felt new and early and odd. But according to Hermione, she was already five weeks and a bit pregnant, and their son was the size of a poppy seed.

Draco’s mind was blown.

He swore to himself that they would tell his parents soon. Lucius would go to the mat for the more complex divorce route as soon as he was informed. Draco was certain of it. But as it was, the look Lucius gave Draco across the table said one thing.

Save it. We will raise this later.

“You may be right, Lord Flint,” said Lucius carefully. “It’s possible that a simple repeal would automatically annul those marriages without any further administrative burden. However, the Ministry’s solicitors and experts in magical marriage bonds would have to investigate it. It’s possible that the magical bonds would not recognize a simple repeal. You know magical divorces have an element of bond-breaking.”

The group hummed at this point and sat lost in thought.

"But you wish to give all the couples an out then?" asked Lord Fawley, frowning at Lucius. "I'll confess that it surprises me. I know that your *personal* circumstances were a bit... *strained*. But you did champion this law Lucius, from the very beginning."

Again Lucius and Draco exchanged a look. Draco was the one who spoke up.

"I'm actually quite satisfied with my marriage. I have no great desire to see it end. But one must give their spouses what they wish, yes? Everybody knows my wife's feelings on the matter."

Lord Flint raised a skeptical eyebrow. "So you want to stay married, but you are giving her an out?"

Draco looked at him squarely. "Allow me to be the one to worry about the success of my own marriage. She and I are adjusting rather well, as it happens. But she does feel strongly about this, and I *know* you all can recognize what a catastrophe the MLPP has been. The press has been horrible. The public is very displeased. It has eroded trust in Minister Shacklebolt to an alarming degree."

"About him," said Lord Selwyn wryly. "What are we going to do about him? I don't disagree that this has been... less successful than we all hoped. But you know Kingsley. The man has become absolutely entrenched, even more so than you, Lucius. He no longer has the public's support, and he is bringing the Wizengamot down along with him."

Lucius's nostrils flared a bit, but he wisely kept his mouth shut and looked at Draco.

"I think it's time we vet some new possibilities for Minister," said Draco lightly. "The conservative bloc has a majority, but we will need to be careful about who we put forth to take his place. The public has been alienated."

"Who do you have in mind?" asked Lord Flint.

"We are still vetting possibilities," said Lucius. "But we wanted to see if you had any ideas and also gauge your interest in pursuing this in the first place. We will all need to be in agreement."

There was some murmuring of acquiescence to this.

"Excellent," said Lucius. "Let's all give it some thought and meet again in a couple weeks to review possible candidates. I really think the Minister needs to go first and then the MLPP. The repeal would be credited with the new Minister and a more tolerant Wizengamot if we do it in that order."

The wizards rose to shake hands and soon left the restaurant where they had been meeting. On the way out, Lucius gripped Draco by the arm.

"They may not go for the divorce route, Draco," said Lucius. "It's far more administratively burdensome."

An uncomfortable sensation settled into Draco's stomach.

"I know, Father, but I would like to try."

Lucius pursed his lips, but nodded. "Fine. We will keep trying. But you should know that there are always compromises that have to be made. Lord Flint's suggestion of a simple repeal is sensible. Surely you must understand that."

Draco rolled his eyes. "I know that's what you would prefer too... for now."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

Draco huffed an exhale. "Nothing, Father. You'll know very soon."

27 February 2004

"Draco, you'll be fine," said Hermione in amusement.

"I've never eaten in a muggle household before," he muttered.

She rolled her eyes. "Well let's see. There are these things called 'kitchens' where you make something called 'food' and you eat it on a piece of furniture called a 'table' while generally having something called a 'conversation' at the same time. When we put it all together we call it *supper*."

He scowled at her, but she just grinned and nudged him with her hip.

"Besides," she added, "Mum and Dad and I are on better terms than the last time you saw them. And you *are* bringing Mum flowers. That's always been the fastest way to her heart."

"It's just that the last time I was here they tried to slam a door in my face and—"

"Mum says she was slamming the door in *Harry's* face, actually. Come on, don't be a baby."

Draco paused at the turn of phrase and then turned to grin at her. "Alright darling, one baby is enough for now."

She smiled a little and approached the same house Draco had visited a couple months prior and rang the doorbell. A minute later Mrs. Granger opened it, wearing an attractive knee-length dress and holding a dish towel.

"Hermione! Draco! Come on in," she said, ushering them into the sitting room. Draco was momentarily stunned. He knew Hermione had been visiting them rather frequently over the previous two months – not to mention the weeks-long stay when they had been on the outs

with each other – but the difference in Draco's reception now versus two months ago was startling.

"Helen, these are for you," said Draco, handing her a bouquet of daffodils. "They are from the Manor gardens. We have patches of them that are charmed to bloom year-round."

Helen's face relaxed into a smile at this. "Well that's lovely, thank you, Draco. Come this way, I'll get a vase."

She led them past a sitting room and something that looked like a nice office, toward a dining area in the back of the home. As they entered, an elderly woman rose from a chair, using a cane to assist.

"Gran!" came Hermione's surprised voice. "Goodness, I didn't..."

She shot a look at Draco, and he quirked an eyebrow to try to say, *It's up to you.*

She cleared her throat and looked at Draco.

"Draco, this is my grandmother, Isabella Granger. Gran, this is my husband, Lord Draco Malfoy."

Isabella gave Draco a look that was so reminiscent of Dumbledore's piercing gaze that he gulped before remembering his manners and stepping toward her.

"Mrs. Granger, it's a pleasure," he said, raising her hand and bowing over it.

She narrowed a beady eye and surveyed him. "Hmmm. So it's true then? You've married a Lord?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "Erm, yes. Yes I have."

Isabella's eyes were still fixed on Draco. "Well he's nice enough to look at, I'll grant you that much. Wiltshire though? Mostly farmland. A famous henge or two, it's true, but what else is there, really?"

"Yes, Stonehenge is quite famous, Gran," said Hermione dryly, and Draco got the impression she was struggling not to roll her eyes. Then she looked at Draco. "She does know I'm a witch," she added.

"Oh thank Merlin," Draco breathed in relief.

All of the Grangers grinned at this.

"My mother has always favored London or the Lake District for a bit of nature," chimed in David, walking forward to shake Draco's hand. "You'll have to forgive her for casting aspersions on your family's seat."

Draco smiled broadly at this. "Cast away. I happen to agree."

"You'll do then," declared Isabella. "Now come sit over here and explain this nonsense about a marriage law, eh? And my granddaughter went to prison? Well she wouldn't be the first one in the family, though it's been a few generations. I think the last time it happened was over some gambling debts. Or perhaps a duel at sunrise to defend a lady's honor, and the idiots involved got caught. The family history has never been entirely clear on this point."

"*Ignore her,*" mouthed Hermione as they settled around the table.

Watching Isabella Granger was like looking fifty years into the future. She was obviously very fond of Hermione, though it had been quite some time since they had caught up. Based on a few nuggets she dropped, however, Draco sensed that Hermione may have seen her gran on occasion, even when the relationship with her parents was very strained. She was funny and sharp, always quick with a retort. She and Hermione debated the finer points of the MLPP after Hermione brought her up to speed, and Draco was rather impressed by the questions she asked and her wit.

"Well you must get this Shacklebolt fellow out of office, my dear," she declared, "though I'd say there's a silver lining to all this."

She nodded toward Draco, who felt his cheeks turning a bit pink, but Hermione gave him a teasing smile.

"Yes, Draco *has* been a rather nice surprise. It turns out we suit quite well."

"In that case, you'll stay married to him once this mad law is repealed, yes?" she asked.

Now it was Hermione's turn to go pink, and she cast a furtive look at Draco. "We are talking about it, Gran. There is still some time, but..."

"But nothing, my dear. The boy is obviously smitten, and he's a Viscount *and* a wizard. You're never going to do better than that."

Draco, who had said very little, wasn't precisely sure how Isabella knew he was smitten. Did he have a sloppy look on his face? Was he staring at his wife? He couldn't be certain, but the older woman had clearly read him like a book within minutes of meeting him.

"You may be right, Gran," said Hermione in a conciliatory tone. "Besides... there may be some other reasons."

Draco stared at her intently. He hadn't been certain if Hermione would still want to go through with this after seeing her grandmother, but he saw her gathering her courage and warmth spread through him.

"And what reasons are those?" asked Isabella with a very knowing glint in her eye as she started to smile slowly.

Hermione flushed pink. "I'm... we're... expecting."

Hermione's mother burst into tears, and David started patting her on the back, while giving Draco a wry, but pleased, look. Isabella beamed.

"I'm due in October," Hermione added. "It's very early still, but miscarriages are quite rare for wizards so we wanted to go ahead and tell you. It's a boy."

"You know already?" asked Isabella in surprise.

Draco cleared his throat. "Erm, yes. My family has some marital magic that guarantees a boy first to preserve the title. We have to add a drop of his blood to the estate's grounds after he is born to break that part of the magic. Until we do, all of our children will be boys."

Isabella's eyes lit. "Fascinating. Well that's quite useful then, isn't it? My father was very disappointed to have a girl first, though he came around once my little brother was born."

She rolled her eyes at this, and Draco smiled a bit awkwardly. "Yes, well, the spells are quite old. The Malfoys were never interested in risking it."

"Have you discussed names?" asked Helen eagerly. "I've always loved William. It's so classic. Matthew is also lovely and—"

"Actually, he'll be named after a constellation or star," said Hermione, cutting her mother off.

Draco blinked in surprise and stared at Hermione in slight disbelief.

"You would... do that?" he asked softly.

She gave him a little smile and rolled her eyes. "Obviously, Draco. I know our son's title will come from the Malfoys, but I rather like the Blacks you know."

"Explain," demanded Isabella, looking intently between them.

Draco felt a little choked up as he said, "Well it's just... my mother's family – the Blacks – is a very old one too. Nearly all of them are named after constellations or stars. The tradition is hundreds of years old."

"Draco, eh?" she asked curiously.

Draco nodded. "Yes, my parents observed it, even though I'm a Malfoy. I was the first wizard in my generation of Blacks. Actually, I'm the *only* wizard in my generation of Blacks, though of course my parents didn't know that would be the case when they named me. But yes, Draco is the dragon constellation."

"What are some other names then?" asked David curiously.

Hermione started listing a few off. "Well Draco, obviously, but also Sirius, Regulus, Orion, Pollux, Arcturus, Cygnus, Alphard..."

"Gracious," muttered Helen. "That's quite different from William, isn't it?"

"Yes, but there are many options," said Hermione. "In fact, I'm quite keen on—"

"Don't say it," cut in Draco, who was still absorbing the fact that she would follow this tradition for him.

"You don't know what I was going to say!" she insisted.

"Of course I do, darling."

She huffed, and Draco thought he saw Isabella's eyes gleaming in amusement.

"Fine then, *what*?"

"You're going to say 'Leo.' But the Gryffindor lion reference is far too obvious, so I'll have to veto that."

She turned pink and harumphed, as the others laughed.

"Well you both have plenty of time to decide," said David.

"And we'll have to brush up on our astronomy," said Isabella. "The names are unusual, but it's a very charming tradition."

"Perhaps you can just call him your little star for now," said Helen, smiling at them both.

Draco heard Hermione's breath catch next to him, and he felt oddly emotional as he gripped her hand under the table.

"I love that," Hermione confessed

David raised his glass, and Helen and Isabella joined him moments later.

"Well then... to our Little Star Malfoy!" he declared.

"To Little Star Malfoy!" they repeated.

Draco felt his eyes prick.

The Next Evening

Draco was staring off into space, happily ruminating on the very satisfying romp with his wife from that morning.

She had been surprisingly enthusiastic. After assuring Draco that (i) sex while pregnant was perfectly safe and (ii) it wasn't like she could get pregnant *again*, Draco unceremoniously threw away the box of condoms and then laid back while Hermione rode him bare.

It was a *fantastic* ride too, he thought, a bit dreamily. Tits bouncing, head thrown back, and all Draco had to do was grip her hips while she took care of both of them.

After their fight and weeks spent apart, it was the first time they had been together like that, having taken a couple weeks to warm up again. But they did it and fulfilled February's sexual quota for the Ministry in just the nick of time, though as Hermione pointed out, it was a leap year so they could have pushed it one more day if they really wanted to.

Because yes, they still had to have sex once a month until a pregnancy was confirmed with the Ministry. And Hermione had successfully scared away the healers who had been so persistent, so nobody had checked on her in the month of February to learn that she was in a delicate condition.

"It's none of their business whether I'm pregnant or not, and I don't plan on telling them," she declared.

Draco, for one, certainly didn't mind. He was in full agreement that the healers who worked with the Ministry were not to be trusted with his wife and baby. The moment the world knew about it, her pregnancy would surely become front-page news, and neither one of them were particularly looking forward to it. In fact, the more they talked about it the more they wanted to keep the entire thing locked down for as long as possible. They were in agreement now that Little Star would not be used for the MLPP repeal in any respect, and the easiest way to avoid it was to keep the news quiet.

Besides, Draco was more than happy to maintain the fiction of monthly couplings until the evidence of Hermione's condition was incontrovertible.

While they were waiting for the end of February to roll around, they had spent the last couple of weeks in deep negotiations with each other about certain aspects of their son's life. Hermione's announcement about his name from the previous night had been a surprise to Draco, but that was because they simply hadn't gotten to the topic of names just yet, other than agreeing that his surname would be "Malfoy." The other things they needed to agree on were more urgent so that, to use Hermione's words, they could "present a united front to potentially hostile parties."

Their son would be raised in Malfoy Manor because he would be titled eventually. This meant – for all practical purposes – that Draco would have primary custody if Hermione chose to divorce him. Hermione clearly struggled with this idea, and Draco hoped it would be another reason to convince her to stay too. But she couldn't argue with the fact that there were traditions and duties and expectations when one was in line for a title like their son's, so she had eventually agreed that he would be raised there and assume the Malfoy surname regardless of what she chose to do with their marriage.

The early years, they decided, would be spent mostly at home. With the Notts and Potters having children close in age, there would be opportunities for socialization, and Draco would serve as a stay-at-home father, along with elf help when he was needed at the Ministry. Hermione would continue to work at Hogwarts or elsewhere. She would take a customary leave right after the birth, but would then return to work.

Later, they agreed that their son would go to a muggle primary school before Hogwarts for socialization with larger groups of children and exposure to the muggle world. With budget being no object and the ability to confound their way onto any class rolls they desired, they agreed that Hermione would be the one to research educational options and would give Draco a short list, from which they could mutually select a school.

This had led to a fascinating conversation about the way they were both raised. Draco had lessons in the Manor with private tutors when he was young. Hermione had gone to a local parish school near her parents' home. They were determined that their son would have the benefit of both, and Hermione agreed to supplement muggle school with tutors during school breaks. He would continue to learn about the magical world that way, along with the etiquette and deportment that would be expected of him due to his role.

And then there was the last thing: the pregnancy itself. This, Hermione informed him, would be done her way and *only* her way since his entire contribution amounted to less than thirty minutes of fucking.

Draco could not exactly refute that, but he still knew that her decisions in this matter would likely result in a fight with those "potentially hostile parties." So no, Draco decided not to think about it and instead occupied his mind with memories of those beautiful tits bouncing in perfect rhythm while Hermione performed sexy calisthenics on top of his cock.

He was a lucky bloke, indeed.

"*Draco,*" came his father's voice, as Draco snapped out of his daydream.

"Wha?" he asked a bit hazily.

"You've been staring off into space for the last five minutes. I said it's time for us to go in for dinner."

"Oh. Right," said Draco distractedly as he drained the last vestiges of his drink and followed his father to the dining room.

He found his wife and mother already seated, Hermione sipping on something that looked like a vodka tonic, but that he knew was just carbonated water and lime. She had become obsessed with sour things over the previous week, and Draco ordered the elves to start offering lemons and limes at every meal that included Hermione. His parents had been looking at the small plates of citrus with confusion, but Draco simply said that he had taken a liking to them and began putting them in his own drinks with regularity to throw off suspicion.

His wife and mother nodded at them as they lowered themselves into their chairs. A few minutes later the elves arrived with dinner. It was steak night once again, and Draco smiled at his wife as her plate was handed to her.

But then his smile slid off his face when he noticed her expression.

She looked green as she stared down at it and swallowed hard.

“Hermione?” he asked in confusion.

“I...” she started, and then shook her head hard and scooted back from the table abruptly to flee. Draco and Lucius automatically stood too and exchanged bewildered glances with each other before Draco came to his senses and followed her.

He found her leaning against the wall just outside the dining room, her eyes closed as she took deep, steady breaths.

“Hermione, what’s wrong?” he demanded.

“It’s the steak. I just... I can’t.”

“You can’t eat steak?”

“No! Just the thought of red meat makes me want to...” she mimed wretching, and Draco’s eyebrows flew up.

“Oh! Because of the baby? Pansy had some trouble with certain foods early on too.”

Hermione just nodded.

“Well what do you want instead?”

She thought about it for a few seconds and then said, “Sushi. With a *lot* of wasabi.”

“Hermione, you aren’t supposed to eat—”

He cut himself off at her fierce glare.

“I want *sushi* from that little place around the corner from my old flat, Draco. And a choconut Sunday for dessert.”

Draco raised two hands in defeat. “Fine. What kind of sushi?”

Hermione placed her order and slid to the floor while she waited. Draco took the floo to her old flat and quickly found the little place she had told him about. It looked a bit seedy to Draco’s practiced eye, but she insisted their sushi was divine. He wasn’t about to argue with her in her condition.

Order in hand for his wife and a few generic selections for everyone else, Draco was back at the Manor within twenty minutes, grabbing Hermione and pulling her back into the dining room.

“Patsy,” he called, as his father was raising a bite of steak to his mouth, “please remove the steak.”

Lucius protested as Patsy cleared everything away, including plucking the fork out of Lucius’s grip. Lucius scowled at Draco.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded.

“Change of plans,” said Draco airily, dropping a plastic bag of takeaway sushi into the middle of the table and passing out trays to his parents and wife. Hermione sighed with relief while his parents looked at it askance.

“What on earth is this?” asked Narcissa as she wrinkled her nose.

“Sushi,” said Draco.

“But *what* is it?” she insisted.

“Fish and rice and a few other things. It’s quite good.”

Draco handed out some chopsticks, and Lucius looked at them in confusion. “What am I supposed to do with these?”

“Merlin,” muttered Draco, who lifted his hands to show his father how to hold them. “They’re utensils.”

Narcissa was frowning. “We should be using fish forks, surely.”

“And it doesn’t explain why I’m eating this... fish thing.... In the first place,” said Lucius grumpily.

Hermione had just placed a large piece of sushi in her mouth, as Draco caught her eye. She gave him a shrug that he interpreted as, *up to you*.

“Hermione is pregnant,” he said.

Narcissa gasped, and Lucius inhaled a few pieces of rice and then promptly began to choke.

Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth, trying and failing not to laugh as Draco thumped him hard on the back.

“Yes, as I was saying,” said Draco, “Hermione is pregnant and the steak made her feel queasy. She asked for sushi.”

“And a choconut Sunday,” she reminded him.

“Yes, and that too,” he agreed. “But I think the elves can manage that.”

She gave him a small smile and returned to her sushi. The amount of wasabi she was adding made Draco wince slightly.

“A baby...” breathed Narcissa, all concern about sushi and fish forks vanishing. “Oh, that is *lovely!* When are you due? Have you been to see a healer?”

Hermione swallowed a bite and said, “I’m due early October. And no, I haven’t been to see my doctor yet. I have an appointment in a couple weeks. They want me to be at least eight

weeks along before they see me.”

There was a tense silence, and then Lucius finally broke it.

“Doctor?”

Draco closed his eyes and prayed. He just knew this was coming.

“Yes,” said Hermione breezily. “My doctor and midwife who will be monitoring my pregnancy.”

“But he’s magical,” said Narcissa. “Surely you must be using St. Mungo’s?”

Hermione raised one eyebrow. “Muggles have babies too. I’m sure you must have noticed, seeing as how they outnumber us a hundred to one. There’s no reason whatsoever to go to St. Mungo’s, especially not when they are obligated to report my pregnancy to the Ministry of Magic.”

Both of his parents froze at this. “Why wouldn’t you report it to the Ministry of Magic?” demanded Lucius.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Because it’s none of their damned business, that’s why. I’m sure they’ll figure it out at some point, but I want them to have nothing to do with it.”

“But muggles...” said Narcissa, wringing her hands. “What if they don’t?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Narcissa, literally every single muggleborn witch or wizard is born in the muggle world. Most of them are born in muggle hospitals. *None* of our parents are magical, remember? None of them know about St. Mungo’s. That means that muggle doctors and midwives handle plenty of magical pregnancies without any ill effect. Besides, St. Mungo’s doesn’t do scans. I’m quite keen to see the baby.”

“*See the baby?*” repeated Lucius.

Hermione nodded. “Yes, they can take pictures that show how he’s growing in there.”

“Don’t tell me they put a camera up—” started Lucius, but then he cut himself off with a glare from Narcissa.

“No,” said Hermione in amusement. “They don’t. It’s something on the outside of the belly. It’s not invasive, and it doesn’t hurt at all.”

Lucius looked gobsmacked.

“I just don’t know...” said Narcissa worriedly.

Hermione sighed. “It’s my choice, as you very well know. But I can assure you, it will be fine.”

Narcissa pursed her lips but fell silent. Lucius, however, was not done.

“It’s not proper for my grandson to be born in a *muggle* hospital.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Why not? He’ll be attending muggle school too. We might as well start him off the right way.”

Lucius’s jaw dropped. “*Muggle* school? Draco, surely you haven’t agreed to—”

“I have,” said Draco, cutting off Lucius. “He will be well educated in muggle primary school and will have tutors during breaks for the magical side of things before Hogwarts. Drop it, Father.”

“But St. Mungo’s—” he started again.

“Draco gets no say in that, I’m afraid,” chimed Hermione. “Little Star might be fifty percent him, but I’m the one doing all the work.”

Lucius opened his mouth to protest, but Narcissa held up a hand, as she stared at Hermione with large eyes. “Little Star?” she asked hesitantly.

Hermione gave her a soft smile. “That’s what we’ve been calling him. We haven’t chosen a name yet, but it will be celestial to honor the Blacks.”

At this, Narcissa started to beam. Lucius opened his mouth and said, “But the muggles—” and was cut off again by Narcissa kicking him under the table.

“Forget the muggles, Lucius,” she said, straightening up. “I’m sure Hermione knows what she is talking about. I never considered it before, but there *are* quite a lot of muggleborns aren’t there? They are all born in muggle hospitals and surely go to muggle schools before Hogwarts. Anyway, I’m quite keen to see these pictures of Little Star, aren’t you?”

Draco felt slightly lightheaded with relief as Lucius scowled into his sushi, muttering words that sounded much like, ‘duty,’ and ‘tradition,’ and ‘madness.’ But with Narcissa on board, Draco knew he was officially overruled.

Narcissa abandoned her chopsticks and called for fish forks for the table. Then she raised a slice of sushi toward Hermione in much the same way the Grangers had toasted them the night before.

“Little Star Malfoy. Oh I can’t *wait* to meet him!”

Chapter 23: Fruit Cocktail

Chapter Notes

This story takes place in 2004, but the first time I had a baby was quite a bit later than that. We're going to do some handwaving and pretend that medical standards and technology in 2004 were generally the same as they are now, with the exception of NIPT because it was not used until 2011 (based on what Google told me, and we all know that's never wrong).

Similarly, we are going to pretend that some of the things Hermione just 'knows' in this chapter were available on the internet back then. She wouldn't have had a pregnancy app, but she would have had the internet, and our girl does her research.

25 March 2004

Hermione's first trimester had been fascinating to Draco. At ten weeks pregnant, she had only been *actually* pregnant for eight weeks, due to some dating anomaly Draco still did not fully understand.

During those eight weeks any number of interesting things had occurred.

Hermione's cravings for sour, salty, and spicy things had not abated, especially when it came to sushi. Draco had become a regular at the little shop by her flat, though most days he only brought home something for her. She continued to have such a severe aversion to red meat that nobody in the family could eat it because just the smell of it would make her stomach turn. Pasta, chicken, and fish were fine though, and Draco told the elves to put those things in the dinner rotation more often.

Her nausea was persistent, but was not debilitating. She proudly announced that she had not actually thrown up yet, though Draco found her crouched in front of the toilet nearly every day when she experienced a precarious moment.

"I'm not going to vomit, I'm *not*," she insisted with gritted teeth. "It will pass eventually. It's just a few more weeks..."

Draco wasn't sure if she was trying to convince him or herself. With few other remedies for it, she drank peppermint tea and sucked on sour candies to the point that even her parents felt the need to comment.

"Don't forget you're more susceptible to cavities while you're pregnant," warned her mother. "It's all the hormones. I've had new mums show up in my office with cavities after

having no teeth issues for decades.” Hermione just gave her mother a tight smile and popped another candy in her mouth.

She became tired, in much the same way as Pansy did, falling asleep at the oddest times and strangest places. She had always been a bit of a restless sleeper, but now she was sleeping like the dead except for the few times she woke up in the middle of the night to relieve herself. She could fall back asleep in a moment though, so deep was her exhaustion.

“Well I’m literally growing a person here, I don’t know what you expect,” she snapped, when Draco asked her how on earth she could sleep ten or more hours per day and *still* feel tired.

Her stomach was still relatively flat, and it was hard to believe that Little Star was in there somewhere, but Draco knew that he was. His own marital magic had dramatically calmed down, having finally achieved the thing it sought from his wife. And while her stomach still looked normal, her breasts were positively *enormous*, so much so that she had to replace every bra in her dresser.

Draco was a huge fan of this development.

More than anything else, the thing that fascinated Draco the most was the week-by-week update that Hermione would drop in casual conversation.

“I’m eight weeks today! Little Star is the size of a raspberry. He has eyes, a nose, and apparently he’s moving around in there.”

“Today is nine weeks! He’s the size of a cherry, and he’s growing ears.”

And that morning she gave him the news that he was the size of a kumquat and had fingers, toes, and even lips forming.

“What’s a kumquat?”

“It’s a citrus thing. It’s about the size of a prune.”

This was massively larger than the poppyseed where Little Star had begun, and Draco could scarcely believe that so much was happening.

Hermione’s first “visit” to her doctor was really nothing more than a quick check to confirm that yes, she was pregnant, and yes she would need a midwife. Hermione, being the type to have done her research, insisted on having her “dating scan” at ten weeks, which was the earliest she could get it. She was certain their son would be advanced in all things, including in this, and she saw no need to wait any longer to see him. So that was how Draco found himself in a muggle waiting room for something called an “ultrasound.”

He was skeptical, to say the least, but Hermione assured him it was entirely normal, and he would even get to see the baby today.

He was dressed in his muggle best for the occasion: his three piece custom suit with a silk tie. He nervously flattened his hair on his head while he waited for Hermione to arrive, and he couldn’t help but wonder if he might be slightly overdressed. The muggles with the

clipboards all seemed to be wearing something that reminded him of pajamas. Still, he would be meeting his son in a way, and Draco was a big believer in first impressions.

Hermione was running a little late, though he supposed she might have gotten held up on her way there. She was coming all the way from Hogwarts for it, having explained to him that she had little choice in the matter. The ultrasound appointment had limited space, and a Wednesday morning was the first available option.

Draco sat up as the door opened, and his wife walked through it, then his jaw dropped as he saw the trail of people coming in behind her.

They were her students.

Hermione cast an amused look at his suit, while Draco looked at her students in confusion.

“Erm, what are they all doing here?” he asked her in a whisper, as he pulled her in for a peck on the cheek. Behind Hermione, he could hear some girls tittering at him.

“Oh, this is one of my sixth year classes. I thought this could be very educational for them.”

Draco raised one eyebrow. “Educational?”

“Of course,” said blithely. “It touches on quite a few things we’ve discussed in class: human anatomy, technology, sex education, and what happens when terrible laws like the MLPP are passed. I thought we could make a field trip out of it!”

The twenty or so students just shrugged at Draco behind her and then found seats in the waiting room that was now completely full of teenagers.

“You’ve told them then?” he asked under his breath.

Hermione gave him a pointed look. “They all signed a magically binding nondisclosure agreement. It’s similar to what I put into place for the D.A. in fifth year. They won’t be able to breathe a word.”

Draco blinked in surprise and wondered if magic like that was strictly legal when performed on minors, but instead of questioning her about it he just nodded. He was married to Hermione Granger, and she could manage her pregnancy however she liked.

Still, it was a bit awkward when Hermione’s name was called out and Draco plus twenty teens all rose at once and crammed themselves into a very small and dimly lit room.

“Erm... we normally only permit the mother and the father or a support partner—” started the nervous muggle who was manning a machine that looked like something out of a muggle space film Hermione had made him watch recently.

“*Confundus*,” said Hermione calmly, as she pointed her wand at the woman.

“Oh yes,” she said vacantly. “Let’s have a look, shall we? Now if you could disrobe so we could do a transvaginal ultrasound and—”

“*Confundus*,” said Hermione again.

“We can just do a regular scan on your belly today. It’s a bit early, but baby Malfoy should be large enough for it.”

“Thank you,” said Hermione cordially.

“Should you really be confounding the woman who is going to be using that machine on you and Little Star?” hissed Draco in disbelief.

“Honestly, Draco, it will be *fine*. I’ve told you a hundred times it’s really nothing more than a giant camera. There’s nothing to worry about!”

Draco harumphed, but dropped it, trusting she knew what she was doing. That trust flew out the window, however, as the woman in charge of the machine leaned forward and lifted his wife’s jumper and then unbuttoned and rolled down her jeans so that her midriff and navel were exposed.

Draco heard one of those blasted teenagers whistle from the corner, and he spun around and glared at him. The kid was runty and rather spotted.

“I went to Azkaban for the unforgiveables you know,” he said in a dangerous voice. “Keep your eyes off my wife!”

“It’s not my fault she’s all... you know!” he said, waving a hand toward Hermione’s midriff.

Hermione just rolled her eyes and scolded Draco. “Honestly, stop being such a caveman. You’re the one who impregnated me.”

A chorus of “Ewws!” followed this announcement, though Draco heard a couple of girls dissolve into giggles behind him.

He huffed and turned back around to find the woman squeezing something that looked like clear jelly on Hermione’s stomach.

“Here we go!” she said excitedly, and Draco did his best to block out all the students around them as the woman placed a sort of muggle wand on Hermione’s stomach. Immediately something black and white and grainy lit up on the screen.

“Whoa...” murmured a few students, and Draco was sure their eyes were as wide as his. It looked like a roundish, hollow cavity, except...

“There’s the baby,” said the woman, pointing to something that didn’t *look* very much like a baby in Draco’s opinion.

“It looks like an alien!” one of the students whisper-shouted, and Draco turned to glare at them. He heard Hermione suppress a laugh.

“We’ll try to get some measurements,” said the woman, and she started clicking buttons and drawing lines across the small form, while making notes. “Crown to rump, 65 millimeters,

which is perfect..." she started.

"Rump?" asked a male voice behind him.

"That means his arse!" answered one of the students.

"Yes, thank you," admonished Hermione.

Draco grumbled as the woman continued to take measurements and make notes. He tugged on his collar, which was sticking to his skin with sweat. This room was far too small for the number of people inside of it, and the equipment seemed to be throwing off heat of its own.

Then Draco's world tilted on its axis when the woman said, "Let's listen to the baby's heartbeat, shall we?"

She flipped a switch, and suddenly a rapid *thump, thump, thump, thump* started to echo through the room. Draco wasn't the only one who gasped. Hermione looked transformed, and even the students appeared stunned by what they were hearing.

"Is it supposed to be that fast?" asked Draco, both amazed and terrified that something was very wrong. It was rapid, *far* faster than his heart would ever be, even during exercise.

"Oh yes, baby's clocking in at 170 beats per minute. That's perfect."

Draco realized his mouth was hanging open, and he closed it with a snap. Then he closed his eyes too and memorized the sound.

Thump, thump, thump, thump

Even more than the picture on the screen, this was proof that Little Star was alive and well inside of Hermione. Draco found himself beaming and made a mental note to pull out the pensieve and revisit this memory.

At long last the woman hit a few buttons on that large camera, and Draco heard an odd sound as a black and white photo came sputtering out of yet another plastic device. She presented it to Hermione, who looked at it with tears in her eyes.

"Oh just look at him!" she said, holding the picture up for Draco.

He grabbed it, staring at the thing that really *did* look more like an alien than a baby. A label had been added with an arrow pointing to the blob with some text next to it that said "BSBY."

"I think she meant to type 'BABY,' but you know the S and the A are next to each other," said Hermione with a fond smile. "I did confund her twice."

"Who does he look like Professor G?" asked one of the students.

"A ten-week fetus, Samantha. Though I have been assured that he will have blonde hair eventually."

“I think we should start calling him Blob,” said Draco, studying the picture a bit more and turning it upside down. Maybe it would look more like a baby that way.

“Don’t you dare,” she declared, snatching it back. “Now then, if you could please wait with my students in the waiting room, I have a regular appointment in just a few minutes. It shouldn’t take long. Oh I am so *excited* to show Mum and Narcissa his first picture!”

His first picture.

Merlin, but that was a strange thought. And yes, he might be more Blob than Baby at the moment, but Draco supposed that was alright. A few weeks ago he didn’t even exist.

Later on that night, after Draco had threatened a few of the male students he overheard talking about his wife’s “sexy tits” and Hermione herself had escorted them all back to Hogwarts, Draco found Hermione in one of the sitting rooms with his mother. They were oohing and aahing over the photo from the scan that day.

Draco leaned against the doorframe, reluctant to interrupt them, but he couldn’t help the small smile that crossed his face as Hermione waxed poetic about it.

“His measurements are just perfect! And they even let us listen to his heartbeat! It was exactly 170 beats per minute, and it was just the most *magical* thing! Everything is going exactly as planned. See? Here’s his first picture!”

“Oh he’s *beautiful!*” gushed Narcissa, as she stared at the photo of the grainy blob. “And you said there would be more?”

“Yes, you and Mum should come with us to my twenty-week scan. That’s the big one where they look at *everything*. He’ll look like a proper baby then!”

“He’s a proper baby now. Very posh, isn’t he? He’s lounging around in there like a Malfoy who already knows he owns the place. Merlin, just look at him...”

They continued on in this vein for some time, and Draco found himself smiling softly. He couldn’t remember the last time he heard his wife or his mother this enthusiastic about *anything*. He idly wondered where Hermione fell on the fear to excitement scale now.

Surely she’s at least twenty-five percent excited.

As Lucius moved into the room and peered down at the photo curiously, Draco suppressed a small laugh.

“Well he has the Malfoy head and nose, that’s for certain,” was Lucius’s final word on the matter, after turning the photo in a full circle to make sure he wasn’t missing something. When Lucius moved away, Hermione looked up at Draco and winked. He just grinned back and gave her a small toast with his drink.

Good show today, Little Star. It was lovely to meet you.

31 March 2004

“I wish I could skip class today,” came Hermione’s voice, which had dropped to something like a purr.

Draco opened his eyes to find his wife’s heated gaze on him. He looked blearily around and realized the sun was barely starting to come over the horizon.

“It’s early darling.”

“Mmmm, but I woke up and caught a break this morning. I’m feeling better than I have the last few days. We should take advantage...”

Her finger trailed down his chest, and Draco fought to shake the sleep off of him. Hermione’s sex drive had been like a pendulum, swinging from incredibly eager to nonexistent depending on how she felt. But even eager, she hadn’t approached him quite like *this*.

“And it’s time for your weekly report,” she added. “Little Star is the size of a lime, and he’s starting to grow a penis.”

Draco snorted at this. “Good boy.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but she looked amused. “Yes, I’m sure the ladies will be pleased in twenty years if he takes after his father in this respect.”

At that, her hand trailed down his stomach and cupped him. Draco inhaled.

“Can I play with him this morning?” she asked innocently. “I’m feeling a bit randy.”

Draco’s brain was going blank at the look on her face, as he just nodded. “Anything,” he said a bit hoarsely.

“Anything?”

“Anything at all.”

Hermione’s eyes lit, and before Draco knew it she had thrown the covers off of them, and was pointing her wand at him.

“What are you—” he started in confusion, but she muttered a spell and ropes flew out to tie his hands together against the headboard. He knew his eyes were huge, and he felt the blood rush south as she quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Does anything include this?”

“Fuck yes,” he breathed.

Hermione smiled sweetly at him, and then waved her wand again to vanish his clothes. She licked her lips as she looked down at him. “Oh my, this *does* excite you...”

“Minx,” he muttered, but he couldn’t help the grin that crossed his face as he realized he was being tied up by Hermione Granger so she could have her wicked way with him. Fuck, if this sort of thing had happened at school, he probably would have become a legend. But they were older now, married, and somehow that made it even better.

“I’m probably supposed to ask you for a safe word,” she said seriously. “I read about it in a book.”

Draco rolled his eyes with amusement. “I don’t care about fucking safe words. Suck me, ride me, slap me around a little... I don’t care.”

“*Draco*,” she admonished.

“Fine,” he huffed. “My safe word can be ‘starlight.’ But I’ll only use it if I think you’re endangering Little Star with your... enthusiasm.”

“He’s perfectly safe in there and very well protected,” said Hermione.

“Good,” said Draco, his eyes fluttering closed as Hermione’s lips closed around him. Gods, he would never get used to this, it was one of his favorite sensations. She gave excellent blow jobs – deep and wet. Draco pointedly refused to consider just how much practice she might have gotten before their marriage and instead decided to simply enjoy it. She was licking, sucking, and Draco already found himself straining at the ropes, wishing he could lace his fingers through her hair.

After several long minutes she moved off with a wet pop and Draco opened his eyes to find her stripping. As usual his eyes went right to her breasts. They were larger than ever, swollen by her pregnancy.

“I wish I could photograph you just like this,” he confessed, as she reached down and grasped them. “Fuck that’s hot...”

“Do you like that then?” she asked as she straddled him and hovered just over his cock. “Do you like knowing that *you’re* the reason they look like this? I couldn’t stay away from you and became reckless with our birth control, and now here I am, pregnant with ridiculous boobs all because of you.”

“Yes,” he breathed. “Yes, I think about it all the time.”

“And you like it?”

“I love it. I love it so much. I want all of your babies to be mine...” She smiled and swirled her hips around his tip, and he gasped. “Please, darling, don’t be cruel...”

“You said anything.”

“I know I did, but I didn’t think you would be such a tease...”

“Maybe I like making you come undone... I have to make sure you stay interested, even when I become *huge*.¹”

He heard the slightest waver in her voice at this, and he looked at her seriously. “Hermione, do you know what I’ve been thinking about whenever I wank recently?”

She stilled and shook her head.

“My newest fantasy is fucking you in your third trimester. You’ll have to top me like this or get on your knees for it because you’re going to look like some sort of fertility goddess with our son making your belly too big for other positions. I’ve already looked it up, you know. I think about it all the time. That phase is going to be far too brief for me, and I want to remember every second of it.”

Her face softened. “How do you always know what to say?”

“I don’t. I’m just telling you the truth. Knowing that my son is inside of you is ridiculously sexy. It turns me on in ways I never imagined. It’s just like you said... I did that to you, and I *love* the fact that I did that to you. With every change of your body I’m reminded of it, and it makes me want to fuck you harder.”

Her eyes darkened, and Draco licked his lips.

“You want a hard fucking, then?”

“Please, darling,” he groaned.

“You know I like it when you beg.”

“I’ll be so good, please. Just ride me, fuck me, let me feel you like this...”

“You are my best boy, it’s true,” she said as she finally sank down on his cock, and Draco’s eyes rolled back at the sensation.

She began to move. She bounced and ground and swirled and pounded. She took breaks to let Draco lick her nipples, only to make him gasp when she seated herself on top of him again. He was entirely hers like this. Whatever she wanted from him, she could have. He would never want to be with another woman, would never even fantasize about another woman. Because this one owned every part of him.

She made Draco hold back until she came twice, and when he finally released himself into her, he was sweaty, sated, and he had never loved her more.

“Hermione,” he murmured, as she released his bindings and sank back down on his chest.

“Hmmm?”

"The decision is going to be yours. But in case I haven't made myself perfectly clear, I want to make sure you know that I really want to stay married to you after the MLPP is gone."

She lifted her head and gave him a shy smile.

"I'm thinking about it, Draco. I promise."

Draco closed his eyes and allowed himself to drift for a few more minutes, imagining not just one pregnancy, but two or three. There would be milestones and birthdays and anniversaries and holidays. He wanted all of it. He wanted her.

"Thank you, darling. I'm going to hold you to it."

A Few Hours Later

"DRACO I NEED YOU TO GET YOUR ARSE TO ST. MUNGO'S RIGHT NOW!"

Pansy's patronus, which was in the shape of a poodle, ceased screeching at him, and Draco looked around at the others in the meeting with him as it dissolved. He was with several of the more moderate members of the Wizengamot, floating the idea of Kingsley Shacklebolt's ousting. He had just been about to propose considering a witch to be the next Minister – the identity of his wife's chosen witch would come at a later meeting – when Pansy's patronus interrupted them.

"Is everything alright?" asked Lord Grant, who was staring right where the patronus had just been.

"The patronus belongs to Lord Nott's wife," said Draco, frowning. "And she is..." his eyes widened as he realized what this could be.

"What? She's what?" asked Lord Patil.

"She's pregnant and due any day."

All the men in the room – because now that he was married to Hermione, Draco was more aware than ever that the Wizengamot was composed almost *entirely* of men – grinned at this.

"Well you had better move along. I'm sure Lord Nott could use some moral support."

"Sorry about this," said Draco apologetically.

"Not at all!" said Lord Grant jovially. "We need more children, don't we? Please, go to St. Mungo's, and we can reconvene later."

Draco rose and shook hands with everyone, giving his father a pointed look to make sure he stayed behind just in case the discussions continued without him. He turned and apparated on the spot, appearing a moment later in the lobby of St. Mungo's. He approached the welcome witch cautiously.

"Erm, Pansy Nott just summoned me and said I should get here immediately," he said.

The witch – a matronly type with gray frizz – placed a pair of spectacles on her nose and ran her finger down a list.

"Yes, Pansy Nott, maternity ward, fifth floor. You'll want to take the lift on your right. There is a separate waiting room there, and you'll need to stay there until somebody calls you back. I'll let them know you've arrived."

Draco nodded and thanked her before heading to the lift and making his way to the fifth floor. When he exited he did a double take. The main lobby of St. Mungo's had always felt a bit run down. It was always in need of funds, and some of the seat cushions and battered end tables in the waiting room had a *reparo* charm cast on them one too many times.

The maternity ward, however, looked like something out of a glossy magazine. The entire space was decked out in calming tones that reminded Draco of the seaside. There was a water feature tumbling down one wall, over a mosaic that glittered underneath it. The soothing sounds of water trickled before it magically disappeared into the floor. There were large photographs of babies smiling at the camera, their rolls dimpling as they laughed.

Draco belatedly remembered that as part of the MLPP, the Ministry had approved an infusion of funds for maternity care into St. Mungo's. Apparently they spent quite a bit of it here. Draco gave it a wry look, wondering if the rooms for actual *medical care* were this nice.

He was pulled out of his thoughts as he noticed Theo, who was pacing back and forth and looking like he wanted to vomit.

Theo's head shot up as Draco stepped forward.

"Is everything alright?" Draco asked cautiously.

"She's in labor!" Theo said, wringing his hands. "And she kicked me out!"

"What do you mean, she kicked you out?"

"Exactly what it sounds like! She told me to find you to go play billiards or something while she just handles it, but I obviously objected so then she went over my head to the Healer, and now..."

Theo threw his hands in the air and resumed pacing.

"Why doesn't she want you in there?"

"I don't know! She says I'm stressing her out! But I was only asking the Healer questions, you know, just to make sure everything was happening properly, and then she had a

contraction and it just...”

He waved his hand vaguely in the air.

“Well do you *want* to go play billiards?”

Draco was truly out of his depths with this.

“No! I want to be there when she pushes!”

“And when is that going to be?”

“I don’t know, do I? She’s only five centimeters...”

“What is five centimeters?”

Theo looked at him like he was dense. “Her cervix? You know, the thing that opens so the baby can come out?”

Draco swallowed hard. He had not made it that far in his reading yet. “Erm, no, I’m not really aware...”

“Well how do you think the baby stays *in* there for nine months? It’s sort of like this, you know, and then it grows...”

At this, Theo made a fist that he slowly opened into a circle. Draco stared at it in bemusement. He had never really thought of this before, but he supposed it made sense. There must be *something* holding the baby back or else it would just fall out, wouldn’t it?

“Alright, so this... *cervix* ... is opening then?”

“Yes, Pansy’s cervix is opening. They keep sticking their fingers up there to check, and she says it hurts worse than a doxy bite. She’s at a five, and they say she has to get to a ten...”

Draco was shifting awkwardly as he realized precisely where this *cervix* must be located. It must be up there – *way* up there. Merlin, he had only gone *up there* with Pansy one time before they both decided it was far too strange.

“You know, I’m really not sure if I’m comfortable talking about Pansy’s cervix,” said Draco, turning a bit pink.

Theo just shot him a knowing look. Draco had finally told Theo, Pansy, and Blaise about Little Star the previous week.

“You’ll be worried about Hermione’s cervix soon enough.”

“Please do not talk about my wife’s cervix,” said Draco, frowning.

Theo rolled his eyes. “At least we aren’t talking about postpartum breast engorgement when the milk comes in.”

"Wait, they get bigger?" asked Draco with wide eyes. His breath caught as he tried to imagine it.

Theo pinched the bridge of his nose as he said, "Merlin, I can't believe Pansy sent me *you*. Even Blaise would be better than this..."

Draco scoffed. "I'll have you know I have plenty of reading material. I am simply keeping up with it as Hermione's pregnancy progresses. She's only eleven weeks today. We have a lime, not a watermelon."

"Well my little watermelon will be pushed out as soon as Pansy's at a ten."

Draco sighed and sank down into one of the chairs. Theo mimicked him, looking stressed.

"How long do you reckon then?"

"Hard to say," said Theo. "She was sitting at a two for weeks..."

"Wait, she's just been walking around with it *open*?" asked Draco in horror.

"Yes! Merlin, you're clueless..."

Draco tried his best not to be offended. After all, Theo was facing impending fatherhood. No doubt he was a bit stressed. He grasped for something, *anything* that might be helpful.

"Look, how about I get you sushi?"

Theo shot him a confused look, and Draco just shrugged. "I know a place. Maybe it will help pass the time."

Theo just gave him an overwhelmed look and put his head in his hands with a groan. Draco rose and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Hang in there, mate, I'll be right back."

Very Late That Night and The Next Morning

Camelia Theodora Nott was born at 11:42 P.M., weighing 3.6 kg and screaming like a banshee. Her father, Theodore Tiberius Nott, consumed four helpings of sushi and six cups of coffee while waiting for her mother, Pansy Parkinson Nott, to move from a five to a ten.

When she finally reached 'Level Ten,' a term coined by Blaise who showed up an hour after Draco did, Pansy pushed for only twenty-seven minutes to get Camelia out. Theo claimed

that Pansy broke his hand during her pushing, and it would never be the same. He told Draco that his injured hand was the reason he didn't cut the cord.

The truth was that the Healer on duty noticed Theo's hands shaking from caffeine and decided that he shouldn't hold scissors near any important bits.

By the time Pansy reached Level Ten, the waiting room at the St. Mungo's maternity ward included Pansy's mother, Narcissa Malfoy, Blaise Zabini, Ginny Potter, Draco Malfoy, and Hermione Granger. Around midnight a triumphant Theo emerged to announce that Camelia was born healthy and strong, having scored an admirable nine out of ten on her WAPGAR – the wizarding version of an APGAR. Draco glanced at Hermione when Theo provided this last statistic, and he couldn't help but notice a competitive glint in her eye.

Little Star had better score ten out of ten or Hermione will have something to say about it, he thought with a chuckle.

Upon hearing the news that Pansy was resting and would not be accepting visitors until her glamors were in place the following morning, everyone went home to sleep before returning the next day to meet Cami, as Theo was calling her.

When the tiny bundle of pink was passed to Draco, he experienced a small moment of panic. But thankfully he was seated on a couch in Pansy's recovery room, and his mother placed the baby in his arms, telling him not to move an inch. Draco held perfectly still.

He looked at Cami, noting the very red face, the closed eyes, and the Parkinson upturned nose. She looked a bit squished in his opinion, but then she yawned, and something inside of him melted.

"You'll be her godfather, right mate?" asked Theo, lowering himself onto the couch beside him and slipping one finger into his daughter's hand. It closed tightly around Theo's finger and tugged it close. Theo had never looked more lovestruck.

"It would be an honor," said Draco, both surprised and touched. This wasn't something he and Hermione had even started to discuss, though he was certain Hermione would insist upon Potter for that role.

Theo just grinned and then sighed down at his daughter, a truly dopey expression on his face. "Thanks. I'm already exhausted, but this dad thing is brilliant. You're going to love it."

Draco knew he would. He already loved being a godfather, and he loved Little Star more than anything.

"Your watermelon is perfect," he said, "and I can't wait to meet mine in a few months."

Chapter 24: Baby Bumps and Molly Wobbling

21 April 2004

Hermione's baby bump seemed to appear overnight. At fourteen weeks exactly, he caught her staring at herself in the mirror, examining her profile with her shirt lifted. She was rubbing a hand over her stomach.

"Can you see it?" she asked, as she stared at it.

Draco approached her from behind and ran his own hand over it. It was hardening a little, and as she tried to suck her stomach in, the small bump remained.

"We have an apricot today," she said. "I suppose he's big enough that my stomach finally popped."

"Fuck that's sexy," breathed Draco, in awe. He was immediately and rather uncomfortably aware just how difficult the next – he did some mental maths – twenty-six weeks were going to be for him.

"I think you have a bit of a breeding kink," she said with a laugh.

"It's the family magic," he said automatically.

"Is it?" she pressed. "I thought you said it had quieted down."

"Hmmm," he murmured, kissing her neck and dipping one hand down into her pants as his other covered hers on top of her bump. "Perhaps you're right. But you're pregnant darling – pregnant with *my* baby. I'm still getting used to it. It's unbelievably hot. And it's starting to look real now isn't it?"

"I suppose," she agreed. "This is supposed to be the best trimester, you know. My nausea is gone and my energy has come back. But I'm not so huge that I feel like a whale."

Draco huffed a laugh as she turned and slipped her arms over his shoulder.

"Draco," she said, and he was surprised to hear a note of nervousness in her voice.

"Hmmm?" he asked distractedly as he moved his hand that was in her pants to grip her arse instead. He was utterly obsessed. It was absurd.

"Can I ask you for something?"

"Anything," he said instantly.

"I know it's a bit last minute, but Minerva approved some time off next week while the students are finishing up some independent projects for my class. I was thinking we could take a babymoon."

He pulled back and studied her curiously. "A babymoon?"

"Yes, it's something muggles do on occasion. It's a sort of last hurrah trip for the parents before the baby is born. We never took a honeymoon, you know, and everyone says to take the babymoon during the second trimester. I thought this could be a good time to do it before I'm busy with exams for the students and you're busy with the MLPP repeal."

Draco relaxed into a smile. "You're right we didn't take a honeymoon, did we? I'll need to reschedule some meetings next week, but I'm sure I can be free for a babymoon. Do you know where you want to go?"

"Maybe the Amalfi coast? I've always wanted to see it."

"That's one of the easiest places you could have picked," said Draco, with a smile. "Just tell me the days you want to be there, and I'll plan everything. Blaise actually has a villa in Positano if that's acceptable? It's been years since I've visited, but I'm sure he would let us use it. He only goes there in the winter."

Hermione beamed, and Draco felt a leap of pleasure at this. She wanted to vacation with him. She wanted to take a trip like a normal couple about to become parents. Surely, *surely* she was warming up to the idea of staying married to him.

"Thank you," she said, reaching up for a kiss. "That sounds ideal. I was thinking we could leave on Saturday and stay through next Wednesday."

"I'll get the portkeys arranged when I'm at the Ministry this afternoon," promised Draco, "and I'll contact Blaise before I leave."

She gave him a pleased smile and one more kiss before pulling away. "What's on your agenda today?" she asked as she began to get dressed.

"Father and I are officially putting forth Maribelle Marchbanks to replace Kingsley. We have a meeting with those in our voting bloc this morning, and if they agree then we will approach her about it – though Father says he's already floated it by her, and she's very interested."

Hermione made a pleased noise at this. "I hope they listen to you."

"I think they will," said Draco seriously. "She's a good choice. I was reviewing her voting record, and you're right that she was very anti-MLPP, but she's otherwise fairly middle-of-the-road."

Hermione nodded, with a satisfied look on her face. "Do let me know what they say."

"Of course, I'll have plenty to report tonight."

She leaned in for one more peck before giving him a swift smile and hurrying out of their room. Draco allowed his eyes to pass across her abdomen one last time, before he turned away with a bit of a shudder.

A breeding kink.

Merlin, but did he ever have one of those. He hadn't known there was a name for this utter fascination and obsession with his pregnant wife, but there was little question Hermione was right about it. She had never looked more beautiful, growing round and luscious with his child. Her hair was silkier. Her skin glowed. And now that she was through her first trimester she was feeling better, and her energy had miraculously returned. She reminded him of a Renaissance painting with her voluptuous curves that drove him utterly mad. If he could freeze her in time just like this – or perhaps a bit rounder still – he knew he would do it in a heartbeat. He couldn't seem to get enough.

It was so sexy that it inspired a truly glorious wank once he was in the shower and preparing for his day. He struggled to put thoughts of her aside, but he knew he would need to do it to focus on the meeting he had scheduled that morning, which he was sure would run into the afternoon. It was the same crowd he had met with several times before – Lord Fawley, Lord Flint, and Lord Selwyn – plus Theo and Pansy's father Lord Parkinson. Draco knew that Theo was already on board, but the others would surely be stunned by the suggestion of a woman.

Every other candidate they had floated thus far had been men. Lucius and Draco had let them do it for the last few meetings, because according to Lucius the first suggestions never seemed to stick. To Draco's slight surprise his father had been right about this, and the initial candidates were vetted and soundly rejected after little consideration. But in the last meeting one of the names had been brought up again, and this, Lucius said, meant they were ready to begin compromising.

Maribelle Marchbanks would be a compromise candidate – and not just because she was a woman.

She wouldn't be conservative enough for Lord Fawley. She wouldn't be old enough for Lord Selwyn. And Lord Flint had always been a misogynistic arse and thought the Wizengamot should be run by men.

And yet, Draco felt sure she would be a candidate that all three of them could get behind once he and his father had pointed out the obvious reasons for selecting her. What they would *not* be saying, of course, was that it was Hermione who had selected her almost unilaterally.

Draco finished his morning routine, made a quick floo call to Blaise who said he was welcome to use the villa, and then stepped out of the floo at the Ministry an hour later. He nearly ran headfirst into Theo, who had dark circles under his eyes and was drinking an espresso like his life depended upon it.

"Alright, mate?" asked Draco, as they fell in step together toward the conference room they would be using.

“Cami woke up,” said Theo.

“Erm... hasn’t she always been awake? I mean, when she’s not sleeping, that is?”

Theo shot him a look that Draco had come to interpret as, *You are not a parent and therefore you don’t know what the fuck you’re saying right now.*

It was vaguely offensive, but Draco assumed he would probably be giving similar looks to Blaise and others once it was finally his turn.

“No,” he said. “Newborns sleep a *lot*. They can sleep anywhere and through anything, and just when you start congratulating yourself for your fantastic parenting and adherence to some sort of schedule they suddenly become alert. Then you realize that there isn’t a schedule and there never was one. They just lured you into a false sense of security, and you gave yourself credit for no good reason.”

Draco chuckled a little, and Theo scowled.

“So what is she doing now, then?” asked Draco.

Theo sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “She has to be held to sleep.”

“Well that’s not so bad, is it?”

“According to your wife, it *is* when the parent needs to sleep too. She sent Pansy all this research that made her think we’re going to hurt the baby if we fall asleep while holding her.”

“Well could you?” asked Draco seriously.

Theo groaned. “Yes, of course we could in *theory*, but mate... I’m dead on my feet! I’m doing magic without realizing it, I’m mixing up ingredients for basic household potions, and I nearly splinched myself while apparating yesterday. Part of me thinks that’s almost more dangerous than just sleeping with her.”

“So what’s the solution then?”

“Sleep deprivation in shifts. It’s the best we can do right now. We take it in four-hour blocks. All of that ‘sleep when the baby sleeps’ advice is utter bollocks.”

“Why not use an elf?” asked Draco curiously.

Theo just scowled at him. “That’s what I said, but Pans says we need to bond with her.”

“Bad luck, mate,” said Draco fervently.

Not that he *wanted* to pawn Little Star off on the elves, but he wasn’t above giving them one of the night shifts if it meant he and Hermione actually got some sleep during those early months.

Their conversation came to a halt as they pushed open the conference room door to find the others already assembled. They shook hands, and all the men clapped Theo on the shoulder in congratulations. Draco had to suppress a snort, imagining Hermione's reaction to that.

"As if Theo did any of the work!"

He rather thought Pansy would agree.

Eventually the excitement died down, and they all settled around a conference room table, where Lucius looked at Draco expectantly.

"Thank you for coming," started Draco. "Father and I have been in the process of vetting several more candidates for Minister, and we think we have a proposal that will prove to be satisfactory."

Everyone straightened and watched Draco curiously as he took a moment to arrange his notes. He and Lucius had prepared for this extensively. Draco *knew* she was a good choice. But he was experiencing a rather unfortunate case of imposter syndrome as he readied himself to drop the news on these Wizengamot members who were veterans in their own right. It was true his father had bullied them into his way of thinking for years, but Draco was of an entirely new generation.

It felt strange.

He glanced at Theo, who gave him an encouraging nod.

"Right," said Draco. "We would like to consider Maribelle Marchbanks."

There was a split second of silence, and then they all started talking at once.

"A woman?"

"Too liberal!"

"Her age though..."

"A *woman*?"

Draco raised his hand for silence.

"Yes, a woman. Given how unpopular the MLPP has been – and it's been especially burdensome for witches – it's critical we present somebody who will make the wizarding public trust the Wizengamot again. Madam Marchbanks did not vote for the MLPP or the amendment. She came out strongly against it during both votes. But she's also not so liberal that the entire conservative bloc will be alienated. She's a reasonable, moderate choice."

There was a beat of silence as the others absorbed this.

"Her age, though..." said Lord Selwyn.

Draco just gave him a stern look. “She’s ten years older than Shacklebolt. She has a couple of decades of experience. She is well-liked, and most importantly it will be clear that we have *listened* to the public when we present a choice who was anti-MLPP from the very beginning.”

“But a witch, Draco. We *surely* can’t have a witch,” said Lord Flint.

Draco opened his mouth to respond, but to his surprise Theo jumped in.

“Lord Flint, I just watched my wife – a *witch* – give birth to my daughter a few weeks ago. And do you know what I thought while it was happening? Thank fuck that wasn’t me. She was brave, beautiful, *powerful*. The notion that a witch should be excluded from this position simply because she’s female is asinine, and you know it. Would *you* have been able to push Marcus out of your... you know?”

Draco internally winced a little. Theo had always been blunt, but this was borderline unprofessional. Draco decided to blame sleep deprivation as he watched Lord Flint’s face turn very red.

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything,” he said grumpily.

Theo rolled his eyes and then rubbed them. He looked slightly manic. “Look, if you have the balls to write a note to your wife in front of all of us to tell her that Maribelle Marchbanks has been taken off the table because you disagree with having a female Minister, then by all means do it. If you write a note to Pamela that says it, we’ll take Madam Marchbanks out of the running right now.”

Draco’s stomach clenched for a moment, but then eased as Lord Flint slumped a little.

“That’s what I thought,” said Theo, rolling his eyes. “Eliminating Madam Marchbanks because she’s a witch is irrational. If anything, choosing a witch as our next Minister will soften the public’s opinion, exactly like Draco suggested. You all know we *desperately* need some improvement on that front. Public trust in the Wizengamot has never been lower, not ever. That includes the war years.”

Lord Flint fell silent, and Draco breathed a mental sigh of relief. He turned to the others.

“Well?”

Lord Selwyn was frowning. “I know she’s older than Shacklebolt, but frankly I always thought he was too young as well.”

“Madame Marchbanks is a perfect age,” cut in Lucius. “She has plenty of experience, but she’s not so old that the younger witches and wizards will be unable to relate to her. I know the MLPP has been unpopular, but we *do* need children and marriages and some normalcy. We need somebody the younger generation will connect to and like. Besides, most of the older candidates we have considered have told us to look elsewhere. It takes a lot of energy to be the Minister of Magic.”

Lord Selwyn snorted a little. “Young people...” he muttered.

Lucius caught Draco’s eye and gave a small smirk. Draco had heard Lord Selwyn call nearly *everyone* a young person with that same sort of distaste, including Lucius. Lord Selwyn was roughly Albus Dumbledore’s age – or the age he would have been had he still been alive – and though Lord Selwyn had plenty of sway on the Wizengamot, he thought anybody below the age of eighty was a child.

“Like Draco said, she’s ten years older than Shacklebolt,” said Lord Parkinson. Draco perked up a little at this, because before this meeting Theo had told him he wasn’t exactly certain what his father-in-law would think about this. Draco had a sudden hope that he would not take any serious convincing.

“Fine,” huffed Lord Selwyn. “But she’s the absolute *youngest* candidate we should consider. You all must know I only supported Minister Shacklebolt because there was little choice in the aftermath of the war.”

There was some sympathetic murmuring at this, and Draco felt a rush of satisfaction. Now it was just...

“I don’t think she’s conservative enough,” said Lord Fawley.

This, of course, was the only objection that was actually substantive. While Draco himself was more moderate than most of these men, the Malfoy seat still fell in the conservative camp. It had for centuries. Draco was determined to pull his bloc closer to the middle or else break with them entirely, but he needed them for this first. It would take time to reposition himself as a moderate or – Merlin help his father – a *liberal*. He wanted to give Hermione her wish list as quickly as possible, so any overt changes to the Malfoy seat would have to come after the repeal went into effect.

With barely a glance at his father, Draco pulled out a stack of parchment. It was Maribelle Marchbanks’s voting record on every single matter that had come before the Wizengamot over the last twenty years, along with Lord Fawley’s own voting record and several other very conservative members. Draco had prepared a side-by-side comparison.

“You’ll see she’s not quite a conservative as you, Lord Fawley, but her record reflects that she is rather conservative on most matters, with the exception of blood politics and laws like the MLPP that have an outsized effect on witches compared to wizards.”

Draco passed copies of the parchment around to each person at the table, and together they dug in and began to go through her record vote by vote.

Draco caught Lucius’s eye as Lord Fawley began to soften, and Lucius gave Draco a furtive smile.

We can do this, thought Draco. We can get them on board.

And Draco was certain that when the most conservative members of the Wizengamot put forth a middle-aged witch with a moderate voting record to oust Kingsley Shacklebolt, the

vote would go in her favor. And then – if Draco was very lucky – Hermione might agree to stay married after Little Star was born.

The meeting only broke up when Pansy's patronus appeared, demanding that Theo come home right that instant to relieve her from baby duties. Draco idly wondered just how often he would be seeing the poodle patronus fetching either him or Theo now that his goddaughter was here.

Draco shook hands with the others and then stopped by the portkey office to arrange their last-minute trip to Italy. By the time he floo'd back to the Manor, he was feeling tired, but upbeat. He would be going on vacation with his wife soon. And the entire group had come around to the idea of endorsing Maribelle Marchbanks, despite the individual concerns from each member in their bloc. It had happened quickly enough that Draco didn't even need to reschedule most of his meetings for the following week to take a few days off.

And with Flint, Fawley, and Selwyn on board – not to mention Theo and Pansy's father and Lucius himself – they would be able to bring others in line to create the coalition they needed to get her instated as the new Minister. Before the meeting broke up they were already in the process of divvying up other Wizengamot members for closed-door meetings, while Draco and Lucius were tasked with formally notifying Maribelle Marchbanks herself. Lucius offered to just handle it, as he had worked with her for years and knew her much better than Draco did.

Draco was feeling flush with success and couldn't wait to share the news with Hermione as he arrived back at the Manor and went in search of his wife.

It took a long while to find her, and it wasn't until he called for Patsy that he eventually located her in a little-used salon. Patsy was wringing her hands as she led Draco there.

"What's wrong, Patsy?" asked Draco with concern.

"It's just that Mistress is having guests," said the little elf nervously. "They is just arriving."

"Who?" asked Draco curiously.

Hermione's classes ended rather early on Wednesdays and Fridays so she often arrived back at the Manor before Draco did on those days. But it was still very unusual for her to receive visitors in the middle of the week.

Patsy let out another distressed sound. "It is... oh Master Draco, I is not wanting to say. 'Tis best for you to see for yourself, Sir."

This was very odd indeed, and Draco had no idea what he was in for as he made his way to the small room, which he knew was in the far corner of the Manor. He wondered why

Hermione was receiving visitors there, unless she needed to make a quick escape. There were several exterior doors to the room.

Steeling himself for whatever he was about to find, he approached the closed door and knocked as he pushed it open. He came to a halt when he saw who was seated in the small room, with tea and a few sandwiches between them.

His wife was in an armchair, looking rather tense. Prudence Weasley was in another, next to Hermione. And seated next to each other on the small settee opposite them was Ron and Molly Weasley.

Draco mentally groaned.

“Good afternoon, darling,” he said, trying to affect a bored air as he strode into the room and dropped a kiss on Hermione’s head. Prudence gave him a tight smile as the others grimaced.

As much as Draco didn’t want to be here, he wouldn’t leave Hermione alone with this crowd. It was true that Ron had apologized and Prudence was a friend, but Molly hadn’t made any effort to reach out, and Draco didn’t know if she was here because she wanted to be or because she was being coerced by the others.

He moved to a chair that was arranged in a corner and levitated it to join the circle, placing it close to Hermione’s other side.

“To what do we owe the pleasure?” he asked coldly, as he very obviously reached for Hermione’s hand and laced their fingers together. Ron and Molly both caught the gesture of course, and their faces looked grim.

“Molly would like to say something,” said Prudence firmly.

Draco’s gaze now bore into the short woman. She was clearly uncomfortable and pursed her lips before taking a deep breath.

“I... overreacted the last time we saw each other. I apologize.”

There was a lengthy silence, and Draco saw Ron exchanging awkward glances with Prudence. Finally, Hermione broke it.

“Why are you really here, Molly?” she asked a bit wearily. “It’s been months.”

Now Molly seemed to slump.

“I had trouble seeing things clearly while Ronald was in Azkaban. I shouldn’t have said those things to you. I didn’t... fully understand the situation at the time.”

Curiously, she was glancing between Ron and Prudence now.

“What situation?” asked Draco.

To Draco's surprise it was Ron who answered with some surprising bluntness. "The fact that I was falling in love with Prudence even though I went behind her back with that amendment. I was too caught up in trying to save Hermione to realize it when I was working with Shacklebolt and your dad, but I had a lot of time to think about it in Azkaban. When I got out I told mum that Azkaban had given me the time I needed to understand what I really wanted."

"And it wasn't me," said Hermione firmly.

"No," confessed Ron. "It never was, not really. Not for a long time. We're too different. You were just..."

"The easy choice," supplied Hermione.

"Right," said Ron a bit awkwardly.

"So you're apologizing now because your son is telling you to?" asked Draco, looking at Molly with some incredulity.

She made a frustrated sound and threw her hands in the air. "None of you are parents!"

Draco pointedly did not look at Hermione, because they *were* parents now. But she was wearing a loose top, and her bump would not be obvious through it. The Potters had been sworn to secrecy, and evidently they had kept the secret.

"I'm not sure why that matters," said Draco.

Now Molly gave him a fierce look. "It matters because parents feel *everything* their children feel! Every moment of hurt, every betrayal, every single slight. When our children cry, we weep. When they are afraid, we are terrified. Every feeling of theirs is amplified in us. I am not trying to excuse what I said a few months ago – I am apologizing for it, truly. But at the time I was a mother trying to support my son who I *thought* had been betrayed by the woman he loved. Hermione left him at the altar, and once they finally made up with each other while she was in Azkaban, Ronald came home and said they would be able to reconcile someday. He seemed encouraged by it, excited. It made me worried because he had always seemed more eager for a relationship than she was. Up until the wedding, I told myself it was just differences in temperament. But after she jilted him I realized she truly didn't feel that way about him and any feelings he had for her were one-sided. That is... terrible to watch, as a parent. I thought that Ronnie loved her from the time they were children, and he was going to have his heart broken yet again. Then sure enough, she married *you* instead. I know I should not have said the things I did, and I have cared about Hermione for many years, despite our occasional differences. But the only thing I could not forgive was breaking my child's heart. That's what I thought she had done, and I... overreacted."

Draco's own heart was racing after this little speech, and he forced his eyes not to slide to Hermione's stomach.

How would he react to a witch who broke Little Star's heart? How would he treat her? He hoped he would be kinder than Molly Weasley, but would he really? The thought of any sort

of emotional slight against his son – however minor – was poisonous.

Hermione sighed, and he could tell she was imagining the same thing.

“So when Ron told you he didn’t really love me, not like that...” she prompted.

Now Molly sighed too.

“When he told me that, I could finally see things from your perspective. I am sorry, my dear. I regret our encounter that day, and despite my beliefs at the time I should never have said the things I did.”

There was an awkward silence for another moment as Hermione seemed to weigh this.

“You do know that Draco’s not a Death Eater, right?” she finally said.

Draco sat up and looked at her in surprise.

Molly dipped her head. “Yes, Harry and Ginny have made that clear. I just... well, at the time I believed your articles, dear. The ones you wrote in Azkaban.”

Draco stilled, and he heard Hermione give a tiny groan next to him.

“God,” she said. “Of course you did. I am such a –”

“Stop,” said Draco firmly. Hermione gave him a miserable look, and he saw the others now staring at him in surprise too.

“Let’s all just stop,” he added. “Molly, Hermione wrote those things to try to make herself a sympathetic figure in the press so she could work to get the MLPP overturned. She didn’t *lie*, but she played up the very worst sides of me and my history to spin it in a particular way. She did it with my permission, and we’re moving on from it.”

Then he turned to his wife. “Hermione, darling, stop beating yourself up about it. We’ve been over this before. It was worth it to get the MLPP overturned, and it’s going to work. I’m certain of it.”

Finally he looked back at the others. “I know I have no right to declare a truce here – I’m not the injured party from *either* side – but from where I sit, it sounds like there were many misunderstandings and high emotions and things that we all regret. In fact, the only person in this room who hasn’t done anything wrong is Prudence.”

“Oh please don’t bring me into this,” she muttered. There were some awkward chuckles at this.

“You’re right,” said Hermione. “I would rather we just move forward from it. I miss your family, Mrs. Weasley. I miss the Burrow. I can accept your apology, and hopefully you can accept mine for ruining the wedding. I truly didn’t mean for it to be so last minute. But if we can both move on, then I would like for us to be able to do that. I just need to know that you

will accept Draco too and won't try to exclude him or bring up old rivalries. We're married now, and I... quite like it."

She turned crimson at this, and Draco's heart flipped. He saw Molly's eyes widen a little, but then she swallowed hard and nodded.

"Yes, of course. Your husband is certainly welcome."

Hermione let out an exhale of relief. "Thank you. I'll be honest, we may not be around for Sunday lunch all that often. Things have changed a lot in the last few months. I have finally reconciled with my parents, so I have been seeing them most Sundays instead. But at some point I'd like to drop by again."

Molly's eyes softened a bit. "You reconnected with your parents?"

Hermione glanced at Draco. "Yes. Draco, he... well, he and Harry went to them without me just before Christmas and told them everything. Then he surprised me on Christmas day by bringing them to Malfoy Manor for dinner. I thought Lucius was going to have a cow."

All three Weasley's lips twitched at this, and Draco gave a small chuckle. Then to Draco's great surprise Molly turned to him and said, "Then you're welcome at the Burrow at any time, Draco. It would be wonderful to finally put these hurt feelings behind us."

She rose, and Ron and Prudence did too.

Hermione hesitated for a split second but then approached Mrs. Weasley and gave her a tentative hug. Molly, however, was not having it, and she pulled her in close.

"We'll start anew, dear. Let's just pretend the last year was a nightmare, and we've all woken up, yes?"

Hermione huffed a laugh. "I'll say."

With that she pulled away and then Draco found himself rather unexpectedly pressed against her ample bosom too.

"Thank you for bringing her parents around," she whispered. "I know they missed her, and she missed them."

Draco blinked in surprise, but just nodded as he was released. He saw Hermione giving Ron a rather awkward side-hug, and then she pulled Prudence in for what seemed to be the most comfortable embrace out of the three.

After they said their farewells, Hermione sank back down into the armchair.

"Well?" said Draco. "How are you feeling?"

"Drained. Relieved. It's a bit like that time we visited Ron in Azkaban, I suppose. I've seen him once with Harry since he got out, but it was awkward. This is going to be awkward too for a while. I don't think I'll ever be as close to Molly as I once was, but then again... I don't

have to be. I can visit the other Weasley's and Prudence without having to spend a lot of time with either one of them until I'm ready. The Burrow is always crammed full of so many people that it won't be difficult. I'm just glad we aren't fighting anymore."

"You didn't tell them about Little Star," pointed out Draco.

Hermione shook her head a bit pensively. "No. I probably will at some point, but... not yet. I need at least a little time to process this before I do."

Draco rose and pulled her to her feet.

"I'm proud of you, darling."

"Oh?"

"You're forgiving, but you also held out for an apology first."

"You think I struck the right balance then?"

Draco shrugged. "I've told you before it doesn't matter what I think. It only matters that you do the right thing for you. I think you're figuring that out, that's all."

She sighed. "Well I have to admit, when I imagine some girl breaking Little Star's heart in twenty years..."

"Don't even suggest such a thing," said Draco airily. "He's going to be the heartbreaker."

"But if it *did* happen..." insisted Hermione.

"Then I'd probably set the family peacocks on her," admitted Draco.

Hermione gave a tired chuckle, and he put a finger under her chin to tilt her face up to him.

"I love you, darling. I'm glad you have come to some sort of resolution with them, truly."

"Me too," she said. "It's a bit sad the relationship may not ever be what it once was, but I think I'm okay with that. I can live with being cordial and a little distant."

Draco smiled. "Good. And now let me give you some news that I'm sure will cheer you up."

Hermione raised her eyebrows expectantly.

"Maribelle Marchbanks is a go."

Hermione's smile was blinding, and Draco's heart skipped a beat again.

The Weasley's didn't matter, though Draco was pleased that there had been *some* resolution on that front. No, it was Draco who had made his wife happy today — Draco and the work he was putting into the Wizengamot to give her to the world she envisioned.

"Thank you Draco," she said, as she flung her arms around him. "You're my best boy."

Chapter 25: The Name Game

Chapter Notes

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

24 April 2004

Draco and Hermione landed with *thud*, and Draco stumbled to keep his wife upright.

“Oomph,” he gasped. “Sorry. Are you okay? Is Little Star...”

“We’re fine,” said Hermione, as she straightened up and pulled a shawl around her shoulders a little tighter. “*Oh*,” she breathed.

Draco looked around too, and a small smile crossed his face. They had landed on the balcony of Blaise’s villa, having been given very precise coordinates by his friend. It was late afternoon, and it was starting to cool down for the evening, though it was still much warmer than the place they had just left.

The sun sparkled off of the turquoise water of the Mediterranean. Just as Draco remembered, this villa had a spectacular view.

“Blaise really doesn’t come here in the spring and summer?” asked Hermione in amazement, as she looked around.

Draco shook his head. “No. He claims he doesn’t like tourists. It’s very quiet in January and February.”

“It shouldn’t be that busy yet,” said Hermione.

Draco shook his head. “No, I agree with you. It becomes mobbed in the summer, but this time of year is perfect. Warm enough to enjoy it, but not yet summer with hoards of school children.”

“Good,” said Hermione. “I’m trying to get *away* from the hoards of school children.”

Draco just raised an eyebrow, and she smiled a little. “Alright, fine. I’ll admit they’re growing on me. But a few days off is still very welcome.”

“Then let me show you the villa, and then we can head into town.”

Hermione nodded agreeably to this, and Draco picked up both of their bags before unlocking the patio door and flinging it open.

Hermione inhaled, and Draco grinned. It had been years since he had been here, but it was just as he remembered. The interior had a painted tile floor, with an elaborate mosaic border

that Draco knew ran through the entire villa. The walls were whitewashed to display the frescos on the ceiling and the interior columns. The entire rear of the villa was fitted with windows to look out over the sea. It was stunning, peaceful, and so very private.

“Blaise sent his elf to prepare it for us, but we won’t be seeing him. It’s just us for the next few days.”

“I can’t believe he has this... it’s just wonderful!”

Draco frowned. “The Manor is nicer.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “No it’s not.”

Draco scoffed. “Of course it is. It has fifteen bedrooms. Blaise’s villa only has eight.”

“Blaise’s villa is in Positano with an unobstructed view of the Mediterranean. Sorry to disappoint you, but he has you beat.”

Draco scowled a little, as Hermione laughed. He watched her glancing around as he led them to the bedroom he was accustomed to using when he used to visit.

“What if I bought it from him?” he asked, as he observed her interest.

Hermione came to a halt in the middle of the hall and turned to look at him in confusion.

“Pardon?”

“This,” he said, gesturing around. “What if I bought it from Blaise? He only comes here during the worst part of the year anyway.”

“But why?”

“Because you like it, and I like you.”

Hermione gave him an exasperated smile. “Be serious.”

“*I am* serious. Blaise could still come for his regular visits. But this could be our little getaway.”

“There’s nothing about this place that’s little.”

“It’s smaller than the Manor.”

She huffed a laugh. “I suppose you have me there.”

“So what do you say?”

She just laughed again. “We’ve barely arrived. Let’s see how we like it before you plan to buy it, hmm?”

Draco inclined his head, but mentally he was already thinking about what he could say to convince Blaise to sell. The villa had been in Blaise's family for a long time, but it was vacant most of the year. Blaise had a love-hate relationship with it for that reason. He was always complaining about the maintenance on it and the tourists that would flood the town the moment it became warm. But Draco had always enjoyed it, and Hermione's eyes shone as soon as they landed on the balcony. If she liked this place as much as he thought she would, then he would have another Project.

Draco led her near the end of the hall to the bedroom Draco thought of as his. The bedrooms were all equivalently sized, except for the primary one, which had its own floor. Draco made a mental note to take Hermione up there before the end of the trip so she could see it, but Blaise had made Draco swear he wouldn't shag Hermione on that bed because he *did* sleep there on occasion. The room that had always been Draco's was still very lush though, and it had its own door out to the same large patio, but on the end which was near the pool.

Hermione gasped again when he led her inside.

"I didn't know there was a pool!"

"The balcony curves a bit. You can't see it from the place we landed, but yes there is. And it's charmed to be the perfect temperature year-round. Blaise turns it into an enormous hot tub in the winter."

Hermione bit her lip as she looked at it, and Draco tried not to groan.

"I didn't bring a bathing costume."

"Who says you need a bathing costume?"

She made an appalled sound as Draco dropped their bags and moved toward her to pull her closer.

"I certainly wouldn't mind taking a dip without one," he murmured into her ear.

"But somebody might see," she breathed.

"Privacy charms," he said. "It's just you and me darling. We can spend the next five days naked if you wish."

She slipped her arm around his neck and began to play with his hair. Draco sighed into her touch.

"You'd like that, would you?"

"I'll confess that it's a recurring fantasy."

"It seems a bit disrespectful to Blaise," she pointed out.

"What Blaise doesn't know won't hurt him. I promised him I wouldn't shag you on his bed. I made no such promises about the pool."

Hermione let out a low chuckle, and Draco pulled her to him to capture her lips. She let him do it, and he spent several lovely minutes tasting her until she pulled back. He let her go reluctantly.

“We aren’t spending five days naked in the villa,” she said, giving him a pointed look.

Draco sighed dramatically. “That’s a shame. It would have been time very well spent.”

“I’m not saying we won’t spend *any* time naked... but I would like to do some sightseeing. I can already tell this part of the world is as beautiful as everyone says.”

“Very well,” said Draco, conceding defeat. “But we should spend some time naked each day. As soon as Little Star is here, he’ll be interrupting our regular sexy time.”

“Sexy time?” asked Hermione in amusement.

“Of course, darling. You know – those times you have your wicked way with me, and I make you come by putting my mouth on your—”

“Okay!” she said, as she started to laugh. “Fine! You win. We will make sure to be naked each day in anticipation of limited sexy time in the near future.”

“I knew you would see reason. And the first stop is this pool.”

A Few Minutes Later

Draco didn’t coax. He didn’t cajole. He wasn’t Weasley. He wooed and seduced. Occasionally he demanded in a sexy sort of way, but usually he let it be Hermione’s idea.

And Hermione really *did* want to explore that swimming pool more thoroughly. He could tell. There was only one problem.

“I’ve never skinny dipped before.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

“But skinny dipping while *pregnant*...”

“Darling, the books all say that water is one of the best ways to relax. It takes the pressure off your back and hips.”

Hermione’s baby bump was still quite petite, all things considered, but she had already started complaining of joint pain. She finally conceded that a dip in the pool might be just

the thing, though she insisted on wrapping up in a towel first and then letting it drop just before she slid in.

Draco, however, was on a mission to seduce his delicious little wife, so once he saw that she was in the water, he strolled out gloriously naked as well.

“Draco, where is your towel?” she asked, but her eyes were huge and looking at his cock while she said it.

Draco canted his head to study her.

She really wants to fuck you.

The family magic had grown quieter since Hermione’s pregnancy took hold, but it still spoke to him now and then.

Draco couldn’t help the smirk that crossed his face as her eyes turned dark.

“Draco, *anybody could see you*,” she said, licking her lips a little and looking toward the next door neighbors a bit worriedly.

Draco waved her off. “I already told you. There are privacy charms.”

And with that, Draco turned to survey the sea with his hands on his hips so that Hermione could get a perfect profile view of his cock pointing straight toward it. He heard her choke.

He glanced back at her and flexed ever so slightly. The choking noise turned into a little groan.

“See something you like, darling?”

“My God,” she breathed. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I’ll make you a deal. Float on your back for a moment so I can see those pretty tits, and then I’ll join you. You can give me my punishment for being so naughty.”

Her jaw dropped, but then a look of determination lit her face as she slowly allowed herself to fall back into the water.

Draco looked down at her and marveled at the curls forming a halo around her face and the rivulets trailing down her breasts and small bump. She was beautiful like this as the sun began to grow lower in the sky. He couldn’t help himself. He dropped his hand to his cock and started to pump. Hermione turned crimson when she noticed, but said nothing and let him look for a long moment.

“You’re like some divine water nymph,” he finally commented.

“I thought I was a fertility goddess,” she quipped, running a hand across her bump.

"Mmmm, that too. Perhaps you're a nymph in heat. Surely they must reproduce. Because right now you look extraordinary. Fecund, ripe, lush, round, filled, fructious, fruitful, preg—"

"Yes, *thank you*," she said, cutting him off with a laugh. "Now are you getting in the bloody pool or not?"

"That depends on your immediate plans."

"I plan to shag you and possibly spank you on Blaise's behalf for talking me into sexy time in his swimming pool."

Draco needed no further invitation, and he silently congratulated himself at being a true master of seduction. It was her idea now, and he immediately slid into the pool and pulled her to him. In no time at all she was pushing him against the wall and sliding down on top of his cock, taking full control as she rode him.

She did not spank him, to Draco's slight disappointment, because the logistics of doing such a thing underwater turned out to be a bit challenging, but he would privately rate the rest of their sexy time a ten out of ten.

"We can spank each other in bed later," she purred into his ear, while Draco's eyes rolled back at her words.

Their sexy time in the pool led to sexy time in the bedroom, and they never *did* get to explore Positano that day. But Draco had no complaints. Their babymoon was off to a cracking start.

27 April 2004

Positano had always been beautiful, but it wasn't until Draco was looking at it through the eyes of his wife that he developed a real appreciation for the place. The last few times he had been here his occlumency haze had been so thick he scarcely noticed the difference between Italy and England.

It was absurd, but it was true.

Whereas Wiltshire was largely rolling pastures with small towns dotted throughout and the occasional larger city with old English charm, the Amalfi coast was entirely different. The houses were mostly white, with the occasional brightly-colored building scattered here and there. They were all very close together and built into the side of the surrounding mountains to give spectacular views over the water. The streets were steep, and in Positano everything led to the beach and small harbor at the base of the town, where the sea kissed the edge of the sand. The neighboring towns were similar, though of course each one had something about it that made it unique.

They had been in Italy for three full days and had run themselves ragged between all the sightseeing and extended interludes for sex. Draco was slightly sunburned, exhausted, and he had never been happier.

Hermione, naturally, was a walking encyclopedia, and she side-along apparated Draco along the coast, while she kept up a constant stream of chatter about the places they were visiting. They had spent anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours in most of the little towns, from Ravello to Praiano to Amalfi itself. Hermione had seemed thoroughly charmed by the shops and cafes, and Draco had been thoroughly charmed by his wife. It was a perfect place to escape for a few days, lost among the cobblestone streets and restaurants with fresh seafood, which Hermione had been craving recently.

Their last day would be spent entirely on a boat, at Draco's suggestion. He insisted Hermione needed to see the coast from the water and not just from land. They had an early evening portkey back, and he thought a long half-day at sea would be the perfect way to end their trip.

Technically this was their final evening there, so Draco had arranged dinner at a small, but delicious restaurant that was tucked away in the small wizarding section of Positano. Their drinks had just been poured when Draco cleared his throat.

"Darling, there's something we should discuss."

Hermione looked at him cautiously. "What is it?"

Draco took a deep breath and pulled the list from his pocket. He had been working on this for weeks, but had not found a good opportunity to talk to her about it yet. The last night of their babymoon seemed fitting.

"Names for Little Star," he said, presenting the list to her with a bit of a flourish.

Hermione relaxed a little, and her caution turned to amusement as she accepted the list and began to scan it.

"We each have an unlimited number of vetoes," he said. "That seems only fair to me. But to make this easier I put together a list of names I would *consider*, with asterisks next to my favorites."

She stifled a laugh as she began to read it.

"What's so funny?" he asked, with a frown.

"Just looking at the names that start with A... you've put an asterisk next to 'Aldhibah,' 'Alrakis,' 'Alruba,' 'Alsafi,' 'Altais,' and 'Athebyne,'" she said.

"Yes, because they're fantastic," he insisted.

"Nobody will ever pronounce them correctly," she pointed out.

"Of course they will. You just did!"

“That’s because I was very good at astronomy.”

“You were good at everything, darling,” said Draco cordially, hoping to butter her up.

“Draco,” she said, just shaking her head and looking amused.

“What? They’re good names!”

“You only like them because they are all part of the Draco constellation.”

Damn. He should have known she would see right through him. She *had* received top marks in that subject, after all.

“Well he’s my son, isn’t he?” asked Draco a little grumpily.

“It’s a bit narcissistic.”

“No, it’s my mother who is named after Narcissus,” he countered. “This is a subtle, but poignant connection between father and son.”

“Look, if we are going to use *anything* from Draco it should be ‘Eltanin.’ That’s the brightest star.”

“Yes, and if you turn to the E’s you will see I put *three* asterisks by that name,” said Draco eagerly. “Eltanin Malfoy. It rolls off the tongue. It’s regal, unique, and *pronounceable*.”

“I would almost have to insist on his middle name being ‘John’ then,” she said. To Draco’s slight consternation she was actually *giggling*.

“Eltanin John?” he asked. “Why?”

“Nothing to worry about, Draco,” she said, still laughing as she reached across the table to pat his hand. “It’s a muggle thing. We can make a point to watch *The Lion King* when we get home, and I’ll explain it to you then.”

Draco wasn’t sure what she was on about, but he sensed that ‘Eltanin’ was on the verge of being vetoed.

“Could we put it on the list of potential middle names then?” he asked, hoping to find a compromise. “The Malfoys have always used the father’s first name as the son’s middle name, but there aren’t many names that sound good with Draco. Maybe we could use one of the Draco stars for it instead.”

Hermione paused and turned serious. “I’ll consider it,” she said. “‘Leo Eltanin Malfoy’ does sound better than ‘Leo Draco Malfoy,’ I’ll grant you that. ‘Leo’ and ‘Draco’ are too similar.”

“I’ve vetoed ‘Leo,’” pointed out Draco.

“Yes, I know you think you’ve vetoed it,” said Hermione blithely, as she reached out to pat his hand. “But I’m sure you will come around again.”

"Hermione, would you please just *look* at other names?"

She sighed and looked down the page.

"Most of these are off the table."

"And why is that?" asked Draco a bit sourly. He had spent *ages* on this list.

"Because they're difficult to pronounce! I know I'm giving you a hard time about Leo, but at least nobody will mess that up!"

"Why are you going on about that?"

"Because *I* have a name that is consistently mispronounced. 'Hermy.' 'Hermo-ninny.' 'Hermy-one.' I was called everything *except* 'Hermione' growing up."

Draco frowned. "Nobody ever mispronounced my name," he said.

"No, because there are only two possibilities: the right way and 'Drack-oh.' But you had tutors who were all being paid to know which one was correct."

"So will he."

"He will also have muggle peers and teachers. Don't put him through that, Draco, please."

Draco sighed, his dreams of naming the baby 'Dziban' or 'Edasich' melting away.

"Fine. Tell me some names you could tolerate then, *other* than 'Leo.'"

"I like 'Atlas,'" she said. "I also like 'Archer,' though it's not on your list."

"Archer?" he asked.

"Yes, like Saggitarius. It doesn't have to be a *literal* star or constellation name to honor the tradition. It could be a reference."

"Alright..." said Draco slowly.

"I also don't mind 'Callisto,' 'Cosmo,' or 'Cyrus...'" she said, now looking further down the list. "I actually love 'Caelum,' but that might be mispronounced too frequently. Perhaps I should field test it with some muggles..."

Draco felt some tension leave him. At least there were a few names she liked. He wouldn't have to agree to Leo.

"Alright then. I won't push for 'Giasaur.'"

She shot him an amused look. "No. I'm sorry, Draco, but every star in your constellation is vetoed except for *possible* middle name usage of 'Eltanin' or 'Thuban.' Then again, I have some reservations about those too. Finding a first name that fits with Draco would be much nicer."

Draco's heart lifted at this a little. "You really don't mind 'Draco' as a middle name then?" he asked.

He had barely admitted to himself that he was afraid she would dislike the Malfoy naming tradition, so he had tried to find alternatives he could live with. She was already honoring the Blacks, and it seemed like too much to hope that she would be willing to follow the Malfoys too. There would be no Granger traditions at all if she agreed to it.

She softened. "No, I don't mind. My family doesn't have naming traditions like yours does. I always assumed Little Star's middle name would be 'Draco.'"

Draco's face split into a broad grin. "Alright then," he said, pulling the list back to him. "In that case, let me strike 'Fafnir' and 'Taiyi' from this list for you, darling. They're both part of the Draco constellation too, but they're my least favorite."

After Dinner That Night

"I love it here," said Hermione happily, as she dug her bare feet into the sand. They had finished their dinner and were now walking along the beach. They hadn't decided on a name just yet, but Draco was feeling increasingly optimistic that they would find something that worked with 'Draco' as a middle name. He loved calling their baby 'Little Star,' but he thought that settling on an actual name would make it seem even more real. Then again, they were in no rush. He had made his opening suggestions, and now Hermione had taken his list and tucked it into a pocket in her dress to consider more closely on her own time.

The sun was beginning to set, and the temperature was dropping, but Hermione seemed undeterred. She had just pulled her shawl out again and wrapped it around herself while slipping off her shoes. Draco had reached for them and was carrying them in one hand while holding Hermione's hand with the other. His own shoes were getting sand in them, but he didn't care.

He thought this night was perfect.

"I love it because you're here," he said simply.

He glanced at her and saw her cheeks turning pink, but she looked pleased. The wind blew a curl in her face, and Draco released her hand for a moment to tuck it behind her ear.

"You do know that, don't you? I'm afraid I'm a bit smitten."

She gave him a shy smile. "Yes, you are rather."

Draco huffed a laugh and shrugged. "I can't seem to help myself."

“Well your smittenness seems to be rubbing off a bit.”

“Smittenness?”

“Hush, I’m entitled to make up words now and then.”

Draco flashed her a grin and then tugged on her hand to continue their slow walk. “You’re entitled to do anything you wish, darling.”

She came to a halt again, and Draco looked back at her in confusion. She was frowning a little and was studying him closely.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s just... you always do what I want.”

Draco inclined his head. It was true, or at least he hoped it was true. It was certainly what he tried to do.

“And?”

“And shouldn’t we do things that *you* want now and then?”

“We could always name the baby ‘Eltanin,’” he quipped.

She just frowned harder at this, and the smile slid off of Draco’s face when she didn’t respond.

Draco narrowed his eyes a little and approached her again. She seemed a little perturbed – maybe even worried. Draco tucked her chin under his hand and tilted her face up. It glowed in the setting sun.

“Hermione, the only thing I want is you and Little Star. Whatever that needs to look like so you’re happy too, I can manage. Whether it’s being in Italy with you or watching movies with you or changing nappies in a few months... that’s all I want. I have everything I want right now, so I’m content.”

He wouldn’t tell her that his greatest fear was that their marriage might be dissolved, and she would never return to him. Despite Draco’s and Lucius’s best efforts with the MLPP, a strong majority of the Wizengamot members seemed to favor annulment instead of divorce. It made Draco ill every time he thought about it, and it was something he had to actively occlude. He knew they might not be successful in insisting upon divorce, but he kept telling himself he would cross that bridge when he came to it. There was still a chance.

Hermione’s face softened. “It seems so simple when you put it that way.”

“That’s because it is. I know our path getting to this point hasn’t been easy, and the circumstances that brought us together certainly weren’t ideal. But we are here now, and well...”

Draco dropped his hand and placed it on the small swell of her stomach.

“How could I possibly ask for more than this?”

His words seemed to make Hermione emotional, because she gave a great sniff and then moved into his arms, kissing him firmly. He indulged himself with his wife’s mouth, the lingering sharpness of the lemon gelato she had eaten for dessert still on her tongue.

When she pulled back, she looked at him so seriously that Draco’s heart seemed to skip.

“I’ve never been the type of person who was content to just *be*. I always had to be on top. I had to help Harry save the world. I had to join a think tank and fight for elf rights and go to prison because of the sodding MLPP. Then I had to marry you before I was fully ready to do it. I’ve never *allowed* myself to be happy with what I have.”

Draco’s skipping heart began to sink for a moment, until she started to speak again.

“But I think...” she added slowly, “Well, I think I may have missed a critical life lesson somewhere along the way. Do you know why my mother and grandmother keep telling me I won’t do better than you?”

Draco shook his head.

“It’s not because it’s one of those things you hear in polite company when talking about social rank and marriages of convenience. Nothing about our marriage was convenient at all – I’ve actually thought of it as a marriage of *inconvenience* given all the things we went through and all the people who hurt us to get here. But they still keep telling me I won’t do better because they know I’ve reached the peak. Whether our marriage was inconvenient or not, there is nobody better for me. I *am* on top already. They’re trying to tell me that it’s okay for me to be content with what I have, even though it’s in my nature to always look for something more.”

“Can you be content?” he whispered, and his heart began to thud.

He needed her to be content. Merlin, but he needed it more than almost *anything*.

She nodded slowly. “I think so, but it’s strange for me. It’s just very out of character for me to decide that I’m content. I’ve always run myself ragged pushing for more. I’m relentless, and I can’t think of a single thing I’ve done or relationship I’ve maintained where I’ve looked at it after the fact and thought, ‘that was good enough.’ That’s really what I’ve been doing these past few months, you know: I’ve tried to learn how to stop looking for more when it comes to a husband. Because Draco... I’ve looked.”

A flash of jealousy hit him so hard he was nearly breathless.

“I’ve looked for years, and I haven’t found anybody who can hold a candle to you. It’s not even close,” she added.

His jealousy fizzled in an instant, and his stomach unclenched.

"It's okay to let yourself be happy, Hermione," he said simply. "I know there are billions of people on the planet. There might be some other bloke out there who is better for you or who would cherish you like I do, without all of the shitty baggage from school and the war. But sometimes I think that baggage is the thing that made us finally see each other clearly. You're right that our marriage was very inconvenient, but I wouldn't have had it any other way because coming together like this helped me see your strength, and I hope it showed you my remorse. And now we're married and expecting our first child while standing on a beach at sunset on the fucking Amalfi coast. I would accept a thousand more inconveniences if that's what it took to bring you back here in five years or ten, preferably with more than one child in tow."

She looked almost stricken, but Draco made himself keep going. She needed to hear this.

"I'm not perfect, darling – far from it. But even if I'm not the most perfect man in the world, I'm *yours*. And I like to think that you're my witch, even when you're cross or exasperated with me. I'm not at all interested in holding out for somebody better, because I don't think I would ever find her. Even if I did find somebody who was better on paper, she still wouldn't be *you*. She wouldn't be the girl who slapped me in third year or the teenager who helped Potter take down the Dark Lord or the woman who went to prison to avoid marrying me or the mother of my child. There is only one witch who has done all of those things, and that's *you*."

"Draco..." she breathed. There was a tear rolling down her cheek, and Draco swiped it away with his thumb and fell silent as he let her absorb the things he had just said.

She exhaled, and for a moment Draco thought she was about to collapse. She leaned into him, and he sensed something draining out of her. He hoped it was all of her fight, her indecision, her concerns that she might find somebody better one day.

"You're right," she whispered. "My perfect man is still imperfect, but I think that's okay. I want the man who challenged me academically. I need the man who was put into an impossible position and allowed it to change him for the better. I crave the man who visited me in prison and who made me feel beautiful in my own body and adopted Crookshanks to get on my good side. I want the man I desire so much that I became reckless with my birth control and accidentally conceived a child with him."

Draco's heart was thudding out of his chest.

"You have him," he said simply. "Hermione, darling, you have every part of him, and if you can just accept it... He will never *ever* let you go."

She seemed to sway a little, and Draco pulled her closer. Her tiny bump pressed against his own stomach, and Draco dropped his forehead to meet hers.

"Hermione," he said, no *pleaded*. Because Draco was ready to plead. He had told himself he wasn't a man who would coax or cajole or beg. He had been proud of his restraint and hadn't done something like this since he was trying to convince her to marry him in the first place. But now? Right now he was willing to fucking beg if he had to because she *could* give him this. She even wanted to, he was certain of it.

"Draco," she whispered. In the setting sun he caught another glint of a tear, but he didn't wipe this one away. He leaned down to kiss it instead.

"Be content, Hermione. Let yourself have this. Let *me* have this. Be my wife, be a mother to our child, let me spoil you and him so much that you're always cross with me. Then in a couple years let's do it all over again so he has a sibling or even two or three. Let's make traditions and memories and mark milestones together. And while we're doing this, live at the Manor with me and tell Crookshanks to keep my father on his toes. Boss me around in bed and tie me up. Then do it in public and tell those bastards on the Wizengamot that you have me whipped, because you absolutely do. Fuck the MLPP and just do life with me, Hermione. Say that it's enough for you, *please* darling."

"It's enough," she said.

It slipped out, barely a whisper, but Draco heard it, and his blood roared. It was the thing he needed to hear from her; the moment when he could finally let his own fears start to recede. There would still be more to do to build their relationship of course. They had only been married a few months, and they hadn't even been on speaking terms a year ago. But she was going to let herself fall for him, *really* fall for him. He could be enough for her, and once the MLPP was gone, Draco thought she would choose to stay.

"It's enough for me too," he said simply. "You will always be enough, darling."

Chapter End Notes

If your name is Fafnir, Dziban, or Alruba, please know that no offense is meant, and you are named after one of the stars in the Draco constellation (which means Draco thinks you're awesome).

Chapter 26: Transitions of Power

15 May 2004

Hermione was seventeen weeks and a few days pregnant, and Draco thought she had never been more beautiful. She could still hide her bump under billowing robes or floaty dresses, but her normal muggle wear – jeans, t-shirts, and the like – now showed it off to perfection.

Hermione had been very careful to always wear robes in public, and even most of her students were still unaware of her pregnancy. Draco wondered if she would be able to finish the school year before it became widely known.

Little Star was now the size of a pomegranate, according to Hermione. Draco wasn't certain *how* she always seemed to know these things, but he didn't second guess it. Comparing their baby to various types of fruit was remarkably helpful in orienting himself, if a little odd.

Today was an unusual Saturday because Hermione had been asked to chaperone the last Hogsmeade visit of the year. Draco had wrinkled his nose at this when she told him earlier in the week, but eventually they decided to make a day out of it, and his mood improved dramatically.

"I only have to be in the village during a certain window of time. There's no real patrol route."

Hermione had been lucky to get the first shift, so she was responsible for getting the students out of the castle, and then she would be in the village through lunch. She left before Draco did, and when it came time to meet her, Draco found himself oddly excited about it. Perhaps it was because they rarely allowed themselves to be seen in wizarding public together since they both despised the press. Or maybe it was because Draco had never taken her on a date to Hogsmeade while they were in school, which was one of those quintessential wizarding experiences. Regardless of the reason, Draco was feeling remarkably upbeat as he made his way to the end of the lane in order to apparate.

A few seconds later, he found himself staring up at the Hogshead, in precisely the same spot where he had vomited all over Hermione months earlier. He shook his head in amazement as he considered just how much had changed since then.

"Draco!" called a familiar voice.

Draco spun around to find Hermione hurrying toward him, her robes billowing as she beamed.

Draco's breath caught as he smiled down at her and pulled her in for a brief kiss.

"Ready for our date then?" she asked. She seemed very eager, almost a little nervous, though her eyes were twinkling.

Draco canted his head to study her. "I'm always ready to spend time with you. But you have an odd expression on your face... do you have something in mind?"

"Well..." she said slowly, before looking longingly at something over Draco's shoulder.

He turned around to find himself face to face with a new boutique that had a window filled with frilly fabrics in white, soft pink, and the lightest blue.

"Ah," he said, a smile creeping on his face. "You want to shop for Little Star?"

Hermione bit her bottom lip, and Draco tried not to groan. She nodded, but seemed a bit hesitant.

"What is it, darling?"

"Well, nobody really knows yet... just our families and closest friends."

Draco pulled her in for a deeper kiss and let his hand drift down to her belly. "They're all going to find out soon enough," he murmured before another cry broke them apart.

"Draco!"

Draco pulled back a little in confusion. Hermione was looking a bit dazed as she shook her head to clear it before focusing on the voice.

It was Beatrice Greengrass. And she was there with Astoria, who was looking very pale indeed. Both of their eyes were glued to Draco's hand, which was still on Hermione's stomach.

"Sod it all," breathed Hermione.

Draco cleared his throat and removed his hand. "Beatrice. Astoria," he said in a cold voice.

Their eyes had still not left Hermione's abdomen, which was now fully covered by her robes.

"Is she pregnant?" demanded Beatrice.

Draco glanced at Hermione, whose face had gone pale. She gave him a look that clearly said, *This is your ex-fiancée. You need to handle it.*

"I cannot fathom why you think that should be any business of yours," said Draco.

Astoria's frown deepened while Beatrice started to splutter. "She's a mud—"

"She is my *wife*," snarled Draco. "And I suggest you keep that fact in the forefront of your mind whenever you speak to either one of us."

Beatrice huffed, and her eyes narrowed. “Our social groups will *never* accept any child of hers!”

Draco felt Hermione tense next to him, but the absurdity of this statement bubbled over, and he just started to laugh. And once he started, he could scarcely stop.

By the time his laughter finally died out, all three witches were looking at him like he had lost his mind.

“I know,” he gasped. “I know, it’s just... you think either one of us gives a single fuck about your social group?”

And then he dissolved into laughter again, and he saw Hermione start to smile a little out of the corner of his eye. Astoria assumed a pained look as though she wished to be *anywhere* else, and Beatrice began to splutter again.

Draco wiped tears of mirth from his eyes as he finally straightened up and looked at them both, still chuckling.

“Beatrice, do us all a favor and kindly fuck off. Astoria, please, for the love of Merlin, get away from your mother. You’re never going to find a husband if she’s the one looking for you.”

Beatrice’s jaw dropped, and Astoria’s mouth tightened, though Draco knew her well enough to see that she privately agreed with him.

“Now then, we must be going. There has been a lot of happy news in the Nott, Potter, and Malfoy households recently.”

Draco pulled Hermione close to him again and gave her a deep kiss before brushing her belly one last time. She was breathless and staring at him with shining eyes as he pulled away and then tugged on her hand to head to the baby store.

The last thing he heard was Beatrice ranting, before Astoria cut her off with a, “Honestly, Mother, he’s right!”

Draco snorted with laughter before turning to Hermione, who was looking at him with amusement.

“Well the cat’s out of the bag now, I suppose.”

He stepped forward and tucked a lock of hair behind one ear. “It’s true, darling. But look on the bright side. We can save ourselves the trouble of making a formal announcement. Beatrice and Astoria will handle it for us. Besides, now you can shop to your heart’s content, and there is no need to hide the bags.”

Hermione relaxed into a smile. “Fair enough. I’ll owl the Weasley’s and Minerva when we get home so they hear it from me first. They’re the only ones I care about who still don’t know. But you’re right. I’m far enough along that everyone is going to find out soon.”

“Excellent,” he said. “Now what are we shopping for today?”

Hermione’s eyes softened as she looked around at the tiny booties and knit caps.

“A layette,” she declared. “And look, I even printed off a list so we wouldn’t forget anything. Let’s start with the newborn sizes.”

Draco’s heart fluttered as she started holding up the tiniest baby outfits he had ever seen.

“Get all of them, darling. Nothing but the best for our Little Star.”

17 May 2004

Malfoy Heir on the Way!

by Rita Skeeter

The rumors are true! Lord Draco Malfoy’s wife, Hermione Granger – also known as Lady Malfoy – is expecting! This reporter caught wind of a rumor a few days ago from none other than Lord Malfoy’s former beau, Astoria Greengrass.

“My mother and I ran into Lord and Lady Malfoy in Hogsmeade and saw them kissing in public while Lord Malfoy brushed her stomach. They were outside Bitty Baby Boutique and clearly ready to begin shopping for their new arrival. I will confess, it was shocking, especially after all of the nasty things Lady Malfoy has written about her husband.”

I immediately took steps to confirm the rumors and reached out to the Malfoy family personally. They released the following joint statement:

“It is true we are expecting a son in October. Like many couples, our marriage has had its ups and downs, and those have been exacerbated by the MLPP. However, we are thrilled to be welcoming our little boy in the next few months and have made a conscious effort to resolve our differences in order to parent him the way he deserves. We appreciate your good wishes and ask for privacy for our growing family during this time.”

The news is no doubt shocking to many readers of The Daily Prophet, especially in light of the rumors that the MLPP may be on its last leg.

“We’ve been talking about overturning it, yes,” said Lord Selwyn, one of the MLPP’s biggest champions. “We have received enough pushback from the public to be reexamining our position, but of course nothing about that is certain.”

If the rumors are true, then this reporter is shocked that Lady Malfoy allowed herself to get into the family way, given that she has become something of an authority on all the legal ways to prevent pregnancies under the MLPP. This reporter reached out to Lady Malfoy to ask her if any of the legal methods she has been writing about for months failed.

"No, Draco and I did not experience a failure with one of the legal prevention methods. In our case, our son's conception had nothing at all to do with the MLPP, other than the fact that Draco and I were paired through the law and reconnected because of it. All along I have been advocating for a witch's right to choose when they start a family and with whom. In my case, I chose my son and my husband, as we have finally found common ground with each other. I wish every witch had the same opportunities that I did."

When asked if she still supported a repeal of the MLPP, Lady Malfoy answered in the affirmative.

"I have always been against the MLPP, and my pregnancy does not change that at all. I think many of the witches who have become pregnant because of this law would agree that it's possible to love our children but still find the MLPP to be a blatant overstepping and interference by the government."

Maribelle Marchbanks folded *The Daily Prophet* and lowered it as she stared over her reading glasses at Draco and Lucius.

"Well congratulations are obviously in order," she said. "And I must say I was impressed with your wife's handling of that Skeeter woman. She's always been a nuisance."

Draco inclined his head. "Thank you, Madam Marchbanks."

"How are you faring with the Greengrasses?" she asked.

Draco waved her off. "They are interfering, nothing more. It was true they caught us shopping for Little Star in Hogsmeade. We knew it was inevitable that the news would come out."

"Little Star?" she asked curiously.

Draco turned a faint pink, but one glance at his father assured him Madam Marchbanks would find the story charming.

"We haven't picked a name yet, but the tradition in my mother's family is to name children for the stars. That's what we've taken to calling him while we consider our options."

"Oh that's lovely," she said approvingly. "And I'm glad to hear your wife is willing to follow your traditions in that matter."

Draco inclined his head.

"I have always been a proponent of muggleborn rights, you know," she added, "but there is no question that it requires compromise from both sides to bring a muggleborn into a family such as yours."

"I am already learning that raising a child with another person requires a great deal of compromise in any event," said Draco smoothly. "My wife is willing to give him a traditional wizarding education, and I am willing to place him in muggle schools for his other core subjects. We have both had to adjust our thinking to accommodate the other, but I like to believe it means our marriage will survive the end of the MLPP."

Madam Marchbanks got a knowing glint in her eye.

"Oh yes, Lucius and I have had a few discussions about overturning the MLPP. It was a truly appalling law, you know."

"Indeed," chimed Lucius, who was studiously glossing over the fact that he was the one who championed the MLPP in the first place. "And in fact, that is why we are here, Madam Marchbanks."

She inclined her head to prompt him to continue.

"You know we've discussed Minister Shacklebolt's views about all of this. Unfortunately, the man has become entrenched and absolutely refuses to see reason. He will not bring a resolution to repeal the MLPP to the floor of the Wizengamot, but we know that *you* would."

A small smile crossed her face. "Of course I would. In fact, it would be a pleasure to do so."

Draco and Lucius glanced at each other and both started to smile slowly. In that moment Draco found himself a bit startled by their similarities. He had always looked very much like his father, but their resemblance was utterly striking as their smiles mirrored one another.

"In that case," said Lucius, "as one of the leaders of the conservative bloc, I would like to propose that we put forward a vote of no confidence. I am certain it will pass. And then we would like *you*, Madam Marchbanks, to step in as our new Minister of Magic."

Draco held his breath as he watched Madam Marchbanks process the news that this was really happening.

"If you think you have the votes for it, then I would be honored to accept. Being the Minister of Magic is something I have dreamed about for a long time, and my first order of business will be repealing the MLPP. And Lord Malfoy," she added, now looking directly at Draco with a small smile on her face.

"Yes, Madam Marchbanks?"

"Please tell your wife I said 'thank you.' I strongly suspect she is the reason I find myself in this position."

Draco flashed a grin. "Of course. I'll admit the idea was hers, but you're the one who did the work to get the others on board."

Madame Marchbanks exhaled and straightened. “Very well, then. When can we expect the vote of no confidence?”

“Friday,” said Lucius. “We will do it on Friday.”

21 May 2004

It was Friday.

Draco and Hermione woke up at nearly the same time, an odd sort of eagerness suspended between them. They exchanged anticipatory looks and then readied themselves for their respective days, knowing that they would be seeing each other soon.

The weather outside was blustery. Something about it felt appropriate for the thing that was coming.

The terms of the Ministers of Magic in Wizarding Britain tended to fall in one of two camps: very long or surprisingly short. Rufus Scrimgeour, for example, was murdered a year after taking office – and then there was Pius Thickness who didn’t even last that long. But when Wizarding Britain was at peace, Ministers of Magic tended to linger. In fact, there had only been five Ministers of Magic in Draco’s lifetime, and that included the war years. There were no term limits or *elections*, per se. Rather, they were selected by the Wizengamot, which had both hereditary and elected seats. There was some accountability to the public that way, but in practice it meant that Ministers of Magic could get away with quite a lot before the Wizengamot felt they had no choice but to act and remove support for the incumbent Minister.

That, of course, was why Cornelius Fudge was able to blatantly dismiss Voldemort’s second rise. It was also why Shacklebolt introduced the MLPP. Neither one believed they would pay for it politically, because when they were making their decisions the Wizengamot opted to put its head in the sand about public perception.

But all good things have to come to an end eventually, even popularity within the governing body that elected the Minister in the first place.

A savvy Minister of Magic knew this, surely. History taught Draco that very few Ministers ever resigned or retired at the height of their power. And why would they? Why not cling to the thing that made them the greatest man – and the very occasional woman – in Britain? He supposed it was a bit like elite quidditch players – they *never* quit the game while they were ahead. Inevitably they kept playing even past their peak, until they had been traded so often their shine had worn off.

Draco thought it was senseless to cling to the title that used to make one great or to *truly* believe that popularity could be resurrected once a good name was lost. Draco knew first-hand just how difficult that could be. While the Malfoy name would always command respect in some circles, he knew there would always be whispers about his Death Eater days too. The things he did while wearing that mask could never be undone, despite the fact that he had been a teenager while it was happening. But even though Draco knew it was stupid to believe he would ever be fully forgiven, he still held out an unrealistic hope that someday the world at large would see him as more than a Death Eater. Similarly, Kingsley Shacklebolt seemed to believe that the MLPP would just blow over if given enough time. Perhaps it was optimism or maybe it was just foolishness. Whatever it was, it seemed inherent in the human condition to always hope, even when all the evidence suggested that such hope was futile. And curiously, it seemed that those who finally fell rarely saw it coming.

Draco, for one, was *certain* that Kingsley Shacklebolt would not see it coming. Draco had run into the man in the halls of the Ministry of Magic the previous day, and Kingsley had greeted him as though they were old colleagues.

"I hear Lucius is training you to take his seat soon! That's good news, my boy. New blood on the Wizengamot is always welcome."

Draco wondered for a split second if Kingsley was really that good of an actor. But he dismissed the thought almost as soon as he had it. Lucius had sworn the conservative bloc to secrecy so that no whisper of the thing that would be happening that day reached Shacklebolt's ears. And miracle of miracles, despite the fact that rumors spread through wizarding society like wildfire, evidently some secrets could be kept. Draco supposed this should not surprise him. Lucius had kept secrets before. The fact that Malfoy Manor had been Voldemort's headquarters had been kept secret for nearly two years, after all. A few months to ensure that the ousting of the Minister of Magic went smoothly was nothing compared to a secret like *that*.

Besides, who *really* wanted to break that news? Even Shacklebolt's staunchest opposition wouldn't relish that sort of awkwardness.

And so, as Draco and Hermione prepared for their day, with Draco giving Hermione a lingering kiss and a brush on her abdomen for Little Star, he knew they were both thinking the same thing: this was historic.

How odd was it to have a day like this, when one *knew* that history was about to be made? In the past, Draco had only realized he was part of history being made after the fact: when he watched Dumbledore *actually* die; when he saw Potter pull off his invisibility cloak to defeat the Dark Lord; even when his name was called with Hermione's during the MLPP Matching Ceremony. All of those things managed to surprise him in the moment, and it was only after they were done that he recognized something truly monumental had just occurred. They were the moments that built through a lifetime – the things one never forgot.

But today, he and Hermione both knew that there would be a turning point for Wizarding Britain before either one of them entered the Ministry of Magic. It was both exhilarating and very odd.

"I'll see you soon, darling," he said, as he watched her floo to Hogwarts. And Draco knew it was true: Hermione had arranged another field trip, this time with all of the seventh year students.

"It's a historic day. I want them to see it," she said simply.

The students, of course, did not know *why* 'Professor G' was taking them to the Ministry of Magic that day. But every single one of them signed up for her field trip, given that the alternative was revision for their N.E.W.T.s.

Draco took a deep breath as he looked at himself in the mirror. Technically he was a visitor today because Lucius still held the family seat. It was good, he thought. He would be able to sit with Hermione in the viewing gallery.

Ensuring that he was presentable and professional, he made a point to school his face. Kingsley Shacklebolt couldn't do anything about what was coming today, but Draco still didn't want to be the one to tip him off. He strode out of his room and made his way to his father's study, where he saw Lucius in the traditional Wizengamot robes.

"Ready?" asked Lucius.

Draco nodded, feeling oddly jittery. Lucius just gave him a small smile when he noticed his son's expression.

"It's strange, isn't it?"

Yes, that was a perfect word for it. *Strange*.

Draco inclined his head in agreement, and soon they were floo'ing to the Ministry of Magic together.

"Hang out in the lobby," said Lucius quietly. "Visitors are allowed in only thirty minutes before the session begins."

"That works. I'm meeting Hermione and her students anyway," said Draco.

Lucius nodded, and then they split: Lucius to do a last-minute check to ensure they had the votes they needed, and Draco to the fountain in the lobby to wait for Hermione.

The minutes ticked by, and Draco watched as several more members of the Wizengamot arrived in their plum-colored robes. A few nodded at Draco knowingly and others looked at him with some curiosity. He knew that not all of them were aware of what was to come, but they didn't have to be. As long as they had the votes they needed Lucius had always preferred to keep things on a need-to-know basis.

Before long the floo turned green, and his wife stepped out, brushing her robes off smartly, as she led a group of seventh year students behind her.

"Draco!" she said, waving toward him. Draco approached and pulled her in for a light kiss, before turning to the students and nodding at a few of them he recognized.

"Ready then?" she asked. "We will all have to go through security first."

Draco and the students nodded, as Hermione led them to a guard station, where their wands were collected for holding. Once everyone had turned in their wands, she launched into a lecture about the Wizengamot, the functions of it and its history, and he was pleased to see that most of the students were listening intently. He supposed it was because they were all adults now, staring down their futures after Hogwarts in just a few short weeks, and Hogwarts really didn't offer a class that focused on things like their government.

"I intend to make this field trip an annual event for the seventh years," said Hermione, with a twinkle. "However, I think this inaugural trip will be rather memorable for you all... emphasis on the word, *inaugural*."

Draco smirked as the students exchanged curious looks with each other, but Hermione refused to say anything more.

Soon they were heading into the same room where Hermione and Draco had been matched. Today, it was partitioned so the Wizengamot members were in the lower seats, closer to the front, and guests were behind them in the upper seats of the gallery.

Draco nodded to several members he knew, and he threw a wink at Theo who was drinking yet more coffee and looking enormously sleep-deprived. In the corner of the room were a few aurors, including Potter, and it was oddly comforting to see him there. Draco knew the aurors were providing security to the Wizengamot members, but he suspected that Potter would prioritize Hermione's safety over that of anybody else in the room.

Before long they all took their seats, and then Kingsley Shacklebolt strode in to open the session.

It took him a full thirty seconds to notice Hermione in the viewing gallery, and as soon as he did his eyes narrowed.

Draco glanced sideways at her and saw her give him a satisfied little wave that made Shacklebolt's face turn ashen.

He cleared his throat and made an effort to ignore her as he opened the session.

They moved through normal business: updates on muggle-wizard relations, anticipated enrollment at Hogwarts for the next school year, and a conflict with the goblins that was being resolved. All of it was routine, and Draco could tell that Shacklebolt was growing more comfortable as the session moved on.

And then he opened the floor for comments and motions, as was customary.

Theo raised his hand, and Shacklebolt frowned a little. Theo was very new and had never said a word up to this point. He glanced at Hermione for a moment before calling on him.

"The Minister of Magic acknowledges Lord Nott and gives him the floor."

“Thank you, Minister,” said Theo. “I would like to present a motion from the conservative bloc for a vote of no confidence in the Minister of Magic.”

There was a split second of shocked silence, and then the press, which was in its own section of the visitor’s gallery, erupted with cameras flashing and quills scratching.

“I second the motion,” called Lucius.

Shacklebolt was frozen with shock.

“But... but...” he stuttered.

“Procedurally, you must call the vote, Minister,” added Lucius, with a sneer.

“But surely there must be a debate or –” he started, and Lucius rolled his eyes.

“No. Debate is not required unless Lord Nott requests it. He did not make that request.”

“But nobody said –”

“We are not obligated to inform you,” said Lucius coldly. “Lord Nott presented the motion, and I seconded it. All we have to do is vote.”

Draco moved his hand to cover Hermione’s, and he felt her grip his hand hard, her nails digging into his skin ever so slightly. He glanced around at the students, who all seemed utterly spellbound by what was happening. He knew that they must realize they were witnessing history too.

Shacklebolt swallowed hard. “Very... very well,” he said haltingly. “Those in favor of Lord Nott’s motion?”

Draco wondered if the man was about to faint as more than two-thirds of the conservative bloc and nearly every member of the liberal bloc raised their hands.

And just like that, his reign as Minister of Magic was over.

It was oddly anticlimactic, until his eyes fell on Hermione again, and his face twisted with loathing.

“This was all because of you,” he spat.

Hermione stood now, and though it was very out of turn for a spectator to comment, nobody seemed inclined to stop her.

“No, Kingsley. This was because of *you*. If you hadn’t supported the MLPP so blindly the public never would have demanded this. I am only one person, and I’m a professor now. I’m no longer a lobbyist. I certainly didn’t convince the Wizengamot to do this on my own. But the decision is the right one. Somebody needs to be held responsible for the worst law passed by your administration, and as Minister of Magic that falls on you.”

Draco saw Kingsley's wand hand twitch, and in an instant he was disarmed, and Potter was striding forward.

"Kingsley," he said. "It's time for you to leave."

"You knew!" he said, turning on Potter.

He just shook his head. "No. I didn't. But you are a civilian now, which means you are a spectator. You know that spectators are not allowed wands in Wizengamot sessions. Please, let's go before the press makes this any worse."

Draco sensed Shacklebolt deflate slightly, though he still threw a look toward Hermione that was pure poison as he allowed himself to be escorted away. As they reached the door, Potter looked back and nodded once to Draco, which he interpreted to mean, *I'll keep an eye on him.*

Draco exhaled and turned to find Hermione lowering herself into her seat, a broad smile slowly blooming on her face.

"Brilliant," she murmured.

Draco smiled too, and then he turned his attention back to the front. It was certainly irregular for the Minister of Magic to be ousted, but procedurally it meant that the most senior member of the Wizengamot became the presiding officer until a new Minister was elected.

It just so happened that this individual was Lord Selwyn.

The man is older than dirt, though Draco a bit uncharitably. Lord Selwyn was a true pain in Draco's arse, constantly complaining about how young everyone around him was. Then again, he was on board with the plan, and that would make the next thing even smoother.

He approached the front and took the seat that had just been vacated by Shacklebolt before clearing his throat.

"Now then," he said in a scratchy voice. "I understand that we need to elect a new Minister. As the conservative bloc has a majority, it shall put forth a candidate for consideration by this chamber."

At this, Lucius rose, and Lord Selwyn nodded to him.

"Lord Wiltshire, you may have the floor."

"Thank you, Lord Selwyn," he said, sounding much warmer now that Shacklebolt was gone. "We would like to put forth a candidate who has united this chamber in the past. This individual has the respect of the public and has assured me that she will champion a repeal of the MLPP."

At the word 'she,' there were some murmurings, and more than one shrewd look was thrown Hermione's way. Draco heard her snort lightly in amusement.

“I’m far too young,” she whispered.

“You won’t be forever,” Draco whispered back.

She shot him a knowing look, and he smiled a little. It wouldn’t surprise him at all if Hermione became Minister of Magic one day, or was at least in the pool of potential candidates. Still, he knew she was right: she was in her mid-twenties. War hero she may be, but the Wizengamot probably would not consider her to be a serious contender for Minister until her mid-forties at the very earliest.

Think about all the things she will be able to accomplish in the next twenty years.

One thing was certain: if she was ever in the running for it, she would certainly have Draco’s full support.

Lucius let the titters die down before continuing. “I would like to present a motion for Maribelle Marchbanks to be instated as Minister of Magic.”

“Seconded,” said Lord Fawley.

The whispers were almost deafening now, as those who had not been made aware of this seemed to be sizing her up. Lord Selwyn banged his gavel several times until there was silence.

“Very well,” he said. “All in favor of Madam Maribelle Marchbanks being named Minister of Magic, raise your hands!”

Hands began to rise through the chamber, and Draco held his breath as he did a quick count. It was not as overwhelming as Shacklebolt’s ousting, that was certain. But as he surveyed the room, he found himself exhaling with relief as he saw that they had the majority with ten votes to spare.

Hermione gave a suppressed squeal and clutched his hand again, and Draco broke out into a broad smile as Lord Selwyn banged his gavel and made the announcement.

“Very well. Then Madam Marchbanks, if you could please rise and join me at the front.”

Maribelle Marchbanks rose, her head held high, a glint of triumph in her eye as she made her way forward.

Lord Selwyn reached out and clasped her hand in congratulations. The press was blinding as cameras went off to capture the moment.

“The official inauguration will be scheduled soon,” said Lord Selwyn. “And in the meantime, you are the acting Interim Minister of Magic. I turn this chamber back over to you.”

“Thank you, Lord Selwyn,” she said, as she accepted the gavel and took her place. Draco knew she was excited, but he was struck by her composure as she lowered herself into the chair.

"Now then, as acting Interim Minister of Magic, I will open the floor to any other business."

Draco was sure there was nothing else to say, but to his surprise Lucius rose again.

"Interim Minister," he said, "I have one more piece of business."

"Very well. Lord Wiltshire may have the floor."

Lucius straightened up, and then to Draco's surprise he turned to the gallery and sent a small smile to Draco. "It is time I resign my seat. My son Draco will be submitting the paperwork to take over the seat from me in the coming weeks."

There was shocked silence at this, none more so than Draco. He knew, of course, that this was his father's plan all along. Draco had even agreed to it. But now? Already?

Madam Marchbanks gave Lucius a piercing look, but he just shrugged. "It will take a few weeks to make the transition effective. Please consider this my official notice of pending resignation so that the Malfoy seat doesn't go dormant during the transition."

Madam Marchbanks inclined her head. "Very well. Your notice has been received, Lord Wiltshire. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to assist with the transition."

Lucius inclined his head gratefully and lowered himself again. Draco turned to find Hermione watching him with a small smile. Draco opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He closed it again and just shook his head a little to clear it.

The session wrapped up soon after that, but Draco was glued to his seat as his father turned and approached. He barely felt Hermione lean in to give him a kiss on the cheek before ushering her students off to give them both some privacy.

It was only when Lucius was right in front of him that Draco finally found his voice.

"Already?"

Lucius smiled a little. "It will take some time, Draco. And I will still be helping with the inauguration and the MLPP repeal."

Draco swallowed hard and nodded. "Alright. I just thought you would wait until the MLPP was gone. Maybe this autumn or—"

He cut himself off as Lucius was shaking his head.

"No, Draco. Now is the perfect time."

"Why?" asked Draco. He wasn't sure why he was feeling so emotional. Perhaps it was because he was about to take up the Malfoy mantle. Or maybe it was the satisfaction he had sensed from Hermione. Or it could have been the look of pride on Lucius's face as he surveyed his son. Whatever it was, the question came out in a small voice. He felt like a boy, asking his father a question that was only for his ears.

Lucius heard it, and he placed a hand on Draco's shoulder, just as he used to do when Draco came to him with problems as a child.

"Because, son... when it's time to repeal the MLPP, I want *you* to be able to cast the Malfoy vote."

Yes, it was a historic day, indeed. Draco knew he would never forget it.

Chapter 27: Dr. Cocky Cock Cox

2 June 2004

Hermione was twenty weeks pregnant.

“I’m halfway done!” she exclaimed.

“And where are you on the terrified to excited scale now?” asked Draco curiously.

“Oh, at least fifty-fifty. Seems fitting, yes?”

“I would say so. And what do we have this week?”

“A sweet potato.”

“Merlin.”

It was shocking. Something about pregnancy seemed to both take forever and move along very quickly all at the same time. It didn’t make sense. Draco was very impatient to meet their son, but then again, the speed at which he was growing absolutely baffled him.

And some part of him wished he could freeze Hermione in time just like this. She had the most perfect baby bump he could imagine: visible, adorable, but not yet so large it impeded her mobility to any great degree. She was starting to complain of back pain a little more often, but it wasn’t yet debilitating. They were in the middle of the pregnancy and also in the middle of that golden second trimester. Soon, he knew, her discomfort would return in full force and probably get progressively worse until the end.

At least, that’s what the books all said.

Draco’s own excitement was well beyond fifty percent, especially today. Because today he would get to see the baby again, and Hermione assured him that this time he would look like a *real* baby and not a blob.

It was the anatomy scan. Draco had read about it of course, and he was both nervous and thrilled. Hermione’s parents would be there for it, and even his parents had asked to come too. Narcissa hadn’t really surprised him by making the request because she had gone positively mad ever since learning Hermione was pregnant; but hearing Lucius say that he wanted to join too made Draco gape, before he grew rather concerned.

“You can’t wear robes, Father.”

“Obviously, Draco.”

“During the last scan I wore a suit, but I may have been overdressed. Jeans are probably more appropriate.”

“I do not own jeans, nor will I *ever* own jeans,” insisted Lucius.

“Chinos then.”

“Draco...”

“You know what? Nevermind. I’ll coordinate with Patsy to make sure you are dressed appropriately.”

Draco was sure the Statute of Secrecy was about to be blown into smithereens by the presence of his parents, but then again, how could he deny his father a request like this, especially when Hermione was in favor of it?

“It’s wonderful, Draco,” she had told him. “It shows a lot growth. I’m not at all inclined to stop him from coming, and isn’t it good for us to do a bit of a dry run at the hospital before the birth? He won’t be in the room with us, but I imagine he and your mother will be in the waiting room.”

“I doubt it,” he snorted. “Mother may be there, but no Malfoy has ever seen his wife give birth. I’m pretty sure my father just waited at the Manor for news when I was born.”

Hermione just stared at him, and then her expression turned stoney. “Do not think, even for a moment, that you will be excused from the birth of our son.”

Draco’s eyes widened as he sensed the threat coming from his wife.

“No! No, of course not, darling, I would never... I’m simply saying that my *father*...”

“Well maybe he’s mellowing out in his old age, because evidently he wants to come to the scan. That’s far more intimate than a hospital waiting room.”

Draco knew she was right, and perhaps her guess that Lucius was mellowing out was correct as well. In any event, Draco soon found himself waiting with both of his parents and his inlaws in the same muggle waiting room as their last scan. Lucius was still a bit frosty toward the Grangers, but Narcissa had warmed up considerably. And to Draco’s great relief, Lucius had consented to wear muggle slacks and a tailored oxford shirt. His hair was causing more curious looks from the muggles than his outfit.

“Sorry I’m late!” came Hermione, as she strode in. “I had to give out a last minute detention, and I got delayed.”

Draco was relieved to see that her students were *not* with her this time.

“It’s no problem, dear,” said Helen. “We are just excited to be here!”

Hermione gave her mother a swift smile before checking in. They waited another thirty minutes or so before her name was called.

“Hermione Granger!”

Hermione, Draco, and all four grandparents rose to follow. The excitement was palpable, though Lucius’s was more muted than the other three. As they walked into the small room with the enormous camera and screen, he looked at it askance.

“We usually only allow—” started the same muggle woman Draco recognized from their previous visit.

“*Confundus*,” said Hermione, pointing her wand to the woman.

“Merlin, here we go again,” muttered Draco.

But to his enormous relief, this time only a single *confundus* was required before they started, as the muggle did not try to make Hermione fully disrobe.

“Let’s just see that belly, love, and then we’ll take a look at the baby!” she said kindly.

Lucius cleared his throat a bit uncomfortably as Hermione’s midriff was exposed. She, however, just rolled her eyes at his prudishness and settled back on the makeshift bed while the muggle woman squirted the same clear jelly on Hermione’s stomach.

“Here we go...” said David Granger excitedly, as everyone’s eyes turned to the screen in front of them. The muggle pulled out the same wand and smeared the jelly around with it and then...

“Circe, Merlin, and Morgana!” exclaimed Lucius.

“*Shhh!*” hissed Hermione as she was forced to confound the muggle again. “Just say ‘Oh my God,’ Lucius, *honestly!*”

Draco was sure Lucius would have had a snarky response to her, if he hadn’t been so transfixed by what he was seeing on the screen.

“But that’s a *baby*,” he pointed out, gesturing to the screen.

Hermione rolled her eyes, but he saw an amused smile flit across her face as she fell silent. They all stared at the screen and saw something that was very obviously a baby suddenly stretch for a moment before curling back into the fetal position.

Hermione gasped, just as the muggle woman said, “There’s our baby Malfoy!”

“What?” asked Draco, turning toward Hermione worriedly. “What is it, darling?”

“It’s just... I felt it! When he stretched!”

“Well of course,” said the muggle. “You must have been feeling the baby for awhile? You don’t have an anterior placenta.”

Hermione blinked, and everyone looked at her for confirmation.

"Well... I thought *perhaps*... but it's been rather faint, and I thought maybe I was imagining things. I kept reading it felt like butterflies, and mine hasn't felt like *that*. It's a bit ticklish. Sort of like a muscle spasm. Or perhaps drinking something fizzy. But just now... that felt like a tiny kick!"

The muggle woman nodded knowingly. "Yes, baby's quite active. Look!"

Hermione swallowed hard, and Draco reached out to grip her hand as they all looked back at the screen again. He almost looked to be dancing as he tried to roll over.

"It's just... wow," said Hermione. She sounded a little breathless.

As for Draco, he was in disbelief. This was no blob. There was a real baby with legs and arms and...

"Oh look, baby is sucking its thumb," said the muggle woman with a smile in her voice.

"Merlin..." breathed Draco. "Err... I mean, oh my God?" he corrected himself as he saw Hermione's expression.

"This is unbelievable," said Narcissa, who was watching with wide eyes.

Hermione smiled a little, and Draco thought he heard Helen sniff as the muggle got to work.

"Alright, let's take some measurements, shall we?" said the muggle.

She started clicking buttons, and the wizards watched in fascination as she measured his head and his legs and body length.

"Is this accurate?" asked Lucius. Draco could hear both skepticism and amazement in his voice.

"Oh yes, fairly accurate," she said. "Obviously there's a bit of user error based on where I start and end the measurements, but it's accurate within a few millimeters."

"Mer – *my God*," said Lucius, swiftly correcting himself. Hermione nodded a little with satisfaction.

"Now then, would you like to know the sex?" asked the muggle.

Everyone in the room exchanged looks.

"We're quite sure it's a boy," said Hermione, though Draco could hear some hesitation in her voice.

Wait. Why was she hesitating? It's obviously a boy. The family magic guarantees it.

Then again, hadn't everything about his marriage to Hermione been unconventional? Not that Draco would object to a girl at all – no, after meeting Cami he was quite keen to have a

girl someday. But he wasn't precisely certain just how many times Hermione would be willing to do this with him, and he *needed* a boy for the title at some point.

Draco promised himself in that moment that he would add Little Star's blood to the wards very soon after he was born. Waiting at least two or three years was tradition in his family. Historically, most generations ensured the heir survived common childhood illnesses or else produced a little brother as a back-up plan first before breaking the magic.

But no, Draco was quite keen to break that spell as soon as he could. Perhaps their birth control would fail again, and then he could have a girl too. Or maybe Hermione would be game to try again someday.

"It would be wonderful if you could confirm our suspicions for us," said Draco smoothly.

The muggle gave him a small smile.

"It does seem like parents often guess correctly. Of course there's always a fifty-fifty chance, but it's uncanny how often those feelings seem to get it right."

She moved the wand around on Hermione's stomach a little more and narrowed her eyes.
"We need baby to turn for us. Ms. Granger, if you could roll on your side please? I'm going to poke the baby a bit."

Draco exchanged slightly alarmed looks with his parents, but Hermione didn't seem to find this unusual at all. She turned to the side, and then the muggle began to massage her stomach a bit. Little Star started to kick and move.

"Oh dear, he doesn't like being disturbed, does he?" asked Helen in amusement.

Draco found his nerves easing, and he chuckled a bit.

"Stubborn little thing..." commented the muggle. "Come on, baby... let us see..."

"He takes after his mother," said David, and Draco heard Hermione huff in irritation as the others laughed.

"One more time..." muttered the muggle, "...and there!"

Sure enough, Little Star finally turned over, spread his legs wide open, and gave them a frontal view.

"Gracious," muttered Narcissa.

"Definitely a boy," said the muggle, with a small laugh in her voice. "You see? There's his equipment."

She pointed to what was obviously a tiny penis on the screen. Draco felt an odd blend of amusement and pride as he stared at it.

"It's rather large for his overall size," commented the muggle, and unconsciously Draco felt his chest swelling.

"He takes after me too, then," he said.

The words just slipped out, and Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth as she started to giggle, while Narcissa made an offended sound. His inlaws gave him slightly pained looks.

"Sorry, mother," he muttered.

The muggle took a few more measurements of Little Star's body and then said, "Now let's check your cervix."

Lucius cleared his throat uncomfortably, but again Hermione just rolled her eyes as the muggle started measuring some other part of Hermione's body and then froze.

"Huh..." she said.

Hermione snapped to attention.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

The muggle glanced at her and then assumed a professional mask, which made Draco's pulse tick up.

"The doctor will talk to you about it. I'm just a technician."

Draco's stomach inexplicably knotted.

"But—" started Hermione.

"Nothing to worry about," said the muggle. "I'm just making notes of measurements, that's all. Now then, would you like to hear his heartbeat?"

This had the effect of diverting the grandparents, but Hermione and Draco exchanged slightly worried looks.

"I'll ask," she whispered. "My appointment is right after this. You can come too if you want."

Draco nodded firmly. He *did* want to. Up to this point Hermione had taken most of her appointments alone, but if there was something wrong he wanted to hear about it first-hand.

He tried to push the anxiety away and focus on the muggle as she turned to the screen and flipped a switch.

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump...

Draco exhaled and glanced at his parents' amazed faces for a moment before he closed his eyes and focused on the sound.

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump...

Little Star was fine. He was moving, dancing, and his heart was beating at a similar pace as last time.

“I can hardly believe this.”

Draco opened his eyes and glanced to his left. The words came from his father.

If this doesn't soften him toward muggles, then nothing will.

But Draco could see Lucius coming around to the muggle way of doing things before his very eyes. Seeing the baby, measuring the baby, *listening* to the baby's heartbeat... Hermione assured him that witches and wizards never experienced this at St. Mungo's.

“Believe it, Lucius,” said Hermione, with a small smile on her face. “That's your grandson.”

30 Minutes Later

Hermione was jiggling her foot nervously. She had changed into a medical gown and was sitting on the edge of an examination table waiting for the doctor.

“I don't know what could be wrong,” she kept saying. “Everything looked normal to me, and you *know* I've researched this extensively...”

Of course she had. Hermione could probably pass a muggle obstetrics exam based on the amount of research she had done.

Draco was seated in a chair next to her that was far too small, as he tried not to let his nerves get to him. He had *just* seen Little Star, after all, and everything looked perfect to his admittedly untrained eye.

“When will the doctor get here?” he asked under his breath.

“Soon,” she assured him. “Dr. Cox is usually on time, but of course if he has to deliver a baby then things go off schedule.”

Draco just nodded and swallowed hard, trying to control his own nerves.

Dr. Cox bustled in a few minutes later, and all of Draco's thoughts were completely derailed by the shockingly attractive man who must have been in his mid-to-late thirties. He had dark, piercing eyes, a chiseled jaw, and his chocolate skin seemed to glow. He was wearing those same blue pajamas that seemed so prevalent in muggle medicine and a white coat. When he

saw Hermione, he smiled, and Draco noticed deep dimples and perfectly straight teeth that were almost blindingly white. As he spoke his voice was a rich, soothing baritone.

“Hermione,” he almost crooned. “How are you doing today?”

Oh fuck no.

This Dr. Cox was far more attractive than Draco was. Draco was quite accustomed to sizing up other, attractive men and coming out on top comparatively speaking, but *now...* well, Dr. Cox looked like a smoother, suaver, more mature and put together version of Blaise, if such a thing were even possible. And not only that, but he was better educated, professional, muggle, and they would be discussing...

“I’ve been feeling alright, but the ultrasound tech made some notes about my cervix, and now I’m very concerned.”

She waved her hands a bit vaguely, and Dr. Cox hummed a little.

“Hmmm, yes, I see that she made a few notes for me. We’ll discuss your cervix in a moment. Let me check you out first.”

Dr. Cox shot Draco a glance.

“I assume you’re Draco?” he asked in a voice that was probably perfectly pleasant, but which Draco chose to interpret as dismissive and challenging.

“Yes, I’m her *husband*,” he emphasized.

Dr. Cox hummed again before placing his hands on Hermione’s stomach and beginning a physical exam.

“Your pain is manageable?” he asked her. “And your nausea is still under control?”

“Yes sir.”

Fucking hell, she just called him ‘sir.’

Draco didn’t think he had ever been this jealous in his life, and that included the day Potter joined the Gryffindor quidditch team as a first year.

“And your breasts? Still tender?”

Why. Just why.

“A bit... especially when Draco is a little rough.”

Draco tried not to choke as Dr. Cox shot him a disapproving look. “You’ll want to be mindful of it. Many women experience breast pain on and off during their entire pregnancy, even before their milk comes in after birth.”

"Right," muttered Draco sullenly. So the man was cocky in addition to being ridiculously attractive.

Yes, he was cocky. His cock was probably cocky too and cocked and eager to impale Draco's wife.

Draco suddenly realized he was checking out another man's crotch for proof of such a transgression before he wrenched his eyes away.

But before he did, he was sure he saw *something* suspicious.

Fuck it all. He was Dr. Cocky Cock Cox.

The doctor made a few more noises as he measured Hermione's 'fundal height,' whatever the fuck *that* was and declared her to be 'absolutely perfect.'

Even if Draco agreed that Hermione was perfect, he didn't care to hear Dr. Cocky Cock Cox say so.

He was in a foul mood by the time they got to her cervix.

"Now your scans..." said Dr. Cocky Cock Cox, as he studied some papers and print-outs the muggle woman must have given him.

"Yes?" asked Hermione anxiously. And even though Draco was ready to fire Dr. Cocky Cock Cox for trying to seduce his wife – because Draco was *certain* that all of his throat-clearing and humming and angling of that cocky cock toward Hermione was an attempt to do precisely that – he tensed as he waited for the news.

"Your cervix is on the short side," he said. Hermione opened her mouth to surely ask a thousand questions, and Dr. Cocky Cock Cox interrupted her before she could begin.

That arrogant bastard.

"Not *alarmingly* short," he added. "Just on the shorter range of normal. It's still *in* the normal range, however, but it's right on the edge. We'll keep an eye on it and give you a transvaginal ultrasound at your next appointment to make sure nothing has changed."

Hermione sank down, and Draco felt some of his tension ease, though he couldn't help but ask a very important question.

"What is a transvaginal ultrasound?"

Dr. Cocky Cock Cox glanced at Draco and gave him a dismissive look before turning back to Hermione.

"It's a wand with a camera in it. We insert it into the vagina to take closer pictures of internal organs. It's a bit more precise than a transabdominal ultrasound."

Hermione just waved him off as though she already knew this, but Draco could only think of one thing: Dr. Cocky Cock Cox was going to be responsible for putting a camera dildo into his wife's cunt and taking pictures of it.

What the actual fuck. If anybody is getting pictures of her cunt it should be me. Why couldn't the family magic have been stricter to prevent any man from touching her forever? Why did this part of it have to stop once she became pregnant?

But Hermione evidently wasn't paying any attention to Draco's internal monologue about how grossly unfair and inappropriate this plan happened to be.

"So the baby's alright?" Hermione asked.

Draco felt a shot of guilt for worrying about pictures of his wife's cunt when she reminded him of the baby.

Right. The baby. We're worried about the baby. Not Dr. Cocky Cock Cox pulling out his camera and—

"Yes, he's fine. Like I said, just something to keep an eye on."

"Do I need to be on bed rest or—"

Dr. Cocky Cock Cox shook his head. "No, it's not that dire. I would say not to overtax yourself, but that's good advice for any pregnant woman. Light exercise is fine. Exhausting yourself is not."

"And sex? We can still have sex, can't we?"

At this, Dr. Cocky Cock Cox gave Draco another glance, and Draco shot him a challenging look back.

Yes, I still have sex with my wife, you wanker. Because she's MY wife. MINE.

"Sex is still fine. I won't put you on pelvic rest *yet*. Like I said, you don't technically meet the medical definition of a short cervix, it's just on the very edge. If it begins to thin too early, however, you'll be on pelvic rest for the end of your pregnancy. We will keep checking it periodically. For now though, sexual activities should be safe."

Draco just knew that Dr. Cocky Cock Cox was going to put Hermione on pelvic rest at some point simply to thwart Draco. He'd probably woo with her lectures about gestational diabetes and Braxton Hicks contractions while citing medical texts to her. And then there would be those cervical checks...

Because yes, Draco had finally read ahead in his books after Cami was born and knew what was coming. This man would not be limiting himself to cameras. No, he would actually be shoving his fingers up his wife's cunt and fingering her in places Draco had never managed to reach before with his own hands.

No. No, I'll convince her to change doctors before then. Somebody old, preferably geriatric. Bonus points if they are female.

The rest of the appointment went quickly, and soon Hermione was standing to thank the doctor, her medical gown slipping off of her a little as she did it. She clutched it to keep it from sliding off entirely and gave a breathy laugh of embarrassment before turning very pink.

Draco tried not to growl.

“Thank you,” she said, her eyes sparkling. Dr. Cocky Cock Cox gave her a twinkling smile and then fucking *winked* at her as he left the room.

Draco was ignored.

Shocking.

“Well that’s a relief!” said Hermione, turning to Draco and smiling.

He forced his feelings about her doctor away as he pulled her to him and gave her a rather lengthy kiss.

It wouldn’t hurt to remind her that *he* was the reason she was here in the first place, would it?

“I’m glad everything is alright.”

“Yes, Dr. Cox is excellent. He’ll keep an eye on me.”

Draco stilled.

“Darling, are there any other doctors you could see instead?”

She pulled back and gave him a perplexed look. “Why on earth would I do that? Dr. Cox is wonderful. He keeps up with all the current medical literature, and he graduated top of his class from Oxford.”

Of course he was at the top of his fucking class.

“He seems awfully friendly...” said Draco hesitantly.

To his consternation she just rolled her eyes as she began to dress. “Yes, because he has a fantastic bedside manner. It’s critical in his specialty, you know – the poor man sees worried, pregnant women all day long who are in pain and hormonal. He does a wonderful job calming my anxiety. Truly, I couldn’t ask for anybody more capable than him.”

Fuck.

“I’m just surprised by how young he is. Surely someone older with more experience would be preferable?”

Hermione shot him a scolding look as they started to make their way out of the room and down the hall that was painted a odd shade of light teal.

"No, actually. Statistically speaking, mortality rates tend to go up when being treated by an older doctor. It's unclear *why* that happens – perhaps they are less versed in the newest research or their fine motor skills may start to diminish as they age. I'm not certain. But I feel safer with somebody Dr. Cox's age. He's old enough to have experience, but young enough to still be on the cutting edge of medical research. Trust me, Draco, he's perfect."

Draco wrinkled his nose and tried not to groan, but he knew he wasn't winning this one.

"Fine. I suppose you won't be seeing him much after the baby is born in any event."

"No, just for a check up after the first six weeks or so and then an annual visit. He's been my doctor for a long time. I don't see myself switching any time soon."

Draco was still mentally grumbling as they made their way out onto the street and toward an alley they could use to apparate.

"I'm so glad Little Star is okay," said Hermione, turning to him before they left. Draco felt himself softening at this.

"Me too, darling. It was wonderful to see him today."

She gave him a small smile and brushed a soft kiss on his lips.

"I couldn't agree more. I'll see you for dinner tonight. I have to go back to Hogwarts."

Draco pulled her forward for one last kiss and place his hand on her stomach as he loved to do.

"I'll see you both tonight darling."

The shy smile she gave him as she apparated away made Draco relax for the first time since the scan.

Fuck you, Dr. Cocky Cock Cox. My wife is coming home to ME tonight.

5 June 2004

It took a few days for Draco to forget Dr. Cocky Cock Cox, and it finally took his birthday to drive the man completely from Draco's mind. It fell on a Saturday this year, which meant very little to Draco who did not hold a traditional job, but it did mean that he was able to

spend the whole day in his wife's company. Exams for the students would be starting the following week, so classes were effectively over. There would be two more weeks of exams, then a week of grading, and then Hogwarts would be dismissed for the summer.

Today, however, Hermione was all his. She had woken him up with a specialty breakfast and insisted on having all of his friends over for lunch. The Potters came too, to Draco's surprise, as did Teddy and Andromeda. It was rather entertaining pulling out their old brooms and racing around the gardens, while Teddy whooped below, though to Draco's consternation Potter *still* managed to beat him.

The afternoon faded into dinner, and it was growing a bit late when his friends finally wished him one last happy birthday and bid him farewell. It was only then that he realized his wife had disappeared at some point, and he looked around curiously.

"Mother, have you seen Hermione?" he asked.

Narcissa just gave him a curious look. "She said she was turning in early. She was feeling a bit tired."

"Oh. Alright."

Draco tried not to let his disappointment show on his face. Not that he *expected* anything for his birthday, and she had arranged a lovely social gathering with both of their friends groups... but he couldn't help the small pang that hit him before he shoved it away.

No. I had a great birthday. And she's pregnant. Of course a day like this would exhaust her.

In fact, Draco was starting to feel a little tired too, so he made his excuses and began to make his way toward their room, thinking that perhaps tomorrow he would *truly* have her all to himself since it was Sunday. His birthday had been wonderful, but very social. Perhaps tomorrow they could have a private celebration.

Every thought of this left his mind, however, as he pushed open the door and came to a complete halt.

For a split second he didn't recognize where he was. The walls behind the bed and on one side of the room had been draped in white fabric. There were lights aiming toward the bed, which no longer had the green quilt they used, but was also made up in all white. And then he noticed his wife, sitting in one corner while wearing a robe, with her makeup dark and hair unbound.

"Erm, Hermione?" he asked in confusion.

She stood and seemed to reach for something just out of Draco's eyesight. She approached him with her hands behind her back, and Draco sensed she was both nervous and determined.

"I thought you might want your birthday gift," she said.

Draco glanced around at the room and had the oddest thought that it looked like a set.

“Alright...” he said slowly. “Can you tell me what it is?”

She hesitated for a moment, but then steeled herself and pulled the thing out from behind her back and handed it to him.

It was a camera.

“You got me a camera?” he asked with a little confusion.

Not that he was opposed, but they had never once discussed it.

She gave him a small smile. “No. Not exactly. This *is* a camera, it’s true. But your birthday gift is a photoshoot. Of me. You’ve been telling me for ages you want to freeze me while I’m pregnant, and I thought you might really want to do it.”

His breath caught. “A maternity shoot?”

She turned a bit pink, but had a teasing smile on her face. “In a manner of speaking. Let me show you how the camera works.”

She walked him through the few buttons he needed to know and the way the zoom and focus worked.

“This one uses film, so we can develop it in the potion that makes the pictures move if you want. Or they can be still like muggle pictures.”

Draco’s heart was inexplicably pounding.

“I’m surprised you want *me* to take them.” he said as she made her way over to the white-draped section of the room.

“Oh?”

“I’m not a professional,” he pointed out.

Hermione shot him a smile. “We can have a professional take some too, if you want. But for these... well I *need* you to take them.”

“And why’s that?” he asked cautiously.

“Because you’re the only one who is going to see me like this.”

And then to Draco’s shock she turned her back on him and let the robe fall to the floor, and he realized she was wearing nothing but tiny knickers underneath.

Every bit of blood in his body rushed straight to his cock.

“Hermione...” he rasped.

She looked over her shoulder at him and gave him a determined look. “Yes, Draco?”

“Are you serious? I can really...”

He couldn’t even finish the sentence. His mouth was dry as he realized *why* he needed to be the photographer.

“If you ever let another person see them, I will hex you into the next century. But yes, Draco. You can have pictures of me like this so you don’t forget. Tell me how you want me.”

Draco licked his lips and immediately raised the camera to his face to capture her little smile over her shoulder to him.

“Bend over the bed for me,” he said. “Spread your legs and let me see it.”

She said nothing, but did precisely as he asked, and he took a couple more shots.

“Sit on the edge of the bed, turn to face me, legs open, and grab your tits.”

She positioned herself just as he said and then threw her head back while she gripped her breasts.

“Fuck me...” he muttered behind the lens.

“You know what? I want you to make yourself come. Touch yourself. Do whatever you need to do to get off, and I’m going to take a picture of every fucking moment.”

Determination lit her face, and then she began to pinch her own nipples as her hand crept toward her knickers.

She didn’t take them off, but she placed her hand inside of them as she began to rub herself, and it wasn’t long before she was moaning.

Draco was snapping pictures like his life depended on it. He couldn’t *believe* she was doing this for him. He doubted she would ever agree to do it again. He wanted every gasp, every tug, every twitch. Her breasts heaved, and her abdomen was filled with Draco’s son: that perfect baby bump that was all because of him.

Draco gritted his teeth so he wouldn’t come in his pants like a preteen.

“Knickers off. I want to see your cunt bare,” he demanded, and then he held his breath to see if she would really do it.

To his utter shock she grabbed her wand from the nightstand and just vanished them before opening her legs again.

This was unbelievable. This was pornographic. This was...

“Dammit, Hermione, I don’t think I’ve ever been this hard in my life....” he said as he took a few more. “Keep going. I want to see you come.”

To Draco's surprise, Hermione was slower to get that point by herself than when he helped her do it. But that just meant more pictures for him. And before too long she was climaxing, and Draco was snapping pictures frantically, determined to capture every moment.

"Put your fingers in your mouth and suck them," he said. "Eyes open and look at me when you do it."

Her hazel eyes opened as she sucked off her fingers in a terribly inappropriate way. And then she began to give him a few more poses to round out the experience.

Hermione in bed, on her side caressing her stomach.

Hermione on her knees for him, back arched.

Hermione on the edge of the bed with her legs crossed, pressing her tits toward him.

Over and over again she posed, and Draco snapped pictures, until he reached the very limit of what he could tolerate.

"We've got it, I'm sure we've got it," he said, as he tossed the camera aside a bit unceremoniously and pulled her toward him. His hands immediately gripped her breasts and arse.

"Fuck, darling... I can't believe..."

She smiled a little as she leaned up to kiss him. "They're for your eyes only, Draco. Nobody else."

"Not ever," he said fervently. "I'll keep them in the same drawer as the polyjuice and condoms."

"Good boy."

"Fuck, don't say that to me or I'll come in my pants."

Hermione just laughed, and pressed herself into him further.

"But you are... you're my *very* good boy... and good boys get to choose. Do you want to fuck me or do you want my mouth?"

Draco licked his lips as he considered this. "Can I have both? After you tie me up first?" Again he held his breathe, not daring to believe his birthday was going to end like this.

Excitement lit her features, and she said nothing to him, but pushed him toward the bed. Moments later his clothes had been vanished and he was bound as her tongue licked up his shaft, and moments after that her lips closed around the tip as she began to suck him off.

Draco's eyes rolled back in his head at the sensation. He was the luckiest bastard in the world.

His very last thought before she lifted herself up and sank down onto his cock was of Dr. Cocky Cock Cox.

Fuck you and your photographic dildo, you wanker. My pictures are a thousand times better than yours.

Chapter 28: Dreams of Divorce

15 June 2004

Kingsley Shacklebolt was out of office, and Lucius was well on his way to transitioning the Malfoy seat to Draco, though it would not become official for a couple more weeks. When Theo had taken over the Nott hereditary seat, it had taken several months to push the paperwork through. His father was dead, and the seat went dormant while waiting for a Nott to claim it. Seats that were already held by a member of that family transitioned more smoothly than seats that were dormant.

Curiously, quite a few hereditary seats had gone dormant over the last few hundred years. When a seat remained dormant and unclaimed for fifty years, it was no longer hereditary and moved into the pool for elected seats. The last seat that had converted this way previously belonged to the Gaunts.

“The person who holds a hereditary seat has to bear the surname,” said Draco.

“I’m aware of that, and it’s ridiculous,” retorted Hermione.

“True. But it did give me an idea, darling...”

“And what is that?”

“Perhaps we should consider having a second child and give him or her the Black surname. Eligibility is allowed to skip one generation.”

Hermione turned and gave him an incredulous look, as though Draco was joking.

“I’m not joking,” he clarified. “There’s a procedure for it. Theo mentioned they may do that for the Parkinson seat, since Pansy is an only child, and there is nobody else to claim it after her. Cami will get the Nott seat.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes and tilted her head to think about it. “Why not Teddy?”

Draco shrugged. “He wasn’t named a Black at birth. They lost the chance to do it. It’s the name you are registered with at the Ministry of Magic when you are born that allows you to qualify or not.”

“And that’s why there are no muggleborn seats except those that are elected,” pointed out Hermione. “None of us are registered at birth, and we can’t marry into a hereditary seat.”

Draco inclined his head. “True.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’d rather do away with hereditary seats entirely.”

Draco bit his lip. “I’m not disagreeing with you, but I don’t think we will ever have the momentum to get *that* rule passed, at least not for a very long time. It’s been set up this way since the Wizengamot was formed, and you would have to get a supermajority of the Wizengamot to vote against their own interests for it. The Black seat will eventually disappear entirely if we don’t have a second child and give him or her the Black surname.”

“Would that be the worst thing? Over time more and more of those hereditary seats will disappear organically, especially for those purebloods who insist on marrying other purebloods. Already nearly half of the seats are elected.”

“Yes, but I’d prefer the seats that disappear be those that are not influenced by us, darling. Keeping the Malfoy and Black seats in the family – not to mention the Nott and Parkinson seats in Theo’s family – can only be helpful for the things we try to accomplish in the future.”

Hermione sat back and considered this.

“I will think about it, Draco. The Black seat has been dormant since Sirius’s father died, so we have twenty-five years before it becomes electable.”

“Yes, but keep in mind our child would have to claim it after they are an adult. So we need to subtract seventeen years from that and another two years to be safe since you’re only twenty-two weeks with Little Star tomorrow, and our second child will also take nine months to grow, and claiming a dormant seat takes longer than transitioning a filled seat. That only gives us about six years to decide, darling.”

To Draco’s consternation, Hermione gave him an amused look and then reached up to pat his cheek.

“You’ve obviously thought about this quite a bit.”

Draco inclined his head.

“I would point out that you don’t necessarily need me for it. Any child of yours could be named Black and qualify.”

Draco frowned. “I don’t intend to have children with anybody else.”

Draco thought a pleased look crossed Hermione’s face, but she said nothing and just raised an eyebrow.

“I mean it,” he insisted. “Setting aside the Black seat for now, I only need one child for the title and Malfoy estate. You are giving him to me. I would rather the seat expire and become electable than have children with some other woman.”

“But...” she prompted.

“*But*, if you were open to having *another* child with me, I’m simply pointing out that he or she could have the opportunity to claim a Wizengamot seat too if we arrange things appropriately in advance. And I’m certain any child of ours will have more progressive viewpoints than others who have held that seat in the past, since you would be their mother.”

Hermione's face seemed to soften a little. "Just how many children do you want, Draco?"

Draco bit his lip. "As many as you'll give me."

Hermione raised one eyebrow.

"I'm serious," he added. "If you only want one, we will have one. If you want more than that, we can have more than that. That can be your decision, darling. However many you want, whenever you want, with the caveat that if you want at least one more then we should make sure the age gap isn't *too* large or else the Black family seat may expire before Extra Little Star gets to claim it. But otherwise, that decision is all yours. I'm pretty sure there is not a number that would be too high for me."

Hermione huffed a small laugh and moved forward to kiss him.

"You're adorable sometimes, did you know that?"

Draco pulled back in surprise. "Oh?"

"Yes. Truly adorable. I'll think about it Draco. I do appreciate you pointing this out to me with six years to consider whether we should make an Extra Little Star or not."

Draco let out a relieved breath. "You'll really think about it?"

"Yes, though for the next several months I'm probably going to be more focused on the Little Star we have before worrying about making an Extra Little Star to join him."

"Fair enough, darling. Now then, I'll see you tonight? I have some big meetings at the Ministry today."

Hermione nodded agreeably to this and moved off to floo to Hogwarts, casting one final, amused look back at Draco before she left. Draco followed her several minutes later, as he floo'd to the Ministry to join his father in what was likely to be one of the most important meetings about the MLPP repeal, at least in Draco's mind.

Today he would learn if all of his efforts to convince the Wizengamot to go the divorce route, rather than annulment via a repeal, had been effective.

Truthfully, *this* was why Draco raised the possibility of a second child with Hermione. He wanted her to be thinking about it and considering it just in case he couldn't convince the others to get on board with divorce. Draco knew Hermione would not divorce him before Little Star was born. She had promised him that months ago. He also *hoped* that she wouldn't divorce him at all if it took some sort of intentional act on her part to end the marriage. He sensed she was settling in with her life at the Manor, and though there were things about her old life she still clung to – she had *not* given up her flat, for instance – Draco hoped that a combination of falling in love with him and inertia would convince her to stay married to him instead of taking the steps needed to get a divorce.

He thought she was falling in love with him. He *hoped* she was. He told her he loved her rather frequently, and she still had not said it back to him in the same way he said it to her.

Then again, her declaration to him their last night in Positano stuck with Draco and was something he clung to whenever doubts began to creep in. She told him she would be content and that he would be enough for her. But he knew that it would still take time for her to adjust to this. It ran so counter to the way she had lived her entire life that it could be a few more months before she fully embraced it and said those words back.

So yes, Draco was still highly in favor of divorce as the preferred mechanism to end the MLPP marriages. He wanted to buy himself as much time as possible for Hermione to decide to stay married to him. If the law was simply repealed, their marriage would end automatically, and she would have to take active steps to marry him *again*. Draco didn't know if she was there yet.

Draco was turning this over and over in his mind as he sat in the large conference room, surveying others. Lucius, he knew, was now very in favor of divorce as well – for precisely the same reasons as Draco. Then again, if this was the thing they had to concede on in order to get the MLPP repealed, Draco knew they would do it.

He had to give his wife what she wanted.

“The divorce route is too administratively burdensome, Lucius,” said Lord Graham. “It will be expensive, and we will have to create an entire department at the Ministry of Magic for it.”

“And it creates a bad precedent,” said Lord Flint. “A full repeal accomplishes our objectives without introducing the concept of no fault divorce into wizarding society. We aren’t muggles.”

“Would it really be so terrible to have a no fault divorce though?” asked Madam Merriweather. Draco peered at the woman. She had a beaky nose and kept her hair in a severe bun. She was part of the liberal bloc and was rather outspoken. Lucius had told Draco that they would still have a chance for the divorce route as long as she was on their side.

“I’d wager it would be very popular with the wizarding public,” she added. “Not everyone wants to be trapped in a marriage, Lord Flint.”

He snorted. “We have lived for thousands of years without the concept, and it has been critical to keeping our social fabric together. Don’t you see what it has done to muggles? The divorce rate skyrocketed.”

“So?” asked Madam Merriweather. “What is it to you, Lord Flint, if couples choose not to stay married because they fall out of love?”

“It erodes our traditions, as you very well know,” he retorted.

It makes pureblood marriages more likely to fail, thought Draco.

This was the thing Lord Flint would not say out loud, but it was a point Hermione had made to him weeks ago when they were discussing it. So many pureblood marriages were practically arranged, that the families who still cared about it relied on the near-impossibility

of divorce for keeping their children in those marriages, at least until grandchildren were born. While divorce was permitted in limited instances, such as infidelity or violence, Draco knew that in practice it almost never happened. Bruises could be healed. Memories could be modified. The very existence of magic made it nearly impossible to gather the proof required for divorce.

“I rather think,” said Madam Merriweather, “that the families who follow those traditions will *still* follow those traditions, whether no-fault divorce is permitted or not.”

“And I rather think that the point of this meeting is to repeal the MLPP, rather than overhauling other magical marriage laws. We can accomplish the same thing as a divorce if we simply repeal it. The Department of Mysteries has looked at it and reports that the marriages that were enacted because of the MLPP would be automatically broken. We won’t even have to do a separate vow breaking for it. It is responsive, efficient, inexpensive, and very simple to administer. We should not *amend* the MLPP by permitting divorce; we should repeal it as though it never existed in the first place. You know that is what the public wants from us, Madam Merriweather.”

Draco held his breath, his stomach in knots now. He could not deny Lord Flint’s points. He was right, of course. A repeal would be simple and would require no finessing of language, no creating loopholes, *nothing*. The law would simply go away. It was clearly in line with what the public wanted, even if it was not what *Draco* wanted.

“Lord Flint, are you certain that—” started Lucius, but Lord Flint gave him a fierce look.

“I am certain. The MLPP is giving us children, which is something the wizarding world needs desperately. But I acknowledge that it has been deeply unpopular, and I am willing to repeal it for that reason. That being said, if we are going to do this, Lucius, we need to do it the whole way. It needs to be simple, clear, administrable. We can’t amend the damn thing yet again and then find ourselves with over two hundred couples thrust into divorce proceedings all at the same time. The press would be almost as bad as the MLPP itself, and you know it.”

To Draco’s unease, quite a few others in the room were nodding along. Lucius shot Draco a look that clearly said, *It’s this or nothing*.

Draco felt a bit sick as he nodded to his father, and Lucius swallowed hard before turning to the others.

“Very well. Then we are considering a full repeal. Madam Merriweather?”

Madam Merriweather looked around at the others, and then sighed. “I would ask that we consider loosening the divorce restrictions in future legislation. However, with respect to the MLPP, I am in agreement that a full repeal is the most appropriate measure. You all know I voted against this law from the very beginning, and I would like nothing more than to see it gone.”

And with that, Draco’s stomach sank to the floor.

There would be no route for divorce if the MLPP was overturned. His marriage would end automatically.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

30 June 2004

There were several notable things that happened on the last day of June.

It began that morning, when Draco was nearly tackled by his wife as he awoke. She was bouncing with excitement, and he did not resist when she pushed him back on the bed and then give him a very large and rather sloppy kiss.

“It’s viability day!”

Draco blinked up at her a bit owlishly.

“Oh?”

“Yes! At twenty-four weeks he has a greater than fifty percent chance of surviving if he is born in a muggle hospital.”

Draco’s jaw dropped. “You’re joking.”

“Nope!” she said excitedly. “Not joking! Obviously it’s still far too early, and he needs to stay in there for several more months, but this is still a huge milestone! We are having a baby, Draco!”

Draco found himself smiling broadly at this, even though he found himself anxious as he thought about a baby that small being born. Little Star would never have a hope of surviving in the wizarding world at this point, and it was shocking to think that he could if under the care of muggles. In fact, his odds were good enough that muggles considered the pregnancy to be viable *already*.

Then again, when had his wife ever been wrong about this sort of thing?

“That’s brilliant, Hermione. Truly.”

She huffed an exhale and smiled too. “It finally feels real. He’s active, he’s viable, and Draco... we are going to do this.”

Draco smiled softly as he raised his hand to her abdomen, and that was when the second notable thing happened: Draco felt a distinct kick.

His eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. He scrambled to sit up and was fixated on her abdomen now as he pressed his hand against it more firmly. Sure enough, a moment later there was another small kick.

“Hermione...” he said softly.

He raised his head to find her staring at him, practically beaming. “You felt it?”

“Yes... yes, I can’t believe it!”

She laughed in delight and pulled him forward for another kiss. “This is going to be an exciting day, Draco. I can just feel it.”

Hermione’s prediction proved to be true when an owl arrived just before she floo’d to Hogwarts.

She ripped the letter opened, and then her eyes widened as she thrust the letter into Draco’s hands.

Hermione,

Gin thinks she might be in labor, but her contractions aren’t close enough yet to go to St. Mungo’s. Molly is at Grimmauld with her to keep an eye on things. I am wrapping up at the Ministry this morning before my paternity leave, but then I’ll be headed back there as well. I don’t know how long this will last – Molly says that Bill took almost twenty-four hours of labor for her – but you’ll be a godmother soon! I know it might be awkward for a little while since we are asking Ron to be godfather, but you two are my best friends and always have been. We would love to see you after you are done teaching this afternoon, whether the baby has arrived by then or not. I’ll send a patronus once we go to St. Mungo’s.

Love, Harry

Draco folded the note and looked up at Hermione with a raised eyebrow. She was wringing her hands a bit.

“Darling, what is it?”

“It’s just... I’m godparenting with Ron...”

Draco sighed and handed the note back to her. “Yes, that’s true. But it’s more ceremonial now that we aren’t in a war. And you said you two are figuring out how to behave around one another.”

“That’s true,” she admitted.

"I'm happy to go wait at St. Mungo's with you," he added. "You don't have to be around all the Weasleys without me."

Hermione exhaled in relief and gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks. I want to support Harry and Ginny, obviously, but..."

"I get it," said Draco. "Think nothing of it. We can head there once you're done for the day, assuming Ginny has gone herself."

Hermione smiled broadly at this and pulled Draco in for one more kiss before floo'ing away.

He glanced down at her retreating bum before checking his watch. He had thirty minutes before his first meeting of the day.

Plenty of time.

He took the stairs two at a time and slipped back into their room, where he opened the top drawer of his dresser and pulled out the photos of Hermione from his birthday.

He still could not believe she had done this for him. They turned out so much better than he ever imagined, especially since she developed the photos in the potion that made them move. Over and over again she was touching herself, arching her back, climaxing for him. Draco had rubbed more than a few out in the days since getting these photos back. Of course, it was always preferable to have the real Hermione instead, but when she was busy or distracted... well, this was vastly superior to his imagination.

Blaise's naughty magazines had nothing on pictures of his wife that were only for his eyes.

Within fifteen minutes he was coming with a grunt. He waved his wand to clean himself up, refastened his trousers, and then made his way back downstairs to the floo for the next notable event of the day: Lucius's last meeting as a member of the Wizengamot.

Early That Evening

Draco was lost in thought, as he sat in the familiar waiting room of the St. Mungo's maternity ward as the clock ticked toward baby Potter's grand debut. There were far too many Weasleys, in Draco's opinion, and they seemed to process stress and anticipation with boisterousness. Hermione was sitting in one corner of the waiting room quietly, with her head on Draco's shoulder as she waited for news. Draco, of course, had his head leaning on top of hers as he reminisced about his father's last day on the Wizengamot. Technically, Draco would assume his duties the following day, though he supposed nothing would change very much. Lucius had turned over increasingly large amounts of work to Draco as they made it to the last day of June, until it was only the things that required an actual Wizengamot member to be present that Lucius handled himself.

Still, it was a bit strange.

"How was it?" asked Hermione softly. "Lucius's last day, I mean?"

Draco huffed a little. "They threw a party for him. I'm not certain if it was to congratulate him or themselves for surviving his tenure."

He felt her chuckle a little. "Are you ready for it, then? That seat will be yours tomorrow."

Draco nodded. "As ready as I can be."

She lifted her head, so he did too. She turned to look at him seriously. "I'm proud of you, Draco. Truly."

Draco's heart stuttered a little, and he felt his cheeks reddening. "I did it for you, Hermione."

She smiled softly at this and seemed to be searching his face for something. Draco found himself falling into her eyes as she studied him. The noise from the Weasleys and that blasted water feature on the wall all melted away as a flurry of expressions seemed to cross her face.

Finally she said, "You're enough, Draco. I hope you know that."

In that moment some vague plans that Draco had been considering ever since he accepted that the MLPP repeal would automatically end his marriage solidified.

"Thank you," he said. "And Hermione... you're enough for me, too. I love you."

Her face softened again for just a moment before she bit her lip, looking uncharacteristically nervous. "Draco, I—"

"HE'S HERE!" bellowed Potter, causing Draco and Hermione to both jump in surprise.

Draco's heart was racing as he glanced back down at Hermione. She was a bit pink and had the oddest expression on her face. She somehow managed to look both relieved and irritated at precisely the same time.

Was she going to say it back?

Draco's heart surged at the possibility. Granted, the waiting room at St. Mungo's wasn't the most romantic place for a declaration like that, but Draco didn't care. He had been saying it to her for ages now, and she had never said it back to him. He was desperate to hear it for many reasons, not least of which included his plans for the upcoming week.

But no. As usual, Potter managed to interfere and interrupt whatever she was about to say. In a single glance Draco knew the moment was lost.

He grumbled to himself as he slowly followed Hermione over to the larger group. She had already made her way to Potter to give him a congratulatory hug.

“Tell us everything!” said Arthur Weasley eagerly. Draco couldn’t help but notice the man looked harried, though now he seemed utterly relieved that it was over. Molly had not been in the waiting room at all, having been by Ginny’s side for the entire experience.

“*My mother will be in the waiting room with the rest of them,*” Hermione had said when she first discovered this. “*Yours too. The only person watching me give birth will be you.*”

Then again, Draco supposed that his mother and Hermione’s mother had only done this once. Molly Weasley had done this six times, and if there was ever a mother who was prepared to see it, then it would surely be her. Still, Draco shuddered a little as he considered just how overbearing an experience like that might be.

“He’s perfect,” said Potter breathlessly. “And Gin is tired, but just fine. He was 3.3 kg, so he’s a bit on the small side, but he’s a couple weeks early. The healers said that was to be expected. No major complications.”

“And the name?” asked Ron. “What did you decide on?”

“James Sirius,” said Potter, now grinning broadly. “After my dad and godfather of course.”

Of course.

Draco supposed it wasn’t surprising. He was grateful that Hermione was willing to honor his own family traditions with Little Star’s name, though they still had not settled on anything official just yet. She continued to insist on Leo, and he continued to veto it, so for now they had come to a stalemate.

“That’s lovely Harry,” said Hermione kindly. “I’m sure your dad and Sirius would both be honored.”

Potter turned a little pink at that, before gesturing toward everyone to follow him.

“They’ve just moved Gin to recovery. It will be a bit cramped with everyone in there, but she wants to introduce you to him.”

Draco and Hermione fell back to the end of the crowd, the trail of redheads all in front. Draco was hoping Hermione would return to the conversation they had been having before Potter interrupted, but instead her eyes were narrowed at his shaggy dark head in front.

“What do you think his WAPGAR was?” she asked under her breath.

Draco huffed a laugh. “Why? Is it a competition?”

She rolled her eyes a little, but he saw she was also smiling. “It’s *always* a competition. I thought you of all people would know that.”

Draco lifted one eyebrow at her. “I’ll not deny I’m keen on Little Star scoring ten out of ten, but that’s for his own health, darling.”

“And because it would give us objective proof that he’s perfect.”

Draco rolled his eyes at her, but her own eyes were twinkling, and he let it slide. Truthfully, much of Draco's competitive nature had been burned out of him by the war. Then again, if there was one child with whom a Malfoy seemed destined to compete it would be a Potter.

"He and Little Star are going to be in different classes at Hogwarts," he reminded her. "Little Star will be born after the first of September."

"I suppose that's true. But that doesn't mean they won't play together or end up in the same house together. James has no choice but to be Gryffindor given who his parents are, and I like to think my genes will outweigh yours when it comes to the Sorting Hat."

Draco scoffed, but she just nudged him playfully as they made it to the room. They slowed as they approached.

"Let's give them a minute," she said, peering in. "It's awfully cramped."

Draco had no objections to this. He and the Weasleys had largely ignored each other in the waiting room, other than a brief conversation with George, Prudence, and then Arthur. Hermione had spoken to the Weasleys a bit longer than Draco had, but it was clear that she was now an outsider. Draco could tell it bothered her a little bit, but he also sensed that some part of her had accepted it. They would surely see the Weasleys a few times per year going forward. It would be cordial and tolerable, and Hermione would gravitate toward Potter, Ginny and hopefully her own husband when they interacted together. Draco idly wondered if Ron and Prudence's marriage would survive the ending of the MLPP too.

They stood there in companionable silence for fifteen or twenty minutes until a shuffling at the door made them both look up.

"Gin is asking to see you," said Ron Weasley a bit gruffly. He moved out with Prudence, who threw them both a smile, and Hermione seemed to exhale in relief that her first foray into godmothering would not be held jointly with Ron Weasley.

Draco watched as she carefully approached Ginny, who was holding a small bundle with a thatch of dark black hair. Hermione had held Cami before, but Draco sensed that this was different for her. This time, the child was *her* godchild. He was the son of her best friend. Draco could tell she was getting a bit emotional as she reached out for him.

Ginny gave her a tired smile and carefully passed the baby to Hermione, who supported him behind the head and instinctively started to sway.

Draco sidled over to her and looked down at him. Just like Cami, James's eyes were closed. His skin was pink, and his hands were tightly fisted.

"What color are his eyes?" asked Hermione softly, her gaze fixed on the little boy.

"Dark blue for now," said Ginny. "But Mum says all of us had blue eyes to start."

Hermione hummed a little at this.

"I'm hoping he gets Lily's eyes," added Ginny with a sigh.

Hermione smiled a little and nodded in agreement.

Potter moved to the other side of Hermione and put a finger in James's fist, much like Theo had that day Draco met Cami.

"This is the craziest thing I've ever done," Potter said under his breath.

"Nonsense, Harry, we've all done much crazier things than this."

But Potter was shaking his head.

"No. No, this is the wildest, most unbelievable thing. And I understand my parents now. I finally know why they did what they did. I'd die to give him a better life than what I had growing up."

Hermione gave him a sad smile, and Draco looked at Potter thoughtfully. He knew Potter had a martyr complex in life and death situations, but he supposed that this was somehow different. This was a deeper love, a greater love. It was something far more enduring.

It wasn't long after that that Molly Weasley approached and coaxed the baby out of Hermione's arms. Hermione let him go a bit reluctantly, and Draco caught a flash of irritation on Ginny's face, though she said nothing about it.

That is going to be a recurring theme for the next seventeen years, he thought a bit uncharitably. No doubt the Potters would have quite a task ahead of them to establish boundaries with the Weasleys toward their son, and Molly in particular. It was obvious to Draco that Molly was smitten with the baby. Not that Draco expected Narcissa or Helen to be less smitten with Little Star, but Draco liked to think that he and Hermione would be able to set appropriate boundaries about that sort of thing.

Then again, perhaps I'm dreaming.

It wasn't long after that that Hermione clasped Draco's hand as she bid farewell to the Weasleys and then tugged him toward the floo in the waiting room.

Once they were back at Malfoy Manor she turned to him and took a deep breath.

"We're next, Draco."

Draco's stomach lurched at this, and he was filled with a mixture of excitement and dread for everything that was coming between now and when Little Star finally arrived.

"You're right," he heard himself say.

Yes, many notable things had happened that day. But Draco knew there was a lot more to come.

Chapter 29: Thirteenth Time's a Charm

Chapter Notes

The end note contains a chapter spoiler.

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

3 July 2004

“Draco, we’re going to be late!”

Draco heard an impatient *tap, tap, tap* coming from his wife’s feet at the bottom of the stairs as he hurried toward it, adjusting his tie. He was going all muggle tonight to forecast the new direction the Malfoy seat would be taking. Draco had officially signed the paperwork to take over the seat the day after James Potter was born, and now here he was, two days later, at his first official engagement.

He came to a halt when he saw Hermione at the foot of the stairs, her arms crossed with annoyance while she checked her watch. She was in a fitted red gown that did nothing to hide her bump. The straps were off her shoulder, giving her neckline a graceful dip. Her hair was pulled back into a low bun, with curls escaping around her face and nape, and the whole ensemble was topped off with large gold earrings and gloves.

She looked like some divine version of the Gryffindor lion.

“Honestly, Draco, this is your first public appearance! We have to be on time!”

Draco forced himself to snap out of it, as he swallowed hard, only now looking at her face to see a flash of irritation cross it. He picked up his pace and lightly made his way down the stairs before pulling her in for a kiss on the cheek.

“There will be a thousand people there, darling. Nobody will notice if we are a few minutes late.”

“You know I can’t abide tardiness,” she huffed.

Draco cocked an eyebrow at her. “You need to learn the art of being fashionably late to things like this.”

“I’m never late.”

“You were late to both of your scans with Little Star.”

"The expectant mother is never late to something like that," she said blithely. "But we *can* be late when we are not the guests of honor."

Draco rolled his eyes, but ceased his objections as he gave her another once over. "You're looking very courageous tonight."

"I decided it was a good night to stand out."

"I find it strangely appealing, though the red and gold motif reminds me of Hogwarts."

"You will see plenty of red and gold when Leo gets sorted into Gryffindor. Now is the time to get used to it."

"Leo is still vetoed."

"Nothing is officially vetoed until his name appears on his birth certificate."

Draco raised an eyebrow at this as he placed his hand on her stomach and started to speak to it. "In that case, I'm going to tell the elves to deck out your room in green and silver, Eltanin. Red and gold just doesn't match anything in the Manor."

Hermione's jaw dropped, and Draco just tapped her on the nose.

"Accept my veto for Leo, and I will accept yours for Eltanin."

She harumped and turned her back on him, before wobbling precariously. Draco's hand darted out to steady her, and only now did he realize she was several inches taller than normal, and he glanced down to find strappy gold heels that looked to be digging into her feet painfully.

"Darling, those shoes..."

"I always wear heels around men who think they're better than me, especially when they're short. It's the best way to tower over them and be taken seriously."

"You're going to break an ankle."

"I'm *not*," she declared, as she stomped her foot and wobbled again.

"Merlin, Hermione, go put on something else!"

She turned and faced him fully. "I have an image to maintain, Draco. Tonight is important for you and for the MLPP vote coming up next week."

Draco sighed and conceded defeat. "Fine. But hang onto me, yeah? We don't need you hurting yourself or Eltanin."

Hermione scoffed, but conceded to grip his arm as they made their way toward the floo.

“Ministry of Magic!” they called together as they *wooshed* away, arriving moments later in the large lobby. They stepped out together and looked around with some surprise. The lobby had always been sizable, but tonight it was enormous. Draco could scarcely see the back wall of it, and it was clear that the Ministry had been hard at work with expansion charms over the past week. Previous events like this were typically standing room only, but tonight the venue had grown enough to hold numerous tables, a stage, and a dance floor. The room was dim and candles floated in the air to create an elegant atmosphere, while the sounds of chatter and the clanking of wine glasses filled the space.

Hermione tugged on Draco’s arm and gestured toward a large table that was elegantly draped in purple and gold, where Harry Potter was standing with several official-looking witches with clipboards.

“Hi Harry,” said Hermione brightly as they made their way over.

Potter had dark circles under his eyes and suppressed a yawn.

“Hiya, Hermione. Hang tight, I have to do the security spells.”

Potter flicked his wand toward both of them, and an odd feeling passed over Draco as though he was being bathed in something slimy. Mercifully, it vanished a moment later.

“What was that?” asked Hermione, and Draco heard the lilt of academic curiosity in her voice.

Potter just waved her off. “Polyjuice detection. As long as I know who you are I don’t have to do more than that if I trust you. Go ahead and get your table. I’m at the one right next to you if I don’t fall asleep first.”

Hermione gave him a sympathetic look. “That bad?”

“I have slept less than four hours since Gin gave birth three days ago,” he confessed. “I wouldn’t have been here tonight if we knew James was coming early, but by the time he arrived it was too late to arrange for other security for this. After tonight I won’t be violating my paternity leave again except for the MLPP repeal. I volunteered for that too because I don’t trust Kingsley not to make a stink.”

Draco exchanged a concerned look with Hermione.

“You don’t think he’s a threat, do you?” she asked.

Potter shook his head. “No, not really. I gave him a pretty stern warning after the vote of no confidence. But he’s not pleased, and he *is* a former auror. He wasn’t invited tonight, you know, but he could still make an appearance at the MLPP vote since it’s open to the public.”

Draco’s mouth thinned at this, but he nodded at Potter. “Please keep an eye on it.”

“Of course I will,” he said, exchanging a knowing look with Draco. “Hermione is my best friend, and other than my wife and child she’s my top priority. And Kingsley *will* get over it, he’s just still smarting from it.”

Draco felt himself relax a bit as he shook Potter's hand and then checked in with the witches with the clipboards. They showed him a map of the room and indicated their table, which was surprisingly close to the head table on the stage. Draco tucked Hermione a bit closer to him as he escorted her toward it, and as they moved through the enormous room he saw many heads turning to watch.

"Hold that head high, Lady Malfoy," Draco whispered to her.

She just smirked. "You too, Lord Malfoy, who knocked up Hermione Granger after she went to jail."

Draco's face split into a broad grin at the reminder. "Merlin, I *did* do that, didn't I? That is unquestionably my life's greatest achievement."

Hermione laughed lightly, and soon Draco saw the flash of cameras that told him the press had found them. Draco made a point to bend close to Hermione and whisper conspiratorially in her ear while brushing her stomach possessively.

Some part of him was hoping Astoria and Weasley would see the photos the next day. Or better yet, Dr. Cocky Cock Cox. Perhaps Draco could drop a few pictures by his office since he was a muggle.

Draco had been unfortunately reminded of him after Hermione's appointment the previous day, in which his photographic dildo evidently made its first appearance.

The dildo may be his, but the baby is mine, Draco told himself.

Still, he made a point to turn Hermione and kiss her directly in front of Rita Skeeter just to increase his odds that the message would be sent loud and clear.

When they arrived at their table, Draco pulled out a chair for his wife and looked around at their tablemates. Theo and Pansy were both there, finally looking a bit more alive. Pansy's parents were there as well. Lucius and Narcissa were talking animatedly to the Parkinsons, and Draco and Hermione rounded out their table of eight.

"Well this is better than I expected," said Draco as he sat between Hermione and Theo.

"The Notts and the Malfoys. We fill an eight-top now," said Theo with a smirk.

Soon everyone fell silent as Lord Selwyn rose from the head table and slowly made his way to a podium. He cleared his throat and then began to speak.

"Tonight, the Wizengamot is inaugurating a new Minister of Magic!"

Draco's mind started to wander as words about progress and the future and a new hope for wizarding Britain washed over him. Instead, he found his gaze lingering on Hermione, who was listening with rapt attention.

I really don't hate Shacklebolt or the MLPP, Draco was forced to acknowledge. *They are the reason she's here with me tonight.*

And it was true.

Like many poorly thought out plans there could be a silver lining, and Draco's personal silver lining was so shiny he found himself a bit wistful as he listened to Lord Selwyn ramble on.

It was only when Maribelle Marchbanks stood to be sworn in that Draco's attention was pulled back to the stage. He was a bit taken aback by the vision of her as she approached. As part of the planning committee for this event, Draco knew the Ministers of Magic always wore ceremonial robes for a swearing in. Hermione said it was akin to muggle royalty during a coronation. Still, even knowing what was coming he was surprised by the elaborate robes of gold that she wore as she approached Lord Selwyn. The stitching was fine, and it was edged in embroidery depicting magical creatures and plants, all woven in silver along the hem. When she reached Lord Selwyn, she kneeled on a purple pillow, and Lord Selwyn placed both hands on her head before muttering a spell.

The audience gasped as swirls of golden light seemed to touch her head and then burst out for a moment, before they dissipated. When she rose the golden robes were open, now revealing an interior dress of plum. She looked regal, and Draco couldn't help but imagine golden eyes where there were blue and brown curls where her straight black hair was slicked back.

Someday Hermione would be the one wearing those robes, he was sure of it. As he glanced at his wife, he could tell from her expression that she thought the same thing.

Soon after that speeches were made and dinner was served. Draco found himself sitting quietly as he listened to the conversations around him. Hermione's light laugh was engaging as she spoke animatedly with Lucius and Lord Parkinson before asking Theo and Pansy about Cami.

She's starting to campaign already, Draco thought with a smile.

Sure enough, when dinner concluded and the dancing began, Draco pulled her close and kept her from tripping over her heels.

"Well?" he asked. "When will it be your turn, darling?"

"Who says it's ever going to be my turn?" she said with a sly smile.

Draco gave her a fond eye-roll.

"Please, give me some credit for knowing you. In fact..."

He trailed off as a notion struck him, and then he pulled her closer as he started to laugh.

"What is it?" she pressed.

"Oh nothing. I just finally realized *why* you took the job at Hogwarts. Even with your excuses about an informed voting population something about it always struck me as odd."

"Oh? You think I had some other agenda?" she asked, as a slow smile began.

Draco came to a complete halt in the middle of the dance floor and tilted her face up to look at him.

"I'm certain you did. You know that after ten or twenty years of teaching at Hogwarts yours will be a household name, not just because of the war but because you will have educated the children and grandchildren of wizarding Britain. I'm certain that by then you will have suggested any number of muggle-friendly policies that Theo and I will be pushing through the Wizengamot. And by the time you're old enough to be seriously considered for a position like Minister of Magic you'll undoubtedly be the obvious choice thanks to your continued connection to the muggle world and your popularity among your former students. You took the job so you could distance yourself from lobbying. You won't be as controversial if your career remains above politics. But you picked muggle studies because it's now a required course for every student at Hogwarts for all seven years, and in the post-war world you believe that it's the subject that could help you become Minister of Magic someday."

She raised one eyebrow and just smirked.

Draco leaned down to kiss her, and once again a camera went off nearby.

When he pulled back he cupped her face.

"You'll do it someday, darling."

"There's never been a muggleborn Minister of Magic before," she pointed out.

"Perhaps not. But you've been shattering glass ceilings since you were eleven years old. You'll crush this one too, I'm certain of it."

Hermione beamed at him and moved back into Draco's arms, as they picked up the dance once more. Draco glanced at the gold glove in his hand and then over at Minister Marchbanks, whose gold ensemble outshone the rest.

Except it didn't, he thought. Nothing and no one will ever outshine Hermione Granger.

9 July 2004

Draco was staring at himself in the mirror, his face pale and drawn as he swallowed hard.

He was prepared for today. At this point there wouldn't be much for him to do, but he had been up very late the night before arguing about the exact repeal date for the MLPP. He had come back to the Manor after Hermione was already in bed, and he was intending to leave today before she woke up. He didn't want to tell her that he had failed in her final request: that the repeal actually take place after Little Star was born.

Just because they were voting on it today didn't mean the repeal had to be *effective* today.

Once the other members of the Wizengamot had made it clear that there would be a full repeal and the magical marriages would automatically end, Draco and Lucius had immediately pushed for an effective date on the first of January. Hermione had been in favor of that approach, because it would ensure that Little Star was born well before their marriage was over.

Up until a couple days ago Draco thought they would be successful too. It would give the Ministry plenty of time to message the change to the public, and everything would start afresh in the new year. Most of the other Wizengamot members seemed to find this sensible. But then Lord fucking Flint had come in at the eleventh hour and demanded that the repeal be effectively *immediately*.

At first Draco didn't understand why there was such a rush, but Lord Flint made the unfortunately valid point that if the repeal wasn't effective very soon then the Ministry would be legally required to hold another Matching Ceremony on the first of September, and the new couples would have to follow the consummation requirements or else risk a short stint in Azkaban before the repeal went into effect.

It was true that it wouldn't affect very many people, because the next batch of matches was much smaller than the first. But it could still be bad press. And in the case of the Flint family, it would affect their daughter, who had just missed the age cutoff for the previous Matching Ceremony by a few days and whose own engagement plans had fallen apart over the holidays. She had no hope of getting married in time.

Yes, Lord Flint certainly had his *own* reasons for repealing the law as quickly as possible, but even Draco couldn't deny that his general points were good ones. It meant that the other Wizengamot members had reversed course very quickly, and Draco and Lucius suddenly found themselves fighting an uphill battle to extend the repeal date past Hermione's due date.

Draco had lost that fight for good the previous night. Lucius had left early, and once he was gone Draco found himself all alone, trying to defend a position that had suddenly become indefensible. He knew what Hermione would say when he finally told her about Lord Flint's point.

My goodness, he's absolutely right! If I had thought of that, I would never have pushed to repeal it at the end of the year!

That didn't make Draco feel any better about it, though. He slipped his hand into his robes and clutched at the thing he was holding there. He had intended to do this anyway, but now it was absolutely critical.

He didn't know if Hermione was ready for it. She *still* had not told him she was in love with him. But Draco was out of time to wait for her to get on board, and at this point the only thing he could do was deliver the MLPP repeal she so wanted and then hope that it would be enough.

He straightened up and smoothed his plum robes with the gold thread around the collar. He had been working the past week of course, but this was his first session and therefore the first time he had ever worn them.

He cast one last glance at himself and then slipped back into their room. He brushed a curl off of Hermione's forehead, and she sighed in her sleep. He would catch up with her after the vote. He knew she would be there for it, and the last-minute change in the repeal date would surprise her.

He made his way silently down the hallway and descended the stairs. He was about to flee away, when a voice stopped him.

"Draco!" came Narcissa's voice from his father's office.

Draco turned to find his mother standing there in her dressing gown, holding a cup of tea. It was such an unusual sight his jaw dropped. Then even more surprising, Lucius appeared behind her, brushing her hair from her shoulder affectionately.

For a moment the Malfoys just stared at each other, and then he realized his mother had tears in her eyes.

"What is it?" asked Draco quietly.

"Look at you, my dear. You're all grown up."

Draco gave her a small smile. "I've been grown up."

"You've grown a lot this past year, it's true. But it's never struck me quite like this."

Lucius wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, as he just raised a knowing eyebrow at Draco. Draco's gaze shifted to his father.

"The repeal won't be immediate, but it's going to happen before Little Star is born. I just... I'm sorry, Father. I feel like I failed."

Draco closed his eyes so he couldn't see Lucius's reaction to this news.

"Draco," came Lucius's voice, much closer than Draco was expecting.

Draco opened his eyes to find his father right in front of him. To his surprise, Lucius reached up to grip his shoulder.

"You didn't fail, Draco. Not at all. You managed to get a compromise candidate instated as Minister of Magic, and you are repealing this law despite the fact that it is against your own interest to do so."

"But I—" started Draco, but Lucius cut him off with a firm shake of the head.

"No. Listen to me, Draco. By any measure you did spectacularly well. Every piece of legislation requires compromise, every single one. You will never get everything you want."

I've been telling you that from the beginning, and here is your proof. I'll not deny that there are times it feels like you fought for nothing. But you need to take a step back and see just how much you *have* accomplished."

Draco was relieved his father wasn't angry, but he still slumped. "But now what?"

Lucius squeezed his shoulder. "You're a Malfoy, son. You know exactly what to do."

"I think about the rules I've been given, and I play to win," recited Draco. It was something his father had drilled into him since childhood.

"Precisely. And when the rules change? Like they did last night?"

"I pivot so I still come out on top."

"Exactly."

"Is that why you support Hermione now?" asked Draco suddenly. "You pivoted?"

Lucius gave an elegant snort. "Your wife was obviously not my first choice, but yes, Draco. When it became clear she was not going to give up and neither were you, I pivoted and decided to play to win."

"And what is winning to you now?"

"My son married and taking up the Wizengamot seat. My grandson growing healthy and strong. That's all, Draco."

"And the title?"

"Frankly, that's not my problem anymore," said Lucius.

Draco looked at him in shock. "Pardon?"

Lucius shrugged. "It's not. I've secured my heir. He survived Hogwarts and the Dark Lord and has grown up. He's now married and has reproduced. By the time the title gets to you, I'll be dead. It's no longer my concern."

"But the MLPP repeal..."

"You know what to do about that."

Draco swallowed hard, and nodded. "Yes, but... it's *Hermione*."

Lucius raised one eyebrow. "And now for my last piece of advice."

Draco nodded, inviting his father to continue.

"You hold nothing back when it's time. She's brave enough to be a Gryffindor, but she's as shrewd as a Slytherin. Appeal to both her heart and her head. And if you do that? You cannot lose, Draco."

Draco took a deep breath.

“I cannot lose.”

“No, you can’t.”

Draco closed his eyes to center himself, but he refused to occlude. Not now, not ever again. He opened his eyes to find his parents staring at him, small smiles on both of their faces. Lucius nodded in approval.

“Now then,” he said, “Go meet the others if you must. Your mother and I will see you in the session. I’m sure Hermione will be there too.”

Draco nodded. “I haven’t seen her yet.”

Lucius waved his hand dismissively. “Not to worry. We’ll tell her where you are.”

Draco gave them both swift smiles and then floo’d to the Ministry of Magic.

That Afternoon

Draco was sitting in his seat in the chambers, trying not to fidget. Both of his parents had just arrived, and as he watched, his wife did too a few minutes later. She shot him a curious glance, and he just grimaced back at her.

Despite his father’s encouraging words, he still felt like he had failed her. And he couldn’t tell from her expression whether she had heard the news or not.

As Minister Marchbanks approached the front to open the session, the visitor’s door opened one last time, and Kingsley Shacklebolt came striding in. Draco froze, as did many others in his vicinity. To his disbelief, Shacklebolt approached Hermione and then sat down right next to her. She stiffened and cast him a glare that was so withering Draco was shocked. Shacklebolt didn’t shrivel up and die in his seat. But as Draco observed them, he soon learned *why* somebody like Shacklebolt had held onto power as long as he did. Evidently Shacklebolt was nearly as stubborn as his wife, if not *quite* as shrewd.

“Hermione,” he said in his voice that always seemed to carry.

“Kingsley,” she said with a saccharine smile. “Pleasure to see you here, with the other visitors.”

Kingsley’s nostrils flared, but Hermione just raised one imperious eyebrow and then turned back to nod silently at Draco.

Draco turned to find Potter in the session, his eyes fixed on Kingsley and Hermione, his hand already on his wand.

Fuck it all.

Draco didn't think Kingsley would be stupid enough to try something *physical*, but there was no question he was trying to intimidate his wife.

The notion made Draco oddly ragey. He glanced at his father and could see that Lucius was sneering at Shacklebolt and glaring in much the same way Draco was. Something about that expression on his father's face bolstered him. He didn't know precisely when Lucius had moved from openly objecting to Hermione to overt support, but the shift had been gradual. Still, it had happened, and there was no question Lucius now viewed Hermione as a Malfoy with every right that position would grant her.

That included the right not to be harassed by other men on a power trip.

"Kingsley," came Lucius's drawl from the gallery, "I do hope we won't be forced to withdraw the Malfoy support for your *other* pet projects. What a shame it would be if your entire political legacy was erased thanks to poor behavior."

The threat was not subtle, and to Draco's relief, Shacklebolt's eyes widened as he seemed to realize that Hermione now had Lucius's full support, and it wasn't just limited to the MLPP. He would be taking on them both if he pushed too hard.

Shacklebolt gave a tight smile and then rose to find another seat a few aisles away.

Draco finally relaxed and saw Potter did too, though his gaze was still fixed on Kingsley and had not budged. He nodded toward his father in thanks, and Lucius shot him a conspiratorial smile before leaning toward Hermione and whispering to her.

There they go plotting with each other again. I always knew those two would be fearsome if they ever joined forces.

But Draco didn't mind it. He rather liked listening to his father and his wife hash out policy over the dinner table before they delivered it to Draco to execute. They would be a well-oiled machine within a few years, he was certain of it.

Minister Marchbanks banged her gavel and opened the session, moving through scheduled business at an efficient pace. Draco had to admit this was something he appreciated about her very much. She was no-nonsense and generally did not believe in having meetings when a memo would do. She wasted none of their time, and before long it was time for the MLPP repeal to be introduced.

"Our last piece of scheduled business," she announced, "is a proposal for a complete repeal of the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan. We will not be debating this proposal, but it will proceed directly to an up or down vote. The precise language of the repeal is very brief, so in the interest of being open with the media and the wizarding public, I will read the text of the

proposal in full and will ask each member of the Wizengamot for an oral vote to state their position on record.”

She cleared her throat and placed some spectacles on her nose as she peered down at the single sheet of paper that Draco knew contained only two sentences. But the words in those two sentences represented so much fight and energy and achievement and failure all rolled into one. He swallowed hard and recited it along with her in his head.

“Public Law 8742, also known as the Marriage Law and Procreation Plan, will be repealed in full, with such repeal to be effective at 11:59 P.M. on the Thirty-First of August, 2004. Any magical marriages that were created as a result of a match by the Ministry of Magic due to the Matching Ceremony on the First of September, 2003 shall be immediately nullified at such time, and the marriage bonds shall automatically break.”

She put the piece of parchment down and then peered over her spectacles at the Wizengamot members and the press, all of whom were listening attentively. Draco’s eyes, however, drifted to Hermione to try to gauge her reaction.

The final date the Wizengamot had agreed upon for the repeal was the last day of August so that their obligations under the MLPP would not be triggered on the first of September. This had accommodated Lord Flint’s concerns, while ensuring that the Ministry and the public had as much time as possible to prepare for the wave of annulments. The repeal would take place late on a Tuesday night. The Ministry was planning on imposing a stay of marriage for the next three business days so that the annulments could be confirmed before any new marriages were registered.

In the case of Draco and Hermione, it gave them about seven weeks to wed again before Little Star was born, assuming she would agree to it. His stomach clenched.

Would she?

Based on Hermione’s expression, Draco thought Lucius must have given her some warning about this. She looked a bit pale, but also resolute, as she nodded at Draco and gave him a small smile. Draco exhaled to calm himself as he turned toward the front to begin the vote.

To Draco’s slight surprise, the vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the repeal. Even those members of the Wizengamot that he and Lucius had not contacted were casting yeas. By the time it reached Theo and Draco, who were sitting next to each other, there were only two votes needed and quite a few other members to go.

“Lord Nott, please cast your vote,” said Minister Marchbanks.

“The Nott seat votes ‘yea,’” said Theo.

“Lord Malfoy, please cast your vote,” said Minister Marchbanks.

Draco cleared his throat. “The Malfoy seat enthusiastically votes ‘yea,’” he said.

He turned to find Hermione beaming at him, and for the first time in hours Draco felt like he could believe his father and enjoy the success he had today.

The Marriage Law and Procreation Plan was officially repealed.

Later That Night

Draco was leaning against the bar at the Leaky Cauldron, watching his wife talk animatedly with several of the younger members of the Wizengamot. Quite a few of them had headed to the Leaky after the vote to have a drink and commiserate, and it had turned into an impromptu public celebration once *The Evening Prophet* had reported that the repeal passed. The place was absolutely packed.

Hermione's laughter floated across the room, and Draco found himself smiling into his glass.

"Feeling any better?" asked Theo, as he sidled up to him.

Draco immediately scowled, and Theo chuckled.

"It's going to be fine mate."

"What if..."

"Don't even say it," said Theo. "She's happy. Look at her."

Theo was one of just three people who knew what Draco was planning tonight. He had been forced to confess everything to Theo the day before when Draco's near-manic insistence upon a December repeal date caused Theo to pull him aside and make him spill everything at wand point.

"I don't know, Theo."

"You've done this before," he pointed out.

"Yes, but I had more leverage then."

Theo raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"I *did*," insisted Draco.

Theo just shook his head wearily. "I don't think that's true, mate. The way she looks at you now... fuck, I wish Pansy looked at *me* like that."

Draco blinked in surprise and turned to face Theo fully. "She's never even said she loves me."

Theo shrugged. “Some people don’t say it that often. Hermione has never struck me as the terribly romantic type, and you know she’s the sort to overthink emotional things. But she *does* love you, Draco. It’s as plain as day.”

Draco took a deep breath and drained his drink. “Right then. In that case, wish me luck.”

Theo clapped him on the shoulder. “You won’t need it. But send me an owl later on tonight anyway. I’ll take you out for drinks tomorrow.”

Draco exchanged a swift smile and then made his way through the crowd to collect Hermione. She must be speaking about something grand, because she was gesticulating broadly, and to his consternation she was wearing heels again and tottering a bit precariously on them. Her balance had been not quite right for the last several weeks, no doubt thanks to Little Star.

“Hermione,” he said, as he sidled up to her. “We should be going soon.”

“Oh yes, of course. Well it was lovely speaking to you all. I’m ever so pleased you voted to repeal the MLPP. Your thoughts about werewolf rights are fascinating, and I’ll ask Draco to get in touch with you on that next week.”

Everyone shook hands, and Draco shot her an amused look, while she just winked at him.

He tugged on her arm and led her to the floo. A few seconds later they were stepping across the threshold at the Manor. Just as Draco had hoped, the Manor was dim and clearly empty.

“Where are your parents?” she asked in confusion, looking around at the lamps. It was late evening, but still not late enough for them to have retired to bed.

“Oh they were having dinner with the Parkinson’s tonight,” he said.

Hermione nodded and allowed Draco to grip her hand. “Come along, darling, we haven’t really had any time to talk the last few days. It’s a nice night. Let’s find some better shoes for you and take a little stroll.”

Hermione nodded agreeably and called Patsy for some flats. Draco’s heart was starting to pound and his palms were starting to sweat, but Theo was right. He *had* done this before.

In fact, he had done this a dozen times before.

But Draco knew that this time it would be different.

“This way,” he murmured, pulling her toward a door at the back of the house that led to the patio and gardens. When they stepped out, she gasped and spun to look at him in amazement.

The path was lined with lanterns and candles were suspended in the air. The night was balmy and warm, and the fragrance from the famed Malfoy roses drifted across the patio.

Draco took a deep breath as he turned to her and grasped both of her hands in hers.

"I'm sorry if I failed you," he said. "Lord Flint put up a fight about the effective date at the last minute and pointed out that if the MLPP was still in effect after the first of September, we would have to hold another Matching Ceremony to comply with the law."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Of course," she murmured. "I should have thought of that."

"We didn't have any choice but to repeal it before that date. I know it's not precisely what you wanted, darling, but I hope it was enough."

Her eyes softened. "You didn't fail me at all, Draco. You got Shacklebolt out of office and repealed the law for me. It's extraordinary."

"But is it enough?" he prodded.

"Enough for what?" she asked hesitantly.

"For this," said Draco, as he lowered himself to one knee.

Her breath caught, and he thought he saw tears sparkle in her eyes.

"Hermione, I've asked you this a dozen times before, and none of them were quite right. But eventually you said yes when you had no other choice, and ever since that day I've been trying to prove to you that I could be the best choice for you, even though we were thrown together by the Ministry the first time. Today I voted for an amendment that will erase our marriage. It will end without any input from either one of us, almost as if it never happened. I don't like that at all, because our marriage *did* happen. It has been the most extraordinary, maddening, wonderful, inconvenient, and special time in my life. You and Little Star are the best things that have ever happened to me, and I love you both so much. And now I'm asking you, *begging you*, to consent to become my wife again, this time through your own choice and not because of any bloody law or matchmaking schemes. Please, Hermione... Will you marry me?"

Hermione was blinking hard, and she opened her mouth in surprise. Draco's heart was pounding as he waited for an answer. Every other time he had asked her this question, they had been in a prison cell in Azkaban. This time, he had done things properly. He had gone back to Cartier and selected a simple engagement ring with a large solitaire diamond that he thought coordinated well with her wedding band. He had created a romantic atmosphere and gotten down on one knee.

He had told her he loved her and their son.

It was the thirteenth time that Draco Malfoy had proposed to Hermione Granger, and he hoped beyond anything that she would say yes.

"Draco," she said softly, as a slow smile started. "I have many flaws, and one of them is being a bit taciturn when it comes to emotional things. I've never been very good at expressing my feelings, and that means I've never said the words to you that you deserved to hear. So let me say them now: I love you too, and I have been in love with you for months. I never thought I would find a man quite like you — and if I ever did, I certainly didn't think it

would *be* you a year ago. But you've proven that you will go to the ends of the earth for the people you care about and love, and there is nothing more that I could ever ask for than that. So yes, you're enough. And yes, I'll marry you. We'll call Anthony Goldstein and ask him to marry us the first day we are allowed to wed after the repeal. I don't want to spend any time *not* married to you."

Draco thought his heart was bursting from his chest as he rose and pulled her in for a deep kiss. By the time he released her she was breathless, and Draco reached into his pocket for the ring. He slipped it onto her finger, and she gaped at it. The diamond flashed brilliantly in the candlelight, and she stared at it in disbelief.

"So we're actually engaged now?" she asked. She sounded properly stunned.

"Yes, but we're also married," he pointed out. "For at least a few more weeks."

At this, Hermione threw back her head and began to laugh, the sound of it floating through the gardens and making the night sparkle with delight. Before long Draco was joining her, and they clutched at each other as the absurdity of everything they had been through to get to this place hit them both at once.

"I love you so much, Draco," she said, as she straightened up and wiped tears of mirth from her eyes. "I could never imagine doing this with anybody but you."

Chapter End Notes

I know a few of you wanted Hermione to propose, and I promise I thought about it... but I ultimately decided I really wanted to earn that 'How Many Times Does One Man Have to Propose?' tag.

The answer is thirteen times because it's my lucky number. ❤️

Chapter 30: It Never Goes According to the (Birth) Plan

Chapter Notes

I tried to make parts of this chapter humorous, and that meant poking fun at certain birthing preferences. Please know that I am not judging anybody's choices, and in fact much of this chapter is a self-insert. I was very much like Hermione in this chapter and my husband was very much like Draco when expecting our two children. If I'm poking fun at anybody it's really myself. Please do not take up arms against me in the mommy wars 🌟

That being said, if you actually managed to achieve a hypnobirth then I salute you. I truly was shit at it.

TW: References to risk of death and injury during childbirth

25 August 2004

Hermione was thirty-two weeks pregnant. Draco thought she was beautiful, but Hermione disagreed.

“I’m huge! I look like a beached whale!”

I didn’t matter how much Draco objected to this characterization, he couldn’t convince his wife otherwise. Theo and Potter had both advised him to give it up and just make neutral noises.

“You can’t agree with her or she’ll hex you,” said Potter wisely, “but if you keep telling her she’s not big, she’ll know you’re lying. Best you can do is just hum whenever she says it.”

Draco knew Potter was correct after he made an enormous error by offering to help her put on her shoes one day. She was sitting on the edge of their bed, struggling, and he bent down to assist.

“*Oomph*,” he said, as she kicked him near the face.

“Well I can hardly see my own feet!” she declared.

“Yes, and that’s why I’m *helping* you, darling.”

“I’m pregnant, not an invalid!”

Draco had quickly become an expert at making soothing noises without actually saying anything at all. Theo even complimented him on it when he and Pansy brought Cami over for lunch one day, and Hermione was using her belly as a prop.

“I can eat food off of it like a TV dinner,” she commented. “And look Cam! You’re bouncing!”

Cami giggled as Hermione lifted her hips a little and made Cami bounce on her belly.

“Mmmmm,” said Draco.

“Nice one, mate,” whispered Theo.

Hermione continued to oscillate between very excited and very, *very* done. He couldn’t help but notice that the closer they got the end, the more the ‘done’ seemed to outweigh the excitement.

“I can’t sleep. I can’t move. I do not understand how on earth I’m supposed to get bigger than this. There is nowhere else for him to go...”

“Darling, you still have eight weeks.”

“Don’t remind me! That’s forever!”

It actually didn’t feel like forever to Draco. And despite Hermione’s complaints he knew that she didn’t think it was forever either. She had taken him shopping for something called a ‘pram’ and a ‘car seat’ in the muggle world. She had been spending a great deal of time with Narcissa and her mother, setting up nurseries at both the Manor and the Granger household so that her parents could babysit now and then. And he had even walked in on her trying on some strange device that was attached to her breasts and jutted out aggressively to create something that looked like butterbeer bottles suspended from her tits.

“It’s a breast pump, *honestly*,” said Hermione, after Draco asked her *why* she was wearing bottles on her tits.

According to Hermione, she was deep in the throes of ‘nesting,’ and it was an entirely normal developmental stage in most pregnancies.

“It means I have the hormonal urge to create a perfect space for our baby,” she said with some authority. “And I may feel the need to reorganize several more times before it is complete.”

Draco just stepped back and let her do it, offering only the rare comment when his opinion was requested, which wasn’t very often.

When Hermione wasn’t nesting, she and both of their mothers were planning a very last-minute wedding.

True to the plan, the Ministry of Magic had declared that there would be a three-day stay of magical marriages to confirm that all of the annulments had been effective before accepting

any new marriages. They would begin registering marriages again the Saturday after the MLPP repeal went into effect, so that was the day Hermione and Draco were going to wed.

It gave them less than six weeks to plan the wedding, and all three women seemed slightly manic because of it. But as Draco continued to point out, they were Malfoys and had every advantage in the world when it came to this sort of thing. They could get married in the rose garden with only the people they cared about in attendance, and the elves could provide food and drink at the reception. It would be fine.

Narcissa and Helen both seemed to think that this was *not* fine, and the wedding needed to feature the hundreds of guests that Draco and Hermione had both invited to their first weddings when they were engaged to other people. To Draco's slight surprise, Hermione agreed.

"I don't care about the spectacle, really, but after everything I wrote about you in the papers... I want everyone to know I am choosing you, Draco."

Draco had shrugged his shoulders and gone along with it, finding wedding planning to be far more enjoyable when he was marrying *Hermione* instead of Astoria. At least this time he did not have any compulsive need to occlude through it.

Hermione, of course, had created a rigorous planning schedule to ensure that everything ran smoothly leading up to the week their marriage ended and she was due back at Hogwarts.

"I won't be able to help with *anything* for the last three days," she declared. "It all needs to be finalized by the thirty-first."

In typical Hermione Granger fashion, she was decisive and authoritative while she made decision after decision about things like napkin colors and chair coverings.

"Don't exhaust yourself too much, darling," Draco warned.

"I won't. And it will all be over soon."

When she wasn't nesting or wedding planning, Hermione was creating her birth plan and explaining all the things she expected from Draco when it came time for the main event.

"I have decided that I will be having a natural birth!" she announced over breakfast one day.

"Erm... is there such a thing as an *unnatural* birth?" asked Draco in confusion.

Hermione harumphed and gave him a look that clearly said, *you are asking me a very stupid question.*

But Draco didn't *think* it was that stupid. Then again, a pregnant wife/fiancée was a temperamental wife/fiancée.

"My apologies," he said, trying to smooth the feathers he had inadvertently ruffled. "Please explain."

"Thank you," she said a bit primly. "All it means is that I will be giving birth without drugs. I plan to use *natural* – meaning non-pharmaceutical – coping mechanisms. And you see? I have created a birth plan. It has pictograms and everything to make sure my entire medical team understands my preferences."

At this, she pushed forward a piece of paper, and Draco peered at it curiously. He saw several things on it, such as a syringe with an X through it that said, '*No medications.*' Next to it was a picture of a nipple being pinched that said '*Natural induction methods.*' And at the very bottom was a picture of ten concentric rings that also had an X through it that said, '*No cervical checks.*'

Draco raised his eyebrows at this last one. Not that he was thrilled about Dr. Cocky Cock Cox giving his wife cervical checks, but if he didn't then...

"How will we know when you get to Level 10 without cervical checks?" he asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes in a way that told Draco he was being daft and said, "My body knows what to do, Draco. Women have been doing this for millenia without cervical checks. I just have to listen to it and *visualize* my cervix opening and the baby lowering."

"Are you certain about that?"

"Yes! *Honestly.*"

Draco's obvious skepticism about her birth plan, however, seemed to light a small fire under Hermione because it wasn't long after that that she demanded Draco attend a birthing class with her, and that was where he found himself this evening, sitting on the floor with his legs spread in a V, while Hermione leaned back against his chest and practiced breathing exercises.

"Birth partners, put your hands on the mother's belly in our *support position!* And now all of you, breathe in through your nose and out for two gusts and then exhale!" cried an older woman with gray curls and floaty muggle clothing. "Now inhale for one, two, three, four! Aaaaaand *hee-hee-hoooooo.*"

Draco apparently fucked it up because Hermione turned around and hissed, "You are 'hee'ing' when you're supposed to be 'hoo'ing!'"

"Hermione, this is ridiculous," whispered Draco.

"No it is not! You're my husband-slash-fiancé, and I *expect* you to pay attention so you can be a supportive pregnancy partner!"

"Hermione, I support everything you're doing! But this timed breathing thing is utter shite!"

"Then next time we do this, *you* can grow a uterus and push Extra Little Star out of *your* vagina and see if you still feel that way!"

At this, Draco noticeably perked up.

“Wait, you’re willing to do this again?”

“I never said that!”

“No, but hypothetically, say I learn all this breathing bullshit for you – would you do it again? Maybe soon?”

“God, sometimes I can’t believe I agreed to remarry you.”

“Hush, wife-slash-fiancée. You don’t get to take it back.”

She rolled her eyes, but Draco sat back, quite satisfied with his counterargument. Truly, the shine from their engagement had not worn off at all. He felt bubbly every time he thought about it, especially because she made a point to tell him she loved him at least once a day after breaking the ice the first time. She told him she had a lot to make up for. Draco didn’t necessarily agree with that, but he wouldn’t object if it meant hearing those words.

Still, Draco had to concede that if it was *his* vagina he would probably have opinions about the way the baby came out of it too. So he buckled down and hee’d and hoo’d until he could do it properly, both to please his wife and also to seduce her into making Extra Little Star as soon as her body had recovered from the first.

Then again, Draco found himself second guessing his own cooperation when she announced at the end of the class that he had graduated and was now ready to study hypnobirthing methods.

“Hypnobirthing?” he asked in confusion. “What the fuck is that?”

“You know, where I sort of go into a trance because I’m visualizing so well I don’t think about the pain.”

“Do you want me to just put you under the *imperius* curse? That would be more efficient.”

“Honestly, Draco, you would go to Azkaban.”

“Not if you don’t tell anybody. And then we can skip the hypnosis nonsense. It’s way faster for me to just say, ‘*imperio*,’ and then order you not to feel pain.”

She opened her mouth to counter him and then got an odd look on her face as though she was actually thinking about it.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Hermione, I’m not *serious!* You can’t honestly be considering the *imperius* curse to simulate hypnosis! And getting hypnotized in the first place is ridiculous!”

“Hypnosis is a perfectly valid method of controlling pain!”

“Did you or did you not actually walk out on Trelawney in third year because you think divination is bollocks?”

“What on earth does divination have to do with anything?”

“It’s like hypnosis, isn’t it? It’s just made up bullshit!”

She scowled. “Hypnosis is not at all like divination, thank you very much! It has shown to be very effective in childbirth!”

“But why?”

She rolled her eyes. “I already told you, didn’t I? I don’t want it to hurt too much! Hypnosis should help me accept the pain and keep my mind elsewhere while it’s happening!”

“If you don’t want to feel pain, then don’t have a natural birth.”

“No, Draco, I want a natural birth so I can connect with my body! I was built to do this!”

“So you want to give birth with no drugs, but also feel no pain while you do it?”

“Yes! Or mostly, at any rate. The hypnosis is supposed to take my mind to other places!”

“Darling, I feel very certain that your mind is going to be focused on the pain unless I *imperius* you. Hypnosis is not helpful at all.”

“Of course it is.”

“No, it’s not.”

She huffed and leveled such a fierce look at Draco that he immediately knew he was losing this one.

“Come to the hypnobirthing class with me, and we’ll see about that.”

So three days later, Draco found himself spending his Saturday afternoon in a hypnobirthing class. A not insignificant part of him wondered precisely how he had ended up here. Then again, his wife/fiancée was here with him, so he supposed it wasn’t a *bad* thing, but there was no question he felt very stupid while he closed his eyes and tried to *visualize*.

“We are thinking of an ocean,” said the soothing voice of the teacher. “Visualize the ocean. The waves are rising. They crest and move rhythmically. In and out, in and out, and now a surge...”

Draco opened one eye and looked around at the five other couples who all had their eyes shut, breathing deeply and *visualizing*.

“And now we’re going to visualize ribbons,” the voice continued. “When the uterus contracts the uterine muscles move up and the cervical muscles open out. Think of the uterine muscles as ribbons. They are purple ribbons that are pulled taught, and then they open the yellow ribbons around the cervix to loosen *easily* and *comfortably*. Follow my voice and visualize that moment. Purple ribbons up! And then yellow ribbons *oooopen...*”

Draco truly had no idea what the fuck ribbons had to do with *anything*.

To Hermione's obvious dismay, she clearly didn't either. Both of Draco's eyes were fully open now, and he was watching his wife peek at the others to see if they were able to visualize the ribbons better than she could.

"I'm not getting this," she said, a bit of panic in her voice.

Draco softened and rubbed her lower back a bit. "Maybe just ignore her and try the water one again," he whispered.

She dutifully closed her eyes and tried, but the creases in her forehead were getting deeper and deeper as she struggled with it.

"Draco!" she whispered in dismay.

That was his cue to be an *actual* supportive pregnancy partner instead of following along with all of this hypnobirthing nonsense. He nudged her to follow his lead, and he stood. "Family emergency," he said smoothly to the confused instructor. He gripped Hermione's hand firmly and pulled her through the door to the classroom and across the hall to a room that was empty. She immediately started to pace, and Draco pulled her to him.

"Stop. Breathe. Let's sit down and talk about this."

Hermione slumped, and they both sat on the floor, though this time Draco made sure to be facing her.

"Tell me what's going on, darling."

"I'm just... I'm scared!"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "You're scared of what?"

"My natural birth."

"Hermione, you don't have to have a natural birth."

"But I *want* one! I really do! But I know it's going to hurt a lot, and the last time something hurt that much I was being tortured on your drawing room floor!"

Draco felt himself go cold.

"Hermione..." he said, but she wouldn't look at him.

"*Hermione*," he insisted, and he cupped her chin to pull her face up toward him. Her lovely face looked miserable because she couldn't do it. She couldn't visualize well enough to take her mind off of the pain. He could see her warring with herself: the thing she wanted versus the thing she was afraid she couldn't tolerate.

"Darling, if you want to *try* for a natural birth, you can try. And if it becomes too much, you should just take the drugs. Absolutely nobody would judge you for it. Hell, hardly any

wizards even know what muggle birth methods are in any event! Most witches request numbing spells at St. Mungo's. It's still uncomfortable, but everything is dulled."

Hermione bit her lip. "It's just... I feel like I should be able to do it. I don't want to flood my body with drugs just because I'm afraid. I've been afraid before, and I've never backed down."

"Merlin," he muttered, as he pulled her in for a hug. "Listen, darling. If this is some sort of latent, Gryffindor, I'm-braver-than-you thing, then I beg you to reconsider. If you want a natural birth because it excites you and it's something you want to experience, I'm all for it. But if you are doing it to prove some point about your strength compared to other women or your lack of fear... then please don't."

She looked so torn.

"I mean it," he insisted. "You're one of the bravest women I know. You have nothing to prove to anybody, least of all me."

"I'm afraid it's all going to go wrong," she whispered.

Draco cupped her face and stared at her intently. "Your birth plan?"

She nodded.

"Hermione, at the end of the day, all that matters is that you and Little Star are safe and sound. Whatever that looks like, however you get there, that is the goal, right?"

She nodded again.

"Good. Then *that* is the thing I want you to focus on. You can visualize and plan and pictogram as much as you want, but I encourage you to prioritize while you do it. Tell me: what is the worst case scenario in muggle childbirth?"

"That one or both of us could die," she answered promptly. Draco's heart seized for a moment, but he nodded firmly and pressed on.

"Exactly. That's the very worst case scenario, and we won't let that happen. So what is the next worst thing?"

She frowned and thought about it. "Probably that one or both of us is permanently injured. It's rare, but it can happen."

Draco inclined his head. "Yes. And we will take measures to prevent that too. So now I want you to think about a birth where you both survive and neither of you is injured. What's the next worst thing you can imagine?"

She blinked at him, clearly unsure about where he was going with this. "I don't know... maybe a C-section?"

"A C-section, alright. And why is that?"

“Because I don’t really fancy being cut open,” she said. “It’s major abdominal surgery, and it’s never the first choice.”

“Okay,” he said. “But would you have a C-section if Dr. Cock – Cox told you it was necessary to keep you or Little Star safe?”

“Yes, of course.”

“If he told you that, would you even jump on the chance to have one as quickly as possible?”

“Obviously.”

“Then I rest my case.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand.”

“My point, Hermione, is that we can’t predict how things will go. But the most important thing – the *only* important thing – is that you and Little Star get through it and are healthy on the other side. Whatever that looks like, whether it’s a natural birth where you feel every twinge or pushing with all of the drugs or a C-section, it’s okay because none of them even approach the true worst-case scenario. Surely you know that no birth is superior to another, as long as the baby and the mother get through it safely. There are plenty of reasons you might prefer a natural birth, but equally valid reasons to need or want a C-section. So prioritize. Rank the things you want the most from top to bottom. But also remember that you are willing to compromise on *all* of it, and you will throw the birth plan out of the fucking window if circumstances warrant it. And if that happens, I want you to do it with a smile on your face and not feel like you somehow failed because things didn’t go according to plan.”

Hermione slumped and leaned into him.

“Have I told you recently that I love you?”

Draco smiled into her hair. “I love you too, darling.”

“I’m sorry I’ve gone a bit mad with this.”

“I’m not,” he said simply. “I think it’s a great idea to have a plan and make your preferences known.”

“But...” she prompted.

“*But*, just remember that you are married to me, not the birth plan. You can break up with it, and its feelings won’t be hurt.”

“I’m *engaged* to you too,” she reminded him with a small smile.

“Of course you are, darling. I have the best wife-slash-fiancée a man could hope for.”

Hermione gave him a wry smile, and he leaned down and kissed her.

"Look, let's get out of here," he said. "I don't know about you, but I can't visualize those fucking ribbons at all."

"No," she confessed. "Not unless they're wrapped around Ronald's neck. I'm afraid he's going to say something insensitive at the Burrow tomorrow, and I'll be tempted to strangle him."

Draco found himself grinning. "You should keep your wand at home, then. I'm not keen on my wife-slash-fiancée going to Azkaban again."

29 August 2004

"Why do I feel like this is a terrible idea?" asked Hermione nervously as she patted her hair in the mirror near the floo.

Draco turned to her. "Hermione, if you don't want to go, we shouldn't go."

"No! No, I do want to go, really. It's been a full year since I've been to one of these. The last time I was at the Burrow without getting shouted at was my wedding day."

"It's true we were both almost married a year ago, weren't we?"

"Yes," she said. "Up to that point I spent half my life at the Burrow. It was as much a home to me as my flat was and more than my parents' house had been for a long time. But now..."

"Now your home is here, with me."

She just nodded, and Draco sighed as he tried to pull her in for a hug.

"Oomph, Draco, my stomach doesn't fit anymore."

He found himself chuckling, and she was giving him a wry smile back.

"Look," he said. "Let's go for at least a little while. Nobody is going to shout at us, and we can stick together. If it gets uncomfortable, just claim to be feeling poorly, and we can leave."

He sensed her relax at this. "You're right. Of course you're right. I'm being completely ridiculous."

"It's not ridiculous. You haven't seen them all together since James was born, and that was a little awkward."

Hermione nodded in agreement.

"But, as you've told me many times, the Burrow is always crammed full of people. Exchange a few polite words with Molly and Ron, and you won't have to do anything else."

"Right," she said, nodding and straightening up. "Then let's do this."

They threw some floo powder into the fireplace and began to spin away. A moment later they emerged on the other side, and Draco jumped in surprise as something that sounded like a series of firecrackers went off, followed by high-pitched squeals and then a baby crying.

"GEORGE!" bellowed a bossy female voice that Draco was certain was Molly Weasley. She came marching around the corner, wearing that same large apron she seemed to favor and waving a spatula threateningly.

She came to an abrupt halt when she saw Draco's rather shell-shocked form standing in the fire.

"Oh hello, dears," she said brightly. "We're eating in the garden today. Now if you'll excuse me..."

She stomped off toward the next room, and soon Draco heard her shouting something that sounded like "*terrible influence on your nieces and nephews!*"

Draco turned to look at Hermione in amazement, who just gave him a slightly apologetic shrug.

"It's like the last year never happened."

Draco glanced down at her stomach. "The last year *definitely* happened. No need to annul our marriage before Tuesday, darling."

Hermione grinned at this and then tugged on his hand. "Come on, I'll show you around."

Draco allowed himself to be pulled away, as he looked around the Burrow with more curiosity than he cared to admit. Something about the name was fitting, he thought. It was just so... *cozy*. In fact, it was almost uncomfortably cozy. The sofa and armchairs were overstuffed with homemade knitted blankets thrown across them. The bookshelves were crammed full of books and odd muggle knickknacks. There was an entire hallway of family photographs and another wall of children's art in bright colors, most of which Draco could not interpret. Absolutely nothing matched, though there was an undercurrent of red and gold in the pictures and throws.

Narcissa would have heart palpitations in a place like this.

Then again, Draco finally understood where some of the things in Hermione's flat had come from. She too had numerous knit blankets thrown strategically across various pieces of furniture; but unlike these, which all appeared well-used, Hermione's had never appeared to be used at all, in the numerous times he had seen them while using her flat as a waystation en route to get sushi.

It also very warm. And loud. And rather cramped.

His poor wife – who was admittedly much larger than usual at the moment – made a futile effort to suck in her belly while she squeezed between two redheads Draco didn’t immediately recognize to get to Harry Potter in one corner. He was bouncing a black-haired infant and looking exhausted.

“Jamie!” Hermione said in a high-pitched voice that made Draco’s eyebrows go up.

The baby coo’d and then promptly spit up.

“Oh dear,” she said, but Potter just waved her off.

“Happens all the time. Molly says he has reflux.”

“How are you hanging in there, Harry?” she asked, eyeing him with some concern.

“Surviving, not thriving, but I think that’s to be expected.”

She grimaced at him sympathetically, and Potter just shrugged before yawning.

“Everyone outside!” came a voice, and then a small cheer erupted from the crowd of redheads, which made Draco wince. Potter chuckled.

“Welcome to the family, Malfoy.”

30 Minutes Later

Molly Weasley was an excellent cook. She might be bossy. She might be interfering. She might be far too traditional for Hermione’s tastes. But the woman could put together a Sunday lunch like Draco had never experienced before.

The roast was succulent with ample amounts of gravy. The parsnips and carrots had precisely the right ratio of crunch to softness. The potatoes were crispy and steamed as Draco bit into them, and the Yorkshire pudding puffed with all of the perfect imperfections that Draco had come to expect from the dish over the years.

It was a damned masterpiece of British culinary arts.

To Draco’s surprise, only he and to a lesser extent Prudence, seemed to find it at all remarkable. Everyone else at the table complimented Mrs. Weasley’s skills offhandedly and then tucked in as though this was just an average Sunday lunch.

But of course it was.

Draco exchanged impressed looks with Prudence, who was sitting across the table from him. The two of them were on the very end, both still outsiders to some degree, or perhaps that was just him. He noticed that Ron was sitting several seats over, so perhaps Prudence was sitting away from him intentionally.

"Well?" he asked over his roast. "What will you and Weasley be doing after the MLPP repeal goes into effect next week?"

Prudence sighed and lowered her fork. "Honestly, I'm not sure."

Draco raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Well he asked me to marry him..."

Draco heard Hermione's fork clatter next to him, as she turned to stare at Prudence in surprise. Potter and Ginny were sitting between Prudence and Ron, and he thought he saw them go still too to listen.

"...but I said not yet," she finished.

"I thought you were in love with him!" said Draco under his breath.

"I am," said Prudence.

"But....?" prompted Hermione.

"But I just want a little more time. I told him I want him to date me properly. Maybe start over again. Be my *boyfriend* for a while before we jump right back into marriage."

"How did he take it?" asked Hermione with a grimace.

Prudence sighed. "I think I hurt him. We're not *not* talking, but it's been awkward for a few days."

Draco glanced at Weasley and for the first time ever felt a shot of sympathy. Proposing and being told no?

Well, to be fair, that had happened to Draco eleven times with his *own* wife.

Still, he knew it could be disheartening. Then again, Weasley had hurt Prudence in a very deep way. There was no timeline for healing from that sort of thing.

"There's no need to rush," said Hermione. "He will understand that."

"I hope so," she said a bit glumly. "I *do* love him, I told him that. I just think we need to take things at our own pace instead of trying to match other people."

"You mean me and Draco," said Hermione wryly.

Prudence smiled a little. "I expect so, yes."

“Well you can remind Ronald that I’m due to pop any day now.”

“Darling, you still have seven-and-a-half weeks,” chimed Draco.

“Hush, you know what I mean.”

“Well yes, but you see... that’s the thing...” said Prudence, and then she turned crimson.

All at once Hermione and Ginny both gasped, and Draco looked between them in confusion.
“What? What is it?”

“Oh *honestly*,” huffed Hermione. “It’s like you can never tell when a woman is pregnant!”

Draco wasn’t sure if *that* was fair. He had been able to tell within five minutes of impregnating Hermione.

That’s only because I stopped telling you to fuck her all the time.

The sodding family magic of his still liked to insert itself every now and then.

“Well that’s wonderful,” said Draco instead, glaring at Hermione who was still looking at him like he was utterly dense.

“Yes, it is, rather. But I’m afraid I told him, and then he immediately proposed.”

“*Ooooh*,” said Hermione and Ginny, again at precisely the same time.

“What?” asked Draco, now confused again.

This time Hermione actually smacked him lightly on the head. “Don’t be such a *boy*. It was insensitive! No woman wants to get proposed to just because she happens to be knocked up! We want true love and romance!”

“Hermione’s right,” said Ginny, while Prudence nodded seriously.

“Ah,” said Draco delicately. “Well I imagine Weasley just thought...”

He trailed off as he realized he was about to defend Ronald Weasley for the first time in his life. All three witches narrowed their eyes, and he quickly back-pedaled.

“You know what? Nevermind. I agree, he’s an insensitive git.”

“Yes, thank you,” said Prudence. “I’m not saying I won’t marry him, and I might even do it before the baby is born. I just want a little more time before we take that step to be certain about each other.”

“You should take all the time you need,” said Hermione.

“Well enough about me,” said Prudence. “What about you? How is the wedding planning coming?”

At this, Hermione launched into a recitation of all the things that would be happening when they married each other again the following Saturday. Draco found himself smiling slightly as her eyes sparkled.

“And have you picked a name yet?” asked Ginny, after the topic of their wedding had been exhausted.

“Yes, I’m in favor of Leo,” she said promptly.

“And I have vetoed Leo, as I have told Hermione a thousand times,” commented Draco. “So that means that *no*, we haven’t picked a name.”

Ginny and Prudence both gave him looks that clearly said, *just name the kid Leo*, but Draco shook his head firmly. This was his one and only hill, and he was prepared to die on it. They both cast him amused smiles, and Draco would not be surprised to learn that bets were being made among the Weasleys about this development. No doubt every single person would put their money on Hermione, except for George Weasley, who always seemed to take the long odds.

Draco would make sure George won if he took that bet because Little Star would *not* be named Leo. He wouldn’t.

As the meal wrapped up, Draco pulled Prudence aside.

“Well was it everything you dreamed of?”

“Pardon?” she asked in confusion.

“The Sunday lunch. Don’t you remember? When you were in Azkaban, you told me your dream was a Sunday lunch with all the Weasleys and your friends Hermione and Draco in attendance, preferably after the MLPP had been repealed.”

Her eyes lit with the memory, and she smiled before surprising him with a hug.

“Yes, Draco. I’m glad you two came around. And don’t wait so long to do it again. Nobody here hates you anymore.”

Draco blinked in surprise, but he realized she was right. Somehow – and he wasn’t quite sure how – he had moved from being reviled and mistrusted to an acquaintance who could be invited in for family gatherings. Perhaps they would never be the closest of friends, but they *didn’t* hate each other anymore. It was freeing, and in a strange way it made Draco hope that perhaps others who had been on the opposite side of the war as him would not hate him so much either. After all, a year ago he could never have foreseen this.

He was just about to open his mouth to tell Prudence that they would be returning soon, when a small commotion over her shoulder caught his eye, and he paused.

“What?” asked Prudence in concern, as she spun around to look too.

But Draco didn't hear her. Every bit of his attention had been pulled to his wife who was clutching her stomach and doubling over, almost pulling Ginny Potter down with her.

"Draco!" she gasped, as her eyes found his.

She looked terrified. In all the years Draco had known her he had only seen her this scared one time, and it was the day Bellatrix was torturing her at the Manor. He was moving before he was even conscious of it, pulling her off of Ginny and into his arms.

"Hermione, darling? Tell me. What is it?"

"It's..." and she cried out again. "It's too early!"

Little Star. It was Little Star. Their baby who wasn't supposed to be born for another seven-and-a-half weeks.

"We're going right now," he said firmly. "I'll call Dr. Cox on the way." It was the first time Draco had ever wanted to even *think* about that smarmy bastard, but now he felt as though Hermione couldn't get there fast enough.

Hermione just nodded, and the sea of Weasleys parted for them. Ginny and Potter handed baby James off to Molly, and even Ron and Prudence Weasley were following.

"What are you—" started Draco, but all of them just gave him fierce glares.

"We're coming with you, Malfoy," said Weasley sourly. "It's Hermione. We were always going to be there."

Draco swallowed hard, but just nodded. "We'll floo to her flat and take a cab," he said. "She's been seeing a muggle doctor."

Weasley's and Prudence's eyes both widened in surprise at this, but they said nothing more as they followed Draco, who was still propping up Hermione, to the floo.

He threw some powder in the fireplace, and as they were spinning away, Draco had only one thought.

This was definitely not part of the birth plan.

Chapter 31: Some Very Inconvenient Timing

10 Minutes Later

Draco was clutching his seat with white knuckles, while Hermione was gritting her teeth in the seat next to him. He didn't even object when she confounded the cab driver so he would take a woman who was on the verge of active labor to the hospital.

Hermione's flat was actually a pleasant walk from the hospital. It was about eight blocks away, and she had always used her flat as a floo point to reach her appointments from Hogwarts, opting to walk from there. She had, however, taught Draco how to summon a cab for precisely this scenario, and given that she had now doubled over twice, Draco knew this was the right choice.

Thank Merlin for Harry Potter, because he knew quite as much about the muggle world as Hermione did, and he had no trouble hailing cabs for the others to follow behind. They were in a small caravan, and Draco was cursing under his breath at every red light and pedestrian crosswalk that caused them to stop.

Draco had used Hermione's mobile to call a nurse, who paged Dr. Cox, and evidently they would be waiting for her. Draco had to admit that he had privately questioned Hermione's insistence on muggle methods up to this point, but now he was grateful for it. The nurse assured him she would be admitted right away, and Draco was fully prepared to use some magical persuasion if that became required.

"Draco, I'm scared," she whispered.

Draco turned to glance at her, as he gripped her hand hard.

"I know, darling. Me too."

Draco didn't know what else to say. Truthfully, he was terrified. This was one of those things in the magical world that was rarely talked about, but that he knew had a tendency to plague pureblood families. While early miscarriage was rather rare, preterm labor was not that unusual. The magical world was not well-equipped to handle a baby as small as theirs. There was a reason so many purebloods were only children or had only one sibling.

"This is why I went muggle, you know," she said, swallowing hard.

Draco frowned and turned to her fully. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I was born six weeks early. I really hoped he wouldn't be the same way, but I've always been conscious of it because of my own birth. The wizarding world doesn't always handle preterm babies very well if they are earlier than thirty-four weeks, but in the muggle world his odds are excellent. My hospital has one of the best neonatal wards in London."

Draco raised his eyebrows in surprise, but his spirits lifted. “You’ve never told me that.”

“Well I didn’t want to scare you,” she acknowledged. “I hoped we wouldn’t need it.”

“But we will...” he said.

“We *might*,” she corrected him. “Sometimes they can slow labor enough to buy weeks and *aaaaahhhhh.....*”

She doubled over and groaned again, while she clutched at Draco’s hand. When it finally passed, she raised her head and was breathing hard.

“God, that hurts...”

“Hermione...” said Draco. He was at a loss. He didn’t know how to help her, and it was a terrible feeling.

“We just... it will be okay, Draco. Like I said, his odds are excellent.”

“How excellent?” he asked, a bit afraid to ask but knowing that he needed to have this information to get him through whatever was coming next.

“His odds of survival are ninety-five percent at thirty-two weeks. And I’m thirty-two weeks and four days.”

Draco blinked and turned to her in amazement. “That high?”

She nodded. “He will be okay, Draco. His APGAR won’t be great, but —”

“Fuck, the WAPGAR.”

“It’s an APGAR in the muggle world.”

“Fuck that too, then. I don’t care about any APGAR score. I just want him to be okay. And you, obviously.”

She gave him a shaky smile and nodded her head. “He will be. I just... God, I’m not ready.”

Draco gave her a sympathetic look. He wasn’t ready either. It was August for Merlin’s sake. They were supposed to be getting ready for their wedding in a week, not...

Oh fuck, the wedding.

Draco’s stomach flipped, but there wasn’t anything they could do about it right now. She said that muggles could slow labor, so perhaps their second wedding would be in a hospital instead of at Malfoy Manor. Truthfully, Draco didn’t care, just as long as they were married when Little Star was born.

One thing at a time. We have nearly a week to figure that out.

The cab finally arrived at the entrance to labor and delivery, and Draco jumped out before racing around to the other side to help out Hermione. To his relief, Potter hopped out of the cab behind them before moving forward and paying Draco's cab fare in addition to his own.

"Tell me what I owe you," he muttered, but Potter just waved him off.

"Just get her inside, Malfoy."

Draco nodded gratefully and wrapped his arm around Hermione as he strode in toward a desk to check in.

"This is Hermione Granger," he said. "We called ahead."

The woman clicked some keys on something Hermione had once told him was called a 'computer,' and then she nodded once. "We'll have her back shortly. Have a seat if you wish, but it won't be long."

Draco nodded gratefully, and he and Hermione wandered back to the others.

"They said they will be taking her back soon."

"How is it feeling, Hermione?" asked Ginny with concern.

Hermione was pale. "They aren't regular yet. But they're coming often enough..."

Ginny looked grim, and glanced around the hospital warily. "And you're sure about being here instead of St. Mungo's?"

Draco couldn't help but notice Hermione exchanged a knowing look with Potter. He was struck by it and suddenly wondered just how much of their friendship was based on the fact that they were the only ones who had been raised by muggles in their entire extended friends group.

"This is the best place for me," said Hermione with surprising patience. "Muggles do an excellent job with premature babies, and they can even slow labor sometimes."

Ginny's eyes widened. "Merlin. Well in that case, I'm glad you're here."

Hermione smiled gratefully and then turned to Harry. "Would you mind contacting my parents? And also Draco's parents? We can't exactly send a patronus, and if I call my mother she's going to want to talk to me. I just... I can't. Not until I know."

Potter was a bit pale, but nodded. "Of course. I'll reach out to all of them once they call you back."

"HERMIONE GRANGER!" bellowed a voice behind them, and Draco turned to find a woman in those same pajamas holding a clipboard and looking around at the waiting room.

"Come on," said Hermione, gripping Draco's hand and pulling him along behind her.

"I'll let you all know as soon as we have news," said Draco, as he locked eyes with Potter, Ginny, and Prudence. He even glanced at Ron, who had said nothing, but was watching Hermione with fear. He grimaced slightly, but Potter nodded firmly.

"No rush."

Draco exhaled and put the others out of his mind. Potter had his marching orders to alert the grandparents, and right now he couldn't worry about anybody except for Hermione and Little Star.

Fuck, we still haven't named him.

There were so many things they still hadn't done. Draco had been shagging her regularly in her third trimester, but that phase hadn't lasted long enough for him. He knew that the cot Hermione fell in love with was still on order and wouldn't be arriving for about two more weeks. Draco hadn't read any parenting books yet or even learned how to change a nappy or...

"I never packed my hospital bag!" said Hermione, suddenly turning to him, looking slightly manic.

Apparently Draco wasn't the only one thinking of all the things they hadn't done.

Be strong for her. It's the only thing you can do.

"That's alright, darling," he said firmly. "As soon as we know what's going on, I'll have Patsy pack one for you."

"Draco, you know I don't like using elves..." she whispered.

Draco stopped in the hallway and turned to face her fully.

"Hermione, I love you more than anything. But now is *really* not the time, darling. We have a lot of help. We need to use it for something like this."

Hermione closed her eyes. "Right. You're riiiiiiiggggharrrrggghhh..."

She doubled over again, and the muggle with the clipboard stopped and turned to look at her with a critical eye. "Breathe through it, Ms. Granger. We'll be able to get you settled into a bed soon, and then we can take a look."

Hermione nodded and tried to *hee* and *hoo*, but Draco sensed it wasn't working very well.

Eventually it passed, and then she straightened up, though she was already looking drained. The muggle gave a firm nod and gestured ahead of her.

"Through that room right there. Let's get you into a gown. We should have a few minutes before the next one."

Hermione shuffled forward, and Draco followed her, watching her worriedly. Hermione quickly undressed and donned a medical gown, and then the muggle pulled a device forward with numerous tubes and cords and began to attach them to Hermione, including...

“Merlin,” winced Draco, as he watched a large needle be inserted into her hand and taped into place. Hermione, to her credit, just gritted her teeth.

“Pregnant women have to get used to it, don’t they?” asked the muggle, as she saw Draco’s look of dismay.

Hermione nodded. “Yes. The amount of poking and prodding is unbelievable.”

The muggle just chuckled, and Draco could tell she was trying to put them both at ease. He appreciated it, even if it wasn’t working very well.

“When will Dr. Cock – I mean, *Cox* – arrive?” asked Draco.

The muggle woman shot him a look of barely suppressed mirth at his slip-up, but thankfully Hermione was so preoccupied by whatever was happening on the screen showing her stats that she didn’t seem to notice.

“It won’t be long. He’s on call today and is on the way in.”

Draco nodded and sat on the edge of a nearby chair, jostling his leg.

Little Star will be okay. Little Star will be okay.

Maybe if he said it enough times to himself he would actually believe it.

Draco felt the urge to occlude rise up, but he forced it back. He had to stay mentally present for Hermione and their baby. It didn’t matter how stressed he was, how anxious. It wouldn’t be fair to either one of them to retreat into his mind.

Hermione experienced one more contraction while waiting for Dr. Cox to arrive. By the time he finally strolled into her room, Draco had become annoyed with him all over again, though this time he felt he had a legitimate reason for it.

She’s been in the bed for twenty fucking minutes!

The very small part of Draco’s brain that was still logical recognized that twenty minutes was really *not* that long, and Hermione’s contractions did not seem to be speeding up. But the fact that she was having them at all was concerning, and Draco was strongly tempted to *imperius* the man so that he devoted his entire attention – but only *appropriate* attention, mind you – to his wife.

“Hermione,” he said in that deep voice that made her sit up as though she was on call in class. Draco thought he should be congratulated for not scoffing.

“Dr. Cox, I’ve had a few contractions. Not Braxton Hicks this time, real ones. They’ve been painful.”

He gave a thoughtful nod and then put on some gloves. “Let’s check your cervix, then. If you could lay down and scoot down to the edge of the bed please?”

She froze. “Cervical checks are not part of my birth plan.”

Dr. Cox raised one eyebrow. “Well it’s up to you, of course. But it’s the easiest way for me to gauge what’s going on.”

Hermione paused for a full thirty seconds as she seemed to weigh it. Draco was chewing on his lip nervously as he watched. He didn’t know if he wanted her to stick to her principles on this point or just open her legs so they could know what the hell was happening.

“Fine,” she sighed. “I suppose I can compromise on that.”

Dr. Cox nodded once and then gestured for her to get into the appropriate position.

Draco watched in some displeasure as his wife scooted down to the edge of the hospital bed and then opened her legs for the man to give him a perfect, frontal view of her cunt. Moment’s later he approached her with a very determined look on his face.

Goddammit, why didn’t I get her to switch doctors? Fuck it, I’m tired of being polite. He’s Dr. Cocky Cock Cox until he stops fingering my wife.

Draco knew that he was being ridiculous – after all, they were here for a very serious reason – but he couldn’t help it. This cervical check was...

Squelch.

Dr. Cocky Cock Cox had put some jelly on his fingers and then unceremoniously shoved them inside of her. The sound made Draco wince.

“Holy fucking hell!” hissed Hermione, which was enough to make Draco sit up and take note. Her face was contorted with pain, and she gritted her teeth as she hissed.

“Sorry,” said Dr. Cocky Cock Cox a bit too casually. “I know it hurts.”

“Christ, it does...” she moaned, and Draco was shocked to see a few tears leaking out. He started to stand to protest, when the doctor removed his fingers and began stripping off his gloves. Hermione exhaled and slumped.

“Right,” he said, looking between them both. “Hermione’s at five centimeters. With the contractions she’s been having, we need to assume the baby will be born soon. We will give her a steroid shot to help the baby’s lungs, and we’ll try to get a second shot into her twenty-four hours from now. I’ll give her some drugs to slow the labor, but it won’t halt things completely. We’ll try to keep him in at least long enough to give the shots time to do their magic.”

Hermione looked tense, and Draco cast her a worried look. She seemed to be struggling to find anything to say, so Draco jumped in.

“The shots are safe?” he asked hesitantly.

“Yes,” said the Doctor. “It’s medically advised to do it, because it causes the baby’s lungs to develop faster than they otherwise would. It will help him breathe on his own or with just some limited assistance when he’s born. And ideally we want to get two shots into her before she delivers. We need to slow the labor a little bit.”

Hermione closed her eyes, and Draco knew what she was thinking: this wasn’t part of her birth plan *at all*.

But it WAS part of the backup plan, he reminded himself. The entire reason she had gone muggle in the first place was for this very scenario. Draco had never heard of wizards being able to develop a baby’s lungs within twenty-four hours. It sounded far more magical than any magic *he* had ever performed, even if it required the use of drugs which Hermione preferred to avoid.

When Hermione’s eyes opened, she had a curious look on her face. Draco had only seen it a handful of times before: when she flipped off Kingsley Shacklebolt during their Matching Ceremony; when she faced him again right after marrying Draco; when she watched the vote pass for Shacklebolt to be ousted; when she watched Draco cast the final vote to repeal the MLPP; and most recently, when she saw Maribelle Marchbanks inaugurated. That look was one of absolute determination and certainty that she would come out on the other side of this with the things she wanted.

Draco knew what her top priority was.

“You know what? Fuck the birth plan. I’ll go natural for as long as I can, but please do whatever you think is best to make sure he’s as healthy as can be when he’s born,” said Hermione firmly.

Dr. Cocky Cock Cox nodded back, as though he expected nothing less.

“I’ll let the nurses know,” he said, “and I’ll be back to check on you soon.”

Within fifteen minutes, Hermione had her first steroid shot, and they were administering other drugs to slow her contractions.

“I’ll keep him in for another twenty-four hours, Draco. He’ll get his second shot before he’s born.”

Draco studied his wife’s resolute face and gripped her hand. “I know you will, darling.”

Hermione kept Little Star in for another twenty-four hours, exactly as she promised.

When the nurse came around to administer the second shot on Monday evening, Draco could see a look of sheer relief on her face.

“Good. That’s good,” she said, before falling silent and looking at the clock in her room nervously.

Hermione had been staring at that clock a lot for the last twenty-four hours, and Draco had too. It had been made worse the previous night after he left to give their parents the news that Hermione was in preterm labor, but the muggles had slowed it down.

Draco didn’t think his father had looked this stressed since the war.

“*What will you do about the title?*”

“*I thought you said it wasn’t your problem anymore.*”

“*Draco...*”

“*Fine. There’s nothing I can do except hope he stays in until Anthony Goldstein can come to the hospital and marry us as soon as he’s allowed to do it. Hermione already had Potter contact him, and he says he will come.*”

“*Can the baby stay in for that long? The Ministry put in the stay of marriage right after the repeal goes into effect! You won’t be able to get married for five more days!*”

“*How am I supposed to know if he can stay in that long? Even the doctors don’t know. They say they can slow labor, but they can’t stop it.*”

“*Draco, what will you do if he’s born during the Ministry’s stay of marriage?*”

“*Then I’m fucked, Father. I don’t know, alright? I can’t worry about the damn title right now. I’m worried about my son. He’s not due for seven more weeks.*”

Telling his mother and mother-in-law to cancel the wedding on Saturday had been almost as bad.

“*Neither of us will be there. Either Hermione is still going to be on bedrest in the hospital or our son will be born and in the neonatal ward of the hospital. Either way, we will be in the hospital that day, so we aren’t going to be able to go to the wedding.*”

“*But everyone is coming...*”

“*Tell them not to come, Mother. If Hermione is still pregnant on Friday night, Anthony Goldstein is just going to come to the hospital and marry us at midnight.*”

Draco and Hermione had only exchanged a few words about this, but he knew they were in agreement with the plan. It wasn’t ideal, but what else could they do? Hermione would just use her considerable determination to hold the baby in as long as possible.

That should work, right?

Draco groaned and ran his hands through his hair. He hated that he had to worry about something as ridiculous as his title on top of the fact that their baby was early, but he *did*. He had spent enough time asking questions about the muggle neonatal ward the previous day that he was feeling at least moderately optimistic about *that* part. One of the nurses had even been kind enough to take Draco on a small tour of the ward so he could see it.

Okay, to be fair, he had confused her to convince her to take him on the tour. But he and Hermione both needed for him to do it. It helped them both when he returned and reported what it looked like, the care their baby would receive, and everything to expect as soon as he was born. It wouldn't be easy on them, but after the tour Draco felt more confident that the muggles knew what they were doing. And he and Hermione wouldn't be completely clueless about what was coming next.

It helped.

And because it helped it meant he could dwell on the timing issues. What if Little Star was born on the first of September? Or even the second or third of September? He would be illegitimate, and it would have nothing at all to do with him *or* Hermione or any of their choices about their marriage to each other. It would just be terrible luck.

Draco knew he would love him. That wouldn't change, not even a little bit. Draco would marry his mother as soon as he could, so that wouldn't change either. But Little Star would not be able to inherit the title or the entailed properties unless Draco and Hermione were married at his birth. That meant he would need a little brother, who would be the one who would inherit instead, and what would *that* be like?

Draco and Hermione had quickly agreed that if Little Star was born with very poor timing, they would give him the Black surname. At least then he would be entitled to his own Wizengamot seat, and of course he would someday inherit plenty of gold that wasn't tied up with the estate.

It rankled, though. It didn't feel right.

And then Draco wondered why it would feel acceptable for a second child to be put in that position and not the first, and somehow that made him feel worse than ever. Draco had no siblings, so he had never really thought about just how unfair that must be.

Still, Draco knew it was part of his duty to secure the title, as much as he still hated that word. And securing the title meant having a boy while they were married. Full stop.

Draco tried to reassure himself that regardless of when he was born, Little Star would be loved and cherished and far wealthier and stable than the vast majority of other children. The *real* problem with the timing was the fact that Draco would then have to convince Hermione to do this *again* with the marital magic intact to ensure a second boy.

Draco wouldn't mind a second boy at all, but he really wanted a girl too. He wouldn't be able to play the odds unless they did this for a *third* time.

He somehow doubted Hermione would ever want more than two.

He swallowed hard and alternated between watching the clock and the television in the room as the hours slowly ticked by.

Just four more days.

31 August 2004, 9:18 AM

“Fuck, that hurts!” gasped Hermione, as Dr. Cocky Cock Cox stuck his fingers up her cunt again to check her cervix.

“Sorry,” he said distractedly. “Alright, Hermione, we’ve slowed this down, but you’re at a seven now.”

She looked pale and worried. “How much longer then?”

“We’ll see. Your contractions are coming more regularly. He may be born today, perhaps tomorrow, or even the day after that.”

“I need it to be today,” she said.

Draco glanced at her. “Darling...”

“No, Draco, we need it to be today. If it’s a choice between today and tomorrow...”

Dr. Cocky Cock Cox just gave her a disapproving look. “We want him to stay inside of you for as long as possible. I won’t be taking him out early. It’s possible he’ll be there for another few days, and at his gestational age, every extra day makes a difference. Now then, I’ll be back to check on you in a few hours.”

He took off his gloves and gave Hermione one last disapproving look as he swept out of the room. Draco reached over to grab Hermione’s hand.

“It will be alright, Hermione.”

Her eyes welled up, and she choked out a small sob.

“Hey!” said Draco, scooting to sit on the bed with her. “What is it?”

“What if he’s born tomorrow, Draco? He’ll lose the Malfoy title! And then I’ll just be the mother of your bastard son!”

Draco went cold, and he turned to cup her face.

"Now you listen to me very carefully. If he's born tomorrow or the next day and loses the Malfoy title because of it, it's not going to make a damned bit of difference how we both feel about him. And you're still going to marry me because you promised to do it."

"I just –"

"Listen to me, Hermione. You are my wife-slash-fiancée, and you don't get to take that back just because Little Star might decide to arrive at an inconvenient time. You said you would marry me. That promise was not conditional on our baby having a title. So it doesn't matter when he's born. You're going to marry me, and we're going to have our little family and live happily ever fucking after if it's the last goddamned thing I do!"

He was breathing hard by the end of it.

"You mean it?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, I mean it."

31 August, 2004, 1:25 PM

"Fuck!" Hermione hissed.

It occurred to Draco that Hermione's language had really deteriorated over the last twenty-four hours. Then again, could he really blame her?

"You're still at a seven," said Dr. Cox, "but getting close to an eight. We'll keep checking."

"I want to be at Level 10," moaned Hermione.

"Level 10?" he asked in confusion.

"Nevermind."

31 August 2004, 5:42 PM

"Aren't we part of the fucking Geneva Convention? Must you continue to torture me with these damned cervical checks?"

"Sorry, but you're solidly at an eight now. How are you handling the contractions?"

“They’re... fuck.... Hee... hee... hoo... hee... hee... hoo....”

“Are you sure you don’t want the drugs, darling?”

“Fuck you for doing this to me! The rest of the birth plan might be gone, but you had better start breathing with me right this fucking minute if you ever want me to shag you again!”

31 August 2004, 11:32 PM

“You’re still at a nine, but close to a ten now! I’d say another hour at most, and you’ll be able to push!”

Draco was clutching his hair in his hands, as he exchanged a look with his utterly exhausted wife. She was beautiful. She was brave. She had even stuck to the parts of the birth plan she could manage in a situation like this.

And yet, they were going to miss the deadline for Little Star to inherit the title. That was very obvious by now. Their marriage was due to be dissolved in twenty-seven minutes, at 11:59 PM, and there was no way she would be able to keep him in for three more days while they waited for the Ministry’s stay of marriage to expire.

It shouldn’t matter. Draco *knew* it shouldn’t matter.

It didn’t, really. It would not make him love his son any less.

Still, if somebody had shoved veritaserum down his throat and asked Draco if he was disappointed, he would have been forced to say *yes*. He wanted Little Star to have his birthright. Draco wanted Hermione to feel like she hadn’t somehow failed him by going into labor too early. Not that Draco believed that at all, but he could tell from her expression these thoughts were already haunting her.

Draco forced a smile on his face, but Hermione did not smile back.

She looked disappointed for a moment and then frightened and then that look of determination lit her face again.

Wait, determination?

Draco sat up and narrowed his eyes.

“Hermione...” he warned.

“I’ve decided it’s time to break up with the sodding birth plan,” she declared.

"*Hermione*," Draco scrambled to his feet as he saw her reach for her wand under her pillow. She turned to cast him a fierce look.

"Draco Lucius Malfoy, you are going to let me do this or so help me God I'm going to stun you and then write 'Leo Draco Malfoy' on this child's birth certificate when I register him at the Ministry of Magic! He's going to end up with a name you despise *and* he will lose his chance to hold the Black Wizengamot seat at the same time! *Do not test me!*"

She looked slightly manic with her sweaty face, tangled hair, and hospital gown that was threatening to slip off.

Dr. Cocky Cock Cox was staring at them both in confusion.

"Hermione, what—" he started, but Hermione was already moving.

"*Confundus*," she whispered, hitting Dr. Cocky Cock Cox directly in the chest. His eyes went glassy before he gave her a lazy smile that was still somehow blindingly white.

"Well, Hermione, are you ready for your C-section?"

"Yes sir," she said demurely.

"*HERMIONE!*" hissed Draco. "You said —"

She turned and scowled at him, cutting him off. "I know what I said, Draco, but Little Star is going to be born in the next few hours whether I do this or not! I am *not* letting him lose his entire birthright because Kingsley *fucking* Shacklebolt picked the first of September for last year's Matching Day! Did you know that part of it was *his* idea? He wanted it to be symbolic! That's why we're here on the last day of August, waiting for the MLPP repeal to go into effect! Well fuck him! Kingsley is not going to screw this up for our son!"

Draco exhaled and looked at Hermione's resolute face. Truthfully, he thought she was stretching things just a bit to blame Shacklebolt for *this* problem, but he didn't dare object to her reasoning when she was in this state.

He wasn't above a short negotiation, however.

"Alright," he said. "But if I let you do this, you're accepting my veto for 'Leo.'"

"Fine," she snapped. "Now let's go."

She said these last words to Dr. Cocky Cock Cox, and within minutes a different doctor arrived to place Hermione's epidural, which made Draco nearly pass out when he saw the size of the needle. She just gritted her teeth, leaned forward, and breathed through it, and now she was fighting back nausea as the nurses wheeled her away.

Draco, too, was given a gown, and he was following, checking his watch every few seconds.

Could muggles really deliver a baby in thirteen minutes? Fuck, he didn't know.

He entered a room with bright lights and several doctors and nurses, and immediately he was directed to sit on a stool by her head, along with a doctor who said he was managing her pain. They were all wearing masks, though Dr. Cocky Cock Cox was clearly the one in charge.

"You'll be alright," he said, as he stepped forward and pulled up Hermione's gown. "We're going to do a pain test first."

11:47 PM

Dr. Cocky Cock Cox reached down and pinched her abdomen, *hard*.

"Did you feel that?" he asked.

"Not at all," confessed Hermione. "Though I'm *very* nauseous..."

He nodded. "That's because of the drugs. We had to push a lot through you, very quickly, and you didn't have any pain relief to start as a baseline. But you'll be alright. If you need to vomit, turn your head to the side so you don't choke."

The doctor next to Draco prepared himself with a plastic bag.

"Happens often enough, ma'am," he said. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm not going to throw up. I haven't done it a single time this entire pregnancy..."

Draco stroked her hair. "Breathe, darling. It will be alright."

11:48 PM

"Alright, we're starting," said Dr. Cocky Cock Cox, and then the nurses in front of him raised a sheet so Draco couldn't see what they were doing.

It was probably for the best, he thought. Draco was here, watching his wife give birth. He did not, however, need to see his wife be actively sliced open. Draco began to sweat.

"Are you alright?" asked the doctor near Hermione's head, who was looking at Draco with concern.

Draco just swallowed hard, and nodded. "Yes. Yes, this is all just a lot."

The doctor hummed sympathetically. "Dr. Cox is the best we have. And the neonatal team is already standing by."

He nodded toward a small team of doctors and nurses who were hovering behind Dr. Cocky – *oh, fine* – Dr. Cox, with something that was clearly a portable cot hooked up to several monitors.

“Good,” said Draco, as he swallowed hard. “That’s good.”

11:51 PM

Draco glanced at the clock.

“How long does it take?” he muttered.

“Not long,” said the doctor. “Just a few minutes.”

“Alright, I see him,” came Dr. Cox’s voice from the other side of the sheet. “Hermione, you’re going to feel some strong tugging, but it shouldn’t hurt at all.”

11:52 PM

“Okay,” she gritted out. “Oh *God* that feels weird...”

Draco watched in concern and gripped her hand hard.

11:53 PM

“Just a bit more...” came Dr. Cox’s voice.

11:54 PM

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!”

Draco’s head shot up so fast, he nearly fell out of his chair. One of the nurses had lowered the curtain just long enough for Draco to catch a glimpse of a naked, *tiny* baby, covered head to toe in blood and slime, before he was ushered into the portable cot, and Draco lost sight of him with the number of muggles who converged upon him.

“Time of birth, 11:54 PM,” announced a muggle nurse. “He weighs 1.8 kg.”

Draco’s heart seized at this. He was so small. So, *so* small. But they had done it.

No, Hermione had done it.

“Darling...” he said, looking down at her. She was silently crying, and Draco brushed her forehead with his lips.

“Is he alright?” she asked in a tiny voice that broke Draco’s heart.

“I think so.”

“Go with him, Draco. I can’t, so I need you to do it. Please go, he needs one of us with him.”

“But what about you?”

Draco desperately wanted to go with their baby. Hermione was right, he was so little, and even though Draco had never felt more useless in his life, he *needed* to know that one of them was there, watching to make sure Little Star was alright. But then again, Hermione was his wife, and she had just let herself be cut open so Draco could have his heir.

He could scarcely believe she had done it.

"I'll be fine," she said. "They'll stitch me up."

"Right you are, Hermione," said Dr. Cox. "This part takes longer than delivering the baby. Mr. Malfoy, you can go with your son. We'll take very good care of Hermione and bring her in as soon as we are able."

Draco exchanged one last look with her and leaned down to kiss her.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Just... thank you."

Hermione gave him a very tired, watery smile and squeezed his hand. "Go, Draco. I'll be there soon."

"I love you, Hermione."

"I love you too."

Draco gave her one more swift kiss before he rose and began to follow the small caravan of doctors and nurses who were preparing to wheel their son to the neonatal ward. Draco had just caught another glimpse of that too-small body with tubes and monitors already attached to him, along with the faintest wisp of pale blond hair, when Draco gasped.

He clutched his heart as his magic seemed to rip through him, and behind him he heard Hermione cry out too. He looked up at the clock on the wall before his eyes rolled back in his head, and he hit the floor, unconscious.

11:59 PM

The Malfoy magic had broken, and Draco's marriage was over.

Chapter 32: Slaying Monsters

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little bittersweet, but it's my favorite chapter in the whole fic. Once again, a lot of this is a self-insert, and I am not making a broader statement about the "right" way to parent. Please don't take it personally if Hermione did it differently than you. 

This chapter is my love note to all first time parents, especially new moms. Please remember that you are always good enough. 

30 Minutes Later

"Mr. Malfoy? Mr. Malfoy? Can you sit up for me?"

Draco groaned and stirred, blinking hard against the lights over him.

"Easy now, you're going to be alright."

Draco opened his eyes to find himself in a hospital bed, blinking at a muggle he didn't recognize. She was wearing those blue pajamas and a white coat.

A doctor, then.

"What happened?" he murmured.

"We think your heart stopped for just a moment. It was about half an hour ago. Do you remember? You were in the operating room with your wife, and you gasped and clutched your chest. We've been running tests for a heart attack, but they are inconclusive."

Draco blanched as everything from the last thirty minutes crashed over him. Hermione had insisted on a C-section. Little Star had been born. And the marital magic had broken so forcefully that...

"Hermione!" he gasped as he struggled to sit up.

"Wait!" cried the muggle, who pushed him back against the bed with surprising forcefulness.
"She's alright!"

Draco slumped. "Are you certain? I heard her cry out too just before I blacked out."

"Yes, she's okay. She passed out around the same time you did, but we brought her back around. I've been told that she just woke up too."

"And Little Star?"

"Who?" asked the muggle in confusion.

"Our baby – our very tiny, *very early* baby!" he gritted.

"Oh, he's alright as well. He's on some breathing assistance at the moment, but we're really just being cautious. The shots Hermione received helped to develop his lungs. You can go see him once we've had a chance to check you out."

"I'm going right now," said Draco, as he started to sit up again, but the muggle shoved his shoulder hard to make him sit still. He blinked at her in surprise. She was quite petite, with a blonde pixie cut, but she was much stronger than she looked.

"Not yet," she said. "It won't take long, but you collapsed, Mr. Malfoy. We have to be certain you're okay first."

Draco gritted his teeth, but he let her proceed to take his vitals and make some notes on his chart while he waited. He wished he could confound her to let him go, but his wand was in his overnight bag that had been left in Hermione's old room. He couldn't very well explain to this woman that he had collapsed because of *magic*.

"Do you have my bag, by any chance? It was in my wife's old room."

"Yes, we moved it to her recovery room before you both collapsed."

Draco tried not to groan.

"Then can I *please* go see her? Or the baby? I'm fine, I promise."

She gave him an irritated look.

"Oh, *fine*. I can't find anything wrong with you. But if you feel even the *slightest* bit overwhelmed or faint, I want you to let a nurse know immediately alright?"

"Yes, fine, whatever."

"Alright then," she said, and Draco hurried to stand up and he glanced back over his shoulder. "Where is my wife? I need something from my bag."

Draco was determined to check on her and retrieve his wand, at a minimum, before going to see their son.

"Room 518. Use the lift to go down two floors. It's down the hall, on your left."

Draco nodded and strode out, still pulling some medical tape and an odd bracelet off of his wrist as he quickly found the lift and jabbed the button to the fifth floor.

Before long he was hurrying down a hall, which he vaguely recognized as being part of the larger maternity and neonatal ward. He breathed a sigh of relief as he opened the door to Room 518 without any further ado and found Hermione sitting up and wincing a little.

“Darling?” he asked as he rushed over to her.

“Draco,” she breathed with relief. “Thank goodness.”

“Are you...” he trailed off delicately, as he eyed the muggle nurse who was helping her.

“Fine. Just a little surprised. And sore from my surgery.”

“Of course,” he said.

“Draco, I need you to go see Little Star. They said you collapsed too.”

“Yes, I just needed to retrieve something from my bag and check on you first. I’ll be headed that way in a moment.”

“Good,” she said with relief. “Give him a kiss for me. It might be a few more hours before I’m let out to see him. They said I have to be able to get into a wheelchair first.”

Draco nodded and reached down to grip her face. “You’re incredible. I’ll go see him right now and report back. I want you to rest and recover as quickly as you can.”

She sighed in relief and sank back into the bed. Draco gave her one last kiss before breaking away to discreetly collect his wand and slip it in his pocket.

“Let our families know too,” she said.

Draco nodded in agreement as he slipped out of her room and retraced the steps he had learned the previous couple of days to the neonatal ward. He pushed the door open and saw there were four cots occupied. The cot in the back left corner seemed to beckon to him as Draco approached slowly. Sure enough, he saw “Baby Malfoy” scribbled on the end, and Draco peered over to see him.

Surprisingly, he wasn’t wrapped in a blanket, but he had a nappy on and a tiny hat. There were thin tubes through his nose and mouth and some cords attached to his hands and chest. He was the most beautiful and fragile thing Draco had ever seen, and he choked back a sob.

A middle-aged nurse turned at the sound and gave him a kind smile.

“He’s doing very well, Mr. Malfoy.”

“But he’s...”

“He’s a fighter. I’m no doctor, but I’ve been a nurse in this ward for twenty years. I’d wager he’ll be breathing on his own within the next couple of days. We are really just being cautious and giving his body a chance to rest from the delivery.”

Draco stared at her. She seemed so calm, so confident, so *optimistic*.

“May I ask your name?” he asked.

She smiled again. “I’m Paula. Barbara and I usually handle this shift.”

Draco turned to find another older nurse adjusting some cords on another cot, and she looked up at the sound of her name and winked.

Draco couldn’t put his finger on it, but something about these two women made him calm in a way he hadn’t felt since Hermione went into labor. They seemed all-knowing and trustworthy, as though they had seen everything there was to see in the world, and yet it hadn’t jaded them. He got the impression that they had an endless well of optimism and hope for the babies under their care.

“He’s really doing well then?” he asked.

“Oh yes, baby Malfoy here is going to be one of our stars, I just know it.”

Draco couldn’t help but smile at this, and Paula smiled back.

“May I touch him then?” asked Draco.

She nodded and instructed Draco to put his finger through a hole on the side of the cot. Draco had watched Theo and Potter do this with both of their children. It was finally his turn.

He placed one finger on Little Star’s palm, and tears sprang to his eyes as his hand closed around it. He was so small his hand barely encircled Draco’s whole finger. But he was warm, and he was breathing with a little help, and Paula – who had so much confidence that Draco was certain she knew everything – had said he was a fighter.

Of course he was a fighter. Hermione Granger was his mother.

“Keep fighting, son,” he whispered. “I love you.”

1 September 2004, 8:03 AM

“Ms. Granger, it’s time to pump. Let’s get you set up.”

Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk...

1 September 2004, 10:11 AM

“Ms. Granger, we need you to pump again.”

Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk...

1 September 2004, 12:08 PM

“Ms. Granger, it’s time. Your milk should be coming in soon.”

“It really hurts...”

“I’m sorry. I’ll call lactation and see if they have any suggestions.”

Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk...

1 September 2004, 2:02 PM

“Let’s get you some different flanges Ms. Granger. We don’t want your nipples to start bleeding.”

Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk...

1 September 2004, 4:01 PM

“Again, Ms. Granger.”

“There’s nothing there!”

“But we have to keep trying. It can take a few days.”

Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk...

1 September 2004, 6:10 PM

“Are the new flanges helping, Ms. Granger?”

“I don’t know...”

“We’ll keep trying. You’re getting a little colostrum with each pump. We’re feeding it to him. Every drop is important.”

Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk...

1 September 2004, 8:05 PM

“Again, Ms. Granger.”

“It’s pointless!”

“You have to keep trying.”

Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk...

1 September 2004, 10:02 PM

“Are you ready to go again, Ms. Granger?”

“I need to sleep.”

“You can rest between pumps. We’ll wake you at midnight.”

Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk...

3 September 2004, 11:27 AM

Hermione had never looked worse, and Draco's heart broke for her.

She was hooked to that fucking machine, every two hours, while tiny bits of milk were extracted for their son. She was shattered from lack of sleep, and Draco was too. He found himself napping in a chair next to Little Star or else in Hermione's room, but every moment of interruption by the hospital staff woke him up too. Hermione had finally sent him home the night before for a full night of sleep because she said one of them needed to be conscious, and it obviously wasn't going to be her.

The nurses had said it could take a few days for milk to come in, and it had been excruciating while they waited for it. It was only in the last few hours that things had finally started to change. The color slowly turned from gold to milky white. The quantity began to increase. But now there were new problems.

"Fuck, they hurt!" she hissed, as she prodded the sides of her breasts gingerly.

They had swelled up to an enormous size. Even to Draco's eye they looked comically large. They were hot to the touch and *hard*. The nurses kept encouraging her to pump, pump, pump as though that would solve everything.

"I hate this," she said miserably.

Draco gave her a soft look. "Let's go see Little Star, yes? Maybe that will help."

She nodded and slowly rose. She had only been walking without assistance for a few hours, and every visit to see him prior to this one had been in a wheelchair. He could tell she wanted to go on her own two feet this time. Draco held her arm in one hand and rolled that fucking breast pump along with them as they shuffled toward the neonatal ward.

"Are we still getting married tonight?" she suddenly asked, as she stopped in the middle of the hallway. "Or should I have Harry tell Anthony not to come?"

Draco glanced at her in surprise and took in her exhausted face and the pain in her stance.

"Whatever you want to do is fine."

For some reason that made her face fall, and Draco made her turn to face him.

"Hermione, what is it?"

"I do want to marry you, I *do...*" she insisted.

“But?” he asked, because he sensed there was more.

“But I’m just...”

She trailed off, looking around the hall miserably.

Draco sighed and made her look at him. “Hermione, we have no more deadlines. We don’t have to avoid the Matching Ceremony. We don’t have to avoid being forcibly wed to other people. We don’t even have to worry about Little Star’s title. All of that is done.”

“So?” she asked cautiously.

“So I think we should get married whenever we *want* to get married. It certainly doesn’t have to be tonight or tomorrow or even next week. Tell me when you want to get married, and we’ll do it then.”

She bit her lip.

“Please tell me, Hermione.”

“I always wanted a spring wedding,” she confessed. “I never dreamed about my wedding day very much, but whenever I did it was always in the spring. None of the other weddings I’ve planned timed out that way.”

Draco waited for the disappointment to hit him, but to his slight surprise it didn’t. He wasn’t disappointed at all. In fact, waiting until the spring suddenly sounded *wonderful* because it meant they could focus on their son and getting through the many challenges they were facing before any wedding planning began in earnest. Whether they were engaged or married, their relationship wouldn’t change.

“Then let’s get married in the spring.”

She looked at him hopefully. “You’re serious? You’re not upset that it’s not right away or—”

He put his finger to her lips. “Hermione, I’m not upset at all. We’ve been married before. We’re engaged now, and we will get married again. Let’s just focus on our son, and let’s get through these first few months with a newborn before setting a date. After everything that’s happened this past week, waiting until the spring actually sounds perfect.”

She gave him a small smile, and it startled him. It was the first time he had seen her smile since she gave birth.

“Come on,” he said. “Little Star is waiting for us.”

They shuffled into the ward and slowly made their way over to his cot. To their surprise, one of the nurses – Draco knew her name was Sandra – was removing the device that helped him breathe.

“Is he ready for that?” asked Hermione in alarm.

Sandra smiled encouragingly. "Oh yes, and he's going to do great. Now why don't you have a seat, and you can hold him once I take it off?"

Hermione clutched at Draco reflexively, but she swallowed hard and nodded before carefully lowering herself into the chair next to him.

Neither one of them tore their eyes from the nurse while she gently disentangled the cords and then lifted Little Star out of the cot. Hermione's breath hitched as Sandra placed him carefully on her chest and showed her how to hold him so that none of his tubes would be pulled out. He seemed to nestle into her instinctively and gave a little sigh.

"Oh..." said Hermione softly, and she began to cry.

Draco crouched next to her and covered her hand with his. "He's perfect, Hermione."

"He really is," she agreed with a sniff.

"And it's just as I suspected," said Sandra, gesturing toward his vital signs. "He's stabilizing. Skin to skin is very important. We'll let you take it in turns, yes?"

Hermione nodded quickly before lowering her face to the top of his head. "This is the best smell in the world," she said softly.

Hermione got to hold him for a few more minutes, until another nurse approached her.

"Ms. Granger, it's time to pump."

7 September 2004, 10:18 AM

"We still need to name him," she said softly, as she watched Draco rock Little Star, while the *ca-chunk* of her pump made background noise.

They had been here a week. Hermione had finally been discharged, but Little Star certainly had not, so for all practical purposes they had simply moved into the neonatal ward together.

Draco had seen his parents, but Hermione had not seen anybody but Draco and the nurses. They had exchanged messages with their friends and family, but Hermione asked for a little space and to Draco's slight surprise everyone gave it to her. She had been taking a late cab to her flat to catch a few hours of sleep the last several nights before returning at the crack of dawn. Draco usually joined her, though he continued to stop by the Manor to give daily reports to the grandparents as well.

The grandparents would be coming that weekend for a first visit, once their son was solidly past 34 weeks.

Draco glanced at her. "Yes, we do need to name him. Have you given it much thought?"

"Yes, I have."

Draco raised his eyebrows curiously as Hermione leaned forward to slip a finger into his hand. He gripped it, and she smiled a little.

"What do you want to name him, darling?"

After everything she had been through the last week, Draco was willing to give her almost anything she wanted, even 'Leo' if she *really* insisted upon it.

But it seemed that Hermione was willing to uphold her end of the bargain and finally accept Draco's veto for that particular name.

"Perseus. Because he's slaying monsters one challenge at a time. But we won't shorten it to Percy. He'll be Perseus."

Draco felt a slow smile creep across his face as he closed his eyes and leaned back.

"Perseus Draco Malfoy. I love it."

11 September 2004, 3:38 PM

"How are you doing, dear?" asked Helen, as she approached Hermione and Draco in the waiting room.

"Not great."

It was true. Hermione had become even more down over the last couple of days. Her pumping was finally going well, and Little Star continued to improve, but Hermione's mood had darkened. One of the nurses called it a hormone crash. Another called it the baby blues. Whatever it was, Draco had never felt so helpless.

"I had a bad crash with you," said Helen. "It will pass."

This did not seem to improve Hermione's mood at all, but she just nodded curtly and gestured that they should follow. David, Lucius, and Narcissa were all there too. It was time to meet the baby.

"How long will he be here?" asked Narcissa tentatively, as she threw Hermione a concerned look.

"At least a few more weeks," said Draco. "We tried direct nursing this morning, and it..."

He trailed off hesitantly.

"It failed," said Hermione shortly, as she led them down the hall to the neonatal ward. "He doesn't have the suck-swallow-breathe reflex yet. He choked on my milk."

"The nurses say he just needs a little more time," said Draco soothingly. "They said it will click soon."

"Well until it does, he's on a feeding tube, and I'm hooked to that damn machine every two to three hours," said Hermione stonily. All of the grandparents glanced at each other and then at Draco, who shook his head slightly in warning not to press her about it.

"Well I can't wait to meet him," said David with some forced cheerfulness as Hermione pushed open the door to the ward.

Draco gestured for them, and they gathered around the small cot.

"Oh Merlin," breathed Narcissa. She looked both awestruck and very sad as she took in the size of him.

"He's doing really well," said Draco encouragingly. "It was just a little setback in feeding, but he will get there. He's still quite young."

"It took Hermione a couple weeks too," said Helen. "And she was born a week later than he was. We just need to be patient."

David nodded knowingly. "Yes, he looks like a fighter. Perseus you said?"

"Yes. It's a constellation, but he was also a hero in Greek mythology who slayed monsters," explained Draco.

"I think it's perfect," said Narcissa.

Draco glanced at his father who had not said a single word. Lucius's face was indescribable as he stared at his grandson in the small cot. It surprised everyone, even Draco, when he looked at Lucius first and said, "Would you like to hold him, Father?"

Lucius blinked in shock before clearing his throat. "Is... is it safe?"

"Yes, and he loves it," said Draco. "Though it's best if you take your shirt off."

Lucius looked at him askance, and Draco's eyes slid to his wife to see her reaction. She actually snorted a small huff of laughter, and the sound was so wonderful and surprising that Draco nodded to himself.

"Right. Shirt off, Father, or I will rescind my offer."

Lucius grumbled, but to everyone's slight disbelief he began to unbutton his shirt to take it off before settling into the chair. Draco and the nurse on duty moved Perseus onto Lucius's chest, and he immediately began to rock.

They said nothing for a long while, until Lucius's eyes met Hermione's with a piercing look.

"I can never thank you enough, Hermione," he said. "Draco told us what you did to secure the title."

Hermione swallowed hard and nodded.

"And..." he hesitated, but then seemed to steel himself to say something difficult. "...and I'm glad he was born here. He may not have done this well at.... *our* hospital." He glanced at the muggle nurse as he said this last bit.

Draco heard a sniff and turned to find Hermione dissolving into tears. She had been doing this regularly ever since her hormone crash began in earnest a few days earlier. All of the grandparents looked slightly alarmed.

"You're welcome," she sniffed. "And ignore me. It's all the bloody hormones."

"Ms. Granger," said a nurse, as she gently interrupted them, "it's time for you to pump."

16 September 2004, 10:14 PM

"He's transferring milk! You see? I told you it would click," said Paula kindly. "We'll build up to a full feed over the next couple of weeks."

Draco looked at Hermione, and her face was pale, while her teeth were gritted.

"Darling?" he asked in concern.

She said nothing, but just shook her head hard, and Draco fell silent, but watched with concern. After twenty minutes, Perseus fell asleep, and Draco stepped in to take him.

"Let's change his nappy to wake him up," said Paula. "Then we'll try the other side."

As he pulled Perseus away from Hermione, Draco froze.

"Hermione..." he breathed. The nipple where Perseus had just been was bleeding.

"It's fine," she insisted. "He actually ate! He did it, and I..."

She choked back a sob, and Draco quickly handed the baby to Paula, while he crouched down in front of her.

"Hermione, you don't have to do this."

"I do! It's so important, and I can't fail him like this, Draco! I already didn't keep him in long enough, so now he's in this ward because of me, and I can't fail him in this too!"

Draco gave Paula an overwhelmed look, and she nodded encouragingly.

"Hermione, you aren't failing him. Not at all, darling. You are doing every single thing you can for him."

"But I want to breastfeed him! I do! I just... Draco, it really *hurts!*"

"His latch may be shallow," said Paula. "Why don't you pump the other side for now? We can call lactation in the morning and see if they have any suggestions. We don't want to damage your nipples, dear."

Hermione's face fell, but she nodded glumly.

Draco stared at her, as he frantically tried to think of something, *anything* that might help. The lactation consultants who had visited her had been perfectly nice, but something about their enthusiasm for breastfeeding seemed to reinforce Hermione's own guilt every time she faced a new problem.

An idea struck him, and he looked back up at Paula. "Do you think he can wait fifteen minutes before trying again? We have a family friend who lives nearby who might be able to help. I can go fetch her right now."

Paula looked surprised, but she nodded. "Well he can certainly wait fifteen minutes, but visiting hours are over so—"

Draco slid his wand out of his sleeve and pointed it at her. "*Confundus*," he whispered, and Hermione turned to look at him in shock as Paula's eyes slid out of focus for a moment.

"Of course, Draco. Bring her in if you think she would help."

"Thank you," he said as he rose to leave.

"Who?" Hermione demanded, as she watched him with narrowed eyes.

Draco shot her a small smile over his shoulder. "You'll see."

15 Minutes Later

"Draco's told me everything, Hermione dear. Let's give it another go, shall we?"

Hermione looked up in slight disbelief to find the authoritative form of Molly Weasley standing there with her hands on her hips. Then her gaze slid to Draco, but he just gave her his most stubborn look back.

It was true Molly hadn't met their son yet. In fact, their closest friends had only met him the previous day. Harry, Ginny, Pansy, Theo, and Blaise had all stopped by to see him. Andromeda and Teddy had come by too. Even Ron and Prudence had dropped in for a few minutes, where they looked at tiny Perseus in shock. Prudence had run her hand over her abdomen and swallowed hard, before looking at Ron intently. Draco had a sense something would be changing in their relationship very soon.

Harry was Hermione's pick for godfather. And Draco surprised everyone by selecting Andromeda as godmother. Something about it was perfect though. Both godparents had been asked and accepted the previous day.

But Molly hadn't been there because Hermione hadn't invited her. Draco knew she would meet their son eventually, but he assumed it would be when they were out of the hospital. After watching Hermione struggle to feed Perseus though, Draco was struck by the idea, and he knew that it was a good one.

Draco wasn't exactly *thrilled* about involving Molly Weasley, but he knew that she was the best person to help with this. During James's birth, he overheard enough to learn that she had nursed all seven of her children, but she also gave them bottles too. She did both. And that told Draco she wouldn't be militant about breastfeeding, but she could surely help Hermione solve whatever problems they were having so she could do it at least some of the time without being completely miserable and tearing her nipples to shreds.

Besides, despite the way their relationship had deteriorated over the last year, Draco knew that these two women cared about each other. Molly had stood in for Helen for years, while Hermione was estranged from her. And if there was anything Draco had learned in the days since their son had been born, it was that healing was not linear. There would be setbacks. There would be hard days. But things could *always* improve.

Draco knew that Hermione needed her.

Hermione seemed to realize the same thing, because she swallowed hard and nodded. "Alright," she said. "Well... it's just, Paula thinks he might have a shallow latch."

Molly tutted and bustled over as Paula brought the baby to Hermione's breast.

"Oh he's a handsome little thing isn't he?" cood Molly as she took in the blonde wisps and cupid's-bow mouth. Perseus already looked very much like Hermione, but his coloring was all Draco.

Hermione smiled a little and nodded. "Yes, I know I'm biased, but I think he's beautiful."

"He most certainly is," said Molly staunchly. "Now then. I've not had a baby *this* small, but the twins were obviously early, and they were very difficult to keep awake for the first few

weeks. Fred, in particular, had a horrendous latch. He was a lazy nurser too, and it was very painful for a time. Let's see this little love try."

It took considerable effort to wake Perseus up, but once they did, Hermione guided him to her other breast. He latched and seemed to purse his lips a bit, and Hermione winced. To Draco's surprise, Molly immediately reached forward and used a finger to break the suction against Hermione's breast.

"Much too shallow. He'll tear you to shreds. Try coaxing his mouth open and placing him on the bottom of your breast like *this*... then scoop *up* so he's forced to open wide ..."

Hermione furrowed her brow and tried to follow Molly's instructions, and the second time he latched with a more open mouth. Hermione blinked in surprise.

"That... that doesn't feel *terrible*..."

Molly smiled a little. "Breastfeeding shouldn't hurt. If it does, then that means something is wrong. It could be an issue with the baby's mouth, but in Perseus's case, I think he's still learning the technique. You don't want him to learn how to do it the wrong way. If it hurts, unsuction him and try again. Do it as many times as it takes for him to learn the correct position, my dear."

"And what if it takes too long for him to get a full feed?" she asked, her eyes fixed on the baby.

"Then give him a bottle with your milk or formula and try again for the next feed."

Hermione glanced at her. "You used formula?"

"I did," she said. "It was all the rage back then, you know. In fact, I was the odd one for nursing at all. But I found it to be the best of both worlds. I could feed my babies on the go without having to prepare any bottles, but I didn't have the pressure of being their only food source for months."

Hermione fell silent as Perseus began to fall asleep again. She unlatched him gently, then roused him before trying once more.

"See?" said Molly, as she watched critically. "He's getting it."

"There's a lot of pressure to exclusively breastfeed," said Hermione quietly.

"Yes, I'm aware. Ginny told me the same thing. Frankly, that's the last thing a new mum needs," declared Molly.

Hermione quirked an eyebrow. "You think?"

"Merlin, dear, of course I think that. Becoming a mum for the first time is overwhelming. It's both wonderful and heartbreakingly as you realize just how much your life has changed. And I'll tell you a secret: it's like that for every child you add to your family. The second time you do it, you know what to expect from the newborn days, but you have the added

winkle of an older sibling to manage. Then you add the third, and now you and your partner are outnumbered. Arthur and I kept going of course and got the twins next. That began my downward spiral, because twins are a real challenge at the best of times, and *my* twins were just... well, I'm sure you can imagine. Poor Ronnie was barely an afterthought when he was a baby because the twins were toddlers, and my hair was literally on fire most days. Then Ginny was our caboose, and by then I had so many children that I scarcely knew what day it was. I've never told Ginny this, but I have almost no memories of her first three or four months. I breastfed all of my children, but after Bill it was purely to keep them attached to me and away from their older siblings. If I didn't, I feared I would lose them or they would get trampled."

Molly smiled a little, clearly lost in the memory.

"You're saying I shouldn't put so much pressure on myself," said Hermione slowly.
"Because it never really gets easier."

"Precisely," said Molly. "Today you're worried about feeding him. In a few months you'll be worried about milestones and sleeping through the night. Then it will be how many words does he have? And is it time to potty train? And what about school? It never ends, dear. Starting motherhood by putting expectations on yourself to perform is the *worst* thing you can do for your mental state while your body and lives are adjusting to the new baby. If you want to breastfeed, that's wonderful - but don't feel guilty if it goes poorly and you choose to supplement or stop altogether. However you feed him, he will be perfectly fine."

"There are so many books about all the things you're supposed to do, though," said Hermione. "It's hard not to feel guilty."

To Draco's surprise, Molly rolled her eyes at this. "Yes, we are given a lot of unsolicited advice about the way we are supposed to parent our children, aren't we? Well if you want my opinion, a lot of it is hogwash. If you are meeting your children's physical and emotional needs and giving them love, then the rest is just details. I am convinced that all children make their parents break the so-called 'rules' at least now and then. You have to make compromises if you want to keep your sanity. You will also find that children are so different from each other that what works for one doesn't necessarily work for the others. Remember, Arthur and I managed to produce Percy *and* the twins. They were not at all alike. The way we had to parent them was completely different. And there was nothing we could do to change that — they just came out that way."

Hermione stared at Molly with tears in her eyes, and Draco was looking at her in slight awe as well, incredibly relieved he had brought her here tonight. She was saying the things Hermione needed to hear, and unlike everybody else who had tried to tell her these things, Molly had a long history with Hermione and the experience to back it up.

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley."

"Of course, dear. Now let's try one more time, and then you should get some rest."

30 September 2004, 8:42 AM

Perseus had been in the neonatal ward for a full month, and he had passed the thirty-seven week mark the previous day.

After a couple of false starts and a few more setbacks, Hermione and Perseus had finally settled into a rhythm with his nursing, though she had taken Mrs. Weasley's advice to heart and now let Draco give him a couple bottles of formula per day to supplement.

She was much happier for it.

"I think I needed it," she said simply. "I still feel guilty sometimes, but Mrs. Weasley was right."

Her hormones had been leveling out too. She still had the occasional bout of sadness, but Draco thought she was slowly improving. He had made a fast and furious study of postpartum depression after seeing how down she was in the early weeks, and he knew to keep an eye on it. He learned the condition was extremely common and underdiagnosed.

He was sure the neonatal ward had made whatever she was feeling worse, despite the care from the nurses and the support of their family members and friends, who had continued to drop by.

In fact, Lucius came by so frequently that he had taken to rocking the *other* babies now and then.

"I'm retired," he said, when Draco caught him with his shirt off, holding a baby he knew belonged to a couple who had been there even longer than they had. "I have nothing better to do. Besides, the Brocktons said I could hold Charlotte whenever I wanted."

"Did you confund them?" asked Draco knowingly.

Lucius refused to respond.

Yes, the neonatal ward was a remarkable place, but it was also a stressful one. Draco knew that neither he nor Hermione would really feel settled until they could bring Perseus home.

They hoped today was his final day. They had celebrated by bringing in a veritable feast of pastries for the nurses, compliments of Patsy and the other Malfoy elves. And now Draco, Hermione, and all four grandparents were watching Perseus with bated breath to see if he could pass his carseat test.

He had failed the test two days earlier, but only *just*. Today, Draco just knew he would pass.

"Just ten more minutes!" said Sandra, as she preemptively began to clear out his cot. "He's doing great."

Draco eyed Perseus's oxygen monitor, barely taking his eyes off of it.

"Come on son," he whispered. "You can do it."

They were all silent as the clock counted down. He had been in this contraption for nearly an hour. While Draco truly couldn't envision a scenario when Perseus would *ever* be in a carseat for more than a short drive around the Grangers' neighborhood – they were wizards after all – after spending a month in the neonatal ward, he didn't question it. The muggles knew what they were about when it came to premature babies, and if they said that Perseus wasn't ready to go home, then that was the answer.

"Five more minutes!" chirped Sandra.

Draco felt a hand grip his shoulder, and he turned to find Lucius staring at him. "He'll do it," he said confidently. "He's a fighter. He's a Malfoy."

Draco gave him a swift smile and watched as the final minutes counted down and then...

"Passed!" said Sandra. "Our little star has graduated!"

Draco broke into a broad smile, and tears pricked his eyes as the grandparents cheered, and he turned to pull Hermione into a hug.

"He did it, darling. We're bringing him home."

When he pulled back, he stared down at her. Her eyes were rimmed red and had dark circles under them. Her hair was wild. She looked pale and utterly exhausted from the last month, but the smile she was giving him was genuine.

She had never been more beautiful.

"Let's bring our boy home, Draco."

It didn't take long before Hermione was wheeling the pram into the room and settling him into it, with just a light blanket to protect him from the early autumn air. He stretched out and gave a contented sigh as she wheeled him toward the door. The nurses who had become friends of theirs over the last month lined up to give them all congratulatory hugs, and it all ended with a final question from Lucius.

"Do you know where I can direct a donation to this ward? The Malfoys would like to show their appreciation for everything you have done for our grandson."

Draco's eyebrows flew up, and he exchanged a smile with Hermione. Evidently Lucius Malfoy had finally gotten on board with the muggle way of doing things, at least when it came to this.

"Of course, Mr. Malfoy," said Sandra. "You can inquire at the front desk."

"Excellent," said Lucius. "I think ten million pounds and a bonus for each one of you should be a good start. Perhaps we should make it an annual thing."

Sandra nearly fainted.

After making a brief stop to inquire about Lucius's donation – which he insisted would be used *only* for the neonatal ward to make this place one of the best facilities for it in Europe – they made their way into the morning sun and strolled the eight blocks to Hermione's flat.

"I don't think you should give this place up, darling," commented Draco, as they squeezed into a small lift with the pram and a now-sleeping Perseus.

"Oh?" she asked, as she pressed the button for her floor.

"No," he said. "It's the closest floo connection to the hospital. And you just *know* we'll be doing this again someday, right?"

"God, Draco, we left the hospital not even thirty minutes ago."

"But don't you want another, darling?"

"Not until my uterus heals from this one first."

He chuckled as they exited the lift, and Hermione unlocked her flat. The grandparents followed along moments later.

"Still," he said under his breath as they arrived. "You know I'm right. We should keep this place as our personal floo hub for all the babies we're going to have together. It's extremely convenient."

Hermione quirked an eyebrow at him. "Convenient, huh?"

"Quite," said Draco. "In fact, I think the floo connection in your flat is the only convenient thing that's happened in the last year."

Hermione laughed as she pulled him in for a brief kiss. "Fair enough, Draco. I would hate for you to *ever* be inconvenienced."

And with that they threw some floo powder into her fireplace and exited moments later on the other side at Malfoy Manor, with Lucius, Narcissa, Helen, and David following behind.

They said nothing as they all circled the pram and looked down at little Perseus, who was blissfully unaware that he had arrived on the grounds of his birthright. He just yawned and smacked his lips a little as he turned his head to the other side.

Draco raised his eyes to find Hermione staring at him, and he smiled.

Their son was finally home.

Chapter 33: Epilogue: Wedding of the Season

Chapter Notes

And this is it! Thank you for indulging me in this Good Boy Draco fic and all the fluff that comes with it.

If you liked this fic, then please subscribe to my series ‘The Virgin Draco Chronicles.’ Any time I write a fic that includes a Draco who is similar to this one, I will add it to the series. They won’t be sequels, but standalone fics you can binge when you need more Virgin Draco in your life. If you are subscribed to the series, then you will be alerted whenever I add a fic to it.

On that note, please check out the second installment of The Virgin Draco Chronicles. It’s a short, novella-length fic (~35,000 words) that I hope will make you smile.

As always, thank you for checking out this fic, and I invite you to look at my profile for many other long fics that are complete! I appreciate all of the support for my writing. You all are the reason I keep going! ❤️

23 April 2005

It was a Saturday, balmy and unseasonably warm. It was as though the weather knew that today Hermione Granger would *finally* get married in the way she had been envisioning since she was a child.

At the Malfoy estate, the gardens had never looked better – no, really, this time was better than all the other times Draco had tried to do this. There was no musky scent of roses today, but instead there were hundreds of tulips surrounding the arbor and grounds, a veritable rainbow of colors that was bright and cheerful. Their bulbs had been planted in the autumn and emerged this spring, after Hermione engaged the services of one Neville Longbottom to predict which weekend in April would feature their peak bloom. To Draco’s great relief, Neville had nailed it.

This time the lawn was a precise *six* centimeters high because Hermione preferred it to be a bit more lush than the five centimeters Narcissa favored, though there was still not a single weed in sight. It continued to look like velvet from a distance. The three hundred white chairs were once again lined up in rigid rows, their spacing confirmed not with a ruler this time, but with Isabella Granger’s walking stick.

Isabella Granger, it transpired, was a goddamned menace when it came to wedding planning.

Draco had not known this the last time he tried to marry Hermione. Isabella had been on an extended holiday and had arrived back in England the day Perseus was born. This time, however, she made certain to be at the center of the wedding plans, and Draco privately believed she was the only woman who could challenge his mother when it came to this sort of thing.

Even more bizarre was the fact that Lucius had practically fallen in love with the woman. They hit it off right away, and Draco now attended a standing weekly dinner with his parents, his wife, and Granny Granger.

Because yes, Draco now called her Granny Granger too. She insisted, and Draco was too scared of her to tell her no.

Draco was in his son's nursery as he stared down at his mother and future mother-in-law, along with Granny Granger. They were standing in a circle and chatting animatedly with one of the elves. He had the oddest sense of *déjà vu*, but he couldn't be *certain* if he had really done this before when he nearly married Astoria: after all, he no longer occluded his feelings and memories away.

Draco had volunteered to help with Perseus's nap today. As usual, Perseus fell asleep on top of Draco, and Draco was too reluctant to move, lest the baby be disturbed.

"Mummy and I will be married soon, son," whispered Draco, as he rocked a sleeping Perseus. "Do you think she'll like her wedding gift?"

It took a few months of discussion, but Blaise had finally come around to Draco's proposal for the villa. Draco was planning to take her and Perseus there directly after the reception this evening. It would be their first family vacation, and he planned to tell her the villa was theirs once they arrived.

He couldn't wait to see Hermione's reaction. No doubt she would be exceptionally annoyed with him, but perhaps she would forgive him for it and give him a very personal thank you after Perseus fell asleep one night. Draco chuckled to himself as he imagined it.

Perseus gave a little sigh, and Draco shifted him ever so slightly as he stared around the familiar room. Perseus's nursery was charming, with dark blue walls, white furniture, and of course constellations on the ceiling. Hermione had even charmed them to change based on the stars that were visible in the night sky at any given point.

She was convinced he would have top marks in Astronomy one day.

Perseus's little puffs of air made Draco smile softly. Bringing this child into the world had been one challenge after another, but he and his mother were worth every single inconvenience to get to this place. Draco had never been more in love with either one of them.

Draco heard a soft knock on the door as it cracked open to reveal Theo, who grinned a little at the sight.

“It’s time,” he whispered. “Granny Granger is going to have a cow if you’re late.”

Because yes, Theo was required to call Isabella ‘Granny Granger’ too.

Draco just gestured at the baby.

“I’m trapped,” he mouthed.

Theo grimaced in sympathy, but made a gesture that Draco interpreted as, *figure it out*.

Draco gritted his teeth and slowly, *slowly* slid his hand to a more secure place and then shifted the baby to a cradle hold position. He breathed a sigh of relief when Perseus didn’t wake, and Theo gave him a thumb’s up as Draco tip-toed to his cot.

If he could just transition him, then one of the elves could keep an eye on him through the rest of his nap.

Draco lowered him and then gritted his teeth again as he realized his hand was trapped beneath Perseus’s body. Draco exhaled and focused to press his hand down into the mattress to slowly slide it out, and…

“WAAAAAAHHH!”

“Fuck,” groaned Draco, as Theo winced.

Draco just sighed and lifted Perseus up before popping a dummy into his mouth. “Well let’s go tell the ladies in charge of our lives that you’ll be attending the wedding after all, yes? Mummy was in favor, so let’s go convince your grandmothers and great grandmother, shall we?”

Draco wasted another five minutes with an unexpected nappy change and outfit change to something Hermione would deem acceptable, before calling Patsy to fetch a bottle. Then he and Theo made their way down the stairs and out into the late afternoon sun to find Narcissa, Helen, and Granny Granger all tapping their feet and looking at him with irritation.

“You’re late,” snapped Narcissa.

“Perseus was asleep,” said Draco, rolling his eyes.

At the mention of the baby all three women zeroed in on him and melted at precisely the same time. It was astonishing, really, how much attention he received.

“Oh he’s adorable in that romper,” said Helen fondly.

“Yes, quite the little gentleman,” agreed Isabella.

Perseus looked at all three of them with a gummy smile before making an odd sound and…

“Urgh,” said Draco, as he felt it happen. “I think he blew out his nappy.”

At this, the women and Theo all took a collective step back, and Draco groaned. “Really?”

“You’re his father,” said Narcissa with a smile.

Draco just rolled his eyes and called Patsy for a *different* outfit, which took another five minutes to attend to. And now Draco was very late.

As he finally handed the baby off to Helen, Narcissa took a critical look at Draco’s cuff and wrinkled her nose.

“Draco, your sleeve is soiled.”

Draco looked down and saw some familiar yellow-gold residue left behind. He swore softly and waved his wand to vanish it. It was only partially successful.

“Draco, you’ll need to change,” insisted Narcissa.

“Mother, we’re already late. It’s fine, alright? It’s clean enough. It’s just stained.”

“But Perseus—”

“Spits up on me and shits on me at least four times a day. It would be odd not to wear something stained at this point.”

“Fine,” she huffed as Isabella stepped forward and yanked Draco’s jacket sleeve down so hard he nearly stumbled.

“Least you can do is hide it,” declared Isabella. “Now up to the front with you. I’m ready to marry off my granddaughter.”

Draco tried not to roll his eyes, but he hurried to the front and took a moment to look out into the crowd. The Weasleys were there of course, along with the Potters, the Parkinsons, and the Notts. Prudence Avery was due to deliver any day, and she was sitting with the Weasley’s. Her engagement ring sparkled in the late afternoon sun. There were quite a few people there for political reasons and others who were family friends on both sides. Maywood was there with his wife, looking around in bemusement, and even the neonatal nurses who had helped Perseus right after he was born were in attendance. Hermione had put the Weasleys in charge of confounding them periodically so the Statute of Secrecy would not be violated.

Draco took his place next to Theo and Blaise, who both smirked at him.

“Gonna run again, mate?” asked Blaise under his breath.

“Don’t even suggest such a thing,” muttered Draco.

“To be fair, it wouldn’t be the first time,” pointed out Theo.

Draco just rolled his eyes, before they were pulled to the front as the music started.

First down the aisle was Granny Granger, who was being escorted by Ron Weasley. Draco saw him wince slightly as her cane landed on his toe, and he tried not to laugh. Ron seated her first and then moved to sit near his parents and the muggles he would be monitoring for the rest of the wedding. Draco saw with some relief that Perseus was now being bounced by Molly Weasley. She had been the backup plan if he was actually awake to attend.

Next came Lucius and Narcissa, who were both beaming this time. It was a stark contrast to the cool, almost professional expressions the last time they walked toward Draco.

After that, Helen was escorted down the aisle by Potter, who joined Draco at the front, but on Hermione's side.

Draco was almost certain that Potter was the first bridesman the wizarding world had ever seen.

Teddy came next, bearing the rings. Draco saw Andromeda giving him a beady look as he stood next to Harry and tried desperately not to fidget.

Then came Ginny Weasley, the only bridesmaid. Her dress was an odd shade of bright purple that perfectly matched several of the tulips in her bouquet. She gave a blinding smile to Dennis Creevey, who was photographing her every step.

This is it. Hermione comes next.

Draco was suddenly struck by the memory of this moment when it was Astoria walking toward him. He had felt cold and sick with dread as she began to walk toward him. But *this...*

Hermione stepped into the aisle with her father, and Draco gasped.

Her dress had a fitted bodice with the sheerest lace sleeves. The skirt billowed out and kissed the ground with a small train as she began to walk toward him. She had white tulips joyfully spilling out of her bouquet, and her hair was pinned back to hold an elaborate veil that cascaded down her back.

She was perfect like this, utterly flawless.

The most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

There would be a lifetime of laughter and stimulating conversation that was punctuated by heat and love.

I want decades of it.

Draco's life would be filled with things to do as she crafted a world in her image and gave her ideas to Draco to execute.

I want to build it for her.

He would never use occlumency again or drown himself in his own mind because his wife was vibrant and alive and made him feel everything.

I love her so much.

And then tonight he would slip between her legs and...

Fuck.

Draco was getting an erection right there as she approached him, and based on the amused glance she gave his trousers, he could tell that she noticed. He just cleared his throat and shifted a little before she kissed her father and stepped toward him.

This part was new.

This was the point at which he had apparated away from Astoria, but he would never run from Hermione. She was his entire future and everything he could have ever wanted for himself.

“Ready?” he said under his breath.

“Yes, Draco. I can’t wait to marry you.”

Draco grinned and pulled her in for a quick kiss while Anthony Goldstein cleared his throat behind them with amusement.

“We generally do that *after* the ceremony, Draco,” he pointed out as the audience laughed.

Draco pulled away and just shrugged. Who cared if things were out of order? Their entire relationship had been out of order in some respects.

“Come along then.”

Anthony pulled out his wand and began to read the words from their vows. This time it was more than a simple sentence crafted by the Ministry of Magic to legally bind them. The vows for this wedding – their *real* wedding – spoke of love and devotion and the life they would spend together. It didn’t take long, but it meant everything.

Once their vows were read, Anthony lifted his wand to perform the binding spell, repeating the words he had said to them all those months ago in Azkaban.

“I hereby bind you, in matrimony and magic, on this, the twenty-third day of April, 2005. Take each other in honesty and integrity to grow your lives together from this day forward.”

Draco felt that same tug on his magic, and he held his breath as he waited for it. The marital magic had been absent since the night Perseus was born. Draco didn’t *miss* it, exactly, but feeling it activate again would tell him that their binding spell had been successful.

Sure enough, that rush of magic rolled through Draco, and his attention was pulled fully toward Hermione.

Your wife must give you an heir. You need to fill her belly with an heir. But you require a boy for it, and she will not be giving you that.

Draco furrowed his brow, as he tried to make sense of the strange thought. The magic felt agitated, unsettled, as though there was something very wrong.

“What is it?” whispered Hermione, who must have noticed his odd look.

Draco just shook his head. “Nothing. The magic is acting up.”

“Then let’s break it,” she suggested.

Draco nodded and gestured for Potter to step forward.

The guests all watched curiously as Potter spoke up.

“Most of you know that Hermione and Draco’s last wedding had to be postponed thanks to the early arrival of my godson Perseus.”

At his name, Perseus gave a helpful coo, and those around him chuckled.

“Hermione and Draco have chosen to break the Malfoy magic today, by adding blood collected from Perseus at birth. His godparents are in attendance to assist with the ceremony.”

Potter pulled out the small vial of blood that Hermione and Draco had saved for months. They collected it from Perseus while he was in the hospital, during a standard blood draw. They debated about doing this for months, but could not determine how it would affect the Malfoy magic if the blood was added while Draco was technically unmarried. There were no family records of it. So they bided their time and decided to wait for the wedding, to make sure the magic had activated again before trying to break any part of it.

Hermione and Draco stepped back to reveal the ward stone, which was in the center of the garden. They had intentionally said their vows directly on top of it and now crouched down near it. Potter and Andromeda stepped forward and kneeled as well. All four of them placed their wands on the ward stone while Draco unstoppered the small vial with his teeth. He poured the blood on top of the stone as he began to chant.

“*Sanguis filii additur. Crescent generaciones. Magia non obligabit patrem.*”

He said it three times, and then the stone glowed gold before the blood disappeared into it. Draco felt a small snap and blinked in surprise. He could see Hermione was watching him intently, and he nodded a little as they all rose and Potter and Andromeda returned to their positions.

He took just a moment to feel it. Now, instead of feeling agitated, the magic felt satisfied. It was as though it knew that the line had been secured. He waited a moment longer to see if he received any other nudges, and sure enough...

She should always be filled up just like she is. Good boy, Draco.

Draco's eyebrows flew up in surprise as he stared at Hermione in disbelief. His eyes were pulled to her abdomen.

"What?" she asked under her breath. Draco was suddenly aware that they had been doing all of this in front of an audience, but he didn't care.

"You were wrong," he whispered.

She looked at him in confusion.

"Wrong about what?" she whispered back.

"When you said I couldn't tell when a woman is pregnant. I *can* tell. Because you are. And I'm almost positive it's a girl this time."

Hermione turned crimson and looked down for a moment as she bit her lip, before looking back up at Draco shyly.

"Is that alright?" she asked hesitantly. "I know it's quite soon."

"More than alright," he said, as he pulled her in for another kiss. "It's everything I've ever wanted."

Somebody cleared their throat behind them, and Draco turned to find Anthony Goldstein staring at them both with amusement.

"We're still not done," he said at a normal volume, and the guests laughed.

Draco rolled his eyes, but released Hermione with a small smile. He felt like he was walking on air. He had his wife, his little boy, and now Hermione was growing their baby girl.

"Do you have your rings?" asked Anthony, and Draco nodded, looking toward Teddy who stepped forward.

They both had new rings. They were from the same line as their old wedding bands, but in a slightly different design because they both still wore their first bands to commemorate their original marriage. Hermione slipped Draco's new ring onto his finger and cast a spell that fused it to his old one. Then Draco placed Hermione's ring on her finger too, with her engagement ring nestled between both bands. He cast the same spell to fuse all three.

"I love it," she whispered happily as she took a brief moment to admire it before turning back to Anthony.

"And now, it's *actually* time to kiss your bride, Draco," said Goldstein with a smile. The guests laughed at this as Draco pulled Hermione in for a deep kiss, that was only broken by...

"*WAAAAAHHH!*"

Hermione pulled back and rolled her eyes in slight exasperation, but she was still smiling broadly as they both turned to find their son wailing in Molly Weasley's arms.

Hermione started to chuckle as she unceremoniously handed her bouquet to Ginny before moving to Mrs. Weasley and picking up Perseus and carrying him to the front.

“Well?” she asked, looking at Draco, “shall we?”

Draco held out his arm, and she took it with one hand while holding Perseus on her hip with the other, and they made their way back down the aisle as a family of three – no, a family of *four*. Behind them, their wedding party began to pair off and move down the aisle as well.

“Dr. Cox may place a cerclage this time,” said Hermione under her breath, about halfway down the aisle.

“Oh? And what is that?”

“It’s where they sew your cervix shut.”

Draco came to a complete halt and looked at her in horror. “Are you saying they stick a *needle* up your—”

“*Hush, Draco!*” Hermione insisted, as Granny Granger made a nose from several rows up ahead.

“Keep going!” she hissed, as she rapped her cane authoritatively on the ground. Draco swallowed hard as he began to walk again.

They passed several more rows before Hermione glanced sideways at Draco and saw that his face was still one of muted horror.

“You’re supposed to be smiling,” she reminded him.

“I’m imagining that wanker with a needle and thread and—”

“Oh *stop*, it’s not that bad!”

Draco scoffed, but they were nearing the end of the aisle, and he finally noticed Dennis Creevey taking pictures of all three of them. Draco pulled Hermione to the side to pose.

“Just think of our marriage and our children, Draco,” she said, as she gave Dennis as bright smile.

Fair enough, darling, thought Draco as his face relaxed into a smile once more.

“Much better,” she said approvingly. “Keep thinking of our little family of four: Draco, Hermione, Perseus, and Leona.”

Draco’s smile fell from his face, and he turned to scowl at her. “Leona?”

“Yes, it’s a carbonaceous asteroid. It’s perfectly in theme.”

“I’m vetoing Leona,” said Draco instantly.

"You keep telling yourself that," said Hermione airily as she patted him on the arm.

She stepped away to hand Perseus off to her mother, and Draco found himself smiling again, despite himself. How could he do anything else in the face of his wedding to Hermione Granger and their two children?

"There's that smile," she said quietly as she came back to him and wrapped her arms around his neck to kiss him soundly one more time. Out of the corner of his eye Draco saw a flash go off.

"I love you, Hermione," said Draco. "And I also love Perseus and Celeste."

Hermione gave him an amused look as she leaned into him, her eyes golden with mirth and joy.

"I love you too. You're always going to be my best boy, Draco."

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