

to him. He said good by distractedly to them still gazing at the train as it made its way around the bend and out of sight.

He was about to turn and go when he saw a little, red-haired boy break free from his harried mother and go barreling into Weasley screaming "Daddy." Hermione took a step away from Weasley, her back still to Draco. Harry looked shocked, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. The child was wrapped around Weasley's legs chattering away, completely oblivious to the adults around him.

The mother of the boy walked up with two other children, a young girl and a toddler boy, both red-haired. He was horrified to see that the plump, harried woman was Lavender Brown. She said something he couldn't hear to Weasley.

He heard Hermione screech "You bastard!" loud enough for it to echo off the platform around them and break him out of his shock. He started forward and grabbed her around the waist just as she was about to launch herself at Weasley. He hauled her back and stood between her and Weasley.

She glared up at him. "Get out of my way, Malfoy. Did you come here to loaf?" She made to move past him but he put his hands on the tops of her arms, keeping her in place.

"No," he said quietly.

"Let me go."

"No. You can't do this in front of the children. Your daughter is standing right there." He nodded over to where Rose was standing, half hidden behind Ginny. "Hermione, I know you're furious. I know he deserves whatever you planned on throwing at him, but you can't do it in front of your daughter."

"I hate it when you're right, Malfoy," she said angrily.

"I know, Hermione. Summon your Gryffindor courage, take your daughter's hand, and walk away with me right now."

"Why should I go anywhere with you?"

"You saved me once. Let me return the kindness."

"Fine." She took her daughter's hand. Weasley was pleading with her to let him explain, but she ignored him. He tried to make a grab for her but Draco stepped in front of him to block

her.

He got up in Weasley's face. "Don't touch her," he ground out, low and dangerous. "I stopped her from hurting you for the sake of her daughter. I won't stop her again. I'll even help her next time."

He turned and walked over to Hermione and her daughter, touched them both on the shoulder, and disappeared the small to his home.

They materialized into the foyer of Spinner's End. "Where are we?" she asked as she took in her surroundings. The walls were cobalt and light gray striped. The floor, staircase, and entries leading to various parts of the house were all dark walnut.

"Spinner's End, my home," he said.

"You don't live at Malfoy Manor?"

"No. I'll explain later. Come on. Let's get some lunch. I think your daughter may be hungry."

He led them into the dining room. The room was done in a similar color scheme as the foyer, solid navy blue walls with silver vines climbing up the walls, walnut floors, gray leather chairs, and a lighter walnut table that looked like it could comfortably seat twenty. Large bay windows covered one wall and looked out onto the lawn. Plates and food were set waiting on the buffet along the other wall.

"Expecting company?" Hermione asked.

"No. Tansy must have seen us arrive," he responded.

"Who is Tansy?" Hermione asked.

"Welcome home, Master Draco. Did Master Scorpy get on the train okay?" the subject of her questions walked into the room.

"Hello Tansy. Yes, he's off to school now. Tansy, this is Hermione and her daughter, Rose," Draco said to Tansy.

"Hermione, Rose. This is Tansy." He introduced them to his house elf.

Tansy looked like many of her kind, large eyes, large bat-like ears and gray skin. Unlike other house elves, she was wearing a bright pink tutu, leotard, and ballet slippers instead of a dishrag.

"Hello, Tansy. It's nice to meet you," Hermione said.

"Hello Mistress Hermione and Miss Rose. May I help Miss Rose get her lunch?"

"It's just Hermione and Rose. No need for the miss and mistress..."

"Good luck with that," Draco snorted. He had tried for years to get her to stop calling him Master. She always looked at him, said "Yes Master," then kept doing as she wanted.

Hermione ignored him, "and yes, you can help Rose. Thank you."

Tansy led Rose over to the buffet. He heard Rose speak for the first time. "Are you a ballerina? I like ballerinas. They're pretty and can dance pretty," she said. Tansy filled a plate for Rose and herself and sat down at the table together, eating and chattering away.

Hermione watched them in fascination. He watched her, trying to gauge her reaction. She turned and looked up at him.

"Your house elf is dressed like a ballerina."

"She's free. She wears what she wants."

"You... have a free house elf," she said incredulously.

"I am not my father, Hermione. She also eats at the table with us as part of the family. She's family. I wouldn't have been able to manage the house and raise Scorpius after Astoria died without her help."

"That's very progressive of you. I heard about your wife. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. It was a very, long time ago. Come let's get some lunch and you can pepper me with all those questions I can see swimming around in that brain of yours."

"I don't pepper..."

"You do. You're not the brightest witch of our age because you waited around for people to volunteer information. Questions aren't a bad thing."

They grabbed plates and filled them with salad and sandwiches. He held out a chair for her to the right of the head of the table. He sat down in his customary seat at the head.

Draco looked out over the sea of families watching the train depart. He saw Harry up ahead, facing him talking to Weasley and her. He nodded a greeting to Harry when their gazes met. He and Harry had made their peace years ago. The Golden Trio had spoken up for him and his mother during their trial. It had kept them both out of Azkaban. Harry had even apologized for not being able to help his father too, but they had both known there was no helping his father.

She was there. Her back was to him and she was leaning on Weasley, but she was the closest to him that she'd been in ages. He'd watched her over the years as she walked by him at the Ministry or Diagon Alley. They had never shared more than a "Hello" in passing. She was happy with Weasley and he only existed as a part of their shared past.

She had no idea of his feelings for her, had never had any idea. He had been horrid to her in school, spouting that pureblood crap that his father fed him growing up, not really understanding the prejudice he had thrown at her feet. He had only been twelve and those ideals had been ingrained in him his whole life. By the time he had understood, it had been too late. She had despised him and he couldn't find a way to repair the damage.

He had been cast adrift in a world ruled by hate. He'd had to make impossible choices to save his mother. Choices he struggled and railed against. He had tried to find the light, to be what she deserved, but he couldn't abandon his family and kept getting pulled back to the dark. She had unknowingly ripped his world to shreds and he'd been left to find a way to rebuild it anew.

Being a father to Scorpius had given him a chance to be the man he wanted to be. He didn't want Scorpius to grow up the way he had. He wanted better for his son. He wanted to create a better world for his son to grow up in.

The train blew one final whistle and pulled out of the station. Draco stood watching his son being taken away, hoping that the year wouldn't be awful for him. Thea and Daphne said good bye

assumptions about you because of me and I'm sorry about that. Just be yourself though and the people worth knowing will see the good kid you are and not just the son of Draco Malfoy," Draco stood facing his son with his hands on his shoulders. His son looked so much like himself at that age, same slick back, white blond hair, same gray eyes and pale skin.

"Dad, I'll be fine and there's nothing wrong with being your son. You're a great dad to me and the people who can't let the past go, can sod off," Scorpius said defiantly.

"Language, son. If you need anything, write and let me know. Write even if you don't need anything. I want to know how you're doing."

The whistle blew and the crowded platform became chaotic as children rushed to board and load their trunks. Families were gathered around the train saying goodbye, children were leaning out open windows. It was time to let him go.

"Time to go, son. I love you. Be strong, study hard, and make good friends," Draco said as he pulled Scorpius in for one last hug.

"I love you too, dad. I'll make you proud."

"You already do, mate."

Scorpius broke away and climbed onto the train. He looked behind him one last time and waved before he disappeared. Theo and Daphne came up to him. Theo clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"You okay?" Theo asked.

"Yeah. I'm just worried about how he'll be treated."

"He'll be fine. You raised a good kid. Drake is there, so are the other Baby Snakes," Theo chuckled a little at their nickname for their group of children.

"Come over for dinner tonight, Draco," Daphne offered, "Spinner's End will be too quiet."

"Not tonight Daphne, but thank you. I'll be fine. It will just take some getting used to."

They ate in silence, listening to Rose and Tansy further down the table.

"Why do you live here and not at the Manor?" she asked after a few bites.

"Would you want to live there?" he asked. She shuddered at the question. "My mother has done a lot to redo the place over the years, but I had a hard time being there right after the war. All the atrocities committed there. I just couldn't do it. I inherited this from Professor Snape and decided that I would rather live here."

"Snape left you a house?"

"He was my godfather. I think he wanted me to have a place I could go to if I ever needed a home."

"You're a Malfoy. Why would you ever need a home?"

"If I hadn't been forced to save my mother, I would have become a disinherited, blood-traitor," he stared at Hermione as he said this, daring her to call him a liar.

She chose to change the subject. "You have a free house self. How did that happen?"

"Tansy came to the door right after I moved in here. Astoria and I were engaged, the house was barely livable, and I didn't have the time or knowledge to get the house in order. I hired her on the spot. When Astoria died, she helped me take care of Scorpius."

"Mummy, can Tansy and I go play ballerinas?" Rose asked them as she came up to where they were sitting.

"I don't know honey, maybe..."

"She'll be fine with her," Draco said quietly.

"Okay, go ahead and play," Hermione relented.

"Are you done eating? Let's go to the study. You'll be more comfortable there."

He took her arm and led her out of the dining room across the foyer into his study. Double walnut doors opened into a room with floor to ceiling bookshelves on one side of the room. Across from the wall of books was a cheery fireplace with bookshelves surrounding it. A comfortable, sapphire blue

## Finding Hermione

couch with matching arm chairs were set in front of the fireplace. Draco's large desk was near the large bay windows at the back of the room. The walls that weren't covered by bookshelves were sapphire and silver leaf print.

"Is every room in your house blue?" Hermione asked as she gazed around.

"Yes. Did you expect Slytherin green?"

"Well, yes."

He grabbed the decanter of scotch from the table and two glasses and guided her over to the couch and sat next to her. He filled the glasses halfway and handed her one. "It's scotch, drink up."

"I don't drink scotch."

"You just found out your husband has a mistress and pack of kids. I think now's a good time to start and it's very good scotch."

"Good point." She took a sip, made a face, then took another. She had turned her face away from him to stare around the room.

"You can let go of that Gryffindor courage now. You've been holding it in a long time. It's time to let it out." He reached over and touched her shoulder, gently massaging her. She turned to face him, tears running down her face.

"Why? I don't understand why he would do something like this? He had a whole secret family that none of us knew anything about. How could he do that to me? How could he do that to our daughters? How is it I had no idea? They had 4 kids together. I guess one is the same age as Minerva since they were at the Hogwarts train platform. How am I supposed to tell my girls about this?" she said, crying softly.

"I don't have the answers for you, Hermione. I don't know why he would go and create a whole other life when he had a beautiful wife and two beautiful daughters to come home to. As for how you had no idea, did he give you any reason to believe that he was capable of this? That there was something going on?"

## Chapter 1: The Betrayal

Sunday, September 1st, 2013  
Fifteen years after the Battle for  
Hogwarts

Draco stood on platform 9-3/4 getting ready to send Scorpius off to Hogwarts for the first time. He was dreading it. He was afraid for Scorpius, afraid that the mistakes of his past would haunt his son as well, afraid of the labels and prejudices that would be given to Scorpius for being his son and a Malfoy. He would miss him being gone too. His home would be lonely without Scorpius.

"You're going to have to be strong this year. People will make

"I'm not beautiful, especially right now. I'm all blotchy and blubbery. Why are you flattering me?"

He cupped her face in both hands and wiped away the tears streaming down her face with his thumbs. He held her face so that she was forced to look in his eyes. "It's not flattery to tell a beautiful woman that she is beautiful. It's just speaking the truth. Don't let anyone ever make you think that you are anything other than beautiful. Even when you've been crying, you're still beautiful. You've had something terrible happen to you that's shattered everything you thought you knew, and it may take you some time to pull the pieces back together, but that doesn't change who you are. You are still a beautiful, smart, and courageous witch, who is an amazing mother. Other things may change in your life, but those things will not."

Hermione started crying in earnest, deep, grief-stricken sobs. Draco pulled on her shoulders and Hermione launched herself into Draco's chest, wrapped her arms around his neck, and sobbed into his chest. Draco picked her up and settled her more comfortably on his lap. He wrapped an arm tight around her waist, rested his chin on the top of her head, and stroked her hair with his other hand.

It broke his heart to hear her cry like this. He would have given all the money out of his vaults in Gringotts to keep her from ever having to cry again. He hated that she was crying over Weasley. He was furious that Weasley had betrayed her like this. He regretted not fighting for her years ago. She wouldn't be going through all this if he had.

Hermione pulled back to look at him once she had calmed down. Draco tenderly wiped away her tears. Hermione looked at the large wet spot on his dark gray shirt and cringed. "I'm sorry. I think I've rather soaked your shirt."

"Don't worry about it. It's just a shirt." Draco waved his hand and cast a quick, wandless *Scourgify* on the wet spot so Hermione wouldn't be uncomfortable leaning against him. He gently pressed her back down so that she lay against his chest again.

SELLING FANFICTION IS ILLEGAL.

DON'T DO IT.

IF YOU BOUGHT THIS, SHAME ON YOU.

IF YOU BOUND THIS YOURSELF. IM SO PROUD

OF YOU!

XOXO - SENNA

## Finding Hermione

"What am I supposed to do now? Where are Rose and I supposed to go? I can't be near Ron right now." She said against his chest.

"You can stay here for as long as you want."

She reared up off his chest to look at him. "You can't be serious. I can't stay here. What will people say? I don't want to impose on you and your life. We're not even friends." Hermione interrupted him.

"I don't give a damn what people say," he said vehemently, "and I'd like for you to consider me a friend."

"I'm sorry, that was rude. You've been so kind to both of us."

"Don't apologize. Please, say you'll stay."

"Why? Why should I stay with you?"

"You'll be safe here. Harry is the only one who knows where you are. There's no one here who's going to pressure you to do anything before you're ready or coerce you into making decisions while you're vulnerable. Your presence could never be an imposition. Say you'll stay, please. Say you'll stay and let me take care of you." He hoped he hadn't pushed her too far by asking that she stay.

"I can take care of myself. I'm not some damsel in distress."

"I know you can take care of yourself. You're the most capable witch I know. That doesn't mean that you should have to right now. Letting others care for you doesn't make you weak. Say you'll stay, please."

"I'll stay and thank you. Thank you for saving me on the platform and taking care of us and letting me soak your shirt."

\*\*\*

They ate dinner together that night. He got to know Rose better. She really was an adorable child. She climbed up into his lap after dinner and politely demanded that he read her a story. Hermione tried telling him that he didn't have to but he waved her off.

He took them to his study and had Rose pick out a book of Scorpius's. They read together on the couch until Rose fell

# FINDING HERMIONE

First published in 2017. Completed in 2023

Based on Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling

Relationship is Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy

Rating: Mature

Words: 217,753

Hits: 315,218

Kudos: 5,072

Typeset by Senna Stein 2025

For personal use only. Not for resale.

\*\*\*

*Thirteen years after the end of the Second Wizarding War, former Slytherin students are creating their own children's literature for the first time. As the new leaves, Hermione makes a startling discovery about her husband and the secret life he's been living. Draco witnesses Hermione's world shatter and comes to her rescue, helping her pick up the pieces and find herself again.*

asleep. He carried her up to Scorpius's room and they tucked her into his bed.

"Are you tired or would you like to go back down and have another drink with me?" he asked.

"I don't think I can sleep yet. Let's go get sloshed."

He laughed at her answer. "Let's see what we can do about that."

They sat watching the flames dance in the fireplace, not talking. Draco had given her more scotch. He refilled her glass when she emptied it and refilled his own as much as he refilled hers. They were both a little drunk. Hermione was chewing on her lip, deep in thought.

"Tell me what you're thinking," Draco finally said.

"My marriage is over. I'm not going to take him back. I don't care what his explanation is. Explanation! Oh, let me explain away cheating on you for at least twelve years and siring four children. I don't need a bloody explanation," raged Hermione.

Good, the anger was coming. Draco remained silent and let her rage. Hermione had grabbed one of his silver throw pillows and was beating it with her fists. He had a feeling that it would never be the same after she was done mauling it. He didn't care. She could rip the entire room to shreds if it made her feel better, though he doubted it would come to that. Hermione would sooner rip her own arms off before she damaged a book.

"That bastard! Thirteen years of marriage. Thirteen years of me supporting his stupid Quidditch dreams after he decided that being an Auror 'wasn't for him'. I practically raised our daughters by myself while he was touring with the team. I guess now I know that he wasn't touring and practicing as much as I thought. I never once suspected that he would be out screwing around. Gah, how could I have been so stupid and blind!"

Draco spoke now. He wasn't going to let her blame or disparage herself for this. Best to stop it now before it got worse. "You're not stupid. Quite the opposite. He was your husband. You trusted him. You trusted him to be true to you. He violated that trust. It doesn't make you stupid for trusting

## Finding Hermione

him. You should be able to trust your spouse with everything.”  
“I’m going to hex his balls off the next time I see him and anyone else who gets in my way,” she glared at him, knowing he had stopped her before from doing just as she threatened.

“Provided there are no children present this time, I may just help you. How about a nice *Slugulus Eructo* to hex? I’m sure he’ll have a fun time vomiting up slugs again,” Draco replied.

“Don’t make fun of me. I mean it.”

“So do I. He deserves whatever punishment you decide to throw at him and I plan on throwing a few myself while you’re not looking.”

She smiled at that. “That’s quite *Slytherin* of you.”

“Once a snake, always a snake,” he laughed.

Draco took the drink from Hermione’s hand and set it back down on the table and his with it. “It’s late and has been a long day. I think it’s time for bed. Do you need a *Calming Draught* or are you drunk enough to sleep okay tonight?” he asked.

“I’m probably drunk enough to sleep through a parade right now. Thanks for that. I’m gonna have one hell of a hangover tomorrow.”

He walked over to his desk, pulled two green vials out of a drawer, and handed her one. “Here. It’s *Hangover Cure*. Drink it now and you won’t have a hangover tomorrow.”

Draco drank his vial down and Hermione followed. He set the vials down next to the glasses. Tansy would clean it up in the morning.

Draco escorted Hermione up to her room and opened the door for her. Hermione hugged him goodnight as they stood just inside the doorway.

“Thanks for rescuing me today,” she said against his chest.

“No thanks are necessary. I’m glad I was able to be of service to you. Goodnight Hermione.” he ran his hands over her hair.

“Goodnight Draco.”

He went to bed and lay there staring up at the ceiling. She was here in his house. Just across the hall from him. She was leaving that lying, cheating bastard of a husband

# Finding Hermione



lepra.art

by ebookdragon

## *Chapter 2: The Daily Prophet*

Monday, September 2, 2013

Draco sat down to breakfast the next morning. Hermione and Rose hadn't made an appearance yet. A copy of The Daily Prophet was waiting for him beside his plate along with the day's morning post delivery. Tansy had the paper on top and Draco took this to mean that she believed that the paper was the most important thing to start his day with.

Draco unfolded the paper and groaned as he got a good look at the headline and photo on the front page. A collage of photos covered the most of the front page. It seemed they chose to rely on the old cliché, a photo tells a thousand words. The central photo was of him with his arm around Hermione's waist, keeping her from attacking Weasley. Arranged around it were other photos, a photo of him talking to her with his hands on her shoulders, a photo of him in Weasley's face, a photo with

## Finding Hermione

his handson Hermione's and Rose's shoulders right before they left.

Smaller photos of what must have happened after they left were circled around the ones of Hermione and him. It looked like Harry had yelled at Weasley after they left and another with Weasley leaving the platform with Lavender and their children. The article below read:

### **Trouble in Paradise**

**By Rita Skeeter**

There are rumors that there may be trouble in paradise between Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley, the two best friends of Harry Potter. Some incident occurred between the two after the Hogwarts' train left yesterday morning. A frighteningly, angry Hermione Granger was led away from the platform by interestingly enough, Draco Malfoy, with her youngest daughter in tow. Harry and Ginny Potter left shortly thereafter. A guilty-looking Ronald Weasley and an unknown woman left shortly after the Potters with 3 curiously, red-haired children. It is unknown what occurred between the two or the fate of their relationship. Neither party has been available for comment.

The article went on to detail the interesting facts about the couple's relationship and their respective careers. There was also speculation about his involvement in the whole incident since Hermione was seen leaving with him.

Great! This scandal was all she needed to deal with right now. He set the paper aside, disgusted and picked up the next bit of mail which, surprisingly enough, was from his mother. He opened the note and read:

Draco, I will be coming over for tea today at two. No excuses will be allowed so you might as well resign yourself to the fact

*Finding Hermione*

that I will be coming. I have already let Tansy know. ~Your loving mother.

Draco was setting the letter down just as Hermione walked in, grabbed a plate, and filled it with the food that was sitting at the sideboard.

"Good morning," Draco greeted Hermione.

"Good morning," Hermione responded glumly.

"Where's Rose at this morning?" Draco asked.

"Apparently, she and Tansy have already had their breakfast this morning and are playing princess ballerina right now," she said as she sat down in the chair he pulled out for her.

"Ah, I hope you don't mind. Tansy would do that with Scorpius most mornings. She probably did it on purpose this morning though."

"I don't mind. She really is a sweet elf. Why would she do it on purpose though?" Hermione asked.

"Check out this morning's Prophet." Draco handed the paper over to Hermione and watched her closely as she read the article. The blood drained from her face then flooded back as she read the article. The longer she read the redder she became. Draco blessed Tansy's foresight in keeping Rose occupied. He had just enough time to lock the door to the dining room and cast a silencing charm before she exploded.

"I'm so glad that my marriage has become the topic for salacious gossip. Does no one have any decency? How did they manage to get so many pictures? Frighteningly angry! I'll show her frighteningly angry. At least that insect managed to get her suppositions mostly correct. But then to act like you had something to do with any of what happened. The nerve of the woman. How dare she even try to allude that you had anything to do with what happened! I noticed she didn't try to say Lavender had anything to do with the revelations on the platform, didn't even mention her by name. Why not make

## Finding Hermione

it a little more accurate and attention grabbing and make the headline 'Ronald Weasley: Lying, Cheating Scum.' I'm going to trap her in a jar and leave her there this time."

Draco was a little surprised that she was so mad for his sake and somewhat confused about the jar. He reached over and placed his hand on hers to get her attention.

"Don't be mad for my sake. This isn't the worst thing that's ever been printed about me. It will blow over in a few days and people will find something else to gossip about. And I told you, I don't give a damn what people say... or print about me. You shouldn't either. Don't waste your time getting mad at the press."

"You really don't care what they say?"

"I wouldn't care if they said we went and had sex on the platform bench right after. They can say what they want. The people who believe that rubbish just don't matter to me. If the people I care about want to know what's going on, they'll ask me about it."

"Like anyone would believe you would have sex with me."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Come on. Have you seen yourself in a mirror lately? You're handsome, rich, and a reformed bad boy. It's like a fucking triffecta. What would a guy like you want with me?"

"First off, you think I'm handsome?" He grinned and wagged his eyebrows at her.

"Shut up Malfoy," she said turning an interesting shade of scarlet.

"Second, I told you yesterday that I thought you were beautiful. You don't seem to believe me, so let me put it bluntly for you. You are beautiful. I have thought you are beautiful for almost twenty years. You are the smartest person I know. And you're so fucking good, the rest of us lesser mortals just hope to bask in your light. Now there's a fucking triffecta."

"And third, what would a guy like me want with you? Everything." Draco continued before she could comment. Her mouth hung open. He might have said too much too soon, but he couldn't just sit there and let her think that about herself. Was she blind? Had no one ever told her she was beautiful?

"I don't know what to say. You can't mean it. Twenty years? You were so awful to me."

"I meant every word. You know thirteen year old boys are idiots and I was the king of them. Did Weasley never tell you that you were beautiful?"

"No, not really. He said I was pretty once in a while."

"Then he's a blind idiot and it's a good thing you're rid of him. He can't have been much of a challenge intellectually for you. What did you see in him anyway?"

"He wasn't, our conversations were usually very dull. He was my best friend though."

"So was Harry and I didn't see you running off to marry him."

"He was in love with Ginny. I guess it was just easy being with Ron. We all went through so much and it was just easy being with him."

That explained it. He couldn't fault her for choosing someone easy and comfortable after the war. He'd done the same thing. Astoria was his parents' choice and after Hermione married Weasley, he had done the easy thing too.

"Tell me about the jar," Draco said changing the subject. Hermione looked grateful for the change of subject. "I trapped Rita in a jar at the end of fourth year for writing all those lies about Harry. I let her go after we got off the train. I blackmailed her a few times over the years too."

"So you figured out she was an animagus then," he chuckled.

"Yes, it was your fault really. I saw you talking to her one day. It looked like you were talking on a walkie talkie, but I knew

## Finding Hermione

those didn't work inside of Hogwarts. It took a while to put together, but that's what started my suspicions."

"They don't call you the brightest witch of our age for nothing." And he toasted her with his coffee. Hermione laughed at that and toasted him back.

"My mother sent a note saying that she will be coming over for tea today and refused to take no for an answer. You don't have to join us if you don't want to."

"Oh, I'm glad she's coming, at least I won't have to go out to meet her."

Draco was a little astounded by her response. "Meet her?" he asked.

Hermione looked at him sheepishly. "Your mother and I meet at least once a week for tea. We've been doing it for years," she quietly informed him.

Draco was flabbergasted and speechless by this announcement. "When did this start?"

"She sent me a note about a year after the war, inviting me to tea, wanting to make amends. I think she was just released from house arrest. I agreed to meet her and told her there was nothing she needed to apologize for. She felt guilty for what happened at the Manor. Wanted to apologize for what Bellatrix did." Hermione rubbed the spot on her arm where the scar was still etched into her skin. "I told her there was nothing she needed to be forgiven for, but she had it unconsciously, if she needed it. We started meeting every week for tea after that."

Draco reached over and took her hand in both of his. "Thank you. You have no idea how much it means to me that you would do that. To meet with her and forgive her. Then be a friend to her. She was so lonely and depressed and haunted by what happened in her home. None of her 'so-called' friends wanted anything to do with her. She seemed to pull out of

it after she was released from house arrest. I thought it was just from being able to leave that place, but now I know it was because of you and your kindness. Thank you. You gave me back my mother." Draco brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. He set her hand back on the table, a little embarrassed by his outburst.

"I'm glad she wrote me. She became like a mother to me. I hope you don't mind that," Hermione said. He caught her rubbing the knuckles he had kissed, gazing down at her hand. "I could never mind something that makes you both so happy. But what about your own mother or Mrs. Weasley?"

"I lost my parents in the war. I obliterated any memory they had of me and sent them to Australia when the Death Eaters started attacking Muggle-born families. I knew they would be a target because of me. I hoped to be able to reverse the spell, but I didn't understand then how much children make up so much of who you are. I wasn't able to reverse the spell without damaging their minds, so I left them be. They seem happy at least. As for Mrs. Weasley, I knew that though she may love me, her love wasn't unconditional and we butted heads a lot. Your mother was just always there for me to listen and offer advice, but she never pushed me to take it."

He'd had no idea that she had lost her parents and that she had been the one who had taken them away from her. She had sacrificed herself to keep her parents safe. He understood the sacrifices you made for family. He had sacrificed a part of his soul to protect his mother. "You are amazing. I hope you know that. Willing to sacrifice so much just to protect those you love. Willing to forgive when no one would have blamed you if you were vicious to those who were a part of the war." "I have a feeling you made a similar sacrifice. I've seen the legislation that you've put through over the years. You've been leading the way to bring about change. Whatever choices you

## Finding Hermione

made in the past, you're a good man now."

"Thank you, Hermione," he said quietly.

They fell into silence then and continued to eat their breakfast. Draco was astounded by everything she had just told him. She had seen the work he did. She thought he was a good man. She thought he was handsome. He had to fight to keep a stupid grin off his face.

He would have been content to love her from afar for the rest of his life if that incident on the platform hadn't happened, but he had to admit he had enough Slytherin in him to take advantage of the opportunity that had presented itself. He would make her his and make sure she never regretted it. He would gladly take the gift that Weasley so willingly threw away.

"Why don't you make a list of the things you would like from home for you and Rose and I'll go get it for you." Draco said as they finished eating.

"Thank you. I know it's cowardly but I don't think I could face Ron right now."

"It's not cowardly. Take the time you need. You don't need to be around him right now anyway."

"Who got the things that were in my room this morning?"

"I sent Tansy over last night to grab you both a change of clothes."

"Thank you."

"Think nothing of it."

\*\*\*

His mother came for tea at two. After greeting him with a kiss on the cheek, his mother told him that his presence was neither needed nor wanted. Feeling bemused about being unceremoniously kicked out of his own drawing room, Draco went to check on Rose and Tansy before he left to get their things

And it's my house too! I'm not going anywhere until I damn well feel like it," he yelled right back at her.

"You are out of your mind! How many times do I have to tell you this? I. AM. NOT. STAYING. WITH. YOU. End of story. I will find a way to divorce you. There is no force on Earth that will stop me from ridding myself from you."

Ron stood up with his wand in hand, "Hermione, you leave me no choice. OBLIV..."

"STUPEFY!"

Ron went flying over the couch. The knick knacks on the sofa table crashed to the floor and Ron hit the floor behind the couch, sprawled out unconscious. Draco had hit him pretty hard with the spell. He was so angry he had trouble keeping himself under control. Draco lifted the vanishing spell on himself, stepped in front of Hermione, and tipped her chin up so he could see her eyes. They were glistening with unshed tears, but her eyes weren't clouded or dazed from an obliviation spell.

"He really meant to take my memories away." She broke down and started crying.

Draco knelt down in front of her and pulled her into his arms. They knelt on the carpet in front of the fireplace holding onto one another. He had almost lost her. If he had been seconds slower, he shuddered at the thought. God, he wanted to kiss her, he was so relieved that she hadn't been harmed.

"We'll figure something out. We'll find a way to get you a divorce from him. You'll never have to deal with him again," he whispered to her as he stroked her hair.

"Get me out of here. Please," she begged him.

Draco picked Hermione up bridal style and apparated them back to Spinner's End into his study. His mother heard the pop when he arrived and came into the study. "How did it go?" she said as she walked into the room, then came rushing toward Draco when she saw that he was carrying Hermione, "Is she injured? Did he hurt her?"

"As if I would allow him to injure her. But no, it didn't go

well." Draco sat down on the sofa with Hermione on his lap. His mother sat down in the armchair across from him. Hermione still had her arms around his neck and her head curled under his chin. He rubbed her back soothingly and gripped her knee with his other hand. He couldn't stop touching her. He had to keep reassuring himself that she was here and safe. "You're safe. I've got you," he whispered to her.

"It was so much worse than I thought it would be," Draco started to relate to his mother, "Weasley got there early. I think he was hoping to obliviate her as she came through the fireplace to avoid the whole confrontation. Then came the biggest load of horse shit I've ever heard. He blamed her for cheating. Then for getting pregnant and keeping him from that slag and her brat. And as if that wasn't enough, he tried telling her she was just going to have to get used to him having a mistress and another brood of kids, because he wasn't going to give her a divorce. He tried to obliviate her when she told him off." At this he pulled her closer to him to comfort himself as much as her.

"That bastard! The gall of the man. You are not to blame for his actions. Do you hear me, Hermione? The fault is his and that woman's and we will find a way to get you a divorce. Now I don't think you should go back to your cottage. You won't be able to ward it against him, since you bought the house together. You and Rose can come live at the Manor with me."

"They're staying here, Mother. Rose is already comfortable and would miss Tansy."

"Oh, well if that's what Hermione wants. Is that what you want, dear?" his mother asked.

Hermione seemed to become aware that she was curled in Draco's lap in front of his mother and being spoken to. She stood up awkwardly, red faced with embarrassment, and unsure what to say or do. Draco looked up at her, "If you're getting a drink, would you mind getting me one too, please?"

Hermione nodded and crossed the room. He watched her as she poured some scotch into a glass, slammed it down, refilled the glass and poured another one for him.

She walked back over to them and handed Draco his drink and sat on the other end of the couch. "I'll be fine now. Everything that happened was a bit more than I expected to have to deal with today. Thank you for your kind offer, Narcissa, but I agree with Draco. We should stay here. Rose seems happy here."

"Well, good. I will rest easier knowing Draco is nearby to keep you both safe."

Draco expected more of an argument from his mother. He was pleased though that given the choice, Hermione had chosen to stay with him.

\*\*\*

His mother agreed to join them for dinner. They all gathered around the too large dining table. Draco was at the head of the table, as usual. Hermione was on his right and his mother on his left. Rose and Tansy were seated beside Hermione. Tansy helped Rose put food on her plate as the dishes levitated around them.

"I think I should return to work tomorrow and Rose has school starting tomorrow," Hermione said.

"You're starting the primary school on a Wednesday?" his mother asked.

"Yes, it gives the students time to learn the hang of things and the teachers get an idea of who's going to need more or less help with the curriculum. I took your suggestion not to start the school year immediately after the older students left for Hogwarts. I thought maybe a few days in between would be good," she replied.

Hermione, as Head of the Department of Magical Education, had started a primary school for magical children to learn necessary skills before they went to Hogwarts. It also gave children a chance to socialize with other children their own age before they were sorted into houses at Hogwarts.

Draco had been following her progress ever since she made the proposal to the Wizengamot. He had backed the idea, forced his friends on the council to vote for it, and then funneled money

talking. We got roaring drunk and one thing led to another and we ended up in bed together.

I didn't see her for a few months after that. I didn't have any intention of seeing her again, but she sent me a letter saying she needed to speak with me. I met her at her townhouse. She told me that she was pregnant with Fred. I was going to go home and tell you, but then you told me you were pregnant with Minerva.

I started playing with the Cannons after that. I lied to you about how much I made, so that I could also take care of Lav. You had a good job and you were good at managing things. You didn't really need me. You fought with me about everything. It was just easy being with Lav. She thought it was great that I was playing for the Cannons. She didn't complain that I had to be gone. She made me feel like she needed me.

You always seemed mad or disappointed in me. I enjoyed being there with Lav and Fred, but I knew I needed to be there for you and Minerva. I was torn. They were both my children. Lav said it was okay, that I could come as much as I wanted. I had already cheated once. Didn't really see any point in denying myself. I wanted her and she wanted me. Then Lydia, Arthur, and Daniel came along.

I don't see why anything should change. Lav's been fine with it for twelve years. You were fine, too. It's not like you have anyone else, since your parents are gone. You can bring Rose home and we can get things back to normal."

Draco had to grab onto her arm to keep her from lunging at him. "You have got to be kidding me! You expect me to stay married to you and just accept Lavender as what, my sister wife! You've been cheating on me for twelve fucking years. There is no way I'm staying with you. Get out of my house! Get out! We are done!" she screamed at him.

"You don't have any choice but to accept it. You're married to me and that's not going to change. Couples don't divorce in the Wizarding World. I don't care what the Muggles do. You can accept this willingly or not but it's not changing anything.

walked behind her soundlessly and touched her shoulder to let her know where he was. The angle gave him a good view of the living room and left his back protected against a wall.

"I want you to try to sit like this when he comes. I can see the whole room from behind you. Don't turn your back on him, don't let him touch you, and don't get up and start pacing. He'll be here soon. Do you have any questions?"

"What if he comes to the door?" she queried.

"Open the door wide and don't block the doorway," he replied.

At that moment, the fire in the fireplace turned green and Ron walked into the room brushing ash off his shoulders. "Ah. Hermione you're here early."

"As are you. You're five minutes early. Have a seat," she said stiffly.

Ron sat down on the sectional. He tried to scoot close to her but she stopped him with a glare. "I'm sorry Hermione about the train station. I didn't mean for you to find out about Lav and me."

"That way or at all? Did you think you could just blithely keep running around behind my back with her and I would never find out?"

"Well no, but I..."

"Were you ever going to tell me?" Hermione interrupted. At this Weasley blushed scarlet. "I take that as a no then. Tell me what happened. When it started and why it started. And what exactly you expect as far as our relationship is concerned."

Draco placed his hand on her shoulder, silently giving her his support. He hated that she asked those questions. The answers, whatever they were, were going to hurt her, badly. He knew that she would need the answers, no matter the hurt it caused. It would eat at her, then not knowing. She wouldn't be able to move past the hurt until she knew the truth.

"Well, uh...it, umm started after we had that argument after I quit Auror training. I left the house and went to The Boar's Head in Hogsmeade. Lav was there and we were drinking and

into the project when funding was slow in coming. He made sure she never knew how much he was behind her success. She had done the work. He had just made sure that it was possible, but he thought she wouldn't see it that way if she knew.

"What time are you leaving for work in the morning?" Draco asked.

"I'll drop Rose off at 7:45 and go to work after I'm sure that the school is running smoothly on its first day."

"I'll go with you. I haven't had a chance to check the school out yet."

Slytherin with Scorpius because they liked him and didn't want to be in the same house as Fred Brown, Ron's son, I assume. The Sorting Hat also knew he was a Weasley, so now Minerva wants to know how he's related to her. I guess I'll have to tell her on Saturday. Did you hear from Scorpius?"

"Yes, he wrote to inform me that he's in Slytherin with the Baby Snakes and made two new friends. He had a run in with Fred too. Fred called him 'Death Eater Scum' and James stood up for him. Then he caught Minerva when Fred tripped her in the Great Hall. It seems they're already watching out for one another."

"I'm not liking what I'm hearing about Fred. He's Minerva's brother and probably knows it, yet he's bullying her to the point that she doesn't even want to be in the same house as him. I'm glad she has James and now, Scorpius. What are the Baby Snakes?"

"You'll meet them on Saturday."

He fire called his mother and had her come over to watch Rose. Hermione questioned her about what Draco had told her and found that Draco hadn't exaggerated.

\*\*\*

They left for her cottage at half past one. Weasley wasn't there. It didn't look like he had been staying there either. He cast the vanishing spell on himself so they wouldn't be caught unawares.

"Where are you going to be? Where are you now? This is weird. I feel like I'm talking to myself," Hermione babbled nervously.

He grabbed her hand and held it. "I'm right here still in front of you. I will be behind you the whole time. It would help if you were seated though. Your pacing and propensity to launch yourself at people could make it difficult to protect you, so please don't do that."

He led her over to the smaller seat on the sectional and sat her down so that her back was in the corner of the chair. He

you cried about that idiot. I get a say because if I hadn't put it together, you'd be going to meet him and get your beautiful brains obliterated again. I get a say because I'm not willing to risk your safety so that you can have your way. And lastly, I get a say because you don't have to go through this alone. I'm here for you and Minerva and Rose. No matter what, no matter when, and no matter where. I'll always be there for you and your girls. So get used to the idea because it's not going to change," his voice rising until he was practically bellowing at her by the time he was done.

"Fine. You can come since I'm obviously not going to be able to stop you. You know I've realized something about you. There are times where you're so chivalrous and kind. Then there are times where you're an overbearing, overprotective caveman. And times like now where you're both and I don't know whether to be elated or frustrated with you. Do you really mean it?" she replied huffily.

He was delighted by the idea that she might relate to him. He liked frustrating her too. It was always entertaining.

He grinned at her, "Every word. You're not alone anymore. Since you've decided to see reason, eat up. It's going to be a long day." He went back to reading the paper and passed her the sections he had read before she got there.

She huffed at him, but ate her breakfast and read the paper, studiously ignoring him. He smiled into his coffee. He didn't think she realized that she didn't think about the coming confrontation with Weasley because she was thinking about him. He was going to win her. It would take time, but he knew it would be worth it. He had waited this long for her. Waiting a little while longer wasn't going to kill him.

"You have a letter from Minerva." Draco handed Hermione the letter that had been delivered with the morning post. Hermione drank her coffee as she read the letter, then set it down.

"Apparently, our children have met and are already best friends. Minerva and James asked the Sorting Hat to put them in

## Chapter 4: Always

Wednesday, September 4, 2013

Rose was dropped off at school for her first day. They walked around the school, meeting the teachers, administrators, and parents. It looked like it was going to be a great success. The school was busy with students and parents. Draco watched as Hermione spoke with the teachers. People listened when she spoke. Everyone seemed to gravitate toward her. She didn't seem to notice any of this.

Hermione and Draco each went to their own offices once they arrived at the Ministry. As a Malfoy, he had a hereditary seat on the council and unlike the other wizarding houses with seats he took his responsibilities seriously. Draco used his position to ensure the past never repeated itself. He didn't want children to have to fight and die in another war that old men dreamed up. He didn't want his son to have to live in a world where the worth of a witch or wizard was determined by the purity of their blood. Hermione had shown time and again that blood purity didn't mean anything.

Theo Nott was one of his few friends who also took his responsibilities seriously. They worked together on the council and had lunch together most days. Today they decided to go to a Muggle restaurant in London so they could have a conversation without being recognized. Draco was still a person of interest to the Daily Prophet because of his involvement in the incident on the Hogwarts platform.

Theo and Draco talked for a while about cases and bills that

were coming before the Wizengamot. Draco knew that Theo was working up to ask him about what he really wanted to know. Theo was also the only person who knew the depth of his feelings for Hermione. He knew his mother guessed but he had never actually told her.

Theo idly mocked Hermione one day in their fourth year after he had caught Draco watching her during lunch. He was trying to get a reaction out of Draco and his efforts got him a facer. Draco was horrified by his reaction and Theo used his guilt to get Draco to tell him what was going on. Draco had confessed everything to Theo.

Draco had developed a crush on Hermione in the third year when she knocked his block off. At the Yule Ball in fourth year, he fell in love with her. She had become more to him than just a know-it-all Gryffindor. Draco struggled with his feeling for her all through third and fourth year. His father taught him that people like her were beneath him. How could she be beneath him when she bested him at everything except flying and Quidditch and that was probably only because she had no interest in those things? He seriously started questioning his father's beliefs after that. Then the return of Voldemort and war had left too much strife and devastation for him to make amends and he did so much during the war that he never felt worthy of her love.

"How's she doing?" Theo finally asked.

"As well as can be expected," Draco gave his standard answer.

"She really had no idea what was going on?"

"Do you think she would've stayed with him if she'd known?"

"No, she doesn't strike me as the type to just roll over and take that from anyone."

"No. She was about five seconds away from hexing his balls off, her words, before I stepped in. As much as I would've loved to see the weasel lose his balls, I didn't think Rose should see her mother hurt her father."

"So, when is she going to go back to him? She's married to the two-timing git and divorce isn't something that's done in the

everything else, my husband would also oblige me," Hermione protested disbelievingly.

"I don't expect you to just take my word on this. I know you well enough to know you're going to have to hear it from the Weasel's mouth. I spoke with my mother about my suspicions. I thought she might be able to tell me I was wrong."

"Of course she told you that you were wrong. There's just no way, Draco. You're being paranoid."

"Will you let me finish? She said that you had brought up some concerns in the past about Weasley being gone a lot and that you were going to confront him. Then the next week you would have no idea what she was talking about. She said it happened quite a few times but she wasn't sure what was going on or how to help you or even if you needed help. Once apparently, you told her you thought she was cheating. Then the next week everything was fine. She thought maybe you were turning a blind eye for the sake of your girls."

"What? I don't remember any of this."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. That's why I'm not letting you be around him by yourself. He can't be trusted."

"So, you're just gonna sit there by me on the couch and expect him to tell us that he's been stealing my memories for the last thirteen years?" Hermione asked.

"No. He's not likely to open up if he knows I'm there. I'm very adept at vanishing spells. We'll get there early and I'll vanish while you wait for him. If he looks like he's going to try anything, I'll stun him," Draco informed her.

"I can take care of myself. I don't need you dashing in like some knight errant," she replied grumpily.

"So, now I'm a knight errant. Earlier I was an overbearing caveman. Which is it? And you're still not going by yourself. Get used to the reality that I'm going. You may be willing to risk it but I'm not."

"What makes you think you get a say in this?"

"I get a say because I'm the one who took you away on that platform. I get a say because I've held you in my arms while

"You are a perfectly capable witch, but you're still not going on your own," he replied as if he were talking to a recalcitrant child.

"Why?" she came up to where he was sitting and started poking him in the chest, "You haven't given me one good reason. And why are you acting like an overbearing caveman about this?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you why."

Hermione grabbed a plate of food and sat down in the chair he held out for her. She was mad at him and his caveman attitude, as she put it. She would have to find a way to get over it. He was sure that Weasley was going to try something and he wasn't going to let her go in there alone.

"Explain," she said once she was seated.

"It was something you said the first night. You asked how you could've not known anything about this?"

"Yes, well it did come as a shock."

"That's just it though. You're the smartest person I've ever met, witch or wizard. So I find it a little hard to believe that the brightest witch of our generation had no idea that her husband of thirteen years had a mistress and a pack of kids," Draco told her.

"You don't believe me. You thought that it was what, all a show? Something we just made up for a laugh."

"Now hold on just a minute. I'm not saying that I don't believe you."

"Then what are you saying? What other explanation could there be?"

"Come on, Hermione. You're too smart not to notice something was going on. You're not the type of witch to just ignore that sort of thing. And Weasley doesn't strike me as the type that would be able to sneak around that well for that long. So taking those things into consideration, what is the only other possibility available?"

"No. No, it can't be. You're wrong. He wouldn't. He just wouldn't. You can't seriously expect me to believe that on top of

Warding World. She'll just have to find a way to live with it and you'll have to give her back to him."

"Over my dead body is she going back to that wanker. Do you seriously think I would just send her back to that bastard?" he stated vehemently, his hands curling into fists on the table.

"So you still love her then. Even after all this time?"

"Always," replied Draco without hesitation.

"What does she want to do?"

"She says she's not going back to him. She and the girls deserve to be treated better than an option. You should have seen the confrontation between her and Weasley yesterday. He treated her like shit and has for years. That asshole had the audacity to blame her for his affair. She told him she wasn't going back to him. He tried telling her she was whether she wanted to or not. He thought she was alone and he could say or do anything he wanted. He tried to obliterate her when she wouldn't comply."

"Do you need help hiding the body?" Theo asked, sardonically.

"Not this time, but I'll keep your offer in mind."

"So, divorce really is her only option, unless she's willing to brave living in sin with you for the rest of her life."

"As much as I would be willing to live in sin with her, I don't want to leave Weasley with that kind of power over her. Divorce didn't sound too bad from how she explained it. According to her, divorce may be something that isn't done in the Wizarding World, but it's done frequently in the Muggle world. She says that families benefit more by divorce than unhappy couples being forced to stay together. The couples learn to work together for the benefit of the children. I don't know how well Weasley is going to work with her on raising the girls, but at least they won't be fully under his power."

"But mate, we're not in the Muggle world," Theo said.

"I know. She may need our help convincing the Wizengamot to grant her a divorce."

"Well she has my vote. No matter what's needed."

## Finding Hermione

"Thanks mate. Means a lot."

"Let's get the Snakes together for drinks this week. Bring Hermione. She might like hanging out with girls," Theo suggested.

"Sounds like a good idea. I'll drag her out if I have to."

"So, are you going to pursue her?"

"Eventually. It's too soon to even think about trying to convince her to be in a relationship with me. I won't deny that's what I want but I know she needs time to heal first."

\*\*\*

Draco stopped by Hermione's office in the Department of Magical Education after his lunch with Theo. He had a feeling his arrival there caused a flurry of excitement. He walked through the warren of cubicles to the back where a dragon-looking woman guarded Hermione's office. He looked at the nameplate on her desk, Methuselah Edvard. Methuselah had a sharp, pinched face with a hook nose. Perched atop her nose rested a pair of red cat-eye glasses. Her gray hair was pulled back into a severe bun.

"Is Mrs. Granger available, Mrs. Edvard?" Draco asked politely. He thought it would be better to get on her good side. She would keep Hermione from him if he angered her.

"Do you have an appointment?" She asked, frowning up at him.

"No. I came to make sure she ate lunch." Honesty would also probably be best when dealing with this woman.

"I took her lunch in thirty minutes ago but knowing her, it's still sitting on her desk," she replied disapprovingly.

"I'd like to rectify that situation. And I will be coming to get her for lunch from now on. What time do you have her lunch hour scheduled?"

"Noon to one, Mr. Malfroy. It'll be good for her to get out of

## Chapter 3: Obliviate

Tuesday, September 3, 2013

"I'm going to go talk to Ron today," Hermione announced as she came into the dining room on her third day staying with him, "would you mind watching Rose for me? I know it's a lot to ask, but I'm not comfortable taking her to Ginny or Molly right now."

"Normally, I would be fine watching Rose, however you won't be going to see Weasley alone, so I am otherwise occupied. I'm sure my mother would be happy to come over to watch Rose," stated Draco, closing the morning paper to give Hermione his full attention.

"What do you mean I'm not going alone? I can talk to Ron on my own. I'm not helpless. Besides I don't think it would make the situation better if you were there lurking about," argued Hermione.

"I don't lurk and you're not going by yourself," Draco stated calmly.

"I am perfectly capable of confronting my pathetic excuse of a husband about his mistress and brood of children on my own," Hermione was getting angry at his insistence. She had abandoned getting breakfast to glare at him. He loved to see a little of her fire reemerge.

"Draco, you did all this? It's wonderful, but you didn't have to go through all the trouble. And how's she supposed to sleep with all this going on?"

"Oh, well it wasn't any trouble. All the walls were already enchanted. I just needed to come up with a picture for them and it changes depending on the time of day. At bedtime, the wall darkens and there are stars on the ceiling. I didn't know if Rose was scared of the dark. Do you like it? It is okay?"

"Yes, it's beautiful, Draco. Thank you."

"Thank you for my room, Draco. It's the bestest room in the whole world."

"You're welcome. Every princess needs her own special room."

"You hear that mummy. I'm a princess!"

"Oh, look at the time. Draco, why don't you walk me down?" His mother interrupted whatever protest Hermione was about to make.

He could see it on her face. Draco left Hermione and Rose in Rose's room. Rose was chattering away, pointing out everything that caught her eye. Hermione was looking on with a smile. He looked one last time before he closed the door and walked his mother out.

She said goodbye, kissed him on the cheek. Her last words before she left astounded Draco. "You have my approval you know." And then she was gone.

the office. I tell that girl she works too hard."

"Thank you, Mrs. Edvard. If I may?"

"Go right on in, dearie," she said with a smile.

Draco walked into Hermione's office. She was sitting at her desk with her lunch untouched pouring over a file. "Mrs. Edvard, I'm afraid I haven't finished lunch yet."

"Yes, that much is apparent," Draco said as he walked in and sat down in the chair facing her desk.

"Draco, what are you doing here? How did you get past Mrs. Edvard?" Hermione asked him distractedly.

"I came to see if you ate lunch today. Obviously, I was correct in checking up on you. You need to eat."

"I know, but there's just so much to do."

"You'll burn yourself out if you keep working so hard. Take a break. Eat."

Hermione acquiesced quicker than he thought she would. She must have been really hungry. "What have you been doing today?" she asked between bites of her sandwich.

"Looked over budgets until my eyes crossed and I was almost in a coma. Picked a fight with Shacklebolt about the vacant Wizengamot seats. Then I went to lunch with Theo. I had a feeling when I got back that you had never left so here I am. I would've come to get you had I realized beforehand that you work through lunch."

"How did you really get past Mrs. Edvard? No one gets past her without an appointment. People are scared to even ask her if I'm in."

"Malfoy charm," he replied with a grin.

She snorted at him. "Right. Is she out there in a full body bind or something?"

"I'm wounded," he clutched at his heart theatrically, "I don't know why anyone would be scared of her. She called me dearie and let me stroll right on in."

"Seriously, what did you do to her?" she asked as she finished her sandwich.

"I'm not joking. Malfoy's are known for doing what's

necessary to get our way. Occasionally that means being nice and polite to the dragons who guard the treasure we seek."

Hermione burst out laughing. "Silver-tongued snake. I've eaten my lunch now get out of my office, so I can get some work done." She got up and they both walked to the door.

"I'll come get you at four so we can go get Rose," he said and closed the door behind him.

"Mission accomplished, Mrs. Edvard. Thank you for your help. I'll be back at four to take her home," Draco said as he passed her desk.

"See you then, dearie."

\*\*\*

The rest of Draco's day passed uneventfully. At fifteen minutes to four he left his office on level two and took the elevator up to level four. He walked into Hermione's office for the second time that day.

"Back again, dearie," Mrs. Edvard said by way of greeting.

"Yes, ma'am. Is she ready or do I need to go help her find the door?" Draco asked with a smile.

"Best go in and see if you can oust her."

Draco walked quietly into the room and shut the door. Hermione was so engrossed in her work she didn't hear him come in. Tendrils of hair had come loose from her bun since he was last there. She was chewing on her lip as she read through a file. She opened another file and Draco decided they would be there all day if he didn't intervene.

"It's time to go get Rose and head home," Draco said.

"I just have a few more things to sign and then I'll be ready to go," Hermione replied, not looking up at him.

"Do they have to be turned in by tomorrow?" he asked.

"No, they're not due until next week," said Hermione.

"Then, they can wait until tomorrow. We can take Rose

cookies before he sat down.

Rose came over to Draco with all her drawings and crawled into his lap to tell him about each one. Draco slipped her cookies when he thought no one was looking. There were drawings of herself, Hermione, and her sister standing outside their cottage, without Weasley, which he thought odd. There were also drawings of her and Tansy in tiaras and tutus, unicorns, and even pictures of him and his mother. He tried reaching for more cookies, but his mother slid the plate out of his reach. Apparently, he hadn't been fooling anyone. He looked up to find them both smiling at him.

"Would you like to go hang your pictures up? I have something to show you, too," Draco said to Rose. He escorted them all back upstairs to the children's loft where they stuck Rose's drawings on the wall with a sticking charm.

Draco looked at Hermione sheepishly and started rubbing the back of his neck. "I redecorated a room for Rose and I kind of went overboard. I hope you don't mind." Then he opened the door and they all went inside.

Rose immediately started squealing in delight and running around the room. Rose's unicorns were placed around the room. Her bed in one corner looked like Cinderella's carriage, all silver and shimmery with a pumpkin roundness to it and a pink bedspread. Sitting on the bed was Rose's princess dolly with a new addition, a green stuffed dragon.

The walls though, they were the truly magical part of the room. They were a living mural, enchanted to look like a magical forest with a lake. Animals wandered out of the forest to take drinks at the lake. A herd of unicorns was running around one side of the wall. There was a baby dragon, similar to the stuffed one on the bed, flying around the trees of the forest.

"Draco, this is beautiful," his mother breathed out in wonder.

## Finding Hermione

staircase divided the house. Scorpius and Rose's room faced each other with a loft in between the two and another two bedrooms along the third wall, opening into the loft facing the stairway. The four bedrooms and loft were meant to be the children's area of the house. When he expanded the house, he had hoped for all of those rooms to be occupied, but with the death of Astoria those dreams had never come to fruition. On the other side of the landing were two master suites, also facing one another. One was Draco's and, for the moment, the other was Hermione's. He hoped that one day it would go back to being a guest suite and those extra children's bedrooms would be filled, but that dream would take time and patience.

Draco and Tansy worked together to unpack and redecorate Rose's room. Once they were both satisfied, Draco left to go see how Hermione and Rose were doing and see if this mother was still here. Tansy went to go unpack Hermione's things. They were all still in the drawing room, chatting and eating cookies. Rose was lying in front of the fireplace drawing while Hermione and his mother were chatting with each other and talking with Rose about her drawings. It was a very domestic scene and Draco found himself wanting to see it more often. Hermione looked a little more at peace after her talk with his mother. She had been crying, but whatever his mother said had helped Hermione feel better.

"Draco, don't just stand there lurking in the doorway. Come in, sit down, and have some cookies," his mother said.

"Hello, Mother. Hello, Hermione." Draco walked into the room, stood behind the sofa. He squeezed Hermione's shoulder as he leaned over the back of the sofa to kiss his mother on the cheek.

"Hello, Rose." He said as he walked by her to take a seat in one of the wing chairs beside the sofa and snagged some

to the park before dinner. I haven't really shown you around. Come on, let's go." Draco took the file from her and set it back in her 'To Do' bin. He helped her into her coat and took her briefcase from her.

Draco escorted Hermione out of her office. They both said goodnight to Mrs. Edvard and headed to the main floor of the Ministry and apparated to Rose's school, then home.

Draco sent them all upstairs to change into comfortable clothes and he changed as well into dark jeans, light blue t-shirt, navy jacket, and black sneakers. Hermione came out of her room wearing a red jacket and jeans. Rose was already bounding down the stairs with a purple tutu over her jeans and purple jacket.

They walked out the front door onto a quiet street lined with townhouses grouped in threes with small alleys separating them. The houses were painted soft colors, mostly whites, creams, blues, and grays.

At the end of the street was a park with a river running along its border. They walked along the path toward the playground. Once it was in sight, Rose ran ahead to play with the other children. Draco and Hermione walked around the playground, keeping an eye on Rose, but mostly just walking in circles.

"This area looks so new. Has it always looked like this?" Hermione asked.

"Have you never been to Cokeworth before?" he asked and Hermione shook her head no, "You know that I inherited Spinner's End from Professor Snape. This was his family home. Cokeworth was a dying industrial town when I inherited the house after the war. That river over there was so polluted it was black. There was almost nothing and no one left here. I basically used one of the Mafloy vaults to buy the town. Cheaply, I might add with the promise to revitalize the area. I got rid of the factories that were polluting the area and hired project managers. We came up with a plan to clean the town up and turn it into a nice, wizarding suburb."

"We had to create almost a whole town from scratch and

then nice people from the wizarding community to come live here. We started with the city center. Revitalized the government buildings, created shops, restaurants, pubs, and a few nightclubs. Then we worked outward on the homes, creating diversified neighborhoods."

"So you bought a town because you inherited a house. Seems a bit greedy. What about the people that lived here?" she asked.

"I bought a town because it wasn't fit to live in. If I was going to live here, it needed to be more habitable. As for the people that were living here, I bought their houses from them for a generous amount and told them they could buy their homes back from me for the same amount they sold it to me once I finished renovations. I made nothing on those deals. I did make a lot selling the abandoned renovated houses and the businesses."

"Look around you and see what my greed has accomplished. I made a large profit from my greed, but didn't take advantage of these people. I sold them good houses and businesses in a nice area. My greed took this dirty, dying town and made a thriving economic center. My greed created this town where magical folk can raise their families in comfort and safety. No one else could have created this. No one else would have cared to try."

"It is very lovely. I agree that no one else would have bothered with creating this, let alone have the resources to do so. I noticed that Spinner's End is much larger than the town houses around it. Did you do that?"

"Yes, the original Spinner's End was very small, especially compared to what I was used to. The town houses on one side were abandoned, so I created one large home out of the three."

"I do like what you did with it. It is very 'Lord of the Manor' but not cold and stiff like you would expect from that type of home. It's very warm and welcoming."

"I'm glad you like it. It's almost dinnertime. Let's grab Rose and head back."

The three headed back home with Rose in between them.

stood back so Draco could look inside. Harry burst out laughing again at the look on Draco's face.

"How many unicorns does she have?" Draco asked. There looked to be twenty unicorns of all different sizes in the room, even one that looked big enough to ride on. Draco started shrinking the unicorns so they would fit in the bag. Harry went to grab the backpack from Ginny and they started packing the unicorns inside. Draco found Rose's doll on her bed, shoved that inside the bag, along with her stack of coloring books and box of crayons.

Ginny came in with a pile of clothes and put them in the bag, then started packing clothes for Rose. Once they had finished, they went back out to the living room. Draco stopped by Hermione's office and grabbed all her Ministry files. He had all the books that she had sitting on her desk, so he left them. He took the bag from Ginny, placed the files inside, and slung the backpack over his shoulder. They all left and made their way back to the Potters' house. Ginny left to go get Albus.

"Thanks for your help. Tell Ginny thanks too." Draco said as he left.

"Give Hermione our love and tell her to take her time. We'll head everyone off until she's ready. Take care of them for us." "I intend to."

\*\*\*

Draco decided he would make a stop before he went home. Time to spoil Rose just a bit. After that he headed home, glad the trip wasn't as bad as he thought it would be. Tansy met him at the fireplace. He gave the bag to her and filled her in on the surprise he had planned for Rose.

They walked up the stairs together to go to Rose's room. The

fool for not knowing something was wrong before the proof was staring her in the face. And now she's worried about what she's going to do with the rest of her life and how to tell her girls. What you're feeling is nothing compared to what she's feeling right now."

Draco left Harry and went back to circling the field, trying to find a way to help Hermione find herself again. She seemed to have lost herself during her marriage to Weasley. He just couldn't believe that she didn't know how amazing she was. He would make it his mission to remind her that she was an amazing, powerful witch. In school, she was the brains of the Golden Trio. She had always been a force to be reckoned with. The war probably would have gone very different if not for her.

Draco, Harry, and Ginny used the fireplace to Floo over to Hermione's house. Weasley wasn't there, thankfully. Draco was relieved. He didn't think he would have been able to keep himself from beating the shit out of him. Draco gave Ginny the list Hermione made. Ginny took the backpack and walked down the hall to what he figured was the master bedroom. Draco and Harry stood awkwardly in Hermione's living room. Draco had never been here before.

Her living room looked cozy and inviting. There was an overstuffed, taupe sectional and a cream throw pillow sitting in front of the fireplace with a mahogany coffee table and end tables. There were lanterns with candles sitting on the end tables and a stack of books on the coffee table. The room was very Hermione.

"So, Rose asked me to get some things for her," Draco said. "What did she ask for?" Harry started laughing when Draco told him. "I hope you brought more bags."

Draco was a little puzzled by his reaction but followed Harry down the hall to Rose's room. Harry opened the door and

Draco took their jackets and hung them up. Hermione sent Rose off to wash her hands. Hermione grabbed his left arm after he had finished. She brushed her fingertips across the faded remains of his Dark Mark. "I guess some scars never fade," she said.

"Do mine bother you?" he asked. He had always been ashamed of that particular scar. The mark had faded over time, but never fully went away. Draco wore long sleeves, even in summer to hide the mark. It felt odd watching her touch it as if it were nothing but a fading tattoo.

"No, we all have scars. They are a part of us. Reminders of the sacrifices we made to survive. Do mine bother you?"

"Only because of the pain you endured to get them. Nothing will ever change how beautiful you are to me." He remembered hearing her being tortured and watching it. He had been helpless and afraid. He lied the day they were brought into the Manor. He knew it was them the second he saw them. How could he not? They were around each other for years. He knew that if he gave them up, she would have been killed, so he lied and created doubt, buying them enough time to figure a way out. But her torture at the hands of his aunt had always haunted him.

"Draco, I'm not..."

"Mummmmy! I'm all washed up for dinner. See!" Rose said as she came running into the hallway, interrupting whatever Hermione was about to say. I'm not, what, he wondered. They separated and faced Rose as she held her hands out to be inspected.

Draco led them to the dining room and held out chairs for Hermione, Rose, and Tansy before taking his own seat. The dishes levitated around and everyone dug in. Rose regaled them with tales of her first day of school. She seemed to have liked it and got along well with her classmates. She liked her teacher, Miss Crow. Draco couldn't remember which one she was. They were all so young.

"You said you got into an argument with Shackbolt today. What was that about?" Hermione asked after Rose left the dining room to play before bedtime.

"Wizengamot seats. Thirteen have been vacant since the end of the war fifteen years ago. With two wars so close together, the old pureblood families that held seats are dying out."

"Why not hold an election to fill the vacancies? The council shouldn't be controlled by so few people."

"That's exactly what this week's argument was about. I've argued with him countless times over the years, telling him there need to be more people in the governing body of the Ministry, so that pure-blood ideals aren't allowed to reemerge."

"Aren't all these families intermarried? Surely there are heirs left."

"Yes, but they are either ineligible because they were Death Eaters or are already holding a seat on the council."

"So, some of you hold multiple seats because you are the last remaining heir to multiple families? Do you get to cast votes for those empty positions?"

"No, one person, one seat, one vote. I am currently the heir to two additional seats."

"What has been done in the past to fill vacant seats?"

"As far as I know, we've never had this problem before. There's always been someone to inherit the seat. So many families died out in the war, were imprisoned, or lost."

"I'm sure there's a law somewhere that details how to fill vacant seats, but our government still relies too heavily on pure-blood families to make up the governing body. What about the common people? Where is their say in making laws that affect their lives?"

"You want to give the governing to the masses? Nothing would get done. You can't get a large group of people to come to a consensus on anything."

"It's not like you need a consensus. The people would just vote on issues that are important to them."

"But who decides what's important enough to hold a vote on? How are the people going to get access to the information needed to make an informed decision? Most people aren't going to bother. They're going to either not vote or base their

Harry's out back if you want to let him know you're here." Draco made his way outside and found Harry carrying 2 broomsticks out of a small shed. "Care to get some air while Ginny is out?" Harry asked.

Harry and Draco had made their peace with each other shortly after the Battle for Hogwarts. The time for schoolboy rivalries had ended. The choices Draco made in the end showed Harry that Draco wasn't a bad guy, but one who had made bad choices out of love for his family and struggled with his conscience over those choices. Harry had told him he couldn't fault him for that.

Draco had proven to Harry over the years that he wasn't that same boy anymore. Draco had worked diligently with the Wizengamot to bring about change. He had helped Harry navigate the political world. Harry had struggled with being pulled into politics. He was too emotional and truthful. He had also never liked the fame that came from being the Boy Who Lived or the Boy Who Destroyed The Dark Lord. Draco showed him that sometimes you had to be a little devious and willing to use fame to get things done.

Harry and Draco kicked off and soared around the field next to Harry's house. They hovered side by side after a few circles around the field.

"So, how's she really doing?" Harry asked. Draco looked at Harry thoughtfully, gauging how much to tell him.

"I know Ron's my friend, but I don't think I'll be able to forgive him easily for this. She wasn't the only one he kept this from and I know it's not the same, but I thought I knew him. I don't know the man who kept this kind of secret from me for twelve years."

"This isn't about you, Potter. He betrayed her. He kept a mistress for years and had a family with her. You feel betrayed. It's nothing compared to what she feels right now. She feels like a

"Thank you, Draco." She held out her hands for a hug. Her little hands were covered in cookie dough and flour but he didn't even hesitate. He gave her a hug and planted a kiss on the top of her head.

"You're welcome, princess." He left the kitchen, not even caring that the back of his sweater was covered in flour. Draco grabbed a backpack that had an undetectable, extendible charm on it out of the closet and used the fireplace in the study to Floo over to the Potters' house in Godric's Hollow.

\*\*\*

Albus came running through the room as he appeared. "Mum, someone's at the fireplace," he yelled without even stopping.

Ginny appeared in the room a few moments later. "Oh, hello Draco. What's brought you by?"

"I thought Harry could go with me to get a few of Hermione and Rose's things."

"Oh, I'll go too. I don't think you'll be comfortable handling their undergarments," she offered. Draco had forgotten about that and was relieved she had offered. Ginny would probably know what Hermione and Rose would need better than Harry and Draco.

"Thanks. She made a list and Rose gave me her own."

"You only brought a backpack?"

"Extendible charm," he said with a shrug.

"Good, you'll need it. How's she doing?"

"I think as well as can be, given the circumstances."

"I just can't believe Ron would do something like this. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I never would have believed it. Mum saw the paper this morning. Flew into a rage," Ginny shook her head. "I'll take Albus to mum's and be right back."

opinions easily accessible sources, like the media and we all know how accurate they are. You want to give the vote to the uneducated masses?"

"I think you're vastly underestimating our society. Don't you think that if our society had taken a more active role in the government we wouldn't have been forced to fight two wars?"

"Who knows what our society would be like? Voldemort didn't rise to power because people weren't involved in the government. He was able to rise to power because he appealed to the ideals of disaffected citizens."

"Disaffected citizens! You have got to be out of your mind. Those were not the actions of people dissatisfied with the government. Those were the actions of people who were blinded by prejudice and hate."

"You think I don't know that! I lived it. I lived with that monster in my house. I saw people that I grew up with thrown into the dungeons of my house. Tortured. I didn't have the luxury of being blinded by prejudice. I saw everything for the horror that it was."

He stared at Hermione. They sat there glaring at each other across their half finished plates of food. Hermione looked away from him.

"You said the families with seats are dying out. How do we save the Wizengamot? How do we save the very foundation our government rests on?"

"I don't know, Hermione. I don't think you're right to want to give the governance of our community to the people."

"You think it's right to allow our government to windle away until there's only a few people in power left? How will that protect our children and grandchildren from going through what we went through?"

"I don't know, Hermione. Why are you wasting your time in an education department?"

"It's not a waste of time."

"It is a waste of time. That department is a joke, especially with someone of your talents and intellect."

"What do you expect me to do? I lost my parents. I fought a war. Instead of jumping into the government like everyone pushed me to do, I finished school. I suffered too. I may have been on the winning side of the war, but that didn't mean my life became all sunshine and daisies once the war was over. I wasted. Tired of running and fighting and being scared all the time. I took the easy way. I let them put me in a go-nowhere, joke of a department because I was tired of fighting."

"I'm sorry for what you had to go through Hermione. I'm sorry for what we all had to go through. If we're going to keep the past from repeating itself, you're going to have to stop taking the easy path."

"I've given enough to this world. What more do you expect from me?"

"I expect you to lead. You were meant for bigger things than just the head of a department."

"How exactly am I supposed to do that?"

"I don't know, Hermione. I'm all out of ideas on how to fix this problem. We need you. We need your sharp mind, because you know as well as I do that there are no laws allowing for a magical divorce. So if we don't come up with something, you're going to be stuck married to that asshole for the rest of your life. And our governing body is going to continue to diminish."

"I just found out my husband has cheated on me for years, has four illegitimate children, and obliterated me multiple times. And now I can't even divorce the bastard without changing the whole legal system. So do you think I can have a little time to fucking process all of that before you make it my responsibility to fix the Wizengamot too?" Hermione shouted at him as she got up and stormed out of the room.

"Hermione wait!" Draco called as the door to the dining room closed behind her. "Fuck!" Draco swept the dishes in front of him to the floor. They landed with a crash and the sound of china breaking. "Stupid, fucking asshole!"

He was an insensitive idiot. She found out about Ron three days ago and here he was pressuring her to do something she

from their home. He found the two in the kitchen making cookies and chattering like magpies.

"Hello Mr. Malfoy. Where's my mummy?"

"Mr. Malfoy is my father. You may call me Draco. Your mummy is in the drawing room having tea with my mummy."

"Is it called a drawing room because you draw in it?"

"No, but you can if you want after you've finished baking your cookies. I'm sure our mummies would like to try some." Draco gave Tansy a look and she nodded. He knew that she would check to make sure everything was okay before they went in with the cookies.

"I'm going to go to your house to pick some things up for you and your mummy for your stay here. Was there anything special you needed?"

"Could I have my unicorns and my dolly and my coloring books and my crayons? How long are we going to stay here, Draco?" Rose said in a rush.

"I will get all those things for you. You and your mummy will stay here as long as you want, princess."

"That's good. I like it here. I like Tansy and mummy doesn't seem as sad. Who were those people and why did they seem to make mummy sad and mad at daddy?"

Draco struggled to answer the question. He knew it wasn't his place to tell her what was going on and how do you tell a child that their father was hiding a secret family from them. "Mummy got a shock is all and she was sad to see your sister leave for school, but we're going to help mummy feel better alright. Can I count on your help?"

The girl nodded, seemingly appeased by the answer for the time being. If she was anything like her mother it wouldn't hold her off for very long though, even if she was only five. "I'm going to let you finish your baking while I go get your unicorns, dolly, and coloring books and crayons."

Prophethadturnedintoapictureofacouplesharingaprivate moment. It didn't seem to matter that they were with a group of people. Beside that photo was another, this one was from behind as they walked down the street outside of the club, right before they had apparated. His arm was around her waist. The photographer had managed to capture two pictures that would give the impression that they were now a couple.

Draco set the paper down with a sigh. Hermione looked questioninglly at him. "Tell you later," he said.

"Can I go with you to see Minerva? I want to see Hogwarts. I want to meet Hagrid. Can I go please?" Rose pleaded.

"I'm sorry, Rose. You won't be able to go to Hogwarts until you're old enough to attend. You'll stay here with Tansy. I'm sure she has fun stuff planned for you today," Hermione said.

"Okay. I'll stay," Rose said glumly. Hermione and Draco had told her stories about some of their adventures at Hogwarts and she wanted to go see where they had so much fun. Draco promised to take Rose flying tomorrow in the park and that seemed to appease her.

"It's too bad she can't go," Draco said as she left the dining room.

"I know but I don't want to ruin the magic of the first day and seeing Hogwarts for the first time all lit up and reflecting in the lake," Hermione said, looking over at the door Rose had just walked out of and back at Draco.

"I'm sure Tansy will be able to distract her while we're gone," Draco said, reaching over and patting her hand reassuringly.

"What was in the paper?" she asked, looking curious.

"Pictures from last night," Draco sighed, handing the paper over to her.

She opened it up to the gossip section, looked at the photos, and read the blurb. "Well, I wonder what she expected me to do. Lay around the house moping? So what, we went out for drinks. I hardly call that living it up. I'm not going to hide out anymore. I'm not going to let others dictate how I decide to live my life, who I associate with, or how I decide to move on from

this mess. She can print what she wants. I've got better things to do with my time," she raged, flinging the paper back down on the table.

Draco was astounded by her reaction. She didn't appear mad about the photos. She appeared somewhat apathetic. Maybe she had taken his comment about not giving a damn to heart.

"I'm glad you're not letting those photos get to you. People will always talk and make assumptions, especially with who we both are. The papers will make the most sensational claims because that's what sells," Draco said to her.

"I know. I really haven't had to deal with Rita Skeeter for years. I don't think I've really been that interesting since the war."

\*\*\*

Draco and Hermione apparated to Hogsmeade. Draco carried a picnic basket and had a red plaid blanket draped over his arm. They walked side by side up to Hogwarts and through the front gates that were flanked by winged boars. Minerva, James, and Scorpius were waiting for them just inside the gates. Hermione hugged Minerva and James while Draco hugged Scorpius. Draco held onto Scorpius, ruffling his hair. He looked happy. Draco was relieved that he was adjusting to being at school so well. Despite Fred's bullying, Scorpius looked genuinely happy. Scorpius introduced him to his two new friends.

"Have you seen my mum and dad, auntie?" James asked Hermione.

"No, not yet. Let's walk over to the lake and I'll send a patronus to your dad letting him know where you are. Expecto Patronum!" Hermione's otter patronus shot out of her wand and bounded away looking for Harry.

"Mum, where's dad at?" Minerva asked after the otter bounded off.

Hermione looked at Draco, her gaze full of dread at the difficult conversation. She had talked with Draco about how to bring it up and what to say. He gave her an encouraging smile and touched James and Scorpius on the shoulder to keep them

## Finding Hermione

back. "Let's take a walk, Minerva," Hermione said. Mother and daughter walked off toward the lake.

"Where are they going?" James asked.

"Something happened after you all got on the train. You're both going to have to be good friends to Minerva after this. She's going to need your help and understanding."

"Why? What happened?" Scorpius asked.

"Let Minerva tell you when she's ready. Just be supportive. Promise me," Draco demanded. He knew boys could be insensitive idiots when having to deal with girls and their problems.

"We promise," they chorused. Draco didn't trust the mischievous glint in the saw in James' eyes. If the kid was anything like his father, he would use whatever Minerva was going through as an excuse to cause mischief in the name of cheering her up.

The Potters, Zabini's, and Nott's walked up to them, kids in tow plus Hermione's namesake. He guessed the Goyle's would meet them by the lake. James went over to greet his parents.

"Where are Hermione and Minerva?" Tracey asked.

"They went ahead to have a talk. It's probably okay to follow them now," Draco said. The adults nodded sympathetically, knowing the talk Hermione was having with Minerva.

"How's she doing today? How's Rose?" Ginny asked Draco. Draco sighed, "She's been reading today. Rose seems to be doing well. She's at home playing with Tansy right now. How are you two holding up?"

"I just can't believe he would do something like this to her, to his daughters. I'm glad you've been there for her. I've been too upset about this to be too much help to her. I'm afraid I haven't been a very good friend during this," Ginny said.

"She said the same thing about you last night. Don't be so hard on yourself," Draco reassured her.

"So Potter, it seems your kid has turned to the dark side," Draco smirked at Harry. He could hear chuckles from the Snakes behind him. He just couldn't resist teasing Harry about

## Chapter 6: Parents Day

Saturday, September 14, 2013

Draco, Hermione, Rose, and Tansy were seated around the dining table for breakfast. Tansy kept breakfast simple this morning, oatmeal with brown sugar and raisins. Hermione was quiet again. Draco was reading the paper. Rita Skeeter had been quick to print a story about last night.

### **Moving On Already**

By Rita Skeeter

Hermione Granger was seen living it up on the town last night with none other than Draco Malfoy. Could she already be moving on so soon after learning that her husband has been carrying on a long time affair?

Underneath the blurb was a photo of Hermione and Draco at The Dragon's Den. The photographer had caught him looking down at her while her fingers were laced through his. It was of the two of them giving and receiving comfort while she spoke about the pain she was going through. The

James being in Slytherin.

Harry laughed at his teasing. "I hate to burst your bubble, but after you and Snape ended up not being such utter arsewipes, I thought maybe Slytherin wasn't as bad as we all thought. Seems to me like a self-fulfilling prophecy. You tell people the house they are in is bad and it creates dark wizards and all the other houses treat you like they're just waiting for you to go dark. What did we expect to happen to children who were ostracized like that? Seems like we weren't any better than the blood purists."

Draco gaped at Harry for a second. They had been friendly for years now but he had never heard Harry talk like that about house prejudices. "Well, we weren't all innocent," he finally said.

Harry shrugged, "No, but maybe things could have been different."

They all headed off toward the lake and looked fondly at the Quidditch pitch as they passed, remembering the games they played.

"We should've brought our brooms," Harry said wistfully.

"Maybe next time we can get a game going," Draco said.

"Maybe then you'll actually catch the snitch," Harry teased.

"Maybe a bludger will do us all a favor and hit you in the head again," Draco retorted.

They reached the lake and spread the blanket out on the ground. They pulled it to extend so that it was big enough for everyone to sit comfortably.

"We didn't bring anything for your picnic. We don't want to intrude," said Ginny.

"We packed extras. Don't worry, there's enough food to go around. You're welcome to join us," Draco said. He had asked Tansy to pack food for twenty people. Three extra people wouldn't be a big deal.

The Goyles came up in the boat. Theo and Blaise went over to help them out. Helena was looking a little awestruck. They greeted their daughter and came over to the Potters and Draco, who was lining the baskets up in the middle of the blanket. Draco took the basket of food from Greg and placed it with

the rest before introducing them to Helena. The two were as surprised as Hermione had been to find out Helena was a Muggle.

Hermione and Minerva came up at that time. Minerva ran off to greet Harry and Ginny and was drug around to meet the parents of the Baby Snakes. Hermione surprised him by wrapping an arm around his waist and leaning into him. He draped an arm around her shoulders. "How did she take it?" he asked.

"Not well. She's mad, devastated. She really hates that boy. Then she finds out he's her half brother. She's mad at Ron. She's too young to really understand the full magnitude of what he's done. I can't tell her everything obviously. I'm afraid for how she's going to feel when she gets older and realizes what happened and not the child friendly version I gave her," Hermione answered as they both watched Minerva talk to Daphne and Theo with Drake standing beside her.

Draco really wasn't sure how to reassure her. He didn't know Minerva well enough to accurately gauge how she was going to react to the full implications of her parents' divorce, especially if this got messy. Hermione and Draco were both doing their best to ensure that Rose was sheltered from everything that was going on. Minerva didn't have that luxury being at school.

Hermione released him to say hello and hug everyone. Theo and Blaise teased Draco about the pictures in the paper. Once everyone was gathered around the picnic, Draco called the Baby Snakes over to him.

"Hermione, Harry, Ginny, these are the Baby Snakes," Draco said waving at the children gathered around him, "You've met my Scorpius. This is Daphne and Theo's son, Drake," Draco waved toward a tall, gangly boy with brown, close-cropped hair and aquamarine eyes.

"This is Tracey and Blaise's daughter, Florence," pointing out a short girl with skin the color of mocha and short, dark, curly hair and hazel eyes.

"And Hermione, this is your namesake, she likes to be called

guided her out of the club and apparated them home. Hermione hugged Draco. She pulled back a little but still had her hand on his chest, his were on her waist. "Thank you for taking me. You were right. I needed to get out. It ended up being fun."

Draco tucked a stray curl behind her ear, "You're welcome. They really liked you and they really meant what they said. They all want to be there for you. I think you made Helena feel more comfortable. I think she's always felt a little on the outside. We don't mean to make her feel that way, but we all grew up together. Plus, she's not magical, so everything we take for granted is very different for her."

"Thank you for sharing your friends with me. It means a lot."

"They're your friends too, now. I'm going to see if Tansy is still awake and ask her if she'll make us sandwiches for tomorrow."

"I'll go check on Rose, then head to bed. Goodnight Draco." "Goodnight Hermione." He pulled her in for one more hug. He felt her hands glide down his chest as she pulled away from him. She turned and walked up the stairs to go check on Rose. He stood at the foot of the stairs watching her go.

Watching her at the club was like seeing the a bit of the old Hermione back again. She finally opened up about what she was feeling the last couple days. He had worried that he had broken her trust irrevocably that night in the dining room. He was glad the evening had gone so well. She really would have made a great Slytherin. He grinned to himself as he made his way to find Tansy.

and apologize. "It's all right. Water under the bridge." She said to him as she squeezed Draco's thigh to let him know she meant him as well. She left her hand there as she continued her story.

"Anyway, she was going to use the Cruciatus curse, which is an unforgivable curse used to torture people, on Harry and I wasn't going to allow my friend to be tortured if I could help it. So, I told her that we were trying to find Dumbledore to let him know that the weapon was ready. She insisted that we take her to it. There was no weapon of course. I led her into the Forbidden Forest trying to make enough noise that something would come check it out. We lucked out that it was centaurs. I knew she would piss them off. Centaurs are very proud creatures and are easy to offend. Well, they drug her off and we made our escape. Dumbledore had to go in and rescue her. I sent her a centaur as a reminder that her prejudices got her in trouble once, and she had the opportunity to change but she wasted it, and now she's paying for it in jail. She got a life sentence to Azkaban for helping Voldemort target Muggle-borns."

"You should have seen her, too. Hermione was so convincing about it. Crying and everything. I tried keeping Umbridge from going with her and Harry, but it was like a kid and chocolate, just too tempting to resist," Draco commented.

"Your insistence on going with her is what decided her against letting you go. You both played right into my hand."

"You really are a brilliantly, devious witch, aren't you? I almost feel sorry for Weasley. He won't know what hit him once we're all through with him," Theo said.

"Remind me never to piss Hermione off," Blaise said sardonically.

"Hermione, you have great stories. Let's do this again soon," Helena said.

"Yes. It's getting late and we should all get going. We have to beat Hogwarts early tomorrow," said Daphne, "Hermione, we meant what we said. Let's get together for a girl's night soon."

They said goodbyes and apparated to their homes after they left the bar. Draco put an arm around Hermione's waist as he

'Mione," he gestured toward a stout girl with lank, brown hair and a pug nose.

"Mione came to hug Hermione. "Thank you for saving my dad," she said quietly.

"Oh, sweetheart. I'm so glad we did," Hermione said as she hugged her tightly.

Hermione walked a little way down the beach away from the group after Mione walked back to her parents. Draco came up and stood behind her as they gazed out across the lake. He touched her on the shoulder to get her attention. She turned to face him. "Are you starting to see the lives you've touched? Without you, she wouldn't exist. Scorpius wouldn't exist. Greg and I would be dead. And it just ripples out from there. All the ways the world would be different without that one act."

Hermione looked out over the water, "It wasn't just me. Harry decided and we followed."

"I know," he said, moving to stand in front of her and forcing her to look at him, "Harry sees the results of his actions all around him though. How can he not? But you, Hermione, you seem to have forgotten that you are Hermione Granger. You are just as much a hero as Harry was. You are the brightest witch of our age. You are the Light. It's time for you to start remembering that."

"Look around you and see all the good your actions have done," he continued, grasping her shoulders, "Feel the pride and the power that comes from knowing the world has become a better place because of you. It's time to remember who Hermione Granger is. Not the jilted wife of that idiot. But the powerful witch who helped save the world, who brought blood prejudice to its knees."

"I don't know who that witch is anymore," Hermione said, crying softly into his chest.

He tipped her face up to him and brushed the tears away. "It's time to find her again. I'll help you. Everyone here will help you. You're not alone anymore."

"Hey, are you two okay over here?" Harry asked as he walked

## Finding Hermione

up to them.

Hermione pulled away from him, brushed the tears from her face, and squared her shoulders. "We refine. Draco was just reminding me of something I'd forgotten."

"Let's go sit down then. The kids are getting hungry," Harry said, leading Hermione away with an arm slung over her shoulder. Draco followed behind them.

Everyone sat down on the blanket and passed around the food. The other couples had come prepared as well and there were enough sandwiches, crisps, juice, and butterbeer to go around. Hermione leaned up against Draco's side as they all ate and chatted with each other and their children. It was a pleasant way to spend their afternoon at Hogwarts. They watched the giant squid swimming lazily across the top of the lake.

Scorpius told him all about his classes, the sorting, and his run-ins with Fred. Fred seemed to like calling Scorpius 'Death Eater scum'. It enraged Draco that his son would be bullied like that. It seemed that no matter how hard he worked, there would always be people ready to point out the biggest mistake of his life. He could take the ridicule pointed at him. In a way, he felt he deserved it, but Scorpius was innocent. That it came from Weasley's son made it seem worse for him. He already hated the gift for what he did to Hermione. It enraged him that Weasley was teaching his son similar prejudices that they had fought against.

He was glad that Hermione was in his house to distract him. Draco thought that without her he would probably be the one moping around in his pajamas. Hearing that his son was being bullied made him wish he'd kept him home and just homeschooled him. He'd seriously considered the idea but his mother had convinced him that Scorpius should go.

Draco saw Harry stiffen out of the corner of his eye. He looked around and saw Weasley walk up with Lavender and a boy he supposed was Fred. Draco got his first good look at Lavender. He hadn't really been paying attention to her on the platform. She was plumper than she had been in school but

Draco straightened and reluctantly took his hand off Hermione's shoulder but kept his arm draped across the top of the booth behind her. Rita Skeeter walked over in a green robe, purple, jeweled glasses and a blue hat with bright red feathers sticking out of it.

"Interesting that you're already out on the town with another man so soon after learning that your husband cheated on you for years. Care to comment on the state of your relationship with Ronald Weasley? How are your daughter's taking this news? Are you and Draco Malfoy in a relationship?" Rita said nastily. "I have a comment for you, Rita. Beetles are easily squished," Hermione said maliciously, pointing her wand at Rita.

Draco burst out laughing at Hermione's comment. Blaise escorted Rita out of the bar with terse instructions that she not ever be allowed back inside.

"Beetles are easily squished? Have you gone mental, Hermione? What kind of comment is that?" Blaise asked as he returned to the booth.

"Rita is an unregistered animagus. Hermione trapped her in a jar at the end of fourth year and has blackmailed her over the years about it," Draco said still chuckling. Some of them already knew about Rita Skeeter publishing lies during with some help from Draco. He related the story to Helena and Hermione's part in getting back at the woman.

"Are you sure you got sorted into the right house, Hermione?" Theo laughed.

"Well the Sorting Hat did seriously consider putting me in Ravenclaw before it decided on Gryffindor, but I'm sure that's not what you meant," Hermione replied with a bland smile. "I also sent centaurs to Umbridge when she got sentenced to Azkaban," Hermione added deviously.

"Why?" Helena asked.

"Do you know anything about Dolores Umbridge?" Hermione asked. Helena shook her head. "Well, she was this toad of a woman who terrorized the students with some misguided help during our fifth year." Greg made to interrupt

shoulder, "Harry comes to see me every couple of days to see how you're doing."

"Thank you," Draco nodded and went to pull his arm off her shoulder and settle it back on the edge of the booth but Hermione held onto the hand that she was holding, so he stopped and let her have her way.

"So, I think we should all get together tomorrow and have a picnic by the lake with the children. Blaise and I will bring dessert." Daphne said, trying to change the subject to less serious topics.

"It's a good idea. I have an outdoor blanket with an extendible charm on it. We can also bring the sandwiches," Hermione volunteered for her and Draco.

"We'll bring the drinks," Tracey said.

"That leaves us with sides," said Helena.

"Great. That's settled. Helena did Hogwarts send you a visibility charm?" Hermione asked.

Hogwarts was invisible to Muggles in order to keep the secrecy of the school and the existence of the Wizarding World, however exceptions had started being made after the war. It had been decided that it wasn't right that Muggle-born children wouldn't be able to have their parents come see them at school while wizarding parents were able to visit.

"Yes, I got a necklace in the mail with 'Mione's letter,'" Helena answered Hermione.

"Greg, you should take her on the boat across the lake her first time over. See Hogwarts the same way we all did the first time," Hermione suggested, leaning forward to look at Greg.

"Ooh, good idea Hermione," Daphne said, looking excited.

"What do you think, Helena?" Tracey asked.

"Sounds magical," Helena replied.

"It really is, especially if you didn't grow up surrounded by magic. I'll send a letter to Hagrid so he can have a boat ready for you," Hermione offered.

"Head's up. Rita Skeeter is headed this way," Blaise said suddenly.

having four children would do that to a woman. Her blond hair was brushed back simply and hung down in waves on her back. He could admit that she was a good-looking woman, nothing like the fiery beauty of Hermione. He found it strange that she was looking at her hands, which were knotted in front of her.

Fred stood beside his mother looking on with a sneer that reminded him a little too much of a younger version of himself. The boy was tall and gangly for his age, much like Weasley had been. He also had the signature Weasley hair that was cut close on the sides with gelled curls on top.

"The kids are having a good time, Ron. If you're here to cause a scene and ruin that, you lot can leave," Harry said.

"Harry, don't be like that. We're mates. Been friends since we were eleven. I never thought I'd see the day you chose to hang out with Death Eater scum over your best mate," said Weasley nastily.

"That's enough, Ron. The war is over. It's past time to put away our differences. And I told you not to cause trouble, so it's time for you to leave," Harry said, his voice starting to rise in anger.

"I have a right to see my daughter," Weasley said stubbornly. Minerva turned up her nose and refused to look at him. Hermione asked her if she wanted to go for a walk with her father. She shook her head no. Hermione was tense beside him. She found his hand on the blanket beside her and latched on to it.

"She doesn't want to see you. I'm not going to make her either. It's time you left Ron," Hermione said.

"Turning my daughter against me already, Hermione," Ron said bitterly.

Ginny got up from the blanket. "Ronald Bilius Weasley! How dare you! You brought this on yourself. I have never been more ashamed that you are my brother. I'm so disappointed in you. I thought you were a good man. A good husband. A good father. Your choices, your actions. Those aren't the actions of a good person."

"Shut up, Ginny. You don't know what you're talking about. We're leaving. I'm not going to stand here and take this." Ron stalked off with Fred and Lavender behind him. The adults around the group let out a collective sigh of relief as they left.

Draco passed Minerva a cookie from the basket. "You wanna talk about it?" he asked, "We're all here for you." He didn't know how she'd react. She didn't know him but he felt bad for her. He was glad when she decided to open up to the group.

"I'm just so mad. I don't understand how he could go out and have a bunch of kids with that woman. And Fred is vile. That boy is my half brother and I just keep wondering why. Weren't Rose and I enough? I know we weren't boys, but we were good. I just don't know why he would want that insufferable git over us. He says I turned on him but it feels like he turned on us," Minerva said, looking forlornly at her hands.

"You can't blame yourself for this. He made bad choices. For him, I don't think it's about wanting Fred and his other children over you and Rose. You're all his children. He loves you all. I know you're hurting now, but he's still your father, and he loves you and Rose. You'll have to try to find it in yourself to forgive him," Hermione said to Minerva, as she hugged her close.

"What about you? Are you just going to forgive him and take him back?" Minerva asked.

"This sort of thing is different between a husband and wife. We will have to find a way to move past it and get along for the sake of you and Rose. But I won't be taking him back. I wouldn't be happy and you and Rose deserve parents who are happy. Does that make sense?" Hermione said. Minerva nodded.

Scorpius and James came over and pulled her away from the group of adults. The children were running around chasing one another, lobbing sprays of water from their wands.

Hermione sagged against him as Minerva ran off. Her hands up and down her arms trying to offer her some comfort and calm her. The other couples were talking quietly among themselves, surreptitiously glancing at Draco and Hermione, waiting for them to finish. Hermione straightened after a little

but I would've forgiven him for the sake of our daughters. We weren't happy together. I just don't understand why he would hang on like that when we were miserable together or why he felt he should be able to have both of us. I knew we were miserable together but I didn't understand until this happened why I stayed with him. It's sad that this is what our relationship came to. I loved him. Maybe not in the way I should have. He was my best friend. He was someone I felt safe with. I'm so sad about all the wasted time I spent being miserable with him. I could have been with someone that loved me. Now what am I? The pathetic, jilted wife of a man who cheated and abused her for years."

Hermione turned and buried her face in his chest. Draco wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight. She had finally given voice to the feelings that had plagued her for days. Maybe now she could purge those negative feelings and start the healing process.

"You aren't pathetic. You've been so strong," he said against her hair.

"I'm really sorry this happened to you, Hermione. You didn't deserve it. I don't think anybody does, but I hope that in the end it's okay that it did. You deserve to be happy and if being with Ron didn't make you happy, then it's good that you found out. You get a chance to make a happier life for yourself," Daphne said.

"We're here for you though, Hermione. We're glad that you agreed to come out with Draco tonight. Being around people is good for you. So anytime you need girlfriends, we're here for you. Bring Ginny too. I know she's probably having a hard time with this too," said Tracey.

"I think I've been a terrible friend though. I haven't even talked to Harry and Ginny. I haven't even thought about what they must be going through," Hermione said, drying her eyes. Draco let go of her and she settled back against his side.

"They don't blame you for taking time for yourself," Draco said. Hermione looked up at him curiously and he shrugged a

rag sheet. "I'm sorry. I told them not to start questioning you about Weasley. We can go if you're uncomfortable. I'll even hex Blaise a bit if you want."

She laced her fingers through the hand that was on her shoulder. "No Draco, I think it might be time I start talking about it. What I've been doing hasn't helped," she said quietly. Then addressing the rest of the table, "Ron has had an ongoing affair with Lavender Brown for most of our marriage, has four children with her, and obliterated me to keep me from finding out. He would have done it again if not for Draco. No, I'm not going back to him. Yes, I plan on getting a divorce somehow. Yes, I know it's not done in the Wizarding World, but I don't give a damn and deserve better than being forced to stay married to that two-timing bastard." Hermione related the story succinctly. The rest of the table erupted. Everyone spoke at once.

"What?" Blaise yelled.

"That bastard!" Daphne cried and pounded the table with a fist.

"Let me kill him," Greg growled.

"Divorce the bastard. He doesn't deserve you," Helena said a little more calmly than the rest.

"All true, I'm afraid and no you can't kill him, Greg. Thanks for the offer, though."

"How are you handling all this, Hermione?" Tracey asked. Tracey had always been the more sensitive one of the group, a good balance to Blaise's brashness.

"I don't know. It's hard. He was my husband. I'm angry and hurt because he cheated and lied all those years. I keep thinking that there's so much of my life that could have been different if he'd just been honest in the beginning. I would've let him go if he had just told me that he wanted to be with her. I'm so angry that he manipulated me into staying with him all those years, not to mention using a memory spell to do it. He knew what it cost me to save my parents during the war, and to use the same spell to manipulate me, it's unforgivable. I could forgive the cheating and lying eventually. I wouldn't have stayed with him,

bit and Draco dropped his hands. She took a deep breath and mouthed 'I'm okay' to him.

"Harry, you're going to need to start taking up your seat on the Wizengamot." Draco said to cut through the chatter and bringing them back into the group.

"Why? You know I hate that political crap." Harry responded.

"He's campaigning for all of us to come back," Blaise said, "Save yourself the headache and just give in. Believe me."

"Harry, it's your responsibility. You need to take it more seriously. I'll need your support when I file my petition to divorce Ron," said Hermione.

"Divorce though Hermione? Are you sure?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry. Divorce. Seriously, Harry! You want me to go back to that. After what he's done, I'm never going back to him. You saw the way he was just now. Do you honestly think I deserve to be treated that way," Hermione snapped at Harry. Harry looked like he wanted to argue. Draco didn't think Harry had any strong opposition to divorce. Maybe he was just having a hard time letting go of the one big happy family picture that he knew Harry had.

"They don't know the whole story, Hermione. I thought maybe they should hear it from you, so I didn't tell Harry when he came to see me. I think they'll need to hear it. You know how Harry is," Draco said.

"Right. Come on then. Let's go for a walk." Hermione used Draco's knee to push herself up. He helped steady her with his hands on her waist and she walked off with Harry and Ginny with a determined stride.

"What's going on between the two of you?" Blaise asked as soon as they walked off, "I didn't say anything last night but she's not here now, so spill."

"We're friends. That's all that's going on." Draco said evasively.

"For now," Theo murmured quietly. Draco shot a glare at him.

"I saw those pictures. I have eyes. Whatever was going on

just now, is not 'just friends.'" Blaise said.

"It's our business, Blaise."

"Fine. I'll just say this though. We like her. Wouldn't mind seeing more of her. So whatever this thing is that's going on or not going on between you two, don't mess it up and chase her away. You both deserve to be happy and if that's with each other, then I say go for it," Blaise said.

"Thanks, mate. Way too soon to be thinking about that though. You saw how she was last night. She's not ready for a relationship," he said, leveling a stern 'don't push it' look at his friends.

"She was talking about wasted time and being with someone who loved her," Tracey said.

Draco looked over to where Hermione was talking with Harry and Ginny, "She's not ready for that. Stop trying to play matchmaker and give her some time."

Headmistress McGonagall walked up to their picnic. "Hello children. I hope you're enjoying your visit. I was hoping to speak with Mrs. Granger but I see she is otherwise occupied. You'll do, Mr. Malfoy. Let's go for a walk."

"Yes ma'am." Draco got up and offered his arm to the aging headmistress. She looked surprised by his politeness but took his arm and they walked off in the opposite direction from Hermione, Harry, and Ginny.

"I'll not beat around the bush. Is what I'm seeing in the papers true?"

"Depends on what you're reading, headmistress. I didn't know you kept up with the gossip columns," Draco said with a smirk.

"Don't sass me. Out with it," Headmistress McGonagall said in a tone that meant she expected him to fall in line.

Draco told her about what happened on the platform. Then what happened at her cottage and about Fred being Minerva's half brother. He also let her know that Fred was setting himself up to be this year's bully and was targeting Scorpius and Minerva. "I never would have believed Ron Weasley could turn into

"Everyone can pronounce 'Hermione' now. You and your friends came back and saved us. You could've let Draco and I burn that day, but you didn't. You risked your own lives to save two people who had never said a nice thing to you. I don't know if I would've done the same so naming my daughter after you was the least I could do. If there's ever any way my family or I can help you, you only have to say the word. All of us are here for you to help you through this difficult time," Greg answered her.

"I'm honored that you would name your daughter after me. I will forever be eternally grateful that we came back for you both that day. Oh, thank you, Draco." Draco had handed Hermione his handkerchief and she dabbed at her eyes.

"You have more people than you know who care about you and only want to help you find a way for you to be happy again." Draco whispered into her ear. She looked into his eyes and smiled. He smiled back at her.

"I had a letter from Drake yesterday. He told me all about his housemates. Apparently, the children of the Golden Trio are all in Slytherin," Theo commented.

"Scorpius corrupted them on the train ride. Offered them cookies to join the dark side." Draco joked.

Hermione elbowed him in the side. "Actually, one of my husband's love children made an ass of himself on the train. He picked on Minerva and Scorpius and tripped Minerva before the Sorting. I got the impression that James and Minerva decided it was better to cavort with snakes than run with lions. I can't say that I blame them."

"So, the Prophet actually reported something close to accurate?" Blaise asked. Tracey elbowed him in the side. "Ow, what is it with you ladies and your well-aimed, sharp elbows?"

"Damn it, Blaise!" Draco said.

"Hermione, it's none of our business. You shouldn't feel you need to tell us anything," Tracey said.

Draco slid his arm down so that it rested around her shoulders. She relaxed against his side. Damn Blaise for bringing up that

Draco had vented his worry for Hermione on Theo and Harry. Harry was no help. He was still too upset with Ron and grieving himself. Theo suggested that maybe Hermione have a night out with people who were sympathetic but not as close to the situation as Harry, Ginny, and the Weasley clan were.

"Well, Draco sprung this on me forty-five minutes ago, so if we're late it's his fault," Hermione responded drily.

"You would've found a way to not be available if I'd told you ahead of time," Draco said to her.

"We're glad you came Hermione. I love that dress by the way," Daphne said, "You know everyone except Helena there beside you."

Helena turned, held out her hand, and introduced herself. Helena was a stout woman with curly, black hair, cornflower blue eyes, and a slight overbite. "Hello, I'm Helena. I'm a Muggle, so that would be why you don't recognize me. But I have heard a lot about you and it is nice to finally meet you."

"Nice to meet you as well. Goyle, you married a Muggle?" Hermione asked in disbelief, leaning around Helena to look at Greg.

"Yes, Hermione. I, Gregory Goyle, son of a Death Eater, married a Muggle woman. I saw her in a department store in London and it was love at first sight. Well, for me at least. She took a little convincing," Greg replied.

"Well, I'll be damned. Congratulations. I'm happy for you. Do you have children? Will you all be going to Hogwarts on Saturday for Parents' Day?"

There stood the table chucked when Hermione asked about their children. Greg and Helena had a daughter who was the same age as Minerva and Scorpius.

"Why are you lot laughing?" Hermione demanded.

"Well, Hermione. You will be happy to know that you have one more namesake among the dozens of others I'm sure you already have," Greg responded.

"You named your daughter after me. Why on earth would you torture her with a name no one can properly pronounce?"

such a scoundrel. How's she handling all this?" she asked, shooting a worried glance up at him.

"She's doing better everyday. She's been really depressed and angry. She seems a little freer today than she has all week. I think the unconditional support that she's gotten has really helped. He really did a number on her. I think she's forgotten who she is over the years," he answered.

McGonagall pursed her lips together, "And what exactly is your part in all this, Mr. Malfroy?"

"Just a friend," he said with a shrug.

"You weren't friends before this, I don't think," she said with a hint of suspicion.

Draco stood up a little straighter and answered nonchalantly, "Maybe not, but things change."

"See that you don't make things change for the worse for her," McGonagall said as she walked off.

Draco walked back over to the picnic and sat down. Hermione, Harry, and Ginny walked up just as he sat down. Hermione sat down beside him again. Harry flopped down beside them, still red in the face. Ginny was wiping her face.

"You have my vote and I'll start going to council meetings. Whatever she needs to get away from him, she's got it," Harry said, still fuming.

Draco nodded his thanks. Hermione turned to look at him.

"What did McGonagall want?"

"To ask about you. I told her. I figured it was okay to tell her and she should know so she can keep an eye out for Minerva. I hope it's okay with you that I told her," Draco said.

"Yes, it's fine. I'm getting exhausted having to repeat the story so many times. I know I'm going to have to repeat it many more times before this is over," Hermione sighed.

"I'll try to do what I can to take the burden from you," Draco murmured to her.

"You've already done so much. You've been a great friend to me. I'm glad that it was you that stepped up and helped me that day on the platform. I would probably be huddled in a ball

in my pajamas right now if it wasn't for you," Hermione said. "I doubt that. You're too resilient to let anything knock you out for long. I'm glad that it was me too, even though I would have loved to see you hex Weasley's balls off!"

"Cunning snake," she said playfully.

"Fearless lioness."

The children came back from playing in search of more cookies. Their parents dried them off with bursts of hot air from their wands. The children related their stories of being sorted. James and Minerva told them about asking to be put in Slytherin despite the hat wanting to put them in Gryffindor. The sun started to set signaling the end of Parents' Day. They all packed up the remains of the picnic. Draco took Scorpius aside to say goodbye to him privately.

"Goodbye, son. I'm glad you've made some good friends and you're happy here. I love you."

"Don't worry about me dad. I'm doing great even if Fred is awful. I really like Minerva and James. I love you too."

Draco hugged Scorpius to him one last time before walking with him back to the rest of the group. All the children ran around hugging adults and saying goodbye. Draco even got a hug from James and Minerva as well as the Baby Snakes.

After saying goodbye to their children and friends, Draco lifted Hermione into the boat to take them back across the lake. Hermione had promised Hagrid that they would take the boat back to the boathouse. The setting sun reflected across the lake casting the castle of Hogwarts in hues of purples and blues. The wind blowing across the water caused a chill in the air. Draco took his jacket off and draped it across Hermione's shoulders when he saw her shiver.

"Oh, thank you," She burrowed deeper inside his jacket, "Do you feel like there is something going on between us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind," Hermione said, staring at her hands in her lap.

Draco tipped her chin up forcing her to look at him. "No,

He grabbed his own jacket and apparated them to the city center of Cokeworth, just in front of his club. The sign above the club read "The Dragon's Den" in silver letters and had a silvery-blue Swedish Short-Snout dragon emitting bright blue flames illustrated underneath.

She took his arm when they arrived and he escorted her inside. The main part of the club had a bar along one wall facing the stage where a band was playing. In the middle was a large dance floor littered with dancing couples since it was a Friday night. Arranged along the sides were small tables and chairs. A half wall separated the dance floor from the more private area of the club. Large, rounded booths in black leather surrounded the walls. This area was more for people getting together for drinks to chat. The lighting was low and intimate. Silvery-blue wallpaper covered the walls above the booths.

The hostess recognized Draco and led them over to a booth where three other couples were already seated, Blaise and Tracey Zabini, Theo and Daphne Nott, and Gregory and Helena Goyle. The Goyle's scooted over to make room for Hermione and Draco. Draco took Hermione's jacket and his and handed them to the hostess.

"What are you drinking, Hermione?" Draco asked as the waitress appeared.

"Whatever you're having is fine," Hermione answered him. Draco ordered them scotch. Hermione seemed to have developed a liking to his favorite alcohol. They shared a glass every night after Rose was put to bed. He didn't get her drunk anymore. A glass after dinner was fine but he knew from experience that it would be too easy to drown your sorrows down a bottle of booze. Draco slid into the booth beside Hermione. He draped an arm over the back of the booth behind Hermione. It was rather crowded now with eight of them seated around the table. Hermione was pressed up against his side.

"We were wondering if you two were going to make it," Theo commented once they got settled.

my shoulder and drag you out in your pj's. What's it gonna be?" Draco said as he pulled the book from her hands, marked her page, and set it down on the coffee table.

She looked so comfortable there on his couch. He felt he needed to take her out though. She had become too isolated. She seemed to be retreating into herself, becoming more and more depressed as the days wore on.

"I don't want to go out," Hermione said, her voice so sad and dejected he wanted to give in and let her go back to reading. He sat down beside her on the sofa and took one of her hands in his.

"I know, Hermione. Please, just humor me. I think you need to get out of this house and socialize with people who aren't Rose, Tansy, or me. Just try and if you don't like it, we can come back home," he pleaded with her.

"Fine. Where are we going?" Hermione said resigned.

"The Dragon's Den. Heard of it?"

"No. Really, The Dragon's Den? What kind of name is that?" Hermione laughed at him.

"It happens to be the name of a club I own. Now go get dressed," Draco said smiling, pleased to hear her laughing even if it was at his expense.

"Figures you would name a club after yourself. The Malfoy ego knows no bounds," she said as she grinned up at him. It was the first smile he had seen in days.

"Go get changed before I decide that you're going in teddy bear pajamas." Draco growled at her.

Hermione came down a half hour later in a simple black cocktail dress with silver vines embroidered into the v of the neckline. The dress was knee length and showed off her legs. She had chosen to complement his silver dress shirt and black slacks.

"Beautiful, as always," he said, as he helped her into her jacket.

"Silver-tongued snake!" she said smiling up at him, "Let's go."

tell me what you mean."

Hermione bit her lip and answered, "I'm not sure exactly. I've always felt this pull to you, even when we were children and you were awful to me. It's why I argued for you during your trial. I couldn't bear the thought of you being in Azkaban and why I started having tea with your mother. It's why I left with you that day on the platform. Do you feel it too?"

He sighed in relief to know that it wasn't one-sided, "Yes. It's why I urged you further into the forest after the Quidditch World Cup and didn't identify you when you were brought into the Manor. You've always been a magnet to me. I've always been drawn to you."

"It's the same for me too."

"How does that make you feel?" He held his breath waiting for her answer.

"I feel comfortable and safe with you. I like the way things are between us, but I'm not ready for a relationship. My life's a mess. I need time before I'll be ready for that. I don't think it would be fair for either one of us to jump into something yet."

"I know you're not ready. I'm not going to try to push you into anything you're not ready for. I told you that in the dining room when you came back to let me apologize. We both know that it's there. We don't have to ever be anything other than friends if that's what you want."

The boat docked at the boathouse. Draco climbed out of boat and held out his hands to help Hermione out. She held onto his hand as they walked to the train station where he apparated them home.

# Chapter 5: A Lioness Among Snakes

Friday, September 13th, 2013

"Get dressed. We're going out," Draco told Hermione on Friday night as he walked into the study.

Nine days had passed since their argument in the dining room. Draco gave her the space she asked for. She had breakfast, lunch, and dinner with him. She went to work and came home, played with Rose, and walked around the park with him. Every night she sat in front of the fire reading in her pajamas or wandering from room to room aimlessly. She never went to visit her friends or had them over. He had offered several times to invite Harry and Ginny over. He told her anyone she wanted to invite over was welcome in his home. She always declined.

Hermione was curled upon the sofa, reading in her pajamas again. Rose had just been put to bed. "What? You can go out if you want. I don't feel like going anywhere," she answered distractedly.

"Which is exactly why you're going. I'm not going to let you sit around and wallow in misery. You need to socialize with people other than me, so go get changed or I'll throw you over

## *Chapter 7: Pictures of Us*

September 20th to October 19th

Draco settled into a routine with Hermione and Rose. During the week, they ate breakfast together and left together for school then work. Draco would pick Hermione up for lunch. Sometimes the Snakes or Harry and Ginny would meet them at a café. Most days they went home together. There were times Draco had to stay late and would meet them at home for dinner.

Hermione and Ginny went out with Tracey, Daphne, and Helena for a girls' night at his club the Friday after Parents' Day. When Hermione wasn't home by ten, he got worried and went over to check on them. He found them dancing together on the dance floor. Hermione looked stunning in a mesh tyst, spaghetti strap, v-neck dress that hugged her curves. The slit up the front gave an enticing view of her thigh. Her hair was swept up off her neck with curls framing her face. Ginny had smirked at him when he saw them coming down the stairs before they left for the night.

He stood near the door watching her dance with the girls. Her cheeks were flushed now with alcohol and dancing. She

spun and swayed with the music. She threw her head back and laughed at something Daphne said to her. She looked like the carefree witch he'd been hoping would emerge from the sadness.

"Busted!" Ginny said when she caught sight of him. He made it way over to them since he'd been spotted.

"Hey! It's girls' night. No men allowed," Daphne told him, her words slurring slightly.

"I'm not here to ruin your fun. I just got worried since it was so late. Just pretend I'm not here," Draco said to them, holding his hands up in surrender.

"Yes, but I'm sure our husbands aren't far behind you," Helena said. Sure enough, Theo, Blaise, and Greg walked in the door moments later, looking for their wives.

"We'll be at the bar. You ladies go back to your dancing," Draco placated them when Hermione pouted that she wanted to dance more.

Draco led the men over to the bar where they sat down for a drink. A half-hour passed with them laughing and joking around about the girls' antics. Harry walked in the door obviously looking for Ginny. He spotted Draco at the bar and walked over to him.

"They look like they're having fun," Harry said by way of greeting.

Draco looked over to the girls dancing together in a group. They were starting to get a bit carried away. Ginny had started slow grinding against Hermione. "Yeah, they've been dancing since I got here around ten. I don't even want to think about how much they've had to drink."

Harry sat watching his wife. Draco thought he caught a hungry look in Harry's eyes as he watched Ginny dance with Hermione. "Since Ginny has her shoes off, I'm going to go with a lot. I caught her dancing like that with one of her teammates during a victory party when she was playing the Harpies. That's how we got James," Harry chuckled. "You know, I think I'll go get my wife."

"TM, Potter!" Draco called after him. They all watched as

clearly didn't want to do and unloading all of his emotional baggage on her. She didn't need that hit. Some fucking friend he's supposed to be. He slammed his fists onto the table and sank down into his chair with his head in his hands.

"Are you going to keep destroying the room or are you going to come apologize to me?"

# *Chapter 8: Dancing at the Dragon's Den*

Halloween and November 1st

"Would you like to go out dancing?" Draco asked nonchalantly as he and Hermione finished dinner. Rose was spending Halloween at the Burrow with her grandparents and Albus.

"That sounds like fun," Hermione responded. Draco thought he caught a glint of anticipation in her eye.

Hesitated at her expression and thought that maybe she was looking forward to having a little fun, "Go get changed. Mother brought something by for you."

She disappeared up the stairs and into her room. He followed behind her and went to get ready as well. He came down wearing a navy blazer with a light gray dress shirt, the top two buttons unbuttoned. He was waiting for her in the foyer when she came down the stairs in the dress his mother bought for her. He gaped at the sight of her as she glided down the stairs with one hand lightly brushing across the banister.

The dress was a cobalt blue, one shoulder, sheath dress that ended just above her knees with a slit up the side to mid-thigh. The dress was fitted to accentuate her curves and it fit her like a

glove. The heels that went with it were a pair of matching blue stilettos. Her hair was pulled up in a loose chignon to show off her slender neck.

"Wow!" he exclaimed, "You look..." he fumbled for words, completely stunned, "Just...wow!"

He took her hand and spun her around slowly so he could admire her from every angle. She was stunning. She took his breath away. She smiled up at him but didn't say anything as he let him twirl her around.

He held onto her hand as he apparated them to the Dragon's Den. Draco wrapped an arm around the waist. "Close your eyes," he murmured as he guided her inside once she had closed her eyes, "Now open."

"Surprise!" The dance floor of the club was full of their friends with drinks in hand. Harry and Ginny were there, the Snakes, Luna, even Neville and Hannah had come from Hogsmeade. Jack-o-lanterns floated around the room.

Ginny came up to them with shots of firewhiskey. "Let's start this Halloween party out right," she hollered, "You look fucking hot, Hermione!"

Hermione blushed, took the shot from Ginny, and slammed it back. Ginny hugged Hermione and Draco in greeting before wandering back over to Harry.

"I think we should make a game of this. Every time someone tells you you're hot, you have to take a shot," Draco said quietly after Ginny walked away. He noticed she hadn't said anything when he and Ginny had complimented her.

"I'll play if you will. You can't tell people though," Hermione laughed up at him.

"Agreed," Draco replied without hesitation.

"Are there any stakes to this game of yours?" she asked.

"Not this time. Let's just do it for fun since we're both taking shots for the same thing. We're going to be trashed by the time tonight is over," he leaned over and whispered in her ear, "You are so fucking hot."

"Draco, it doesn't count if you say it," Hermione protested,

Hermione leaned against the door jamb to her room, "They're hurt, like everyone else, but Molly accepts that I shouldn't have to accept that sort of behavior from anyone. I didn't tell them everything though. Ginny was glaring at me to tell them but I just couldn't do it. We were having such a good evening with them and I didn't want to ruin it."

\*\*\*

Pictures of them standing outside the Burrow appeared in the paper the next day. Draco's platinum blonde hair stood out amidst all the red and brown. Rose's head peaked out over Draco's jacket. Hermione stood at his side hugging Molly while Draco shook Arthur's hand.

"How do they manage to take a bloody picture without us seeing a flash? It was dark outside," Draco asked. He handed the paper to Hermione.

"Whoever they are, they're good. They've taken plenty of pictures without us knowing anyone is there. Who knew we were going to the Burrow for dinner?" Hermione asked.

"No one that would say anything," Draco answered.

"We're being followed then," Hermione concluded.

called after him. Draco got down the Weasley's copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard and settled them on either side of him on the couch. He opened the book to "The Fountain of Fair Fortune" and began to read.

"High on a hill in an enchanted garden...." The children settled against him to listen to the story of the three witches and the Muggle knight and their trials to reach the fountain. These stories had never been read to him as a child. His father didn't like the Muggle elements of the book and refused to allow his mother to read it to him. When he arrived at Hogwarts his first year, he snuck into the library and read the book covertly. He read it many times over the years as a child growing up and to Scorpius then Rose.

Hermione and Ginny walked into the room as he was finishing reading "The Wizard and the Hopping Pot."

"I always preferred "The Tale of the Three Brothers,"" Hermione said to him.

He looked up at her, "A bit dark don't you think, especially for children."

"Well, yes but that story is one of the reasons we were able to defeat old Voldemort and Hermione figured it out before anyone else," Harry said. Harry picked up a sleeping Albus. Ginny followed behind him carrying their jackets. Draco picked up Rose, who had also fallen asleep, and followed Hermione out the door. He took his jacket from Hermione and draped it over Rose to protect her from the cold night air. Molly and Arthur walked with them down the path outside the wards. They all said goodnight as they disappeared from the Burrow.

"What did you talk to the Weasleys about while I was distracting the children?" Draco asked after they tucked Rose into her bed.

Hermione looked up at him as they walked across the landing to their rooms, "Visiting with Rose mostly. I invited them over for a picnic next weekend."

"How are they taking the separation? Are they going to give you a hard time over wanting a divorce?" Draco asked.

smacking him on the arm.

"We didn't agree to that. You said I couldn't tell anyone, not that I couldn't say it," he smirked down at her.

"Just like a Slytherin," she said, rolling her eyes at him. He snagged two shot glasses from a passing waiter. "Drink up, lioness!" He handed her a shot and drank his down.

Draco and Hermione circulated the room, greeting people, his hand never leaving her waist. Hermione glowed with all the attention. The Snakes came up to them en masse.

"Hermione, Happy Halloween! I love that dress. You look hot!" Daphne said, hugging Hermione.

"Happy Birthday! That dress is very flattering on you. It compliments you nicely," said Tracey, also hugging Hermione.

"Compliments her nicely? She's fucking hot. Where were you hiding all of that?" Helena gestured at Hermione, "Happy Halloween, dear," she said kissing her on both cheeks.

Theo, Blaise, and Greg hugged Hermione. Draco noticed their gazes sweep down her but they refrained from saying anything to Hermione about her appearance.

Draco stopped a passing waiter, handed her two shots, handed some around to the rest of the group, and took two himself. "To Hermione," he toasted and the rest of the group cheered, "To Hermione!"

"Why are we toasting me?" Hermione asked as she drank her shots down.

"Because you wouldn't let me throw you a birthday party when everyone wanted to be with you to celebrate your special day. So we got together to celebrate Halloween with you," Draco answered her.

The band started playing. Draco grabbed Hermione's hand and led her or onto the dance floor. "Come on, I promised you dancing and no one will start dancing until you do." He spun her around on the dance floor. She laughed up at him, the alcohol helping her let go. Other couples joined them on the dance floor. Somehow the dancing morphed into who could come up with the most ridiculous dance. By the time the song

ended, they were all laughing hysterically.

After the song ended, he led her away to talk to Harry, Ginny, Neville, Hannah, and Luna. She already drunk four and he owed her three more shots after the girls were through with her. He was actually starting to worry a little bit about their game. Seven shots were a bit much for the both of them.

The waiter arrived and Draco handed her three shots. Harry raised his glass to her, "Happy late birthday, Hermione. You've had a hell of a time the last couple of months and here you stand. To Hermione!"

Hermione drank her shots and hugged Harry. She told Draco that she wanted to thank everyone for coming. He signaled for the band to stop after they finished their song. Draco led her to the stage, handed her the microphone, and stepped away. The waiter circulated the room, handing shots to everyone.

While she was waiting for everyone to quiet down, Luna walked up to him. "I'm rather glad you've finally stopped fighting it. You two were taking forever. I wonder if this little party will end up in the paper tomorrow," she said in her typical dreamy voice.

Draco looked down at the strange woman and answered her, "The club is closed tonight. No press, no cameras, just friends having fun," choosing to ignore her other comments.

"That's good," Luna said in a singsong voice. She wandered off into the crowd, leaving Draco standing there looking bemused. Conversations with Luna were always interesting.

"I want to thank you all for coming out tonight to celebrate Halloween and my late birthday with me," Hermione started, "We've all walked a long journey the last fifteen years. Loved and lost. Lost ourselves and were remade stronger. Found traits inside ourselves we never knew we had. Became better people than we thought we were. I want to thank you all for your support during the difficult time I've gone through. Draco, I want to thank you for saving me that day, for your support and compassion, for your protection, and for reminding me of who I am. You walked with me through the fire and helped me come

but was now faded to a pinkish hue. Rose climbed up and sat on his lap, playing with the dragon. Albus had given back to her. Harry and Hermione related the story of Norbert the dragon to the group. Draco chimed in during his part. They all had a good laugh about their antics with a scolding from Molly about sneaking out of the castle at night.

"So, you named the dragon I gave her Norbert," Draco said. "It was all in good fun. I thought it would make a great story," Hermione said.

"Devilish witch," he said with a grin.

They sat around the kitchen table eating dinner. The table had been shrunk to seat the eight of them comfortably. Rose sat between Draco and Hermione. Harry, Albus, and Ginny were seated across the table from them with Molly and Arthur seated at the head and foot of the table. Hermione and Draco filled Rose's plate for her.

Rose cleaned her plate. Harry laughed when Rose used Draco's shirt as a napkin and wiped her greasy hands down the front of his shirt. "Rose, Draco is not your napkin," Hermione admonished.

"My hands were greasy and I dropped my napkin on the floor," Rose reasoned sweetly.

"Just say something next time, princess. Let's go wash the rest of the grease off your hands." Draco picked Rose up and took her off to the bathroom to clean her up and scourify his shirt. Draco came back into the kitchen carrying Rose.

Hermione came up to him as he entered the room. "Draco, would you mind doing me a favor?" she asked.

"Of course," he answered readily.

"Would you take Rose and Albus into the other room so we can talk about Ron?"

"Sure thing," Draco said. He walked over to where Albus was still sitting between Harry and Ginny. Draco leaned down to pick up Albus too. "Up you go, buddy. Let's see if we can find a story to read."

"On the shelf in the living room, Draco," Mrs. Weasley

"Thanks," he murmured into her ear.

"They're really not going to judge you. They may miss Fred but that doesn't mean they blame you for being on the wrong side of the war," Hermione reassured him.

Rose and Albus rushed by, chasing after one another. They crashed into Draco, sending him into Hermione. "Slow down, guys. You're going to hurt someone," he chided.

"But he has Norbert," Rose complained.

"You can share your dragon with your cousin," Hermione said.

"Her dragon's name is Norbert?" Harry asked, laughing.

"What's so funny about that?" Draco asked. Hermione and Harry started laughing louder now, barely able to control themselves. Tears were running down Hermione's face because she was laughing so hard. The elder Weasleys, Ginny, and the children were looking at the two curiously.

"Will one of you control yourselves enough to clue us in on what's so funny?" Arthur asked.

"Hagrid's... dragon.... First year," Harry wheezed before bursting into laughter again.

Draco remembered spying on the Golden Trio at Hagrid's hut and finding a newly hatched dragon on his kitchen table. He had tried getting them expelled and Hagrid sacked by telling Professor McGonagall that they were sneaking the dragon away, but he couldn't find them and ended up doing detention instead.

"Astronomy Tower," Draco said. Harry and Hermione started laughing louder. "I knew it. I knew you were there. I had to do detention because of you."

"You tried getting us expelled and Hagrid sacked! I think detention is a small price to pay for all the trouble you caused," Hermione said.

"Why don't we sit down while you tell us the whole story?" Arthur suggested. They all seated themselves in the sofas and chairs around the room. Draco sat beside Hermione on a sagging sofa that he thought at one time might have been red

out a stronger, better witch. To Draco! To good friends!" She lifted her glass to him and drunk, her eyes never leaving his.

The party cheered and drank their shots down. The band played a slow song and she drugged him onto the dance floor once again. She slipped her hands inside his jacket and ran them up his chest before she laced them around his neck. He threw his head back and closed his eyes as her hands travelled up. The smooth glide of her hands against him was exquisite torture. He pulled her flush against him, his hands tight on her waist, trying to keep himself reined in and not go exploring here on the dance floor in front of their friends.

"That was some speech," he said quietly to her, swaying with the music, "You didn't have to thank me though."

The smiled a little drunkenly up at him, "I did. I meant it. I wouldn't be here without you."

He tried to look at her seriously, but he had a feeling he had a drunkenly, goofy grin on his face, "You could've done it on your own, but I would walk through a thousand fires with you. I would take every curse and hex thrown at you. Anything to keep you safe and happy."

"I know," she answered simply. She laid her head on his chest as they finished dancing to the song.

The song ended and Tracy and Daphne pulled her away to dance the next song with them. All the ladies danced in a group together and looked like they were deliberately trying to drive their men wild. Draco stood leaning against the bar with Theo, Blaise, and Greg watching them. Harry and Neville joined them, watching the ladies. Hermione was gyrating along with the rest of them. Ginny smacked her ass at one point. He couldn't wait to get his hands back on her.

"Merlin, that is so hot," Blaise exclaimed, "Have I said how much I like these little outings? By the way, Hermione is looking good! I didn't want to say it in front of Tracey because I love my wife and I also love keeping my balls attached and in working order." Blaise kept his eyes on his wife in dancing in her little black dress.

"I think I'm going to take Daphne home after this and spank her for teasing me like this," Theo said, watching Daphne dance with Ginny.

"Later," Draco said, "I think we should reward them first. Get it a little hotter in here. You all ran off the last time before we could fan the flames."

"You weren't complaining too much if that dance across the paper was any indication," Harry said, teasing him.

The band played a bump and grind song next and Draco pulled Hermione roughly into his arms. He had his hands on the small of her back. They swayed their hips back and forth to the beat. He thought she was deliberately trying to drive him crazy as she rocked up against him. He stared down at her through half-closed lids. She rubbed up against him once more and looked up at him with a mischievous grin. She spun around so her back was to his front. He put his hands at her hips and pulled her back to him, rolling his hips against her.

She started rotating her hips, grinding her ass deliberately against him. He had to bite his lip to stifle the moan that threatened to escape. She leaned her head back against his chest as they moved together. He wrapped an arm around her just under her breasts. He ran his free hand lightly down her bared neck and shoulder. She reached her hand back and touched his face. He turned into it and kissed the palm of her hand. She swayed her hips with his grinding against him.

"You're so sexy. You're driving me crazy," he growled low in her ear, rocking his hips up against her.

"It's just the dress and alcohol getting to your brain," Hermione answered him dismissively, swaying back against him. He let his hands wander down the curves of her sides as they swayed against one another, "The dress just accentuates the beauty wearing it. I may be drunk but I know a beautiful body when it's rubbing up against me." He thrust against her again. "Do you feel how much I desire you? That's not alcohol or a pretty dress. That's desire for the beautiful, smart, courageous witch here in my arms."

quick buck off the latest gossip. They'll find something else more interesting and move on eventually."

\*\*\*

Draco went with Hermione and Rose to visit Mr. and Mrs. Weasley for dinner on Saturday. Hermione had told him she was fine going alone if he was uncomfortable going but he didn't want her going alone just in case Weaselbee was there. He was tempted to come dressed in a full three-piece suit just to see Harry and Ginny's reactions. He chose instead to wear his navy jacket, a gray tee, and dark blue jeans.

They apparated to just outside the wards of the Burrow and walked up the path to the front door. The door opened at Hermione's knock and Ginny let them in. "Damn, I hoped he would show up in a suit."

"Nice to see you again, Ginny," Draco said drily.

They walked inside and Draco took Hermione and Rose's jackets and hung them on the hook by the door. Draco walked over and greeted Arthur and Molly. He expected them to be cold to him, especially for his part in the war and the loss of their son during the final battle, but they greeted him warmly.

"You'll want to take your jacket off too, Draco. It gets warm in here with everyone gathered around," Harry said, loudly. Draco glared at Harry's lack of sensitivity, "I'm fine with it on," he ground out.

"Draco, it's not as if we don't know it's there. Hermione doesn't hide hers," Ginny said.

"Hermione wasn't branded a Death Eater. I just prefer not to inflict the sight on that mark on people, especially those who lost loved ones during the war," Draco retorted.

"We're not going to judge you, Draco. Take the jacket off and get comfortable," Arthur said.

Draco relented and took his jacket off and hung it on the hook alongside Hermione's. He was uncomfortable facing them with no way to hide his forearm. Hermione took his arm and draped it over her shoulders allowing him to hide the brand.

"They're welcome to come to Spinner's End, as well. You all are. You have an open invitation to come over anytime."

Harry and Ginny looked astounded by the invitation. Ginny had come by before going out to girls' night with Hermione but they had never come over to spend time with them. "You just don't want to go to the Burrow," Harry finally said.

"I wouldn't mind if that's what Hermione wanted, but I also want to make sure that you all know you're welcome as well."

The rest of dinner passed uneventfully. They laughed together as they shared stories of the antics of their children. Draco paid the check before Harry could grab it, insisting that he get this one. Harry and Ginny apparated home after dinner was over and they hugged Hermione. Ginny hugged Draco and Harry shook his hand before they left. Draco and Hermione walked off dinner by walking home rather than apparating. They took off down the well-lit street. Hermione wrapped an arm around his waist and he pulled her close to him as he put his arm around her.

\*\*\*

More pictures appeared in the paper the next day of their dinner with the Potters. The four of them laughing at some story Ginny was telling. The hug from Ginny. The handshake from Harry. He and Hermione walking home.

"We really have to find out who's been following us around," Hermione said as she surveyed the paper at breakfast.

"I've tried. It's an anonymous photographer. They owl the pictures to the Prophet with a comment on what they saw. The owl waits for payment, then leaves," Draco said as she looked up from the letter from Scorpius that he was reading.

"I'm not sure I like that someone's following us around taking pictures and we haven't even been able to spot him or her."

"I'll keep trying to find out who it is but I don't think they're dangerous. Probably just some photographer out to make a

"Draco, I want you," she arched and moaned against him, "I'm just afraid it's too soon."

What was left of his functioning brainpower jumped in jubilation at her words. "I'm not telling you we have to do anything about this right now. That you want me is enough."

The song ended and Ginny pulled Hermione away to make a trip to the restroom. Harry walked up to him as he watched them walk off. Hermione threw a look back at him full of heat and promise.

"What is it about girls going off to the ladies room in packs?" Draco asked, looking over at Harry.

Harry looked at him seriously, "Probably to ask her what's going on between the two of you. It was getting pretty hot and heavy out there."

"If this is the part where you question my intentions, save it," Draco responded curtly, glaring at Harry.

Harry poked him in the chest, "Just so it's said, I'll kick your ass if you hurt her."

Draco swatted at his hand impatiently, "Same as you did to Ron?" Draco retorted. He knew very well that Harry hadn't done more than yell at Ron for his actions.

Harry had the decency to look ashamed, "Touche."

"If your wife ruins this party for her, I'm holding you responsible," Draco threatened, poking Harry back.

Harry nodded and then looked at him seriously, "Duly noted. Just so you know, I'm not going to stand in your way if you two want to be together. You're good for her and she seems happy with you. I saw how you were with Rose at dinner at the Burrow. You're a good father, probably better than Ron ever was as much as it pains me to say that about my best friend."

Draco nodded his thanks to Harry. Harry was the closest thing Hermione had to a brother and his easy acceptance of them would make it easier for them when she was finally ready for a relationship with him. Hermione came back with Ginny from the ladies room. She didn't look mad or upset so he supposed the interrogation went well.

"Ready for cake?" he asked. Food and water would probably be a good idea.

At two-tiered cake with candles was wheeled in. They all sang happy birthday to her even though it was Halloween. "Make a wish," he said. She blew out the candles. The waiter cut slices of cake and he grabbed a slice from each tier and offered them to her. "We've got chocolate and strawberry."

She plucked the plate with the chocolate slice away from him. He laughed at her greediness for the chocolate. They sat down at a table to eat. He handed her a bottle of water and insisted she drink some.

"Do you like strawberries?" he asked. At her nod, he cut a bite onto his fork and held it out to her. "Here try a bite."

He watched entranced as she wrapped her lips around his fork. He pulled the fork away and she moaned at the taste of the strawberry cake. She held out her own fork to him with a bite of her chocolate cake on it. She reached a finger out and wiped away some frosting from the corner of his mouth then licked it off her finger. They sat that way, eating their own slices and feeding each other occasional bits of cake, sharing heated looks as they fed each other.

They danced, drank, and had fun with their friends until two in the morning. They had to take the Floo home and the bartender had to call out the location before they stepped in the fireplace since slurring their location might have disastrous results. They stumbled up the stairs, supporting one another and laughing, and fell into their separate beds.

\*\*\*

They woke up late the next morning and stumbled downstairs together, both holding their heads and grumbling about hangovers. Tansy left a vase of flowers over the next to their places at the table. "Bless that elf!" Hermione said as she drunk hers down.

The gossip column was covered in pictures of them.

years and was now full owner of the restaurant. The place was always busy and he made sure to reserve a table when he planned on coming in. "The chicken curry will blow your mind," he finished. They ordered chicken curry, pineapple fried rice, and pad Thai to share among themselves.

"Hermione tells us that you're teaching Rose how to be a seeker," Harry said to Draco.

"She's a natural. She didn't inherit any of her mum's flying skills," Draco joked. Harry and Ginny laughed, both knowing Hermione's aversion to flying.

"I know how to fly. I just don't understand why anyone would want to when they can floo or apparate," Hermione said drily.

"Because it's fun, Hermione," Ginny said, "Has Ron contacted you at all about seeing Rose?"

Hermione took a deep breath and shook her head, "No. I haven't gotten any owls from him. Has he said anything to either of you about seeing Rose?" she asked.

Ginny looked angry as she answered, "We haven't seen him since Parents' Day. He hasn't been by the Burrow either according to mum. She's sent him a few howlers. I imagine those were fun."

"I would have loved to be a fly on the wall when he opened those up," Draco chuckled maliciously.

"You would," Hermione said as she jabbed him in the side, smiling up at him.

Draco smiled down at her, "He deserves it and you know it." "Anyway, it's sad that he hasn't contacted anyone about seeing Rose," Hermione said, looking back at Ginny.

"I know. Mum and Dad would like to see you both though. Draco is welcome to come too," Ginny said.

Harry started laughing. "I can just imagine seeing Draco Malfoy walking through the living room of the Burrow eating dinner at the kitchen table. In a suit." Ginny and Hermione started laughing as well. Draco cracked a smile at Hermione's reaction.

said jumping up and down.

Hermione dropped down to a knee and hugged Rose to her.

"Of course we saw. You did a great job."

"That's some good flying, princess. We'll make a seeker out of you yet," Draco praised her.

"Like you and Uncle Harry?" Rose asked.

"Just like me and Uncle Harry," Draco answered. He took the snitch from her and put it back in his pocket as Hermione started peeling her gloves off her hands. He charmed the picnic blanket to fold itself up and packed it into the basket.

Hermione levitated the basket and brooms to float behind them as they made their way back home. They each held one of Rose's hands and swung her between them on the walk home.

\*\*\*

Pictures appeared in the paper again the next day of the picnic in the park. He and Hermione lying together on the picnic blanket. He and Rose flying over the river. Him teaching Rose how to turn properly. Hermione hugging into his side. The three of them walking back to Spinner's End.

\*\*\*

Harry and Ginny met them for dinner at Samorn's Kitchen, a Thai restaurant near his club in Cokeworth. The restaurant was small and quaint. They took a booth near the back of the restaurant.

"Another one of your properties?" Hermione asked as they took their seats.

"No. I sold this place to Samorn after I met her in London." He told them about meeting the little Thai witch working in a struggling restaurant in London and enticing her to open up her own place in Cokeworth while he was rebuilding the town. He'd given her the start-up money and let her create the restaurant she had always dreamed of. She'd repaid his investment in three

Prominent along them was the picture of them grinding on the dance floor. They had captured the moment when he had kissed her palm. Her head was thrown back against him, body arched, eyes half closed, slightly parted lips. His head was turned into her hand at his face, eyes closed, arm banded just under her chest.

"How bad is it?" she asked. He had been staring at the pictures transfixed for a while. He handed the paper to her wordlessly.

"That's what we looked like," she said in astonishment, "No wonder Ginny asked if we were sleeping together. Did you see the photographer?" she asked, looking up from the paper at him before looking back down at the paper.

He laughed a little at her question and answered drily, "I think I was a little distracted at that particular moment and I probably wouldn't have been able to muster a brain cell to care. The club was closed though. No one should have been in there to take pictures." He saw her run her fingers lightly across the pictures.

It was by far his favorite picture of them. He just wished it hadn't been played across the paper like something tawdry.

They spent the rest of the day relaxing and recovering from the night before. Hermione apparated to the school to pick up Rose at the end of the school day. Rose played on the floor in the study while he and Hermione curled up on the couch together, reading.

His mother surprised them by coming over in the afternoon for tea. He expected a lecture about the pictures in the paper, but she just smiled at him. Surely being caught grinding on a dance floor with a woman, even if it was Hermione, necessitated a lecture about proper behavior. This was odd for his mother.

They all sat down in the drawing room. Hermione and his mother shared the couch. He took up an armchair close to Hermione. They sat there together talking about nothing, drinking tea.

Rose sat coloring with them. She got up and left after a while,

then came back with a stack of books and set them on the table beside him. She held out a book to him. "Will you read to me please?" she asked as she crawled up in his lap, not bothering to wait for an answer.

Hermione and his mother were still talking, but so quietly he couldn't hear. Halfway through the third book, Rose fell asleep against him. He set the book down feeling his own eyelids droop. The murmured voices of Hermione and his mother soothed him to sleep.

He woke slowly a little while later. He thought he heard his name and he came to the realization that his mother and Hermione were talking about him. Curious, he kept his breathing steady and his eyes closed. Rose was still curled up in his lap. He could feel her little hands fisted in his t-shirt.

"Draco used to do that with Scorpius. I would come over and find the two of them curled up asleep in a chair and a stack of books on the table," he heard his mother say.

"He's good with her. He plays with her, reads to her, and listens to all her stories. He's even taught her to ride a broom. If he's like that with her, I can only imagine what he was like with Scorpius at that age," Hermione said.

"He's probably pretty similar. I would imagine he's kept himself from going into full on daddy mode to be respectful to you. You two seem to be getting on well. Did you have fun last night?" his mother asked blandly.

"Loads. Probably the best birthday slash Halloween party ever," Hermione enthused, then asked, "Are you going to ask what's going on between us too?"

"No. Who asked you that?"

"Ginny. Shortly after that picture was taken. She said she was surprised that I had moved on so soon. I told her that when I moved and with whom was none of her business," Hermione said firmly.

So that's what Ginny had pulled her away for. Hermione had been surprisingly closed-mouthed about her conversation with Ginny.

soothed, running his hand down Hermione's arm.

Rose grabbed Scorpius' old training broom and mounted. It only hovered about two feet off the ground. She flew in circles around them. Draco took a snitch out of the pocket of his jacket. He caught Rose's eye and showed her the snitch before he released it.

The snitch was meant for five-year-olds just learning how to fly. It moved in slow, lazy circles around them, never moving more than five feet away from where Draco and Hermione stood. Rose maneuvered the broom around, trying to catch the snitch. She was a natural on a broom. Thankfully she hadn't inherited her mother's dislike of flying. They stood there side by side watching Rose as she flew around. They shouted encouragements to her.

She fell off at one point when she banked too hard into a turn. They ran over to check on her but Rose insisted on getting back on to try again. Draco helped her back on and showed her how to get low on the broom and lean into the turn. Rose flew off again looking for the snitch.

"She's fine," Draco soothed as he came back to Hermione and draped an arm over her shoulder. Both her arms came around his waist as she hugged into his side. "She fell just like I taught her to."

He wouldn't deny that his heart had been in his throat as he watched her tumble off the broom. She had thrown her arms over her head and rolled as she hit the ground just like they had practiced when he first took her out flying. He was so proud that she hadn't panicked or been too afraid to get back on.

After twenty minutes of chasing the snitch, he watched as Rose stretched out her hand, as she was lying low over the broom. The golden ball was just inches from her outstretched fingers. It darted in front of her face and she snatched at it, catching it so fast her hand was just a blur. She landed with the snitch fluttering in her hand.

Draco and Hermione cheered as she ran over with the broom and snitch. "I caught it! I caught it! Did you see?" Rose

He understood how she felt. It was one of the things that made him angry about the situation too. Weasley's stupidity had kept him from possibly being with her all these years. His own cowardice had kept him from pursuing her as he should have.

"I know. You can't live thinking about how things could have been different, though. It will just make you bitter and angry. How do you feel about your life now?" he asked quietly.

Her smile was as bright as the sunshine. She answered him in a breathy voice, "Free. More like myself than I have in years."

He cupped her face, stroking her cheek again. "I'm glad. I killed me to see you so sad."

She grabbed his hand stroking her face and held onto it, "It's because of you. You didn't let me wallow in misery for long. You wouldn't let me take the blame. You reminded me who I was. Why couldn't this have happened years ago when we were in school?"

Why indeed? He answered her honestly though, "Because I was an idiot. I had to learn to be a better man."

"Mummy, can I have some cookies?" Rose asked as she came awake.

Hermione sat up and here-braided her hair for her as she gave Rose a cookie and a juice box. Rose begged to ride his broom and he couldn't turn down her pleading. He set her on the broom in front of him, wrapped an arm around her, and sped off flying around the park. He heard Hermione calling after them not to go so fast. Rose squealed in delight as they flew over the river. Little Rose was a thrill seeking, speed demon.

He glided them to a stop in front of Hermione, who stood with her hands on her hips and an exasperated expression on her face. "Must you go so fast?"

He shrugged it off as he helped Rose dismount his broom, "It's fine Hermione. She likes it."

"What if she falls off?" Hermione asked, still exasperated with both of them.

"I didn't fall off mummy. It's fun," Rose interjected.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to her," Draco

"Good for you. You deserve happiness. Do you feel ready to move on?" His mother was probing. He could feel it.

"I don't know," Hermione said, sighing, "It feels like it should be a bit soon. I mean, I only found out Ron was cheating on me two months ago. I don't want Draco to be a rebound guy."

"If you hadn't just gotten out of a serious relationship, would it seem too soon to you? Would you have the same reservations?" There were times he loved his mother and her gentle probing. This happened to be one of them. She could ask the questions he wouldn't be able to.

"No. If he acted the same way he's been acting the last two months, I wouldn't have any reservations. But I did just get out of a serious relationship. Technically, I'm not even completely out of the relationship. I'm still married to Ron and who knows how long that will take to get out of."

"Do you still have feelings for Ron?"

"Other than disgust and anger, no."

"Well, you'll know when you're ready to move on," his mother said softly, "I will just say that I don't think you should wait until your divorce is finalized before you move on with your life. Life is so short. You know that. Grab whatever happiness comes your way with both hands."

"Who's to say what too soon is?" she continued, "If you don't feel anything for Ron anymore and you feel you're ready, then that is the right time, whether it's tomorrow or a year from now. Others will always have an opinion but you can't sacrifice your life and happiness on the altar of public opinion. Be selfish and greedy about living the life you deserve. Don't let others convince you what's too soon. You decide," his mother finished heatedly.

"Thank you. That's why I like talking to you. You give me a different perspective and then tell me to make my own choices."

"Well that's what mothers are for, to help you find your options and then let you decide which one is best for you. We really should wake them up."

"Yes, Rose won't sleep tonight if she sleeps any longer. I'll

wake them up," he heard the rustle of clothes as Hermione got up to wake him.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, then brush up against his cheek. Draco nuzzled against her hand the slowly opened his eyes and blinked up at her, hoping that he was convincing enough to make them believe he had been sleeping the whole time.

"Time to wake up sleepy head," she said, smiling down at him.

"How long have I been out?" he asked, trying to sound drowsy.

"About a half hour," she said, smoothing his hair back off his forehead.

"Will you get me some water, please?" he asked with a croak, "I'll wake up Rose."

"Sure," she walked off to get him some water.

"How long have you been awake?" his mother asked quietly.

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about mother," Draco said, trying to look innocent.

when I do this," he started massaging her scalp with one hand to make his point.

She made these cute purring noises every time he rubbed her scalp. It only further fueled his fascination with her hair. She turned onto her side so she was facing him and gazed at him. He pillowed his head on his arm so he could look at her and raised an eyebrow at her.

"Why am I not more upset about him?" she asked seriously. He frowned at her, "Are you looking for a reason to be more upset?"

She shook her head and started tracing the pattern on the blanket with her finger, "No. It just seems weird to me that it's only been a month after I found out and I'm laying here on a blanket with you, content and at peace. I stopped crying myself to sleep a few nights ago. Does that mean I didn't love him or something?"

He didn't know that she cried herself to sleep. He ran his over her hair and cupped her face. She leaned into his touch. "I think you might be the only one that can answer that question. Do you still love him?"

"Merlin, no!" she said with a shudder, "That feeling is well and truly dead. I keep thinking that I should be more upset and I was at first but now, I'm just relieved that it's over. I was tired of fighting with him but I didn't really try to work it out either. Who knows how bad it really was since he managed to take some memories away? Isn't love supposed to be eternal though?"

He twirled a lock of her hair in between his fingers and watched her hair glint red and gold in the sunlight, "I think some love is. But it's also like a fire or a living thing. Love needs to be fed in order to survive and grow. I don't think you got that from him."

She looked at him, her mouth turned down and pain in her eyes, "I just keep thinking how much of my life he wasted. If he had told me he wanted to be with her, I would have let him go. I could have spent those years with someone who wanted to be with me."

## Finding Hermione

"What do you suggest we do about it?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

She turned in her pacing and looked at him like he was being dense, "Make new laws. It's time to take the Wizarding World out of the Middle Ages and into modern era."

Finally, he thought to himself. He'd promised her he wouldn't push her after their argument in the dining room. He just bided his time, waiting for her to decide when she was ready to start tackling the issue of her divorce.

\*\*\*

They took Rose to the park for a picnic and to spend the day in the sunshine before the weather turned. Rose exhausted herself running around and fell asleep on the blanket after lunch. Draco lay stretched out on the blanket. Hermione had lain down perpendicular to him, her head resting on his chest. She was reading a book aloud to him. He had worked the elastic from her braid and was unraveling it with his fingers while he listened to her story.

She stopped reading and turned her head to look at him.

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" he asked, playing dumb as he continued to toy with her hair.

She rolled her eyes at him but still answered, "Every time we relax together lately, you pull my hair down and start playing with it."

"I like your hair. It's so soft," Draco said as he continued to run his fingers through her curls.

"You're insane. It's a bushy mess," she protested as she made to sit up but he grabbed a handful of her hair to keep her in place.

"Stay still, please. I like it. I like how it feels running through my hands. I like how it smells. I like the little noises you make

## Chapter 9: Missing

Monday, November 4th

Hermione burst into Draco's office at the Ministry a little after four o'clock with tears streaming down her face. He had been planning on staying late while Hermione went to go get Rose from school.

"What's going on?" he asked as he got up quickly and crossed to her.

"She's missing," Hermione sobbed, wrapping her arms around him.

"Who's missing?" he pulled her back and made her look at him.

"Rose. I went to pick her up from school and her teacher said that Ron already picked her up. I don't know where she is," Hermione started crying harder.

Draco pulled her into his arms. He wanted to tear the room apart, scream, and punch something. He wanted to rip that git limb from limb for daring to take Rose from Hermione without her permission. He couldn't do any of those things. He had to stay strong. He had to remain calm for Hermione. "It'll be okay. We'll find her. We know who has her at least."

"Tansy!" he shouted at the ceiling.

A minute later Tansy appeared. "Master Draco has called Tansy?"

"Can you sense Rose, Tansy?" Draco asked frantically.

"Yes, I feel her," Tansy said. Bless that elf!

"Good. I want you to go to her. Stay invisible. I don't want anyone to know you're there, even Rose. Don't interfere unless she's in danger. If she is, do what you have to do to get yourselves out. Stay with her until I call you again. When I call, you'll take us to her. Got it?" he instructed Tansy.

"Yes," Tansy said as she disappeared with a pop.

"Why didn't you just have Tansy take us to her?" Hermione asked, close to panic.

"We need help. If we pop in there and try to take her, it could get violent. I don't want to risk you or Rose getting hurt. I don't think he'll hurt her, so waiting a few moments to prepare will be okay. Now come on. We're going to get Harry," Draco grabbed her hand and they walked quickly to Harry's office with the Aurors.

Draco explained the situation and why Harry was needed. "I can't believe that he would just take Rose. What's gotten into him?" Harry asked.

"We can discuss that bastard's poor decision making skills another time. Are you ready?" Hermione said. Harry nodded.

Draco called for Tansy. She reappeared instantly and reassured Hermione that Rose was safe. They joined hands and Tansy took them to Rose. They appeared inside a living room and found Rose was sitting on a couch with her father.

"Mummy! Draco!" Rose said as she ran to them. She tried hugging them both in her excitement and ended up knocking them together. Hermione dropped down to her knees and pulled Rose in for a hug. Draco positioned himself so that he stood between Weasley and Hermione.

"Mummy, I don't want to live here. I want to stay with you and Draco," Rose said.

Draco glared across the room at Weasley. Draco could see her creeping up the back of Harry's neck, a sure sign of impending fury. Weasley managed to look both furious and apprehensive at the two of them standing there.

"You're not staying here. You're coming back with us,"

a divorce from Ron. I told him about what happened at the cottage. I even offered to let him inspect my memories. He refused to listen to me. He wouldn't even hear me out."

"I did try telling you it was pointless to try to get Shackbolt on your side. He's not the same wizard the Order decided to put in power at the end of the war," Draco said. It would probably be one of the few times he would ever get to say "I told you so," though he hated being right about this.

Hermione started pacing his office from the windows along one wall to the bookcase along the other wall. "You haven't even heard the worst part," she said, gesticulating wildly, "He told me that wizarding folk don't divorce, that the magical bonds of matrimony are not meant to be severed. If they make a poor choice in their spouse, then they must find a way to live with their decision. I tried arguing with him. I tried convincing him that Ron had abused me psychologically. He told me that I would have to find a way to live with it and to cut out all my nonsense about running away. He even had the nerve to tell me that as Ron's wife, I was his to do with as he saw fit, like I was nothing more than a piece of property."

"So, do I need to get Theo so we can hide the body?" He was only partially joking but he wouldn't really be all that surprised to find out something nasty had happened to the Minister. Some people just had no sense of self-preservation. Shackbolt must have been out of his mind telling Hermione Granger that a wife was the property of her husband.

"Har, har. Do you think this is funny?" she said, poking him in the chest, looking like she was about to hex him.

"You know I don't," he said, making a grab for the hand that had been poking him and missing.

She spun away and started pacing the room again. "This can't be allowed to continue. We're in the twenty-first century and we're still following archaic laws that treat witches as nothing more than chattel. Witches have more than proven that we are the equals of wizards. How many witches are there in our world that are stuck in loveless, abusive marriages?"

into her smiling eyes.

"You knew?" she asked, her expression unfathomable. Draco shrugged it off, "Of course I did. I wanted to throw you a party but Ginny said you didn't like celebrating your birthday anymore."

"Not since I lost my parents, but thank you for wanting to." They both fell silent as he spun her around. She twirled back into his embrace and rested her hand on his chest, leaning her cheek against him.

"Take me home," she said as the song ended. He twirled them around once more as they disappeared from the club into the foyer of his home. She stood on tiptoe in front of him. He felt her soft lips graze his cheek, feather light across his skin. Her enticing scent enveloped him as he brushed against him. "Goodnight, Draco," she said before she was gone up the stairs. He placed a hand to his cheek as he watched her walk up the stairs and disappear into her room.

\*\*\*

A picture of them appeared in the paper the next day. He watched the moving picture show them waltzing across the page over and over again. They both stared at each other as they glided along. He saw the expressions on their faces and wondered if that was really what they looked like when they looked at each other.

\*\*\*

Hermione had a meeting with on Thursday with Shackbolt. She stormed into his office afterwards in a tearing rage. Draco got up and told his secretary to cancel his appointments. He then locked and silenced his office. It wouldn't do to have the whole floor hear her raging. "I take it you aren't a newly freed witch," Draco said as he lounged against his desk.

Hermione glared at him, clearly not liking his levity of the situation. "No, obviously. I told him I wanted to be granted

Hermione reassured her.

"What are you doing here? She belongs with me. I'm not with going to let her stay with you if you're going to keep shacking up with this Death Eater scum," Weasley said, coming towards the three of them. Harry moved to stand on Draco's left, the two of them forming a wall between Weasley and Hermione. Hermione stood up, red and shaking with anger. "Take Rose, Draco," she said as she shouldered her way past the two of them to stand toe to toe with her jackass husband.

Draco picked Rose up and held her on his left hip. He held her so that his body and Harry's blocked her from full view of her father. Rose wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. He gripped his wand, ready to defend Hermione if Weasley tried to attack her.

"How dare you! You take my child from school without my permission or knowledge. Then you tell her she's staying here. She's my daughter. She belongs with me. You haven't even bothered trying to see her until now and you suddenly decide she's coming to live with you. This isn't about wanting what's best for her. It's about you and whatever fucked up logic you have going on. And you have the audacity to speak about Draco that way. He has been nothing but kind and caring to your daughters and me. He gave us a safe place to live when you were caught with your mistress. He protected me when you tried to oblivate me. He is a good man. A better man, a better father than you've ever been, Ronald Weasley, and I'll be damned if I let a hypocrite like you say one bad thing about him," she screamed at Weasley. He could see her shaking in anger.

Gone was the wilting flower, burnt to ash, in its place was a fiercelioness roaring to life and her fierceness was beautiful to behold. She was back, no longer the hurt, jilted wife, no longer defeated. She was the witch, who was a force to be reckoned with, burst free to protect her child and defend him. Canaries circled around her head. Weasley shrunk back away from her at the sight of the little yellow birds.

"I will not have my daughter living with a Death Eater's

whore," Weasley spat at her.

"You dare call me a whore. Better to be this Death Eater's whore than your wife," Hermione shouted back at him.

"It's time to leave, Hermione. Go with Draco," Harry spoke for the first time.

"You're taking their side," Weasley rounded on Harry.

Harry looked sadly at his friend, "Yeah, I am. I'm disappointed in you, Ron. Pull your head out of your ass and do the right thing before it's too late and your daughters and your friends want nothing to do with you. This kind of behavior is unacceptable. It's one thing to want to see Rose. It's a whole different issue to take her from her mother and start trying to fill her head with lies. I won't stand by and watch a child treated that way, even if we are friends," Harry said.

Draco wrapped his free arm around Hermione's waist. Just as they were about to apparate, the canaries dove at Weasley's face, pecking and clawing at every available bit of skin available. Draco smirked and silently aimed a slugulus eructo charm at Weasley, then quickly apparated them away. Let him spend the day vomiting slugs as well as dealing with his bird bites.

"Tansy, thank you for your help today," Draco said to Tansy. Tansy nodded and left the room.

Draco sat on the couch and set Rose in the middle of Hermione and himself. Rose climbed into Hermione's lap and clung to her. Draco slid closer and wrapped his arms around both of them.

"Rose, honey are you doing okay?" Hermione asked.

"Mummy, I don't want to go live with Daddy. I don't like it there and Daddy says mean things about you and Draco," Rose said.

"You're not going to go live with Daddy. You're staying with us," Hermione reassured her daughter.

"Good. I don't like it there. He shouldn't say bad things," Rose said, looking down and playing with her shoelace.

"No, he shouldn't," Hermione agreed, still looking a little fierce.

Harry walked over and picked up Ginny's shoes and purse. He said something to Ginny then picked her up and threw her over his shoulder, swatting her backside playfully. Ginny grinned mischievously and waved bye as she and Harry disappeared from the club.

"Potter may have a good idea. Drunk sex is awesome and my wife is wearing a killer pair of fuck-me heels. See ya," Blaise said. The lure of sex was more than Theo, Blaise, and Greg could resist and shortly they apparated home with their wives, leaving only Draco and Hermione left at the club.

"I guess girls' night is over," Hermione said as she walked up to him at the bar. She grabbed his drink out of his hand and drained it before setting it back on the bar.

He put his hand on her waist and drew her to stand between his legs. "I blame Harry. He put the idea of drunk sex in Blaise's head and that was pretty much it for the guys." Hermione laughed at that. "Are you ready to go?" He asked her. Before she answered the Draco heard the opening chords of "You And Me" by Lifehouse. "Dance with me, Hermione?" he asked, holding out his hand for her.

She nodded and he led her out onto the dance floor. He twirled her around then settled his hand back at her waist. Her hand came to rest on his shoulder. He led her through the familiar steps of a waltz as the crooning voice of the lead singer started to sing. Her chocolate eyes met his, making him feel like he was drowning in their depths. He tightened his arm around her waist pulling her closer.

This song had always spoken to him where she was concerned. The years went rushing by him, all the times he had watched her across the Great Hall at school or in the hallways, all the times he saw her after the war wanting to speak to her but not able to find the right words. People had always surrounded her but his eyes always found her in the crowd. He never understood the hold she had on him. He had never known until that day on the boat that she felt the same.

"Happy birthday, Hermione," he said quietly, staring down

contacted my father about a betrothal. We spent many years very happy together."

Hermione's wide-eyed gaze met his, "So you're saying I'm Draco's soul mate."

"Surely, you've felt it, dear. I've been hearing about you for years, so I know you two have been around one another," Alexandria said.

"Felt what, exactly?" Draco asked, breaking the pull of her gaze to turn back to the portrait.

"The pull of your soul to hers. The desire to touch, kiss, and claim her," Armand answered.

He looked down at Hermione standing beside him and suddenly everything clicked into place. He remembered the first time he felt the pull of her on the train. He was sitting in a train compartment joking around with Crabbe and Goyle when she came by his compartment looking for Longbottom's toad. He'd been struck dumb by her eyes and his heart leapt in his chest. She'd stuck her hand out for a Muggle style handshake introducing herself to him. He'd been surprised and embarrassed as Crabbe and Goyle snickered at her.

He'd been disappointed and angry to find out that she was Muggleborn and therefore off limits to him. They couldn't be friends. He couldn't have anything to do with her. Every time he saw her after that he felt the same irresistible pull toward her. It made him angrier each time he saw her, to want her and know that he'd be denied her because of her heritage. He'd started lashing out at her as only a spoiled boy can, with words that stung and hurt and a very memorable in that enlarged her front teeth, meant to keep her away from him so he could stop feeling like he needed to be with her.

Always. He'd always felt it. He'd always felt her. He'd known the second she was brought to the Manor by the Snatchers. He'd felt like he was dying as he watched her being tortured by his crazy aunt. He'd wanted to stand by her side during the final battle instead of crossing the line to save the lives of his parents "Does this mean we have to marry now?" Hermione asked the

portraits, breaking him from his reverie.

"No," he said a little more forcefully than he intended, "I'm not going to be one more person that forces you to do something you don't want to do."

"But Draco, we're soul mates. Neither one of us can ever be truly happy without the other," Hermione said in despair.

Draco grasped both her hands in his, "That doesn't mean I'm going to let you be forced into marriage or anything else. Neither one of us would be happy if that was the only reason we married."

"Stop being so dramatic, you two," a gaunt old man growled from the painting to their left, "The bracelet only serves to identify the soul mate of a Mafloy. It is up to the wizard to convince his witch to be with him."

"How do you know this?" his mother asked, "You never married."

"I wronged my soul mate. I found out too late that she was mine, but by then she wouldn't have me. There was no convincing her despite spending my life trying to make amends. I lived alone rather than take a witch who would be a pale comparison to my Emilie. There are many other Mafloys here who never found their soul mate and lived perfectly happy lives."

"Hermione, Draco, I know that this is a lot for you both to take in. There are books in the library that might be of use to you. Let's go get them," his mother said, ushering them from the portrait gallery.

Draco watched his ancestors mumble as they walked by, all eager to see the future "Lady Mafloy" as they put it. He didn't hear the word "Mudblood" once from their lips. He found it odd to see how they treated Hermione with a newfound deference.

"Is anyone else a little freaked out by how they're treating me?" Hermione asked in disbelief.

"I'm not complaining, but this isn't how I expected them to treat you on your first official visit either." Neither one commented on the circumstances of her first visit to his former

home.

His mother threw the open the double doors to the Malfoy library. Draco watched Hermione's face as she walked into the vast expanse of books. Taking Hermione into a library was like taking a child into a candy store. He could feel the hum of barely contained glee radiating from her.

The room was the biggest one in the house, even larger than the grand ballroom. Bookshelves three stories high lined the perimeter of the room, all filled to bursting with books. Aisles of bookshelves radiated outward from the center of the room. Spiral staircases led to the floors above. Comfortable chairs were interspersed across the main floor as well as near the landings on the other two floors. Windowed alcoves with seats made for curling up in took up the back corners of the room. It was a room that looked like it had been built with Hermione Granger in mind.

Hermione's look of awe and excitement erased the tension she had been feeling since they discovered the cuff on her. He had a feeling his mother might have taken them here last on purpose. The prospect of exploring a vast library would have erased even the worst mood from Hermione Granger.

"It's so vast," she finally said in awe and wonder.

"More books than even you could read in a lifetime," he said.

"Wanna bet?" she said with a grin.

"What would I get if I win?" he asked her.

"What would you ask for?" she replied.

"Another lifetime with you," he said with a smile, taking both her hands in his.

Hermione smiled at him through a haze of tears. "Deal."

"Wait. What do you get if you win?" Draco asked. He really wanted to win this bet.

"I'll tell you when I win," she smirked at him. He could tell he was rubbing off on her. Her teasing smiles were worthy of a Slytherin.

He scoffed, "There's no way you can read all those books." Hermione didn't respond. She just smiled up at him with an

"Welcome to the family, my dear," the lady said to Hermione with a smile.

His mother led them on without offering an explanation further down the gallery to a portrait of a younger couple dressed in clothing that was reminiscent of three hundred years prior to the Elizabethan couple. The name plaque read "Leonora and Theophilus Malfoy." Hermione repeats the process and is shown a similar cuff in return. This one decorated in diamonds and garnets. The lady addresses Hermione and Draco with a smile, "You are a very lucky man, Draco. Welcome to the family, young lady."

"Mother, I don't think this is helping clear anything up," Draco said, impatiently.

"One more, Draco. Be patient," his mother chided.

She led them down four more portraits to the portrait of Lillian and Armand Malfoy, the first Malfoy to inhabit England after the rise of the Muggle king, William the Conqueror. Lillian showed them her cuff decorated with amethysts and opals and said, "Finally, another Malfoy finds his one true mate. I have long been disappointed that there are so few of us."

The two other ladies gathered into the painting of Lillian and Armand. "I'm not sure I really understand," Hermione said, "I don't understand what any of this means."

Lillian chose to act as the spokeswoman for the group and looked kindly down from her portrait at Hermione. "Many years ago my husband despaired of finding a wife who loved and valued him for himself, rather than for his position, power, or wealth. He was a strange man for his time, wanting to be loved by his wife. As a solution, he created a charmed cuff that would only appear on the lady whose soul was mated to his own. Being the romantic that he is, he charmed the magic to work for all future generations of Malfoy men and to appear after they've kissed their soul mate. He kissed me one night at a Yuletide ball and the next morning this appeared. I, of course, panicked much like I think you're doing right now, my dear. He saw the appearance of the cuff the next week at court and

## Finding Hermione

Manor. Rose should stay here this time though."

Hermione let Tansy know that they were going over to the Manor and asked if she would watch Rose while they were gone. Then they both followed his mother through the fireplace to Malfoy Manor. Draco stepped out of the fireplace with Hermione's hand in his. He watched her as she looked around at the bright creams and golds of the front parlor. She squeezed his hand and followed after his mother with a determined stride.

His mother had redecorated the entire Manor after her release from house arrest. The Ministry had confiscated all the dark objects in the house soon after the end of the war but the Manor was still left with a dark pall over the house from all the deeds done within its walls. His mother set about banishing all the darkness from each room, bringing a light into the Manor that it hadn't seen in centuries.

She led them through the house to the portrait gallery. Draco recognized the portrait of his grandfather, Abraxas, just inside the gallery. "You dare bring that filthy Mudblood into this house," his grandfather sneered at them.

"Show him the cuff, Hermione," his mother said with a bored air over her shoulder as she continued walking.

Hermione held her arm up and showed the portraits near her the cuff on her wrist. Draco watched in astonishment as the portrait of his grandfather and other nearby relatives, all staunch blood purists, bowed to Hermione and murmured, "My lady," as she walked by them. His mother came to a stop about halfway down the long gallery and stood in front of a portrait of an ancestor. The portrait was of a brown haired witch and a wizard with the distinctive Malfoy hair. The name plaque under the couple read "Alexandria and Lucius Malfoy".

"Lucius?" Hermione asked.

"The first," his mother answered, "Please show her the cuff, Hermione."

Hermione held up her arm to the lady in the portrait. The lady responded by raising her arm and showing a similar cuff on her arm. This one decorated with emeralds and rubies.

unfathomable expression. Then she turned and walked away, following his mother into the stacks.

His mother stepped through the fireplace later that morning, dusting ash off the shoulders of her black long-sleeve sheath dress. Draco was waiting on her arrival seated on the couch in front of the fireplace. Hermione was pacing anxiously behind the sofa, twirling the cuff repeatedly around her wrist.

Draco rose off the couch to greet his mother with a kiss on her cheek. "Thank you for coming, mother."

"Your call did make it sound important. What's going on? Did Ron try something again? Are the children okay?" his mother looked nervously at Hermione pacing behind him.

"The children are fine. It's not about Weasley. Please have a seat," Draco placated his mother. He turned to look at Hermione pacing and called out to her, "Hermione, come sit down please."

Hermione looked up from her pacing and finally noticed his mother sitting in the room with them. She came over and sat down on the sofa beside Draco. He draped his left arm over the back of the sofa behind her and twirled a curl around his finger.

"Thank you for coming over so quickly," Hermione said to his mother, "We were wondering if you recognized this piece," Hermione said as she held out her arm to his mother.

His mother moved over to sit beside Hermione on the sofa and took Hermione's arm in her hands. She examined the cuff slowly before she released Hermione's arm and beamed at both of them. "I just knew it would be you, dear. Oh, this is so wonderful! Amazing! At long last! And it's my boy!" she exclaimed as she pulled Hermione in for a hug and kissed her on both cheeks.

He could see Hermione tense as she returned his mother's hug, not really appreciating his mother's declarations about how wonderful the appearance of the cuff was. "Mother, maybe you could save the exclamations and tell us what's going on. Hermione is getting a little freaked out."

His mother looked at both of them before saying, "I think it would be best if I showed you. Come with me back to the

He pulled her to him, cupping her face before he brought his lips against hers. She sagged against him, fisting his shirt in her hands to pull him even closer. He poured his relief and forgiveness into the kiss until he pulled away leaving them both panting.

He took her left hand in his right and brought her wrist up so that he could closely inspect the cuff on her wrist. The cuff was made of platinum and about four inches wide all the way around. The Malfoy crest dominated the front of the cuff. The crest was a black and green quartered shield with a silver central letter "M" emblazoned across the shield. A silver banner scrolled along the bottom with the family motto "Sanctimonia Vincet Semper" written inside. Black dragons flanked each side. The band of the cuff connecting the two sides of the shield was decorated in intertwined Celtic knots in sapphire and alexandrite. He watched the light play across the blue of the sapphires and the reds and greens of the alexandrite. It really was beautiful.

Draco studied the band, carefully turning it around on Hermione's wrist. A faint familiarity niggled at him. The piece seemed familiar but he was certain he had never seen this cuff among the family jewelry. He tugged gently on the cuff to see if it would enlarge to slip off her wrist as most magical bracelets did. Hermione snorted at him when the bracelet refused to budge past her wrist. Well, at least she resisted the urge to tell him 'I told you so.'

"Well, it looks familiar but I can't place where I've seen it. I know it wasn't in the vaults or Manor among the jewelry collection. It is beautiful though," he finally said.

"Yes, it is rather impressive. Would your mother know something about it?" she asked with a curious lift of her voice.

"Maybe." A loud, angry gurgle interrupted him reminding them both that they hadn't eaten breakfast yet. "I'll call her after breakfast and see if she can come over."

# Chapter 11 Reading

November 6th to 8th

"How am I supposed to hide this thing?" Hermione asked the next morning at breakfast.

"Long sleeves?" he suggested.

"Too bulky. It looks like I'm trying to hide something."

"Well, you are trying to hide something," Draco said with a smirk.

"Draco, be serious. I'm not exactly ready for all the questions that this thing is going to bring up."

"I know. I'd like to be able to date you before my mother decides to start planning the wedding."

"Yes, well I'd be surprised if she didn't start planning it already. The only way we're going to have any privacy is to keep this cuff between us, so back to my previous question. How am I supposed to hide it?"

Draco got up out of his seat and knelt beside her chair at the dining table. He took her left hand in his and used his other hand to slide the cuff up her wrist and past her elbow. He ignored the spark of desire that surged through him whenever he touched the cuff. The cuff expanded as it went up her forearm. He brought the cuff to rest on her bicep and it tightened around her arm to keep it from sliding down. He covered the cuff with

the sleeve of her blouse and stood looking at his handiwork.

The cuff wasn't as noticeable resting on her upper arm as it had been on her wrist. The silver of the band was thin enough that it almost blended in to her arm with the sleeve covering it.

"Well, how about that?" he asked her, dropping a kiss on her lips.

\*\*\*

Draco walked Hermione into her office after dropping Rose off at school. Mrs. Edward winked conspiratorially at him as they both greeted her good morning. He smiled as he saw the lavender roses he'd ordered waiting for her on her desk.

"What do you have in this briefcase?" Draco asked as he set it down on her desk.

"Research. Thank you for the roses, Draco. They're beautiful." "You're welcome. See you at lunch." Draco pulled Hermione to him. He smirked at her as his hand closed around the cuff. He kissed her quickly before he left the office, intent on using his day to do some research of his own.

\*\*\*

He found endless excuses to touch the cuff as the days passed. As he pulled her chair out for her at meals. When he pulled her to him to kiss her. The cuff and the significance of it fascinated him. What also fascinated him were their reactions whenever he touched the cuff. He was quickly becoming addicted to the thrill that raced down his spine and pooled in his groin, as well as Hermione's sweet shudders against him whenever he touched it.

Their evenings were spent curled upon the sofa in the study reading the books they brought back from their trip to the Manor. He tried convincing her to let him take her out, but she refused to go until she'd finished the books concerning the cuff. She came home from the Manor with seven journals, a book

there. It hurt that she didn't believe him.

One day. They'd been together less than a day and they were already fighting. He knew they would fight and argue, probably a lot, considering their personalities. He could even admit to looking forward to the arguments. Things between them had always burned hot. He hoped they would burn hot in more fun ways, other than screaming matches at one another. Maybe he'd asked her to be with him too soon.

Draco tensed as he heard the door open and close quietly behind him. He wasn't ready for round two of this argument. He felt the hand slip around his waist and her head rest between his shoulder blades as she hugged him from behind.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

He let go the breath he'd been holding and rested his hands on hers. His fingers brushed the cold metal of the cuff. A spark of electricity surged through him as he touched the cuff. He felt her shudder against his back. Interesting. "I didn't put that on you," he said quietly.

"I believe you. I saw the crest and I couldn't get it off and I jumped to conclusions."

"I can understand why you would but I wouldn't put something on you that you couldn't get off without your consent and full knowledge of what it was. I also don't think I need to resort to something so underhanded in order to get you to wear jewelry."

He knew there were pieces of jewelry out there that were impossible to take off. Usually, they were wedding rings though and meant to be a two-way magical bond. Since the only jewelry he had on was his signet ring, he guessed that whatever this cuff was meant to mark her alone.

"Can I see it now? Maybe we can start to figure out what it is," he asked.

She released his waist and he felt her take a step back. He turned and looked at her. He was relieved to see there were no tears and no splotchiness to indicate that she had cried at all. She met his gaze steadily, her posture straight but not stiff.

world slowly and brandishing her left arm. He caught a flash of silver before her arm was back at her side.

"No," he answered, still confused.

"It has your crest on it, Draco. Just because we started actually dating doesn't mean you can claim me as your property or whatever this is supposed to mean to you," she shouted at him.

It was too early for this. He couldn't think properly. He didn't like her shouting at him and he sure as hell didn't like her accusations. "I didn't put that on you," he said, gesturing at her arm, "just take the thing off."

She growled in fury at him, "Don't you think I've tried? I can't get it past my wrist. Why would you put this on me?" she shrieked, waving her cuffed arm for emphasis.

He lost his temper then and shouted back at her, "How many different ways can I say this? I did not put that on you," gesturing at her arm, "I'm not fucking Weasley. You're not a piece of property to me. I hoped you would know that by now."

Draco stormed out of the room. He knew he shouldn't leave in the middle of a fight but he just couldn't stay there arguing with her right now. The argument was going nowhere fast. He knew their tempers would lead them into saying things that neither of them meant. Her panicked fury kept her from listening to anything he said. There was no point in continuing to fight a battle that he was destined to lose in her current state.

He went to his study, the one place he always felt the calmest. He stood looking out the windows watching the sun rise over the fields. They were charmed windows. The real view would have been the back of another house but Draco hadn't liked how dark the room was without some windows and natural light so he charmed them to look like the lawns at the Manor.

He replayed the fight in his head. He could understand her being upset about waking up with a piece of jewelry that she couldn't get off. He could even understand her thinking it would be him since she says it has his crest on it. He just couldn't understand her not listening to him when he denied putting it

written by Armand concerning the cuff itself, and a rather large book on the Malfoy family concerning their traditions, beliefs, and history. She looked surprised when he said he had never read that particular book claiming it was probably full of blood purist crap.

He brought home a book on the Wizengamot. He found a previously overlooked tome on the formation and history of the council. The information he was finding in the book was proving invaluable to further his goals.

"What are you reading tonight?" he asked.

"Armand's book about the cuff," she answered.

"Find anything interesting?"

"Yes. You know you can read it too. After I'm done with it," she said with a grin, looking at him over the open book.

"I'm not really fluent in Norman French. How is it that you are?"

"Translation charm. I can read any book in any language that I want."

"Of course you can. I've never heard of a translation charm? Did they teach us that in school?"

"No, I created it. I was having a hard time reading something that was in Ancient Greek and I decided that I'm a witch and I should be able to figure out how to read whatever I wanted."

"Clever witch. Now tell me something interesting about your cuff." Leave it to Hermione to create a spell just so she could read a book.

Hermione slid the cuff down her arm to rest at her wrist. Draco took her hand in his and ran his fingers over the knots of the band. "Well, the jewels are our birthstones. The alexandrite is yours and the sapphires are mine. This Celtic knot is a love knot, which signifies two bonded souls. The Malfoy crest is pretty self-explanatory."

"That explains why it looked different in the portraits. How does the magic of the thing work?"

"It's bonded to your blood. It recognizes you as a Malfoy. Your kiss activates the cuff when it senses your soul mate. It

looks for the bond between your soul and another and will appear within a day of the kiss."

"Why kissing? Why not shagging?" he asked, "What?" he asked at her look of disbelief.

"Shagging, really? You expected your ancestors to go around shagging women until they found their soulmate. Considering the time this was created, unmarried women did not go around having casual sex."

"I guess getting someone to kiss you is easier. Speaking of kissing..." he took the book from her hands and set it down on the coffee table, open to the page she was reading, "I need more of your kisses, lionesse."

Hermione rose up over him on the sofa. She placed her hands on his shoulders and teasingly brushed her lips against his. "Is this what you need?" she whispered against his mouth.

He wrapped the braid of her hair around his fist and held her head still. "More, witch!" he growled. He crushed her mouth to his. He felt her surrender against him. He growled again and wrapped his free arm around her. The soft mounds of her breasts pressed into his chest.

Her hands ran through his hair and scraped against his scalp. Her tongue dueled with his as she claimed him just as fiercely as he claimed her. He felt the sting of her teeth as she bit his bottom lip then ran her tongue over the bite. The electricity of the sensation ran straight to his groin. The bite and scratch of his passionate lionesse ignited a fire in his veins.

She pulled away from him and he groaned at the loss of contact. The angelic smile she bestowed on him shifted to a devious grin as she said, "Was that what you needed?" She kissed him one more time before she scooted off the sofa. "Goodnight, Draco," she said over her shoulder as she sauntered from the room.

His witch would be the death of him. He breathed deeply through his nose trying to calm his pounding heart as well as the throbbing that had started in other areas.

## Chapter 10: *The Malfoy Legacy*

November 5th

"Malfoy!"

His witch's shout woke him abruptly out of his dreams. What was going on with her? It was too early in the morning for her to mad at him for something he did, not that he could think of anything that he'd done to piss her off. He got up and threw on a shirt and made his way to the door of his room. He opened it to find Hermione poised to knock.

"Good morning, lionesse," he said gruffly, his voice still thick with sleep.

"Don't you 'good morning, lionesse' me," Hermione said as she stomped into the room in a lavender camisole and lounge pants, the clingy fabric bringing to mind his lascivious dreams that he was rudely awoken from. Her hair was billowing out around her, practically crackling with fury and unrestrained magic.

He closed the door and cast a wandless muffliato on the room. He turned to face her, wiping his hand across his face trying to wake up. "What's got you so worked up this early in the morning?"

"Did you cuff me?" she asked angrily.

Whoa. "What?" he asked confused.

"Did you... put this... on me?" she said articulating each

Draco picked Hermione up from her office for lunch the next day. They walked hand in hand out of the building and to a small café in Muggle London. Theo was waiting for them at a table. Draco pulled Hermione's chair out for her and kissed the hand he'd been holding as she took her seat.

"Finally," Theo said, rolling his eyes at them.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Theo. Have you been here long then?" Hermione said.

"That's not what the 'finally' is about, Hermione," Draco said.

"Yes, it seems congratulations are finally in order, Draco," Theo drawled.

"Yes, well," said Hermione, as she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. They hadn't really discussed revealing their new relationship to their friends, but neither had really been discreet about it the last couple of days. "Draco tells me that you're rather good at creating new bills."

"I've been known to create a few bills in my time on the Wizengamot," Theo said. Draco snorted at Theo's response. Draco relied on Theo's help whenever they wanted to pass new legislation. Draco could argue a point until the other side capitulated from exhaustion, but Theo was the whiz at creating new, comprehensive laws.

Hermione took out a stack of papers from her bag and set them on the table in front of her. "I've done a bit of research on British and American Muggle laws concerning divorce." Draco thumbed over the four-inch high stack of parchment.

"This is more than a bit of research. When did you do all this?"

"You've said it yourself. My department is a joke. It practically runs itself. I've used my free time recently to research laws concerning divorce."

Draco groaned remembering the time he'd insulted her department. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

Hermione took his face in her hands and brought his mouth

to meet hers. It was just a quick peck before she released him and continued with her lunch. Draco draped his arm over the back of her chair, brushing his hand across the cuff resting on her upper arm. Hermione reached over and ran her nails slightly up his thigh.

Draco jumped at the contact, then shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he struggled to adjust to the confining space his trousers had become. Hermione smirked up at him. It seemed his teasing was going to get him teased in return.

"You two really are nauseating. Now back to the matter at hand, I take it you've got a plan set out somewhere in this stack of papers."

"Yes, I've written out laws that I would like to include along with references to where I got them from. I need your help in drafting a bill since you both know that none exist."

"May I take this with me?" Theo asked.

"Of course. I have a copy at home as well."

Theo and Draco's eyes met as they both caught her slip. "Well, I think it's time we all return to work," Theo said, "I think we should meet someplace more private to continue our discussions in the future."

"Yes, The Prophet catching wind of this might not be a great idea," Draco agreed.

"I'm not sure I agree with you on that. I think as long as we control the story, we might be able to garner public sympathy," Hermione said as they all walked back to the Ministry.

"I don't know, Hermione. The Prophet is difficult to control," Draco said.

"We don't need The Prophet. We just need one unregistered animagus. She's been looking for a scoop and I am Hermione Granger after all."

Draco pulled Hermione to him. He crushed his mouth down on hers. She darted her tongue across his before pulling away from him. "I love it when your mind goes all devious," he whispered in her ear.

"If you two don't want to give The Prophet a different scoop,

the issues we argued about. He was obsessed with the fame that came from being a part of the Golden Trio and a war hero. Harry and I just wanted to get on with our lives. He left me alone all the time, just the thing I was afraid of, until I just got used to it being the girls and I. It stopped bothering me that he was gone so much. I liked who I was better when he wasn't there. I suppose I must have asked him for a divorce sometime over the years."

"I'm sorry. I wish I'd known something was wrong. I would've whisked you and the girls away. I'm sorry you spent all this time alone and not being loved like you deserved." Her rolled so they were facing one another on the couch. "Be with me. Give me a chance to show you how you deserve to be treated. You've kissed me, so I hope that means you're ready to move on. Give me a chance to make up for all the years we lost."

"I think I'd like that."

His heart soared. She was going to give him a chance. He brought his lips down to hers and kissed her. Her intoxicating smell wrapped around him, lavender and jasmine, as he buried his face in her hair and kissed his way down her neck. He smiled into the curve of her neck at the noise she made as he brushed his mouth across her collarbone. At long last, she was his.

Our parents arranged the marriage before the war started. My mother never really cared for her but she was good to me. We helped each other through the trauma. She helped me come to terms with my actions and seek forgiveness and learn to forgive myself."

"She was so happy when she found out she was pregnant with Scorpius," he smiled as he remembered the day she told him, "I was terrified. I didn't want to be like my father. She said that I already wasn't going to be like my father because I said I didn't want to. The pregnancy went fine. She was always so happy and never got sick. Then, one day during her thirty-second week, she started bleeding heavily. There was so much blood. I got her to St. Mungo's and they delivered Scorpius, but she had lost too much blood. There was no way they could save her. I took Scorpius home and buried my wife. I may not have loved her but we were friends, she was the mother of my son, and I mourned her loss."

"Tansy was a lifesaver," he cleared his throat and went on, "We wouldn't have made it through without her. Scorpius became my whole life. I refused to remarry any of the girls my mother paraded in front of me. I told her to stop. The only way I was going to remarry was if I was hopelessly in love. My mother knew it was no use then and stopped with the matchmaking."

She had laid her head on his chest while he talked. He felt her hand cover his heart and he placed his over it. He snuggled her closer, feeling like he couldn't get her close enough and tipped her chin up so he could kiss her softly.

"She sounded wonderful and I'm glad you had each other to lean on after the war."

"Why did you marry Weasley so soon after the war?" he asked.

"I couldn't stand to be alone. It terrified me. He was my best friend and he felt safe. We had always fought with one another when we were in school. We kept arguing, only then it wasn't stupid childish squabbles, and we never really resolved

I suggest you stop making out on the steps of the Ministry," Theo said. Draco thought maybe he was starting to sound a little irritated.

"Later," Hermione whispered. The three of them walked to Hermione's office. Draco left Theo standing outside the office with the formidable Mrs. Edward. He grinned at him as he closed the door.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Draco found himself pushed back against the door. His shoulder hit the door with a thunk. Hermione was on him a second later, pulling his head down to meet her. He grabbed the back of her thighs and lifted her up against him. Her legs came up to wrap around his waist as she continued her delicious assault on his mouth.

He turned them and pressed her back up against the door. They continued to duel for dominance, the tastes of their lunch mingling together. He could smell the heady scent of her arousal mixing with the sweet smell of the roses on her desk. He rained kisses down her neck, finding the spot behind her ear that drove her wild.

"Mmmm... Draco, so good."

"You drive me wild, witch," he growled low into her neck. He grazed the base of her neck with his teeth. His bites sent her arching and moaning against him.

"Draco, we need to stop. We're at the Ministry."

Her voice of reason stopped any further plans he had. They were getting carried away. He rested his forehead against hers and inhaled deeply. He hated having to stop. He loved seeing how responsive she was to his touch.

He held her up so she could unhook her legs from around his waist. He watched her as she smoothed down her shirt and slacks then tried to tame the riotous curls he'd messed up. He smoothed down his own clothes and tried to discreetly adjust himself. He chuckled when he saw Hermione's gaze flick downward and then quickly back up with heat in her eyes.

"Don't look at me that way, lioness. I'll never be able to leave if you keep it up."

"I think it's time for you and Theo to go back to work then. Maybe that will help refocus your mind."

"So cruel," he said smiling at her. He kissed her on the forehead before opening the door. He stroled out of her office and found Theo sitting in a chair in front of Mrs. Edward's desk carrying on a lively discussion that had the witch laughing.

They both walked out of the office after saying good bye to the secretary. Draco stuck his hands in his pockets, thinking about the twists and turns of his life. He never expected to ever feel this happy.

"I'm going to punch you if you start skipping too," Theo said beside him.

His sardonic jab jolted Draco out of his reverie to find that he'd been whistling a tune to himself. When was the last time he'd whistled? He didn't think he'd ever done that before. He was going to have to chill out. He was behaving like some love struck fool.

\*\*\*

"It seems your family is not as pure as was always believed," Hermione said looking up from her book. He was absentmindedly rubbing the foot propped up in his lap while reading his own book.

"What makes you say that?" Draco said. He set his own book aside and started rubbing her feet and calves in earnest. Hermione hummed in pleasure.

"Well, those three women were all Muggle-born witches." Draco was astounded to find out that bit of information. One of the beliefs his father had always pushed was the purity of the Malfoy bloodline and how it was Draco's responsibility to ensure that the family remained pure. Their own family motto was "Purity will always conquer."

"Which book is that in?"

"It's in the journals. I haven't gotten to the history book yet." "Hmm. I wonder how they managed to be accepted into a family of blood purists."

conscience."

"It seems we both made sacrifices because of our love for our parents. You've changed a lot. You aren't that same boy anymore. I think you've more than made up for the mistakes of your past."

He reached up and kissed the scar carved into her arm. "I'm sorry. I never said I was sorry. I was such a coward. I was so scared. I didn't lie well enough to save you from being tortured. I didn't stop her from hurting you. I didn't do anything to save you. I'm so sorry. I'm not worthy of you," he said, pouring out the apology he'd wanted to make to her for years.

She took his face in her hands and forced him to look at her. When he lifted his eyes to hers, she said, "Draco, you were just a boy. We were all just children. You lived in a house with Voldemort and Bellatrix, saw them all the time, saw what they did to people all the time. We didn't fear them the same way you did because we didn't see first hand everything they did. You did. Your fear was real and founded. You couldn't have saved me. You created doubt and that doubt bought us time. We wouldn't have been able to escape without that. You've more than proven that you are worthy to me."

He kissed her again, tenderly. He was humbled by her acceptance of him. He stroked her hair, touched her face. "I've worked for years to be a better man, to be someone you deserved. I never had any hope that you would ever notice or that it would make a difference to you."

"War changed me," he continued, "It made me really see what was important. After what happened to my family and me, after what I saw and was forced to do, after all the kindness we received from people I was taught to hate, after all of that I knew that I couldn't let it happen again. Astoria and I both agreed that we wouldn't raise Scorpius with those prejudices."

"Tell me about her," she asked quietly.

"She was a sweet girl. They terrorized her at school and she was as relieved as I was when it was all over and our side had lost. We never loved one another but we got along well enough."

Heknewhewasgoingtohavetocfess to her eventually. Now the time had come. He guessed it was time she knew. "From the very beginning probably, when you came in the compartment on the Hogwarts train asking about Longbottom's toad. But more so since third year, when you punched me and broke my nose. You never took shit from me and you never backed down. So strong and courageous. That was the moment you made me start to question my father's beliefs."

"Then why were you always such an insufferable git?"

"I already told you I was an idiot," he said with a self-deprecating laugh, "I was angry because I wanted you when I knew I wouldn't ever be able to have you. I tormented you and your friends and I didn't know how to make up for it. I didn't think you would listen if I just apologized and I didn't think an apology was enough. I didn't know what to do. I knew the hell I would get if my father ever found out about my feeling for you. Then the war started and I wasn't worthy of you and it would have put us both in danger."

Shesnuggled into his chest and he wrapped an arm around her, "I wish I had known. You've never really said why you became a Death Eater. You've hinted at it and I've never really believed it was because you really bought into those beliefs. I saw your struggle in sixth year."

Draco hated talking about the year he became a Death Eater. It had been a terrifying time for him. "When my father was sent to Azkaban, my mother and I were ostracized by people who were once our closest friends. We had no one to turn to, no one to protect us. Voldemort took over our home. I had to become a Death Eater to protect her. I couldn't find any other choice that saved us both. Then Voldemort gave me the task to kill Dumbledore. He expected me to fail and he didn't care. Either Dumbledore died or I died. It didn't really matter to Voldemort either way. That's what our loyalty to that madman bought us. I realized that I couldn't do it. I couldn't kill him but I couldn't find a way out that didn't end up with my parents being killed and I couldn't sacrifice my parents' lives for the sake of my

"That's also the interesting part. It seems that the appearance of the Malfoy soul mate outweighs blood purity. She's revered as the Malfoy's greatest treasure. Acceptance becomes automatic as soon as the cuff appears. Even if she refuses the Malfoy, she is still considered family and protected by the family. Armand wanted a way to protect future generations. I can walk through any wards you set up or that are around the Manor because as your soul mate I'm considered a part of you. I also have access to your vaults and can order or free your house elves."

"Well, I would have given you access to all of that anyway but it's good to know I really don't have to worry about it now. Please don't try to force clothes on the house elves at the Manor though. I can assure you that they aren't mistreated in any way and you can go talk to them if you like, but it would upset them greatly if they were forcibly freed."

He was anxious that she would try to go over to the Manor and force his elves to take clothes. He'd known all of them his whole life. He could imagine their reactions to her if she started trying to give them socks or hats. The whole lot of them would end up in a mass of hysterical tears every time she asked something of them. He knew how traumatic it could be for house elves if their masters forcibly released them. Some could move on with their lives but others became despondent until they could no longer function. Some even took their own lives.

"Relax. Your mother and I have already discussed the Manor's house elves. I already know they aren't being mistreated. I'm not going to rush over there and start handing out woolly hats."

Draco let out a sigh of relief. "I appreciate it. Why are there only four, well five now, known instances of the bracelet appearing?"

"I haven't really come across an explanation for that but if you think about it, you have to kiss the person you're supposed to be with. One person out of all the women, witch and Muggle, that could be anywhere in the world. It would be like finding a needle in a haystack. Your ancestors tried. It used to be quite common for Malfoys to run around stealing kisses."

"What changed though? I would think something like that would be passed down as being pretty important."

He once again thought of all the ways his life would have been different. If he'd known about the existence of the cuff and what it would mean for both of them, he would have been able to be friends with her. He would have been able to kiss her and have her accepted as a part of his family. There would've been no way his family could rejoin Voldemort's army, since they would have been obligated to protect Hermione. So many things that could have been.

"It seems to have stopped after Brutus Malfoy in the 1600s. His journal was not particularly pleasant to read."

"He was the one who found his soul mate but lost her?"

"Yes, she was a Muggle, not even a witch. He was a part of a group that burned and pillaged her village. He took her as a concubine, kissed her, and then raped her. The next day he saw the cuff but the damage was done. She refused to forgive him."

"Can't say that I blame her."

"Me neither. There are some things that are unforgivable. He had a twin brother whose son became the heir. The son, Cassius, refused to tell his own son about the cuff and forbade anyone to tell him after he saw how her refusal ate away at his uncle. Most of the family believed she should have been honored to accept him despite what he'd done. The tradition was lost after that."

doubt herself and her own appeal. He had been waiting for her kiss for years. She made her choice. Hopefully this meant she was ready to move on because he wasn't going to ever be able to stop kissing her now.

The desire to kiss her had haunted him for years. Her being here, so close to him all these months was sweet torture for him. Having to resist the urge to kiss her had been hell. He'd gotten to hold her and prove to her how desirable he found her when they danced, but he'd been determined not to push her to give her the time she needed to move on from the wreck her marriage had become.

He'd let her kiss him first to prove to herself that she was ready to move on. It was time to show her just how much he desired her, hungered for her. He fisted a hand into her curls and wrapped a steely arm around her waist to pull her flush against him. He devoured her lips, ran his tongue along the seam of her mouth and when she gasped from the sensation he plunged in, caressing her tongue with his.

He poured all the years of hunger and desire that he'd concealed from her into that kiss until he was sure that she understood his desire for her. They were both breathing hard by the time he pulled away. He kissed her tenderly one more time and held her to him, desperate to prolong the moment.

It took some time before she pulled back slightly to gaze at him. She touched his face. He pulled her back to him and kissed her again. She tasted delicious to him, like scotch and apples. She was more daring the second time. He felt her plunge her tongue in his mouth. Her hands were in his hair. The scratch of her nails along his scalp sent shivers down his spine. She felt so good pressed against him, her hands in his hair, and her mouth on his.

She broke away from him then, releasing her hands from his hair and running them down his chest. He put his hands over hers to keep her there.

"When did it start for you? I know you said twenty years, but when?" she asked as she sat down and leaned against him.

\*\*\*

After Rose was put to bed, they went to back to the study to relax. Draco grabbed the decanter of scotch and the glasses, sat on the couch, and poured them both drinks. He looked back to find Hermione pacing the floor behind him. He turned and kicked a leg up on the couch so he could watch her.

Draco watched her while he sipped his scotch. She was chewing on her lower lip. He was curious about why she was pacing. She wasn't talking. She didn't appear mad anymore. Well, she was probably still furious. He knew he would be in her situation, but he didn't think her current pacing had anything to do with today's events.

She appeared to come to some decision. She squared her shoulders and walked over to him and took the half finished glass of scotch out of his hand, drained the contents, and set it on the table. Draco quirked an eyebrow at her, waiting for her to tell him what was going on.

She knelt on the couch between his legs, placed her hands on his chest, and leaned into him. He stopped her just before her lips touched his by rubbing his thumb across her lower lip then cupping her face. "Don't kiss me because you're hurting and need to feel loved. Or because you're mad and you want to get back at him," he said softly, gazing into her eyes.

"You don't want to kiss me," she said as she tried to back away from him.

He held firm to her with his hand on the back of her neck. "More than I want my next breathe, but I'm enough of a selfish bastard to not want you to regret it later. Kiss me because you want to, because you can't stand the thought of not having your lips on mine. Not because Weasley is a fucked up bastard."

She looked at him for about a second, then leaned in and gently kissed him. It was so light and tentative, like she was afraid he was going to stop her, like years of neglect made her

\*\*\*

"What are you reading?" Hermione asked on Friday night. It seemed it was his turn to talk about books tonight. He should have tried harder to convince her to let him take her out tonight, but they had to be at Hogwarts tomorrow so neither wanted to be out late tonight.

"Wizengamot formation," he answered.

"Why? Haven't you read everything about the Wizengamot already?"

"I thought I had but I found this while we were at the Manor." He held up the book and showed it to her.

"What's so different about this book?" she asked him. She seemed to always pick the question that got to the heart of the matter.

"Well, I may have found your Christmas present," Draco said, nervously. He did want to give her this particular present but it wasn't something he could just spring on her. He knew she would need time to think and weigh her options.

"What are you talking about? What does this book have to do with a Christmas present?"

"Do you remember our talk about the empty Wizengamot seats?"

Hermione snorted, "How could I forget?"

"This book has the answers on how to fill empty seats or create new ones."

"So we can fill them. We should let the Wizengamot know there's a way to fill the vacancies."

"No, not until after the divorce. I'm not trusting something like that to a bunch of unknown quantities."

"But it's the right thing to do."

"And we'll do it. Just not until the right moment."

"Who decides the right moment?"

"I do. I want you to be able to vote on your own legislation. I plan on giving you the le strange seat," he brought the scarred arm up to his lips and kissed it, "I think it would be fitting for you to take the seat from the woman who tried to break you."

"You want me to take her seat. I'm not a politician. I'm not a pureblood. Is it even possible?"

"Technically, it was her husband's seat. She was a Black and Harry has that seat. You don't have to be a pureblood or a politician. I get to choose who takes the seat and I choose you. And yes it's possible."

"But I can't take a Wizengamot seat. I run a department already. It would be too much work."

"If you decide to accept the seat, you'll need to give up your job as department head. I hope you'll accept. I told you before that you were meant for greater things and I meant it. If you accept, we can forge a better world together."

"That's a lot to take in. What you're offering is life changing."

"Just promise me you'll think about it."

"You should put him in time out," Rose said seriously, looking up at both of them.

"Uncle Harry put him in time out for us," Draco reassured her.

Rose calmed down after her ordeal and was reassured that Weasley would not be coming over to take her from them. Draco worried about the lasting implications of this incident. Children were resilient but he worried about how much Rose heard and understood about what was going on. Rose ran off to the kitchen to be with Tansy when she got bored with being fussed over by her mother and Draco.

"Lioness, I can see you're still mad. Smoke is coming out of your ears," Draco said, wanting her to let off some steam.

"Don't make a joke of this. He took her. He didn't plan on giving her back. Like he has any right to pass judgment on me, on us. The sodding hypocrite is shackled up with that woman and he calls me a whore. Expects me to just roll over and do what he says like a good little wife." Hermione had gotten up and was pacing around the room.

Draco stood in front of her and grabbed her shoulders to stop her. "Everything is fine now. We got her back. We'll take precautions at the school so he won't be able to take her again. And he doesn't know you very well if he thinks you're going to put up with his shit."

Hermione looked up at him with a sad expression, "Maybe he doesn't. I feel like I don't know who he is anymore. He was supposed to love me. You don't call the person you love a whore. You certainly don't cheat on them for over a decade. You don't take their memories away. And then to act like we're the people in the wrong after everything he's done. That's not love."

"No, I don't think that's love. I don't know where it went wrong for you and I'm sorry that you've had to go through this. You're free from him now though. You've got two wonderful daughters," he told her reassuringly.

"You've got me now," he thinks.

## Finding Hermione

the game as both sides used speed and cunning to score.

The seekers were seen hovering above the pitch watching the game and talking animatedly to one another. Draco Malfoy stunned the spectators by suddenly diving toward the goal post causing Greg Goyle to have to scramble out of the way in order to avoid a collision. The two seekers raced toward each other along the length of the pitch chasing after the snitch in a thrilling game of chicken.

Draco Malfoy caught the snitch just inches before Harry Potter and for the first time, defeated Potter in a game of Quidditch. After congratulations were given to the winning team, Draco strode off the field and presented the winning snitch to Hermione Granger. We have been eagerly anticipating confirmation of their relationship for some time. The two lovebirds have been making regular appearances in the gossip columns since Granger's very public split with husband, Ronald Weasley, after finding out about a longtime affair with former housemate, Lavender Brown.

Hermione Granger accepted the winning snitch from a very earnest Draco Malfoy. Ginny Potter was heard urging Granger to take the snitch presented to her, indicating that the match was approved of by friends and family. Harry Potter was asked his opinion on the new couple and he stated, "We're happy for Hermione. Draco is a good man and he makes her happy." Has the seeker found his mate at long last? Will we be hearing wedding bells in the future for these two?

Beneath the front page story were photos of their game. Prominent among them was Hermione plucking the snitch out of Draco's hand. Pictures of their kiss as he spun her around and Harry and Draco shaking hands at the end of the game were also featured in the article.

**"Wemadethefrontpagethistime,"Dracosaid,handingthepaper to Hermione.**

Hermione set down her cup of coffee and took the paper fromDraco'soutstretchedhand."It'soddthatareporterwould

## EbookDragon

beathogwarts.Idon'tthinkMcGonagallwouldallowthepress to intrude at school."

"You and Potter are also making comments to the press now," Draco said as he buttered a slice of toast.

"Well I did say that but I was talking to Hagrid and I doubt Harry would make a comment to a reporter about our relationship."

"You would if you didn't know they were a reporter. It's not like they all walk around looking like Rita Skeeter," Draco pointed out.

"It's not a bad article though," Hermione said with a shrug and set the paper aside.

Draco picked up a letter from the stack of and opened it. He was surprised to see an unfamiliar neat, loopy scrawl and checked the signature at the bottom. Minerva Granger-Weasley. He read through the letter carefully.

*Dear Mr. Malfoy*

*I have spoken with Scorpious and the rest and I would like to take you up on your offer to teach me to ride a broom over the holidays if it is still available*

*Sincerely*

*Minerva Granger-Weasley*

Draco handed the letter over to Hermione saying, "Your daughter wrote to me. She's decided to conquer her fear of flying." He felt a surge of pride for the girl. He wouldn't have blamed her in the least for never getting near another broom again after her last experience.

Hermione read over the short note and set it down with a smile. "Thank you for offering to teach her."

She picked up a letter from in front of her plate. Draco noticed the Ministry seal on the back of the letter. She broke the seal as Draco watched. Her brows scrunched together and her eyes moved furiously over the page. She handed the letter

## Finding Hermione

to him silently.

Draco took the offered letter from her, concerned about what the news was and Hermione's silence.

Dear Mrs. Granger,

This letter is to inform you that you are currently in violation of Ministry Code of Conduct 104.3.a "Employees of the Ministry shall conduct themselves in a discreet and virtuous manner in their personal and professional lives."

Your conduct over the past few months has been neither discreet nor virtuous. You have been seen in public consorting with a man who is not your husband and entering into a public relationship with that man.

Considering your service to the Ministry and exemplary record, we are giving you two weeks to rectify this situation. Our expectation is that you will end this immoral relationship and return to your home and husband. Failure to do so will result in your removal from Ministry employment.

Sincerely,

Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic

Draco set the letter down and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"What would you like to do about this?" he asked.

"Can he even do this?" she asked.

"Yes. The Minister can fire anyone he wants, especially with a policy that vague," Draco answered, her feeling a little furious that Shacklebolt would put Hermione in this position.

"So I'm expected to choose between my relationship with you and my job," Hermione said blandly. Draco looked closely at her. He expected more of a reaction. Anger. Hurt. Something other than the apathy he was seeing on her face.

"Well, you're not going to get rid of me that easily, but if you want to keep your job, we can move you back to the cottage and be more discreet," Draco said. He would probably end up sleeping every night on her couch just to make sure she and Rose were safe. Draco heard Rose racing up the stairs, her tinkling laughter floating about in the air as she and Tansy played. They both were essential to him now, as much a part of him as his son and mother.

"We haven't really spoken about our living arrangements.

## Chapter 13 Love and Other Things

Sunday, November 11th

### Seeking Love

Saturday's Parents' Day at Hogwarts brought some exciting developments. Two former enemies joined together for a friendly game and a long awaited relationship was revealed.

Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy took to the Quidditch pitch, once again captaining opposing teams consisting of their children, friends, and their children's housemates. The two reprised their roles of seekers, while Ginny Potter nee Weasley, former Chaser of the Holyhead Harpies, equipped herself with an all female Chaser crew, consisting of Hermione Goyle and Florence Zabini, housemates of her son, James Potter. Rounding out the Potter team was Blaise Zabini as Keeper. James Potter, Scorpius Malfoy, and Drake Nott gave the ladies a run for their money as Chasers for the Malfoy team. Gregory Goyle acted as the team's keeper. When asked about the lack of beaters and bludgers, Hermione Granger stated that 'since the children were so young and this was just a friendly game between friends, the use of bludgers was deemed too risky.'

The game started out with a blur of movement as Scorpius Malfoy snagged the quaffle and quickly scored a goal in an impressively fast bout of flying that we have come to expect from the Malfoy men. Scoring stayed fairly even throughout

rightful places.”

“I wouldn’t hurt you, Draco.”

Draco handed her wand back to her. She took the wand and stored it in the holster at her waist. “Yes, well I call you my lioness for a reason. You’re scary when you’re mad, especially when it comes to your children.”

“He’s going to pay for this.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something appropriately devious,” Draco said, hugging Hermione to him relieved that he’d made it out of the situation with all his body parts attached.

\*\*\*

“Where are you off to?” Hermione asked him as he walked into the drawing room carrying a black leather case.

“I promised McGonagall that I would bring back some snitches. She’s convinced that all the love sick seekers will start presenting them to their girlfriends.”

“That was very romantic of you,” she said from her place on the couch. He walked over and kissed her good bye before throwing a pinch of floo powder into the fireplace and calling the directions to the headmistress’ office.

‘You have no idea,’ he thought as he walked into the flames.

Our relationship hasn’t exactly been traditional,” she asked tentatively.

“I want you to stay!” Draco blurted out. They both were a little surprised by his sudden outburst. Draco reached over and took her hand, “I know this hasn’t been a traditional courtship. We lived together before we even began our relationship, but if you want to, I’d really like you to stay. Seeing you and Rose every day gives me something to look forward to, a reason to wake up every morning and rush down the stairs.”

“Oh, Draco,” Hermione said. She got up from her seat. Draco scooted his chair back and she sat down on his lap. He kissed her tenderly. “I want to stay too. We both know that my job is pretty meaningless. It’s not even a hard decision to make. Even if it were a great job, I would still choose you. I’m not going to let some backward laws and policies keep me from being with you.”

Draco leaned forward and buried his face in her curls, kissing her neck. “You have no idea how happy you’ve made me.”

Draco was relieved. He didn’t truly believe that she would leave him for her job. He hated that she had to choose though. He hadn’t wanted her to move back to the cottage. He didn’t want to worry about her being safe. He especially didn’t want to think about not being able to see her every day.

“Well, being unemployed will make a few things easier. Theo and I can work faster on the divorce bill. Your mother has been hinting about wanting help with her charity ball.”

“You can also seriously consider my Christmas present,” Draco said, rubbing his hand in circles across her back.

“Yes, this will also make that easier.”

\*\*\*

Draco took Hermione and Rose out to dinner that night in Diagon Alley. Hermione wanted to gauge public opinion of

their relationship in the wake of the article. If people empathized with her and supported their relationship, they would support her as she tried to create divorce laws.

La Famiglia was a new Italian family restaurant that opened up on Diagon Alley, directly across Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, seeking to draw in families as they came out of the joke shop. Blaise recommended it and Hermione had been dying to try it out. They were given a seat by the window and watched as people walked by outside.

Dinner was interesting. The waitress, a young witch fresh out of Hogwarts, appeared very nervous to be serving them. She stuttered and stammered while taking their order, almost dropped the bread basket in Draco's lap, and forgot their drink order. She was almost in tears when she had to come back and tell them that the kitchen was out of Osso Bucco. The young witch finally calmed down when Rose started to regale her with flying stories. By the end of the meal, the witch gained enough confidence to tell Hermione that she hoped she was able to get a divorce because everyone deserved a chance at happiness.

They took a stroll down Diagon Alley after dinner. The three of them were a subject of curiosity among the witches and wizards out and about that evening. They received glares of open censure from some, mostly from the older generation. Draco pulled Hermione to him for a scorching kiss just to rile the old codgers up. What surprised him were the cheers and wolf whistles he heard around them. Some he knew came from the direction of the joke shop. Younger witches smiled and whispered to one another as they walked by.

Rose wheedled Draco and Hermione into stopping for ice cream before they returned home. Before they walked inside, Draco overheard a conversation between a woman and boy standing in front of the window.

Draco grabbed her arms by the arms, "I don't think that's what actually happened, Hermione." He related Minerva's story to Hermione.

The rage that consumed Hermione was difficult for Draco to control. The news of Weasley's neglect of their daughter was too much to take, especially coming so close on the heels of his attempted kidnapping. Three trees fell victim to her rage as she pointed her wand at the man and shouted *Incendio*. He let the trees burn momentarily before putting them out with jets of water from his wand.

"I'm going to kill him. This is too much. That bastard is a dead man." She stomped around the clearing shouting her rage repeating it over and over again like a mantra. Another tree went up in flames.

"You can't kill him, Hermione," Draco tried telling her calmly.

He should have just kept his mouth shut and let her rage. Hermione was scary when she was angry. And dangerous. He held out his hand and her wand flew from her fingers into his hand. Better to get punched again than have her wand pointed at his jugular or have the park burning around them. Unfortunately for him, disarming her just pissed her off more.

"Give me my wand, Draco," she shouted at him, holding out her hand.

He held it up out of her reach. "Not until you calm down. You're kinda scary when you're pissed off."

"I'm going to hex your balls off when I get my wand back," she threatened.

"That may impede any fun you want to have with them in the future. Hex the weasel's balls off."

Hermione glared up at him. He caught sight of a faint quirk in the corner of her mouth. He wagged his eyebrows at her and she snorted in reluctant laughter.

"I'll give this back to you." He held her wand out to her. She tried to snatch it away from him but he held it away from her again. "If you promise to leave all my body parts in their

try? I'll teach you properly."

"I don't know. It looks like fun, but I'm afraid of falling again."

"I don't want to pressure you, but I think learning would really help you conquer your fears. I don't want you to miss out on something fun because of one bad experience. Talk to Scorpius and the rest of the Baby Snakes. They'll tell you how I taught them. It will be a little different for you because you're older than they were, but we can talk about it if you decide you want to try."

"I'll think about it."

Well, it wasn't a 'no'. That was progress at least. Maybe if she agreed, they would be able to form their own bond.

\*\*\*

Draco asked Hermione to walk around the park with him before they went inside to go get Rose from the elder Weasleys. He held her hand as they strolled through the park. It was getting cold but Hermione's warming charms kept them comfortable. He could see the rounded bulge in her jacket pocket from the snitch.

"I saw you talking with Minerva. You looked enraged there for a minute. I thought maybe she said something but then you both started talking normally again."

"Minerva told me why she didn't like flying," Draco said to explain why he looks so angry.

"Why were you so mad about it? It's perfectly okay that she doesn't like to fly."

Draco stopped walking and stared down at Hermione flabbergasted. "What exactly do you remember about Weasley teaching Minerva to fly?" Draco asked slowly.

"He said she was afraid of heights. I understood that so I didn't push her to keep trying."

"Mum, can we get some ice cream?" the boy asked.

Draco noted the look of tired resignation on the woman's face. This was not a witch who had an easy time of it. The robes of her and her son were shabby and threadbare in places. Their shoes were battered and scuffed. The boy looked to be around Rose's age and he had an expression of such intense longing that Draco found painful to see.

"I'm sorry, Jake. We just can't afford it," the woman responded, tiredly.

The boy hung his head and took his mother's hand. They started to walk away. Draco just couldn't stand the look of dejection from the boy or the failure he saw on the woman's face. He squeezed Hermione's hand and walked over to the mother and son.

"Excuse me, ma'am. My family and I would be honored if you would join us for ice cream."

The woman looked up at him startled and, he thought, perhaps a little fearful. "That... that's very... um... kind of you, sir. We wouldn't wish to be an imposition of you or your family, but thank you for your offer."

"It's no imposition," Draco said, trying to appear as friendly as possible to the witch. Her son was vibrating with excitement at the prospect of ice cream. Hermione and Rose walked up to them and Draco introduced them all to the witch and her son. "I'm Draco. This is my girlfriend, Hermione, and her daughter, Rose. Please. We'd like for you to join us."

"Oh, I know who you are. Everyone in our world knows Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger. I'm Honoria Blake and this is my son, Jacob."

Draco ushered the group inside the ice cream parlor before the woman could change her mind and try to refuse him again. The children, of course, had a difficult time deciding. Jake had a particularly difficult time. Draco thought it might be because

the boy thought this was going to be the only time he was ever going to taste ice cream and he didn't want to choose wrong. Finally, after sampling every interesting flavor, the children had their sundae and the adults had their own bowls of ice cream. Draco spooned a bite of his favorite chocolate ice cream with caramel swirls into his mouth. He stole a spoonful of Hermione's ice cream, chocolate chip cookie dough, and received a playful smack with her spoon. He watched the children sitting together chattering away. Well, Rose was chattering. Jacob was in a state of sugar-induced bliss and too enthralled with the experience of ice cream to do more than nod at Rose.

"Mrs. Blake, I hate to pry," Hermione said, awkwardly, "but it seems like you've fallen on hard times."

Draco felt sorry for the woman. She was clearly uncomfortable sitting here with them. He also understood the sacrifices parents made to make their children happy and Jacob was clearly enjoying himself.

"These last few years have not been easy for us," she replied evasively.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Hermione asked. Draco draped his arm over the back of her chair and played with her hair. He loved wrapping the curls around his fingers and it gave him something to do to distract him from watching Jacob enjoy something that everyone else took for granted.

Mrs. Blake's gaze drifted between the couple. Draco saw her eyes soften as she responded, "I have a feeling that the two of you are already working on what I need help with given your current situation."

The children finished their ice cream. Mrs. Blake thanked them for the ice cream and got up to leave. Just before she left, holding her son's hand, she turned and said, "I know the path has been difficult for you, Mrs. Granger, however, you truly are the only one who would bother to help the voiceless."

that Hermione was with him to really mourn that her marriage with Weasley didn't work out and being honest with the girl was probably better than giving her meaningless platitudes.

"I know what giving her that snitch meant. She probably doesn't but I paid attention to Quidditch. Do you really mean it?"

Draco stopped looking at Hermione to meet Minerva's eyes. "Yes," Draco answered simply.

She nodded at him then changed the subject. "Did you really teach Scorpius to fly like that?" she asked.

"Yes and Florence, Mione, Drake, and your sister as well. Why do you think you're hopeless on a broom?" Draco said, using the opening she'd given him to question her about flying. He didn't really expect her to answer him.

"My father tried teaching me when I was five. He threw me up on his Quidditch broom, told me to hold on tight, and let go. It took off really fast. I had no idea how to control it and I fell off. I hit my head on a rock. I started crying and my head was bleeding. It hurts so much and it was so scary. He and mum had one of the worst fights I've ever heard that night. I was too scared to get on a broom after that. I had a panic attack in Madame Hooch's class and she excused me from flying lessons after that."

Draco could feel a tick in his jaw as he tried to contain his anger at yet another reason to hate Weasley. He'd acted like an idiot and completely traumatized his daughter. Putting a young child on a racing broom meant for Quidditch was a disaster and a tragedy waiting to happen. She could have been killed. She was extremely lucky she wasn't killed.

Draco breathed deeply through his nose, flexing his hands into fists and releasing, before flexing them again. Weasley should be glad he wasn't among the spectators right now. No force in this world could have kept Draco from kicking his ass if he caught sight of him. Calm. He needed to calm down.

Once Draco regained control of himself, he turned to Minerva and gently asked her, "Would you like to give it another

the winnings snitch to anyone was a declaration that the seeker had found what they were looking for.

"Take it, Hermione!" Ginny shouted behind from him.

Hermione smiled and plucked the golden ball from his outstretched hand. He picked her up and spun her around, laughing. She threw her arms around his neck and laughed down at him. Cheers erupted around them.

He looked up at her flushed cheeks and wild curls flying about. His breath caught in his throat. He felt he was struck dumb looking at her. A sense of profound gratitude settled over him. He didn't deserve her. She was too good for him, yet here she was. She'd forgiven him for all the terrible things he'd done to her over the years. This witch, his soul mate, accepted and challenged him in a way no one ever had. He really was a lucky bastard.

She cupped his face in both her hands and leaned down to kiss him. He felt a surge of emotion overwhelm him as she kissed him there on the Quidditch pitch. This was how they should have been during their time here. Regret for what might have been warred with the surge of love he felt for her and the gratitude for what they shared now. He set her down still kissing her and placed his hands on her upper arms, one covering the cuff that was hidden under her heavy jacket.

They broke away, smiling at one another. "Congratulations, Draco." She kissed him one more time before walking away to talk with the others. He watched her as she congratulated the boys for flying so well. She praised the girls for working together and using their cunning to score more goals than the boys. Ginny hugged her as she held open her hand showing them all the snitch resting there in her palm.

"She never looked at my father the way she looks at you."

Draco looked down to find Minerva standing beside him, looking at her mother. "I'm not really sure what to say to that, Minerva. I would like to say that I'm sorry things didn't work out between her and your father, but I'm afraid that would sound insincere." It would also be insincere. He was too ecstatic

They watched mother and son leave the ice cream parlor. Draco felt humbled and a little ashamed by the encounter. There were women out there every day going through what Hermione went through and maybe worse. He was supposed to be helping people. He was on the Wizengamot with the express purpose of helping the wizarding community, and yet it took something horrible happening to Hermione before he even realized that there were women out there who needed help getting away from their husbands.

They disappeared from Fortescue's to the foyer of Spinner's End. Draco pulled Hermione and Rose close to him and buried his face in her curls. "I'm so sorry," he whispered in her ear.

She pulled back to look at him. The anguish he was feeling must have shown on his face. She placed her small hand on his cheek and asked, "What could you possibly have to be sorry for? You did a good thing today."

Rose, not interested in the seriousness of the conversation, wriggled free of his embrace and ran off, calling for Tansy. It wasn't hard for him to imagine Rose in Jacob's place. The thought of that precious girl in shabby robes and begging for ice cream brought tears to his eyes.

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Hermione caught the gesture and guided him into the study. She made him sit on the couch then went to get the scotch. He heard the tinkle of glass and the slosh of the scotch. He took deep breaths trying to get the ache in his chest to subside.

A glass was pressed into his hand. He took a sip automatically and relaxed a little as the ball of warmth traveled through him. He dropped his head in his hands. Hermione settled beside him and ran her hands through his hair.

"Tell me what has you so upset," she said finally.

"I should have done something sooner. I had no idea that

there were women like her or you out there, needing to get away from their husbands. I kept putting you and Rose in the place of those two and it broke my heart."

"Draco, love," Hermione said, "you can't blame yourself for this. You did an incredibly kind thing today. We're working on changing the laws and soon we'll be able to set women like her free."

"I should have already done it. You shouldn't have to always be the one that makes everything better."

"Hey, look at me," Hermione said. He turned his gaze to her. Those chocolate eyes gazed into his. "How could you possibly think you haven't done enough? You didn't know. You can't fix what you don't know about. You've done so much for us. You took Rose and me in. You helped me through my grief. You've been absolutely and completely amazing."

She took his glass from him and set it on the table. He was surprised when swung a leg over him and straddled him. He brought his hands up automatically to circle her waist. He tipped his head back to look at her. She cupped his face and said, "No more sad thoughts tonight."

Her lips crashed down on his. He groaned into her mouth as she massaged her tongue against his. She tasted like her ice cream and scotch. The combination of cream and liquor was intoxicating on his tongue. His hand easily found her silky curls. He gathered up a handful and wrapped it around his fist. He crushed her against him in desperation, thrusting into her mouth and tangling his tongue with hers. She was here and safe. He'd managed to save her. Her breath was coming in gasps and pants, the musical sound warping with the pop and crackle of the fireplace. He broke the kiss and pulled on her hair, exposing her neck to him. He attacked the column of her throat. She gasped and mewled above him.

Her hips started undulating against him. Her core rubbing

the glint of gold circling around the center goalpost under Greg. Draco angled his broom down, flattened himself out, and dived for it. The snitch zoomed away from the post just as Draco got near. Draco pulled out of the dive, staying low to the ground, level with the snitch that zigzagged about five feet from the ground.

Draco saw Harry out of the corner of his eye zooming towards him and the snitch. Draco stretched out a hand. He felt the fluttering of wings and clenched his hand just as Harry zoomed past him swearing. Draco held his clenched fist up, circling around the pitch. He'd done it. He'd beat Harry Potter to the snitch. Draco let loose a jubilant whoop unable to contain his joy at finally beating Harry. It might have been childish. They weren't rivals anymore. He wasn't still seeking any means possible to gain his father's approval anymore. It was pure competitiveness and it felt amazing.

Draco landed in the center of the field. Blaise landed beside him, slapping him on the back in congratulations. The boys landed around them, jumping for joy. Draco instructed them to shake hands with their opponents. Draco held out his hand to Harry, who shook it grinning ruefully.

"Never thought I'd see the day you beat me to the snitch. Good game."

"Thanks. I have to admit it feels good to finally beat you." Draco grinned back at Harry.

He strode off the field toward Hermione, who'd left the stands with the other ladies to join in the congratulations. He opened his palm and presented the dormant snitch to Hermione. Several gasps were heard around them as die-hard Quidditch fans and players understood the significance of a seeker presenting the snitch to someone and surprised that Draco Malfoy was presenting one to Hermione Granger. Hermione looked up at him curiously but he just grinned down at her.

Quidditch players often played the positions that closely identified with their goals in life. Seekers were always looking for something. For Draco, it was always love. A seeker presenting

## Finding Hermione

goals. James and Drake flanked him, working together to keep the girls away. Scorpius threw the ball into the center hoop and was gone before Blaise had much of a chance to even defend the goal.

"That boy of yours is fast," Harry said, hovering beside Draco watching the game. James snatched the quaffle from his mother, who shrieked her outrage. They heard James' laughter in the wind as he sped off toward the goal. James celebrated by doing loop-de-loops.

"It seems yours is as much as a daredevil as you were."

"He's bloody showing off. He's going to break his neck," Harry said, "James, are you playing Quidditch or trying out for the circus?" Harry shouted.

Draco flew around the pitch looking for a hint of gold around him. He looked towards the stands where their group was seated. Minerva was standing on the walkway in front of the stands, her hands gripping the railing. He caught what he thought might be a look of longing on Minerva's face. She might declare herself hopeless but the thought she still longed to fly. Draco felt sad for the girl and vowed to get to the bottom of her flying aversion.

The score stayed fairly even. Scorpius, Drake, and James might be fast but Ginny was a professional and Mione and Florence were wily. Draco laughed as he saw Florence distract Scorpius while Mione stole the quaffle from him. Greg wasn't much of a keeper and let a lot of his goals in.

Word of their impromptu game must have spread around the grounds. He saw Hagrid sitting next to Hermione. Luna was sitting on the other side of her, seemingly lost in her own thoughts instead of watching the game. He also spotted Neville and Hannah talking with Helena, as well as other parents and students sitting in the stands watching. He even spotted the headmistress watching the game and cheering.

Harry was at the other end of the pitch, circling around looking for the snitch as well. A cloud opened up above the pitch and sunlight streamed through. A ray of sunlight caught

against the erection straining against his slacks. He let go of his hold on her hair and grabbed the full globes of her ass grinding her into him. He felt like he'd been waiting forever to get his hands all over her lush curves. He bit and sucked on the curve of her neck, marking her like they were teenagers again. He thrust up against her as she rolled against him. Her pants turned into full-throated moans that echoed off the walls of the study.

"Mummy! Tansy says it's time for bed."

Draco groaned quietly into Hermione's hair. She chuckled as she slid off him. His precious girl really had an impeccable sense of timing, he thought as he followed Hermione and Rose upstairs to tuck Rose into bed.

chasers and you and I can be the seekers," Draco said.

"I'm not playing," Minerva called out. Everyone turned to look at her standing beside Hermione.

"Minerva doesn't like to fly," Hermione explained for her.

"I'm hopeless on a broom," Minerva said morosely, looking down at her feet.

"Well, that's because you didn't have my dad to teach you. He taught all of us. He can teach anyone to fly," Scorpius bragged.

"I can teach you, Minerva, if you decide you would like to get on a broom again," Draco offered.

Minerva shook her head, a burn curl covering her face, still staring at her feet. He didn't understand why she was looking down at the ground. Hermione hated to fly. She boldly stated that she hated flying and wasn't embarrassed about it. Minerva wasn't acting that way. He didn't know the girl very well to understand her reaction. Draco looked at Hermione face for some sort of reassurance that Minerva was fine and wasn't seeing anything in Hermione's face that indicated that this was abnormal behavior for her daughter.

Ginny was drafted as a chaser. She insisted on having Florence and Mione as her fellow chasers, used to working with an all girl team. Drake, Scorpius, and James were chasers for Draco's team with Greg as the keeper. Draco kissed Hermione for luck before she left to take a seat in the stands with Minerva, Daphne, Tracey, and Helena. The teams fanned out around Theo, who was acting as referee, and the case of Quidditch balls.

"I want a clean game. This isn't Slytherin versus Gryffindor anymore. Any rough play will be grounded," Theo said sternly, looking pointedly at the boys who were a little Quidditch mad and tended to get overly enthusiastic when they played.

The ten flyers kicked off. Greg and Blaise took their positions around the goals. Draco and Harry hovered higher than the chasers. Theo released the snitch and they all watched as the golden ball darted away. Theo then took the quaffle and threw it up in the air. A blur of platinum blonde hair darted out and caught the ball, zooming toward the opposing team's

## Finding Hermione

Hogwarts.

Hermione should have looked over her shoulder and realized how quiet he'd been. He leaned into Hermione and kissed her, running his tongue across her closed lips. She brought a hand up and touched his face before pulling away. They didn't need to be making out here in front of their children. Someone coughed to get their attention. Hermione blushed and ducked her head into his shoulder as Draco turned to look at the group. Blaise was grinning at him. "Anything you two would care to share with the rest of us?"

Draco took hold of Hermione's hand and kissed it. "Yes, Hermione has done me the honor of allowing me to court her." A few girlish squeals greeted this news.

"Ugh, you two are going to be one of those nauseating couples aren't you," Greg said, looking disgusted.

"Be quiet. It's new to them. I think it's cute," admonished Tracey.

"I do distinctly remember you being nauseating when you were courting Helena, Greg," Draco drawled.

\*\*\*

"So, who's up for a friendly game of Quidditch?" Harry asked, "There's sixteen of us, but I know Hermione won't play."

Lunch was finished and they packed up the picnic. The group headed in the direction of the field as they discussed the game. The day was starting to become overcast and a little cold. They would have to have a picnic in the Slytherin dungeons during the next Parents' Day.

"We don't need beaters either, Harry," Draco said. Draco wasn't comfortable letting loose bludgers around eleven-year-olds. He didn't care that Harry played at that age or that he had played at twelve. Bludgers hurt when they hit you.

"No beaters. What's Quidditch without bludgers?" Greg complained.

"Safer," Hermione snorted.

"Greg and Blaise can be the keepers. The kids can be the

Chapter 14  
Two Weeks Notice

November 12th – 22nd

To: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic  
From: Hermione Granger, Head of the Department for Magical Education

Date: November 12, 2013

Re: Formal Resignation

Dear Mr. Shacklebolt,  
In regards to your recent letter, after much reflection, I find that I am unable to accept your generous offer allowing me the time to comply with Ministry Code of Conduct 104.3a. I find that requiring an employee to return to an abusive situation for the sake of appearing discreet or virtuous to be counterproductive to the aim of the Ministry, which exists in part to guard the safety of its citizens.

Since I am being given the choice of my career or my safety, I

## Finding Hermione

*will choose my safety. This letter is to serve as my two weeks notice to allow you the time to find a suitable replacement. I thank you for the opportunity that you've given me to serve the Ministry and Wizarding society and sincerely regret that we must part on these terms.*

*I strongly urge you to reconsider your stance on this matter. You have the opportunity to effect great change within the Ministry and guide our society out of its archaic practices and bring it into the twenty-first century.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hermione J. Granger*

## Head of the Department for Magical Education

Draco looked up from the parchment Hermione handed him after thoroughly reading it, looking for anything that might reveal their plans before they were ready to take on the Minister. "Are you ready to send this? Are you sure? There's still time to change your mind."

"I'm sure. No one is going to tell me how to live my life," Hermione responded. She folded the letter up and sent it off through the halls of the Ministry to the Minister's office. "Now comes the hard part, telling my staff that I'm leaving."

"I don't envy you that job, but it's not like they won't ever see you again. You'll be back roaming the halls before you know it," Draco said. He got up out of his chair, walked around Hermione's desk, and kissed her. "I have to go get started on my own work. I'll see you at lunch."

Hermione reached up and straightened his already straight tie. "I'll see you at lunch then."

Draco closed the door behind him and said good bye to Mrs. Edward as he walked by. He mused about how much his life

## Ebook Dragon

"Wait, steal what?" Draco asked looking between Hermione and James. Neither was paying attention to him. Scorpius and Minerva were doing a better job than James at trying to look innocent. Here recognized that look on Scorpius. Scorpius wasn't usually mischievous, but Draco had been on the receiving end of that fake innocent look enough to know that the group was doing something they shouldn't be.

"I went to school with your father. I know all his secrets," Hermione said, "Which is it, James?" Hermione was running out of patience with her nephew.

"The map. He'd notice if the cloak was gone," James finally admitted.

Harry walked up to them as they arrived at the picnic spot by the lake. "I'd notice if what was gone, James?"

"He has the Mauraders' Map, Harry," Hermione answered for James.

"Stay out of trouble, James," Harry said. Draco caught the wink that passed between father and son. "And don't tell your mother."

It figured that Potter's son would be corrupting his Scorpius. Draco shrugged it off. Boys will be boys and their grades were good and they hadn't gotten in trouble yet so let them have their fun. They were only going to be children for so long.

\*\*\*

They settled down to their picnic. Scorpius came up with sandwiches and butterbeer for both of them and then plopped down beside Florence in front of the baskets. Draco watched the group gathered on the picnic blanket as he ate. He never thought he would see the day when Harry Potter carried on a civil conversation with a Slytherin or that their sons would be friends. They'd all come so far from their own days here at

daughter. As for my intentions, they are honorable. I'm serious about your mother. It's not a fling for me." Draco answered her.

"Are you going to get married?" James asked. The boy was grinning at her, clearly enjoying the show he was witnessing.

"James! Honestly, it's much too soon for that," Hermione said. Draco started guiding the group down to the lake for their picnic.

Yes, he thought but he didn't want to scare Hermione or Minerva. This was going better than he thought it would. "So, you two are okay with this?"

"Yeah. If you're happy, I'm happy," Scorpius said with a shrug.

"If you make my mum happy, then I'm fine with it too. But if you hurt her, I'll hex you into next week," Minerva answered, pointing at him with her eyes narrowed menacingly. Draco would've laughed at how adorable the expression was but he didn't want to hurt the girl's pride.

"Don't you threaten my dad!" Scorpius shouted at Minerva.

"He's dating my mum!" Minerva shouted right back.

"Children!" Hermione and Draco admonished together. They looked at each other and laughed.

"You two are totally going to be siblings," James laughed.

"Why don't we go meet everyone for our picnic?" Hermione suggested, "How are your studies going?"

"We see what you're doing mum," Minerva said, calling her mother out on the subject change.

"Well, you are my daughter. Are you all staying out of trouble?" Hermione said, hugging Minerva to her.

"So, school is going well. Minerva is top of our class and Scorpius and I are right behind her," James said. The three children picked up the pace. Draco caught surreptitious glances between the three.

"Which one did you steal, James?" Hermione said.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about, Auntie," James said, trying for an air of innocence. It was ruined by the grin that kept emerging despite the boy's best efforts.

had changed in the last few months. He went from a lonely widower sending his only son off to school to a man who'd found everything he'd ever dreamed of in such a short amount of time.

\*\*\*

"I swear to you, Hermione, I didn't make a comment to any reporters," Harry said. Draco held back a chuckle at the earnest expression on Harry's face.

"I know you didn't, Harry," Hermione responded. She patted his hand soothingly.

Harry deflated at the reassurance, like a balloon someone let go of. Harry had barged into his office as soon as he'd arrived. He was worried and stressed out that Hermione would be mad at him for the article that appeared in The Prophet. Despite reassurances from Draco that Hermione wasn't angry with him, Harry refused to calm down. Draco finally told him to join them for lunch so that he could talk to her just so that Harry would leave his office and let him get to work.

"You're not mad?" Harry asked.

"No, Harry. It was a good article, certainly better than I expected when people finally found out about our relationship. Whoever wrote it did a good job."

Draco pulled Hermione closer to him in the booth and gave her a peck on her temple. She smiled up at him and placed her hand on his thigh. Draco looked at Harry, "It told you everything was fine, Harry. Now stop wringing your hands like a batty old lady and relax."

"Clever, Draco," Harry responded, rolling his eyes. Draco grinned back at him.

Hermione looked between the two of them. "You two have talked about this already?" she asked.

"Harry pounced on me as soon as I walked into the office, fretting about the whole thing."

"I was not fretting."

"Why didn't you just come talk to me about it, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Your secretary scares me," Harry mumbled, clearly embarrassed that he could take down dark wizards without breaking a sweat but Hermione's secretary reduced him to quivering in his shoes.

"She's not that bad. Draco gets along with her just fine. So does Theo. Anyway, I have other news that you should be aware of," Hermione said.

"Oh, what's that?" Harry asked, looking between Hermione and Draco with a look of curiosity and dread. Draco could practically see the thoughts running through Harry's transparent face. If he had to guess, Draco would say that the possibilities of the impending news that Harry was expecting warred between engaged or pregnant or possibly both.

"I'm quitting my job," Hermione announced.

Clearly not one of the possibilities that Harry had considered, he sat there doing an incredible impersonation of a fish out of water before he recovered enough to respond. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm quitting. In two weeks I will no longer be Head of the Department for Magical Education."

"But...but why, Hermione?" Harry asked, clearly flabbergasted that Hermione would quit anything.

"Mostly because I was given an ultimatum by Kingsley. Break up with Draco and return to Ron or lose my job."

"That's not right, Hermione," Harry protested, "You shouldn't have to give up your job. You shouldn't have to choose between Draco or your career."

"It's a choice I made gladly, Harry."

"But what are you going to do now?"

"Spend more time working on the divorce bill with Theo. I agreed to help Narcissa with her charity ball, though I doubt she actually needs my help. She could probably plan it in her sleep."

three brooms and their lunch. Hermione smirked at him but didn't say anything, knowing by now that he wasn't going to let her carry anything. They apparated to the front gates of Hogwarts.

Draco levitated the objects to float behind him when they landed. He kissed her quickly before they walked through the gates and held his hand out to her. Hermione smiled up at him then took his hand in hers. He took a deep breath, willing his anxiety away. Minerva, Scorpius, and James came running up to them just as they crossed inside. They stopped when they saw their linked hands.

James nudged Scorpius, grinning, "I told you it was true."

"So you two really are together?" Scorpius asked. Draco didn't miss the grin on his son's face. Maybe this wasn't going to be as bad as he thought.

"How did you...?" Hermione started to ask.

"Honestly mum, we see the paper," Minerva interrupted.

"Sweet Circe, Minerva, why are you even interested in the paper at your age?" Hermione asked.

"You two have been in the gossip columns for months. Did you think the older kids weren't going to figure out who we were and ask us?" Minerva replied.

"Well, I guess the question is how do you two feel about it?"

Draco asked.

"Before I answer, I want to know what your intentions are with my mother. She just got out of a relationship. She doesn't need someone toying with her affections," Minerva replied with her hands on her hips. The expression on her face reminded him of Hermione when she was that age.

Draco stared at Minerva surprised. How old was this child? It wasn't something he expected from an eleven-year-old. She was Hermione's daughter after all.

"Hey, that's my dad you're talking about. He's not some playboy," Scorpius defended him.

"It's okay Scorpius," Draco wrapped an arm around Scorpius and ruffled his hair. "Minerva, you really are your mother's

Hermione tugged on his hand and had him sit on the sofa with her. "Why are you pacing?"

Draco massaged the back of his neck before answering, "We have to tell the children about us today."

"And you're worried about how they'll react."

"Yes. Not Scorpius so much. I'm worried Minerva will hate me."

Hermione turned Draco's face, forcing him to look at her, "Minerva is not going to hate you, Draco."

"But how do you know? What if it's too much for her? The last time we were at the school you were telling her about her father and now we're telling her about us. I don't want her to get anxious every time she sees us at the school."

Hermione placed a gentle hand on his cheek. He leaned into it breathing deeply. "Trust me. She's my daughter, Draco. She won't hate you."

"Can we maybe wait to tell them?"

"The next time we are going to see them is for Christmas break. Would you like Minerva and Scorpius to find out that they're spending Christmas together when they get off the train?"

Maybe not the best way to reveal their relationship to their children. Nothing like an "Oh, hey. By the way, we're together and we're all going to spend Christmas together, to start off the holidays. "I hate it when you're right."

Hermione smirked at him, "I know. You'll get used to it." Hermione leaned over and kissed him softly. Draco felt all the anxiety melt away as her lips moved over his. She was gone much sooner than he liked. "If you're done being hysterical, let's go. Ginny told me to remind you to bring the brooms."

Draco followed her out of the study mumbling, "I wasn't being hysterical." He unlocked the closet where he kept the brooms and took out three Firebolts. He knew Hermione wasn't going to play Quidditch, so he thought three would suffice. Hermione came back with the picnic basket and blanket. He took the basket and blanket from her and awkwardly juggled

Draco snorted at this. His mother probably could plan every detail involved in a charity event before her tea went cold. She'd been raised with the expectation that she would be a society wife and all the duties that it entailed.

Harry wasn't content to accept Hermione's answer though. "But what about after the divorce bill passes and the charity ball is over. Then what are you going to do with your time? You can't just sit around reading all day."

"Oh, I probably could. Have I told you that Malfoy Manor has one of the largest libraries I've ever seen?"

Harry looked at Draco and asked, "Is that how you got her to date you? Bribe her with books."

Draco laughed. "No, but I wish I'd thought of that. It totally would have worked."

"Oh, it definitely would have worked. Every nerdy girl secretly dreams of a prince giving her a grand library full of books," Hermione said.

"Well, he's better to look at than the beast is at least," Harry retorted.

Draco looked between them confused. "Thanks, Potter. I think?"

Harry and Hermione laughed good-naturedly at Draco's confusion before Hermione explained, "It's a Muggle cartoon called Beauty and the Beast."

"Oh," Draco responded. He'd tried incorporating more Muggle elements into his life after the war. He wore Muggle clothing most of the time now and found them more appealing than wizarding robes. He'd been happy to ditch the quills and ink bottles for pens. The Muggle technology eluded him though.

"That's the moving drawings right?"

"Yes. Think of it like what you did with Rose's walls but the pictures tell a story."

"As fascinating as Draco's Muggle education is, back to the matter at hand. What are you going to do with your time, Hermione?" Harry interrupted.

Draco was thankful for the interruption. He got along well

## Finding Hermione

with Harry now. First name basis and all that. But he didn't like to appear ignorant in front of his former rival all the same.

"There's a plan in place, Harry. Don't worry," Hermione reassured her friend.

\*\*\*

Hermione and Draco walked back to the Ministry hand in hand. Harry was called away right after lunch to help with MLE business.

"Did you tell your employees that you were leaving yet?" Draco asked. The cold November day made him extremely glad that he was a wizard and his clothes were protected with a warming charm as he watched the cold and miserable Muggles scurry to their destinations, bundled up in coats and scarves and hunched over against the cold. He slipped a £20 note into the tin of a beggar on the street as they walked by.

Hermione caught him slip the man the money and pulled him to her for a quick kiss. He kept his arm wrapped around her as they continued their walk back to the Ministry.

"I only told Mrs. Edward. She threatened to retire. She said she wasn't going to keep working for a Ministry that thought firing the 'great Hermione Granger' was a good idea."

"Well, maybe you could convince her to just take a vacation. You're going to need your own personal secretary soon."  
"I'll talk to her about it."

\*\*\*

"Who do we know that's good at finding people?" Draco asked the group.

Draco, Blaise, Theo, Greg, and Harry were sitting in a booth drinking at the Dragon's Den. Hermione, Ginny, Tracey, Daphne, and Helena were on the dance floor enjoying themselves for a raucous girls' night. The ladies had "allowed" their significant others accompany them to the club with the promise that they

## Chapter 12 The Relationship Reveal

November 9th

Draco was nervous. It didn't sit well with him. He preferred to stride confidently into any situation, preferably with a plan maybe two. Today was the day. They were going to tell their children about their relationship.

He was nervous about Scorpius. Draco had never introduced Scorpius to a woman he was dating before. He'd never really dated anyone after Astoria died. His world had revolved around Scorpius. Now Scorpius would have to share him with Hermione and her daughters. He didn't think Scorpius would react badly to it. Thankfully the boy was nothing like himself at that age.

Minerva. She was the one he was really nervous about. If Minerva decided she hated him that was pretty much it. He didn't think she would, but they didn't really know one another. It helped that she and Scorpius were friends. He just didn't know how she'd react to learning that Hermione had moved on from her father.

"Are you pacing, Draco?" Hermione said. He could hear a bit of laughter in her voice.

Draco stopped and looked around, confused to find that he had been wearing holes in the carpet. "Yes, it seems your bad habits are rubbing off on me."

me. That means you will not do anything that may endanger the lives of our daughters. Yes, I know all about Minerva's 'flying lesson.' You should count yourself lucky you're alive right now. If you step out of line, I will do everything in my power to keep them from you. I won't have my children hurt by your childishness."

"You can't keep my kids from me!" Weasley shouted, pounding his fists on the table.

"I don't want to but I will if you force me. Do you think you can behave yourself for the sake of our children?" Hermione asked.

"Do you? Can he? I don't want him around my daughters," Weasley retorted.

"That's not your decision to make any more. And for your information, we don't disparage either of you in front of Rose or Minerva," Hermione answered.

"You're still my wife. You're my property!" Weasley shouted. Draco saw red. He drew his wand and shot a stinging jinx at Weasley's chest. How he longed to crucio the man. "She's no one's property. I suggest you take the peace offerings she's giving you because if she decides that she doesn't want you around her daughters, she will have the Malfoy name and fortune at her disposal. I will help her make sure that you never catch so much as a glimpse of them again and I will make sure that you are nothing more than a fading memory to them. So what is your daughters' love worth to you? Is it worth sacrificing your overinflated ego? Is it worth getting along with your ex-wife so that they can have a happy life that you're a part of? Decide what they're worth to you."

"Fine. I agree. When can I see them?" Weasley said sullenly.

"Rose comes to the Burrow on Sundays. If you're here, then you can see her but she does not leave anywhere with you. After the stunt you pulled at the school, she doesn't trust you and neither do I."

"One day a week! That's not enough. And visitation supervised by my parents. That's slow Hermione, even for you."

"That's what you're getting right now. Take it or leave it." "Fine."

"You need to earn my trust and you need to earn Rose and Minerva's trust. Provided you abide by our visitation agreement with Rose and nothing happens then Minerva and Rose may visit you at your home during the Christmas break. I will need to know where that is. I won't force them to stay if they're unhappy. They will be able to call Tansy to come get them at any time if they want to leave. It's up to you to ensure they don't need to. You will also not set up wards to keep Draco or me out. During the Christmas holiday break, Minerva and Rose will come over on the 23rd, 27th, and 29th from nine to five. They will spend Christmas Eve and Christmas morning with me and can spend Christmas day with you and return by six. We can discuss New Year's Eve and Day once everyone knows their plans. You may also see them again on the second. I want to remind you that they aren't obligated to stay with you during your visitation time. I won't have them miserable."

"Fine," Weasley replied, miserably.

"Noooooooo!"

They heard Rose scream. All the adults rushed to get outside. Draco lifted the visible hexes from Weasley so the children wouldn't see him like that. They all split up searching for Rose. Draco and Hermione found her and Albus lying on the ground in the mud behind the house. They ran over to them.

"Albus! Rose! What's wrong? What happened?" Hermione asked, standing the children up and getting herself covered in mud in the process.

"They... they were mean to me," Rose sobbed, "They said mean things and pulled my hair. Then they took Norbert and threw him in the mud. Then they shoved us down and now I'm all dirty." Apparently, the younger Brown children were as bratty as their elder brother. He spotted them running away from their hideout behind a shed.

"Shh, it's okay darling. Are either of you hurt?" Hermione soothed.

"No, but they ruined Norbert," Rose cried. Albus shook his head.

"We can clean Norbert. He'll be good as new," Hermione said.

Draco grabbed the muddy dragon and put him in his pocket. Tansy could clean him when they got home.

"Are you ready to go back inside?" Hermione asked her daughter.

"Can we go home instead?" Rose pleaded. Rose looked exhausted. She rubbed her eyes tiredly and looked about to burst into tears again.

"Yes, but we need to take Albus to Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny and say goodbye to everyone."

"Will you carry me, daddy?" Rose pleaded, looking up at him and holding her arms up. Looking down at her with mud streaked down her face and hair with tears shining in her eyes, he realized that he would never be able to deny her anything. Merlin forbid she ever found out that he was wrapped around her little finger.

"Of course, princess."

"I want to be carried too!" Albus protested, also reaching up to be picked up.

"You're too heavy, Albus," Hermione said. Albus looked so disappointed not to be included and started to turn away to walk back to the house.

"Nonsense," Draco said, "I can carry them both back to the house." Draco lifted both muddy children in his arms and they walked back to the house. Draco cringed inwardly at how much mud covered them all. His jacket was covered on both sides. He had a feeling there was mud on his neck.

A little hand touched his cheek and he turned to look at Rose. Now there was mud on his cheek. "You're pretty," she said.

"Men aren't pretty, princess. They're handsome. And thank you."

Little finger touched his hair. And now there was mud in his

daughter. I raised you better than this. Calling her a whore, that's a bit hypocritical don't you think, considering your actions?" Molly raged, beating him about the head. Weasley flinched and tried dodging her assault, throwing his arms over his head.

"At least I'm not hopping into bed with a Death Eater," Weasley stated mulishly once his mother stopped beating him.

"The war is over Ron. It's been over for fifteen years," Hermione said. She squeezed Draco's hand under the table.

"That's easy for you to say. They didn't kill anyone in your family. They killed Fred," Weasley said.

"Draco didn't kill Fred. He lied for us at the Manor. His mother is the only reason Harry is still alive. The only reason we didn't lose the whole bloody war is because of the actions of these two people. I lost my parents. They may not be dead, but they don't know me, so they might as well be. They were all I had. You lost a brother and that sucks but I lost everything! You were supposed to be my husband, yet you cheated on me throughout our marriage. You betrayed me. You abused me. Yes, abused me. That's what forcibly taking someone's memories away to hide your wrongdoing is. Then you tried telling me to just live with your infidelity because I don't have anyone else. I deserve better than you. I deserve to be happy. I deserve someone who will love me no matter what."

Molly looked like she wanted to start beating on her son again. Arthur was having a hard time restraining his wife, who was so apoplectic with rage that speech had failed her.

"The question now, Ron," Hermione continued, "is how much do you want to be a part of your daughters' lives? I'm not going to try to keep them away from you though your actions are making that decision very difficult for me. There are some things I'm not going to put up with. We will behave civilly with one another while the children are present. That means you and your mistress won't be talking bad about Draco or me in front of our daughters. That means you will prevent your other children from bullying our daughters. That means you won't tell our daughters that you're taking them away from Draco and

Hermione pointed her wand at her weasely, pimply husband and uttered the phrase, "Ní féidir bheith caidreamh collaí," with deadly calm. A shudder passed through Weasley but no other visible sign of whatever Hermione hit him with showed.

Draco looked at Hermione. She grinned up at him with a malicious glint in her eyes. Whatever that spell was, Weasley wasn't going to like it when he figured out what the effects were.

She took his hand and breezed past Weasley and Lavender into the kitchen. Hermione seated herself on the bench at the kitchen table. Draco slid in beside her. Weasley sat down across from Hermione and glared at her through his beady weasel eyes. The affect was rather amusing.

Ginny walked into the kitchen. "Oh, you started the hexing portion of the day without me. No worries, I'll catch up." Ginny's famous bat-bogey hex was soon visible on her brother's face. He almost sympathized with the bastard, having been on the receiving end of that hex. Almost. Well, not really at all. The bastard deserved worse.

Molly, Arthur, Ginny, Harry, and Lavender stood around the kitchen. Molly appeared to be working herself up into a tirade. Arthur was trying to soothe her and keep her temper from erupting.

"I don't know what Hermione hit you with but I'm not even going to try to fix you. They can unhex you. Ronald Weasley, I don't know who you are anymore. You cheat on your wife for years. You have children with this, this woman," Molly spat, gesturing at Lavender, who looked at the floor, "You obliviate your wife to keep her compliant. You kidnap your child."

"She's my daughter. I can't kidnap my own daughter," Weasley squeaked at his mother.

"You can if her mother doesn't know where she is!" Molly shouted.

"Let's not forget he called her a whore. In front of Rose," Ginny added, shooting a glare at her brother.

"You called her a whore! You called the mother of your children a whore. You called her a whore in front of your

hair." "Your hair is soft," Rose said. Albus joined her in touching his hair. Why not? Draco embraced the fact that he was covered in mud and would need to at least have three showers before the mud was fully gone. He got to be the knight to his little princess though and it was worth being covered head to toe in mud. Hermione snickered beside him.

"We found them!" Hermione shouted as they walked inside the house.

Ginny and Harry were the first to find them. Harry took in Draco's appearance and struggled to suppress his laughter. "What happened? Why are they all muddy?" he asked.

"They're fine now. Just a little squabble with the other three delightful children," Hermione said.

Harry took Albus from Draco. Draco smirked as Albus smacked his father's cheek, leaving a muddy handprint. Weasley chose that moment to walk in with Lavender, their three children, and Molly and Arthur.

"Did you go for a roll in the mud, ferret?" Weasley remarked, snidely.

"No, your children were picking on Rose and Albus. We're leaving. Rose has had enough for today," Hermione replied.

Draco set Rose down. "Go say goodbye to everyone," he told her. Rose said goodbye and gave hugs to her grandparents and aunt and uncle but refused to hug her father. She would only say goodbye grudgingly once she was safely standing between Hermione and Draco.

"I'll be right behind you," Draco said to Hermione as they turned to walk down the lawn. Draco turned and faced Weasley. "You're not off to a good start, weasel. I'd control your demon spawn if I were you. She's not going to put up with that type of behavior from them towards her girls. Keep calling me 'ferret' in front of the girls too. See how long she's willing to put up with that."

"Bugger off, ferret."

"Such a delightful conversationalist, Weasley."

A very muddy Draco caught up with Hermione and Rose.

## Finding Hermione

HepickedRosebackup,threwhisotherarmaroundHermione, and kissed her before they disappeared from the Burrow.

Norbertwasgiveninto thecareofTansywhentheyarried. House elf cleaning charms were always more effective than anything a witch or wizard could do. Hermione took Rose off to clean her up and put her down for a nap. Draco dropped a kiss on Hermione's forehead before disappearing into his own room.

\*\*\*

Draco lay on the couch in the study sipping scotch when Hermione walked in. Her damp locks were braided into pig tails and left damp marks on her shirt. The shirt was interesting. It was white with a red circle and a yellow lightning bolt over the circle. If he wasn't friendly with Harry, he would wonder why he couldn't seem to get away from lightning bolts.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," she said. Draco drew her down onto the couch so that she lay on top of him. She rested her cheek on his chest over the steady thump of his heart.

"Is Rose okay?" Draco asked. He found a bit of exposed skin on her back where her shirt rode up. He stroked his fingers up and down the small of her back.

"She's fine now. Tansy brought Norbert to her just as I finished cleaning her up. She's taking a nap now."

"She called me 'daddy'," Draco said, wonderingly.

"How does that make you feel?" Hermione asked.

"Like someone told me I get to be a father again. Is that okay?" He was elated about Rose claiming him as her father. He couldn't hide it from Hermione. He was a little anxious about

"Maybe Rose would like to go play with Albus. I take it you brought him, Ginny," Draco said. This argument looked like it was going to devolve fast and Rose had already seen enough of her parents arguing.

"Oh yes. He's out back playing with... Well, I'm sure it will be all right. Come along Rose. Let's go find Albus."

Rose looked at Hermione. "Go on, honey. It's okay. Mummy and Daddy need to have a talk." Ginny led Rose outside. Rose kept herself as far from her father as was possible as Ginny led her from the room.

"I see you brought the Death Eater and convinced my daughter to start calling him 'Daddy'," Weasley spat as the door closed behind Ginny.

"I see you brought the home wrecker and what she calls Draco is none of your damn business," Hermione retorted.

"Stop it, both of you. Ron, what was Rose talking about?"

Why was she afraid to hug you?" Molly asked.

"I took Rose out of school one day last month. I didn't tell Hermione," he answered his mother, "They're turning my daughter against me," Weasley whined, obviously hoping his mummy was going to take his side in this.

"We don't have to do that, Weasley. You're doing a great job of that all on your own," Draco sneered at him.

"Why are you even here?" Weasley asked.

"Where she goes, I go, so get used to it especially since the only reason she's even here is because you weren't able to obliviate her the last time you thought she was alone." Oops, he wasn't supposed to say that. Sorry, not sorry.

"Obliviate her! You tried to obliviate her?" Molly screeched.

"It worked before! Oh shit!" Weasley paled as three wands were drawn and pointed at him.

"Mutatio Skullus!" Draco shouted at Weasley. Weasley's head transformed into a red haired weasel. He'd secretly wanted to do that for years. Childish, yes but oh so therapeutic.

"Furnunculus!" Harry shouted at his best friend, maybe not so best anymore. Weasley's furry face erupted in boils.

through the door. He was still getting used to the easy affection that Mrs. Weasley doled out. "Good afternoon, Molly," Draco said, returning her hug.

He took their jackets from Hermione and hung them on the hook. He'd remembered to wear long sleeves today. He didn't want the mark to agitate Weasley and further complicate the proceedings and add more stress on Hermione. He watched Rose go hug her grandfather as they walked into the living room.

Harry and Ginny came out of the kitchen. Draco caught a look of fury from Ginny before she quickly masked it behind a happy smile for Rose. Rose ran to them for hugs. Ron and Lavender came out of the kitchen behind Harry and Ginny. Rose saw them and broke away from Ginny and ran to hide behind him and Hermione.

"Don't I get a hug too, Rose," Weasley called after her.

"No!" Rose shouted from behind their legs. Draco petted her head soothingly. This wasn't starting off so well.

"Rose, honey, come hug your daddy. He's missed you," Molly tried cajoling the girl from her hiding spot. Weasley was getting redder and redder as Rose continued to refuse to hug him and cling to Draco and Hermione's legs.

"No! Not my daddy! Draco's my daddy," Rose shouted.

It was one of the best moments of his life. This sweet angel claimed him as her father and he had a difficult time keeping the elation from his face. The fact that she did it to Weasley's face probably would have been a good moment too if he wasn't so worried about being Avada'd on the spot.

"Daddy, don't make me hug him. He might take me away again." She said it loud enough the whole room heard. Silence descended on the room.

"Again! What have you done Ron?" Molly yelled.

Ron paled at the sight of his mother's fury. "Mum! She's... she's..."

"Don't you dare say it, Ronald Weasley!" Ginny shouted, forestalling Weasley attacking Hermione, and keep him from calling her a 'Death Eater's whore' again.

how she would feel about it.

"If it makes you both happy, then I'm happy. I'm a little worried about her rejecting her father though. And you know you're going to have to share her, right?"

Draco wrapped his arms around her and hugged her reassuringly. "I think it might be understandable that she be wary around him right now. The last time she saw him, he was filling her head with lies and telling her she wasn't going to see her mother again. Other than that one instance, she hasn't been around him since September. She sees me every day. At her age, I don't think it's difficult to get confused. I'll share her, so long as Weasley behaves himself. You can't have too many people loving your kids and wanting the best for them."

"You do treat her like she's your daughter," Hermione said softly against his chest.

"I think of her as mine," Draco said, "She didn't start out that way. She was your daughter and that was enough for her to be special to me, but something changed for me and she's mine now."

They lay in silence for a while. Draco ran his hand down the ridges and planes of her back enjoying the feel of her body on his. The smell of her shampoo mingled with the scent of her body wash. The soothing lavender and jasmine scent relaxing him further.

\*\*\*

"Hermione," he said quietly.

"Hmmm?" she asked. She raised her head a little sleepily and propped her chin on her hand to look at him.

"I'm curious about the spell you used on the weasel today. Did it work?"

"Oh, I'm sure it did. Unless he says something to us, we may never know though."

"How can you cast a spell and not want to find out if it worked or not?"

## Finding Hermione

"Very easily in this case, since finding out would mean to either try to talk to Ron about his sex life or attempt to have sex with him and I find both prospects distasteful."

Draco curled his lip in disgust. "Ugh... I see what you mean by not needing to know. You finally hexed his balls off like you've been promising to do?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. He won't be getting it up for some time to come."

Draco roared with laughter. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Hermione giggled delightedly above him. "You really are a delightfully devious witch."

## Chapter 15 *A Convention of Weasels*

November 24th

Draco apparated with Hermione and Rose to the Burrows for the dreaded 'Convention of Weasels,' as he started calling it, much to Hermione's annoyance. Harry and Ginny were going to be there as well to act as moral support and to try to keep things as civil as possible. He didn't know how well that was going to work. Ginny was still livid about Weasley's attempted kidnapping.

Draco picked up Rose when they landed outside the wards. She was clutching her green stuffed dragon in one hand and had the other on the collar of his jacket. He took Hermione's hand and they walked up the hill to the front door of the Burrows. "Ready to do battle?" he asked. A garden gnome went running across the lawn in front of them.

"Not really. I'm so tired of all this," Hermione answered. "I know. I wish this was going better for you and the girls." Why couldn't Weasley be reasonable about this? He knocked on the door of the Burrow.

Mrs. Weasley opened the door. "Hermione dear, you didn't have to knock. Let me get a hug from my beautiful grandchild." Draco transferred Rose into her grandmother's outstretched arms. "Oh, you've gotten so big."

Mrs. Weasley hugged Hermione then Draco as they came

## Finding Hermione

reached the atrium of the Ministry. Gathered near the fountain was a cluster of journalists and photographers. They were spotted as they left the elevators. Cameras flashed as the group walked across the atrium. Journalists bombarded Hermione with questions, most of which were too hard to understand in all the commotion.

"Hermione, what can you tell us about your decision to leave the Ministry?" someone asked.

Hermione stopped and looked out over the crowd of reporters. She held up her hands in a plea for silence. The expectant crowd quieted down.

"Thank you all for coming to see me off today," Hermione joked with the crowd of reporters, "What can I tell you about my decision to leave the Ministry? It was not an easy decision. I've worked in the DME for many years. I was trusted to head the department and I've gotten to know and trust the many people I've worked with over the years. We've worked together to create a department that is focused on improving the education of our children. In the end, it came down to doing what was easy or what was right."

"Hermione, anything you want to say to the Minister?"

"Yes," she smirked at them, "You haven't seen the last of Hermione Granger."

*Chapter 16  
Let's talk about...*

November 25th through 30th

"She called me 'Daddy,'" Draco announced.

"Kinky," drawled Theo.

"What?" asked Draco, then realization dawned. "Not Hermione, you perv, Rose."

They were in a café in Muggle London for lunch. It was the first time since September that Hermione hadn't joined him for lunch. He liked Theo's company but he really missed Hermione. He noticed the uncomfortable chairs and the overly flirtatious waitresses more without her presence than at a waysmanaged to drown out the small annoyances of life. It was strange but he didn't mind all that before Hermione came into his life.

"Congrats. How does Hermione feel about that?" Theo asked.

Draco took a sip of his wine before he answered, "She seems fine with it, made sure to inform me that I have to share. Rose picked the worst time to make her announcement though."

"Oh?" Theo asked.

"We went to the Burrow to talk to the weasel about visitation for the girls. Rose refused to hug him. Molly tried getting her to hug him. She announced to everyone that I was her daddy and not Weasley."

"I imagine he took that well!"

"Not at all. Surprisingly, no one else really voiced any

objections."

"The kids are coming home from school soon. How's Minerva going to react to all of this?"

"It's anyone's guess at this point," Draco said. He sat eating his salad, musing about Hermione's oldest daughter. He worried that she would feel left out. He was going to teach her to fly so that would give them time to hopefully bond. She knew that he was in love with her mother though and she took that well enough.

"So, have you two consummated this unholy union yet?" Theo asked, startling Draco out of his musings.

"What?" Draco asked automatically. Then his brain caught up to what Theo said. Theo was smirking at him across the table. "No, we haven't."

"Really? I expected you to have pounded her into that new desk you got for her."

After Hermione's grand exit from the Ministry of Magic, Draco had presented her with a new desk for the both of them in the study. It was called a partners desk. The thing was as large as a billiard's table in dark walnut. They could sit on opposite sides of the desk, working together, but with their own space. If he was honest, it had featured in a few of his early morning fantasies recently. Not that he was going to be as crass as Theo about it.

"I'm a little concerned about how much thought you've put into our sex lives."

Theo shrugged, nonchalantly. "What are friends for if not to be incredibly intrusive? Are you saving yourself for marriage or something?"

"Funny. No. It's nothing like that."

"Afraid you're going to blow your top in like three minutes. It's understandable," his incredibly intrusive friend persisted. Who needed enemies when you had friends like this to boost your self-esteem?

"I'm not a teenager, Theo. I have learned a little self-control over the years."

would be accompanying them to help Draco take the boxes home and put them away in the study. He also had a surprise waiting for her when they got back.

They arrived at the Ministry early. It was still relatively quiet. Rose was being taken to school and picked up by his mother today. They made it to the DME without incident. Mrs. Edvard was already in the office waiting for them.

Draco took out a box and returned it to its normal size. He handed the box, now the size of a shoebox and wrapped in green paper with a silver bow, to Hermione. Hermione hugged the elderly witch that had looked out for her for so many years. Draco pretended not to notice when he saw the fearsome secretary dab her eyes.

In the box was a statue of the Eiffel Tower that would act as a portkey taking the Edwards to Paris for a vacation. The couple would be staying in Draco's mansion in the 16th arrondissement. Tickets for operas, museum tours, and reservation to restaurants accompanied the portkey. Draco had done everything he could to make sure the couple had a memorable vacation.

Hermione spent the day helping Tansy and Draco clear out her office. She spent time with each of her employees giving guidance and encouragement. With the exception of Mrs. Edvard, they would all be staying on to run the department in Hermione's absence.

Four o'clock came with the arrival of Harry, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and the Snakes. The last of the boxes were transported to Spinner's End with Tansy.

"Why are you all here?" Hermione asked the group.

Harry acted as spokesman for the group. "We weren't going to let you walk out of the Ministry alone. Neville is here representing Hogwarts. The Snakes are all a part of the Wizengamot and I'm the Boy Who Lived. I hardly need a reason to support my best friend. Plus it's a bit of a field day out there. The press is crawling all over the atrium."

They all made their way through the Ministry accompanied by Mrs. Edvard and the rest of the DME. Once the group

council member for the Weasley family, stated, "Hermione has been an asset to the Ministry in the past, however her adulterous relationship with Draco Malfoy reflects badly on the Ministry. She was given the opportunity to rectify the situation and become a model Ministry employee, which she declined." When asked about his brother's own long-standing adulterous affair with Lavender Brown, which resulted in four children, Weasley chose to answer "No comment." Theodore Nott and wife, Daphne Nott, council members for the Nott and Greengrass families, stated, "We support Hermione and Draco. They are a lovely couple. Both have worked hard for our society and it pains us that Hermione is being treated so poorly by the Ministry."

Considering the outpouring of sadness and outrage at Granger's departure possibly for disagreements over her relationship, change may be necessary within the Ministry. The future of our society and the education of our children cannot afford for talented Ministry officials to feel they are forced to resign because of disagreements with the Minister.

Draco handed the paper to Hermione, who started reading it: "I wish I knew who was writing these articles and taking the pictures. I'm tempted to send them a gift, you know like a house or something."

Hermione set the paper down and started to laugh. "Really, Draco. A house? A bit over the top, don't you think?"

"I'm a Mafloy. Over the top is what we do," he said and took a sip of his coffee. He was serious about the over the top gift.

Hermione just snorted at that and continued to read the article. Her last day at the DME. Draco cleared his schedule today to help her pack up her office and be a supportive presence as she said her goodbyes to the others in her department. Tansy

"Well, what is it then? It's not like the two of you don't have plenty of opportunities. She lives in your house with you." Draco leveled a glare at his friend's persistent involvement in his sex life. "That is kind of the reason," he admitted, "This is the only woman I'm ever going to have sex with for the rest of my life. I don't want our first time to be just an ordinary day. I want it to be something we'll always remember."

There's nothing special about falling into bed together because it's a Tuesday and they got carried away with the heavy petting. Hermione deserved better. She deserved flowers and candles. She deserved to be worshipped.

Theo rolled his eyes at Draco, "You're such a girl. It will definitely be memorable for her when you blow after three minutes."

"Seriously, Theo, I'm not fifteen anymore and that happened once." Damn Pansy for telling Daphne and Tracey about the one and only time they'd had sex. The girls had immediately told Theo and Blaise, who were all sympathetic and advice. Not! He'd been getting ribbed for it ever since.

"You know there's this thing you can do with your tongue..." Theo persisted.

"Stop!" Draco interjected, not wanting to continue this discussion about his sex life anymore. "I don't need sex advice, Theo."

"Seriously though, it works every time."

Draco wanted to pound his head into the table. Only good breeding and not wanting to cause a scene in the café stopped him. The waitress as she had over to their table. A quick glance at her revealed that the top button of her blouse had mysteriously come undone during their lunch in her section.

He handed her his credit card without waiting for her to hand him the bill. The quicker they got out of here the better. He had a feeling she would somehow trip and manage to fall in his lap if they stayed much longer. He seriously hated that shit. Next time he went anywhere without Hermione, he was moving his signet ring to his left hand. At least that would keep

some of them off of him.

The waitress returned with his bill and credit card receipt to sign. Sure enough on one copy was her phone number. Not that he owned a phone or was going to use it but he knew enough of Muggle technology to know what the series of digits meant. It wasn't the first time a woman tried to slip him her digits. He left a tip and signed the slip, leaving the number in the folder. He and Theo escaped the café, Theo laughing behind him as Draco hastily made his way out of the café.

\*\*\*

Draco hurried home from the Ministry. He couldn't wait to see Hermione and Rose. He was anxious all day, not having her in the same building anymore. He flooded home from the Ministry and stepped into his drawing room brushing ash off his shoulders.

"Daddy!" his littered-headed princess screeched, running across the room to greet him.

He dropped his briefcase on the floor and scooped the girl up in his arms. "Hello, princess. Did you have a good day?"

Draco gave his mother a peck on her proffered cheek and kissed Hermione tenderly before sitting beside her on the couch and setting Rose in his lap. Rose chattered away about her day.

"When did that happen?" he heard his mother ask Hermione quietly.

"Sunday. At the Burrow," Hermione whispered back.

He caught a peek at his mother out of the corner of his eye and saw her quirk her lips in a small smile. He could practically see the wheels turning in his mother's head. He had a feeling their wedding was being planned as she and Hermione spoke about the upcoming charity ball.

Rose finished her recitation of her day. Her teacher read them a book about a hungry caterpillar. A boy in her class made all their crayons fly up in the air when another boy took the color he wanted. Tansy made a peanut butter cookie today. The

sad to see such a talented young witch go. Mrs. Granger has dutifully served the wizarding world well through her efforts working with the Order of the Phoenix during the Second Wizarding War and the changes she made to the Department for Magical Education. We wish her luck in her future endeavors."

Sources tell us that the split between the two Order members was not so amicable, citing the Minister's objections to Granger's new relationship with Draco Malfoy as the cause of the rift between the two. "She was given the choice between her career with the Ministry or her relationship with Malfoy," a source close to the couple stated, "Hermione wasn't going to let anyone dictate how she lived her personal life so she chose to leave."

Parents and educators are dismayed by Granger's plans to leave the DME. Headmistress McGonagall fumed at Granger's resignation and the supposed reasoning behind it stating, "Mrs. Granger has been the best thing that has happened to Hogwarts and the Department for Magical Education. She has brought about great changes in how we educate magical children. Using her experiences as a Muggle-born witch entering Wizarding society, she has helped other Muggle-borns and their families adjust to the sometimes daunting changes and culture shock that many Muggle-borns' experience. She, along with Draco Malfoy, have made great strides in fostering inter-house unity both inside and outside of Hogwarts. If their new relationship is the cause for this resignation, then the Minister does the Wizarding world and the DME a great disservice."

Draco Malfoy has not commented on his views on his girlfriend's resignation from a Wizengamot council member's viewpoint or as a loved one. Malfoy, an admitted former Death Eater, has worked diligently over the years to eradicate pureblood supremacist ideology from the Wizarding world. Years ago when asked why he took his Wizengamot seat amongst the overwhelming opposition, Malfoy stated, "We have to be the change we want to see in the world. We have to be the generation that shows the Wizarding world that blood status means nothing anymore. We have to ensure that our children and our grandchildren don't have to choose between killing someone because of their blood status or seeing their own family killed."

Other Wizengamot members have commented about Granger's resignation with varied opinions. Percy Weasley, a Wizengamot

Hermione reassured her daughter repeatedly that everything would be fine. That her father wouldn't try to take her away again. That Tansy would come to get her if she wanted to leave. Rose said she believed all of their assurances but still sought out them both for extra cuddles.

Draco spoiled Rose shamelessly. Thankfully Hermione let them both have their way understanding Rose's fears and Draco's reservations. So Rose got to have extra broom rides with Draco, extra stories before bedtime, and a bedtime returned when Draco slipped her a cookie before dinner.

Draco kept his reservations about Weasley's fathering abilities to himself. He remained supportive to Hermione, knowing that she didn't need the added stress of a fight with him about her daughter's father. He also knew that any expressed or felt reservations in front of Rose would make it more difficult for the girl to accept her father's presence.

\*\*\*

An article ran in The Prophet on Friday, the last day of Hermione's employment. Somehow word had leaked to the public about Hermione leaving. Draco read the article during breakfast and glanced at the accompanying photo. It was from the opening of the primary school in September. Hermione was talking with the principal from the school. There were teachers, parents, and children clustered about. He saw himself standing behind Hermione talking with Rose's teacher.

### Granger Leaves Ministry

War heroine and the brains of the Golden Trio, Hermione Granger, has turned in her notice and plans on leaving her career as Head of the Department for Magical Education. Granger has not commented on her reasoning for leaving her post.

The Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt was asked for a comment about his reaction to Granger's leaving and said, "We are

green dragon on her wall grew a little bit and shot out flames. She kissed him on the cheek, slid off his lap, and left the room in search of Tansy.

"How was your day, Draco?" Hermione asked.

Too bloody long, he thought. "Good. I'm going to work from home for the rest of the week and Theo's coming over. He told me to tell you that he's finally finished all your research and proposals and wants to get started working on the bill with you. Did you have anything going on tomorrow?"

"No, but I've been informed to keep Friday clear."

"Oh, why?" Draco asked, looking between Hermione and his mother.

"We're going on a little shopping excursion," his mother placidly informed Draco.

"Wear comfortable shoes," Draco said to Hermione in a loud whisper. Hermione giggled. His mother's little shopping excursions were the worst. He'd gone with her once after her house arrest to keep her company and it was awful. They'd gone into so many stores he'd lost count. The bags had to be banished to the Manor because there were too many to carry. His feet and back ached from walking so much. He'd retreated home and went straight to bed after the day was over and refused to ever go again.

"I think I'll go now," his mother said, rising from her chair.

"Narcissa, are you sure you won't stay for dinner?" Hermione asked.

His mother kissed Hermione on her cheek, and then kissed Draco. "No, dears. I'll go say goodbye to Rose. You children enjoy the rest of your evening."

She left them sitting in the drawing room, waving them back down when they made to rise and see her out. A short while later a 'pop' was heard signifying her departure.

Draco turned to Hermione and drank in the sight of her. She was dressed in a white fitted blouse with a blue floral knee-length skirt. Her blue ballet flats were under the coffee table. Her chestnut curls fell over one shoulder.

"I missed you today," Draco said, kissing her again.

"I missed you too," Hermione said. She cuddled against his chest and he held her to him, thinking his life couldn't get any more perfect.

\*\*\*

"I don't think I'm any good," Hermione said, looking nervous and chewing on her lip.

It took Draco a minute to process this as his brain had currently taken up residence in his pants. The segue from making out to having a conversation that required more of a response than the grunt he was currently capable of threw him off balance. Brain function returned to its normal state and location and he was able to give her a confused, "What?"

"Having sex. I don't think I'm any good at it."

Hermione was still looking anxious like she expected him to bolt for the door at the statement. He wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of her words. Where in the hell would she get an idea like that? He kept in the bark of laughter because he knew she would think he was laughing at her.

"Lioness, I can tell you one thing right now and that is there is no way you are bad at sex," he reassured her.

"How do you know? We haven't had sex yet."

Because up until a minute ago, you were rolling your hips across my dick like you wanted to ride me. Because if I rubbed my hand across your knickers, I know I'd find them wet, he thought to himself. How had the woman even been able to have a coherent thought running around in that brain of hers?

"I just know. Why would you think you're bad?"

"Well, my husband did cheat on me for twelve years."

Draco scoffed at the statement. "Weasley's never been known for his keen intelligent mind. As much as I'm going to hate hearing about this, I think you should probably tell me a little about your sex life with the weasel."

He set Hermione on the couch beside him. He couldn't think properly with her sitting on his lap, especially with her

"I never had any intention of forcing them to stay with him. Ron will have to prove himself and earn everyone's trust again."

"So, I brought over some samples I thought we could look over for the decorations," his mother said to Hermione, trying to distract them both from a full-scale argument.

Hermione gave her attention to the planning and just like that the day was back to being just another Saturday, except that it wasn't. They had the looming meeting with Weasley to face and he knew that despite her wanting to give Weasley a chance, she wasn't looking forward to it any more than he was.

\*\*\*

The last week of her employment as Head of the Department for Magical Education arrived with a terse letter from the Minister. Draco fumed at the callous way Shackleton accepted her notice. He couldn't understand the stupidity of the man in just throwing away such a talented witch.

Her employees were informed of her decision to leave. The resulting drama made for a trying day as Hermione sought to comfort the distraught staff. Draco had to settle for quick snatches of her time while at the Ministry since she refused to leave her desk for lunch. Hermione was determined to leave the DME running smoothly until her replacement could be found. No doubt it would be some sycophantic idiot of the Minister's that would either run the department into the ground or profit off of Hermione's hard work by maintaining the status quo. Either way, nothing new would come out of the DME unless one of her employees forced it out.

Rose wasn't having a great week either. After Molly's departure, Hermione told Rose about going to see her father next Sunday and spending time with him after that. Rose was not on board with that plan and threw a spectacular temper tantrum. She was sent to her room to calm down and told to return when she could communicate with her words and not her feet.

"How does next Sunday work for you?" Molly continued.  
 "That's fine, I suppose. Makes sure Ron knows that there are going to be some stipulations to getting me to agree on any visitation terms. Our previous encounters have not been the most positive."

Molly agreed to tell her son. She got up and made her goodbyes. A pinch of Floo powder and she was gone.

"I can't believe you're going to let them anywhere near him," Draco said after the green flames died and the fireplace went back to its normal orange glow.

"He's their father. He deserves to see his children."

"He's an abusive bastard and he doesn't deserve to be anywhere near them," Draco retorted angrily. He hugged Rose closer to him as if holding her there in his lap could keep any harm from coming to the girl.

"He's their father, Draco. I don't much like it either, but what kind of woman does that make me if I won't let the father of my children anywhere near them. I have to believe that he can change, that he can still be the good man that I know is in there."

"You have to stop trying to find the good in everyone. There are people out there who can't be redeemed and I'm afraid that he's one of them."

Hermione held up the cuff on her wrist. The firelight dazzled off the stones making the alexandrite glow red. "People once said that about you. Should I have not tried to see the good in you and walked away from you that day on the platform?"

Damn. She knew just what to say to take the fight right out of him. He didn't think she was right about Weasley but that was something only time would tell. He also knew that it was probably a bit of selfishness that wanted to keep Weasley away from the girls. That combined with a healthy dose of over-protectiveness.

"Fine, Hermione," Draco relented, as if he had a say in the matter, "Just don't force them to stay if they're miserable. They can call Tansy if they want to come home."

skirt riding up around her legs. He kept a hold of her hand so that she wouldn't think he was rejecting her. He adjusted himself into a more comfortable position as he turned to face her on the couch.

She was looking down at their joined hands in her lap and curling her free hand into the fabric of her skirt. Draco tipped her chin up so that she was forced to look into his eyes. "Hey, just tell me whatever you're comfortable with. What was it like in the beginning? You lost your virginity to him?"

Hermione took a deep breath and looked away from him to stare at the flames in the fireplace. "Yes, he was my first. I don't think I was his. I have a feeling it was Lavender during sixth year. The first time was awful. It hurt and I cried. After that, it was pleasant enough. Not very frequent."

Pleasant enough. Not really a new emotion that one would say about enjoyable sexual experiences. "Have you ever had an orgasm, Hermione?" Draco asked.

"Yes. Not with Ron."

"So masturbation then," Draco said bluntly, knowing she hadn't cheated on Weasley. Hermione nodded. "Lioness, none of that is any indication that you're not good in bed. It is a good indication that Weasley didn't know what he was doing or wasn't interested in seeing to your needs. Why are you worried about it?"

"We haven't had sex yet," she stated again.

"I'm very well aware of that." Just the thought of sinking into her warm, wet heat. Focus, Draco. "Our relationship has never really progressed along the lines of a normal courtship. I haven't tried taking you to my bed yet because I want you to be sure that's where you want to be. You need to know that it's not just your body that I want and to be clear I really want your body, but I want so much more. I want your mind and your heart and your soul. I want everything that is Hermione Granger. You already have everything that is Draco Malfoy. Mind, body, heart, and soul. It's all yours and always will be. So why haven't we had sex yet? Because I want it to be special for

us. Because you deserve special." Especially now after he found out that she'd never had special.

Hermione's look of dumbfounded speechlessness was enough to make him grin. He'd rendered the great Hermione Granger speechless. She caught his grin and rose up over him, pushing him down into the couch. He drew his leg up onto the couch and she straddled him once more. He let his hands wander freely over her as she resumed the heated snog she'd interrupted earlier. As if she'd never stopped to doubt whether she'd be wanted in his bed.

\*\*\*

"You haven't told me about your own sexual experiences," Hermione said.

Well, at least they weren't snogging when she decided to bring that up. He'd been expecting the question. His prying into her sex life deserved reciprocation. Draco set his book down and drew her feet into his lap. Hermione stretched out on the other side of the sofa and got comfortable.

"What would you like to know?" he said.

She took a fortifying sip of her scotch before answering, "Well, I guess starting at the beginning would be good. Who was your first and how old were you?"

"You haven't been talking to Daphne and Tracey about this have you?" he asked, suspiciously. His first sexual experience was not something he was really proud of for liked to talk about but he knew those girls liked to talk.

"No, why? Should I?"

"Please don't," Draco practically begged, "I'll tell you. I was fifteen and it was with Pansy. We both decided on a mutual deflowering during the summer between fourth and fifth year. It was not a great experience for either one of us and it was not repeated. Well, I thought it was great at first but then it became a terribly embarrassing experience."

"Why was it so bad?" Hermione persisted. She had a slight

walked around the coffee table, and shook Molly's hand.

"It's so nice to see you again, Molly," his mother said as if the woman hadn't been responsible for her sister's death, not that his mother blamed Molly Weasley for killing her sister.

"It's good to see you too, Narcissa," Molly said, looking a little unsure.

"Hello, Molly," Draco said to cut the unease, "I'd get up but Rose is asleep right now."

Molly looked over at Draco with Rose in his lap and smiled. She came over and kissed the top of Rose's head before giving Draco an awkward hug to keep from waking the sleeping child. "It's good to see you, Draco."

"You wanted to talk, Molly?" Hermione asked, "Would you like some tea?"

Molly sat down on the armchair across from Draco. "Yes, please," she answered.

Hermione poured tea for the woman and added cream and sugar like it was an old habit before handing the cup and saucer to her mother-in-law. "So what brings you over?"

"Well, I don't want to ruin your Saturday but I came over to talk about Ron."

"Okay," Hermione said, clearly dreading the subject.

Hermione had kept the most recent revelations about Weasley from his mother. As far as Molly knew, her little-Ronniekins was only philiandering in scum, not the complete piece of shit that Draco knew him to be. Molly didn't know about the years of obliviation or about the broom incident with Minerva or about the kidnapping incident with Rose. Draco didn't agree with Hermione's decision to keep those details from Molly but it was her decision.

"Ron has asked for me to set up a meeting so that you both can discuss visitation for the girls."

Draco looked at his mother who had her mouth pursed like she'd smelled something particularly nasty. It took everything Draco had not to settle his face into his patented Malfoy sneer. He didn't want Weasley anywhere near his girls.

I never knew that my best mate was abusing her for years. Ginny and I are horrified that we never suspected. We would've stepped in if we knew something was wrong. But I would never let them end up begging on the streets."

Draco took a sip of his scotch and savored the liquid fire that raced through his veins. The drone of conversations swirled around their booth. The heavy thumping from the dance floor could be heard behind them. Draco studied the drink in his hands as he contemplated Harry's assertions. Draco wanted to blame Harry, Ginny, and the Weasley clan for not knowing about what was going on with Hermione's marriage to the Weasel, but he knew it wasn't fair to do so. If Hermione never said anything and Weasley was obliviating her, then how were any of them supposed to know.

"There's nothing for you to feel guilty about, Harry. I know you would've done something if you'd known. The same with the rest of the Weasley clan. I don't think Hermione blames you either," Draco responded.

\*\*\*

Saturday rolled around. Hermione was recovering from girls' night by having a lazy Saturday afternoon. His mother came over for tea and to discuss the details of the upcoming charity ball. Rose was sitting with him in his armchair, curled up on his lap fast asleep.

The fireplace flared green and the voice of Molly Weasley called out, "Hermione, dear, are you home?"

Hermione got up off the couch and stood before the fireplace. "I'm here, Molly."

"Do you have a moment that I could talk to you?"

"Why don't you come over? Crouching in front of the fireplace can't be good on your knees."

A few moments later Molly was standing in the fireplace looking a little startled to see his mother sitting there on the couch. Hermione greeted Molly with a hug. His mother got up,

smile playing across her lips, clearly amused, but her cheeks were tinged a nice rosy color from the alcohol and sex talk.

"Fifteen-year-old boys are not known for their self-control or concern for their partner's needs. I was over eager and a fumbling idiot in general and I rushed the process. I pretty much lasted about two minutes and strutted about like I was some sort of sex god afterward. Then Pansy told all her girlfriends about the experience, who then told their boyfriend, who then started teasing me about my less than stellar performance."

"I take it that's not an issue anymore."

"Care to find out?" he teased.

"Not if you're only going to last two minutes," she quipped impishly.

"That's not an issue anymore. It hasn't really been an issue since fifth year. A seventh-year girl from Slytherin took pity on me and became like a sex tutor, I guess you would call it, and I studied very hard."

Hermione burst out laughing at his bad joke. "Why would she do that?" Hermione asked, "I thought pure blood girls were supposed to be pure and wait for marriage."

"Slytherins look out for their own. And no, discreet is more like it. She said it would be a shame to look like I did and be terrible in bed." He smirked at her as he said the last part.

Hermione threw a pillow at him, laughing. "Yes, a terrible shame to all womankind I'm sure."

"So what about after Astoria?" she asked.

Draco took a sip of his scotch before he answered her, savoring the rich, smoky flavor. "It was probably close to two years after Astoria died before I had any interesting women. I've had a few casual sexual partners over the years. Never anything serious. Never any girlfriends."

"Until me," Hermione said.

"Yes, I guess. You were and are the only one that would ever be worth it."

"Come here," Hermione said, crooking her finger at him. Draco put a knee in the couch and scooted forward until he

loomed over her. She put her slim hand up to cup his face and said, "I'm so glad it was you that day on the platform, that you've been the one there for me every time I've needed you."

Draco leaned down and gently pressed his lips to hers. "Always."

"You sound like your godfather."

\*\*\*

"I'll need to tell Scorpius about the bracelet when he comes home for Christmas."

Hermione set down the book she'd been frowning over all evening, Malfoy: A History. "Of course you should. But you know the effects of the cuff won't take place until he's seventeen. Why the rush to tell him?"

"I think it's best that he knows about it from early on. This is something I should have grown up knowing. I'm frustrated that I didn't. I keep fantasizing about how things could have been so different for us if I'd known." How things could have been different if he hadn't been such a prat.

"What have you been fantasizing about? What would have been different for us?" she asked quietly.

Draco stretched out on the couch so that he was lying on his side beside her. Her head was pillowed on his arm. His back was leaning against the back of the couch. He leaned down to start whispering the fantasies he imagined for them in her ear. Her eyes drifted shut.

"That first day on the train. I would've greeted you properly," he whispered quietly, taking her free hand in his and kissing the knuckles. "I would've felt the pull of you from the first time you walked into that compartment with your big, bushy hair and your beautiful, chocolate brown eyes and I would've known right then and there who you were to me. I would've been your first real friend at Hogwarts. Maybe we both go into

stay in their booth and leave the girls to their fun.

"Who needs finding?" Greg asked.

"Honorita Blake. I'm not sure how old she is. She has a son named Jacob who's probably five or so."

"Another bird trying to blackmail you into supporting her kid?" Blaise asked.

"What?" Harry goggled at Blaise.

"It's happened over the years. Richas Croesus and widowed is usually a combination for trouble. Plus the whole former Death Eater thing makes people think that I'm an easy target for a payday. But no, that's not what this is. Hermione and I ran into her and her son when we took Rose out for ice cream last week. She looked like she didn't have two knuts to rub together. I just want someone to find her discreetly and see what her situation is and if we can help her."

"I'll start asking around. See what I can dig up," Greg volunteered.

"Thanks, mate," Draco said, "She held herself like a pureblood if that helps."

"If you can't find her, Greg, just let me know. I'll search through the Ministry records and see if I can find her," Harry offered.

"We need to keep it quiet though. I have a feeling there's a husband that we don't want to alert to her presence or our interest in her," Draco said.

"Why the interest in this woman and her kid though?" Theo asked.

"I felt bad for them. They were so poor and miserable. The boy was begging his mum for ice cream and it was just awful having to watch her tell him they couldn't afford it. I've never been poor. I've never had to worry about where my next meal was coming from, but I put Hermione and Rose in the shoes of that poor woman and son and I felt awful for them."

"You know we wouldn't ever let Hermione or her daughters ever go without." Harry said, "I feel guilty that Ron was abusing her and we never knew about it. She's like a sister to me and

couldn't be found in Hogwarts: A History. Traditions that weren't found anywhere outside of Slytherin and weren't shared with people from other houses.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Slytherins tend to protect their own. We're fiercely loyal to one another. They also tend to have the most arranged marriages of any other house. Dealing with large amounts of property and money traditionally meant that marriages were brokered for power or accumulating more wealth. That part has died out. There are customs in Slytherin house that are designed to help witches and wizards get to know one another better so that they can acclimate to their marriages easier. The traditions are still practiced but have been modified since the war."

"Like?" she prodded.

"Well, you know that chivalric barbarian thing you love so much," Draco said. Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "We're taught from an early age to protect and respect Slytherin witches. That's been expanded to all women, not just Slytherin witches. They carry our children but they're also pretty creative when you piss one of them off. At meal times, the wizard usually serves the witch. It's considered insulting to the wizard's pride if the witch beside you has to reach for anything. It teaches communication between the two as well as teaching the wizards to pick up on visual cues, anticipate needs, and learn likes and dislikes. Information is power and the witch beside you might be your wife one day so you want to make sure she's not going to make your life a living hell. Other than the food thing, it's basically about being a gentleman. Carry heavy stuff. Pull out chairs."

"Okay, so this is still going on at Hogwarts. I'm surprised Minerva hasn't said anything about it. I'm surprised you haven't mentioned it earlier. So a man can just control what a woman eats or how much?" Hermione said. She was getting little worked up. He should have told her sooner.

"First off, it's not about control. Think of it this way. I order our meals and drinks when we go out. We always talk about what

we're going to have and I always order for us. I don't order you salad when you want steak. I don't do it because I think you're incapable of ordering for yourself. I know you're perfectly capable. It's about paying attention to the witch beside you and learning everything you can about her. I know that you eat your oatmeal with a scoop of brown sugar, a splash of milk, and a sprinkle of raisins. I know that you like coffee in the morning with your breakfast and you like it with two spoonfuls of sugar and creamer and that you feel guilty about the sugar because your parents are dentists. You like salads or sandwiches for lunch. You hate raw tomatoes. You eat chocolate when you're on your period. You don't like the smell of roasted cauliflower."

"How is it you know all that about me after only three months? Ron didn't know all that after twenty years of knowing me," she said in disbelief, "Is that why there's always chocolate lying around?"

"That's only part of what I know about you. Imagine spending seven years with someone doing that for you. How much are they going to know about you? How much are you going to know about them?" He wasn't going to comment on Weasley's lack of care for Hermione.

"Why hasn't Minerva said anything about it before now?"

"Honestly, I'm surprised she hasn't but she must be accustomed to it by now. With everything that's happened and is happening, Slytherin is really the best place for her to be. Brother or not, the other Slytherins won't tolerate her being bullied. It's probably why they knew about us before we went to the school to tell them that we're together. The older Slytherins would have made sure that they saw the pictures."

"You're sure that's what happens. It's not some pureblood submissive wife training program?"

"You've met my mother. You hang out with Daphne and Tracey. Do any of them seem like the submissive type? My mother lied to the Dark Lord to his face to save Harry and to get to me."

Hermione admitted that submissive was not a trait to be

found in Narcissa Malfoy. She sat there staring into the flames in the fireplace in the study. Draco was tense as he waited to hear what decision she was going to come to about this. If she decided it was sexist and demeaning to women, then she'd take on a thousand years of Slytherin tradition and get it stopped.

He hoped she didn't. For him, it wasn't being a sexist, which of course he would think that way; he was a man after all. For him, it was about treating a woman like she was special. When he was younger, that hadn't included witches outside his own house. Now, things were different. The birth of feminism didn't have to mean that chivalry was dead. You could still hold a chair out for a woman and be interested in her thoughts and opinions.

"I want you to give me your honest opinion," she said finally, "You talk about being Rose's father. So, my question is would you want Rose to be treated this way when she goes to Hogwarts? Would you want some boy ladling soup into her bowl or pouring her juice? I don't really have a problem with the other stuff but I'm having a hard time accepting this."

"I can't say that I'm all that thrilled about her being around boys, but yes. Yes, I would be fine with a boy or boys doing that for her. I remember you telling me about the time in third year when Harry and Ron were mad at you about the broom and no one talked to you until they got over it. That wouldn't have happened in Slytherin house. You wouldn't have been left to fend for yourself. And come on, a wizard wants to wait on you hand and a foot. What's so bad about that?"

"Why don't you serve my food for me then?" Hermione asked.

"I had a feeling you'd hex my balls off if I tried. I do as much as I think you'll allow me. If you want, we could give it a try and see how you like it. It would give you some perspective."

"So you're saying Draco Malfoy would be willing to wait on Hermione Granger. That sounds intriguing." She had that glint in her eyes that he knew by now meant she was going to have fun with this little experiment of theirs.

house. He'd been putting it off but he knew it couldn't be avoided anymore. He'd been waiting for the appropriate time to bring it up or some opening but Hermione had been a little preoccupied with working with Theo.

She finally gave him his opening when she asked, "What was it like to be in Slytherin?"

Yes! Finally! "Why do you want to know?" he prevaricated.

"Partly because I'm curious and partly because I wasn't really prepared for Minerva to go into Slytherin. I would've bet money on Ravenclaw of Gryffindor."

"How did you imagine Slytherin house to be?" he asked, curious about how she'd viewed his house.

Hermione seriously considered her answer for a moment before replying, "Well, your house was never painted in a very good light and that was something we learned on the first night. They taught the prejudice before we really had a chance to form our own opinions. Then, of course, some of you didn't do a very good job of helping us change our minds. Growing up, I would've guessed that Slytherin house would have reinforced the prejudice your parents taught you. I never really believed the whole lot about the Dark Arts stuff. I guess I thought being in Slytherin house meant that you knew or learned how to be sneaky, conniving prats. I've met so many Slytherins and it's made me question those childish views, especially after the war. So now I'm curious about what it's really like being in Slytherin?"

Draco laughed a little at her assessment of his house. He knew that he personally colored some of those childish prejudices for her and her friends. "Well, we were mostly a bunch of spoiled, little rich kids raised to believe that we were better than everyone else and we treated people outside our house like they were beneath us. The prejudice wasn't reinforced at Hogwarts but it was difficult to get away from. There are some good traditions in Slytherin house though that are very old and are still observed."

He knew saying it like that would peak Hermione's thirst for knowledge. There were things about Slytherin house that

framework needed for the introduction of divorce into the wizarding community. Draco read through the sections of the divorce bill. The amount of work Hermione and Theo put into the creation of the bill since she'd left her job boggled his mind.

The entire framework needed to cover all aspects of severing a magical matrimony was truly astounding. They'd thought of everything. Hermione's research abilities paired with Theo's keen legal mind proved an unstoppable force. The debates and arguments that had raged on between the two of them in the study often gave him headaches and sent him fleeing from the room.

It was coming together. Soon Hermione would have her divorce. She would be free from Weasley. Draco had no doubt about how the vote was going to go. It had been his job to smooth the way for the bill. He'd been counting votes since they'd started along this path. There were too many that loved Hermione and backed her.

\*\*\*

The children would be home from school soon. They'd set up Minerva's room for her and moved over everything from Hermione's cottage now that it was established that they would be staying at Spinner's End. The children's loft had been turned into a media room with Hermione's sectional and coffee table taking up the center of the loft and a large television and entertainment system on the wall. Shelves of movies took up the corners of the room.

Draco was curious about the television. Hermione had explained it to him but they hadn't sat down and watched any movies yet. He didn't know how to work the thing. Hermione wasn't that interested in it, citing television as an additive form of entertainment.

Minerva's choice to go into Slytherin was going to necessitate a talk that he would have to have with Hermione about Slytherin

\*\*\*

"The ball is tomorrow," Draco said at dinner.

He had served Hermione and Rose at dinner. He did not serve Tansy. She'd never been comfortable with that custom and had politely requested he stop years ago or she would start eating in the kitchen. Rose got a little bit of everything with her roast cut up into small bites for her.

Hermione got the leanest slices of roast beef since he knew she didn't like the fat. No roasted carrots since he knew she didn't like them. Extra green beans and roasted potatoes. And a roll to wipe up the gravy with. She'd looked impressed when he levitated her plate to her.

"Yes. I have to say, I'm looking forward to it," she said. She took a bite of the roast beef and made a small moan at the taste. He loved watching her eat.

"Mum is excited about it. She refused to tell me anything about the dress you bought during your little shopping excursion," he prodded curiously.

He'd tried getting the information out of Hermione and his mother. Then Ginny, who only smirked at him. Tracey, Daphne, and Helena had all been equally unhelpful. He'd tried using needing to get jewelry for Hermione as a tactic. His mother brought him the emeralds from the vault at the Manor instead of telling him. He'd never been this intrigued by a dress in his entire life.

Hermione smiled a little mysteriously at him, "You'll just have to wait until tomorrow to see."

Draco pouted a little at this. "Thanks for helping my mother with the ball. She does it every year but this one seems to mean a little more to her."

His mother loved Hermione. She loved that Hermione had forgiven her all those years ago. She loved that Draco was with her and that Hermione turned out to be his soul mate. She adored Rose and couldn't wait to shower Minerva with affection. She was thrilled that Hermione had taken an interest

in planning the 12th Annual Malfoy Christmas Charity Ball.

His mother had started the ball after her release from house arrest. She'd wanted to help the widows and orphans affected by the war. It had turned into just helping those in need as the years went on, making sure that poor children could afford to go to Hogwarts. His mother had thought it was tacky to 'fundraise' by auctioning off things or charging for a meal. Donors simply handed a house elf a bag of galleons when they arrived. No specific amounts were asked for, just what the invitee was willing to give.

"I was happy to help her. It's a very special cause and a very special night," Hermione said, looking at him meaningfully before popping a green bean in her mouth.

Draco couldn't help but grin at her emphasis on the word 'special.' "Very special indeed," he said.

"All of them," Hermione responded drily, "Your mother had to pick."

"Who did she pick?" Draco asked. He had a feeling he knew the answer already. There are only two she would send to look after the girls.

"Topsy and Turvy. She said they were particularly good at keeping children out of mischief."

Bingo! Draco laughed, "That they are. They foiled many of my grand ideas growing up."

"Like what?" she asked.

"Using the banister as a slide, jumping off of things to see if I could fly, trying to fly my broom around the house. The list is pretty much endless."

"Sounds like you were a difficult child."

"You've known me since I was eleven. Of course I was difficult."

Hermione just rolled her eyes at that statement. At least she felt better about the girls going over to Weasley's house during the winter break. Those two elves wouldn't let anything happen to the children. He'd disagreed with Hermione about giving the git a chance. He still disagreed with her. He was glad she was taking precaution even if she wanted to give Weasley a chance.

\*\*\*

"The bill is coming along nicely. We're almost done."

"That's good," Draco said, "When do you think you'll be ready to bring it to the council for a vote?"

Hermione and Theo looked at one another before Theo answered, "After the New Year."

Draco knew that answer from Theo meant the bill was mostly done. The group had started gathering at Spinner's End. Draco started working from home most days after Hermione left the Ministry.

Hermione and Theo worked tirelessly on creating the entire

## Finding Hermione

home. Draco was glad the day was over and the visit had gone well. Now that Rose was home safe with them, he could breathe easier.

\*\*\*

Draco stood beside Hermione as she was working on her side of her desk. He leaned his hip against the desk and crossed his ankles. He reached over and took one of her curls in between his thumb and forefinger pulling it straight and then letting it curl back up.

"Did you need something or did you just come over here to play with my hair?" Hermione asked.

"Both?" Draco said, "I've been thinking."

"That's dangerous," Hermione teased, "What have you been thinking about?"

"The girls. I'm nervous about them going over to that house alone. I know they can call Tansy if they want to leave, but what if he tries something? What if they're hurt and they can't call her?"

"They won't be going alone. I'm not sending them over there without protection."

Draco was relieved that she was ahead of him on this. He was also confused. It's not like they could go over there and hang out. Harry and Ginny couldn't be expected to spend their days over there when the girls were visiting.

"Who's protecting them then?" Draco asked.

"Two of the Manor house elves. They'll go over with them, remain invisible, and bring them home at any sign of trouble. The girls will still be able to call Tansy if they want to come home early. I'm not planning on telling them that the elves are there. It's just as a precaution."

Draco grinned at her, "So you're ordering my house elves around now?"

Hermione glared up at him, "I did not order them to go. I asked for volunteers."

"How many volunteered?" Draco asked.

## Chapter 18 The Ball

December 14th

This was the first ball in a long time. Draco was actually excited about attending. Hermione left early that morning for a spa day with his mother, Ginny, Daphne, Tracey, and Helena. The plan was to get massages, manicures, pedicures, and generally relaxed into a state of bliss. After that, makeup and hair stylists would get them ready before sending them back home to dress. Draco had been forbidden to see Hermione until just before they left for the ball. Draco was glad the girls had asked his mother to come along and go to be a part of the fun. There weren't many ladies that his mother associated with and he thought most of those weren't real friends anyway.

The absence of Hermione left Draco and Rose to get into their own mischief to while away the hours. He took her to the park to fly around, first with him on his broom and then on her own. She practiced catching a snitch. Draco also started teaching her to play the other Quidditch positions. Since she could catch a snitch, catching a quaffle would be easy enough. He tossed a Nerf ball to her while she balanced on her broom then as she flew around.

They played in the park until it was time for lunch. Tansy had gone to the Manor to help with the preparations for the ball, so Draco was left to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for him and Rose. An overabundance of strawberry jelly led

to a mess of monumental proportions all over the kitchen countertops. He laughed a lot as Rose tried licking the jelly off the countertops. It was hard getting her to stop since she wasn't taking him seriously. He put Rose down for her nap after cleaning her up and the kitchen. He had a feeling Tansy would throw something at him if he left a mess in her kitchen.

Left to his own devices until Rose woke up and it was time to take her to Molly's, Draco made his own preparations for the night. Hermione had said that tonight was "special" which meant that she expected it to end in only one way. Bouquets of red and orange roses were levitated into her room and placed on either side of her dressing table. Draco respected her private space and only stayed in the doorway. He desperately wanted to find the dress in the closet.

He tried to read. He kept staring down at the same page but never taking in a word that was written. The excitement and the nerves were really starting to get to him. No matter how many times he tried telling himself it was just a ball, it just wouldn't work. It wasn't just a ball. It wasn't even about the blasted ball.

It was about the next stage of their relationship. It was about finally being with her. He was excited and nervous. More nervous than his first time with Pansy. More excited than on his wedding night. It wasn't fair to either lady and he knew that. Astoria would've understood. This was Hermione. This was his soul mate, the woman he'd waited his whole life for. After everything that had happened to her, she deserved a spectacular night and he was determined not to disappoint.

\*\*\*

Finally, after hours of waiting and preparing, it was almost time. Almost time to see Hermione. Almost time to leave for the ball, to dance the night away, to return home for other delights. He adjusted the emerald cufflinks one last time and picked up the jewelry box that held the necklace and earrings that his mother picked out to go with her dress.

"Then we'd better get started," she said as she drew him down to her.

\*\*\*

"Everything went fine today," Harry said when they went to pick Rose up from the Burrow.

Molly was helping Rose get ready to go while Harry filled Hermione and Draco in Weasley's visit. Rose was running around the room with one shoe on but untied and Molly was chasing her around carrying the other shoe. Draco watched her and was relieved that the visit went well. He and Hermione had worried that they would come over to find Rose sullen and moody.

"He didn't try anything?" Hermione asked.

"As if he would try," Ginny scoffed, "He can't take on all of us and he knows he's on thin ice with mum."

"Were Lavender's kids here?" Draco asked.

"Yeah, so was Lavender. It started off a little rough but one look from Lavender and those kids straightened up pretty quick. Lavender seems to be taking lessons from Molly. Rose is still a little wary around Ron but she hugged him when they left. She even hugged Lavender. We were all pretty shocked," Harry said.

"I think that's the good thing about kids that age. They forgive easily and they can be pretty adaptable," Hermione said.

Harry handed Hermione an envelope. "Lavender gave me this before they left. She left it unsealed so I looked inside. It's just a card with her address on it."

Harry probably would have broken the seal to look inside anyway. Draco knew he would have before he handed Hermione anything from Lavender Brown. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission in some cases.

"Mummy, Daddy, is it time to go?" Rose asked bounding up to them. Molly had wrangled her into her remaining shoe and put her jacket on her.

They said goodbye to everyone and took the Floo back

"Go get your jacket, Rose, and we'll head over," Hermione said.

Rose scampered out of the room. Draco looked at Hermione. "I hate this," he said to her.

Hermione reached over and took his hand. "I know. I hate it too. I'm glad I have you with me through this though."

The trip to the Burrow was uneventful. Weasley wasn't there yet. Harry and Ginny were there "visiting" along with Albus. Harry quietly said that he'd keep an eye on her while Molly distracted Rose. They disappeared from the Burrow after saying good-bye to Rose. Draco stood holding onto Hermione in the foyer of Spinner's End when they arrived.

"I need you to distract me," Hermione said, pushing away from him, "I was trying to tell you about an idea I had before I got distracted talking about marriages."

"What idea do you have spinning around in that head of yours?"

"I want to start a domestic violence shelter. I want to help women and children that need to get out of abusive situations. We need a house with a Fidelis charm on it. I would suggest the house Harry inherited from Sirius but it was pretty run down when the Order used it and I don't think Harry has done anything with it since. Plus, I would rather not use that house since Kingsley knows about it."

"I have houses. You can take your pick. You can have as many as you want. I don't know how to do a Fidelis charm. Can you do one?" Draco said eagerly.

"Yes. I know how to do a Fidelis charm. Are you sure you want to give me a house or houses?" Hermione asked.

Draco drew Hermione's left arm up and placed her hand with the cuff over his heart. "I'd give you anything that is mine to give. You want houses; I'll give you houses, especially for something like this. Let's make Granger House together."

"Granger House?" Hermione asked with a grin.

"I told you that we'd change the world together," he responded.

He waited for Hermione at the foot of the stairs, clutching the black velvet box in his hands. He turned in his pacing and there she was standing at the top of the stairs. The box slid out of his hands and hit the floor with a thunk and a jingle of protesting jewels.

She was exquisite. Her hair was piled high on her head with her curls artfully arranged around two emerald hair combs, exposing the line of her neck with tendrils of curls framing her face and extenuated her elegant beauty.

The dress looked like it had been made with her in mind. The dress was a floor-length emerald green satin that just begged to be touched. The strapless, sweetheart neckline dipped low and accentuated the fullness of her breasts. The mermaid style dress was tight against her hips before it flared out to the floor. Every beautiful curve was shown off to perfection. He wanted to fall to his knees and worship her for the goddess she was.

An amused laugh brought him back to the realization that he'd been staring and probably with his mouth hanging open.

"You... you look stunning," he stammered.

She tucked a red rose into his buttonhole and said, "You look pretty stunning yourself."

Her black-gloved hands smoothed down the front of his tuxedo. He couldn't stop staring at her. The black of her gloves made the cuff at her wrist stand out and sparkle in the light. It was there on display for all the world to see. Their claim on each other.

"You dropped something," she said.

He looked down and remembered the fallen jewelry. He picked up the box and opened it for her to see. Her gasp of surprise causing a grin to break out on his face. He took out the necklace and walked behind her to drape it around her neck and fasten it. The large, teardrop emerald lay just above her cleavage with pear-shaped diamonds in decreasing size circling her neck. He handed her the simple matching emerald studs to slide into her ears.

He ran his fingertips lightly across the creamy flesh of her

exposed shoulders. She shivered against him. He pulled her back against him, kissing her behind her ear. She ground that sweet ass of hers against his painfully hard erection.

He bit lightly on her earlobe and growled low in her ear, "Don't tease me, witch. It's taking all the self-control I have not to throw your skirts up and fuck you against that wall."

She turned and looked up at him with heavy-lidded eyes. He could smell her desire intertwined with her floral perfume. A soft hand slid up the tent in his trousers causing him to throw back his head and groan, thrusting into her hand. All too soon the teasing hand was gone.

"We need to go. I promised your mum we wouldn't be late," she said stepping back from him with a teasing grin.

He grabbed her hand and put it back where he wanted her touch most. "You're such a cruel temptress," he whined.

"The sooner we leave, the sooner we'll be back," she said, laughing, squeezing him a little and pulling her hand away.

That galvanized him into action. He pulled on her arm and dragged her into the drawing room to the fireplace with indecent haste wanting now more than ever to get this ball over with. He'd waited long enough to be with her. He could hear her mumbling behind him about sticking charms and corsets not being comfortable to run in. He threw a pinch of Floo powder into the fireplace and said, "Malfoy Manor, Receiving Room." With an arm around Hermione, they were both gone to the ball.

They arrived in the receiving room of Malfoy Manor to find his mother waiting to greet the guests. His mother looked regal in her midnight blue gown with a silver lace overlay. After brushing the ash from Hermione and himself, he walked forward and kissed his mother on the cheek.

"You look beautiful as always, Mother," he said.

"Thank you, darling. You look quite handsome as well," she said before turning to Hermione, "You, my dear, look stunning. I knew that dress was perfect for you as soon as I saw it. Don't you think so, Draco?"

"Absolutely exquisite, mother," Draco answered.

Weasley had ever bothered to pull out her chair for her but he didn't want to ruin the moment and he probably already knew the answer.

"Mummy, Daddy, do I have to go to grandma's?" Rose interrupted them. Tansy had helped her get ready to go while they were talking. She was wearing a green sweater and jeans. Her curly red hair was tied back with green ribbons.

Ugh, it was almost time to send her over there to spend time with her father.

Hermione ran a hand over her daughter's head and said, "Yes, sweetie, you have to go. It will be all right though. Grandma and Grandpa will be there. Maybe Uncle Harry, Aunt Ginny, and Albus will come over."

"Are you staying with me?" Rose asked.

"No, sweetie. We talked about this. You're going over there to spend time with your daddy."

"But he's my daddy," Rose said gesturing at Draco.

Hermione looked up at him for help. Draco scooted back in his chair. "Princess, come here." Rose walked the few steps and stood before him. He picked her up and set her in his lap facing Hermione. "I'm your daddy and I always will be but he's your daddy too. You and your sister are very special because you get to have two daddies. You're going over to the Burrow today so that you can spend time with him because he misses you."

He didn't want to send her over there. He knew Molly wasn't going to let anything happen to Rose but just the thought of her being around Weasley made him nervous. He wanted to spend the day taking her flying and reading stories to her with Hermione. He hated sharing. He was trying very hard not to be selfish. He knew how easy it would be to turn Rose away from her father, but he knew he couldn't do that. He didn't want to take that choice away from her.

"Do you understand, Rose? Are you ready to go now?"

Hermione asked. She shot him a grateful look.

Rose nodded her head. Draco dropped a kiss on the top of her head before he set her back down on the floor.

parents' marriage like?" she asked.

"Well, it was an arranged marriage. They got along fairly well. I think they might have loved one another in their own way. My father would never have raised his wand or hand to my mother. Plus, I'm pretty sure he was a little scared of her."

Hermione chuckled a little at that. "What about your friends' parents? I don't have much to go on as far as wizarding couples."

Draco sighed heavily. Pure blood marriages were always an interesting dynamic. Most of the balance of power depended on the witch, her personality and how she was raised. Some were sweet and submissive leaving open the possibility to be abused, he supposed. Some were forced to be reckoned with, like his mother.

"I'm not really sure about what their marriages were like. The only lost his mom when he was eight and his dad never remarried. I never saw any of them argue but that's not something that you would see as a guest or a child. What was your parents' marriage like?"

"They were very happy. They met in dental school. My dad always said it was love at first sight. They got married right after they graduated. I only ever saw them argue a few times and it was never about anything serious," Hermione responded wistfully.

Hermione stared off at the wall, not really seeing anything. Draco knew that she was envisioning her parents and her childhood. He reached out and placed his hand on hers. "I miss them," she said.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"They would've liked you. My dad was old fashioned. He said never to date a man who couldn't be bothered to get up and pull a chair out for his woman."

Draco could hear his own father saying much the same to him. He remembered the lessons his father gave him about how to treat a witch like it was yesterday. "Son, you always get up and pull a chair out for a lady. If a man can't be bothered to do that simple thing, what else can he not be bothered to do?" Draco wanted to ask if

"Thank you both," Hermione said, "You look amazing, Narcissa. What can we do to help?"

"Well, since you offered, you both can help greet guests as they arrive. The house elves will take their donations and put them away."

Draco groaned inwardly at being stuck in the receiving line. He sent Turvy to find him a glass of scotch to make the endless schmoozing more bearable. The three of them greeted each guest that came through the fireplace for the next forty-five minutes.

He watched Hermione as she charmed the guests. She greeted most of them by name and always had some personal question to ask those she knew, often startling those outside of their circle that she would not only remember their names but also would remember some small detail from a previous conversation or ask after their children or grandchildren. She could've been born to the life of a society wife, groomed from birth, much like his mother, with the effortless ways she seemed to charm the people around her. He was glad she wasn't though. Being a society wife would've bored Hermione to tears.

Eventually, they were released to go mingle before the dancing started. They made their way to the ballroom where everyone was gathering. Their friends were all gathered together talking and sipping on champagne. It was surreal seeing the group gathered together and comfortable. Slytherins and Gryffindors getting along with one another, rising above house rivalries like they'd never been able to do as teenagers.

"There you two are. We were beginning to think you had snuck away to snog in a dark corner," Blaise said, earning him an elbow from his wife.

"No such luck," Draco said. He'd tried too. He also tried convincing Hermione that they could floo back home without anyone noticing.

"Hermione, that's quite a bracelet you have on there," Harry said.

The group turned, seemingly as one, all interested in the cuff

on Hermione's arm that very clearly had the Malfoy crest on it. Draco looked down at Hermione just as she looked up at him biting on her lip. Clearly, she was worried about how much to reveal to their friends in such a public setting.

"Well...you see, Draco and I..." Hermione said.

"Draco, Hermione, there you are. The band is ready to start and I'd like you two to open the ball up," his mother said, thank goodness for interruptions.

"Duty calls," Draco said to their friends, taking Hermione's hand in his and leading her to the center of the dance floor.

Draco spun Hermione into position flaring her dress out around her in a swish of satin and bowed formally over her hand. Hermione sunk into a deep curtsey smiling mischievously up at him and affording him an enticing view of her cleavage. She rose and placed her left hand on his shoulder, very clearly displaying her cuff with the Malfoy crest on it.

Draco recognized the familiar start of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty Waltz*. Draco led Hermione through turns and lifts of the waltz. Draco noted out of his periphery that other couples had joined them on the dance floor. He only had eyes for the witch in his arms though. She was mouthing words in time to the beat of the music.

Curious he asked, "What are you singing?"

"It's a song from the Disney version of this piece. I must have watched the cartoon a thousand times growing up."

"How does it go?" he asked.

"I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream  
I know you, the gleam in your eyes is so familiar a gleam  
Yet I know it's true that visions are seldom all they seem  
But if I know you, I know what you'll do  
You'll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream,"

she sang as they danced.

"Beautiful. And very true," Draco said as the waltz ended. Draco smiled at the blush on Hermione's cheeks as his words as he bowed low over her hand again kissing her knuckles. "Do you want to keep dancing or should we go sate our friends' "

## Chapter 17 Plots and Plans

December 1st – 13th

"I've been thinking," Hermione said at breakfast that morning.

"That's unusual," Draco joked.

"Very funny, Draco," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. She ate a spoonful of oatmeal and sipped her coffee while Draco watched her.

"About?" Draco prompted.

"Honorias Blake and her son."

"Oh," Draco said, setting his coffee cup down. "We're looking for her and her son but we haven't had any luck yet."

"I figured you would be looking for her. It's not just her though. There have to be other women out there. There aren't any domestic violence shelters out there for witches. There's no way for these women to get out of abusive relationships."

Since meeting Honorias that was something that bothered him. Women couldn't escape their husbands. All the power in the relationship was with the man. A husband could pretty much do anything he wanted without repercussion. It bothered him how backward their world was compared to the muggle world.

"Do you think there may be a lot of women out there in abusive situations?" Draco asked.

"I'm not sure. It really would be hard to tell. What was your "

curiosity?" he asked.

"We won't be able to hold them at bay much longer," Hermione said, "I don't think tonight is the best time for that conversation though."

Draco nodded his agreement. He led them back to where their friends had congregated once again, snatching two flutes of champagne from a passing house elf.

"You two dance beautifully together," Tracey said as they joined the group.

Ginny pierced Hermione with a look as she murmured their thanks, "What's with the bracelet, Hermione?" "Gotta love Gryffindor directness, Draco thought.

"It's a family piece," Hermione said, not exactly lying but not revealing the whole truth. Very Slytherin of her.

"Is there something you need to tell us, Draco?" Theo asked.

"Not at this exact moment, no," Draco said, knowing that Theo was expecting some sort of engagement announcement as a means to explain the cuff.

"The soul seeks one who mirrors its own," Luna intoned dreamily beside them.

"Erm, quite right Luna," Hermione said, "You are looking lovely tonight."

Draco privately thought he might need sunglasses if he had to keep looking at the strange witch. Luna was wearing a breezy, sunshine yellow dress that fell in gauzy layers to the floor. Combined with her blond hair and pale complexion, the effect was a bit of an eyesore.

"Thank you, Hermione. I love yellow. It keeps the wrackspurts away and it is their mating season, you know. Slytherin looks good on you."

Draco inhaled the sip of his champagne and choked, earning him a sharp look from Hermione. The rest of the group chuckled, not really reading anything into Luna's odd ramblings.

The house elf came around again and Draco passed around fresh glasses.

"Just sparkling water for me, thanks," Ginny said. The elf

handed her a flute of water.

"Ginny?" Hermione asked.

Draco noted that while everyone was distracted by the interplay with Hermione, Ginny, and Harry the elf discreetly replaced Daphne's champagne with water as well.

"It's really all your fault, Hermione. All those girls' nights,"

Ginny said.

Hermione screamed in delight, jumping up and down, and throwing her arms around her two friends. "Oh my God! Congratulations! I hope it's a girl this time."

Draco lifted his glass and eyed Theo and Daphne as well, "A toast to new life."

The group raised their glasses and toasted the Potters' good fortune. Theo and Daphne could keep their secret for now. He knew they had been trying for years without success and would want to keep it a secret for a little while until they were sure this time would stick. He'd thought they'd given up and sent up a prayer that they'd get their wish this time.

His mother found them again. She went around the group greeting them all again, kissing Ginny on both cheeks in congratulations, touching Daphne's hand lightly, tipping Hannah's chin up with a quiet "Your time will come soon," a hug for Tracey and Helena, and whispered words to Luna.

"Mother, may I have this dance?" Draco asked.

"Surely you want to dance with Hermione," his mother protested.

"Oh, no. I'm going to sit this one out and go in search of a powder room," Hermione said.

"See Mother, now you really must dance with me," Draco said, leading his mother out onto the dance floor.

\*\*\*

Draco stood with his mother on one side and Hermione on the other on the raised dais that the band was situated on.

"Thank you all for coming tonight and supporting our annual

have gladly walked it all over again.

"So it's okay if we tell Scorpius?" he asked.

"Of course. It was always going to be okay that we tell Scorpius. I just wanted to know why you wanted it to be so soon. I was thinking you were going to say it was because of a girl or something."

Draco went still beside her. He hadn't even thought of that and then something about Scorpius suddenly made sense to him.

"What is it Draco?" Hermione asked.

Draco grinned down at Hermione, overjoyed with happiness for his son. "I think there might be a girl."

I would try to convince you that we needed seven, enough for our own Quidditch team. You would think three was enough. We would compromise on four but the fourth pregnancy would end up being twins and we would get five. Three boys and two girls. And I would go to bed every night exhausted but so blissfully happy that I couldn't believe how amazing my life was."

Hermione brushed a tear from her eye and reached up to draw him down to her. Draco kissed her heatedly. She pushed him back a little to look at him, her hand caressing his face and running through his hair. Those beautiful eyes of hers glimmered like molten chocolate pools from unshed tears.

"Draco, that's a beautiful fantasy and a part of me wishes it could've happened. As wonderful as it is, we can't dwell on it though. We've got beautiful children that wouldn't be here without both of us each making the choices we did. We've got wonderful friends that we may not have had. We've finally found each other and while we may both wish it hadn't taken so long or been filled with so much sorrow and pain, the paths we've both walked have made us who we are today. We're making our own reality and it's beautiful."

"I'm glad for what this cuff means and how it ties us together," she continued, "I'm glad that you always felt something because I always did as well. I could never understand why I felt such a strong pull towards you. Or the crush I had on you that I never understood and never really went away. Seeing the cuff made me realize why I didn't mourn the end of my marriage more. I was never supposed to be with him. It was always supposed to be you."

He didn't think he could love her more than he already did but in that moment, the paths they both walked together themselves to this moment where they could be together might have been different but as long as the path was always to her, he would

charity ball. This ball started out for my mother and myself as a way to make reparations for our part in the war and we are happy that it has become an annual event that draws such good people who want to help those less fortunate. The proceeds from this year's ball will fund scholarships for underprivileged children going to Hogwarts. As our last song for the night, I have requested something from my own years at Hogwarts. During our fourth year for my friends and I, we were lucky enough to attend the Yule Ball as a part of the Triwizard Tournament. That particular ball brought about a stunning revelation for me that has brought a new happiness to my life along with many new friendships. Please grab a partner and join Hermione and me on the dance floor for the last dance of the night."

Draco took Hermione's hand and led her once again to the center of the dance floor. Their friends all joined them in the inner circle of the dance floor. Harry grumbled good-naturedly about once being more than enough for that dance.

"I've been waiting to dance this with you for nineteen years," Draco said, remembering her in a different gown, just as beautiful but in a different, more innocent, way.

"Better late than never," Hermione said to him, "I can't wait to get you alone though."

Draco grinned at her as he lifted and spun her, "Have I told you that you look like a Christmas present?"

"Are you ready to unwrap your present then?" Hermione asked impishly.

Draco wagged his eyebrows at her, "So ready."

He had purposely maneuvered them to the doors of the ballroom and they slipped out just as the song ended and raced away to the Floo.

\*\*\*

XXX

Draco led Hermione into his room. A flick of his wand and the candles he'd arranged earlier flamed to life, bathing the room in a soft glow. The blues and recently added purples

## Finding Hermione

mixed with the firelight making the room look like a sunset over open waters.

He drew her into his arms and gazed into her eyes. "Have I told you how beautiful you are tonight?" he asked.

A smile quirked at her lips, "You might have mentioned it," she said, her hands sliding up his forearms to wrap around his neck.

"It bears repeating. You are so beautiful. Having you here with me is a fantasy come to life."

He kissed her then. The soft, tender caress became hungry and demanding as their desire for each other mounted. Her hands drifted down to the buttons of his tuxedo jacket as she kissed him. Once she loosened the buttons, her hands slid back up to push the jacket off his shoulders. He let his arms fall to his side so the jacket would fall to the floor.

He started backing them up to the settee at the foot of his bed as she loosened the knot of his bow tie. He turned and guided her to sit down dropping to his knees in front of her. He grasped her ankle and slid the silver-heeled sandal off her foot, massaging the arch of her foot. He grasped the other ankle and repeated the same treatment to her other foot, relishing in her hums of appreciation.

He found the jeweled combs in her hair and pulled them out. Her hair, once released from its hold, fell in a riot of curls over her shoulder. Draco ran his hands along her scalp, massaging life back into her tenders scalp. His attention was rewarded with her shivers of delight. He knew it was uncomfortable for her to have all that hair up too long and left her with headaches and a sore head.

She worked the buttons on his shirt, untucking his shirt, and taking the cufflinks out of his cuffs. He heard the clink as they were set on the table beside her hair combs. Hermione stood up and turned, presenting her back to him. He found the tie of the corset backing at her hips and worked loose the knot and loosened the ties so that it could be drawn down. A sigh of relief escaped Hermione as the corset loosened and allowed her to

when all our friends were celebrating in another part of the train. I would get down on one knee with my grandmother's ring and ask you to marry me right there where it all began. You would cry and say yes and after we kissed we would run back to where our friends were partying and tell them the good news."

"Our mothers would team up to plan the wedding and drive you crazy with all the fuss they were making. We would get married in the gardens at Malfoy Manor. I would see you for the first time in your wedding dress when you appeared at the end of the aisle and I would think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever met, but then you always were."

"We would escape our wedding reception early to go on our honeymoon. Some place tropical with a beach. We would make love that first time in a bed surrounded by candles with the breeze from the ocean drifting in through the windows and it would be slow and sweet like our first time, but after that first time, we'd start fucking like rabbits again. We'd stop wearing clothes because there would be no point. I'd make love to you in the ocean and on the beach and up against every wall and flat surface in the beach house."

He watched as Hermione's cheeks flushed with desire. Her breath was coming in shallow pants and her thighs were pressed together. He knew if he touched her now he would hear her moan. The temptation was so great, but he didn't want to break the spell.

"You would come home knowing that you were pregnant already because you always knew everything first. I'd be so happy watching you swell with our first child." Draco set his palm across the curve of her belly, that place where she'd carried her own daughters. She set her hand over his.

"First?" she asked.

Draco twined his hand with hers across her midriff. "Yes, first.

"On my seventeenth birthday, we would kiss and you would know what to expect because we talked so much about the cuff over the years. We would fall asleep on the couch in my sitting room because we tried staying awake to watch it appear. In the morning we would wake up to find the cuff there. My mother would start crying again and Father would smile a little but secretly be really happy."

"We would go back to school and show everyone the cuff and no one would be surprised because they always thought we were meant to be together. You would be Head Girl and I would be Head Boy and we would get our first taste of what living together would be like. You would get mad at me because I was incapable of picking up after myself. I would get mad at you because your cat liked to sleep on my robes and get them covered in cat hair."

"We would've made love for the first time one night. I would slowly take your clothes off, kissing you, making sure you were ready," Draco said against her ear. The quiet whisper of his breath sending chills through Hermione. "I would've been so nervous, shaking like a leaf inside. Once I got you naked, I would've lain you down on my bed and marveled at how beautiful you are. I would've explored every inch of you with my hands and mouth, worshipping your body with my own. I would've gone slow, terrified of hurting you. It would've been sweet and wonderful, maybe I would've fumbled around a little bit in my nervousness, but it wouldn't really matter to either of us because it was perfect because it was with each other and we loved one another."

"After we graduated, we would've taken the train back to London one last time. I would've taken you to the compartment we first met and run off the little first years sitting in there. You would be exasperated at me for terrifying them and not really understanding why we had to come to that compartment

breath more freely.

Draco circled her running his fingertips lightly down her neck and shoulder then across the tops of her cleavage. He delighted in the goosebumps that trailed along after his fingers and the hitch in her breathing. The bodice of the dress gaped now that he'd loosened it, giving him an enticing view of what treasures lay underneath.

"Is this what you want, my lioness?" he asked huskily.

Hestared into those chocolate eyes searching for any hint of hesitation on her part. He could see the heat in her eyes as she looked back at him. She licked her lips and he had to resist the desire to capture the pink tongue that darted out.

She pushed his gaping dress shirt off his shoulders to fall on the floor by her shoes. The undershirt soon followed and was dropped to the floor. Her hands ran across his bared waist right above the waistband of his pants, reminding him that she still had her gloves on. The silky touch sent thrills of pleasure shooting down to his groin. The touch traveled up over his abs and pecs, drifting across the scar across his chest from the battle with her best friend, to settle around his neck again. She drew his head down to her lips.

"Make love to me, Draco," she whispered against his mouth and rose up on her toes to kiss him.

He pulled her against him and growled against her mouth. The words he'd waited so long to hear coursing through his veins. He kept a hand fisted in her curls guiding her where he wanted her as he devoured her. The other hand traveled from her back to her waist to settle across the curve of her ass. He pulled her even closer grinding her erection against her silken core.

She broke away from the kiss to throw her head back and moan. He took advantage of her exposed neck to kiss his way down the expanse of creamy flesh, nipping her at the base of her neck, earning him another deep-throated moan. He continued his descent across her collarbone and then pressing feather-light kisses across her cleavage.

"More, Draco," she moaned.

He tugged the dress down exposing her breasts to his view for the first time. He took a moment to marvel at them. Perfection. Large enough to fill his hand with dusky pink tips. Hesitant to the settee and pulled her between his legs, placing a kiss in the hollow between, over her heart.

"So beautiful," he murmured against her skin.

A hand brushing through his hair caused him to look up at her. He found her smiling down at him. The candlelight in the room reflecting in her eyes. The emerald and diamonds at her neck sparkled in the firelight against her bare skin.

He returned his head nuzzling into one mound. Her breathing quickened as he licked and kissed his way around the outside of one breast then turned his attention to the other and repeated the process. The hand in his hair tightened when he sucked a hardened nipple into his mouth, circling with his tongue before sucking hard on it. She gasped above him and arched her back. He scraped his teeth across her tightened bud then bit lightly.

"Oh God! Draco!" she cried out, digging her hand into his hair, without the gloves it would have been painful.

He smiled as he switched his attention to the other side. He laved and nibbled until her cries were echoing off the walls of the room. He worked her gown down over her hips as he sucked on the dusky tip in his mouth.

She pulled hard on his hair dislodging him from his worshipping attention with a pop. She crashed her lips down on his kissing him fiercely. Her bared breasts touched the hot skin of his chest and they both groaned at the contact.

"Please, Draco. I need you, now!" she pleaded.

"So demanding, my lioness," he said.

Draco tugged the dress the rest of the way off. With the exception of her gloves, she was completely bared to him. His gaze traveled down her midriff and the slight swell of her belly to land on the small triangle of curls at the apex of her thighs.

He ran a finger across her nether lips and said, "No knickers, lioness?"

Ravenclaw together. I would've written to my parents telling them I'd found 'The One' and told them all I knew about you. My mother would cry and be overjoyed. My father would initially be disappointed because you were muggleborn but would come around in a few months. You and your family would've been invited to spend part of the Christmas holidays and summer vacations with us after that."

Draco kept looking down at Hermione. Her eyes were still closed and there was a small smile on her face. "When we were older," he continued, "I would've kissed you for the first time." He leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her lips; almost chaste like the one he would've given her.

"Where?" she asked softly. He was pleased that she was joining in on the fantasy.

"At the lake because we liked to take walks there before dinner. I would've asked you to be my girlfriend. We would've gone to the Quidditch World Cup together before fourth year. The Muggle baiting wouldn't have happened. I would've asked you to go to the Yule Ball with me and got to admire you in your periwinkle gown."

He twirled a lock of her hair around his finger. "You were always beautiful to me from that first day on that train. Seeing you in your gown with your hair tamed and arranged so that part of it was falling over your shoulder, I would've blurted out how much I was in love with you. You would smile at me and tell me you loved me too. We would've danced, kissed, laughed, and parted the night away."

"When darkness returned, we would've stood together. My father wouldn't rejoin Voldemort because he had to protect you and your family. I wouldn't take the Dark Mark." He ran his hand over the scar on her arm. "You wouldn't bear the scars from my crazy aunt. After he was defeated, we would've returned to school to finish."

we ready?"

Hermione worked with both children as they concentrated on levitating the ornaments up to the tree. She worked with them on wand movement and pronunciation. She reassured them when they lost concentration and the ornaments fell and shattered on the floor. She clapped and hugged Scorpius when he got three ornaments in a row up off the floor and near the tree. Minerva got her ornaments upright behind Scorpius and both children found themselves enveloped in Hermione's arms.

Draco sat down on the floor beside Rose as she practiced levitating her own ornaments. Little beads of sweat were popping out on her forehead. The concentration was exhausting her. "That's the last one, princess. You're going to give yourself a headache," he said.

The ornament she was levitating wobbled a little bit but was soon close enough to the tree. A yellow fairy darted out and caught the golden snitch ornament and placed it on a branch. Draco picked Rose up and set her down in his lap. She leaned back against his chest as he pulled out his own wand and started levitating ornaments onto the tree. The ornaments were all hung and the empty boxes were sent to a corner.

"Excellent job, children," Hermione said, "Let's take a break. I'm pretty sure I saw Tansy set some cookies down somewhere in here."

The word "cookies" reenergized Rose and sent her surging up in his lap, knocking the top of her head painfully into Draco's chin.

"Ow!" they both exclaimed rubbing the injured areas. Hermione came over to Rose and asked, "Are you okay?" Rose shook her head and pouted, "I hurt my head." Hermione kissed the top of her daughter's curly red head and asked, "All better?"

panting mouth.

She pushed him away and ducked under his arm to get the sponge and his body wash. She poured some of his wash into the sponge and the scent of rosewood and musk filled the air. She took the sponge and started rubbing it along his neck and shoulders, coming up close to him so that the tip of her breasts brushed against him.

"Mmm...you always smell so good," she said, running the soapy sponge down his chest and abs, running across the v of his hips before stopping and working on his arms.

She turned him around and massaged his neck and back with the sponge, fondling the curve of his ass as she made her way downward. She turned him back around and sunk to her knees in front of him, his erection level with her mouth and desperately seeking her attention. She ignored it and worked her way up his legs, washing his feet, calves, and thighs, completely avoiding the area that so desperately wanted her attention. She stood up and Draco could barely control the groan of frustration.

"Time for a rinse," she said, mischievously.

"I think you missed a spot, lioness," he said, huskily.

She kept her eyes on his and said, "I think I did. How silly of me."

She ran the sponge across his hips, around the blond thatch of curls surrounding his erection, and back and forth across his balls. She squeezed the sponge then and caught the suds in her hand. She gripped his cock with her soapy fingers and pumped him lightly a few times. Draco leaned his head back against the wall and groaned as she worked his cock with one hand and played with his sac with the other. All too soon her teasing hands were gone and she was reaching for the showerhead to spray him off. She followed the path of the sponge and sprayed off his neck and chest, her hands running along the ridges of his muscles and humming in appreciation. She turned him around and rinsed his back off, then back around for his legs. She sunk back down to her knees, rinsing off his legs and thighs before running the water gently

## Finding Hermione

over his groin. She handed the sprayer back to him and he placed it in its holder on the wall and offered her a hand up.

"I think I missed another spot," she said from her kneeling position and before his brain could fully register her words the wet heat of her mouth was around his cock.

"Oh God!" he groaned, arching back against the wall and touching her curls.

Her chocolate brown eyes flicked up to him, heated with desire as she brought her hand up and fisted the root of him pumping him while her lips stretched wide around him. She brought her other hand up to cradle his balls and play with them as she sucked and pumped his cock. He felt her tongue swirl and flick around the head of his erection as she pulled back before sucking him back in.

"Hermione, oh God, I'm not going to last," he groaned again.

It was too much. The sensation of her hand and her mouth around him was too exquisite. The beautiful vision of her on her knees in front of him with the water from the shower plastering her curls to her head and rivulets of water running down her torso.

He tried to pull back as he felt himself about to cum. Her hand released his balls and grabbed his ass to keep him in place. He let go then and came into her waiting mouth, pumping his hips and gripping her hair as he emptied himself into her, shouting her name. She licked him clean before she stood up smirking at him. He grabbed her and turned them so that she was pushed up against the wall with him leaning heavily into her. He kissed her then, devouring her mouth, dueling with her tongue and tasting his seed on her.

"Oh God, that was amazing," he said, resting his forehead against the wall above her shoulder and breathing hard.

"I think you said that already," she said, biting his earlobe.

"I think you might have blown my brains out," he said, still panting.

"I knew that's where you kept them," she teased.

## Chapter 20 Morning Interlude

December 22nd

Draco woke early and looked down at Hermione's nude body curled around him. He marveled at her beauty, her soft skin, the way she smiled in her sleep as he ran his hand up her side. The early morning sunlight streamed weakly through the windows. The small ray of sunshine reflecting off the cuff on her arm draped across his chest.

He kissed her forehead and shifted to get out of bed. Her hand drifted down under the sheets and fisted his early morning erection. He groaned at her touch and pumped his hips into her hand a few times before reluctantly pulling her wrist away and getting out of bed. He walked into the bathroom and turned the shower on, letting the water heat up while he relieved himself.

He just finished washing his hair when he heard the shower door open and close behind him. He turned to find his love standing just inside the shower with a wicked glint in her eye.

"Good morning, lioness," he said, backing her against the wall of the shower as he hungrily kissed her.

She pressed her slick, wet body against his as she returned his kiss. "I thought you could use some help washing," she said hungrily, biting his earlobe.

Draco rained kisses down on her neck, rocking his hips against her, his erection sliding along her moist lips. "I was just thinking I could use some help with that," he said against her

At Rose's nod, Hermione sent her over to the coffee table where Minerva and Scorpius were to go find a cookie. Hermione turned back to Draco and looked down at him.

"What about you? Are you okay?" Hermione said with a smile. Draco grasped Hermione's hand and pulled her down so that she was draped across his lap. "I hurt my chin," he said, not able to pull off a pout because he was smiling at Hermione. "Poor thing," she said and leaned up to kiss his chin, "All better?"

"Nope, still hurts," he said. Then he swooped down to kiss her, all hurts evaporating with the feel of her pillow, soft lips against his and her soft curves brushing against him.

They broke apart to a chorus of "eww's" coming from their children and laughter coming from his mother, hanging garland over by the fireplace. Scorpius and Minerva were playfully making gagging noises and Rose had both hands covering her eyes.

Hermione rolled her eyes at the children and kissed him again quickly before holding out her hand and saying, "Help me up." Draco grasped her hand and helped her to her feet before getting up himself and following her over to the couch for tea and cookies. He watched the children chasing each other around the room, Hermione snuggled into his side talking to his mother and thought this was the life he'd always dreamed up for himself.

He growled at that and bither lightly where her neck met her shoulder. "Turn about is fair play, my lioness," he said.

He pushed off the wall, got her sponge and lavender and jasmine wash, and lathered up the sponge. Hermione was already panting against the wall, her full breasts rising and falling, her nipples taut and pebbled in excitement. He took the sponge and ran it down her neck and across her shoulders, rubbing the sponge around her sensitive breasts. The scratchiness of the sponge against her sensitive skin caused her to moan. He ran the sponge against her belly, then back up her sides and down her arms. He turned her and soaped up her back, running his newly forming erection against the cleft of her ass. She leaned back against him moaning and rocking her hips against him. He ran his free hand down her body, pinching her nipples, causing her to moan louder. He sunk down on his knees and washed her feet, calves, and thighs. He ran the sponge between her thighs across her sensitive labia and up into the small triangle of curls.

Draco tossed the sponge behind him and stood, turning on the overhead water fall and positioning Hermione under it. Draco used his hands to guide the soap from Hermione's body, driving her desire into a fever pitch. He sucked and pinched her nipples until she was pulling on his hair and crying his name. Then he sunk lower, raining kisses down her belly and across her hips, backing her up again so that the wall was supporting her. He found her sensitive bundle of nerves peaking out at him just below the triangle of her curls. He licked then sucked her clit into his mouth. Hermione instinctively widened her stance and pressed his face closer as he worshipped her. He sunk a finger into her wet heat and had to brace Hermione as she arched against him, moaning his name.

The tiles were cutting into his knees but he was beyond caring. His cock pointed straight up at her as it jumped and twitched at her cries. He sunk another finger in and pumped in and out of her passage, curling his fingers. He sucked hard on her clit, relishing in her juices coating his tongue. He could feel her tensing up around him, her body writhing against the

shower wall, her moans echoing off the walls of the bathroom as he drove her relentlessly toward her release. She clenched down on him, her nails digging painfully into his scalp as she screamed her release.

He eased his fingers out of her and stood up. He picked her up and wrapped her shaking legs around his hips and slid her up the wall. He lined his cock up with her core and she sunk down onto him with a sigh. He growled into her hair as he encased himself in her heat. He could feel the aftershocks of her orgasm pulsing around him.

"You taste so good, my lioness," he said, "Feel so good."

He started pounding up into her then. Hard and fast up against the shower wall. Both of them too far gone in their desire to prolong the moment by going slow. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she hung on.

"Oh God, Draco, yes!" she shouted over and over as he plunged in and out of her.

He kissed her, plunging his tongue into her mouth in time with his cock plunging into her pussy. She broke the kiss to moan again and he bit and sucked the side of her neck.

"Come for me again, lioness. Your pussy feels so good. Come for me. Bathe my cock with your juices," he said against her ear.

"Fuck! Harder, Draco. Fuck me harder!" she begged.

He could feel the fluttering of her impending orgasm around his cock. He drove harder into her causing her head to knock against the wall. He adjusted the angle of his hips and ground his pelvis against her sensitive clit as he pounded hard into her.

"Fuck yes, Draco!" she screamed.

He felt the walls of her pussy clench down on his cock as she screamed her orgasm. He plunged harder into her driving her orgasm higher as he emptied himself into her.

"Hermione!" he shouted as he followed her over the edge.

He collapsed on the bench before his legs gave out. His heart was thudding painfully in his chest and his breaths came out as pants in the steamy air. Hermione was panting just as

you float it over to the tree now?"

Roses crunched up her face and concentrated very hard on the unicorn in her hand. Soon the unicorn was floating in front of the tree where it was grabbed by a blue fairy and hung on a branch. They all praised Rose who beamed at them.

"Scorpius, Minerva, wands out," Hermione instructed, "Wingardium Leviosa is the spell. Swish and flick."

"Umm, lioness. I don't think they're supposed to be doing magic outside of school," Draco said. That's all they needed was to be hauled into the Ministry to answer for allowing their children to practice their magic outside of school.

"Draco, darling, do you know what department the Use of Underage Magic falls under?" Hermione said, grinning up at him.

Draco thought for a moment. The Ministry had been restructured a few years back and various offices were moved around into departments that better suited them. Finally, he looked up at Hermione grinning, "The DME."

"Yes, and as the head of the DME, I nipped off a few little rules that I didn't like. And neglected to send out a memo. Very forgetful of me. The spells are monitored still but mostly to uphold the Secrecy Act and ensure safety."

"So now children are being allowed to practice magic outside of school?" Draco asked.

"Not publicly but yes. How else are children supposed to perfect their spellwork? Plus I always felt it was unjustly geared toward preventing muggleborns and half-bloods living in Muggle areas from practicing their magic."

She had a point there, Draco thought. Draco had always used his magic during the summer and holidays. Malfoy Manor was warded so heavily that no one at the Ministry would have been able to tell he was even doing magic. Plus his father bribed enough people that it would have been overlooked anyway. Hermione turned back to the children. "Alright children, are

they watched their children marvel over the little white fairies.  
 "Why do the white ones seem to like the children?" Hermione asked.

The other fairies were all gone to light up the tree, leaving the white fairies playing with the three children.

"They are the young of the colony. They were born sometime after last Christmas. They will eventually find their light and by next Christmas, this batch of young will be all the colors you see and a new batch will take their place," Draco explained.

"Children are always fascinated by each other," his mother added from where she was standing behind the three children.

Rose had her open palm up to her nose cooing over the fairies standing in her hand. The fairies around Minerva were playing a game of hide and seek in her curls. Scorpius was humming a tune and his fairies were dancing around him. The small tinkling of bells coming from the Christmas tree was steadily getting louder.

"Alright, time to send the fairies to their tree. Their parents are calling them," his mother said.

She guided the three children over to the tree. She blew lightly on Rose's hand sending the little fairies into flight. Scorpius stopped humming and held out his hands for the fairies to land on. With a soft "off you go" he blew the fairies off his hand and toward the tree. Minerva's fairies were the most mischievous of the bunch and did not want to stop their game of hide and seek. His mother combed her fingers through Minerva's hair and blew off the fairies clinging to her fingertips. The tree still tinkled lightly and Minerva's hair was pulled up to reveal one small fairy still hiding, perched on the collar of her sweater.

"Are we ready to hang the ornaments now?" Hermione said.

"I wanna hang the first ornament," Rose said.

"Go get your ornament then," Hermione said.

Rose dashed off to the pile of ornaments on the floor. She held out her hand and a glass unicorn ornament floated into her open palm.

"Very good, Rose," Hermione praised her daughter, "Can

heavily above him. Her limp body draped over him. He brushed her damp curls aside and kissed her as the aftershocks of her orgasm around his softening cock made him jump.

"You're so amazing," he said against her lips.

Until her, until that first time they'd made love, he didn't know that sex could be this amazing.

"I wish we could stay in bed all day and do this," she said blissfully.

"Me too, my lioness," he said, "Technically, we're not in bed though."

His stomach decided at that moment to growl and remind him that they were also not at breakfast like they were supposed to be. Hermione giggled at him and swung herself off him, gasping as his cock slid free. He rinsed himself off then took the sprayer down and he rinsed her sex off with the water hitting his hand cupped against her so that the spray wouldn't irritate her abused flesh.

She handed him a towel to dry himself off as she toweldried her hair then wrapped it up in another towel and warmed that one with her wand. She left the warming towel on her hair and dried herself off. Draco watched with mounting desire as she spread lotion across her skin. She caught his look in the mirror as she worked the lotion into her breasts. She teased him by playing with her nipples, pinching and rolling them between her thumb and forefinger.

"Minx," he said, closing the distance between them and taking the place of her hands, "I want to bend you over this counter and fuck you again but I know you're going to be sore from our shower escapade." He'd been rough on her and he didn't want to hurt her by going again so soon before she could recover.

She leaned back into him as he played with her nipples, the warm towel resting on his shoulder. "I have some cream. I'll be fine in a few hours," she said, "Let's get dressed and get you fed before you get all hangry."

XXX

Draco reluctantly released her and stepped away, kissing her softly, before he walked into their closet to get dressed. He set out his clothes for the day; boxers, socks, dark denim jeans, gray long-sleeve button-down shirt, and a sapphire sweater.

He was just tying his boots up when Hermione walked in gloriously naked with her hair in soft chestnut curls around her shoulders. He stayed on the bench in the middle of the closet as he watched her gather her own clothing for the day. Matching green lace bra and knickers were pulled out of the drawer and set on the bench beside him. He ran his hand down her backside as she walked by him. She handed him a pair of acid wash jeans and a hunter green sweater. A silky soft green camisole was pulled out of a drawer along with a pair of socks.

"So beautiful," he said when she sat down on his leg.

He handed her knickers to her, enjoying this part of their morning ritual. They'd learned earlier this week not to try to get dressed at the same time if they wanted to leave the room. She stood up pulling on her lace knickers and he handed her bra to her and turned her so he could press kisses along the waistband of her knickers. Hermione turned into his embrace as she snapped close the front closure of her bra. He buried his face in between her breasts, humming in pleasure. She ran her hand down his face and backed away from him, pulling her camisole on over her head.

"What are your plans for today?" she asked, looking down at him.

"I thought I would start working with Minerva on flying this morning," Draco said, smiling at the thought, "What are you planning on doing today?"

"After breakfast, I'm going to Diagon Alley with your mother to do some Christmas shopping. I thought I'd take Rose and Scorpius with me," Hermione said as she sat down beside him on the bench and pulled on her socks and shoes.

He ran the palm of his hand down her back. She wanted to spend the morning with his son. He hadn't even suggested it yesterday. She asked him if she could take Scorpius with her.

of over five hundred over the last three centuries.

The floor around the tree was littered with green and red boxes. Hermione, Minerva, Rose, and Scorpius were gathered around three boxes pulling out ornaments and unwrapping them.

"I want to hang the ornaments, Mummy!" Rose whined.

"Not until the fairies are lighting up the tree," Hermione said, handing a wrapped ornament to Scorpius.

"Why can't we just use the string lights?" Rose whined again.

"The fairies are fun, Rose," Scorpius said, "When I was little, they would fly around me when I came in the room. Their wings tickle you as they fly by. The young ones will probably play in your hair."

Rose abandoned the ornament unwrapping party to stand in front of Draco. "I want to see the fairies, Daddy."

Draco crouched down in front of Rose, "Nana Cissa is almost done and the fairies will come out soon."

His mother stood up and dusted her hands. That brought Scorpius over, tugging on Minerva's hand to stand beside the fairy burrow. The fairy burrow looked like a miniature forest. The center of the forest was the oldest part with the largest trees where the original colony built their homes in the trees provided by a long-ago Malfoy wife. Each year Christmas negotiations added on to the burrow, allowing the colony to continue growing.

The fairy queen flew up from the central tree in a sparkle of blue light. The rest of the colony soon took flight following their queen. Greens, blues, purples, reds, yellows, and blinding white soon flowed throughout the room. The white fairies seemed particularly taken with the three children standing in front of the burrow.

"Hold out your hand," Scorpius said quietly.

Minerva and Rose held up an open palm and the little fairies landed on their outstretched fingers. Hermione came over and put an arm around Draco, leaning her head into his shoulder. Draco kissed the top of her head and put an arm around her as

bag off your hands," he said, holding his hand out for the bag. "Good luck. You're going to throw your back out carrying this thing," his godson said.

"I'm not that old," Draco scoffed.

Drake held out the strap of the messenger bag. Draco took it from him and almost dropped it on the ground, not expecting the bag to be so heavy. His godson laughed as Draco hefted the strap of the bag on his shoulder.

"Told you so," Drake said, "The older Slytherins have taken to practicing their weightless charms on the thing, so it's actually much heavier than that."

"I'll take care of it. Wouldn't want you hurting yourself carrying around a heavy book bag," Draco said with a smile.

He said goodbye to his friends and made his way back over to where Hermione was standing talking to Minerva and Scorpius. Draco caught Scorpius's smile as Hermione reached over and fixed his jacket collar and smoothed down his hair that was becoming ruffled in the winter wind.

Draco put an arm around Hermione's waist and she smiled up at him. "Are we ready to go?" he asked.

"Yes, let's get going. It's getting a bit windy out here," Hermione said.

The kids led the way out with Rose walking between Scorpius and Minerva. Draco couldn't help the smile that broke out as he watched their three children walking together.

\*\*\*

Draco stood looking around the drawing room. In front of the large picture window, stood a twelve-foot Douglas fir tree. He and his mother were given the duty of coaxing the faeries to leave their comfortable burrow to go light up the tree. His mother was much better at negotiating with the creatures. He just stood there nodding along with whatever his mother agreed to. Probably a bigger house. Every Christmas they always wanted a bigger house. What had started out as a small colony of three dozen faeries seeking refuge had grown into a large civilization

She stood up and took his hand and they made their way out of the bedroom and down the stairs to the dining room. Scorpius, Minerva, and Rose were still gathered around the dining table eating their breakfast in their pajamas. From the looks of things, they had started breakfast right before Hermione and Draco walked in. Hermione walked around the left side of the table dropping a kiss on Minerva's head then Scorpius, telling them good morning. She continued walking around the table and kissed Rose good morning before sitting in the chair Draco was holding out for her.

Draco sat down in his own chair and levitated the dishes of food over to him. He quirked an inquiring brow at Hermione. She answered his query by saying, "I'm famished this morning, Draco, and it will be a long day."

Draco took that to mean she wanted to fill up before the day began. He filled her plate with scrambled eggs, bacon, and hash browns. He levitated her plate over to her before filling a bowl of fresh fruit for her. Scorpius came over with a cup of coffee and set it down beside Hermione and set another beside Draco.

"Minerva told me how you like your coffee," Scorpius said. Hermione placed a hand on his cheek, "Thank you, dear." Draco stopped Scorpius with a hand on his shoulder before he sat back down, "Thank you, buddy. Good job."

Scorpius sat down looking a little pink around the ears. Everyone ate quietly for a while. The clang of silverware on plates the only noise in the room. Draco opened up the paper and turned to the gossip and society pages as had become his habit over the last several months. He smiled down at the pictures he found.

The mysterious journalist had managed to capture a picture of them leaving the train station. The three children walking side by side. Scorpius talking to Minerva over Rose's head and those absurd blinking antlers. Rose rotating her attention between the two. Hermione and Draco were walking behind them, arms around each other, with similar expressions of happiness.

## Finding Hermione

Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy reunited with their children today as they picked them up from the train station for the start of Christmas vacation. From the happy expressions on the children's faces, we can assume that their parents' new relationship is not causing the children any unhappiness.

Ron Weasley was not seen on the platform for the arrival of the train to greet his three children that were there. Lavender Brown picked up her eldest and the two quickly left the platform.

Ginny and Harry Potter were there to pick up their son, James. The Potters have been seen quite frequently in the company of Draco Malfoy and his fellow Slytherins, which makes us wonder about the state of his friendship with his brother-in-law, Ron Weasley. Has the Golden Trio broken up to form a new group, leaving Ron Weasley out in the cold? Only time will tell.

"Hmm..." Draco said, sipping his coffee.

Hermione shot him an interested look and Draco handed the section over to her. He watched her as she took in the picture and article. A slight smile played across her face as she read. She frowned at one part, then quirked an eyebrow at another. She set the article down and took a sip of coffee as well.

Scorpius and Minerva were watching Hermione. The paper seemed to be something they were interested in now. Hermione caught them watching her and wordlessly passed them the paper. Minerva took it and set it between her and Scorpius to read.

Minerva looked up from the article commenting, "I didn't even see Fred when we arrived."

"He was behind you when you got off the train," Draco said to her, "He wasn't walking with anyone else."

"That's because he doesn't have any friends," Scorpius said matter-of-factly, then went back to eating his breakfast.

"That's sad," Hermione said quietly.

"Sad!" Minerva screeched, looking at her mother in disbelief.

"Yes, Minerva. Sad. It's sad that he's at school away from his family and he hasn't got any friends. It's incredibly lonely being so far away from your family and no one will talk to you,"

## @bookDragon

as they all walked the rest of the way to where the adults were gathered. Curious glances were shot at Hermione and Draco as Minerva and Scorpius listened to Rose's chatter.

"Mum says we can decorate the house when we get home and Tansy said she would make cookies and Nana Cissa said she would come over to help and..." Rose was saying.

"Nana Cissa?" Draco mouthed at Hermione, who shrugged and shook her head.

"Breathe, Rose," Minerva said, laughing. The kids all broke up into groups to hug their parents. Draco pulled Scorpius to him and squeezed him hard.

"Dad, you're crushing me," Scorpius said.

"Sorry, buddy. I just missed you," Draco said, loosening his hold on his son but not letting him go. Three and a half months was a long time to be separated from a child.

"So, Dad, Hermione, Minerva, and Rose are living with us now?" Scorpius asked.

"Yes, remember we talked about that during Parents' Day and in the letters," Draco said, "Are you going to be okay with that?"

Scorpius shrugged, "I think I'll be okay. I'm sure it will take some getting used to. I get along with Minerva just fine."

"You'll like Hermione and Rose too," Draco reassured his son.

"Okay. I'm going to give Florence her bag. Can the Baby Snakes come over during break?" he asked.

He really needed to have that talk with his son and soon. Hermione would want to tell Minerva too. Maybe they should sit them both down together and tell them. Then would come the talk with the rest of their friends.

"If it's okay with their parents. We'll discuss it more in the car. Where's Minerva's bag?"

"Drake has it," Scorpius called as he walked over to the Zabini's. Draco watched as he said something to Florence and she laughed and nodded.

Draco headed over to the Notts. "Drake, I'll take Minerva's

screaming children when they got too close to the edge of the platform. The children returned to stand before Hermione as if they'd been lassoed and pulled back in by invisible bonds.

"It's getting too crowded for you two to be running around like a bunch of hooligans," Hermione admonished, "Albus if you want to try on Rose's antlers, you should ask nicely. Rose, you should let your cousin try on your antlers."

"Yes, Auntie, Rose, can I try on your antlers, please?" Albus pleaded with his little fists clenched together under his chin. It seemed like the kid had turned pleading into an art form.

Rose slid off the headband and put it on her cousin's head with a plea to be careful with them.

Harry leveled a look at Draco, "Care to tell me why my house looks like a bloody florist shop, Malfoy?"

Draco laughed. He'd gone a bit overboard. He was a Malfoy. It should be expected by now. "Just a simple thank you for a helpful bit of fashion advice you wife had a hand in."

"I didn't give you any fashion ad..." Ginny started to say, then looked at Hermione, who was smiling and back at Draco, who was grinning, "Oh... oh!"

Harry shook his head, "I don't want to know," but Draco caught the smile Harry tried to hide by rubbing his face.

Tracey and Blaise walked up with Helena and Greg just as the train was pulling in to the station. The doors opened and excited children flooded out of the train. Draco spotted the Baby Snakes walking together at the back of the platform. He spotted his son's distinctive hair beside the curly brown hair of Florence Zabini. Florence said something to Minerva beside her and the sunlight glinted off of Minerva's fiery locks as she threw her head back and laughed. Drake pulled on a lock of her hair when the wind blew it in his face. James and Helena appeared to be arguing intently about something. Draco also noticed that Fred Brown was walking by himself behind them and shooting sullen glances at the group of friends.

Rose broke from the group of adults and launched herself at her sister. Minerva hugged her fiercely and held her hand

Hermione said to her daughter.

Scorpius seemed to decide that his plate of food was incredibly interesting rather than joining in on this conversation.

"No one wants to talk to him because he was an arrogant prat. He called Scorpius 'Death Eater scum' on the train to school. He made fun of my hair and tripped me in the Great Hall before the Sorting started. James got into a fight with him right after he tripped me," Minerva raged at her mother.

"Minerva, you will learn throughout your life that people act a certain way for a great many reasons. I'm not excusing what he did. He owes you both an apology for his behavior. Since you will be going over to his home to visit your father, I hope that you will at least not be openly hostile," Hermione said calmly to her daughter, looking across the table and continuing to sip her coffee while being glared at.

In that moment, she reminded him of his mother. His mother was rarely ever one to shout. He or his father would rage around her while she calmly told them they were wrong or they were expected to behave a certain way and just sip her tea while they raged. It always worked. She always got them to fall in line, but this mother always knew when to pick her battles too. "As long as you're not expecting me to be friends with him,"

Minerva said mulishly.

Hermione smiled slightly. If Draco hadn't been watching her, he would've missed it. "I wouldn't dream of telling you who to be friends with."

Draco passed Hermione the rest of the paper to read. Rose was happily eating her breakfast and sipping her juice, completely oblivious to the tension around her. Scorpius seemed to think it was safe to look up from his plate without being drawn into the conflict between mother and daughter.

Draco took a sip of coffee and looked at Minerva, "Are you ready to begin your flying lessons, Minerva?"

Minerva took a gulp of her juice and nodded. She went from looking upset with her mother to looking nervous in a split second. Draco understood her nervousness.

"We'll start with broom identification today as well as care and maintenance. If you're comfortable after that we'll start on safety lessons in the park," Draco continued.

"Okay, that sounds good," Minerva said looking a little more confident.

"Don't worry, Minerva. My dad's the best at teaching flying," Scorpius said, looking at Minerva.

"Yeah, Minnie, Daddy taught me to fly. I can catch a snitch," Rose said from across the table.

"Taught," Hermione corrected, "Daddy taught you to fly."

"Scorpius," Hermione said, "would you like to come with us to Diagon Alley today?"

"Yeah, could you help me pick out some things for my friends?" Scorpius said shyly.

"Of course, dear. Nana Cissa should be here soon so let's get our breakfast finished up and go get dressed," Hermione said.

The three children wolfed down the rest of their food and escaped the table. Draco could hear their laughter as they raced up the stairs.

"He'll want to get jewelry for Florence. A simple beaded bracelet is fine, but nothing more extravagant," Draco said as soon as the children were out of earshot.

"Jewelry for eleven-year-olds? That seems a bit much, Draco. Surely chocolates would be more appropriate," Hermione said.

"I've been holding him off on buying jewelry for her for the last five years now. Plus, he's a Malfoy and my son. You know I tend to go a bit overboard. I filled the Potters' house with flowers because you didn't wear knickers to the ball at Ginny's suggestion," Draco said, grinning.

Hermione laughed, "I can just imagine Harry's face seeing all those flowers. I wonder if Ginny told him why you sent them."

His mother walked into the dining room just as they were getting up from the table. Hermione hugged her and Draco went over to kiss her on both cheeks.

"Are you almost ready to go, Hermione?" his mother asked. "We're just waiting on Scorpius and Rose to finish getting

dropped us off. There are five of us now so I want everyone to be comfortable. I didn't ask you to drive because I know you're already stressed out about the girls going over to Weasley's. I can't do anything to make that easier but I can take this stress off your shoulders."

He was delighted when Hermione melted against him. They rode that way with her head resting on his shoulder. He enjoyed these quiet moments with her. Scorpius was coming home. So much had changed since he last made that strip. It was astounding how much his life had changed in three and a half months.

"Daddy?" Rose sat up looking at him. Those blinking antlers causing him to smile at their silliness.

"Yes, princess," Draco said.

"You're my daddy, right?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And Scorpy is your son, right?"

"Yes," he said slowly.

"Does that make Scorpy my brother?" she asked.

Draco froze at the question. He looked at Hermione and pleaded for help. They hadn't discussed this. He wasn't quite sure how Scorpius would react to being unceremoniously adopted by Rose as her new brother.

"Honey, this is going to be very new for Scorpius and Minerva. You're used to seeing us together and living at Spinner's End. Minerva is moving to a new house. Scorpius is now living with three girls. We need to give them time to adjust to all the changes."

"Okay, Mummy"

\*\*\*

Draco, Hermione, and Rose passed through the magical barrier and walked onto the crowded platform. They found Harry and Ginny talking with Theo and Daphne. Albus came running up to Rose and tried taking her antlers away from her to try on. Rose screeched and started running away from Albus, causing Albus to give chase. Hermione pointed her wand at the two running,

week of steamy nights that caused them to put silencing charms on the room. Of falling asleep with her in his arms and waking up with her still there. It felt like a dream.

"Don't worry about it. I was mentally undressing you as well," she smirked at him.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and whispered in her ear, "Tempt not a desperate man, my lioness."

Heran his tongue around the shell of her ear causing her to squeal and swat at him. "Desperate," she said, "We just... you know... this morning before breakfast."

They had to be careful of little ears that heard too much and found inopportune moments to repeat what she heard. Said 'little ears' was currently racing towards them with her jacket on.

"I'm always desperate for... you know... with you," he said quietly, holding open Hermione's jacket for her to slip her arms into. "You ready to go, princess?" he asked Rose.

He opened the front door and ushered Hermione and Rose out the door to the waiting car. The driver had gotten out when he saw the front door open and stood waiting for them with the back door open.

"Really, Draco! A limo? Is that really necessary?" Hermione said exasperated as she slid in the back of the limo behind Rose.

"What! I have long legs. I like to stretch out," Draco said, getting in and closing the door behind them.

Rose was lying on the bench seat across from them giggling.

"See, Rose likes the limo."

"I could have driven us to the train station."

"Then you would've had to deal with traffic and parking. You would've been stressed out and the kids would've started arguing because you were stressed out. I'm really doing this for you. You should thank me," Draco grinned roguishly at her.

"Did you take a limo to drop Scorpius off at the train station?" she asked after she swatted at him.

Draco grabbed onto her hand after it smacked into his chest. "No," he said, "It was just the two of us. We took a town car there and I planned on apparating home so it just

ready. Scorpius wants to get presents for his friends. I've been warned not to let him go overboard," Hermione addressed his mother.

"Yes, like father like son in this case," his mother said, looking fondly over at him.

Scorpius came pounding down the stairs. Minerva and Rose were close on his heels. Draco helped Rose into her coat and handed Scorpius his. He took Hermione's over to her and helped her into it. They all walked into the drawing room. The little fairies swirled around the children when they walked in but were shooed back to the tree by Hermione and his mother.

Floo powder was thrown into the fireplace and his mother stepped in with Scorpius and Rose. Draco kissed Hermione quickly before she stepped in after them and called out "The Leaky Cauldron." With a swirl they were gone, leaving him standing with Minerva.

"Well, Minerva. Are you ready to start your lessons?" he asked the nervous girl.

Time to bond with his future daughter. He held the door open for her and they walked out of the drawing room together.

## Chapter 21 *Flying Lessons*

December 22nd

Draco led Minerva to a locked door under the stairs, "I assume you know the spell to unlock a door," gesturing at the door, encouraging her to give her magic a try.

Minerva looked at the door, nodded, and pulled her wand out of her sleeve and said, "Alohamora."

The door clicked open and Draco swung the door wide and turned on the light. Several brooms were locked up against the walls of the broom closet. Minerva walked in behind him and looked around the small room. The three walls were lined with brooms and a small cabinet standing on the wall beside the door filled with maintenance supplies for the brooms. Draco gestured to the bench in the middle of the room and Minerva sat down facing him, looking expectant.

Draco took a deep breath, stood in front of Minerva, and started explaining brooms to her, "There are three types of brooms. Training brooms, transportation brooms, and racing brooms," gesturing at each wall as he named each type of broom.

Draco took a broom off the wall that faced the door, sat down with it, and placed it between them on the bench, "This is a training broom. All the brooms on this wall are training brooms. They come in various sizes and speeds, depending on

## Chapter 19 *An Evening*

December 21st

"The car is going to be here in fifteen minutes. Let's get a move on ladies!" Draco shouted up the stairs.

He'd arranged for a car to take them to King's Cross Station and back. Apparating with children and trunks was not ideal or fun so they were making the hour drive from Cokeworth to London.

Rose came bounding down the stairs in a green and red sweater with Santa Claus on it and a headband with blinking antlers. "Daddy, Minerva is coming home from school," the girl said excitedly, "Do you think she'll like her room?"

"I know, princess, and if she doesn't like her room, then we can change it. Go get your jacket on. It's almost time to go."

Hermione came down the stairs next. The fitted purple sweater catching his attention as it accentuated the sway of her breasts as she moved down the stairs. "My eyes are up here," she said, teasing him.

"Sorry," Draco apologized a little sheepishly.

He didn't really mean to stare but the sway of her body mesmerized him now. Granted, it had before but now he knew what she concealed under those clothes. He knew what she tasted like and what her skin felt like, flushed and sweaty against his. A week had passed since they had first made love after the ball. A week of discovery and stolen moments during the day. A

the age and experience of the rider. All training brooms are light in color," Draco said, indicating the light brown wood and bristles of the broom, "The darker the broom, the faster it goes," pointing across the closet to his Firebolt that was almost black, "Are you with me so far?"

"Yes. The lighter the broom the slower it is. This broom here," Minerva said, pointing at the broom between them, "is a training broom. It appears to be slightly faster than that broom," pointing at the little broom, Rose's, hanging on the wall next to where he'd gotten hers, that was almost white, "but slower than the other training brooms, transportation brooms, and racing brooms."

The girl was quick, just like her mother. In front of her was the slowest training broom for her age he could find. "Very good," he praised, "For now, you will be using this broom. As you become more comfortable, you'll work your way up to faster brooms. Any questions so far?"

She nodded, looking at the brooms that lined the walls on either side of the bench, "What's the difference between transportation brooms and racing brooms? Why use a transportation broom instead of racing broom to get around?"

Draco smiled encouragingly at her, glad that she was comfortable enough to ask him questions, "Transportation brooms have cushioning charms on them. They're meant to get you from point A to point B as safely and comfortably as possible. Racing brooms are meant to go fast. All the charms on a racing broom are designed to make it go faster. They aren't as comfortable and if you can help it, you don't travel long distances on a racing broom."

She chewed on her bottom lip and nodded as she took in his words, "That makes sense. Why all the different racing brooms? Why not just use the fastest?" she asked.

Draco liked that she was interested in knowing about the different brooms and why they are used and what the purpose was for each model and type. Usually, he had to repeatedly get his pupil's attention and tell them the same thing over and over

again. They always wanted the fastest too. It didn't matter to them the reason for choosing a slower broom for a purpose.

He stood up and walked over to the wall of racing brooms, starting in the corner furthest from his own broom. He had multiples of the same broom with the exception of his own Firebolt. No one, besides him, in this house was able to control his broom. "These two brooms are the slowest of the racing brooms. They're best for keepers, some cushioning charms, and stability charms so the keeper can balance easier," Draco said, gesturing at two brown brooms. He walked a little further down and indicated the next four brooms, a shade darker than the previous brooms, "Can you guess what position these brooms would be for?"

"Beaters," she replied, looking at the brooms.

"That's right," he praised, "They're a little faster, less cushioning charms, but more stability charms, and are in forced broomstick. They're meant to take a beating."

Draco moved further down and gestured at the six darker brown brooms.

"Chasers," Minerva said confidently before he could ask. Draco couldn't help but smile at her quick answer, "Good. They're almost as fast as seeker brooms. No cushioning charms. Some stability charms for catching and passing the ball. Streamlining to make it faster."

He moved down to the two closest to his. "These are seeker brooms. You can use them to play any position. You can use any of these brooms to play any position but these are best suited to seekers. They have no cushioning charms, no stability charms, and are designed to streamline the broom and rider," Draco pointed at his broom, the almost black one, and leveled a serious look at her, "This is my broom. It's the fastest broom on the market. This broom has locks and wards on it that you won't be able to break. Don't take that as a challenge either," he cautioned, "I know you're your mother's daughter and very smart. As a responsible member of this household, it is your job to ensure that this room stays locked and that the brooms

She screamed his name as she shattered and flew. He trusted into her through the after shocks of her orgasm, sending him flying over the precipice as well.

"HERMIONE!" he roared as he emptied himself into her.

He collapsed in exhaustion on top of her, panting hard and burying his face into the crook of her neck. The rapid rise and fall of her chest matching his own. She moved her captured wrist and he let go of the cuff. Her hands ran along his arms and back causing gooseflesh to rise in the wake of her touch.

"That was...am...amazing," she said quietly with wonder.

"Earth-shattering," he mumbled into her hair.

He regained enough strength to stop squishing her with his weight and rolled off of her, pulling her with him so that she was draped on top of him and ran his hand down her hair and back. He tipped her face up to his and kissed her, slow and sweet pouring all the unsaid words into the feel of her lips against his. He felt the wetness of her tears against the palm of his hand.

He pulled back and brushed away the tears with his thumbs.

"Why are you crying, love?"

"I'm just so happy," she said, laying her head on his chest.

He accioed his wand to him from the nightstand and extinguished the candles in the room and pulled the blankets up to cover them both. She scooted into him slinging a leg over his and her hand coming to rest on his chest over his heart. He tightened his arm around her and covered her hand with his own. He could feel her body relaxing into sleep. Just before he drifted off with her, he sighed feeling more complete and at peace than he had ever felt.

## Finding Hermione

down to his elbows above her claiming her lips as he eased his hips forward sliding slowly into her wet heat. Home, it was like coming home. Like knowing everything you ever wanted was right there as you opened the door and stepped inside.

Once she was fully impaled on him, he broke the kiss to look in her eyes once more. Her chocolate eyes glistened and he touched her face. She smiled up at him and he caught the glimmer in the candlelight as a single tear fell from the corner of her eye. She covered his hand with her own and pulled him down to kiss her again.

Hermione thrust her hips against him slightly, indicating she wanted him to start moving. He withdrew and thrust slowly back into her, her own hips coming back up to meet him. They continued with the slow thrust and withdraw until sweat dripped down his face from trying to maintain control. Her moans were making it difficult for him to keep the tight rein. He could feel the tension building up at the base of his spine, begging to be released.

He could feel the flutters and clenching around him of her impending orgasm as he continued to thrust into her, changing the angle of his hips and finding that spot inside that made her moan his name. He reached between them with one hand and found the bundle of nerves that had her writhing under him. She was close. He could feel it. Her walls were gripping his cock like a vise. He used his other hand to grab the cuff on her arm by her head,amping up the red-hot desire pumping through them both.

"Look at me, my lioness," he said.

Her heavy-lidded gaze found his as he continued to thrust into her, picking up the pace. Her hand came up to rest on his cheek tenderly. He kissed her palm.

"My dragon."

"Come for me, my lioness. I'm not going to be able to last much longer. You feel so good."

He tweaked her clitoris as he thrust into her hard. The change in friction was all that was needed to send her over the edge.

in here stay locked up."

Minerva met his eye, looking very serious, and nodded her understanding, "I understand. Keep the room locked, lock up the broom I use, don't leave brooms lying around unlocked."

"Good," Draco said, going over and unlocking a beater broom and sitting it down next to Minerva's training broom.

He took out two cloths and a bottle of broom polish. He handed her a cloth and sat down across from her, straddling the bench. He poured some polish on his cloth and handed her the bottle. She mimicked him and sat there waiting for instruction. He started rubbing the handle of the broom and she followed his lead.

"Part of riding a broom is taking care of it," he said, looking down at the broom handle, "The broom is a tool, like your wand. In order for them to work properly, you have to care for them properly. The broom handle needs to be polished regularly or it will crack and splinter."

They sat there quietly polishing their brooms. Draco noticed Minerva kept looking up at him then back down. He waited patiently for her to gather the courage to say whatever was on her mind.

"Umm... Draco?" Minerva said nervously.

"Yes," he said, looking up at her.

"Do you think my dad's a bad guy?" she asked in a rush, looking back down at her broom and focusing on polishing.

"Why do you ask, Minerva?" he asked, cautiously.

Still focused on polishing, she said, "He cheated on my mum. For years. I know he did something to her. She... she doesn't remember stuff... or she thinks things happened differently."

Yeah, Draco thought, Weasley was a bad guy. The things he'd done to Hermione and Minerva were unforgivable in his book. He couldn't say that to Minerva though. He'd promised Hermione not to talk bad about Weasley in front of the girls and he wasn't going to go back on that promise.

Draco kept his own eyes on the broom he was polishing as he talked to her, "I'm not sure, Minerva. You're dad did some

stuff to your mum that I don't think was the best way to handle the situation, but we often don't make the best decisions when something happens that makes us feel out of control of the situation."

"Do you think he has a good reason for doing what he did?" she asked, finally looking up at him.

Noway in Hell, he thought. "Only your dad can answer that," Draco said looking at her. He set his cloth down, pushed up the sleeve of his sweater, and unbuttoned his cuff on his left arm. He showed Minerva the faded scar of the Dark Mark on his arm. "Do you know what this is?"

He wasn't quite sure what possessed him to show her the brand. Their conversation about her father resonated with him as similar to his situation when he was a teenager. He didn't think Weasley had a good excuse for doing what he did and Draco was willing to bet money that he'd screw it up, but he wasn't going to make it more difficult for the girls to accept Weasley or feel like they had to choose between the two of them.

Minerva looked at it and nodded, "It's the Dark Mark. We learned about it in history class and Scorpius told us about you on the train ride."

He felt odd showing her the mark. She was one of the few that didn't look at his mark with any sort of negative emotion. He was used to those looks. Regret from his mother. Pity from his friends. Revulsion from those who thought he should be in prison. She just accepted it as a part of his past, which was good. He didn't hide the mark at home and didn't want her to be uncomfortable seeing it.

They both sat there looking at the fading brand as he spoke, "I got this when I was sixteen. My dad was in Azkaban and Voldemort was living in our house. I volunteered for it to protect my mum and I was told to do something horrible. I hurt people because I was scared. There were better options I could have taken, but I didn't see them at the time. People would say that I'm a bad person, but your mum and your Uncle Harry saw

She grinned down at him, "Ginny said they would ruin the line of the dress."

He smiled widely, doing his best impersonation of a Cheshire cat. It was a good thing he hadn't known earlier that she was walking around completely bare under that dress. He definitely would have pressed her against a wall and had his way with her or climbed under the dress and had her ride his face until she screamed her release.

"I think we should definitely make that a rule. No knickers under dresses."

He picked up his wand and vanished her gloves. They felt wonderful but he wanted to feel her hands on him. He picked her up out of the pile of clothes and carried her over to the bed. He set a knee in the mattress and lay her gently in the middle of the bed. She took his wand from his hand and cast a contraceptive charm over herself. Curious that it responded to her but those questions could wait for another time.

He kicked off his shoes, shucked his pants and boxers together, and pulled off his socks, flinging them from him in indecent haste. He caught the appreciative glint in her eyes as she climbed into the bed beside her. He lay on his side and pulled her into his arms pressing a tender kiss to her lips. He ran a hand along the bare flesh of her back and buttocks, kneading the fleshy globes and marveling at the soft lushness of her. She was so perfect. Her womanly softness melding perfectly against his hardness.

"Are you sure?" he asked again, making sure that this was what she still wanted. Seeking reassurance that she was ready for this next step with him.

"I'm yours and you're mine, Draco. Make love to me," she said, running her hand across his face.

He moved so that he was atop her. He took her legs and placed them on either side of his hips. Draco looked into Hermione's eyes as he grasped the hard length of his erection and ran the tip across her wet lips. She moaned softly at the feel of him there. He settled his cock at her entrance and sunk

last few months, we haven't really been able to tell you about firsthand."

Hermione patted the seat on the other side of her and Minerva moved over to sit beside her mother. She wrapped her free arm around her daughter. Draco watched as both children snuggled into Hermione.

"We know that the past couple of months can't have been that easy for either of you," Hermione said, dropping a kiss on both their heads, "I'm sorry that you had to find out so much about your parents' lives through the paper," she turned her head to Minerva, "I'm sorry it took me so long to tell you what happened with your father. This was not the way I wanted you to spend your first few months at school."

Draco understood the guilt she felt. He felt some of the guilt himself. Letters from home could only go so far and Parents' Days only lasted so long. Every time he saw his picture in the paper with Rose, he felt overjoyed and sad at the same time. He loved Rose and those moments the mysterious journalist caught of them. The pictures also made him miss Scorpius and wish the both Scorpius and Minerva could be there and be a part of the moment. Boarding school was tough.

"Scorpius," Draco called softly to his son, "come sit with me." Hermione looked up at him. She must have seen his need to hold his own child. She unwrapped her arm around Scorpius. Scorpius walked over to Draco looking uncertain. Draco patted the seat next to him and Scorpius sat down next to him looking awkward. Draco ruffled his hair and wrapped an arm around him. Scorpius relaxed against his side. His boy was almost too big to want to cuddle with his father.

"I'm sorry you had to find out about my relationship with Hermione through the papers," Draco started uncomfortably, "I didn't want you to find out that way."

"It's okay," Scorpius murmured against his side, "Don't tell

Minerva but I was jealous at first. I would see the pictures in the papers of you and Rose doing things that we used to do and I was jealous. It felt like you were replacing me."

Draco took a deep breath and squeezed him closer to his side. Draco ran his hand down Scorpius' head and back. He remembered the healer placing Scorpius in his hands right after he was born, still bloody and squalling as they rushed off to try to save Astoria. He remembered that rush of love and wonder; and the fear that always overcame new parents.

"No one could ever replace you, Scorpius. You're my son and I love you. That doesn't change because our family got bigger," Draco said, wanting desperately to reassure my son.

"Dad, I know. I know, okay," Scorpius said. He pushed away from Draco so that he could look him in the eyes.

Draco saw the earnest expression in his son's gray eyes.

"You're not jealous anymore?" he asked.

Scorpius shook his head, "No. It was just at first. I missed you. I missed being at home."

Draco pulled Scorpius back to his side, "I missed you too. You have to know that I missed you," Draco said, stroking Scorpius' back.

He looked across the sectional at Hermione and Minerva. Minerva had her head in her mother's lap. Hermione was looking down at Minerva, humming softly to her daughter and stroking her hair. Minerva's eyes were closed and he wondered if she was asleep.

"Are you okay with everything, Scorpius? With the cuff? With my relationship with Hermione?" Draco asked quietly.

He could feel Scorpius starting to sag against him. Both the children were exhausted. It was a long day for all of them. Scorpius took a deep breath and answered his father sleepily, "Yes. I really like Hermione. She gives good hugs."

Draco chuckled at his son's answer, "That she does, son. Let's

get you to bed."

Scorpius got up off the couch and hugged Hermione good-night over Minerva, who was asleep on her lap. Draco followed his sleepy son into his room and pulled the green coverlet back for him to climb in. Once the covers were tucked around Scorpius, Draco pressed a kiss to his son's forehead. "Goodnight, son," Draco said, straightening up and making his way out of the room.

"Night, dad," came the sleepy reply. Draco turned as he heard the covers rustle and found Scorpius sitting up in bed, "I still want to get Florence something special for Christmas."

"Of course. We'll go tomorrow, just you and me, and pick something out for her," Draco answered with a smile.

"Kay, dad," Scorpius said, yawning hugely and flopping back down on his bed.

Draco closed the door quietly behind him. Hermione looked over her shoulder at him. He walked over and kissed her over the back of the couch. She couldn't really move since Minerva was effectively trapping her in place.

"Let's put Minerva to bed too," Draco said.

He went around the sectional and scooped her up. Hermione groaned as she got up, rubbing the feeling back into her legs. She opened the door for him and pulled the covers back so that Draco could lay her down, kissing her brow before moving back so that Hermione could draw the covers over her and kiss her goodnight too.

Draco looked around at the room they had created for Minerva. Black water rippled around him with a large crescent moon rising along one wall and reflected in the water. Stars and constellations glittered on the top of the walls and across the ceiling. They'd changed the color of the carpeting to a sandy brown to mimic the beach.

Her furniture in her room looked like it belonged in a beach

to push through to the heart of a problem.

"Your mum asked a very similar question when we found out about the cuff," Draco said, looking at both Scorpius and Minerva, "We were assured by a very cantankerous portrait that our happiness was not tied to finding a soul mate or being with that soul mate. I find that I agree with him," Draco failed to mention that he detested that particular ancestor, "I don't think a person's happiness can be determined by whether or not they find their soul mate. To me, that seems to put a lot of pressure on another person or on something that might not happen. I don't think you can live your life thinking 'I'll be happy if only this would happen' or 'I'll be happy if this person loves me.' I think the people that think that way aren't happy and are trying to assign responsibility for their own happiness or lack thereof on a person or event."

This sort of deeply philosophical discussion wasn't the type of conversation he expected to get into with an eleven-year-old. Any uneasiness that Scorpius had left melted from him at Draco's answer. Draco hated that this caused stress for his son. "Why tell us now dad? If this won't really affect me until I'm older and I'm too young to really worry about it, why say anything?" Scorpius asked.

Draco cast a soft smile at Hermione sitting beside his son and thought back to the fantasy he'd spun for them, "I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did. This is something I think you should grow up knowing. This is something I wish I'd known about when I was your age. I agree with Hermione that you're too young to be worrying about some sort of romance with Florence. Just be friends. All that other stuff will follow if it's meant to."

"We also wanted to tell you both now rather than waiting because we thought it would be better coming from us," Hermione said, "So much about everything that's happened in the

## Finding Hermione

they're supposed to."

Scorpius nodded and relaxed against Hermione, letting her rub his back soothingly.

"What do you think about this, Minerva?" Draco asked.

Minerva looked at her mother and Scorpius and then at Draco. "I'm curious about this. So mum's bracelet appeared after you kissed her. And you think Florence is Scorpius' soul mate. I've seen them together so I can see why you might think so. Is this a common occurrence among the Malfoys?"

"Umm... no. This bracelet has only appeared five times since its creation. It's extremely rare. The history of it was lost for hundreds of years until it appeared on your mum's arm," Draco said.

Minerva nodded thoughtfully as she took that in, "Sort of like finding a needle in a haystack. How long has this thing been around again?" Minerva asked.

"About a thousand years, give or take," Draco answered.

"And the bracelet has only appeared five times. Do other families do this sort of magic? Is this a common occurrence among pureblood families?" she asked.

"No," Hermione said to her daughter over Scorpius' head, "I've done a lot of research on this and as far as I can tell, the Malfoy line is the only line that employed this type of magic and it was done so long ago that the spells used to create it are almost extinct now. Many people don't even believe in the existence of soul mates, even in the wizarding world."

"Do you think the hundreds of Malfoys before you were doomed to a sad and lonely existence because the cuff didn't appear for them?" Minerva asked, looking at Draco.

Scorpius sat up straight, leaving his spot on Hermione's shoulder to listen to his answer. Maybe this is what was distressed him the most along with possibly taking Florence's choice away from a future marriage. Leave it to Hermione's daughter

house. Her bed was a sturdy teak four-poster bed with white gauzy curtains and a white and mint embroidered coverlet. Lanterns with candles, sand, and seashells topped the matching nightstands.

He tiptoed out of the room with Hermione and closed the door quietly behind them. They made their way across the landing and into their bedroom.

"What were you and Minerva whispering about?" Draco asked curiously as he sat down on his side of the bed and undressed. Hermione was seated on the settee at foot of the bed, pulling her sweater over her head. She looked over her shoulder at him and smiled warmly, "She said she didn't mind seeing the photos in the paper. She felt like she got to watch me heal and see our relationship unfold. She likes you because you took care of me and her sister."

Draco thought how different Scorpius and Minerva's reactions were to seeing the photos in the paper. Minerva was charmed and reassured. Scorpius had been initially threatened. He must have hidden his reactions well from Minerva if he didn't want her to know before he came to accept Hermione.

"Scorpius says you give good hugs," Draco said crawling to the end of the bed and unhooking the front clasp of her green lace bra and drawing it off of her.

XXX

She stood up and drew off her jeans leaving her clad in only her green lacey knickers. She over at him with a soft, seductive smile and hooked her thumbs under the waistband of her knickers and drew them down her thighs to fall down on the floor. She stepped out of them and walked over to him and kneeled on the settee.

"Aren't you tired?" Draco asked.

He was exhausted but other parts were quickly becoming interested. Naked love of his life prowling toward him. No

problem in the interested department. She shoved his shoulder and he fell back in a sprawl on the bed.

"Utterly spent," she answered him as she straddled him. She looked down at him with heavy-lidded eyes. Her soft curls falling down her back. He drew her down to lay on his chest. Her hair cascaded around them. He brought his hands up to fist them in her hair as he kissed Hermione slowly and languorously.

"We don't have to if you're too tired," Draco said, looking up at her, moving his hands down her back to rest on her hips. Hermione reared up over him with her hands resting on his chest. She bit the corner of her lip before saying, "I know. I just need you."

Draco surged up to cup her cheek, "You have me," he said against her lips.

He tilted them so that they lay on the bed facing one another. She brought her leg up and draped it over his hip. The continued their lazy snog as he rocked his hips, sliding his arousal across her folds. The evidence of her rising excitement was soon coating his cock. He tilted her hip back and sunk slowly up into her. She hummed in appreciation against his lips. He kept a languid rocking pace as they continued to kiss. She cupped his cheek with her free hand and broke the kiss. He stared into those chocolate brown eyes he adored so much. "I want to look at you while we make love," she whispered, holding his gaze.

The intensity of gazing into her eyes was going to send him over the edge. It was more intimate than anything he'd ever experienced before. He knew she didn't have any skill with Legilimency but it felt like they were both stripping each other bare all the way down to that shot of gold that seemed to connect them together.

He could see so much shining out of her eyes. Every feeling

lief, looking from Hermione to Draco, "You think she's my soul mate?"

Scorpius sat back on the couch, staring at the ceiling looking stunned. Draco worried a little about the thoughts going through his son's head. It was a lot to take in as a child. Not only had he just found out that Hermione was Draco's soul mate and not his mother, he also found out possibly who his own soul mate was. Heavy stuff for an eleven-year-old.

"Were you two drawn to each other when you were in school?" Minerva asked curiously, giving Scorpius a chance to process what was going on.

"Yes. Neither of us knew what was going on and I couldn't really accept it then, but I've been drawn to your mum since the first time I saw her on the train to Hogwarts," Draco said, looking at Minerva but watching Scorpius out of the corner of his eye.

Minerva nodded and looked at her mother, "Does this mean you aren't married to Dad anymore?"

"I'm still married to your father. I can still feel the matrimonial bond that ties us together. From what I can tell, the cuff does not bind Draco and I together any more than we already are or sever any bonds that are already in place. It just acts as an identifier for Draco," Hermione answered.

"This means that if Florence is my soul mate, she doesn't have to marry me? I don't want to take that choice away from her," Scorpius asked quickly, sitting up and looking worried at Draco with an anxious expression.

Hermione got up from her spot beside Draco and sat beside Scorpius. She ran her hand through his slicked back blonde hair. "She still has a choice," she said quietly, "You have a choice," she said, tapping him on the chest, "This does not affect your free will at all. You're both too young to worry about this. Be friends and enjoy being friends. Things will happen as

## Finding Hermione

ball, she appeared at court again, looking angry and panicked. She attacked him, convinced that he'd put the cuff on her to ruin her chances at a good marriage. It wasn't really logical of her but she was distressed. He told her what the cuff was and why it was there. After she finished threatening to hex him, she allowed him to start betrothal negotiations with her father. And as the saying goes, they lived happily ever after."

Minerva sighed again, louder this time. Eleven-year-old girls seemed to love fairy tales and Hermione's daughter was no different. Of course, he remembered quite a few sighs from Hermione while she was piecing the story together. Scorpius looked more interested on an intellectual level. This was his ancestor and the cuff now impacted his life personally.

"If Armand did it for himself, then why does Hermione have a cuff?" Scorpius asked, sitting back on the couch and addressing his father.

"He extended the magic to apply to all Mafloy males," Draco said, "It means that Hermione and I are soul mates. Scorpius, as a Mafloy, you also have the potential to know your soul mate. The cuff won't appear on your soul mate's wrist until you are seventeen and you've kissed her but there are signs before then that you should be aware of."

He wasn't going to tell his son that one of the more interesting benefits of the cuff was that touching it enhanced the desire between the two mates. He could figure out that on his own when the time came. Plus, awkward.

"Like what?" Scorpius asked, looking wary like he was already figuring out the answer and already knew who Draco might be talking about.

"You will be drawn to her and she to you," Hermione said, "and now that you know what's going on, you will be able to understand why you are drawn to her."

"You're talking about Florence then," Scorpius said in disbelief.

she'd ever felt for him. He could feel everything he'd ever felt for her pouring out of himself.

"You are my everything," he said softly, "You are my past, present, and future. In this life and the next."

She clenched down hard around him. His words sending her over the precipice. She threw her head back and called his name. He buried his face in her exposed neck, rocking into her faster his hand gripping her hip hard enough to leave finger marks.

She drew his face up to look at her again as the waves of her orgasm continued to crash around them, "You are mine, Draco Mafloy. In every life and every incarnation, you are mine and I am yours."

He lost it then. He groaned her name against her mouth. He came in harsh spurts, filling her womb with his seed. White starbursts dazzled him behind his closed eyes.

They lay there panting, their arms entwined around each other still connected intimately. She shivered and he reached back for his wand and summoned the covers to settle over them.

"Mine," he growled low in her ear.

"Caveman," she giggled, snuggling into him.

She relaxed into his embrace and drifted off quickly. His exhaustion finally catching up to him, he let her deep even breathing lull him to sleep.

children as Hermione leaned back into him.

"Armand had been around power for the majority of his life. He witnessed the clingers-on that tried to improve their own status or gain more for their families by sucking up to those in power. He became frustrated by the grasping, maliciousness of people who all pretended to be his friends in an attempt to get something from him. He was constantly sought out by hopeful fathers and scheming mothers trying to gain something by getting their daughters married to him."

Scorpius leaned forward and rested his hands on his knees. His son had always been curious about his ancestors. Draco regretted now not encouraging that curiosity. In his defense, he didn't really think there were that many ancestors worth learning about, and he had been afraid that they were all prejudiced and would teach his son that prejudice.

"Tired from years of fighting and now ruling a country, Armand wanted someone who just wanted him for himself, a mate that he could lean on and confide in. Armand wanted something we all seek out, true love. Because of that, Armand created a piece of identifying magic. A cuff like this was formed from that magic. The cuff was meant to appear on the arm of his soul mate after they shared their first kiss."

Minerva sighed and rested her chin in her hand. Scorpius rolled his eyes at Minerva's dreamy sigh. He caught the faint upturning of Hermione's mouth in an amused smile. Draco snorted quietly at the children's different reactions.

"Armand met Lillian for the first time at a Yule ball. She came to London seeking a husband. Armand was drawn to this witch that didn't simper at him or fawn over him. He danced with her and talked with her throughout the ball. At the end of the night, he kissed her as he walked her to her carriage. Armand became alarmed when he didn't see her at court for a week. He searched frantically for her until a week after the

similar cuffs, and they explained what was going on," Draco continued.

"The story starts with Armand Malfoy," Hermione started the tale. She and Draco had agreed earlier that since she knew more about the history she would be responsible for the backstory, "Armand was friends with William the Conqueror from the time they were teenagers. Armand saved the young Duke of Normandy from an assassination attempt. The two became fast friends after that. Armand quickly became one of William's advisors and generals, helping him secure his hold on his country by leading his armies of magical and non-magical warriors. There was no Secrecy Act then, as I'm sure you both know. Magical and non-magical folk often lived and worked together. Six years after William brought his country under control, Edward the Confessor, King of England, died without any heirs. Two claimants to the throne of England emerged, William the Bastard, as he was known then, and Harold Godwinson. Armand and his warriors sailed with William to England to claim the throne. The Norman invasion began in September of 1066 and William was crowned the King of England on Christmas of that same year. He credited his sweeping victory in large part to his trusted general, Armand Malfoy. As a reward for serving him so faithfully in Normandy and England, William gave Armand the large tracts of land that Malfoy Manor now sits on. Many of the families that reside in Wiltshire to this day are descendants of those warriors that followed their general. When William left England to return to Normandy, he appointed a Wizenagmot that would rule in his stead with Armand as one of the members of that council!"

The two children sat rapt listening to Hermione's story, well history lesson. Both children had a thirst for knowledge, so he was sure they didn't find the story boring. He watched the

## Chapter 23 The Reluctant Quiver

December 23rd

Draco was startled awake by Hermione sitting bolt upright in bed. The silk, silver sheets pooled around her waist, affording Draco a very nice, if groggy view, of the glorious expanse of her back.

"What is it?" he asked sleepily.

"It's gone," she said, looking over her shoulder at him with a bewildered expression.

Draco sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. The cuff was still there as was the scar on her arm. Her clothes were gone but she couldn't be talking about that since she was the one that took them off last night. Needless to say, he had no idea what she was talking about.

He rubbed a hand soothingly up her back, "What's gone?"

"The bond with Ron. It's gone. I thought I felt something last night. Now the bond is gone," she said, looking at him confused.

Draco remembered when he felt his matrimonial bond with Astoria sever. It had felt like a rubber band snapping back on him. He hadn't needed the healer to come and tell him that his wife was gone and his newborn son was motherless. He'd felt it the moment she'd left.

"Do you think something's happened to Weasley?" he asked,

drawing her into his arms and cradling her against his chest. She traced the Sectumsemprascar that started near his right collarbone and ended just under his left armpit. He always got little tickles of sensation when she touched the silvery scar tissue.

"I don't think so," she said, her soft exhalations across his nipple causing him to shiver.

"I've never heard of a matrimonial bond breaking for any other reason than death," Draco said, thinking back again to Astoria.

"I don't think he's dead or even gravely injured. I didn't really process it last night while it was happening but it felt like it unraveled rather than snapped, now that I think about it," Hermione said.

Draco lay back against the pillow and brought her with him. He lay there thinking as his hands skimmed up her back. The bond that connected her to Weasley was gone. A bond that was usually only severed with the death of the partner. She didn't think he was dead and he felt that she should trust her judgment on that one.

"When do you think it happened?" he finally asked. She rested her chin on her hand on his chest and breathed deeply, "While we were making love last night."

"We've made love every day since the ball. Multiple times a day," he said, smiling and waggling his eyebrows, earning him a laugh and a playful smack, "Why would it suddenly break last night?"

"I'm not sure. It's gone this morning though."

He rolled them so that he was on top of her. He looked down into that face he'd dreamed about for years. He saw the girl she'd been when he first met her and the woman she was now and everything in between. Her chestnut curls fanned out around her head. He wondered how he ever became lucky enough to deserve the love that she saw shining out of her eyes.

"I think we should make love again just to make sure it's gone," he said with a grin.

## Chapter 22 The Malfoy Legacy, Part

December 22nd

"We'd like to talk to both of you now that Rose is in bed," Hermione said to Scorpius and Minerva, as they closed the door to Rose's bedroom.

They had been watching movies in their pajamas in the loft when Draco and Hermione put Rose to bed for the night. Minerva scrambled off the sectional to turn the movie off. Draco and Hermione took seats on one side of the sectional facing the kids. Scorpius looked curious and a little wary. Minerva just looked curious at Draco and her mother.

"We stumbled on a bit of family magic a few months ago," Draco started. He then looked directly at Scorpius, who sat up straighter, "Scorpius, this will directly affect you when you get older. We wanted you both to know now since we think you're old enough."

Draco looked to Hermione and she drew the cuff down her arm and showed it to them. Scorpius and Minerva both looked at the bracelet with confusion.

"When Hermione and I decided to be together, this cuff appeared the next day. Your grandmother, Scorp, took us over to the Manor, showed us some paintings of our ancestors with

head down for a kiss that made him forget how exhausted he was.

"Missed you," she said against his mouth.

"Missed you too. Did you have fun shopping? Where did my mother go?" Draco asked, leaning back and looking down at her.

Her smile was incandescent, "Yes. It was a good day. Your mum went back to the Manor. We went into George's store and George loaded Scorpius up with presents that I'm sure his friends' parents won't appreciate."

"What about Scorpius' girl? Did he get her something?" Draco asked eagerly. Maybe he should have gone too and helped Scorpius pick out something.

"We couldn't agree on what to get her. I thought chocolates would be appropriate but Scorpius thought it was too impersonal. I suggested that maybe this was something a father and son should do together," Hermione said.

Draco kissed Hermione then. Relief and thankfulness washed over him. He didn't realize until just now how much he wanted to be the one to help Scorpius pick out the first piece of jewelry he got for his possible soul mate.

"Insatiable rogue," she said, drawing him down to give him a scorching kiss, "It'll have to be quick. We need to spend time with the girls before we take them to Ron's."

"I can do quick," he said.

\*\*\*

It had been quick, Draco mused as he dressed for the day. They'd gazed into each other's eyes as he'd made love to her. He found the gold thread easier than he had last night. She'd come apart in his arms still gazing at him. He'd had to rest his forehead against hers when he came to keep from severing the connection.

"You're not married to him anymore, are you?" Draco asked as Hermione came into the closet to get dressed.

"Magically, no," she answered, looking over her shoulder at him as she pulled her undergarments from a drawer.

"What does that mean?" he asked from the bench, tying his boots on.

"Legally, I'm still married to him. As far as the Ministry is concerned, we're still married," she said, handing him her undergarments and going to pick out her outfit for the day.

"Okay, I don't understand. It's literally called the Ministry of Magic. How can they still recognize a marriage that isn't bound by magic?" Draco asked, looking down at the knickers clutched in his hand, black with gold lace today.

She came over to him with a pair of dark jeans, a light gray sweater, and a black cami soled draped over her arm. He took the clothes from her and handed her knicker to her. She sat on his knee and started dressing.

"I guess there's a choice when you get married if you want to do the binding or not. It seemed romantic when we got married but now, I wonder what the point was. It didn't stop him from cheating," she said.

Draco rubbed her back soothingly. He knew Hermione hated it when she didn't understand something and for all her talk, he knew she didn't understand why the bond broke.

"Let's get down to breakfast. We can worry more about this later," he said, taking her hand and leading her from the room. The children were arguing when they walked into the dining room. Well, Scorpius and Minerva were arguing. Rose was shouting at them to stop arguing, which caused them to argue louder to be heard over Rose.

"What in the world is going on in here?" Hermione asked, looking at the three children.

"I just want to fix my own breakfast," Minerva cried at her mother and stomping her foot in frustration.

"I told you I would get it for you," Scorpius said to her, just as obstinate.

They looked like they were going to start arguing again. Rose put her hands over her ears and looked ready to burst into tears.

"Scorpius, take your... take Rose over and fix a plate for her please," Draco said to his son.

The two walked over to the buffet and Scorpius started dishing oatmeal into a bowl for Rose. Hermione looked at Minerva, who looked about ready to burst into tears herself.

"What's really going on?" Hermione asked, "You've haven't seemed to have a problem with Scorpius or Draco serving your meals to you since you got here."

Minerva looked at the ground, her curly red hair covering her face, and then Draco heard a distinct sniffle come from her. He looked at Hermione and gestured with his chin toward the door. She nodded at him, looking worried, and wrapped an arm around Minerva and guided her out of the room.

"We'll be right back. Eat your breakfast," Draco said to Scorpius and Rose, who were seated together at the table and looking glum.

He closed the door behind him and found Hermione and Minerva sitting on the bottom steps of the stairs. He crouched down in front of them.

"You're welcome. It takes a lot of courage to do what you did today. To stand up to your fear. I'm really proud of you," he said seriously.

"Thanks. Can I ride back to the house?" Minerva asked, looking even more confident on her broom.

That excited, hopeful look in her eye had Draco smiling. "Yeah, that's fine. Let's head back."

Draco walked beside her as they made their way back home. Minerva chatted excitedly with him. He was proud of her. He was proud that she even wanted to try riding again. She did so much better than he thought she would. He expected her to balk or give up at being told she had to let herself fall off a broom. She pushed through her fear and kept trying even though she was scared.

Draco helped her dismount the broom and carried it inside for her. He had her put her own broom away in the closet and watched as she locked the door behind her. As they were walking back into the foyer, the door to the drawing room opened and Hermione walked out with Scorpius and Rose.

Hermione saw them and shot a worried glance at him. He smiled at her and she took a deep breath, letting go of her worry.

"How did it go?" she asked, running her hand down Minerva's hair.

"Mum, I can fly. Draco taught me and I was scared at first because he told me I had to fall off the broom but he always caught me. Then I flew around the clearing and I got to fly back home," Minerva said in an excited rush.

"She did very well today," Draco said, "Why don't you all go put away your winter gear and wash up for lunch?" Draco suggested, looking down at the three children gathered around.

He caught Hermione slip a red and gold bag with a large W printed on it out of her purse and hand it to Scorpius. Scorpius hugged her quick then ran up the stairs after Minerva and Rose. Draco pulled Hermione into his arms and she wrapped her arms around his neck. She leaned up on her toes and brought his

handletogofaster.Hecouldfeelherhummingwithexcitement as she got more comfortable with being on the broom.

"Let's fly back and forth for a while. You're going to fly in a straight line to the end of the clearing, make a complete left turn, fly to the other end of the clearing, and make a complete right turn," he instructed.

Minervanoddedandflewforward.Dracohadtowalkquickly to keep up with her as she flew to the end of the clearing.

"Let's make the left turn," Draco said, supporting her as she banked left.

"I did it!" she squealed as she pulled out of the turn, leaning up and clapping her hands.

"Of course you did, angel. You're doing great," Draco said encouragingly, looking over at her excited face.

She launched herself off the broom at him. Draco caught her as her arms came around his neck. He smoothed her hair down. He laughed with her and twirled her around, so happy that she was happy.

"Thank you," she said breathlessly, squeezing his neck.

"You did the work, angel," Draco said, setting her down on the ground, "We are going to have to talk about launching yourself off a broom at people," with mock severity.

"Sorry," Minerva said, looking down and kicking the ground. Draco ran a hand down Minerva's head, "You startled me, angel. You could've hurt yourself."

"Sorry," she said, not looking sorry in the least, "I'll be more careful but I knew you'd catch me and you did."

"Alright. Let's do another turn then head back for lunch. Your mum should be back with Scorpius and Rose soon," he said, starting to get hungry and a little sore.

Minerva lowered her hovering broom and climbed back on. Draco walked beside her as she flew to the end of the clearing and made a perfect right turn.

"Very good. You did great today," he praised her.

"Thanks. Thanks for teaching me," Minerva said, sitting up straight on her broom.

"You want to tell me what this is about?" Hermione asked her daughter, who was looking down at her hands.

Minerva looked at her mother with tears in her eyes and pleaded, "Don't make me go over there. Please, mum."

Hermione reached over and petted her daughter soothingly, "I want you to try. Remember when we talked about this, I told you that you didn't have to stay if you didn't want to, but I wanted you to try."

"Please, mum," Minerva begged, starting to break down again, "I have a bad feeling. I don't want to go."

Draco settled on his knees in front of them and took Minerva's hand, "Hey," he said to get her attention. She looked up at him. "Remember what we talked about yesterday," he said and she nodded at him, "You and your sister will be safe. Just give your dad a chance."

She nodded again and wiped her eyes. Draco realized then that it probably wasn't going to get any easier for him to send his girls over to Weasley's. It took all he had to convincingly reassure Minerva.

"Are you ready to go to get some breakfast?" Hermione asked Minerva, hugging her daughter close.

"Yeah. I'm starving," Minerva said.

Draco stood and held a hand out to Minerva, pulling her up and giving her a quick hug before sending her back into the dining room. He held his hand out again, pulled Hermione up, and wrapped his arms around her. He nuzzled her neck, seeking her comforting lavender and jasmine scent.

They watched from the open doorway as Minerva walked over to Scorpius. She said something to him. Then Scorpius stood up and hugged her. He pulled her chair out for her and had her sit down while he walked over to the buffet.

"I'll be in a second," Draco said, guiding Hermione to the door.

Hermione looked at him curiously but walked into the dining room after Minerva. Draco turned and walked into his study. He shut the door quietly behind him.

"Topsy. Turvy," he called to the empty room.

Twin house elves popped into the study in matching sturdy black pillowcases with the Malfoy seal embroidered on them. They both bowed to him. Their matching toffee colored eyes looked up at him expectantly. Turvy addressed him, "Master Draco has called us?"

The only way Draco knew it was Turvy was the left ear that was down turned slightly at the tip. Draco had accidentally hit it with his broomstick when he was four and the ear had curled down permanently.

"Yes. Thank you for coming so quickly," Draco addressed the elves, "You'll be going over to the Weasley-Brown house today with Minerva and Rose. I know that Hermione and my mother have already given you your instructions and I know that you will do a good job watching over them," he paused and looked at each elf seriously, "They're my girls. I want you to stick to them like glue and if you think for one second that they're in any danger, no matter how small, I want you to get them out of there. I don't care who you have to stun to do it."

The elves nodded solemnly at Draco. "We will protect the Misses Minerva and Rose with our lives if necessary," Topsy intoned seriously.

Tears stung Draco's eyes at the thought of losing either of the two house elves if something went wrong. He knew that if necessary one would sacrifice themselves so that the other could get the girls to safety. He placed a hand on each of their tiny shoulders, "Thank you," he said hoarsely, "I'm sure it won't come to that, but thank you for watching over them."

Draco cleared his throat and dismissed them, "Tansy is in the kitchen if you'd like to go visit with her until it's time to leave."

The beloved elves bowed and left the room with a pop. Draco cleared his throat again, trying to get rid of the frog that seemed to have lodged itself there. He left the room and made his way back to the dining room. It was odd to find them all sitting in a row. Scorpius had chosen to sit by Rose while he

"I've got you. You're safe," he reassured her, setting her on the ground. "Remember to protect your head like I showed you and let yourself go limp," he reminded, gently.

"This is hopeless. I'm never going to get it," Minerva said, stomping her foot in frustration.

"You're doing fine. Try again," Draco persisted.

Sheremounted the broom and tried again, shrieking as she rolled off the broom. She remembered to bring her hands up this time. She was so like her mother. Determined. Courageous. She was afraid. He knew she was afraid. He knew he was pushing her by making her roll off that broom. He knew she was probably reliving that day, that fall off the broom. Every time she chose to get back on that broom, she was conquering that fear. She loosened up a little every time he caught her, every time he told her she was safe.

"Good job. Again."

"You're safe. Again."

"I've got you. Again."

Repeatedly, he had her roll off the hovering broom until she began to land in his arms like a limp noodle with her arms covering her head. Thankfully, she'd stopped screaming every time she rolled off the broom. His ears had started ringing from her high-pitched screeching.

Once she started doing it perfectly without screaming, he stopped her from climbing back on and commended her, "Great job. I think you've got it. I want you to remember what to do if you fall off the broom. Are you ready to try flying around now?"

"Yeah, let's do it," Minerva said cheerfully, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Fear. Conquered. Well, maybe not completely but she jumped on that broom easy enough now. He had her hover a few feet off the ground, just enough that her toes would touch if she set them down. He adjusted her hands and posture. He taught her how to lean into a turn and to use the foot braces to help with the turning. Lean up for slow and down low over the broom

## Finding Hermione

Minerva gulped audibly, focused on her hands on the broom, "I'm good. Let's keep going."

Now came the hard part. He was going to ask her to do something that was going to be difficult for her to do.

"Good girl. Now you're going to learn the proper way to fall off a broom," Draco said calmly as if he asked terrified children to throw themselves from a broom every day.

"Fall!" Minerva screamed, tipping on the broom.

"Easy," Draco said as he steadied her on the broom, "You need to learn how to fall off so you don't hurt yourself in case it ever actually happens."

"Okay," Minerva said, clearly not convinced that this was a good idea but willing to trust him.

"Remember I put a cushioning charm on the ground, but I'm going to catch you," Draco said with a calm, reassuring voice, "What I want you to do is roll off the broom, bring your hands up to cup the back of your head using your arms to protect your face, and try to go limp as you fall," he explained as he showed her how he wanted her to position her hands on her head then pushed the broom up so that it hovered at chest level.

"I've got you. When ever you're ready," Draco said, trying to look as reassuring as possible.

Minerva rolled off the broom, screamed like she was being murdered, and landed like a log in his arms.

"Oof," he said, grunting at how hard she landed in his arms, "I've got you," he said, setting her down on the ground, "Okay good. Remember to cover your head and go limp."

"I don't know about this," Minerva said with trepidation.

"You did fine. No one gets it perfect on the first try. Up you go," he said encouragingly as he lowered the broom and had her remount before raising it back up again.

"Try again," he said.

She rolled off again, still stiff as a board and forgetting to protect her head, screaming, not as loudly as before, but still causing some ringing in his ears. He might actually go deaf if she kept screaming.

and Hermione were out in the foyer talking to Minerva. When Minerva came back in the room, she chose to sit on the other side of Scorpius rather than take her usual place at the table.

Draco went down the line dropping a kiss on everyone's forehead in good morning before he went to the buffet to fill himself a bowl of oatmeal. He sat down and found a steaming cup of coffee sitting in front of him. He took a sip and sighed appreciatively.

Hermione smirked over at him, barely glancing up from the paper, "You're not the only one that pays attention."

"Thank you for the coffee, Iioness," he said smiling at her.

She slid the paper over to him and he looked down at the pictures she was pointing out. Of course, they were covering the gossip pages again. The photographer had caught this flying lesson with Minerva yesterday; prominent among them was the picture of Minerva launching herself off her broom at him. Photos of Hermione, his mother, Rose, and Scorpius shopping in Diagon Alley were also present. George Weasley had his arm around Scorpius in one, no doubt whispering mischief in his ear.

"That's new," Draco said, studying the pictures.

He felt Hermione shift over in her seat to look at the paper again, "What's new?"

"We were gone at the same time yesterday," he pointed out.

"That is new," Hermione agreed.

He could see Scorpius and Minerva craning their heads from down the table, even Rose was starting to look interested, no doubt wanting to be like the other children. He took the section out and gave it to Hermione. The paper was passed between the children.

\*\*\*

Nine o'clock came all too quickly for Draco's liking. Scorpius was

left with Tansy while Draco and Hermione took Minerva and Rose to visit with their father. They all stepped out of the Floo into a comfortable looking living room. Draco remembered the floral patterned couch from the last time they'd come here to retrieve Rose from Weasley's clutches.

Weasley sat on one of the overstuffed, lavender armchairs. Looking around the room, Draco noticed that lavender Brown seemed to have decorated her room in lavender, purples, and cream. A bit of an obsession with her name, Draco supposed, not that he was much better since Rose was currently clutching her dragon, Norbert, in her hand, not to mention the businesses that were named after him in Cokeworth.

Weasley stood up and came over to them looking apprehensive, "Hi. I wasn't sure you'd come."

"We're here, as agreed," Hermione said tensely. She looked down at the girls and then back at Weasley, "You remember what we agreed upon?"

Weasley's jaw clenched and his nostrils flared, "I remember. Now it's my time with our daughters. So if you would please," he ground out gesturing back at the fireplace.

Draco wanted to snarl at Weasley. His attitude wasn't making it any easier for them to leave the girls there. Draco saw Weasley's lip curl when Hermione turned her back to hug the girls. It was gone in a flash and Weasley's face settled back into an expression of bland neutrality. The girls were thoroughly hugged and kissed. Draco squeezed Minerva's shoulder in reassurance before he left with Hermione. Just as he was stepping into the fireplace he felt an invisible hand touch each of his knees.

They stepped out of the fireplace and into the study at Spinner's End. Scorpius was lounging on the sofa with a book propped open. He looked up at them as they stepped out and closed the book.

"So they went over to see their dad?" Scorpius asked with a worried frown, looking between Draco and Hermione.

cushioning charms on the ground, telling Minerva exactly what he was doing. He set the broom down on the cleared patch of ground and had Minerva stand beside it.

He stood in front of her with his hands in the pockets of his jacket. "Do you remember how to get the broom off the ground?" Draco asked, looking down at Minerva.

"Yes. I remember that part from flying class," Minerva said, shuffling her feet and looking terrified.

"Are you scared?" he asked with concern. He didn't want her to be scared or have another panic attack.

"No. Just nervous," Minerva said, looking at him with a determined tilt of her chin and squaring her shoulders.

"Nervous is fine. You have to tell me if you're too scared to keep going. I'm not going to let anything bad happen to you," Draco reassured her, "Let's get this broom up in the air."

"Up," Minerva said in a barely audible whisper, holding her palm out over the broom. The broom didn't move at all to her timid command.

"Louder, more authority," Draco directed her.

"Up," she said, a little louder with some confidence. The broom twitched in response.

"That's better. One more time with feeling," Draco called encouragingly.

"Up!" she shouted. The broom handles shot up, landed in her palm, and hovered in the air.

"Very good. Now I want you to mount the broom and push off a little so that you hover in the air," Draco said, moving around to her side so that he could support her.

Draco stood beside Minerva with one hand on the handle of the broom and one supporting her back so that she wouldn't fly away if she kicked too hard. Minerva pushed off the ground and hovered in the air two feet off the ground. Draco let go of the broom and let her hover on her own and get a feel for being on a broom.

"You're doing great. How are you feeling?" he asked, noting how tense she was on the broom.

fifteen years and it's just kind of stuck."

"So was it the same when you were at school?" she asked, "The mealtime rituals and carrying books and stuff."

"Yeah. I was always stuck carrying Pansy Parkinson's books and she always sat beside me during meals, so I had to fill her plate for her as well," he said, thinking back to how annoying it had become to constantly have Pansy glued to his side, "Has Scorpius been helping you adjust?"

Minerva nodded, "They've all been great. Drake has helped the most. He was a little annoyed at first, but it became easier for me to accept after a while. He explains things in a way that I can accept. Some of it is pretty awesome. I don't have to carry my book bag."

She was grinning at that last statement. It made him feel a bit sorry for Drake, having to carry that bag all around the castle.

"Yeah, about that," Draco said slowly, "Did you really need to bring the entire Hogwarts library home? That bag was atrociously heavy," Draco said with mock severity.

Minerva blushed at that, "Sorry. I tend to over-pack."

Draco laughed at her answer, "I think these brooms are polished enough. Are you ready to give flying a try?" he asked. She nodded and he stood up and locked his broom away. He picked up Minerva's broom and ushered her out the door, locking it behind him.

Draco studied Minerva, looking for any impending anxiety. She looked a little nervous but otherwise fine. Satisfied that she wasn't already terrified, he told her, "Go get your jacket, gloves, and hat and we'll walk to the park."

Minerva ran upstairs to get her winter gear. Draco went over to the closet and put on his black leather gloves, wool-lined black leather aviator jacket, and black knit beanie. Minerva was waiting for him in a soft gray puffy jacket with bright pink knit gloves and matching knit beanie when he finished getting ready. They walked out the door and over to the park. Draco took Minerva to the clearing in the park he often took Rose flying in. He cleared out a large patch of snow and put down

"Yes," Hermione said with a sigh, sitting beside Scorpius on the couch and smoothing his hair down.

"Minerva was really worried about going over there," Scorpius said, leaning into Hermione and letting her wrap her arms around him.

Draco sat beside Hermione so that she could lean against him. He didn't like it, not one bit. He wondered if he could get away with calling Harry and sending him over there or make the elves just bring them home.

"I'm sorry she snapped at you," Hermione said to Scorpius. Scorpius shrugged, "I knew she didn't mean it. She was like that sometimes at school. Something would bother her or she would be having a bad day and she would just snap. Drake handles it the best. They would go off for a walk or Drake would pick a fight and she seemed to be better once she let off a little steam."

"So you picked a fight with her?" Draco asked his son. Scorpius looked at him over Hermione's shoulder, "Yeah. I was hoping it would work, but it seemed like it just upset Rose more than anything, and then we started arguing about that." "Was she like that often?" Hermione asked.

"No. Just every once in a while. One was after we were shown the paper the day after school started. Drake walked around with her for hours. Then she had a huge fight with Drake after our first flying lesson with Madame Hooch. After that, it was just pretty random. Since the last Parents' Day, she's been pretty mellow," Scorpius said, fiddling with the pages of his book. "Does she just hang out with Drake then?" Hermione fished. Scorpius shook his head, "No, we all hang out together. There are even kids from other houses that we're friendly with." "Dad," Scorpius said, looking at him again, "remember you said we'd go pick out a gift for Florence today. Can we go do that?"

"Sure," Draco said, looking at his son, "Go get your jacket and shoes on."

Hermione kissed his forehead and released him. Scorpius stood up, looking a little pink, and set his book on the table. "Do you want to come with us, Hermione?" he asked.

"Thank you, sweetheart, but I think this should be a father-son outing this time," she said.

Scorpius left the room to finish getting ready. Hermione drew her legs up onto the couch and snuggled into him. She shivered a little as he played with her hair.

"What are you going to do while we're gone?" Draco asked idly.

"Poke around the library at the Manor probably," she answered, drawing patterns on his chest with her finger.

Books. That would be a good distraction from her worrying about the girls. His mother would be there as well and could keep her company if Hermione needed it. Scorpius came bounding back into the room looking excited. Hermione sat up and they both smiled at Scorpius' enthusiasm.

"Come on, dad. Let's go. Let's go," Scorpius said, pulling on Draco's arm to get him to stand up and get moving. "Alright," Draco said laughing and standing up.

He bent down and kissed Hermione, biting her lip, and then rubbing his tongue against hers. He wanted to have her taste on him before he left.

"Eww, gross. You can do that when we get back. Let's go!" Scorpius said, getting impatient and pulling on his arm so hard, Draco thought he might be trying to wrench it loose.

"We're going over to the city center here in Cokeworth. We'll meet you at the Manor when we're done," Draco told Hermione, giving her one more peck on the lips before turning to Scorpius and letting himself be tugged away, "Alright, Mr. Impatient, let's go."

that I was just a scared kid in an impossible situation and they spoke up for me. They gave me a second chance to be a better person. Your dad... I don't know what was going through his head. I don't know why he did what he did, but your mum... she thinks he deserves a chance to be a good dad to you and your sister. She wasn't wrong about me, so I have to believe that she's right about your dad too."

Minerva sat there and took in his words. Draco rolled his sleeve back down, buttoned it up, and pushed his sweater down. They continued to polish the brooms in silence.

"So I should give him a chance," she said finally still focused on the broom, "What if we're miserable? What if he tries to hurt us?" she asked, looking wretched at the thought.

Draco gripped both her shoulders and made her look at him. He stared down into her bright blue eyes. "Your mum would never make you stay anywhere that made you miserable. She would never send you into a situation that she thought would be dangerous. You can call Tansy if you or your sister want to leave. Your mum won't make you stay there."

"Okay," she said quietly.

He let go of her shoulders and went back to polishing his broom. "How are you getting on in Slytherin?" he asked, changing the subject.

He was curious what Minerva thought about her chosen house and how she was fitting in.

She smiled and shrugged, "Fine. It's odd, the way they are with each other. Mum told me about her time at school in Gryffindor house. They didn't seem as tight as the Slytherins are. Fred tried bullying Scorpius and me after school started and the older Slytherins put a stop to it when they saw," she answered, still polishing the broom handle.

"The Slytherins are better than they used to be when I was in school," Draco said pensively, "The traditions are still the same but they've all worked hard to change the image of Slytherins. Slytherins didn't have an easy time after the war, so they had to band together and take care of one another and now it's been

# Chapter 25

## Evening

? - December 31st

Draco came awake slowly and was greeted by the sounds of crying. Just his luck, he seemed to have returned to the land of the living just in time for his funeral. His body seemed not to want to comply with his commands. He couldn't seem to open his eyes or speak to console whoever was crying. His hands remained stubbornly at his sides when all he wanted to do was reach out to the person crying over him.

The memory of the choice he'd had to make made him want to sink back down into sleep. He wasn't ready to face a world without Hermione in it. He wasn't ready to face the grief, his own and their children's. How was he to go on now? How was he supposed to find a way to live without her? How was he supposed to find a way to raise the children without her?

They would be devastated. The children probably already were devastated. Scorpius, who longed for a mother and for a short time found the mother he wanted. Minerva and Rose, who lost the only stable parental figure in their lives before he came into the picture. How was he to help them with their grief when he knew his own would consume him?

Whoever was crying seemed to be convinced that he was dying or dead. The soul racking sobs were heart breaking. He desperately wanted it to stop, or he feared he would join in. He

## Finding Hermione

wanted to convince the person weeping over him that he wasn't dying, but the effort of just breathing in and out seemed to be taking all the concentration he could muster.

Draco froze as the sobbing person spoke for the first time, "Please, Draco," she begged in the warm, slightly husky voice that he would've sold his soul to hear on more time just minutes ago, or maybe it was hours? Days? How long had he been out? It didn't matter he was back and she was alive.

Hermione. He focused all his energy on at least getting his voice to work.

"Please, Draco. Please wake up. Don't leave me. I don't want to have to go on without you," she begged.

Her pleas resonated with him. He'd had to make the same choice, mistakenly thinking that she was already gone. She was alive. He hadn't failed after all. He wasn't going to have to figure out what life would be like without her. He wasn't going to have to try to figure out how to raise her girls without her in their lives.

Hermione, my love, my soul, I'm here. Give her something to let her know you're alive, you idiot. Twitch, something, anything.

He felt his hand grasped and lifted. Hermione's soft, still damp lips brushed across his knuckles. Her tears landed on his hand and ran down his arm. He felt himself getting fuzzy like his body wanted to slip back into sleep. He fought the urge. He needed her to stop crying.

"I love you," she whispered against his hand, "Come back to me, Draco."

Those words. Those sweet words he thought he'd never hear surged through him and sang in his veins. Draco knew Hermione loved him. Neither had said the words before, but he knew, just as he was aware that she knew that he loved her. He focused on trying to squeeze the hand she grasped.

He must have succeeded on some level because he heard her startled gasp above him. His hand was put up to her cheek again, and fresh tears ran down his fingers.

"Draco? My love can you hear me?" she choked out.

he was breaking in half?

He ran down the seemingly endless path toward life and his children. He was determined not to fail them this time. He looked back over his shoulder one last time as the memory of Hermione kissing him the first time swirled around him.

Forgive me. I love you. I'll do better this time.

He was going back. Back to a lonely life without Hermione in it. Back to children, who would need him, but would always long for the comfort of their mother. Back to guilt and heartbreak that would be so much more devastating than it had been after the war and after Astoria. Back to wearing a mask so that his children and mother wouldn't know how empty he was without Hermione in his life.

How was he supposed to go on without her? Their lives weren't supposed to end up this way.

"He's so handsome and kind and smart," she said with love shining in her eyes.

"He takes after his mother," Draco said. Astoria laughed, "Don't sell yourself short. There's definitely a lot of you in there."

Draco snorted in disbelief, "He's nothing like I was at that age."

Astoria placed both her hands on either side of his face and forced him to look at her, "No, he's not but you had your reasons for being the way you were. Reasons he doesn't have because you raised him better. I'm proud of the man you've become. I'm proud of the boy you've raised. I couldn't have asked you to do a better job."

Draco swallowed the lump in his throat, "Thank you. That means a lot."

The gardens and pond were fading back to white around him. That seemed to galvanize Astoria back into action.

"It's time to go back, Draco," Astoria said, turning him toward another path.

Draco clutched Astoria's hands desperately, "Can you tell Hermione something for me? Tell her I'm sorry and that I love her. Tell her I had to go back for the children but I love her and I'll miss her every day. Tell her that not a day will go by that I don't think of her and that I hope she'll be able to forgive me. And tell her I'll be along when my time is done."

Instead of answering him, Astoria shoved him hard down the path, "Hurry!" she shouted urgently, "You don't have much time left to make it back."

Draco ran down the path shouting at Astoria to please tell her. The path turned into a tunnel and all the memories he'd relieved on his journey to this place circled around him.

The memories of the children and his mother spurred him onward. He kept them firmly fixed in his mind as the memories of Hermione swirled around him. Those memories threatened to break him. How was he supposed to go on? How was he supposed to be strong enough for the children when he felt like

"My-nee," he managed to croak out in a hoarse whisper. His hand was dropped and flopped uselessly on the bed beside him. Hermione's weight crashed across his chest, and her arms were flung around his neck hugging him so hard he thought he might suffocate. Her kisses rained down across his face and lips. It felt glorious and oh so painful. The pain of her on his chest was unbearable, and he let out a groan of pain. Instantly she was gone, and he whimpered in protest, wanting to feel her touch again.

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry," she said, raining kisses down across his face. The feel of her lips against his skin mingled with her tears. "I love you. I love you so much. Don't ever do that to me again." Draco tried to let out a laugh at her stern admonishments, but it came out more of a croak. "Let me get you some water," she said, kissing his forehead once more before he felt her heat move away from him.

He heard the sounds of water being poured into a cup. Then he felt a straw against his lips. He took a slow sip, and the cool water washed the cotton from his tongue and throat. Her free hand traveled over him, through his hair and down his face. He hummed in appreciation and wanted to purr and push himself into her touch like a cat seeking affection.

"Love you too," he managed to say hoarsely.

He couldn't open his eyes and oh how he wished he could. He wanted to see Hermione's face the first time he told her he loved her. He wanted her face to be the first he saw after this whole ordeal. After everything though, he would settle for hearing her voice and feeling her touch against him. He would take anything he could get. The relief of knowing she was still alive was so great. The effort to talk was draining him, and he would be out again soon. He could feel the blackness of sleep trying to claim him again.

"Sleepy," he managed to get out. He didn't want to pass out again and worry her that he was going to die.

"Of course, my love. You need to rest and heal," she said, kissing him again on the lips.

## Finding Hermione

"Not dying. Give everyone... my... love... don't... worry," he said with difficulty as sleep started to pull him under again.

"I'll tell them. Sleep now. I love you," she said against his mouth.

\*\*\*

He managed to open his eyes later. He didn't know how long he'd been out this time. Time still didn't really matter. He managed to blink the haze from his eyes and found Harry sitting in a chair with his feet propped up on the corner of Draco's bed and his chin resting on his chest. Draco drifted back down to sleep.

\*\*\*

The next time he drifted up from unconsciousness was to find Astoria sitting in the chair beside his bed. How was she here and when had she aged so much?

"Draco," she said. The voice wasn't quite right. Neither was the hair, now that he thought about it.

"So cruel, Stori," he said quietly, wanting her to know that he was not amused that she hadn't made his choice easier by telling him that Hermione wasn't dead.

He saw her shift and look at her as his eyes drifted shut again, "Did he just call me..."

\*\*\*

Greg was pacing around his room his next time surfacing into

out over the water.

Astoria didn't answer and he looked at her. She quirked an eyebrow at him, indicating that she thought he was being purposely dense, "You don't expect me to do all the work, do you?"

Draco took a deep breath and pulled his hand lightly from her grasp to rest them both on his knees, "I have to decide whether I want to go back and live or cross over and die."

"Yes, and I'm afraid you don't have much time or the decision will be made for you," Astoria said sympathetically.

"I got her killed," Draco said, starting to break down and sob, "How am I supposed to go on living with that knowledge?"

Astoria knelt behind him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She rocked him back and forth like he was a child. "And what about the people that would be left behind if you decided to cross over?" she asked softly against his hair.

He froze as she said those words. The pain and unfairness of it all making him sob harder. He knew then the decision he would have to make. He couldn't leave his son an orphan. He couldn't leave Scorpius without a mother and a father. He had to go back for him even if it meant that he lived the rest of his life without Hermione. He had to try to be there for her daughters too if they would have him.

He would have to go on without her and it would be like a gaping hole in his chest. The other half of his soul gone. But he couldn't leave those children to go on alone in the world with only their circle of friends and family to care for them. Hermione would be gone but he would find a way for her girls to be happy even though she wasn't there.

"I'll have to go back. It's the right thing to do," Draco said as tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I'm glad you made the right decision," she said into his hair, "You've done a great job with Scorpius," she said letting him go and standing up.

Draco stood up and looked at her, "I always wondered if you were watching down on us."

wanted him to come. He didn't deserve her and her light. He deserved the blackness and the loneliness.

"You always were so stubborn," a voice behind him said with a laugh.

That soft, cool voice. That tinkling, girlish laugh. He hadn't heard it in almost twelve years. He whirled around and saw a face that he never thought to greet him. Her honey-colored hair hung down over one shoulder and just grazed her side above her hip. Those baby blue eyes laughed up at him in amusement. Her milky skin glowed in the ethereal white light that surrounded them and off her white flowing robes.

"Astoria!" he exclaimed in disbelief.

He was definitely dead if his dead wife was greeting him. Maybe she had come to convince him to cross over because Hermione was so mad at him that she wouldn't come for him. The thought was disappointing but he felt like he deserved it.

"Why are you here, Astoria, and where exactly is here?" he asked in disappointment and disbelief.

She took his hand the way she had so many times throughout their marriage. Her soft touch enveloping him in a way that he could break away if he chose to. Her touch so much like the woman herself, soft and cool, giving him comfort but allowing him to reject it as well.

The white light around them changed and he found himself in a muted version of the gardens at the manor. She led him over to the hill beside the pond and gestured for him to sit with her.

She settled herself down on the grass beside him. It didn't really feel like he was sitting on grass. It was more like how he imagined a cloud to be. He was sitting, but there wasn't the pressure of his backside where he would normally get from sitting on anything. It was like he was there but wasn't.

"Now, I believe you asked me two questions. Why am I here? To help you make a decision, Draco. Where is here? You are between the living and the dead," she explained.

"What decision do I have to make?" Draco asked, looking

consciousness. The sound of a vase crashing to the floor was what startled him out of his sleep, followed by a string of colorful swear words that would've done a backroom brawler proud.

"Trying to sleep here," Draco grouched at his friend.

Greg jumped like a scalded cat at the sound of his voice. Draco couldn't help the snort of laughter that escaped.

"Sorry," Greg said, looking a little ashamed and thoroughly bored, "Not used to you waking up. Go back to sleep."

"Sounds like a plan," Draco murmured as he let sleep overtake him again.

\*\*\*

"He's just being dramatic," Blaise whined. "This is just like that time he got eaten by a hippogriff."

"Blaise," Tracey said irritated. "Let him sleep. The healer says she's healing well and should start coming around for longer soon. And he obviously didn't get eaten by a hippogriff."

"The way he went on about it would have made you think he did," Blaise said.

"Honestly," Tracey said now sound exasperated, "I think you're the dramatic one here."

"But I'm so bored," Blaise whined. Histone turned suggestive then, "Come over here and keep me entertained."

If his friends started having sex in his hospital room, he was going to throw something at them. He drifted back off before he could hear if Tracey turned Blaise down. Hopefully so, he didn't want to think about that going on in the same room as him.

\*\*\*

"Draco, I know you're awake," the sound of his mother's nonsense voice brought him fully out of the in-between state of dreaming and wakefulness.

He'd been dreaming about Astoria. He could hear her laughing voice as he yelled at her for not telling him that Hermione wasn't dead. She had calmly pointed out that she'd never told him that Hermione was dead. He'd assumed that. But everything was fine now, and he really should be grateful to her for urging him to go back to the land of the living.

"Draco, wake up," his mother said more sharply.

Draco slowly opened his eyes and found the distressed and haggard appearance of his mother standing beside his bed. She seemed to have aged ten years in the time he'd been out of it. She had dark bags under her eyes. Her usually pale, translucent skin now seemed gray.

"I love you, mum," Draco said, needing those to be the first words she heard from him.

She breathed a deep sigh of relief and then leaned over to kiss his forehead. The gesture was oddly reminiscent of when he was little and stuck in bed sick. She grasped his chin and looked into his face, her piercing blue eyes full of worry, "Oh, my precious boy. I love you so much." Her face turned fierce then, and she smacked him lightly on the shoulder, "Don't you ever scare me like that again."

"I'm sorry, mum," Draco said, wincing dramatically at her smack that wasn't hard enough to swat a fly.

He looked around the room, trying to take in his surroundings for the first time. Uncomfortable gray chairs were on either side of his bed. A cot was along the wall to his left with a single white pillow, and gray blankets tucked around white sheets. Along the wall on the right were a gray leather loveseat and the door to the room. The wall in front of his bed had a long table running along it with covered with flowers and pictures drawn by Rose and Albus, the only color in an otherwise gray room.

"Where am I?" Draco asked.

be with her at the Halloween party. He remembered that first hesitant kiss and how soft her lips had felt against his. The first time they had made love and the soft tears rolling down her cheeks afterward.

He finally had everything he wanted there for so brief a time. He had found the love of his life. His soul mate. He'd gotten to be so blissfully happy with her and the houseful of children he'd always dreamed of. The time was so short with them all though. Not nearly enough.

He was so cold. Everything around him had faded to black. He couldn't feel Hermione beside him anymore and he thought that maybe she was already gone and waiting for him on the other side. How would he ever be able to face her after he'd failed her so horribly? How could she ever possibly forgive him for failing to protect her and taking her away from her daughters? How could he forgive himself?

Forgive me. I love you.

He stood in the blackness, refusing to move forward or backward. He saw a pinprick of white light but refused to move toward it. He wanted to. He desperately wanted to follow that light and find Hermione. He wanted to comfort her in her grief of being separated from her children and everyone she loved. He wanted her comfort as he let loose his own grief and guilt for getting them killed and for losing everyone he'd loved. That was why he didn't move. He didn't deserve her comfort. It was all his fault. He failed his love, his son, his girls, and his mother. He failed them all.

He watched as that stubborn pinprick of white light steadily became larger. He knew it was her coming for him. Hermione would force him to cross over with her. She would force him to let go of his guilt. She would find some way to make him believe that getting them killed wasn't his fault. But he knew, no matter how she tried to spin it, he was at fault. He had gotten them killed.

He obstinately turned his back on the light and crossed his arms over his chest. She would have to drag him through if she

first time she hugged him with her hands covered in flour and cookie dough. The first time she together and sneaking cookies. Her exuberant glee when he'd taken her up on his broom for the first time. "Daddy."

Minerva and their talk in the broom closet. He'd failed her when he had reassured her that nothing bad would happen. Her gradually coming to trust him as he caught her over and over again. Her disbelieving happiness when she flew on her own. Minerva launching herself into his arms from atop the broom. He'd probably failed her worst of all. Her trust in him had been such a delicate thing and he had shattered it by letting her mother and himself get killed by her father of all people. The one person they had pressured her to see.

Hermione. The love of his life. His soul mate. So much good and so much bad flashed before his eyes. He remembered the first time he saw her on the train with her wild, chestnut hair, big, chocolate brown eyes, and buck teeth. That first tentative smile, so pure and innocent. The innocence he'd ruined with his reprehensible behavior towards her. That right hook she got him with for being a vile, loathsome, evil, little cockroach. The Yule Ball when he'd realized that he was in love with her. The scared, pleading look she gave him when they were dragged into the Manor. Her screams as she was tortured by his aunt as he stood there and watched. The look of fear and determination as she flew to help save him, Vince, and Greg with her friends in the Room of Hidden Things. The look of sympathy she gave him as she saved his worthless arse again and kept him out of Azkaban.

He got to repay her for all her selfless acts by saving her on the platform the day that Weasley had ripped her world apart and again when Weasley had tried to oblivate her. Their friendship that somehow managed to find its way into their lives despite all the past hurts and grievances and had grown into love. The type of love you only ever found once in a lifetime and only if you were extremely lucky. Their first dance across the dance floor at his club. When he confessed how much he wanted to

"Privateroom in St. Mungo's," his mother answered, walking over to the table of flowers and pulling dead stems out of the bouquets. He knew she was using the flowers as an excuse to get control of her emotions.

"Mum, come sit with me. Talk to me," Draco said, "I could use some water if you've got to do something."

She took a deep breath, and Draco heard the catch in her breathing. His mother busied herself with filling a glass for him. She brought the glass over to him. His hands shook as he tried holding the glass and bringing it to his lips. His mother steadied his hand by covering it with her own and helping him take a sip of water.

"How long have I been out of it? What day is it?" Draco asked.

"Eight days, four hours, and about fifteen minutes. It's about ninety-three at night on December thirty-first," she answered like she'd counted every single minute he'd been in the hospital.

"Where are Hermione and the children?" he asked, reaching out and taking his mother's hand.

"They're at the manor," she answered, looking down at their clasped hands, "Along with nearly all your friends. The Zabini's, Goyle's, Nott's, and Potter's have been at the manor taking turns watching over the children and sitting with you. The Longbottoms stopped by for a few days during Christmas. Luna comes and goes from here and the house. She seemed the least concerned by your comatose state. Infuriating girl at times."

"Weasley?" he asked.

His mother tightened her grip on his hand and pursed her mouth in distaste, "Currently in a holding cell under the Ministry."

The door to his room opened. Draco turned his head in the direction of the door. He smiled as he saw Hermione walk into the room. She was wearing dark blue yoga pants and a baggy green and silver Quidditch shirt that looked to be one of his from school.

She smiled back at him as she took in that he was awake and alert. Her smile was glorious and radiant. He felt it warm him all the way to his toes. He reached out his free hand for her, and she walked over to him eagerly and took his hand in hers. He ran his hand up her arm and cupped her cheek. He weakly drew her down to him. He could feel his hand shaking as he tried to hold it to her cheek. Hermione leaned in and kissed him softly, a feather-light brush of her lips across his.

"I love you," he murmured against her mouth.

"I love you too," she whispered back.

She leaned back and sat down beside him holding his hand. His mother looked across the bed at Hermione, "Are the children asleep?" she asked.

"Yes," Hermione answered, looking between him and his mother like her eyes were always drawn back to him. "They're all nestled together like puppies up in the nursery. I had to give Minerva a bit of Dreamless Sleep potion."

"Why?" Draco asked.

Both Hermione and his mother looked apprehensive. Finally, Hermione spoke, "She's been having nightmares since it happened. She stunned Ron when she saw you on the floor bleeding and me trying to save you. Ron seemed like he was about to attack again and she stunned him and knocked him unconscious. Topsy whisked her away right after she cast the spell, so she's been afraid the whole time that you're dead, and we're lying about it."

Draco let go of their hands and made to sit up on the bed. He looked around to see if he could find his wand somewhere. Hermione stood up and pushed back on his shoulder.

"Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. Where do you think you're going?" she asked.

"I'm going home. You're drugging Minerva because she thinks I'm dead. I'm not going to lay here in a hospital bed while she goes through that. While they all go through that," Draco was panting from the exertion of trying to sit up and flopped back on the bed, "Dammit!" he shouted in frustration.

He opened his eyes and found Hermione kneeling beside him trying to heal him and staunch the flow of blood. He could feel himself getting cold. His vision was going black around the edges. His sense of smell seemed to be sharper. He could smell her lavender and jasmine scent, along with the sharp tang of fear and blood.

The blackness was closing in around him. He saw movement near of the corner of the darkness and realized it was Weasley advancing on them. He tried to shout, lift his arm. Something. Anything to get Hermione's attention so she could protect herself. Fucking useless, he thought angrily to himself.

As the blackness consumed him and Weasley stalked closer to her, he knew without a doubt that he had failed. He had failed to protect her and gotten them both killed in the process. He screamed again in pain and fear.

They say that your life flashes before your eyes when you die. It wasn't that way for him. The faces of people he loved flashed through his head.

His son, who he was leaving truly orphaned in the world. The first time he saw him, red and squalling, with a tuft of pale blond hair that was almost translucent. Scorpius' first smile, right after peeing on him. His first steps. Scorpius running around Spinner's End, naked and laughing. His first broom ride and the joy and exhilaration on his face. Watching him getting on the train to Hogwarts.

His mother, who had already suffered so much. Her warm hugs and cuddles when he was little. The lullabies she would sing to him. Her fierce, often vengeful, protectiveness of him. The pain and anguish in her eyes when he took the Dark Mark. Her fear for him throughout the war and their home being overrun by Voldemort and his followers. The unconditional and unwavering love she gave him when all he wanted was to wallow in misery and guilt. Her joy and happiness when she found out Hermione was his mate.

Minerva and Rose, who were the daughters of his heart, and he had no idea what would happen to them now. Rose and the

it very difficult for me to keep trying to do the right thing." Weasley looked mulish at that. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the two of them.

Draco sneered at him, fed up with his infantile behavior, "Where are the girls? We have dinner plans tonight and it would be rude to be late."

"They can stay here while you go to your fancy dinner, Malfoy," Weasley said with an odd mixture of hopefulness and nastiness.

"As it is a family dinner, their presence is necessary," Draco drawled. It was just too easy getting this idiot worked up. How had Hermione ever been able to have an intellectual conversation with the git?

"They're not your family, ferret," Weasley spat, starting to flush beet red in anger.

"That's enough," Hermione said, "Where are the girls?"

"They're on their way down. They were just helping clean up the playroom," Weasley said.

Hermione turned back to look at Draco. Draco caught the change in Weasley's expression from anger to determination. He didn't have time to ponder the look as he saw Weasley draw his wand from his sleeve. Draco shoved Hermione behind him with a shout just as he felt a familiar, burning slash rip across his chest.

He felt like he was falling. His body had an odd weightlessness like he was being pulled under water. Draco struggled to stay upright. To protect Hermione even if his body was only a shield for her. He felt and heard the thunk reverberate through him as he hit the floor, knocking his head against the hardwood flooring.

"Draco!" he heard shouted above him.

Run! He shouted in his head. He couldn't make the words come out. All that seemed to want to come out was a scream of pain. He felt like he was being ripped in two. The burning radiating from his chest felt like an inferno. He felt himself gasping for breath like he couldn't fill his lungs properly.

He was starting to get pissed about being an invalid right now. He needed to go home. He needed to be with his kids. He'd broken Minerva's trust by pressuring her to go to her father's house, and now she was traumatized and having nightmares because she'd had to attack her father to protect her mother and him. The overwhelming sense of failure threatened to engulf him again.

"They're asleep right now. Now that you're alert, we'll bring the children here to visit first thing in the morning," his mother said, stroking his arm and trying to get him to calm down. Draco took three deep breaths. He didn't need them worrying anymore about him than they already had, "Fine," he replied sullenly.

His mother got up out of her seat and sent it back into a corner by the cot with a flick of her wand. "I think I'll be going now," she said, "since I'll be back early tomorrow with the kids."

She bent down and kissed him on the forehead again, "I love you, my precious boy."

"Love you, mum," he answered with a sleepy yawn, suddenly exhausted.

His mother hugged Hermione tightly and kissed her forehead too. The door closed behind her with a soft click.

"Why am I so tired?" he asked Hermione yawning again, "And weak?"

"Ron hit you with a Sectumsempra curse," Hermione answered.

"I figured that much. I don't remember it hurting this much the last time," Draco said.

Hermione sighed and wiped away a tear, "Harry didn't know what he was hitting you with, and the curse wasn't as drastic. Professor Snape also knew the counter-curse the last time since he created the spell and you healed rather quickly after-

## Finding Hermione

ward. It took us two days to find the counter-curse among his papers. Two days of them working to keep you alive since the wound wouldn't close," she choked out a sob as she said the last part. Her lip trembled, and tears leaked down her face, "You bled profusely, and the healers had to keep pumping you with blood replenishing potions and blood transfusions until we could find the counter-curse," Hermione finished, and her face crumpled as she let loose great hiccupping sobs.

Tears threatened to overwhelm him as he listened to her cry, "Hey. Stop crying please," Draco pleaded desperately, "Widen the bed and come lay beside me."

"I don't want to hurt you," she said, still sniffing into a handkerchief.

"It doesn't hurt that much anymore," he said, only partially lying, "I need you. I need to feel you against me. I need to smell you around me. If I thought I could manage it, I would be begging you to let me make love to you," Draco said with a laugh.

Hermione snorted, "You must be on the mend if you're thinking of sex."

"Please," Draco pleaded again, "Widen the bed and come sleep beside me."

She couldn't resist his desperate pleading, just like he knew she wouldn't be able to. He wasn't lying though. He did need to feel her around him. He needed the solidity of her presence to reassure him that she was real and alive.

She widened his bed and pulled the blanket and pillow off the cot. She gingerly climbed into bed beside him, so very careful not to jostle him. He could feel himself drifting off to sleep again as she settled beside him.

He grasped her hand and brought it to his lips, brushing a soft kiss across her knuckles, "I'm sorry I'm so tired. I just want to stay up all night and talk to you, but I'm...so...sleepy," he

## Chapter 24 The World Turned Upside Down

December 23rd - ?

Draco and Hermione stepped out of the fireplace and into Lavender Brown's pathetic attempt of self-glorification. Weasley was waiting for them in the front room as they stepped inside and dusted an inordinate amount of soot from their clothes. Weasley's expression made him uneasy. Draco wasn't sure why or what it was about his face that made him wary, maybe it was because it was the first time he hadn't seen Weasley flushed with anger.

"How did it go?" Hermione asked by way of greeting. Irritation flashed across Weasley's face, "It went fine. They are still my daughters, no matter how much you try to turn them against me."

Draco stepped forward, looking to pound some sense into the idiot. Or just beat his face in because he hated the git and hated how he treated Hermione, Minerva, and Rose. Either way, his fist itched to connect with Weasley's nose. He was stopped, unfortunately, by Hermione's hand on his arm.

"Don't," she said warningly to Draco, then turned to Weasley and hissed in a harsh whisper, "We haven't turned them against you. I'm trying to do the right thing. I'm trying to give you a chance to be a better father to them and your attitude is making

about.”

“Well you’ve got my vote,” Scorpius said.

Draco ruffled his son’s hair up, much to his son’s annoyance,  
 “You’re a good kid. You know that right?”

yawned large enough to pop his jaw.

She tucked the covers up around him, just below the bandage across his chest, “Go back to sleep. I love you.”

“Love you too,” he murmured sleepily.

\*\*\*

He came wide-awake some time the next morning. The healer, an unassuming man with a balding speckled pate and a friendly face covered by a scraggly red beard, in green robes, was bent over him removing the bandage on his chest. The healer seemed to realize he was awake and looked up smiling. “Good morning. I heard you were floating in and out of consciousness, but every time I checked on you, you were asleep. I’m Healer McNair by the way,” the healer said in a soft Scottish brogue.

“McNair?” Draco asked quietly. He knew the name McNair very well. This man obviously wasn’t him because Draco knew for a fact that Walden McNair was dead.

The healer gave him a weary look. The man obviously had to deal with suspicion as a part of his everyday life. “Angus McNair. Yes, he was my cousin. No, I’m not a Death Eater, nor have I ever been. Now that all that’s squared away, are you still comfortable with me being your healer?” the wizard said in a bored tone.

Draco felt a little sorry for the man. The suspicion Draco dealt with on a regular basis was almost justifiable in his opinion. He’d made bad decisions in his youth and hurt people. His family had developed a reputation that would probably take generations of hard work to eradicate.

Draco turned his forearm up to expose the faded Dark Mark.

"I'm not in a position to judge. You didn't refuse to treat me, as others have in the past. Plus, you've managed to keep my sorry arse alive this long."

The healer seemed to bristle at the knowledge that someone would refuse to treat him and started spluttering about oaths and their job being to heal, not act as judge, jury, and executioner.

"Others will always judge me for the choices I made as a scared sixteen-year-old," Draco said in a matter-of-fact voice. Draco looked down and at the sleeping witch beside him, snuggled into his side, facing away from him with her arms wrapped around his arm that was wedged between her breasts. Healer McNair caught his look. If he disapproved of Hermione sleeping in his hospital bed with him, he wisely kept his mouth shut about it. Draco looked down at his exposed chest and saw his wound for the first time. A deep, red slash ran across his chest from armpit to armpit just below his collarbones. He realized then how lucky he was to have survived at all.

The placement of the wound also made him tighten his hold on Hermione, and he realized how much he hadn't failed that day. All things considered, throwing himself into the line of fire wasn't the most idiotic thing to do.

"You're healing very well now," McNair said, leaning close to inspect the area, "Are you in any pain?" he asked, palpating the area.

Draco winced and hissed in pain, "A little."

"Sorry," he said matter-of-factly, still examining the area, "I can give you a pain potion if you like."

"No thanks," Draco said. He didn't want to be asleep or woozy when the kids came by, maybe after they left if he felt he needed it.

The healer looked at him curiously, "Are you sure?"

"She gives good hugs. She treats me just like Rose or Minerva. She doesn't seem to care that I'm not hers," Scorpius answered easily, then his whole face turned red as he continued quietly, "She's soft and warm. And she smells good. And she's really pretty," then his son turned to face him and Draco stopped and looked down into his son's earnest face, "And she makes you really happy. You don't seem sad or lonely anymore."

Hermione's brand of love was addictive, Draco knew. She wasn't the type to hold anything back. She loved with everything she had. Weasley was a fool to throw that away. He hadn't realized his son caught on to the times when he struggled to overcome his past. He tried to hide the struggle he felt at times when his past actions haunted him.

Loneliness would engulf him when he would remember Astoria's words when he struggled with his guilt for his actions during the war early on in their marriage. He could still remember her soft, cool voice lapping around him like the gentle waves of a lake, "You can't change the past. You can only atone for your actions, forgive yourself for what you did to survive, and do better next time." Hearing her voice in his head didn't hurt like it used to.

"So, if I were to propose to her, you'd be alright with that?" Draco asked slowly, "You'd be alright with Minerva and Rose being your stepsisters?"

"I think so," Scorpius answered with a shrug, trying to look indifferent, but Draco caught the grin that burst out on his son's face.

"I'm glad you like her," Draco said looking down at his son, "I'm not going to propose anytime soon though," Draco cautioned.

"Why not?" Scorpius asked, kicking a rock down the sidewalk. Draco rubbed the back of his neck, searching for the right words, "It's still really soon. There's also you kids to think

proposals on the way home," Draco said, looking to perk his son back up a bit.

He ended up picking three infinity bands for Hermione, garnets for Minerva, emeralds for Rose, and just in case, amethysts for Scorpius. He looked meaningfully at the engagement ring Scorpius had picked out and back at Elphie. She winked and sent the ring to the back of the store.

Once they got outside, Draco steered Scorpius in the direction of Spinner's End. They walked quietly side by side until they got out of the congestion of the city center.

Draco finally broke the silence when the crowd thinned, "Why do you want me to propose to Hermione?" he asked, looking down at his son.

Scorpius looked up at him with a vulnerability he'd never seen in his son before, "I want a mum," Scorpius said quietly.

Draco stopped dead in his tracks. This was the thing he'd always feared. That Scorpius would feel that he'd missed out on something because Draco had never remarried after Astoria. Draco had never given him another mother to love him. Never even given him the hope of a mother until Hermione came into their lives.

"I'm sorry," Draco said finally, "I should've tried harder to find you a mum when you were younger."

"I was okay with it being just us. I don't think I really knew what I was missing until Hermione came along," Scorpius said, tugging Draco back into motion.

"You really like her?" Draco asked. He had to confess that he was desperate for his son to like Hermione. Just like with Minerva, his son's opinion mattered.

"I like her," Scorpius answered a little shyly. Draco watched with amusement as his son ducked his head and his ears got pink.

"What do you like about her?" Draco asked in curiosity.

"Yeah. My kids are coming over for the first time today, and I don't want to be out of it," Draco explained.

McNair reached into his pocket and took out a tin with a blue-tinged paste in it, "Ah. I'll check with you after they leave then," McNair said, nodding in understanding, rubbing his chest with the cream, and replacing the bandage with a new one. At Draco's curious look, he explained, "Healing cream. It helps the skin and muscle repair itself and relieves the pain. You'll have a scar, but I think it will be very similar to the one you already have." He gestured over his shoulder to a bag in the corner, "Your mum brought you some clothes last night. Your wound is closed, but the skin and tissues under are still tender. The cream will help with the pain if you get jostled a little."

"Thanks," Draco said sincerely, "When can I go home?"

"In a couple of days, I think. I want to monitor you for a little while before I send you home," the healer answered seriously. Draco considered arguing with the man. He opened his mouth with the intention of arguing with him. He didn't want to be stuck here any longer than he had to but the healer was giving him a look that meant the battle would be fruitless and he would call in reinforcements if necessary. He closed his mouth and decided to pick his battles.

McNair, realizing that he wasn't going to have to fight Draco on his decision, relaxed a little, "Why don't you try to get some more sleep before she wakes up? I know she hasn't been sleeping that much the last several days, so more rest is in order for both of you."

"How bad was it?" Draco asked, looking down at Hermione again, really noticing for the first time the bags under her eyes. "I threatened to dose her tea with Dreamless Sleep potion if she didn't stop pestering me and lay down on the cot and try to sleep," McNair answered with a chuckle.

"They must have all had a rough time of it," Draco mused, looking down at Hermione and remembering his mother's haggard appearance and finding Harry sleeping in his room. The healer looked speculatively at him, "The first two days were the worst," he looked over Draco at Hermione and whispered almost inaudibly, "Don't tell her I said this. If they hadn't found the counter-curse when they did, you wouldn't have made it. Your heart was failing from the strain," he took a deep breath and continued at a louder whisper, "Once we administered the countercurse, you fell into a coma. We administered potions and monitored you. You started healing, and I recommended not forcing you from the coma, thinking that you would wake up when your body was sufficiently healed." Draco couldn't take it all in. He just nodded dumbly at the healer and choked out, "Thanks... for everything."

McNair squeezed his shoulder, "Get some rest."

Draco decided to take the healer's advice and sunk back into sleep. His dreams were troubled by thoughts of all the stress and worry his friends and family had gone through during this ordeal. He could feel himself burning with anger at Weasley. Draco had promised Weasley that he would make him pay if Weasley ever did anything to hurt Hermione or the girls. Weasley would pay, and Draco would ensure that they never worried about that bastard ever again.

Draco thought about it for a second. Maybe Hermione wouldn't mind if he got them something small for Christmas. "I think that's a good idea," he agreed.

They decided on a charm bracelet similar to Florence's. Scorpious picked out a silver rope bracelet with an owl on the clasp. They then picked out silver charms for her initials, M, H, G, and W. Draco picked out a garnet charm similar to Florence's aquamarine and a dangling white snowdrop flower. He also found a dangling broom and added that to the pile of charms. Draco picked out a silver chain necklace with an opal unicorn pendant for Rose. Elphie boxed up the bracelet and necklace and put them in a bag along with Florence's bracelet.

Draco was starting to usher Scorpious toward the door when Scorpious stopped in front of a case of rings, "Wait! We need to get something for Hermione."

Elphie looked positively eager, especially since Scorpious had stopped right in front of the case with the engagement and wedding rings displayed.

"I like this one," Scorpious said, pointing at a four carat, pear-shaped diamond set in a rose gold filigree setting with a matching rose gold diamond infinity band.

He had to hand it to his son. The boy had good taste. The ring was perfect for Hermione. It was way too soon to be considering proposals yet and Elphie would probably be dying to tell someone that Draco bought an engagement ring for Hermione.

"It's very beautiful, Scorp, but that's an engagement ring," Draco said.

Scorpious turned to look at him, "So? You're going to ask her to marry you right?"

"Not for Christmas, I'm not," Draco said emphatically.

Scorpious looked disappointed by his answer, "Oh."

"Let's get something else for Hermione and we can talk about

"I have a few things over here that your young lady might like," Elphie said.

She opened up a case and levitated some bracelets out along with displays of charms and beads. Chain bracelets and rope bracelets were lined up across the counter. Scorpius picked out a silver rope bracelet with a clasp decorated with daisies and cherry blossoms. He then picked out charm beads with her initials on them F, A, and Z. After that Scorpius appeared lost about what else to pick out.

"When is her birthday?" Elphie asked.

"March seventeenth," Scorpius answered.

Elphie picked out some aquamarine beads and beads with daffodils on them, "So these are her birthstone color and birth flowers," Elphie explained.

Scorpius picked out the aquamarine bead he liked, an aquamarine stone with a diamond halo and cut-out hearts along the sides of the charm. He then picked a dangling yellow daffodil charm. Elphie took the charms and threaded them through the bracelet, putting small silver spacers between each of the charms. She fastened the bracelet back together and handed it to Scorpius.

Scorpius showed him the finished project, "Well, Dad. What do you think?" he asked excitedly.

"I think it's perfect," Draco said.

This was one of those times he wished Astoria were watching so that she could watch her son pick out a gift for a girl the first time. See how excited he was.

Elphie put the bracelet in a black velvet box and handed it to Scorpius, "There you go young man," she leaned forward and whispered, "She's going to love it."

"Hey, Dad?" Scorpius asked.

"Yes, son?" Draco answered.

"Should we get something for Rose and Minerva?" he asked.

## Chapter 26 Swift

January 1st

Hermione had just finished helping him into his green flannel pajama shirt and buttoning it up for him when a knock sounded at the door. She smoothed back his hair and helped him sit back against the pillows of the bed before rushing over to open the door.

She swung the door open wide, and Draco couldn't help but break out into a happy grin to see his mother standing in the doorway behind Scorpius, Minerva, and Rose.

Rose answered his grin with a radiant smile of her own and ran into the room, curls bouncing, and shouting "Daddy!" She crawled up onto the bed and threw her arms around his neck. He was incredibly grateful for Healer McNair's foresight in putting the healing cream on him. He saw Scorpius and Minerva still standing in the doorway, holding each other's hands for support, and looking apprehensive.

Draco tried to keep the reassuring smile on his face as he motioned for the two to come in. He felt so guilty seeing the worry on their faces. What must they have gone through over the last several days? No happy Christmas like he'd planned. No New Year's festivities like Hermione had planned.

"Come on, guys," Hermione said, urging them into the room. Minerva started sniffing as she got closer to the bed. Then he saw Scorpius start too. Draco shot a worried glance at Hermione. He could see the guilt creeping up into her eyes at the children's tears.

Draco set Rose beside him on the still widened bed. He kissed her forehead and smoothed away the frown that was starting to cloud her face at her sister's crying. "Will you go hug Nana Cissa for me while I give a hug to Scorpy and Minnie?"

Rose nodded and started to climb off the bed, "They need hugs. They've been scared even though I told them not to be. Auntie Luna said you would be fine once you got done talking to Scorpy's mum. I told them everything would be fine cause Auntie Luna is never wrong."

"Auntie Luna is an unusually perceptive lady," Draco agreed seriously.

Draco turned back to Scorpius and Minerva; both were standing just inside the room as Rose climbed down and bounced over to his mother to deliver a hug.

Scorpius looked at him with his slate gray eyes filled with tears, "Is she right Dad? Did you talk to mum? Does that mean you were dead since she's dead?"

Minerva started crying harder now, her shoulders shaking as she sobbed. Scorpius' chin began to wobble as he tried to keep from breaking down again. Draco saw his mother quietly guide Rose out of the room with a promise to find some hot chocolate. Hermione had an arm wrapped around both kids, making soothing, shushing sounds to both of them.

"Come up here on the bed with me, guys," Draco said to them.

Scorpius was the first to comply. He shucked his jacket as he walked around the bed, dropped it carelessly on the floor, and climbed in on the side Rose had vacated. Draco kissed his

He grasped Scorpius's shoulder and apparated them to the center of town just outside a jewelry store. He had a fondness for the owner, Tobias, who had named his store "The Dragon's Treasure" after Draco as a joke. He ushered Scorpius inside the store.

A young, blonde witch that Draco remembered as being the owner's eldest daughter, Elphie, greeted them with a smile, "Good morning, Mr. Malfoy and young Mr. Malfoy. What's brought you in to see us?"

"Good morning, Elphie. We've come looking for Christmas presents," Draco answered, flicking a glance between the witch and his son, who was looking around awestruck.

"Dad was wondering when we'd see you in here. He saw that extraordinary cuff on Ms. Granger's wrist in the paper and was dying to know who made it and was a little disappointed you didn't ask him," Elphie said with fond amusement at her father.

"Tell your father it's a very old family piece and not to be jealous. He knows he's my go-to for jewelry," Draco said, "Scorpius here has a young lady he'd like to buy a Christmas present for."

"I've got a few things you might be interested in," Elphie said, leading them past the cases of large occasion pieces, bridal jewelry, wedding and engagement rings, to a case of bracelets. Scorpius peered into the case and Draco looked over his shoulder. Scorpius pointed at a diamond tennis bracelet, casting a hopeful look over his shoulder at Draco.

Draco shook his head at his son with a small frown, "That's a bit much for an eleven-year-old girl."

Scorpius looked indignant at Draco's answer and huffed, "We're almost twelve."

Draco held back his chuckle of amusement. Elphie smiled at him over Scorpius' head.

looking offended. "I'll have you know my defensive skills are quite good. I was distracted by you almost dying at my feet." The Patronus of a Labrador bounded into the room, and the voice of Healer McNair boomed from the dog, "I expect you two lovebirds to get dressed and unlock this door this instant or I will blast it open. I don't care if you're naked or in the middle of coitus."

Hermione giggled and slid off him. She pulled on her shirt and pants and went over to the door. Draco pulled up the sheets that were tangled around his feet and covered himself. Hermione opened the door to the exasperated healer and smiled sheepishly as she let him in. Draco leaned back against the bed with his arms behind his head and a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

The healer gave him a stern look and pointed angrily at him, "Don't you give me that look, Draco Malfoy. I didn't work my ass off to keep your sorry butt alive so that you can go mess it up by having sex and opening up your wound with your exertions."

The healer started angrily peeling off the bandage on his chest, muttering to himself about the stupidity of patients. Draco thought he distinctly heard the words "ungrateful wretches" and couldn't help his snort of amusement at the healer.

"Well, you've managed not to hurt yourself it appears. And since you seem well enough to get it up, I'm sending you home tomorrow," the healer pronounced, smearing some more cream on Draco's chest. "You can take a shower. Just don't get the bandage wet."

Draco held his hand out to the man, "Thank you for everything you've done. We really are grateful."

Healer McNair shook the proffered hand with a smile and said severely, "The next time I see you in here, it better be for

seed. "I love you. I love you so much, l'ioness," he said panting. Hermione started crying again, her head nestled against his shoulder above his bandage. "I hope those are happy tears and not a testament to my pathetic love making skills," he said, holding her close and brushing away her tears.

XXX

"It's all my fault," she mumbled against him.

"What's your fault?" he asked, brushing her hair back off her face.

"You almost died. I put my babies in danger. I almost cost Scorpius his father, all because I wouldn't listen. I thought I was doing the right thing and I almost destroyed our lives," she wept.

Draco tipped her chin up so that her teary gaze met his, "None of this is your fault, or Harry's, or Minerva's, or mine, for that matter. We all made choices. We did the best that we could, but ultimately it's Weasley's fault. He turned his wand against you and tried to kill you for reasons only he knows. Let's place the blame where it is due. No more blaming ourselves for this."

"He tried to kill me. That slash across your chest was meant for me," she said with tears in her eyes.

Draco shuddered at the thought, "Thank God he got me instead of you. I told you once that I would take any curse or hex thrown at you. I meant it. I still mean it. I couldn't bear the thought of you being hurt."

"Maybe next time you could throw up a shield instead of stepping into the line of fire," she suggested with a smile.

"Maybe next time you could not turn your back on a potential threat," Draco retorted, "How did you manage to stay alive during the war with defensive skills like that?"

She reared up over him, still straddling his waist with his softening cock still inside her, and placed her hands on her hips,

hand out to her, "You'll have to be on top. I can't support my weight yet."

She took his hand and climbed on the bed. She swung one leg over his and grasped him in her hand. Draco threw his head back and moaned at her touch. He reached forward, ran his fingers along her folds, and found her eager for him. Draco sunk a finger inside and felt a thrill go through him at the feel of her wet heat welcoming him.

"Draco, I need you," his love moaned, rocking against his hand.

She whimpered when he took his hand away. Her gaze became heated as he brought his hand to his mouth and sucked on his finger, his smoldering gaze staying on hers as her taste flooded his mouth. She decided she'd had enough foreplay and rose up over him.

He growled as she slowly impaled herself on him. He unhooked the front clasp of her Slytherin bra and drew it off her. He kept one arm around her, supporting her as she rose and fell slowly on him, her head thrown back in ecstasy. He worshipped her breasts as she rode him at a frantic pace. Her movements started becoming erratic as she neared her orgasm.

Making love with her felt different this time than all the others. They'd almost lost one another, and the need and passion seemed more intense because of it. Their coupling this time was quick and desperate.

"I love you so much," he said, drawing her down to lay on him and helping her rock against him.

Her hair drifted around them like a curtain. She ground down hard against him, the head of his cock coming up against the opening of her womb.

"I love you," she panted as she came apart.

He let go and came with her, flooding her womb with his

## Chapter 27 The Women Are Up to Something

January 1st, Evening

The door clicked as Healer McNair left Draco and Hermione alone again. Draco could feel the pain fading again as the cream started to take effect.

Hermione turned and looked at him with an embarrassed smile, "I cannot believe we just got caught having sex in your hospital room." She buried her face in her hands, "Oh my God, that was so embarrassing."

Draco grinned unrepentantly, kicking off the sheets and moving to sit on the edge of the bed with his legs dangling off, still completely naked, "I got to make love to you and get out of the hospital a day early because of it. I fail to see a downside to any of that."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him with a murmured, "You would."

Draco stood up slowly with his hands grazing the bed for support. He caught Hermione's glance as she observed him, her look shifted from a worried frown to an appreciative smile as she took him in. He smirked a little at her look.

"Care to help me take a shower?" he asked, thinking back to the first time she'd 'helped' him take a shower.

What the wasthinking must have shown on his face. Hermione shot him a serious look and said, "No funny business this time," as she helped him walk the short distance to the bathroom with an arm around his waist.

He held back the bark of laughter and walked into the small bathroom. A small stall shower was along one wall with a white plastic curtain hanging down. A toilet and white porcelain sink with a mirror above it took up another wall. The walls were the same pale gray as the hospital room with the same small white tiles.

Draco sat on the bench in the shower that was pushed up against the wall. He couldn't wait to get home and sleep in his own bed and shower in his own massive shower. Hermione reached up and angled the shower head down so that it wouldn't spray his chest when she turned it on.

"You should get undressed," Draco suggested, as she turned the knob and let the water start to heat up. He tried to keep the eager expression out of his face, but he knew he was failing miserably.

"You just want to get me naked," she huffed, looking a little put out with him.

Draco gave her a 'well duh' look but shrugged and said, "I just thought you wouldn't want to get your clothes wet."

"Easily fixed with a warming spell," she interrupted him.

He didn't let her logic deter him, "I also thought you might like to freshen up a little after our earlier diversion."

He knew she hated being sticky and drippy. It always made her a little uncomfortable to be walking around with wet knickers and sticky thighs. He admittedly loved the idea of his seed dripping down her thighs. It brought out the possessive caveman in him, and she knew it.

She rolled her eyes at him. "You're lucky I love you," she said, pulling her shirt off.

"I am lucky," he answered seriously.

She softened then and kissed him tenderly. He let her scrub him down. He probably could've done it himself, but he thought

was already very interested in knowing if she was serious. "Please, Draco," she pleaded, "I almost lost you. You thought you were going to have to spend the rest of your life raising our kids without me. I thought the same thing," she had gotten his shirt open and ran her fingertips over the bandage, "I need you."

Being inside her was just what he needed as well. He needed to feel her around him. To feel like they were both alive and everything would work out in the end.

"Lock the door," he said with a hungry growl.

XXX

Hermione shot him a seductive smile as she pulled out her wand and locked the door. She dropped her wand on the bed beside them. He watched as she got off the bed and stripped her black yoga pants off. Her oversized Gryffindor tee shirt covered up everything but her sexy legs.

"The shirt too, lioness," Draco said, his eyes never leaving hers as he kicked off the blankets.

She had a playful glint in her eyes as she grasped the bottom of her shirt and slowly pulled it up. His mouth went dry as she slowly exposed every delicious inch of herself to him. Her shirt was finally pulled over her head, sending her curls swinging, and leaving her clad in only a green and silver lace bra. He groaned at the sight of her.

"You're so beautiful, my lioness," he breathed, "I love seeing Slytherin colors on you."

He took her wand and vanished his pajama bottoms, not willing to struggle with them to get them off.

Hermione watched him fascinated, "Curious," she said, looking at her wand as he set it back down, "Impatient much?" she asked quirkily an eyebrow at him.

"God, yes," Draco groaned. He was so impatient for her it was starting to become painful. "Climb up," he said holding a

"When I talked with Astoria, I thought you were dead. She told me I had to make a decision. I thought you were dead, and I wanted to be with you, but I couldn't. I knew it wasn't the right thing to do. I couldn't leave our kids without any parents. I chose the kids. It broke my heart to do it because I thought I had to leave you behind."

The sound of a door clicking shut caused him to stop and look up toward the door. Harry was gone, and he was alone with Hermione. He looked back at the witch in his arms. He loosened his hold on her and kissed her deeply.

She drew back from him, and he looked at her questioning-ly. Her chocolate brown eyes seemed to glow as she looked at him. "You gave up the chance to be with me when you thought I was dead to come back for our kids?" she asked quietly, her eyes never leaving his.

Draco nodded seriously. He loved this witch so much. He'd been willing to sacrifice his life for hers without a second thought. He hadn't wanted to have to choose between her and the kids, but if anyone would understand, it had to be her. He knew he would expect the same decision from her.

Her hands were on either side of his face, so soft and gentle, that feather-light touches comforting him and washing away some of his anguish. "I have never loved you more than I love you right now, Draco Malfoy."

"I love you, Hermione Granger. Now and always," he told her. He leaned in and pulled her against him. He needed her kiss. He needed her, the feel of her, her touch, her kiss, and her heart that she'd let him into, undeserving as he was.

"I love you," she said against his mouth, "I need you, Draco," she said with more urgency, starting to unbutton his pajama shirt.

"Hermione?" he asked. She couldn't seriously be trying to seduce him in his hospital bed. Not that it would take much. He

they both needed this little bit of giving and receiving care and to symbolically wash away the stress and grief of the last several days.

He was still weak from his injury, being immobile for so long, and the blood loss and strain on his body from his ordeal. He felt better today than when he first started waking up and knew the potions were doing a good job in helping him recover. Soon he would be back to normal, and they would be able to go about their lives.

The thought of going about their lives brought on thoughts of Weasley. If he were more like his father, he would go and kill the man. Draco wasn't his father though. He'd worked hard not to become the hard, unyielding man that his father was. The urge was there nonetheless. He wanted to make Weasley pay dearly for what he'd put everyone through.

"You're frowning. What's wrong?" Hermione asked worriedly, interjecting into his thoughts.

He'd completely zoned out while she washed him. He found himself leaned back against her as her hands massaged his scalp. The scrape of her nails against his skin felt divine, and he found himself wanting to arch into her touch.

"Nothing's wrong," he finally said.

"What were you thinking about then?" she asked as she rinsed his hair out.

"Weasley," he answered.

Her hands stilled in his hair. He sat up and turned to look at her. He could see the anger bubbling up in her eyes.

"I hate that bastard," she said with quiet ferocity.

"He's not worth hating," Draco said quietly.

"When I get my hands on him," Hermione said with rising fury, "he'll wish he'd never been born."

"No," Draco said firmly, grasping her hands.

"No!" Hermione shouted at him, angrily pulling her hands from his grasp, "He almost killed you. He tried to kill me. He deserves to pay for that at least. Not to mention all the other stuff he's done to me over the years."

"And he will," Draco placated, "Let's finish our shower, and you can continue yelling at me."

Hermione finished her shower, scrubbing herself vigorously. She shut off the water, stepped out, and handed him a towel before taking another and drying herself off. She was furious. He could feel the heat of it coming off her in waves.

He followed her out of the bathroom and found some black running pants and a blue long-sleeved t-shirt in the bag that his mother had packed for him. He heard Hermione scourgify her clothes before putting them back on, all the while muttering to herself. He sat down on the bed facing the door and where Hermione was putting on her clothes.

Once she pulled her shirt over her head, he said, "Alright, lioness. Let me have it."

She looked over at him with a livid expression, "Where do you get off telling me 'no' for wanting Ron to pay for what's he's done."

Draco took a deep breath and tried to keep his expression neutral, "You don't want justice for what he's done. You want revenge. You want to hurt him yourself for what he's done."

"Justice," she spat, "You think we're going to get justice for what he's done. He obliterated me repeatedly, and the Minister wouldn't do a thing to punish him. He acted like it was within his marital rights. You think trying to kill his wife and almost killing her lover is going to go any better."

Draco froze and looked over at her. She actually believed Weasley would get off for what he did to them. "Why would you think he's not going to be punished?" Draco asked heatedly.

Hermione scoffed at him, "It's all over the papers. Skeeter has been having a field day with this. Ron being arrested is a matter of public record, as is the reason he was arrested. No one is talking, but the absence of facts isn't stopping her from getting everyone worked up. Some old bitty tried telling me you got what you deserved for breaking up a 'happy family.'"

"Weasley is not going to get away with this. Attempted murder is a capital crime, and with enough evidence, he won't

echoed off the walls of the room as he let loose his fear of how close he'd come to losing her.

"Draco," Harry said, trying to get his attention, "Draco, you saved her."

The words started to pour from Draco. The fear. The grief.

The guilt. It all came flowing out. "I shouldn't have let her go over there. I shouldn't have let her send the girls over there. I thought they would be safe. We took precautions. I thought she was wrong to give Weasley a chance but I thought he would just be an ass and they would come home and refuse to go back. I should've tried harder to change her mind. I thought they would be safe. I convinced Minerva she would be safe."

"Draco, stop. They're safe. You know that you can't change Hermione's mind once she's made it up," Harry tried consoling.

Draco wasn't listening. He had curled in on himself, his hands pulling at his hair, "Right before I blacked out, I saw Weasley look like he was going to try to attack her again and I couldn't do anything. I couldn't warn her. I couldn't lift my arm to cast a spell to defend her. When I blacked out, I thought for sure she was dead. I thought I failed to save her. I thought I got us both killed."

A gasp from the door brought his head up. Hermione stood in the doorway with her hand covering her mouth and tears streaming down her face. She ran to him, and he held his arms open, drew her into his lap, and hugged her to him, so hard he knew he was probably crushing her. Her arms came around him, and she embraced him so tight the pain in his chest was radiating throughout his body, but he couldn't be bothered to care.

"I thought you were dead," he said, pressing his face into her damp curls and breathing in her lavender and jasmine scent.

tion arrangement. I wanted to ensure she would be comfortable over there. Arthur and Molly would never let anything happen to Rose, but they were still processing everything Ron had done. Molly especially had a hard time believing that Ron was capable of doing the things he did. Hell, I didn't trust him, but I didn't think he was capable of actually attacking you or Hermione." Harry collapsed in the chair again. He put his head in his hands and slumped down, looking defeated. Draco had to admit to himself that he hadn't expected Weasley to be capable of something like that either. He thought he was an utter arsehole and a pretty despicable person, but certainly not capable of attempted murder, especially with all his children in the house. The curse Weasley used hadn't been meant to kill instantly either. If he'd managed to get Hermione as he'd intended, she would have bled out, known she was dying the whole time. Draco would've had to watch her die. That thought brought back the memories of his time in the "in between," as he was calling it now when he thought she was already dead. He was trying hard to suppress the memory of his grief and guilt then. Of how he was going to have to try to live without her for the sake of the kids.

"She would've died," Draco said in a choked whisper. Harry looked up at him with tears swimming in his eyes and looking utterly grief-stricken. Draco ran a finger lightly across where Weasley had slashed him, "Right there. That's where her neck comes to on me." Harry let out a strangled cry and hid his face in his hands again. Draco stifled a sob but couldn't stop the tears from streaming down his face, "She would've died, Harry. I would've had to watch her die and been powerless to save her."

The thought overwhelmed Draco, and he turned his face away from Harry and let himself cry as he tried not to picture Hermione dying in his arms, choking on her own blood. His sobs

even get a trial. He'll be sentenced to life in Azkaban," Draco said, trying to hide his anger that Hermione had also had to deal with the press while she was worried about his recovery, "Why didn't Theo tell you this?"

"He might have said something to that effect while I was incinerating the papers," Hermione said a little flippantly.

"I see someone should've taken your wand away from you," he said with a smile. Hermione glared at him but wasn't able to hold the expression. "How much of the gardens did you destroy in your fit of rage?"

She snorted at that statement, "Your mother would kill me if I destroyed her rose bushes." Little did Hermione know, his mother had destroyed a good portion of the back gardens and parts of his Quidditch pitch in some of her fits of rage and grief. "I'm still mad at you," she said.

Draco looked up from his musings. She wasn't quite as angry as she'd been before. Here eyes were narrowed, and she still had a frown marring her beautiful features.

"Why are you still mad at me?" he asked.

She let out an exasperated huff, "I'm not some pathetic woman that can't think for herself or make her own decisions."

Where had that come from? Draco looked at her with a confused frown, "Of course you're not."

She put her hands on her hips and shot him an irritated glare, "That's how you made me feel when you told me that I couldn't make him pay for what he's done."

Draco had a fish out of water moment. He sat there opening and closing his mouth as he processed her words. He wanted to deny her words. He was protective of her, he couldn't deny that, and she knew it. He wanted to be the one to make Weasley pay, but he didn't want to allow her to do it. Allow her? Who was he to allow her to do anything? He didn't want her to hate that pathetic excuse of a husband because he didn't want her ruined by hate, but Draco admitted to himself that he was quite capable of hating Weasley. He was being hypocritical about this. "I'm sorry," he said finally, "It wasn't my intention to make

you feel that way, and I can see your point."

She nodded her head, accepting his apology. She was so far away from him, only halfway across the small room but he wanted her beside him. He sensed she needed distance to organize her thoughts and he didn't push her. He loved that she was strong and independent. He wouldn't want her to be any other way. He knew his overprotective nature got on her nerves sometimes, hence her calling him a caveman.

"What if he gets off?" she turned, looking at him with a worried frown.

"He's not going to get off," Draco answered with an assured tone. There was no way in hell Weasley was going to weasel his way out of this one.

"But what if he does?" she persisted, starting to pace the room and chewing on her bottom lip.

"The dungeons at the Manor are empty," Draco said darkly, "Such a shame he got out the last time."

"That's not funny, Draco," she said as she stopped in her pacing to look at him.

"Who says I'm joking?" Draco said seriously. He was dead serious. He was confident of the outcome of Weasley's fate. Weasley wouldn't be set free after he'd almost murdered a member of the Wizengamot. "Do you honestly think I'm going to just let that bastard walk free after what he did? I'm a Slytherin and a Malfoy, not some bloody turn-the-other-cheek Hufflepuff."

"You can't be certain that he won't get off for this," Hermione said, looking like she wanted to start crying again.

Draco stood and walked to where she was pacing. Forget giving her space to be mad at him. He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly against him. He smoothed a hand down her damp, curly hair.

"He's not getting off for this. I can assure you of that. I've been pressuring all our friends to take their Wizengamot seats for months now so that your divorce bill will be a guaranteed thing. I can and will put pressure where it's needed to make

them, maybe that wasn't such a bad thing."

"How are Lavender and her demon spawn doing?" Draco asked. It wasn't fair to refer to those kids like that. Draco instantly wished he could take the words back, even though they'd been little shits to his children.

"Fine, I guess," Harry said, waving the statement off as he continued his pacing, "How could I not know that he was capable of this? He was my best friend." Harry slumped down in the chair again, looking dejected, "He was my best friend, and I had to arrest him. I got Lavender's Patronus at the Auror's Office, and we rushed over to her house. I had to arrest my best friend for trying to kill my other best friend and possibly killing you." Harry buried his face in his hands and hunched over in his chair, "He was my best friend."

"Is he still?" Draco asked quietly.

Harry looked up at him startled. Then his gaze darkened, "How could you possibly ask me that?" Harry growled low, "He hurt my friend. He took memories away from her. Who knows what else Ron did to her? He's not the boy I've known for most of my life. I'm not even sure that boy is in there anymore."

"You didn't exactly do anything when you found out what he'd been doing to her," Draco pointed out.

Harry got up in Draco's face and shouted at him, "You think I didn't want to. I wanted to arrest him that day at Hogwarts. Hermione wouldn't let me. She said she didn't want it all over the papers. She didn't want Minerva to find out everything." Draco flicked away the spittle that had landed on his cheek from Harry's raging. "You seemed okay being around him at the Burrow," Draco pushed.

Harry looked like he was seriously considering hexing him, "I wasn't okay. I was fucking furious. I saw how Rose acted around him that day at the Burrow when you made the visita-

one's best friend. He'd come to respect the man over the years and had forgiven him for unknowingly trying to kill him in the bathroom all those years ago.

"Why in the world would you think this is your fault?" Draco asked him, "You weren't even there."

Harry got up and started pacing the floor in between the foot of Draco's bed and the table full of flowers. "I don't know.

I should have known he was that unstable," he raged, "He's been my best friend since we were eleven."

"Yes. I distinctly recall you choosing that prat over me," Draco said sardonically, smirking at Harry and crossing his arms over his chest below his soon-to-be newest scar.

Harry stopped pacing and stared at Draco incredulously then huffed out a laugh, "You were such an ass growing up."

Draco shrugged. It's not like he could argue with him. "Hermione would say that I was a product of my environment."

The mention of Hermione started Harry's angry pacing again, "He obliterated my friend to hide his cheating. How could I not know that he was obliterating her all these years? You figured it out in two days."

More like one, Draco thought, but you know who's counting. Draco had only had his suspicions because he knew Hermione was too smart not to notice that her husband was cheating and too upset about it to know and not care.

"Well, I always was smarter than you, Potter," Draco drawled. He was deliberately poking the bear, but if he was going to be cooped up in this hospital, he could at least get some entertainment out of it.

Harry glared at him and said, "Shut up, Malfoy," before resuming his pacing and continuing his rant about his friend, "And he was a shit father to those girls. Hardly ever around and didn't pay attention to them when he was, which considering how awful his kids with Lavender were when we first met

sure he's punished. He's not getting off for this, and if by some misfortune of fate, he does manage to escape justice, we'll take him down together. He doesn't get to attack my woman and traumatize my kids and get away with it," he said into her hair, heatedly.

"You're still a bloody caveman," Hermione growled against his chest, "You can't tell me you don't want revenge for what he's done."

Draco tipped her chin up so that he could gaze into her eyes, "Do you remember what I said to him at the Burrow?" Hermione shook her head. "I told him that if you ever decided you didn't want him around your girls," he continued, "I would use every means at my disposal to make sure he never saw them again. I knew he would eventually fuck it up. I never expected him to do so in such a spectacular fashion or make it so easy for me to keep him away from you and the girls. While he's rotting in a dank prison cell, we will be going about our happy lives. He will have to think about everything he's missing out on."

He dropped a kiss to her upturned brow, "My revenge is knowing that while he's in prison, we'll be living our lives. Minerva and Rose will have me every day to show them what a real father is. In time, we'll all forget about him. He will just be a fading memory. But he won't be able to forget us and what he threw away. Forgetting about that bastard and living our lives is truly the best revenge."

Hermione stared up at him for a moment before she broke into amused laughter, "Oh my God," she panted, "that's probably the worst thing you could do to him. The one thing Ron always needed was the spotlight."

Draco didn't bother to hide his smug smile, "Lioness, I may not show it that often, but I was in Slytherin for a reason."

He would make sure that Weasley knew that his girls were now Draco's. Draco already loved them and considered them his own. Draco would raise those girls as his own daughters, and he would make sure they never missed that sorry excuse of a father they once had. Weasley would rot in a cell knowing

that he was forsaken by friends and family. It was truly the best revenge because Weasley had brought it on himself.

\*\*\*

Five o'clock brought with it chiming bells a whole slew of people intent on welcoming Draco back to the land of the living. The large gathering was ordered off the fourth floor by harassed healers.

Draco, aided by Theo and Blaise, who hovered around him like mother hens, slowly made his way to the lifts to join his family and friends in the tearoom for a picnic. Several gray tables were pushed together with the black metal chairs with gray cushioned seats lining the sides of the table.

Draco impatiently swatted away Blaise and Theo's hands as they tried to steer him toward the table, "I'm not an invalid," he muttered irritably.

"No, you're just shuffling around like an old man," Blaise retorted.

"Stop exaggerating, Blaise," Theo said drily, "I'm sure Draco is relieved we aren't letting him fall flat on his pretty face."

Draco huffed in annoyance, "I'm not walking like an old man, and I'm not about to fall over." Both Blaise and Theo gave him identical looks of skepticism. "Fine," Draco sighed, "It's hard to stand up straight right now, and everything is just a little sore from disuse."

Draco hated admitting to any weakness. He may have reveled in the attention when he was younger, but he didn't like it now as an adult. He probably would have fallen on his face or still been shuffling down the hall without their help.

"Before we go over there," Blaise said, "the women are plotting something."

"What?" Draco asked softly, looking across the room to where Hermione was sitting with his mother, Tracey, Daphne,

He dropped his hand weakly and allowed her to end the kiss. He watched her through half-closed eyelids as she stood up and blushed a little to find that they still had an audience. Healer McNair was looking around the room with a slight smile on his face.

She brushed her fingertips across his face and then grasped his hand at his side, "I'll be back in a little bit," she said quietly. He smiled a little blearily at her, "Take your time. I'm just going to hang out here for a bit," he joked lamely.

He turned his head and watched Hermione cross around his bed and leave the room, saying goodbye to the healer as she left.

"That's some woman you got there," McNair said as he lowered the incline of Draco's bed and dimmed the lights.

"That she is," Draco murmured, finally letting himself drift off to sleep.

\*\*\*

Draco was just finishing his lunch when Harry knocked and poked his head through the door.

"Come in," Draco said, waving him over.

"How're you doing?" Harry asked, sitting in the chair beside Draco's bed and looking uncomfortable.

"Like I had my chest slashed open again," Draco said. He was joking. Well, he was just kidding a little bit. He'd never actually taken the opportunity to give Harry a hard time about slashing him with that curse in sixth year.

Harry winced and looked away, "Sorry," he said lamely and then in a rush, "This is all my fault."

Draco looked curiously at the stricken expression of Hermi-

"Not the brain function I was referring to," she looked down at herself again, "But perhaps a relaxing soak in the tub is in order. Your bathtub in your old bedroom is practically indecent."

The bath in his old room at the manor put the Prefects' bath at Hogwarts to shame. He never understood why it was so big. The bath was very similar to the old Roman baths, large and deep with a bench that ran along the outside and jets that ran along the walls. Just like the Prefects' bath, the bath had several faucets with different scents. A nice relaxing bath was exactly what she needed and a nap.

Healer McNair walked back into the room carrying a blue vial of pain potion, saying, "Here's your pain potion," uncorking the vial and handing to Draco.

Draco took the vial with relief and downed it. He made a face at the bitter taste of the potion. He lay back against the pillows and breathed a deep sigh of relief as he felt the effects of the potion course through his body. Hermione brushed back the lock of hair that had fallen across his forehead and looked down at him concerned.

He took her hand in his and held onto it. "I'm fine," he said groggily.

"You should have said something earlier if you were in pain," she admonished.

"I didn't want to be groggy around the kids. I knew it would scare them," Draco said slowly.

He was quickly losing the battle with consciousness. He could feel himself drifting down into sleep. He felt Hermione's lips brush against his. He hooked a hand in her shirt and pulled her closer to him. He slid his tongue along her lips and into her mouth. She tasted like mint and something that was uniquely Hermione. He wanted to fall asleep with her taste on his tongue.

Ginny, Helena, and Luna. Strangely they had all taken up the end of the table, leaving only one spot open at the head of the table.

"Not sure, mate," Theo answered with a shrug.

Draco sank gratefully into the vacant chair at the head of the table, flanked by Hermione and his mother, and ignored the tightness across his chest as he tried to sit as straight as possible. His children surrounded him, all clamoring for his attention.

Rose insisted on climbing into his lap and receiving the bulk of his attention. Thankfully, Minerva and Scorpius were content to stand beside him and let Rose pepper him with questions.

"How's your ouchy, Daddy?" Rose asked, looking like she wanted to pat him on the chest.

"Don't," Minerva interjected, taking her sister's hand to keep her from touching the bandaged area.

Rose looked a little hurt not to be able to touch him. Her chin wobbled as she geared herself up to start crying.

"None of that now," Draco said soothingly, smoothing out the wrinkle in her chin that threatened impending tears, "It itches something fierce," he answered her question with a touch of humor in his voice.

"Should you scratch it?" she asked, looking up at him, her eyes full of youthful curiosity. Draco looked at her closely, noting how quickly her expression changed from tearful to eager curiosity.

Draco shook his head in mock seriousness, "Oh, no. Healer McNair would be very sore with me if I scratched away all his hard work."

His son sent him a hopeful glance and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, "Does that mean you're healing? Are you going to be able to come home sooner?"

Draco reached over and tousled his son's hair affectionately. Scorpius immediately brought his hands up and started smoothing his hair back down with an aggrieved expression. "Healer McNair is letting me go home tomorrow instead of the day after tomorrow," Draco answered smiling, winking at

Hermione who blushed and rolled her eyes at him.

Rose started jumping up and down in excitement on his knee and clapping her hands, "Yay! Does that mean we can celebrate Christmas when you get home?"

"Of course!" Draco said, trying to sound happy.

His children had missed Christmas because of his injury and hospital stay. Another crime to lay at Weasley's door. A riot of emotions washed over him. Rage was first and foremost at the thought of how their first Christmas together was tainted by Weasley's attack. Sorrow followed at a close second at how worried they'd all been. Rose seemed to be the only one who hadn't suffered over much while he was in the hospital, and that was probably only because she believed Luna when Luna had told them that he would recover. He gathered them to him. He breathed in their soft scents, like cookies fresh out of the oven.

"Daddy, you're squishing me," Rose whined.

Draco released them from his embrace and placed a kiss on Rose's brow, "Sorry, princess."

"Alright everyone," his mother called from her seat beside him, "find your seats."

The ladies kept their seats near each other. Hermione, Ginny, and Luna sat along one side. His mother, Daphne, Helena, and Tracey took up the other. The children quickly took places in the middle of the table. Rose insisted on sitting beside "Auntie Luna" and that Albus sit next to her. Florence sat next to her mother, and Scorpius insisted on sitting beside her. Minerva seated herself between Albus and 'Mione. Drake and James took up the spots on the other side of the table next to Scorpius. That left four very confused men forced to sit at the end of the table. Harry seemed not to mind that much and took his seat next to his eldest son. Theo, Greg, and Blaise shot suspicious looks down the table at their wives, who were pointedly ignoring their husbands and whispering to one another while the seat claiming was going on. The women had banded together, and something was up.

His mother flicked her wand in a graceful arc and glasses and

over Draco's bed at the healer, "I am not your patient, Angus, and I would not suggest you try to force me from Draco's side."

Healer McNair glared back at Hermione, "I'm not your healer, but I know you've barely slept at all since he's been here. You are exhausted and will wind up here in the hospital if you don't get some rest," the healer stated firmly and then directed his attention to Draco, "I'm going to go get you a pain potion. Reason with her while I'm gone." The healer left the room at that and closed the door quietly behind him.

Draco looked at Hermione. Even though she had gotten some sleep last night, it wasn't nearly enough to make up for all the sleep she'd lost while they'd been trying to save his life and when he'd been in a coma healing. She had bags under her eyes still and a tense set of her shoulders that meant she was barely holding it together.

"Don't look at me that way, Draco Malfoy," she warned.

Draco held his hands up in surrender, "I didn't say anything." "I know I look like shit right now but I just got you back, and I don't want to leave you here by yourself," she said, looking down and picking at his Quidditch jersey.

He grasped her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her palm and then her wrist, "You're beautiful and I kind of like seeing you in my old Quidditch jersey."

She scoffed and tried to pull her hand away, but he held on, "Obviously we need to get your eyes checked. Or maybe you have a concussion that has severely impaired your brain function."

"Get rid of the yoga pants, and I'll show you how unimpaired my brain function is," Draco said lasciviously nibbling on the heel of her hand. He looked up at her as he did it and caught her gasp and grinned against her hand.

She rolled her eyes at him, pulling her hand from his grasp,

crying again.

Healer McNair straightened and looked at Minerva and Scorpius kindly, "No. Your dad is still sore, but he is healing just fine. This is just standard protocol."

"See Minnie," Rose said smugly, "I told you Daddy's ouchy would be just fine. Auntie Luna said so."

Rose jumped up on the bed and Draco had to hide his wince of pain. The healer looked at him sharply, and Draco thought he must have caught the tightening of his mouth. The cream that the healer put on early in the morning must have worn off by now.

"Alright. I really must insist that your daddy rest," Healer McNair said, looking kindly at the children and then at Hermione and his mother.

Rose pouted, "But I barely got to see my daddy."

Draco forestalled a full-on tantrum by suggesting, "Why don't you all come back and we can have dinner together tonight?"

"That sounds like an excellent idea," his mother said enthusiastically. She threw a concerned look at him as well. She had probably caught the pain he was trying to hide. "Let's listen to the healer and let your father rest," she said to the children. His mother came up and kissed his cheek, "Listen to the healer. Get some rest," she whispered into his ear.

The children all gave him hugs. He had to clench his jaw to keep from hissing in pain as they each jostled and bumped against his chest when they hugged him hard. His mother had them don their jackets and ushered them out the door.

The affable healer said goodbye to all of them as his mother closed the door behind them. He turned to look at Hermione, "You too, missy," he said with a no-nonsense tone, "I want you to go home, take a shower, eat something decent, and take a nap."

Hermione placed her hands on her hips and leveled a glare

pitchers of pumpkin juice appeared. Before anyone could reach out to pour, his mother flicked her wand again, and the pitchers started pouring out the juice.

Once the glasses were filled with the golden liquid, his mother stood and lifted hers. Quiet descended on the table as everyone looked expectantly at his mother. "I want to thank you all for everything you've done over the last several days," his mother said as she looked down the table at his friends, "I've never before seen such an incredible group of people drop everything and work together to help a friend and their family through a hard time. We understand the sacrifice you all made in staying with us during the holidays. Your efforts, though at times a bit high-handed," at this his mother glared down at the end of the table where Theo and Blaise had the grace to look a bit shame-faced, "were nonetheless appreciated. Thank you for being there to support us."

"What did Blaise and Theo do to Mother that has her so miffed?" Draco leaned over and whispered to Hermione after he took a drink of his juice.

"They got caught spiking her tea with a mild sedative a few days ago," Hermione murmured to him. "It's a wonder Blaise can even sit down right now."

Draco looked sharply down the table to where Blaise sat. Sure enough, Blaise was squirming in his chair, looking disgruntled and uncomfortable as he tried to find an easy way to sit in the uncomfortable chair.

"What did she do to Theo?" Draco asked, not seeing any signs of discomfort from his friend.

Hermione let out a bark of laughter, drawing the attention of the rest of the table. She waved them off, and they settled back into their conversations. "He apparated to another part of the house when they were caught and hid until you woke up." Draco laughed a little. His stomach rumbled, and he found that he was ravenously hungry. He looked at Hermione, "What are we having for dinner?" he asked, "I'm starving."

Hermione startled a bit in her seat, "Oh, sorry. That's me."

Draco wasn't given time to ponder her oddly cryptic words. Hermione flicked her wand and white plates with silver cloches covering them soared gracefully over the table to land in front of each person at the table. Another flick of her wrist and the cloches were whisked away to stack themselves on a table in the corner.

Draco looked down and felt his mouth start to water at the smells emanating from his plate. A large ribeye steak took up half his plate. He could see the juices from the steak oozing around to mingle with the green beans and mashed potatoes. Draco looked around for his utensils and growled in frustration to find nothing beside his plate.

Ginny giggled beside Hermione, "Someone's hungry."

"Yes. Better give him some utensils, or he'll start eating it with his hands," Hermione responded.

Ginny smirked and waved her wand. Rolls of white cloth napkins appeared in front of their plates. Draco grabbed his eagerly, draped the napkin over his lap, and started cutting up his steak. He moaned at the first bite. The garlic, salt, and pepper seasoning on the steak combined with the savory juices of the meat were just short of heaven for Draco. Draco ravenously ate his dinner, rudely ignoring everyone at the table that had come to see him. He finished his food with a contented sigh and set his utensils down on the plate.

Draco looked up to find several of his friends watching him with amused smirks on their faces. "What?" he asked, thinking that maybe he had food on his face or stuck in his teeth.

His mother smiled and reached over to wipe the corner of his mouth with her napkin. "Darling, I don't think I've ever seen you eat that much or that quickly before."

Draco smiled sheepishly, "Sorry. I was famished."

"I'll say," Harry joked, "that steak looked like something out of a Flintstones cartoon."

Draco cast a confused look at Hermione for a translation. She smiled at him and laced her fingers with his. "Cartoon about prehistoric people. The food was massive in the cartoon

side.

Hermione finally cleared her throat, "You and your sister won't be seeing him anymore."

She turned away from them then. With his arms full of kids, Draco couldn't stop her as she slid off the bed and walked over to where Scorpius had dropped his jacket on the floor. She picked it up and cradled it against her chest.

A knock on the door startled them all. Healer McNair poked his head in and then opened the door. Both kids sat up and tried to look like they hadn't been cuddling and crying. Draco hid a smile as he caught their overly serious looks directed at the healer. Hermione turned from her corner with Scorpius' jacket still in her hand. The look on her face was one of such incandescent rage that Draco wondered if he should ask the healer to leave for his safety. Hermione seemed to take a deep shuddering breath and draped the jacket over a chair. By the time she turned back to face them, her expression had settled into a calm smile that Draco had recognized as being just a little too forced.

"Good morning," Healer McNair greeted the room.

Both Scorpius and Minerva murmured a polite "Good morning" to the healer. Rose bounced into the room with a noticeable hot chocolate mustache. His mother hurried to keep up with her.

"Who're you?" Rose inquired to the healer, tugging on his robe to get his attention.

The healer crouched down to Rose's height and introduced himself, "I'm Healer McNair."

"Can my daddy come home today?" Rose asked, looking hopeful.

The healer shook his head with a smile, "Your daddy needs to stay tonight and tomorrow night."

"Is he still hurt?" Minerva asked, looking like she might start

## Finding Hermione

across his waist.

"Shh... everything is okay, angel. Stop crying. No more tears," Draco soothed.

Hermione reached across him and touched her daughter. Minerva still cried and hiccupped into his shoulder. Draco looked helplessly at Hermione, looking for some guidance on how to fix this situation. Hermione looked just as helpless as him.

"It's all my fault," Minerva finally mumbled, with her face still buried into him, refusing to look at anyone.

"No, angel, it's not your fault at all," Draco protested immediately.

"Sweetie, look at me," Hermione said to her daughter and waited until Minerva moved her head out of his shoulder and met her mother's eyes, "There is no way that any of this is your fault."

Minerva shook her head in denial of Hermione's words, "I provoked him. He made some comment about Draco teaching Rose and I how to fly, saying it was his job as our father to teach us. I couldn't help it. I got mad. It was his fault that I was afraid to fly in the first place. I told him he was a shitty father and a shitty flyer and Draco was better than him at both." Draco chose not to say anything to this, preferring to let Hermione take the lead. Knowing how he felt about Weasley right now, he'd probably make some caustic remark about her father that wouldn't help the situation.

"You are still not at fault for this," Hermione maintained, and Draco nodded his agreement, "Your father..."

"He's not my father," Minerva cut in vehemently, "He should rot in jail for the rest of his life for what he's done, and I'm not going to have anything to do with him no matter what you decide, and you can't make me."

Hermione and Draco sat looking at each other for a stunned moment. Minerva just burrowed herself back into Draco's

since their food source was dinosaurs."

Still confused, Draco said, "I just ate what was on my plate." Daphne piped up then with an amused laugh that always startled Draco with how similar it was to her sister's, "Hermione charmed the dishes to fill according to the hunger of the diner."

"Oh," Draco said, suddenly realizing why everyone was amused, "Is there any dessert?"

Everyone at the table started laughing. "I made lemon meringue pies. You can have some in a little bit," Helena said, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, "Let your food settle or you'll make yourself sick."

"Speaking of the food, delicious by the way," Draco said, with an amused smile, "What's going on with you ladies? You seem up to something."

The ladies shared a glance with each other. Daphne, Helena, and Tracey looked determined but apprehensive. Finally, Hermione said, "We've decided we want to do away with the food issue," Hermione said in a rush to the table, "We don't want you serving our food for us anymore unless we ask you to."

"Okay," Draco said slowly, "Why the big production?" he asked as he grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips, "You know that it was up to you all along."

"I know, love," Hermione said, "We agreed together," she continued, gesturing at the ladies around her, "that we don't want our daughters growing up thinking that it's normal. At school is one thing, it's a tradition there. They have each other, and we trust the boys, but at home, we need to show them what is normal."

Draco nodded, "That is understandable. They need to be brought up to be independent, self-sufficient witches."

The loud scraping of a chair across the floor drew Draco's attention to where Blaise was rising gingerly from his seat. He crossed to the other side of the table, wincing slightly with each step. He dropped a kiss on the brow of his daughter and stood behind his wife's chair.

"Tracey, my sweet, may I talk to you privately," Blaise said quietly.

She nodded, and he pulled her chair back for her. They drifted away from the table. Draco glanced over at them and saw Blaise lean against Tracey as they talked.

"Daphne," Theo called from the end of the table, "will you come down here and sit with me?"

Daphne rose gracefully from her seat and moved down the table to Theo. He scooted his chair back and drew his wife to seat herself on his lap. Greg and Harry got up to give the couples some privacy. Greg sat down beside Helen and Daphne vacated her seat, threw an arm around her, and kissed her soundly.

Harry stood behind Ginny's chair and joked, "Well, I, for one, am glad that my son will stop calling me an uncouth barbarian and a shame to the Potter name now."

Draco and Greg burst out in hearty guffaws, looking down the table at the amused look on James' face. "I quite like your boy, Harry," Draco said.

The undercurrent of tension at the table seemed to evaporate as a giggle from Daphne burst from the end of the table. Tracey and Blaise made their way back over to the table to stand behind their daughter.

"I feel like there's more to the story," Draco said, "Will you tell us what led you to this decision?" Draco asked diplomatically.

He knew Hermione had no compunctions with throwing away centuries worth of tradition if she felt it was the right. She never really bought into the whole food thing anyway. Tracey, Daphne, and his mother would need something serious before they decided to go against tradition.

Hermione looked around the table at the group gathered, then back at Draco, "I don't know if anyone told you, but Harry and Greg found Honoria Blake and her son."

Draco nodded and was relieved to know that she'd been found. "When was this?" he asked.

Greg spoke up, "A few days after your attack. I got a lead on her and took Harry with me." Greg shrugged, "People usually

son's forehead and brushed away the tears. He drew him down and cuddled him close in a way they hadn't done since Scorpius was little.

Draco looked over at Minerva who was still crying and hadn't moved to get on the bed. "Come on, angel. You too," he said, grasping her hand and pulling her closer to him.

Hermione slid Minerva's jacket off her and helped her climb up onto the bed. He pulled her down to his side, and she curled up with her head on his shoulder, matching Scorpius. Hermione sat down on the edge of the bed. He felt her run a comforting hand down his leg, then it drifted away, and she was touching Minerva, then Scorpius.

"I want you both to try to stop crying and worrying. Everything is going to be okay now," Draco reassured them, "I didn't die, so stop thinking that. I did talk to your mum though, Scorpius."

Scorpius looked up at him with a curious frown, "Really? You saw mum?"

Draco smiled and nodded, running his hand through his son's hair and down his back, "She came to talk to me for a little bit. She wanted me to tell you that she loves you and she's proud of you. She said you were a handsome, smart, and kind boy." Scorpius buried his head in Draco's shoulder again. He could hear his son's muffled hiccups as he started crying again. Draco rubbed soothing circles on his son's back. Hermione got up off the bed, walked around to the other side, and sat down beside Scorpius. She rested a hand on his shoulder and then leaned down and kissed his cheek, whispering words Draco couldn't hear to Scorpius. Minerva reached across Draco's waist and grasped Scorpius' hand.

Minerva started sobbing again, just as Scorpius quieted. It was starting to seem like one stopped crying and then the other would start up. He felt Scorpius' hand tighten on Minerva

see the guilt etched into her face. She'd tried. They'd both tried to find another way to help Minerva heal.

"Minerva, tell me what you want, love," Hermione said softly, kissing her daughter's head.

"I don't want to be a Weasley anymore," Minerva answered quietly, "No more Weasley name. No more Weasley red hair. No more Weasley blue eyes."

"Okay," Hermione answered slowly, "We'll think of something. Just give us some time."

Draco had no idea how they were going to give Minerva what she wanted. A name was easy to take care of, they could just change it or drop the Weasley name. The hair, the eyes. How were they going to change that?

XXX

\*\*\*

After they coaxed Minerva to take a nap, Tansy cleaned up all the hair and sat watching over the girl while Draco and Hermione went downstairs to figure out how to keep their promise to Minerva.

"How do we give her what she wants?" Draco asked despondently.

He swirled the contents of his glass around as if the amber liquid within would give him the answers he sought. He caught the look that passed between his mother and Hermione.

"What is it?" Draco asked, sitting up straighter on the sofa, "You know how to give her what she wants?"

Hermione bit her lip and looked at his mother again. His mother nodded her head mysteriously. The two stared at each other for a while in some sort of silent communication before Hermione turned and took his hand in hers.

"There's a way to give her what she wants," Hermione said, fiddling with the trio of rings stacked on her right ring finger,

"Your mother and I, we've been looking for a way since Minerva first started bringing up that she didn't want to be a Weasley anymore. I hoped that it wouldn't come to it, but she's just not getting any better."

"How long have you known you can help her?" Draco asked, getting angry.

They'd known they could give her what she wanted and they let the poor girl suffer. Draco stood up and flung his glass into the fireplace. Hermione and his mother jumped as the glass smashed explosively against the brick of the fireplace. Draco rounded on them ready to start yelling when his mother held up her hand to forestall his tirade.

"I found it yesterday evening," his mother said, "and I came over as soon as I found it to talk to Hermione about it."

Draco remembered his mother showing up suddenly and the two of them sequestering themselves in the drawing room. It cooled his ire to know that they hadn't known for weeks how to give Minerva what she wanted. He didn't like that they were keeping secrets from him though. This would have been nice to know last night before Minerva decided to cut all her hair off.

"What do we need to do?" Draco asked hoarsely, still standing by the fireplace.

Hermione fiddled with her rings some more and looked nervously at him, "It involves blood magic." Draco shrugged at that, not concerned with whether blood magic was considered light or dark if it meant it would help Minerva. Seeing his shrug at what she suggested, Hermione continued, "Since she doesn't want to be a Weasley and doesn't want any of the outward characteristics of a Weasley, she is rejecting her blood. In order for the spell to work, a blood relation must willingly give her up, and someone must willingly give her their blood to make her their family. It's basically an ancient magical adoption," Hermione said, looking nervously at him.

Draco sat stunned, looking between the two women in his life. Hermione with her nervous expression and his mother's placid demeanor. "You've been preparing for this?" he asked.

Hermione nodded slowly, "I hoped time and talking about it would help her move on. Today has shown us that it's not working and is becoming worse. It's dangerous for her to keep rejecting her blood. She will start to reject her magic soon if we don't stop it. This ritual is our last resort."

"What do we do then?" Draco asked, "You need a Weasley to give her up?" ready to go drag a Weasley back by the hair if needed.

Hermione nodded assent, "Yes, we have to convince one of them to willingly perform the ritual. Part of the reason I wanted her to go over there today was so that they could see that she wasn't getting any better. I hoped that being around her grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins would help her see that being a Weasley was a good thing, but I think I just pushed her over the edge."

Tears started trickling down Hermione's face again. His mother reached over and grasped Hermione's hand. "They needed to see," his mother said quietly, "They wouldn't give her up if they didn't see firsthand how much she was suffering."

Hermione nodded at his mother's words but still sat there crying. "I could see that she couldn't handle it, so I let her go home. I thought you'd be back from the school by then," Hermione said to Draco, "and I knew Tansy was there. I wanted to talk to them without her there, so I let her go alone."

Draco knelt in front of the sofa and took her other hand in his. She looked at him full of remorse. "I'm sorry," she whispered to him, "I know you thought I was being stubborn, but until last night, I didn't know what to do for her. I don't think she'll ever forgive me."

"Tell her the truth," Draco said quietly, "I'm sure she'll understand if you just talk to her."

Hermione nodded at his words. His mother let go of Hermione's hand and gave Hermione a handkerchief to wipe her face. Draco released her hand as well so that she could dry her eyes and wipe her nose. Once Hermione cleaned her face, she looked curiously at him still kneeling on the floor in front

her. Minerva appeared to have used her wand to cut her hair. Tufts of red stuck out in odd places. Cuts lined her scalp where she'd gotten too close.

Draco disarmed her just as she was about to try to sever a lock of hair on the back of her head. He sunk down to his knees in the pile of fallen hair, looking like red ribbons on the floor, and gathered her up into his arms.

"Angel, what have you done?" he asked, breaking down and crying at the sight of her.

"I couldn't look in the mirror anymore and see his hair," Minerva said hollowly.

Draco pulled Minerva into his arms. Draco started rocking her like an infant as she murmured "No more Weasley," over and over again.

Draco squeezed her tight, "Whatever you want, angel. We'll do whatever you want."

"Tansy!" Draco called.

The house elf popped into the room and surveyed the two of them on the floor, surrounded by Minerva's hair. He didn't miss the tears that pooled in the elf's eyes at the sight of Minerva.

"Will you please go get Hermione from the Burrow?" he asked, then added, "and please get my mother after that."

The elf nodded and was gone with a pop. Tense minutes passed that seemed like hours, but was probably only about two minutes before Hermione popped into the room alone.

"Draco," Hermione called, then she stepped into the light of the bathroom doorway, "Oh my God," she cried horrified.

She dropped to her knees beside him and ran her hand over Minerva's scalp. "What did she do?" Hermione asked brokenly, tears starting to course down her face.

"It has to stop, Hermione," Draco said, pleading his daughter's case and letting Hermione see his fear, "She could've seriously hurt herself today. You have to give in. Let her be a Granger. Hell, let her make up her own bloody name if that's what she wants."

Hermione nodded, tear-stricken down her cheeks. He could

Hestia nodded understanding. Both Hestia and Draco knew the weight of an infamous name. "She wants to disassociate herself with the name that's caused this pain and torment in her life. It's understandable since she was bestowed the Weasley name by her father that she would want to reject it as she rejects her father."

"What does Hermione think of all this?" Minerva asked.

"She's being stubborn. She thinks that letting Minerva change her name won't help her, but nothing else is working. I think she might be close to giving in," Draco answered.

"I'm not sure what to tell you," Minerva said kindly, "but she does need to return to school soon. Even someone as smart as Minerva can fall behind easily if she's out of school too long."

"We'll do what we can to help her through this," Hestia added, "when she does return."

Draco thanked the ladies and Flooed back home. He stepped into the drawing room and was drawn to the windows by a tapping noise. He opened the window and a large, tawny barn owl soared into the room and dropped a letter into his hand before soaring back out. Draco ripped open the seal, barely noticing that it was from the Ministry.

XXX

Dear Parents of Minerva Granger-Weasley,

This letter is to inform you that your underage witch performed a severing spell at 1:40 today. While the use of underage magic is no longer prohibited outside of Hogwarts, we do recommend that the use of such potentially dangerous spells not be used without parental supervision, if at all.

Sincerely,

Carmella Whingdon

Department for Magical Education, Underage Use of Magic Division  
Draco dropped the letter and started running up the stairs shouting Minerva's name. He bounced off the door to her bedroom when he tried to open it. He whipped out his wand and blasted it open. He found her on the floor in her bathroom. Her long, red curly hair was lying in heaps on the floor around

of her.

Draco took her hand in his again, clutching her hand to stop the shaking of his own. Kneeling on the floor with his mother looking on, he looked at her and said with a slightly shaking voice, "Hermione, I have to ask you a question...."

take care of family.”

Draco marveled at the wonderful kid he’d somehow been blessed with. He didn’t deserve a kid like Scorpius, not after how much of a spoiled shit he was growing up. Weren’t you supposed to be blessed with children just like yourself so that you knew the hell you put your parents through?

“I don’t deserve you,” Draco said, smiling down at his son, “You’re the best son a father could ask for.”

Scorpius blushed again and fidgeted with his new ring. “I just want her to get better,” Scorpius said sadly.

“We all do, buddy,” Draco said, resting his hand on his shoulder.

“You could always make her a Malfoy,” Scorpius suggested.

“If it were a possibility, I would do it in a heartbeat,” Draco answered. He would make her a Malfoy in a second if he thought it would help her move past this.

They floored to the headmistress’s office at Hogwarts. Minerva McGonagall, as well as Hestia Carrow, Head of Slytherin, were waiting for them when they stepped out of the fireplace. Both teachers talked quietly in a corner of the room the give them time to say goodbye. Scorpius was soon sent off to unpack his bag and return to classes.

After the door closed behind Scorpius, the headmistress assessed him with a sharp appraising look, “I’m glad to see that you’re on the mend. How is my namesake doing and when can I expect her back?”

Draco sighed and seated himself in the red and gold tartan chair in front of the headmistress’ desk. “She’s not doing well. I don’t know if Hermione told you, but she was the first to find us after Weasley attacked me. He was about to attack Hermione and she stunned him. She didn’t want to go over there but we talked her into it. Then that happened and I almost died. She still has nightmares about what happened.”

“Oh, the poor dear,” Minerva said softly.

Draco nodded and continued, “She says she doesn’t want to be a Weasley anymore.”

## Finding Hermione

we'll do whatever she wants."

Draco felt relief at her capitulation.

\*\*\*

Hermione's grand idea seemed to be an odd version of immersion therapy. All the Weasleys were gathering to help Minerva. Draco privately thought the idea was rubbish but he was willing to try anything to make the nightmares stop.

After Draco's attack and their son's arrest, Arthur and Molly Weasley had finally disowned their son. The Weasleys were steadfastly loyal, especially to one of their own. For them to disown a family member was almost unheard of. Draco could appreciate how hard it had to have been for them to publicly disavow their son. He could imagine that no matter her son's actions, Molly Weasley still saw that little boy with the golden smile and mop of red hair. He could understand how hard it would be to reconcile that image with the reality of the man her son had become. He knew they both had to be dealing with their fair share of guilt, blaming themselves for their son's actions and wondering where they went wrong.

Out of sensitivity for their feelings, Draco wasn't going to this Weasley family gathering. He was taking Scorpius back to school. He watched as Hermione took Rose and a reluctant Minerva to the fireplace to Floo to the Burrow. Scorpius hugged Rose and Hermione goodbye. He spent a long time hugging Minerva, whispering something in her ear that had her hanging on tighter to him and nodding into his neck. Draco hugged and kissed the three before they stepped into the fireplace and disappeared to the Burrow.

"What did you say to her?" Draco asked Scorpius, curious about what had happened between the two.

Scorpius ducked his head, ears turning pink. "I told her that her last name didn't matter. She's my sister and Malfoy always

## Chapter 29 Becoming Minerva

Malfoy

Afternoon of January 6th

"Will you let me adopt Minerva?" Draco asked Hermione, "Will you allow me to be a father to both your daughters and raise them with you?"

Draco wanted to tack on a "will you marry me" and maybe a "will you have my babies" to his list of proposals but he thought that it wasn't right to make a marriage proposal while she was currently married to another man. He also wasn't going to ask her to be the mother of his hopeful babies in front of his mother. Granted, his mother was no prude. She knew they lived together, obviously. She even knew they had sex, but there were just things she wasn't willing to talk about with her sitting there watching the two of them.

"Yes, Draco," Hermione said, to his relief.

Draco bowed his head and touched his forehead to their clasped hands, "Thank you, Hermione," Draco said fervently. A watery chuckle burst from Hermione's mouth. She touched

his cheek and forced his face up to meet her gaze. She looked down at him with an amused smile, "Honestly, Draco. Who did you think I was going to let adopt Minerva?"

Draco gave her a sheepish grin, "Well, I hoped it would be me, but I didn't want to assume. Also, I thought it would be better if I did the asking so that you know that I want them as my own."

"I know that you do," Hermione said, "Come sit down. Your knee has to be going numb by now."

Draco rose stiffly from the floor. His knee did hurt, and he rubbed it to get the blood circulating again. Draco sat down on the sofa beside Hermione. He looked over at his mother who smiled enigmatically at him. Draco didn't bother to puzzle over his mother's smile. She would tell him when she wanted.

"What do we do now?" Draco asked.

"Well," Hermione said, with a bit of apprehension, "I need to go talk to Minerva. Then I'll go see if I can catch me a Weasley, as well as bring Rose home."

"If you aren't able to bring one back, I'll go over there and drag the first one I see back by their hair if need be," Draco said ominously.

Draco might have made an effort to end the Malfoy-Weasley feud but he would resume hostilities if they kept him from adopting Minerva.

"Caveman," Hermione muttered, then in a chiding tone,

"They have to be willing, Draco."

"Fine," Draco said sullenly, "Bribe them if you have to. Give them whatever they ask for."

"Sometimes, Draco," his mother said drily, "you are so like your father. This is not something we can use force or bribery for. It takes diplomacy."

"Mother," Draco retorted, "you know as well as I do that our families have been feuding for centuries. I don't think they're going to be eager to hand one of their family members over to me."

"I think you're not giving the Weasleys enough credit,

He stalked to their room after watching Hermione give Minerva the potion and seeing Minerva drift off to sleep. Hermione followed him into the room and quietly closed the door. Lines of worry were etched into her face along with dark circles under her eyes from sleep deprivation. He imagined he looked just as bad as she did.

"Lether stop being a fucking Weasley," Draco pleaded with Hermione, "If this will help her move past the nightmares, then let her stop."

"I don't think letting her change her name will make what she's going through stop," Hermione protested, looking equally frustrated and guilty at the ordeal her daughter was going through.

"She thinks it will," Draco said, running his hands harshly through his hair, "She has the same dream every night. She keeps seeing him about to attack you. She sees me dead on the floor and she's not able to save you. She keeps seeing both of us dead." Draco sat down on the settee with his head in his hands, rocking back and forth, "I can't keep hearing her screaming. It's killing me that I can't make it stop."

"I know," Hermione answered him, moving to stand in front of him. Draco looked up at her when he caught the watery wobble in her voice. "I'm being eaten away by guilt that I didn't listen to her that day when she said she didn't want to go over there. My eleven-year-old child had to attack her own father to protect me."

Hermione broke down crying then. Draco pulled her down into his lap and cradled her close to him. Hermione buried her face in his neck as Draco stroked her hair and back soothingly. Her tears slid in warm, wet trails down his neck causing him to shiver at the sensation.

"I'm supposed to be the one protecting her," Hermione sobbed into his neck.

"If this is what makes her feel better, let her do this, please," Draco pleaded.

"I want to try one more thing," Hermione sniffled. "Then

qualified to understand how it felt to harm another person to protect yourself or your loved ones at such a young age.

Today was the last day for the children to board the train to return to Hogwarts for the start of the new term. Minerva wasn't going. That much was clear to both Hermione and Draco. She had nightmares every night. They were all starting to get a little sleep deprived and Draco was getting a kink in his neck from sleeping in that too small bed.

Scorpius, while more likely to hug or cuddle with one or both of them for no reason, wasn't having nightmares. Weasley's attack was more of a wake-up call to Scorpius that his father wasn't invincible. Scorpius was slowly shedding the anxiety he'd felt during Draco's hospital stay. Every day Scorpius saw Draco moving easier and returning to his normal routines seemed to make it easier for Scorpius to accept that Draco would be fine. Draco decided that he would be able to return to school tomorrow, only a little late to return to classes.

Every night more and every talk ended with Minerva denying her family name. Loud and stubborn refusals to be a Weasley turned to tearful pleas. Then angry defiance when she felt they weren't taking her seriously enough. Today, before bed, was a quiet, more so please, almost as if she'd given up hope of getting what she wanted.

They'd had to dose Minerva with Dreamless Sleep potion so that everyone could get a decent night's sleep without waking up to screaming and crying. They couldn't keep giving it to her. The potion was addictive and the effects would wear off over time, making it more difficult to achieve a completely dreamless sleep until the user had to take more and more to get the effect they desired. Minerva was exhausted though. Draco and Hermione were exhausted.

Draco could feel his temper fraying at the edges from exhaustion and what he felt was Hermione's stubbornness. He hated having to give Minerva the potion, but he agreed with Hermione that they all needed at least one night of uninterrupted sleep this week.

darling," his mother drawled.

"Probably not," Draco admitted, "but I don't want this to drag out. I want Minerva to be well again, to be a happy eleven-year-old girl."

Hermione placed a hand on his arm, "It's what they want as well. They'll let you adopt her. I only need one to agree anyway. If I get one, then we can do the ritual." Hermione turned to his mother, "Will you help Minerva get ready after I finish talking to her?"

"Of course," his mother agreed.

"What can I do?" Draco asked, looking between the two of them as they both got up to leave the room.

His mother arched an eyebrow at him, "You can clean up all the glass in the fireplace from your dramatics."

Draco didn't bother to apologize for throwing the glass. He'd been angry at them for keeping secrets from him. Speaking of secrets, he asked them both before they left the room, "Do you two have any more secrets you're keeping from me?"

Hermione looked over her shoulder at him, "Yes," she answered mysteriously.

Draco goggled at them. His mother smirked at him. "Do I get to know what they are?" Draco asked impatiently.

"I'm sure you'll find out some eventually," Hermione said breezily, then walked out the door into the foyer, his mother following behind.

Draco set about cleaning the glass up out of the fireplace. Once the evidence of his "dramatics" was cleaned away, Draco plopped back down on the sofa. He sat staring into the fire, twirling his signet ring around his finger. He felt like an expectant father all over again, waiting for a bundle of joy to be thrust into his arms. He found it odd that his three children became his so differently.

Scorpius came with so much mixed emotions; joy and sorrow, birth and death. The beginning of Scorpius' life brought with it the end of his mother's. The birth of his son also brought about great change in Draco, seeking forgiveness for his past

deeds and forgiving the cruelty of others who judged him for his impossible choices. Scorpius saved him. He brought light into Draco's life and drove away the dark.

He became Rose's father through words and deeds. Bedtime stories about unicorns and princesses in disguise. Fast broom rides and Quidditch lessons. Rose was his princess. Rose imperiously claimed him as hers and stubbornly refused to listen to anyone that said otherwise.

Minerva would become his through magic. Blood magic, though often considered to be dark, would bring another light into his life. She would become a Malfoy through blood magic. The first Malfoy daughter in centuries, Draco was sure. Probably the first ever adopted Malfoy.

The door opened, and Minerva came into the room with his mother guiding her. The hollow look was slowly ebbing from her eyes and being replaced with a wary hope. His mother had cleaned her up, removing the remaining tufts of auburn hair and scrubbing out the blood that remained stubbornly behind after he and Hermione had healed her cuts. She was an odd contradiction with her shaved head and pretty emerald green dress and black Mary Janes.

She approached him timidly, and Draco patted the seat beside him on the sofa. She sat down beside him and looked up at him. He could see the hope shining out of her eyes.

"Mum says you found a way to make me not a Weasley anymore," Minerva said quietly, looking down at her hands.

"Your mum and Nana Cissa have found a way," Draco answered, "Your mum has gone to get someone to help us."

"Mum said that I have to do a blood ritual. Why can't I just say I'm not a Weasley anymore?" she asked.

"You said you didn't want the Weasley hair and eyes anymore. Dropping the Weasley name will not make those things go away. It's in your blood. The blood ritual will allow you to forsake your father's blood," he explained. "We can just drop the Weasley name if that's what you want. If you can be alright with the Weasley hair and eyes. Is that what you want?"

"What is that?" Hermione asked sleepily, sliding out of bed and putting on her crimson dressing gown.

"One of the kids," Draco answered, also getting out of bed and putting on a shirt.

She cinched the belt of her silky robe tight, "How come we can hear it in here though?"

Draco walked to the door and opened it. The noise in the room died away but they could hear the faint cries emanating from down the hall. "The rooms are charmed to let the master suite if something happens in the middle of the night," Draco explained as they hurried across the landing to Minerva's room, where the cries were coming from.

Minerva clung to them when Hermione woke her up. She mumbled 'wasn't in time' over and over again as she sobbed into his chest. Finally, she cried herself into an exhausted sleep but refused to let go of either of them. Not willing to pry her hands loose, Draco lay back on the bed with her nestled between them.

\*\*\*

They talked, together as a family, throughout the entire week Draco had been home. Draco and Hermione spent time with each child, talking to them about Weasley's attack and Draco's hospitalization. They spent the most time with Minerva, talking about her actions that day, working to absolve her of the guilt she felt for her mistaken belief that she was the cause of the attack. Out of all the talking and listening, two things remained the same for Minerva, the nightmares and her desire to stop being a Weasley.

Much to Draco's relief and slight annoyance, Harry seemed to be able to help the most. He came over to the house and took Minerva for walks around the park. When Draco asked what they talked about, Harry told him that he was uniquely

and tucked it behind her ear. "Can you tell us what happened?" "I don't want to be a Weasley anymore," Minerva said quietly. Draco drew the bracelet out of his pocket, "Is that why you ran off?"

Minerva nodded her head still looking down at her feet. "I don't want to look at the 'W' all the time. I don't want to be a Weasley anymore."

"Honey, that's your name. It's a part of who you are," Hermione said with sympathy. "I know that what you had to do was awful for you, but that doesn't mean you should reject your name."

"No. I can't do it. I don't want to be his daughter anymore," Minerva said. She started to sob then. The sound of her crying echoed off the walls and warred with the sound of the waves of the ocean in her room.

Hermione wrapped her arms around her daughter and let her cry into her shoulder. While they were both occupied, Draco unlatched the bracelet and slid off snowdrop charm, spacers, and 'W' charm. He put the snowdrop and a spacer back to make it look like the 'W' was never there. He put the bracelet on her nightstand and slipped the charms into his pocket.

"It will get easier with time," Hermione was saying to Minerva, stroking her hair.

"No, it won't," Minerva wailed, "I don't want to be the daughter of a man that tried to kill my mum. He almost killed Draco. I don't want to do it anymore."

Draco wanted to give her what she wanted. He wanted to let her renounce her Weasley name if it would make dealing with this easier for her. Her crying was breaking his heart.

\*\*\*

The sound of screaming reverberating off the walls of the master suite woke them both from their sleep.

Minerva shook her head emphatically, "So I'll just be a Granger then?" Minerva asked.

Draco sighed heavily. He wasn't looking forward to having a modified version of "the sex talk" with his daughter. Draco started explaining a little uncomfortable, "Witches and wizards are made up of both their mother's and father's magic. That mingling of magic makes up who we are at our core, and we cannot exist without both. To forsake your father's blood, another must take his place."

"You?" she asked.

Draco nodded, "If you'll have me. You'll be a Malfoy. You'll look like Scorpius and me."

She lunged at him then, burying her head into his side, "Thank you," she mumbled over and over again like a litany. Draco hugged her to him and dropped a kiss onto her bald head.

"I knew I was doing the right thing," a voice Draco didn't recognize called from the doorway.

"Uncle George!" Minerva called.

George Weasley, with his long, shaggy, carrot-colored hair, strode into the room looking solemn followed by his siblings. Draco was familiar with Bill, mostly because Bill had been one of the first apologues Draco had gone to make when he'd sought to make amends. He knew Charlie by the scars and tattoos. Ginny walked in behind her older brothers with Harry beside her.

No Percy, but Draco hadn't expected Percy Weasley ever to darken his doorway. Draco and Ron Weasley might be personal enemies, both fighting for the affections of Hermione. Draco and Percy were political rivals. If Draco wanted something, Percy opposed it, whether for spite or because he didn't believe in whatever bill Draco was proposing, Draco never knew. Hermione closed the door behind her.

"Hey Peanut," George said, crouching down in front of Minerva.

"Why are you calling me a peanut?" she asked, looking

affronted by George's nickname.

He palmed her head and juggled it a little, "You look like a peanut with your new hairstyle. Maybe it would look good on me. What do you think?" he asked, flicking his shaggy hair off his shoulders.

"Nah, you probably have a lumpy head," she answered with a grin. George started feeling for lumps on his head comically.

"You all came to help me?" Minerva asked.

"Yes. I volunteered first, so let the honors, but we all agreed to help you." George said simply, taking both her hands in his, "Before we get started, I want to tell you something. Family is more than people who share your blood. Family is people who are there for you to celebrate the good times and pick you up and carry you during the bad. If I understand what Hermione is telling me, after this ritual, we won't be blood-related anymore, but that doesn't mean we aren't family. We'll always be family. You'll always be a part of us. We do this for you because we love you and we want what's best for you."

Minerva launched herself off the sofa and hugged her uncle, nearly knocking him down, so fierce was her relief that he'd come to help. George managed to stand and wrapped an arm around Minerva's shoulders.

Draco stood and held his hand out to the man, grateful that they had understood Minerva's need enough to give her up. George grasped his hand hard, giving him an appraising look. Something in Draco's face must have reassured the man because he nodded and let go. Bill and Charlie both clapped Draco on the back. The percussive force of their slaps jolted him forward, causing both men to chuckle. Draco righted himself and winced dramatically, reminding them that their brother had almost killed him. He smirked devilishly at them over Hermione's head when she came forward to fuss over him and scolded Bill and Charlie for hurting him.

"We appreciate what your family is doing for Minerva. We understand how hard it is to ask this of you," Draco said to the Weasley siblings.

Hoping to ease her anxiety, Draco took the black velvet box that was on the end table beside him and handed it to Minerva, "Here. This is from Scorpius and me."

That got her to set her wand down. She took the box from his hand and looked up at him with a puzzled frown. "What is it?"

"Open it up and you'll find out," he answered.

She cracked the lid of the jewelry box and gasped. She drew the bracelet out of its box and held it up so that she could examine it closer. She smiled and leaned into him when she saw the little broom charm dangling from the bracelet. She froze as she continued to inspect the charms. She surprised him by setting the bracelet back in its box, grabbing her wand, and fleeing the room, leaving the bracelet in its box sitting beside him.

Hermione came over and sat beside him, picking up the box.

"What happened?" she asked.

Draco looked at the closed door that Minerva had just fled through, "I'm not sure. I gave her Christmas presents to her. I thought she liked it at first, but she put it back and ran off."

Hermione took the bracelet out of its box and examined it herself. "I'm not sure what the problem is," she said, putting the bracelet back, "You did a very good job picking out the charms."

They left her alone to gather her thoughts while Scorpius and Rose finished opening their Christmas presents. Hermione helped Rose clasp her unicorn necklace around Rose's neck. Scorpius looked so proud of himself as he slipped on the small signet ring that Draco had worn when he was his age.

They climbed the stairs together and Hermione knocked on Minerva's door. Hermione stuck her head inside and asked quietly, "Can we come in?"

After a murmured response, Hermione led the way inside. They found her sitting on the edge of her bed, looking down at the floor. Draco and Hermione sat on either side of Minerva. Hermione brushed some of Minerva's curly, red hair back

to survive on Christmas Day? Maybe next Christmas would not be spent at Spinner's End or Malfoy Manor. He would have to see what Hermione thought about spending Christmas in Paris next year. They could create new traditions then. Traditions that weren't tainted by fear and guilt.

Scorpius, Draco could tell, wasn't all that interested in opening presents. He was only sitting on the floor tearing open the gifts for the sake of Rose. He kept shooting glances at Draco and Minerva sitting on the couch. Draco didn't spoil Scorpius like he'd been spoiled as a child. There weren't piles of presents stacked under the tree for each child. Draco was always more interested in giving meaningful gifts, not junk that would be played with once and thrown into a corner.

Minerva wasn't interested in presents at all. She refused to sit on the floor with Hermione, Scorpius, and Rose. 'Can't see,' was all she said when asked why. Draco understood the need to protect your back. Even now, years after the war, he never turned his back on a door.

She sat beside him on the sofa, gripping her wand tensely as if she expected them to be attacked at any second. Draco remembered that feeling. It had been years after the war before he was able to sit in a room and not grip his wand convulsively. He set a hand on her shoulder and she jumped, little red sparks shooting out the end of her wand.

"Put the wand down," he said quietly but firmly to her. She was coiled so tight she could seriously hurt someone if they startled her bad enough.

She shook her head and swallowed convulsively, still gripping her wand.

"You're going to hurt someone if you keep that up," he said quietly to her, "Set it here between us on the couch."

Rose and Scorpius didn't notice the exchange. They were too busy ripping wrapping paper and flinging it over their shoulders with glee, more so on Rose's part. Hermione shot them both a worried glance from her spot on the floor between Rose and Scorpius.

"What he did to you, Hermione, and the girls was despicable," George spat, refusing to utter his brother's name, "There must be consequences for what he's done. If giving her a new father and a new last name helps her heal, then, while it saddens us to let her go, we will because it's what's best for her," George said, looking down in sympathy at Minerva and squeezing her into his side.

"She and her sister will be treasured as daughters of the House of Malfoy," Draco said formally, "I'll make sure they never want for anything."

George nodded, "You're just getting Minerva as a Malfoy today, but we decided that when Rose gets older, if she decides she wants to be a Malfoy as well, we'll agree to it. We agreed with Hermione to let you be their father. Do a better job than he did," he said to Draco, then turned to look down at Minerva, "Well, Peanut, are you ready for this?"

Minerva nodded, "Thank you, Uncle George."

"So," Harry asked awkwardly, "How are we doing this?"

"Let's all move over here to this open space," Hermione said, directing them to the open area between the chairs and his and Hermione's desk.

They formed a loose circle with Minerva and his mother in the middle. George and Draco stood in front of Minerva with Harry and Ginny behind her. Bill and Charlie stood opposite Hermione. Hermione handed Draco and George each a slip of paper.

"Okay," Hermione started, "First, I need to do a spell that will reveal the bond styling Minerva to her father. It's a pretty big spell, and it will cover everyone in the room. It's also difficult to maintain, and I won't be able to hold it for long, so I'm going to ask that you keep any questions about what you see to yourselves until we're done. Is everyone comfortable being a part of the spell?" They all nodded their agreement. "I'll give you a minute to look at the bonds then we'll move forward. Narcissa will help you three throughout the spell while I focus on the bonds."

His mother stepped up and started to explain what she would be doing. They went through a practice run before they started the proceedings. Draco searched Minerva's face one last time before Hermione cast the spell, "Are you sure this is what you want? There's no going back after this."

"I'm sure," she answered firmly.

"Okay, everyone ready?" Hermione said. She waved her wand over her head and said "Animabus nostris, quatenus rad invicem per caritatem familiaeque."

A large, silvery dome shot out of her wand encompassing the occupants in the circle. Once the silvery wall of the dome hit the floor, a vast spiderweb of color appeared between them. Colors shot from each person and connected to others in the group or shot off to end at the dome.

Draco looked at the threads shooting out from his chest. A blue thread ran to the outside of the dome. Another ran between him and his mother. A thick, gold thread connected him to Hermione at their hearts, as well as two sets of blue threads that connected from her abdomen to him.

Along with the blue and gold that connected Hermione to Draco, were two more blue threads branching out from Hermione, one to Minerva and another to the edge of the dome. Minerva had multiple blue threads heading to the edge of the dome, as well as the myriad of blue connecting her to all the Weasleys in the room.

Draco looked across to Ginny and Harry. They had a gold thread connecting the two of them, along with three blue threads coming from both of them. Two that stopped at the dome and one that joined them together at Ginny's abdomen.

Draco connected the dots of what that meant. He hadn't dared to hope what the blue threads connecting him to Hermione indicated earlier, but seeing the same connection between Harry and Ginny allowed him to rejoice at the news. "Hermione," he said in wonder. He got a faint smile from her and noticed the fine sheen of sweat breaking out on her brow. He turned to his mother, "Mother, let's get this started."

## Chapter 28 *Being Minerva Weasley*

January 2nd to January 6th

It began with the opening of presents. Draco realized then that Minerva wasn't going to bounce back as easily as Rose and Scorpius. What she had seen and had to do affected her too deeply to just let it go and move on.

Rose had insisted on opening presents almost as soon as Draco and Hermione came through the Floo. The presents piled under the tree calledbeckoningly like a siren's song to the girl. Rose seemed to be the only one to maintain a festive spirit throughout Draco's hospital stay.

The festive holiday spirit had come and gone at Spinner's End. The room they'd all decorated together now seemed like a pale comparison to the cheerful room it had been at the beginning of the children's winter break. The tree didn't glitter with fairy lights as Tansy had sent the fairies back to their home in the attic when Christmas had come and gone without Draco returning home.

Draco was disappointed. It wasn't the Christmas he'd envisioned as their first together. He was also worried about how much this would affect future Christmases. Would his family always remember that he'd been in the hospital fighting

His mother walked up to stand beside Minerva. She took a black dagger out of her pocket and took Minerva's hand in her own. "I'm sorry my dear, but this will hurt." She sliced the dagger quickly across Minerva's hand, leaving a shallow cut and blood pooling in the palm of Minerva's hand. Minerva bit her lip to keep from crying out at the sight of the blood in her palm.

His mother quickly wiped the blade of the knife on her emerald green dress, leaving streaks of red. She then took George's proffered hand in hers and cut his palm as well. She placed Minerva and George's palms together and nodded at Minerva to proceed.

In a strong, sure voice, Minerva intoned, "I, Minerva Helen Granger-Weasley, reject as my blood the Most Noble House of Weasley. I ask that the House of Weasley willingly relinquish me as their blood kin."

George placed the tip of his wand over their joined hands. White strands wrapped around their joined hands and traveled down their arms to wrap around the blue threads radiating from them. "Minerva Helen Granger-Weasley, blood of my blood, I, George Septimus Weasley, speaking for the Most Noble House of Weasley, do hereby relinquish you, from your bond as our kin. We willingly break this bond and give you into the keeping of another."

The Weasley siblings gasped as the blue threads connecting them to Minerva faded. Minerva now only had two blue threads that joined her, one to her mother and the other to her sister. His mother took Draco's hand and swiped a quick cut across his palm. She took Minerva's hand and placed their palms together.

Minerva looked up at him; those innocent, hopeful eyes drew him in. "I, Minerva Helen Granger, ask the Most Noble House of Malfoy to accept me as their blood kin."

Draco placed his wand over their joined hands and looked into Minerva's eyes. White strands encompassed their hands against swirls around the threads at their hearts. "Minerva Helen Granger, I, Draco Lucius Malfoy, speaking as the Head of the Most Noble House of Malfoy, do hereby form this bond with

## Finding Hermione

you, and accept you as my kin, as blood of my blood, and as my own blooded daughter. From this day forth, you shall have the protection of the Malfoy line and name and shall bear the name Minerva Helen Granger-Malfoy."

Blue threads appeared between the two of them, as well as one connecting her to his mother and another running outside the dome. Minerva was now a Malfoy and his daughter. He marveled at the threads before they wavered and disappeared along with the silvery dome surrounding them.

Draco looked over at Hermione, his hand still clasped around Minerva's. He could feel himself bursting with joy. He saw Hermione stumble and struggle to right herself. Harry was beside her in an instant and had an arm snaked around her waist. Draco rushed over and scooped her up into his arms. He carried her over to the sofa, brushing off her protests.

"I'm fine," she protested weakly, "Put me down. You'll hurt yourself."

Draco gingerly settled her down on the sofa as if she were made of glass. He knelt down on the floor in front of the sofa and brushed her hair off her forehead. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed the sweat away.

"You're pregnant?" he said quietly to her.

She looked unsure and apprehensive, "That's what it looks like. I know we didn't talk about this, and we didn't exactly plan for it. Are you mad?"

He interrupted her with a kiss, soft and sweet, full of the joy he was feeling. "If I get any happier, I might burst. Did you know before we did this?"

Hermione shook her head. The pregnancy was a surprise to both of them, though it shouldn't have been. They hadn't exactly been diligent about casting contraceptive charms. He hadn't reminded her or cast the charm himself, which was not something he would have forgotten in the past. With Hermione though, he hadn't cared about casting the charm.

"It's so soon," she worried.

"I know," he admitted, "but that doesn't make it any less of a

Spinner's End if they need or want to."

"Mummy, can we have dessert now?" Albus pleaded, breaking the weight of sorrow that had fallen over the room. A few of the adults chuckled at the boy, who had assumed his "begging" look with big eyes, a pouting lip, and hands clasped together in front of him.

Draco stood up to gather their attention, "Before we dig into Helena's delectable pies, I'll be going home tomorrow. I'd like to thank you all for what you've done. I'm sure I can speak for my family when I say that your presence helped make this ordeal more bearable for them."

"It's what family does for one another, mate," Theo called from the end of the table.

Family. Draco knew that you couldn't always pick the family you were born to, but if you were lucky, you made up for that with good friends, a good partner, and children; the ones that were yours by blood, and the ones you thought of as your own. If you allowed it, family was an ever-widening circle of people you knew you could count on when you needed them.

of Honoria Blake. "The tradition was all Honoria knew. She met her son's father during her last year of school. He was in Ravenclaw. He was kind, just like her father, at least at first. Her parent's died in some sort of potion explosion right after she had Jake. Honoria said the birth of her son was when things started to change in their marriage. He would cut back on her portions, not enough to be noticed at first, but eventually, it became noticeable that he was controlling her food. He would withhold meals from her and punished her for sneaking food when he was away or during the middle of the night. It seemed he was obsessed with her being slim like she was in school and she had difficulty shedding the weight. Plus, the idiot of a man just didn't understand that you don't always return to the way you looked when you're seventeen after having a baby. Finally, Honoria had enough, and she ran with Jake. When we met her, she'd been running for two years, relying on friends to give her shelter, but her husband would find her, and she would have to run again."

Theo let go the breath he'd been holding in a whoosh. "Merlin, that's awful."

"So you understand why we don't want the girls to continue growing up accustomed to this tradition?" Hermione asked looking around the table at Draco first, then Greg, Blaise, and Theo, in turn.

Draco understood, and he noticed that the others agreed with him. Greg and Blaise looked a little angry at the thought of someone harming their daughters. He could empathize. If they continued the tradition at home, it would be the only thing Rose, Mione, and Florence were used to, and maybe Minerva to a lesser extent. He didn't want to leave them vulnerable to abuse. He knew more keenly than most how fragile life was and that he may not always be around to protect them.

"Where are Honoria and Jake now?" Draco asked.

"They're staying at my cottage with one of the house elves from the manor," Hermione answered, "There are wards around the cottage but they can Flood directly to the manor or

happy occasion. We haven't done things the normal way in this relationship yet. Why start now?"

"People will say such horrid things," she continued to fret, rubbing a hand protectively over her abdomen.

"And then they'll remember what it's like to cross a Malfoy," Draco said darkly. Anyone that disparaged the mother of his children would find themselves face to face with the full force of the Malfoy wrath.

"You can't go around hexing people," Hermione chided.

"I'm not a Gryffindor, remember. Hexing people is so," he said, waving his hand, looking for the right word, "straightforward. Mild discomfort and then the person goes back to their lives, probably not even sorry that they hurt someone's feelings. That's so... unrewarding."

"You're going to be dreadfully overbearing the next nine months, aren't you?" she asked with a playful smile.

"I've always been overbearing," he answered her. He dropped the grin though and let her see the vulnerability he was hiding from the rest of the room, "I need you to let me," he begged, "I'm probably going to be overbearing and overprotective. You'll be lucky if your feet touch the ground or you get to lift anything heavier than a paperback book. I know it will be annoying for you, but I need you to be patient with me."

She looked like she wanted to protest but Draco forestalled her. "Astoria... I... you," Draco stuttered, "It hurt losing her, and I mourned everything she would miss. It would destroy me if I lost you."

"Oh Draco," she sighed. She propped herself up on an elbow and ran her hands across his furrowed brow, soothing away the worry lines. "Everything will be fine. I've done this twice before. Sturdy, Muggleborn birthing hips and all that," she joked, patting the flair of her hips, "Now stop fretting. We've got a bunch of people over there trying to discreetly not get caught listening to what we're talking about."

Draco looked over at the group of people still milling about in the center of the room. His mother had scourgified the blood

off her emerald sheath dress and healed Minerva and George's cuts. She couldn't hide the smile on her face. Harry had the grace to blush and look away at getting caught eavesdropping. Ginny had no such compunctions and smirked at him.

George grinned unrepentantly, tapped his cursed ear, and said, "Sorry, couldn't hear that. I'm sure it was ear-istably nauseating. If you start worshipping Hermione because she's pregnant, the rest of us lackwits are going to get an earful from our wives."

Bill groaned at that. Charlie chuckled, "I'm glad I only have to deal with dragons."

"How long can he make the ear jokes?" Draco asked quietly.

"Days," Hermione laughed.

Hermione sat up on the sofa and Draco protested that she should keep lying down. He got her to compromise by keeping her feet up on the couch. He fluffed a pillow up behind her so that she could recline back on it, and sat down beside her with her feet in his lap.

"Come over and sit down guys, since I'm obviously not going anywhere," Hermione called.

"And so it begins," George intoned ominously.

Bill and Charlie said goodbye, hugging Minerva and congratulating Hermione and Draco before they left.

"Mind if we widen the chairs, Draco?" Harry asked politely.

"No, no, go ahead," Draco said distractedly, looking for Minerva and beckoning her over. He took her hand in his and checked to make sure that her cut was fully healed. Minerva and Hermione let him fuss unnecessarily over them.

He wrapped a handkerchief around his cut. He would leave it to heal on its own. Maybe his mother had cut deep enough, and it would scar. He always wanted to be able to see the reminder of how Minerva became his.

"How are you feeling, angel?" he asked.

"Fine," she answered, shuffling from one foot to the other and biting her lip in a way that was so similar to her mother. Without the red hair, he could fully see how much she resembled

aren't overjoyed to see me, but everyone trusts The Boy Who Lived."

Harry rolled his eyes in annoyance at Greg, "We convinced her to stop running and come with us. It took a lot of convincing. She doesn't trust men. I took her and her son to Godric's Hollow. Greg left to get Ginny and Daphne. They came back, took one look at the two, and kicked us out of the house."

Ginny took up the story. "We got them fresh clothes and let them use the master suite to bathe and change. Honori didn't want to be out of sight of her son even to take a shower. I made food for them. They ate enough for four people. I was a little worried they would get sick."

"We stayed the night with them. After they ate, they went to bed, and we called Malfoy Manor to let them know what was going on," Daphne said to Draco.

"Hermione and I left the children with the boys the next morning," his mother said, "Helena, Luna, and Tracey went with us to Harry's home. We had tea with her and she started to tell us her story."

"She was born Honoria Ainsleigh. Her father was William Ainsleigh, and her mother was Petunia Parkinson, one of Pansy's distant relations," Tracey said, "Petunia was disowned because she married William, a Muggleborn, but she taught her daughter the Slytherin and pure blood culture. Honori was sorted into Slytherin about four years behind us. You wouldn't believe she's only twenty-nine to look at her. Or that Jake is six with how small he is."

His mother picked up the story with a little disapproval tinged in her voice. "She told us she grew up very sheltered and naïve. Her father was a very kind man and upheld the traditions her mother was accustomed to. He served all their meals for as long as she could remember. Then she went to Slytherin House, where they continued the tradition. Being served was something she was accustomed to."

Hermione continued telling the story. The children, as well as the men, were listening carefully by now to the trials

heart that I was going to have to stop, but I knew that I would have to eventually. I asked your mother not to tell you. I didn't want you to feel like you owed me for anything. I wanted to help and it was enough for me to know that Scorpius was happy and healthy."

She shivered and Draco drew the sheet up around her and ran his hands up and down her arms to warm her up. "Your mother and I agreed that since I didn't want you to know, it would be best if I didn't keep seeing Scorpius after he stopped taking my milk. She said she was pushing it enough by not telling you who was feeding Scorpius. She didn't feel right about sneaking him away. I have a picture of us. Your mum took it one day without me knowing and gave it to me the last time I fed him."

Draco sat staring at her. Emotions flooded through him too quickly for him to latch onto just one. Wonder at her that she would take the child of her childhood enemy to her breast. Gratitude. Profound, overwhelming love for this woman that had been a part of his life for so long without him even knowing. He wondered how she'd managed to keep the secret this long and how many other secrets she and his mother had.

"Draco, say something," Hermione said nervously.

Draco startled and said the first thing that popped into his head, "Can I see the picture?" he asked, suddenly very curious to see his son being nursed by his love.

"Umm...sure," she said. She reached over and opened the drawer of the nightstand and pulled out a slim black leather journal. She thumbed through it until she found the page she was looking for and handed the journal to him. Affixed to the page was a picture and below that was a curl of white-blond hair wrapped with a pale blue bow.

Draco stared mesmerized by the photo. Hermione was sitting in a rocking chair in front of a window. She was smiling down at his son and saying something to him while she stroked his head. His son's head and a blanket was thrown over one shoulder covered hers so that she wasn't exposed to the camera. "Can I have a copy?" Draco asked in a choked whisper.

Hermione grabbed a wand and silently cast a spell to copy the photograph. Draco took it from her and set it in the corner of a photograph of Scorpius and him on a broom together when Scorpius was five.

He lay down on his side and drew Hermione down beside him. He hid his face in her hair, breathing in her scent, as he tried to control the surge of emotions coursing through him.

"Are you okay?" she asked into the darkness.

He snuggled closer to her and wrapped an arm around her waist. "You have no idea how much it means that you would do that for us, for him."

"It wasn't any great sacrifice, Draco. I was happy to do it. I had more than enough for Minerva and I wasn't going to let a baby starve, no matter their parent's former allegiances or past grievances," Hermione said, twining her fingers with his and drawing his arm up to rest between her breasts.

He cradled her back into his chest as if bringing her closer would impart how much it meant to him. "It meant a lot to us, to me," he started, impassioned, "You wouldn't believe how many people were willing to let him starve because he was the son of a Death Eater. It was awful begging for their help, offering exorbitant amounts of money, and having them sneer at me. I was willing to do it, sacrifice my pride to them for the sake of my son. Some were kinder than others, saying their family wouldn't like it, but no one that St. Mungo's sent to us wanted to help. I would've paid any amount of money. I would've given them anything they wanted. That you did it without asking anything in return, no money, no acknowledgment, you can never understand how much it means to me that you did that. I could never hope to repay you for that."

"There's nothing to repay. I was happy to do it. It saddened me to have to let Scorpius go, so I'm glad I get to have him back," she said with a sleepy yawn.

Draco felt her breathing even out and her body relax against him as she sunk into sleep. He lay awake holding her, staring off into the dark of the room for a long time afterward. Thoughts

of things that might have been swirling around in his head.

What if... What if she'd let his mother tell him who was feeding his son? What would've happened if he'd gotten to bring his son to her rather than his mother acting as the intermediary? Would she have stopped taking Scorpius to her breast and simply given him the bottles? Would she have left Weasley sooner if they'd been around each other more, especially then when they had his son to connect them?

him in his carrier and went to the restroom. He started crying. His cry, it was this thin, plaintive wail and I felt so bad for him, not having a mother, so I picked him up. He could smell the milk on me and he started rooting around and grunting."

Draco let his gaze drift down from her pleading eyes. Pleading for him to understand. Begging for him not to be mad for not asking his permission to feed his son. Anger wasn't the emotion he was feeling now.

She took a deep breath as she plunged on with her explanation. "I asked your mother if I could feed him and she practically burst into tears. So I fed him and while I did, she told me that he didn't like the formula and would only take it when he was starving. She told me that you weren't having any success in finding a wet nurse. He was so small, but he was strong. He didn't have any trouble latching on. We talked about him taking my extra milk. She tried to pay me but I wouldn't have it. I didn't need the money and I wanted to give him a little mothering like I imagined his mother would. I felt bad for him and her," she pushed his chin up to meet her gaze and he could see the sorrow there, "and you."

He kept his gaze on her eyes as she continued. "She started bringing him with her every week when Ron was away to pick up more milk. He didn't really like my friendship with your mother and he would've been livid to find out that I was nursing your son." Draco felt himself get angry at the mention of that girl and that Hermione felt she had to hide what she was doing. She ran her hands along his jaw, making him relax the clenched muscles. Her eyes took on a faraway look as she continued, "He got so big and he was so adorable. He looked so much like you. He would smile so big when ever you rum brought him over and his little fists would wave in the air while he kicked his feet. I would play with him, tickle his little belly, sing him songs."

She sighed and a tear slipped down her cheek. Draco reached forward and caught the tear on the end of his finger. "My milk started drying up when they were about six months old and I knew that I wouldn't be able to feed them anymore. It broke my

## Finding Hermione

chest." Mother took him with her on an errand one day, so that I could take a nap. I'd been up all night with him, walking the floor and trying to coax him to take the bottle. When they came back, he had a full belly and a week's supply of milk. Mother said she made arrangements with a lady that had enough milk to supply an army of babies. She refused to tell me who. She only told me that she was a perfectly nice lady and that I should be honored that she would help. I was, and I was grateful that someone would help us and I didn't press Mother about who it was because I didn't want the lady to stop."

"He was so small," Hermione sighed, breaking him from his reverie. Then she stiffened beside him. "I'm sorry....I....I..." she stuttered and trailed off.

"He was eight weeks early," Draco answered, then stopped, her words clicking in his head, "How did you know how small he was?"

Hermione shifted against him. She looked up into his eyes with a wary, pleading look, "I'm sorry. I know I should've asked you for permission. He was just so hungry, and your mother was so desperate," Hermione said, trailing away, with a pleading look in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I should have asked you first," she whispered.

Draco sat up, bringing her up with him, and searched her eyes. "You. It was you?" Hermione nodded. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I probably would have gotten down on my knees and kissed your feet for what you did. I would've sent a house elf to help you so that you weren't so exhausted. I would've given you anything you wanted." He'd wanted to know for years about the woman that had helped Scorpius. His mother always refused to tell him, saying she was respecting the lady's privacy. "Tell me everything. Tell me how it happened," he demanded, eager for answers.

Hermione laced her fingers through his. "Well, you know your mother and I became friends about a year after the war was over. She came over to my house for tea and brought Scorpius. Minerva was asleep, and Ron was at Quidditch practice. She left

## Chapter 31 The Stranger for a Mother's Love

January 11th

Draco and Hermione took Minerva back to school that Saturday so that she could get used to being back before she had to return to classes and so that her classmates could get used to her new look and new parentage. The headmistress and Slytherin Head were surprised to bere-introduced to Minerva Granger-Malfoy. Draco and Hermione had to tell them both the spells used to for the magical adoption. McGonagall questioned them both closely, seemingly very curious about everything they had done and seen during the adoption ritual. Draco left Hermione and Minerva talking with the two teachers and went in search of his son.

He found Scorpius in the Quidditch stands watching the Slytherin Quidditch practice and debating strategy with James and Drake. The three boys jumped up when they caught sight of Draco climbing the steps into the stands.

"Is Minerva back?" Scorpius asked before he'd even said hello to Draco.

"Hello to you too," Draco joked, "Yes, she's back. She's talking with the headmistress and Professor Carrow right now." Draco looked seriously at his son, "Let's take a walk, son. There are some things we need to talk about."

Drake and James took off ahead of Draco and Scorpius in the direction of the castle. Draco walked aimlessly with Scorpius around the large open field outside of the Quidditch stadium. He pulled the picture of Hermione and Scorpius out of his pocket and stared at it while they walked, trying to figure out where to start.

"Umm...dad?" Scorpius said hesitantly.

"Hmm?" Draco asked, still distracted.

"Nana isn't going to be happy you stole her picture," Scorpius said.

Draco stopped in his tracks and stared down at his son. "You've seen this photo before?" he asked.

He hadn't expected Scorpius to recognize the picture. Hadn't intended for his son to know yet about Hermione's role in his infancy. How much did his son really know though?

"Nana says it's her favorite. She keeps it on her nightstand so it's the first thing she sees when she wakes up," Scorpius answered.

"What do you know of the photo?" Draco asked curiously.

His mother and Scorpius obviously had talked about the photo, but when Scorpius met Hermione for the first time, he hadn't seemed like he'd remembered her or knew of her role in his infancy.

Scorpius shrugged, "I asked Nana once when I was little if it was a picture of me and my mum. She told me it was a picture of me with a powerful witch. She used to tell me stories about her when I would stay the night with her."

Draco was curious that Hermione had featured in the stories his mother told to his son, "What kind of stories did she tell you about her?"

Scorpius sent his father a questioning look but answered him, "She told me the witch once robbed Gringott's and escaped on

help you."

Hermione let loose a sharp bark of laughter, "Yeah, right. He pretty much made himself scarce if Minerva started crying. He was fine when she was a happy, gurgling baby. He would sit and coo over her for hours, but God-forbid the man change nappies or get spit-up on him. He wanted lots of kids, a big family just like his was growing up. As an only child, I wanted that too, but then I saw how much he wasn't willing to help me, so I told him I didn't want any more. Rose was a surprise, but Minerva was five then, so it was easier."

"You know that's not going to happen with us, right?" Draco reassured her.

"You'll make sure it doesn't if you don't want your balls hexed off," Hermione answered with a laugh, "I've seen how you are with Scorpius. That doesn't come from being a standoffish father. What was it like for you after he was born?"

Draco stared up at the ceiling, thinking back to Scorpius' first year. "Wonderful," he started, "and awful. Being a single father to a newborn has a whole series of complications that can never be prepared for. Mother came to stay for the first four or five months until he was sleeping through the night. She and Tansy would help me. I didn't know what to do. I'd never been around babies, but I made them show me. He and I, we figured it out. He cried a lot at first. I think he could sense my grief and was grieving himself."

Draco ran a hand through his hair. There were parts of Scorpius' early days that he hated thinking about. Things that scared him to this day and how the timely intervention of an angel had saved him from genuinely panicking about the welfare of his son. "He hated the formula. We were scared when he wouldn't take a bottle. We looked for wet nurses, but everyone just saw him as the son of a Death Eater." Draco clenched a fist at the thought of the needless cruelty those women had inflicted on his family.

Draco took a deep shuddering breath and fingered a curl of Hermione's hair. Her hands traveled soothingly down his

meet his downward thrusts. "Harder, Draco!"

He was so close. His balls were drawing up tight as her warm heat constricted around him. "I'm so close, Iioneess. You've almost got me convinced. What other sexy, swotty stuff do you have to convince me?"

He didn't need any more convincing. He just liked hearing her talk. If what she said was true, he would be making love to her as often as he could.

"I'm so close, Draco. Your cum..." she panted, "I need it in me."

"Why?" he ground out, as he continued thrusting hard into her. Having her begging for him to cum in her was sexy as hell.

"Prevents... complications," she moaned. She was clamping down on him like a vise now. The claws had come out, and his Iioneess dug her nails into his back as she arched into him. The hardened tips of her nipples rubbed up against his chest, and she cried out her release.

He threw his head back and cried out her name as he emptied himself into her. He held himself propped up over her, so he wouldn't squish her and the babies with his weight, as the stars cleared from his vision. A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead onto his nose and dropped into her hair.

XXX

He rolled onto his back and brought her with him so that he could snuggle up with her. "That was amazing!" he panted, "Was all of that true?"

"Hmmm... yes," she said sleepily, trailing a finger down his chest. "There's more, but I was a little too distracted to get it all out."

"Makes you wonder why people don't have more babies," Draco said idly, wrapping a curl around his finger.

Hermione snorted, "I could think of several reasons why. I'm sure you remember the crying and waking up every two hours for feedings. The smelly diapers. It's exhausting. With Minerva, there were days where I felt like I didn't sleep a wink." Draco skimmed his hand down her back, "Weasley didn't

the back of a dragon."

Draco couldn't help but laugh. Of course, that would be the story his son remembered first. What boy wouldn't be fascinated by stories of bank robberies and daring escapes?

"What about the picture? Was there a story your nana told you that went with the picture?" Draco asked. Scorpius kicked a stone and nodded. "Will you tell it to me, please?"

Draco kept his eyes on the photo as they continued to stroll around. Scorpius started the story hesitantly as if he were having difficulty remembering how the story went. "About a week after I was born, Nana took me to visit the powerful witch. Nana said the witch was a hero to our people. She was very smart and helped the savior defeat the Evil One. Nana took me to visit her one day because I was hungry but couldn't eat. She thought the witch might know how to help."

Draco wondered how many stories his mother told Scorpius about Harry. How had Scorpius not put together that James' father was the savior in his grandmother's stories? The stories seemed old though considering how much Scorpius paused to think about the way the story went.

Scorpius furrowed his brow as he tried to remember the story, "The witch picked me up and held me. She noticed at once how hungry I was and how strongly I resisted drinking the formula. She said I wouldn't drink because I missed my mum and my mum missed me. The witch said that I needed a surrogate mother to help my mum give me the love my mother wanted. Mother has since died before she could bestow her mother's love on me. My mother's love would flow through the witch and into me, making me strong."

Scorpius took his wand out of his robes and started twirling it in his hands, "Nana told her that they weren't able to find a worthy witch since my mum's love was so great. The witch said she knew how powerful a mother's love could be and it would take a powerful witch to be able to help my mother bestow it on me. The witch said that because my mum loved me so much, I was destined to grow up to be a great wizard and help bring

prosperity to our people."

"The witch said that she would help my mother bestow her love on me, so that I could grow strong and fulfill my destiny, but that it would take time because my mother's love was so powerful. One day when I was about six months old, she told Nana that my mother's love had been fully bestowed and that my mum and I were both able to be at peace even though we were separated."

Draco wondered how he'd never known that his mother told his son stories of Hermione. His mother had always weaved stories, ever since Draco could remember. Though his mother had never told him stories about Muggle-born witches. His mother was a mark of how much times have changed, that she would seek out a friendship with Hermione, take his son to her for sustenance, and wholeheartedly support his relationship with her. These things wouldn't have happened before the war.

"How long has it been since your nana told you these stories of the powerful witch?" Draco asked.

"I don't know. A long time I think. You're going to give the picture back to Nana, right?" Scorpius asked.

"This isn't your nana's picture," Draco answered. At Scorpius' curious expression, Draco handed the picture to his son. "Look at the witch and tell me if she looks familiar to you."

Scorpius took the picture from Draco and examined it closely. Draco watched his son's face change from curiosity to confusion as he slowly realized who the lady in the picture was. "That's Hermione," Scorpius exclaimed in disbelief, "Nana was telling me stories about Hermione. Do you think they're all true?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe you should write your nana and ask her or you can ask Hermione," Draco said.

"It was Hermione all that time," Scorpius said in wonder, "Hermione gave me my mother's love."

Draco wondered who had thought the story up, his mother or his soulmate. Draco had wanted to keep Astoria's memory alive for Scorpius. He'd never realized how much his mother

along the bud of her clit as he fucked her pussy with his tongue, "and they last longer and are more powerful!"

"God, yes! I'm so close, Draco," she cried out. He replaced his tongue with a finger so that he could plunge in further and caress her g-spot. He looked up at her spread out on the bed above him as he sucked on her clit. Her hair was fanned out in wild disarray around her. Her body flushed, a rosy glow spreading across her skin, as she continued to play with her breasts. The sight of her pinching and pulling on her nipples was making him unbearably hard.

"Frequent sex helps boost self-confidence," she continued. "How so?" he asked as he plunged a second finger into her warmth.

Sherocked her hips down meeting the thrusts of his fingers. "It shows you're still attracted to me."

"I'll always find you desirable," he reassured her, pressing a kiss to the inside of her thigh.

"Say that," she gasped, "when I look more like a beached whale."

He sucked hard on her clit and quickened his thrusts into her pussy. He could feel her walls constricting around his fingers as she approached her orgasm. He drove her relentlessly onward until she clamped her thighs around his head, threatening to suffocate him, as she cried out her release.

He wiped her juices off his face as he stood, gripped his cock, lined it up with her entrance, and plunged in. They both groaned at the feel of him in her.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured into her hair, "You'll always be beautiful, even when your belly is so round you can't see your feet, you'll still be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

The walls of her pussy clenched around him at his words. "Oh God, Draco! I need you to move!" she screamed.

"Tell me more," he said, as he thrust slowly into her. "It helps... oh yes, like that... strengthen the muscles and makes labor easier," she gasped out, rocking her hips up to

"I thought you were going to give me a sex lesson, l'ioness?" he asked quietly, not stopping his ministrations on her neck. "You... expect... me... to think... while you're doing that," she panted.

Here reached down and started playing with her nipples, lightly pinching them between his thumb and forefinger. She moaned and arched into his hand. "Maybe I should just stop while you tell me."

"Don't you dare!" she shouted.

He moved his head down and flicked a rosy nipple with his tongue. Her hands fisted painfully in his hair. "Then tell me, l'ioness," he said, then circled his tongue around the hard peak, "Why," he flicked her with the point of his tongue, "we should be having sex," he blew across the wet peak and watched it pucker even more, "while your beautiful," he moved his attention over to her other breast and ran his tongue around her areola, "delectable body," he sucked the tightened bud into his mouth, "ripens with my children," he ran his teeth across the hardened nipple and chuckled as her moans reverberated off the walls.

She shot him a look that promised retribution. She pushed on his head, and he started making his way down to her sweet center, stopping to feather kiss along her abdomen just under her navel.

He jumped a little when she started to speak, "Everything is more sensitive during pregnancy," she sighed. "Increased blood flow and estrogen make my breasts," here she cupped her glorious tits in her hands and started pinching her nipples, "pussy, and clitoris much more sensitive."

She pushed on his head again, and he obliged her by running the flat of his tongue across her lower lips. They fluttered open like the petals of a flower, already dewy with her desire. "Because everything is so much more sensitive," she groaned as he plunged his tongue into her pussy and started fucking her with his tongue. "Oh God yes!" she cried, writhing against his face, "it is much easier to achieve orgasms," he rubbed his nose

had done to acquiesce to his wishes. Daphne told Scorpius stories of Astoria growing up and Draco told him stories of their short time together. His mother seemed to have her own way of keeping Astoria's memory alive for his son.

Draco hugged his son to him. Scorpius distractedly returned his hug as he continued to stare down at the picture. Draco nudged his son's chin up and met his son's overwhelmed ice gray eyes, "I must tell you something. You gained a sister over the last couple of days. I adopted Minerva. The spell we performed to seal the adoption changed how she looks. Minerva has the Malfoy blood now."

Confusion clouded his son's eyes, "I thought you said it couldn't be done."

Draco gave Scorpius a self-deprecating smile, "Hermione and your grandmother are loads smarter than me. They found a spell that made it possible. I hope you don't mind that I didn't ask you first."

Scorpius shook his head eagerly, "I don't mind. You know how I feel about it. Did it make Minerva better?"

Draco resumed their circuitous walk toward the castle. The other inhabitants were starting to throw curious looks their way. "It's helped some, yes. It didn't change her memories of what happened, but I think she's able to accept her part in it a little better. You'll keep an eye on her?"

Scorpius puffed up indignantly, "She's my sister," and Draco supposed that was all the answer he needed. "What about Rose? Is she a Malfoy now as well?"

Draco draped an arm over his son's shoulders, barely resisting the urge to ruffle his hair. "No. She's still a Weasley. Adopting Minerva seemed to be the only way to help her move past it. Rose wasn't affected the same way Minerva was. She's still young enough to believe people like Aunt Lunawhen they say everything's going to be okay."

Scorpius looked up curiously at him, "Won't it be weird for her if she's the only one?"

"She can decide when she's older. Like you said, her last

namedoesn'tchangehowwefeelabouther,"Dracopausedand squeezedhisson'sshoulder.Hewassuddenlynervouspassing on the last bit of information he had for his son. Scorpius admittedtobeingjealousofRoseatfirst.Howwashegoingto feelaboutthetwins?Ifhedidn'ttellhimnowthough,Minerva would."There'sone more thing I need to tell you before we headback.WhenwedidthespellsothatcouldadoptMinerva, weinadvertentlyfoundoutthatHermioneisexpectingt看ns."

"Soyouhavetoaskhertomarryyounowright?She'sgoing to be my mum?"His son asked the questions so excitedly he was practically bouncing under Draco's arm.

Draco took in his son's eager expression. Not quite the reaction he was expecting. His son had completely bypassed impending siblings and went back to Hermione.

Dracohidthesmilethaththreatenedtobustoutwithaserious expression,"CanIgiveyoualittleadviceabouttwitches?Don't ever ask one to marry you just because she's pregnant. They don't like that."

Curiously, his son's hackles started to rise. He stopped walking and pulled himself from Draco's embrace. Scorpius clenchedhisfistsandaddressedDracoheatedly."ButNanasaid thatifIevergotawitchpregnantoutsideofwedlock,she'dhex me down the aisle herself.Nana will hex you when she finds out,"Scorpius said in a tone that made Draco think Scorpius was thinking about doing a little hexing himself.

Dracoquirkedanimperiouseyebrowathissonashestared down at him. "Nana already knows, but I'm sure she has a plethora of hexes ready for me if I take too long."

Scorpius mirrored his father's expression. The only thing thatgaveawayScorpius'nerves wastheslighttwitchingofhis wandinhis hand.It wasthemostScorpiushadeverchallenged him. He found himself oddly proud. "So that means you will ask her and soon?"

Draco furrowed his brow as he looked down at his son, "Why are you pushing this so hard?"  
Scorpiuslookedathimwithanexasperatedsigh,"Itoldyou

skincoupledwiththesharpnipsofterteethhadhimshivering in anticipation. Hewanted nothing more than to slide into her and feel the soft, wet velvet of her pussy clenching around him as he drove his cock into her and filled her with his seed until it was dripping down her thighs.

He froze then at the thought of his seed filling her. His seed had already done its job. She was pregnant. With his children. Twins. "Uhh...Hermione, should we be...uhh...?"

"Yes,"sheanswered simply, trying to get him to take his shirt off. When he resisted, she sat up, rocking her pelvis against his hardcock, and glared at him. He groaned again and grasped her hips to keep her from moving. "Do you want to stop what we're doing?" she asked, grinding down on him this time.

"God, no," he growled, "I...just don't...want to...hurt the babies," he panted, giving in and letting her roll her hips against him.

"As magnificent as you are, there's no way that you can hurt the babies," she said with a breathy sigh as she continued to rub herself against him. "And sex can be quite beneficial to an expectant mother. Sex and orgasms release oxytocin. Oxytocin makes you happy and happy mummy means everyone else is happy."

Draco surged his pelvis up to rub against her, earning him a gasp in surprise. "I love it when you get all swotty."

"Take off your boxers, and I'll keep elucidating the benefits of sex during pregnancy," she whispered in his ear before she bit the lobe.

He grabbed a wand from the bedside table and vanished both their clothes, earning him a growl of approval from Hermione. He flipped her over onto her back and kissed her deeply, running his tongue across her lips, and then plunging into her mouth to massage and dance with hers. He broke away from her lips reluctantly and kissed her neck, right behind her ear. She shivered in delight under him and gasped when he sucked the flesh into his mouth running his tongue over her sensitive skin.

"No," Minerva answered with a yawn.

"Good. There's nothing for you to feel guilty about," Hermione said.

"Angel," Draco said, "I meant what I said. Don't bottle it up. Professors McGonagall and Carrow have both said that they would be there to listen if you needed to talk."

They both kissed Minerva goodnight. Draco stuck his head into check on her before he retired for the night and found her curled up with a smile on her face.

XXX

"It's working," Draco said smugly. He lay back on the pillows with his fingers laced behind his head.

Hermione straddled his waist and rubbed her core against him. "You needn't look so arrogant about it."

Draco groaned at the feel of her rubbing against him. They hadn't been able to make love since he came home from the hospital and he missed her. "Thank you," he said with a sigh.

"For what?" she asked, nibbling at his jaw.

"Letting me adopt her. Not throwing a fit because Mother gave her a casket of jewelry," he answered, running his hands through her curls.

She purred as he dug in and started massaging her scalp. "I've learned to pick my battles when it comes to Malfoy extravagance. Though, they're not going to school with the tiaras."

"Fine. We'll limit the tiaras to special occasions, like shopping trips and Quidditch games," Draco said in mock resignation.

There was honestly nothing he thought young girls needed tiaras for but he wasn't going to stop them from playing dress-up with them, and it was fun to watch Hermione get exasperated with the things. The things were only sitting around not doing anything. No one was probably ever going to wear them. His mother wasn't that ostentatious, nor were they considered fashionable.

Hermione smacked him playfully as she continued to kiss her way down his neck. The soft slide of her lips against his

I want a mum. And I want Hermione to be my mum. She's already been my surrogate mum. And I think my birth mother would be okay with it."

He was sure Astoria would have approved of Hermione as a mother for her child. "You know you don't have to wait for us to get married. I bet if you ask her, she would be happy to be your mum right now?"

"Shouldn't I get her a present first or something?" Scorpius asked, looked suddenly unsure of himself.

Draco pointed over to the rose bushes that lined the walls outside the library. "If you really want to get her something, go pick a flower. Sincerity means more than presents."

Scorpius rushed over to the rose bushes and took an inordinate amount of time choosing a bloom for Hermione. Draco was starting to get impatient and about to walk over and pull his son away when Scorpius turned and came back to him carrying not one bloom as Draco had intended, but ever the Malfoy he came back with six pink and white roses. Draco handed his son a handkerchief to wrap around the stems.

They made their way back inside the castle and started the trek back to the headmistress' office. Up stairs and down corridors, Draco and Scorpius made the familiar trek to the office in relative silence. He could feel the excitement and nervousness emanating off his son.

At the stone gargyle entrance, Scorpius hung back reluctantly. Draco turned to him and raised an eyebrow questioningly. "I...I..." Scorpius stammered, then took a deep breath, "Who's up there?"

Draco placed a calming hand on his son's shoulder and answered, "Professors McGonagall and Carrow, Hermione and Minerva, I suppose."

"I don't know if I can do this," Scorpius said nervously.

Wanting to make it a little easier for Scorpius, Draco offered, "Why don't you come up and wait in the outer office and I'll have Hermione come out so you can talk to her?"

Scorpius visibly melted in relief and followed Draco up the

moving staircase. Draco left him waiting outside the oak door to the headmistress' office. Draco went inside and found the two professors and Hermione seated around a low table taking tea and talking. A very bored looking Minerva was draped across the arm of the sofa her mother was seated on, gazing at the door with a glazed look in her eye. She seemed to reanimate herself as she saw Draco walk in. The three ladies noticed her movement and turned to look at him.

"Scorpius would like to talk to you," Draco said by way of greeting to Hermione.

Minerva jumped up off the couch, "Scorpius is here. Are the rest of the Slytherins with him?"

She made to go to the door but Draco stopped her. "Hang on for a minute. I think he wants a private conversation."

Hermione set her teacup down on the table and murmured a polite "excuse me" and let Draco lead her out of the office.

They found Scorpius pacing the floor of the outer office muttering to himself. Draco distinctly heard the word "mum" a few times and thought that he was trying to rehearse what he would say. Draco cleared his throat and bit back a grin as his son jumped and hastily hid his bouquet behind his back.

Draco and Hermione moved to stand in front of Scorpius. "Your dad said you wanted to talk to me," Hermione said, looking at Scorpius with concern, "What's going on, dear?"

Scorpius flicked his gaze between the two of them and shuffled from one foot to the other, "Umm.... Dad, could you... you know?" Scorpius said, glancing at the closed door. Draco chuckled to himself, "Okay, I guess I'm not needed here. Come say goodbye when you're done, son."

Draco left Scorpius to his proposal in the outer office and let himself into the headmistress' inner sanctum. He settled down in Hermione's vacated seat on the couch beside Minerva.

Minerva shot him a questioning glance, "What's going on?" The two professors sipped their tea, both trying to look nonchalant about eavesdropping on their conversation, but clearly curious about what was happening in the outer office.

face Hermione. "I don't know. I think we should send her back to school in the tiara. This way everyone will know she's the Malfoy princess."

Minerva giggled. Hermione rolled her eyes, took the tiara off her daughter's head, and put it away. "We aren't introducing our daughter to the Wizarding World as the new Malfoy princess." She slid the rings off her daughter's fingers and put them away, then took off several bracelets, chiding gently, "Honestly darling, less is more."

Draco chuckled at Hermione's tone. Minerva had been wearing hundreds of thousands of galleons worth of jewelry when he'd come into her room. Rings had adorned each finger. Bracelets were stacked one on top of the next on each arm. A large emerald and diamond necklace matching the large tiara was around her neck over her Malfoy necklace.

Draco felt a rush of joy at being able to claim Minerva as his child. "We were just talking about going back to school," Draco said, pulling the covers back for Minerva to climb in bed.

"Are you ready to go back?" Hermione asked Minerva, brushing her short hair down, "You've missed a week, and I don't want you to fall behind on your studies, but I don't want to send you back if you're not ready."

It had hurt Hermione when Minerva admitted her frustration and anger at her mother for not listening to her when she said she didn't want to go to Weasley's house. After Minerva had gone to bed after that revelation, Hermione had spent a long time staring at the fire in the grate before finally saying she had to stop treating Minerva like she was still a little girl.

Minerva climbed into bed, and Draco tucked the blankets around her. "I'm ready. I feel better every day."

Hermione looked speculatively at her daughter, "You're sure?" Minerva nodded, and Hermione bent down to kiss her brow, "I'm so proud of you. I know what you had to do was hard and I never wanted you to have to do anything like that. I'm sorry I didn't listen to you before. Do you still feel guilty about it?"

and gaudy emerald and diamond tiara perched on her head. The Hair Replenishing potion was working wonders on her shorn head. She already was sporting a chic pixie cut. The hairstyle coupled with her now, white-blond hair and ice gray eyes made her look a bit like a fairy.

Rose was fascinated by her sister's new look. She liked playing with Minerva's hair and took extra time to look at her eyes. Thankfully she hadn't insisted that they turn her hair blonde. Rose was adorable with her curly red hair and blue eyes and Draco knew that Hermione would miss seeing her daughters the way they'd been born. So Rose hadn't asked to change her looks and they didn't have to have an argument with a six-year-old about her hair color.

"Are you ready to go back to school, oh daughter of mine?" Draco asked playfully, taking the large tiara off and replacing it with a smaller one. "There, much better," he teased, placing his hands on her shoulders and meeting her gaze in the mirror.

"Yeah. I'm ready to go back. I'm not completely over it, but I think I will be," Minerva answered.

"Do you think the adoption is helping you?" he asked.

He'd asked the question many times over the last few days, wanting to know that Minerva didn't regret him adopting her. Now that she'd gotten her way and wasn't a Weasley anymore, she'd opened up more to them. About her frustration at not being taken seriously. Her guilt that she felt she had to attack her father. And guilt that she might have driven him to try to attack Hermione and Draco. Her anxiety that Draco would die and Scorpius would lose his father.

She nodded, "I can't explain it. I just feel better."

"That's good. I want you to go to the headmistress or Professor Carrow if you start having a hard time. Don't hold it in," he said sincerely.

Hermione walked into the room, coming to tuck Minerva in. "Really Draco? A tiara to bed is a bit much don't you think?" Hermione teased.

Draco winked at Minerva in the mirror before he returned to

"Your brother is trying to get himself a mother," Draco said in a loud whisper.

Minerva smiled, "Brother. That's so weird to hear."

"You don't mind that he's asking?" Draco queried.

Minerva waved the question off, "He's sharing you with Rose and I. The least I can do is share mum with him. It would be cruel not to since he's longed for a mum for so long."

Draco heard a sniff coming from the other side of the sitting area. He glanced over just in time to see the headmistress dab her eyes with a handkerchief. She caught him looking at her and frowned at him, trying to resume her stern professorial look that used to scare the dickens out of him.

"Have a biscuit," she said, gesturing to the plate in the center of the table. Draco didn't bother to hide his smile as he reached over and took two Ginger Newts from the plate, handing one to Minerva.

He made small talk with the two professors and Minerva for what seemed like a long time. All four glanced at the door from time to time waiting for Hermione and Scorpius to come back in.

Draco could swear he heard Professor McGonagall murmur, "Where's an Extendible Ear when you need it?" as the conversation dropped off into tense silence once again. He shared her sentiment. What was taking them so long?

Finally, Hermione and Scorpius came back into the office. The smile on Scorpius' face told Draco everything he needed to know. His boy finally had the mother he longed for.

Scorpius' look changed from incandescent joy to startled confusion as he got his first glimpse of Minerva. Minerva rose slowly from the sofa and went to meet him. Hermione let the two acquaint themselves and moved to sit beside Draco. They watched the two fondly.

The children kept their voices to a whisper so that Draco couldn't hear what they were saying to one another. He saw Scorpius reach up and touch Minerva's pale blond hair in wonder. Minerva showed Scorpius the Malfoy pendant on her

necklace.

They became aware of their audience and sheepishly turned to face the adults. Draco couldn't hold back his astonished gasp at the sight of the two blonde-haired, gray-eyed children standing side by side. Scorpius was like a clone of him at that age, minus the perpetual sneer. Minerva, on the other hand, was the perfect mixture of Hermione and himself. He hoped that once her hair grew out, her curls would come back. Seeing the two children standing side by side, there was no doubt Draco was their father.

"They make quite a pair, don't they?" the headmistress finally said, "There's no doubt she's a Malfoy now, seeing her standing beside Scorpius." Professor McGonagall cleared her throat and turned her sharp gaze on Minerva, "As we discussed, Professor Carrow and I will inform the other teachers of your change of name and your appearance changes. It is up to you to decide what you will tell the rest of the student body. I think being in Slytherin with your brother and cousin will be helpful for a smoother transition for you, however, if you find the other students are giving you difficulty with this, please do not hesitate to talk with a teacher."

"Thank you, Professor," Minerva said quietly, fiddling with the pendant of her necklace.

Professor McGonagall looked sharply at her door before looking at Hermione, Draco, then the children, "Now, there are four students trying to batter their way into my office in their impatient crotchety way, Minerva. Perhaps now would be a good time to say good-bye and relieve my poor gargyle of Mr. Potter's persistence."

Taking that as a dismissal, Draco rose from his seat and held a hand out to Hermione to help her stand. They both crossed the short distance to their children. They hugged and kissed the child in front of them thoroughly, then traded and showered that child with affection.

"Oh, my babies. You're both so big now," Hermione gushed, "Take care of each other."

## Chapter 30 Tiaras and Babies

January 7th to January 10th

Their lives started to return to normal. Draco and Hermione were both relieved when they woke up the morning after Minerva's adoption to the knowledge that Minerva hadn't woken them up screaming. They decided to keep her home from school a few more days just to make sure. Other than startling easier than she used to, Minerva was adjusting to the changes in her life.

Minerva and Rose came home from the manor that first evening in high spirits. Just as she predicted, Rose was wearing a small, diamond tiara that had belonged to some pompous Malfoy wife that fancied herself royalty.

Minerva came home from her visit to the manor with a new necklace, a platinum chain with a pendant bearing the Malfoy crest. His mother informed them that the necklace had belonged to a long-ago Malfoy daughter, along with a whole cache of jewelry. That Malfoy daughter had been treated like royalty because of her rarity, no doubt spoiled rotten as well.

The casket of jewelry was placed in Minerva's room. On her third night as a Malfoy, Draco found her in her pajamas preening in front of her full-length mirror with a rather large

this. They're both my daughters. A spell didn't change that for me."

Hermione took his hand and kissed it, "She's Minerva Granger-Malfoy now."

"Mum," Minerva said in an exasperated whine, "we aren't babies."

"Pish," Hermione said with a wave of her hand, "you'll always be my babies."

"Mum," Minerva whined again. Scorpius niggled beside her. Minerva rounded on him indignantly, "She's calling you a baby too."

Scorpius just shrugged, "I don't mind."

"You will," Minerva retorted but Scorpius just shrugged again.

"Alright," Draco said, forestalling an argument, "We have to be going. We've imposed on the headmistress enough."

They sent them on their way with a final hug goodbye. Then made their farewells to the two professors and stepped into the fireplace to Floo home. They were greeted by his mother, Rose, and surprisingly Harry and Theo.

Tansy pushed through the door into the drawing room bearing a platter of sandwiches with another one with drinks floating behind her. Draco was thankful that lunch was served. He was suddenly starving.

Draco kissed his mother's cheek in greeting and picked Rose up and tickled her before setting her back down with a kiss on her nose. He shook Harry's hand and gave Theo a one-armed hug.

They settled down to eat the lunch Tansy had prepared. Theo and Harry resumed their seats in the set of armchairs to the left of the sofa. His mother took up her usual seat on the right. Rose sat on the floor in front of the couch with her plate and drink in front of her.

Hermione reclined back on the sofa and allowed Draco to hand her a drink and a sandwich. Once he got his own drink and sandwich, she brought her legs up and draped them over his. Draco knew these little things she did, allowing him to take care of her, were her way of easing his anxiety about her pregnancy. Rose chattered away through lunch, asking questions about Minerva and Scorpius. She told a story that Nana Cissa told her

about a witch that broke into a bank and freed a dragon. Theo was laughing at Rose's retelling of the story.

Harry and Hermione shared a look before Harry rested his hands on his knees and looked at Rose seriously, "You want to know a secret, Rose." Rose, of course, nodded eagerly. Harry continued, "I know who that witch is, he whispered theatrically.

"Who?" Rose asked.

"Harry, don't," Hermione protested.

Harry looked over at her with a mischievous grin, "Turn about is fair play." He then turned back to Rose and stage-whispered, "It was your mum."

Rose started giggling. "No it's not," she said in disbelief. "There's no way mum would rob a bank."

Harry looked a little put out that Rose didn't believe him. Hermione laughed at his face and said, "There's no way she's going to believe you."

After lunch was finished, Rose helped Tansy take the dishes away with the intention of helping her bake cookies. Draco faced Theo and Harry and noted the stiff looks that fell on both their faces after Rose left the room. He reached over and grasped Hermione's hand, expecting some sort of bad news. "Not that we're not happy to see both of you," Draco started cautiously, "but what's going on?"

"Two things," Theo started, "that we need to make a decision on how we want to proceed."

Hermione shifted into a more comfortable position beside him. Harry looked at both of them and spoke, "Ron's hearing is in three days. I've been told it won't go to trial, but that's all the MLE are telling me because of my connection to him."

"They told me more," Theo spoke up, propping his ankle on his knee and resting his hand on it. "He was given Veritaserum and questioned a few days after his arrest once the scope of his arrest shifted from homicide to attempted murder."

"And what were the findings?" Hermione asked tensely from beside him.

Draco wanted to stop them from telling her. He didn't

Minerva ran over and hugged her uncle. Draco caught the whisper, "Remember what I told you," from George. She nodded her head and then went to hug Ginny and Harry. His mother took her hand and led her out of the room.

Once the door closed behind them, George addressed Hermione, "Hermione, that was some spell you did. I bet with a bigger group; all those bonds would be quite complex."

"Yes," she answered, "it can also be quite revealing since I certainly had no idea I was pregnant."

"What were the gold threads?" Harry asked.

"Soulmates, I think," Hermione answered.

Ginny looked excited by the answer, "So you and Draco are..." she trailed away.

"That's why I have this bracelet. One of Draco's ancestors was oddly romantic," Hermione said, lifting up her arm to show them the cuff, "It also means that you and Harry are soulmates, though that's no surprise."

"Angelina's not my soulmate then," George said in a quiet, morose tone.

Draco hadn't really paid attention to the bonds of the Weasley brothers. He realized then how dangerous revealing your bonds could be. It could reveal things about yourself and those around you that were better kept private.

"That doesn't mean you don't love her, George," Hermione said, craning her neck around to look at him, "I believe there are many different types of soulmates, not just the romantic ones like Draco and I, or Harry and Ginny."

"Fred," George said, looking down at his hands.

"I'm sorry, George," Hermione said sympathetically.

"What about the blue then?" Harry asked as Ginny surreptitiously wiped away a tear.

"Blue looked like a line between family members," Draco said.

Harry looked over at Draco and leveled a stern look at him, "She's your daughter now. You better take good care of her." Draco met Harry's gaze, "She was my daughter before all of

## Finding Hermione

"Yes, love. Twins apparently," Hermione answered, "How do you feel about that?" she asked, taking her daughter's hand in her own and looking a little unsure. Draco couldn't blame her. He was a bit hesitant how Minerva would react to this news with everything that had been going on.

"Are they going to cry a lot?" Minerva asked.

"That is what babies do," Hermione answered.

Minerva wrinkled her nose up, "Do I have to change the diapers?"

"You are expected to help when you're home from school," Hermione said calmly.

"What about Rose and Scorpius?" Minerva persisted. Draco could hear Harry and Ginny chuckling at the exchange.

"They have to help too," Hermione answered.

She shrugged then, maybe in relief that she wouldn't be the only one on babysitting duty, "I think I'm okay with it," then she turned to Draco, "What am I supposed to call you now?" she asked.

"Whatever you're comfortable with, angel," Draco answered, "I know it's soon, but will you tell us how you feel?"

Minerva looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. "I feel a little better now that I'm not his daughter anymore. I know you all wanted me to stay a Weasley, but I just couldn't be his daughter anymore."

"We understand," Ginny said, "Does this change how you feel about your sister or us?"

"Why would it change that?" Minerva asked.

"We all look like Weasleys," Ginny said, gesturing to herself and George, "Rose is still his daughter."

"Rose is my sister," Minerva said stubbornly, challenging Ginny to contradict her.

"Ginny," Hermione said sharply, sensing Minerva starting to get upset, glaring over at her friend to shut up.

"Peanut, come give us a hug before you run off to adorn yourself in Malfoy glitter," George said, from his seat beside Draco's mother, cutting through the tension in the room.

think it would be good for her or the babies, but he knew he'd probably get hexed for suggesting it.

"Attempted murder," Theo said calmly. "I didn't get to read the transcripts but they said the evidence was conclusive."

"What do we need to decide on then?" Draco asked, "He's going to rot in a prison cell for the rest of his life."

"As the victim and intended targets, you both are within your rights to confront him before he goes to his hearing and may have Veritaserum used. You may also decide if you want to ask for leniency," Harry said, though he spat the word "leniency."

"I want to confront him," Hermione said vehemently.

"No!" both Draco and Harry protested.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and glared at both of them. "He will be fully restrained and without a wand. I deserve to know why he wanted to kill me."

If there weren't people around them, he would've gotten on his knees to beg her to rethink confronting Weasley. It was still a possibility. He wasn't above begging her even if he was ridiculed about it for years by Harry and Theo.

"Please," Draco started, "I'm begging you to reconsider. I don't want you around him."

Harry jumped in, "Hermione, I agree with Draco on this. You're expecting and you don't need the stress that a confrontation with him will bring. It will be nasty and you know that."

His mother spoke up for the first time, "She's barely pregnant. Without the spell, we wouldn't even know." She held up her hand for silence when Draco opened his mouth to protest, "You both need closure. Once he's put away, we can all move on with our lives."

Before Draco could comment on this, Hermione said, "I'm going. I need to know why he did this. I will agree to any security measures you think up, but I'm going."

Draco nodded in acceptance. He looked over at Harry, who looked like he was contemplating every security measure he could think to protect Hermione.

"I don't want an army of Aurors there when I talk to him," Hermione added sharply, "I don't need them gossiping to The Prophet about what they overhear."

Harry accepted her condition reluctantly, giving away that he had planned on pulling several Aurors to protect her during the confrontation.

"There is one more thing," Theo said, "Since the divorce bill is ready and we were only waiting for the new year to bring it before the Wizengamot before all this happened, we need to decide if we're going to try to push it through the council before or after Weasley's hearing."

"Before," Draco answered immediately.

"After," Hermione answered at the same time.

"Why after?" Draco asked, turning to look at her a little hurt that she didn't want to get divorced immediately.

"I love you," she said, reaching a hand out to cup his face, "I don't want to be married to him any longer than I have to."

"Then why don't we take this before the Wizengamot tomorrow?" he asked.

"There are a few reasons. It makes a more convincing case before the council if he's already been sentenced."

"We already own the council. We know how everyone's going to vote," Draco protested.

"The papers will run a story of Ron's hearing the day after, which will feature many of his comments that he made while he was being interrogated. After that, the people won't be able to take his side and will be behind new laws allowing divorce."

"I don't care about any of that. I'll ruin anyone that tries to tell you that you don't deserve to divorce that bastard," Draco said, getting increasingly frustrated.

"How about this one? There isn't a waiting period for divorce when a spouse has been convicted of a violent crime. We could get the law passed and I could walk out divorced before we even leave the building."

"There also isn't a waiting period to get remarried," Theo chimed in, "if she waits."

her mother. The color of her blue eyes was starting to fade a little.

"Hermione, look at her eyes," Draco said excitedly.

"Come here, love," Hermione said. Minerva sat beside Hermione on the sofa and let Hermione take her face in both her hands and turn her head this way and that to catch her eyes in the different tight as she closely examined her daughter. "It's working. Her eyes will probably be gray by morning."

"Does this mean that her hair will change too?" Harry asked from the love seat they'd created beside Draco.

Hermione nodded, "It should be blonde like Draco's when it grows back."

"Speaking of growing back," his mother said from her seat on the love seat closest to Hermione, "We can't send her back to school looking like this. I had one of the elves get some Hair Replenishing potion while you were at the Burrow. With your permission, I'd like to take her and Rose over to the manor. I'll put the potion on her since you can't now in your condition. And maybe we'll have a bit of fun playing in the vaults."

His mother was going to spoil those girls. She'd always wanted daughters and granddaughters to do girly things with. Rose would come home with a priceless tiara attached to her head, he just knew it. Maybe Minerva could use the distraction of playing in a jewelry vault to help ease the trauma of the last couple of weeks.

"Please, mum," Minerva begged excitedly.

"That's fine. Make sure you tell Nana Cissa if you feel funny at all," Hermione said, smiling at her daughter.

"She's not in any danger, right?" Draco asked worriedly, not ready to let Minerva out of his sight yet.

Hermione shot him a glare, the look saying 'as if I would do a dangerous spell on my daughter,' "No, she'll be fine. Being at the manor around the Malfoy family magic for a few hours would probably help solidify the bond."

"Mum? Are you pregnant?" Minerva asked, looking between Draco and Hermione.

## Finding Hermione

better for Hermione and the girls."

"I saw the pictures. I saw you deceiving her into loving you. And the pictures of you pulling her into your group of friends and brainwashing her into thinking you were something better than what you are, Death Eater scum."

Weasley started mumbling and thrashing around, his head turning from side to side. Draco noticed Weasley's closed eyes like he was seeing the pictures flashing behind his lids. "Pictures. Pictures of you always in the paper. Every time I opened the paper, there you were taking something else away from me. So many pictures. Watching my wife being seduced away from me. My daughters being taken from me. My friends. My family. Every picture, you're taking something away. Everywhere I went people looked at me. Disgust. Pity. Hatred. People ignored me. I got booed when I walked out with the Cannons at a game."

Draco heard gasp from behind them. He stared incredulously at Weasley. They'd lived their lives. Those pictures were of them living their lives, going about their business. Weasley hadn't factored into their lives at all when those pictures had been taken.

Weasley's gaze turned to Hermione. He dropped the loathing he'd thrown at Draco. Now he looked more like a petulant child. "No one cared about me. No one cared about my side of the story. Reporters didn't hound me for details about our relationship. It was all about Hermione Granger. I was just an inconvenient footnote in the story of Hermione Granger." Weasley's gaze landed on Harry to the side, and he spat, "Just like I was a footnote in the history of the Second Wizarding War. The sidekick of Harry Potter. Harry was the hero. Hermione was the brains. And me. I was just the sidekick."

"Are you seriously telling me that everything you put us through was because you weren't the center of attention?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"You don't know what it was like constantly being in someone's shadow. Bill, Charlie, Percy, even Fred and George. Why aren't you smart like Bill? Or tough, like Charlie? Or as

studious as Percy? Or as funny as Fred and George? I never measured up. At school, I wasn't Ron Weasley. I was Harry Potter's friend. When we got married, I was Hermione Granger's husband. I was never my own person. I was just an extension of someone else."

"And you thought killing me would make you your own person?" Hermione asked.

Apparently, there was enough question in Hermione's tone to compel Weasley to answer, "I thought killing you would solve all my problems. Seeing you dead would destroy Malfoy if he truly cared for you, just before I killed him too. Once you were out of the way, I was going to tell the girls you ran off with Malfoy and abandoned them."

Draco sat flabbergasted at Weasley's reasoning. At his willingness to inflict pain on his own children to suit his own ends.

Hermione's face took on that pinched look she had when she was trying to contain her fury. "And what about Harry? How did you think he would've reacted to my disappearance?"

Weasley shrugged, "Once you two were out of the way and stopped filling his head with lies, he would've gone back to being my best friend."

"What about Scorpius and Narcissa?" Hermione persisted. Weasley curled his lip in derision, "Death Eater scum. No one would've listened to them."

"You are completely delusional," Hermione screeched. The dams had broken, and she finally let loose all the rage she'd been holding in since Weasley started talking. "You cheated on me for years. You obliterated me. You neglected our children and harmed Minerva through your negligence. I left you when I found out about your secret life because I didn't want to be anywhere near you, not because Draco brainwashed me. I stayed away for my own protection because I couldn't trust that you wouldn't try to oblivate me again."

Draco barely kept Hermione from jumping up off the sofa and pacing in front of the glass separating them from Weasley.

Nonetheless, Hermione started gesticulating wildly as she tore Weasley apart.

"Draco didn't take anything away from you. You threw your life with me away. You're like a spoiled child with a toy. You're not interested in it until someone else picks it up. You threw our family away. You can't throw a tantrum because someone else came along and values the thing you threw away. I was willing to try to co-parent with you, to have you continue to be a part of our daughters' lives despite how misguided I was. It wasn't enough for you. You decided that my life and Draco's life were a fitting sacrifice to the altar of your pride and arrogance. You were willing to leave three children parentless over your stupid jealousy. No one in their right minds would believe that Draco and I would leave our children to run off together. There would've been no need. Draco's son is my son. My daughters are Draco's daughters."

"My children will never be Malfoy's," Weasley spat, "I don't care what they call him, Malfoy will never be my children's father."

Draco watched Weasley's face with barely concealed glee as Hermione pronounced, "Minerva is now a Malfoy. Draco adopted her a few days ago. Your family agreed that it was the best for Minerva because she had a difficult time accepting that her father tried to kill her mother. Rose will also have a choice when she's older to decide if she wants to officially become a Malfoy. I'm done talking to you. I hope that you come to realize the damage you've caused was unnecessary. You'll have plenty of time to contemplate your choices in Azkaban."

She rose from the sofa and walked to the door. When Draco didn't rise from his seat, she looked back questioning him. "I have a few things to say to Weasley. I'll be right there if you want to wait outside with the Aurors."

She nodded, and Harry opened the door and let her out of the room. Draco turned back to Weasley still bound to the chair. His eyes still held the manichated that he'd maintained all day but had lost the slightly golden tint from being administered

"What specifically did I take from you?" Draco asked angrily. If looks could kill, Draco imagined he'd be dead a hundred times over by now. The malevolence coming off Weasley was palpable. He was glad they were separated by a glass wall.

"To start, you took her," Weasley spat, nodding at Hermione, "There was always something about you that drew her to you. She defended you when we all knew you were just a good-for-nothing Death Eater. She became friends with your mother, despite my telling her not to. I could've fixed what happened between us if you hadn't stepped in that day on the platform. She would've taken me back, but you turned her against me." Hermione tensed up at that statement. No doubt Weasley meant he could obliterate her into compliance again. She looked ready to protest his statement, but Draco placed a hand on her shoulder to stop her. Weasley was talking, answering questions without much prodding.

Weasley fixated on Draco. The loathing was pouring off him like a tidal wave seeking to destroy them all. "Then you started taking my kids. You convinced Rose to start calling you 'Daddy' and stay away from me. You made Minerva believe you were a better father than me. You took away my right to teach my kids to fly."

It was hard to keep his mouth closed at that. Weasley had the chance to teach his daughter to fly and he'd almost gotten Minerva killed through his negligence.

Weasley started turning red. His voice came out in an angry snarl. "You took my best friend. He didn't want anything to do with me after that day on the platform. We've been friends since we were eleven years old. And you came in and convinced him I was a bad guy."

Harry snorted in derision of Weasley's assessment of the friendship that had developed between the two formal rivals. Was Weasley that dense to believe that Draco had subverted their friendship?

"You took my family from me. They liked you better. Respected you more. You deceived them into thinking you were

had never seen poured from his eyes at the occupants in the room.

Draco drew Hermione to him protectively as they seated themselves on the sofa facing Weasley. Hermione placed her hands demurely in her lap and crossed her ankles. Draco sat on her right so that his wand hand was free to protect them if necessary. He wasn't making the same mistake twice. His left arm rested on her shoulders in a blatant display of protectiveness and possessiveness.

He watched Hermione as she assessed the man she'd been married to for thirteen years. He wondered what was going through her head as she took in his appearance. He saw sadness flit across her face, then anger and determination as Weasley continued to glare at them.

She narrowed her eyes at Weasley, then turned to look at Harry, "Was the Veritaserum administered?"

"Yes," Luna spoke up, "fifteen minutes ago. It should be taking effect now, and I have more if it wears off before we are finished." She looked over at Weasley with a surprisingly stern expression, "For the record, what is your name?"

"Ronald Bilius Weasley," Weasley ground out through clenched teeth. His neck strained, as he seemed to try to fight the Incarcerous spell that had him bound to the chair.

"Remember to ask questions," Harry said and gestured to Hermione and Draco to proceed.

Draco looked at Hermione. He cared very little about questioning Weasley. He didn't have questions for Weasley. Hermione would probably ask all the important ones anyway. He was here for Hermione ... and vengeance.

"Why?" Hermione started in a firm voice, "Why did you attack me that day?"

Weasley continued to glare at them. "Because you took everything from me," he spat with vehemence.

"What did Draco and I take from you?" she asked with a slight waver in her voice, aghast at his response.

"Everything," Weasley answered evasively.

Veritaserum. Draco wondered if Weasley had gone a bit mad. Draco stood and faced Weasley, "Do you remember the day at the Burrow when I told you that I would make sure you were only a fading memory to Minerva and Rose if you screwed up?"

Draco didn't bother to wait for an answer to his question. He continued in a calm, cold voice, the ice to Hermione's fire, "I knew you would eventually fuck up and make those girls never want to see you again. I was willing to bide my time and let you. I didn't quite expect you to do such a spectacular job of it though." Draco thought about applauding Weasley for his stupidity but contained himself.

Draco channeled his father's look of derision as he looked down on his defeated foe, "I'll do everything in my considerable power to make sure you rot in Azkaban for the rest of your life. Your daughters will eventually forget you were ever their father. While you rot in prison, I'll be their first dance partner. I'll be there to watch their Quidditch games. And chase off the boys I think aren't good enough for them. I'll be there when some young wizard comes to ask me for their hand in marriage. I'll be there to walk them down the aisle and watch as they marry worthy wizards that will treat them like the treasures they are. While I'm there for every part of their lives, you'll be in prison. We will go about our lives and forget about you, but I'm willing to bet you'll never forget about us. That thing you hate the most about your life, being a footnote in other people's stories, you brought that on yourself. You had it all, a loving family, a beautiful, intelligent wife that loved you, two beautiful daughters. I'm not sure about your life with Lavender Brown and your children with her, but I'm sure they were worth more consideration than what you gave them. Your sons and daughters will grow up without you, and I'm sure that's not a bad thing. You brought this on yourself, Weasley. I hope you rot. You deserve it."

Draco turned his back on Weasley and crossed to the door. Luna gathered her sheath of parchment and quill. Harry opened the door, and they all left the room without giving Weasley a

backward glance. Draco found Hermione leaning up against a wall outside the room. He crossed quickly to her and put an arm around her waist.

"How are you?" he asked, cupping her cheek and kissing her tenderly.

She melted into his embrace, "I'm glad that's over," she answered with a sigh, "After the trial tomorrow, we won't ever have to see him again."

"Let's go home and start forgetting about him," Draco said.

"What did you say to him after I left?" she queried.

Draco shrugged, "Oh, you know. Male dominance, caveman stuff."

Hermione laughed and turned to Harry, "I meant to ask you, Harry, why are your knuckles bruised?"

Harry looked at Hermione with a look of such profound sadness that Draco drew her closer to his side.

"I'll never tell," Harry answered mournfully, "I wish I'd done it sooner though."

Hermione looked quizzically at him and opened her mouth to question him further when Luna cleared her throat.

"I need to deliver these to the MLE," she said, indicating the parchment in her hand, "I would like to talk to you both in private sometime today though."

"Of course, Luna," Hermione answered, "Come over this afternoon for tea."

Luna nodded seriously and walked away from the group.

"Do either of you know what that's about?" Draco asked, indicating Luna's retreating form with his chin.

Harry shrugged, "Probably some cryptic statement that you won't understand until the middle of the night where it will wake you up out of a dead sleep but will reaffirm why you should take her seriously even when you don't understand."

They walked out of the dungeons of the Ministry. Harry and the Aurors walked with them to the atrium. Draco pulled Harry aside while Hermione was distracted talking to one of the Aurors.

a tap of his wand. He opened the door and stepped into the room. Hermione and Draco followed Harry. Draco took in the white tiled walls and floor of the room, a stark contrast to the dark walls and floor of the hallway. The lighting overhead made the whole room glow. Weasley sat stiffly on a chair towards the back of the room. The chair looked similar to the one he'd been bound to during his trial. A clear wall separated the room in half with Weasley on one side and them on the other. A white sofa sat on their side of the wall, facing Weasley.

In the corner of the room sat a witch he didn't expect to see here. Luna Lovegood sat behind a small writing desk with a stack of parchment and a purple Quick Quotes Quill, the kind the Ministry used for quickly taking statements, not the green ones that reporters used for embellishing stories. She had radishes dangling from her ears and a necklace of bottle caps around her neck over horrid puce green robes.

Hermione noticed the strange witch as well and looked questioningly at Harry before greeting Luna. "Hello, Luna. We didn't expect to see you here today."

"She volunteered to record the proceedings," Harry said by way of explanation, "We thought you'd prefer someone you know. Now, we are running late this morning, so let's get this over with."

"I told you the Malfoys would be thirty minutes late," Luna said with a sigh. Draco was a little surprised to hear Hermione and himself referred to as "the Malfoys."

"Yes, yes, male dominance and all that. I remember," Harry said impatiently, his ears turning a little red, "Let's get this over with."

Hermione and Draco turned from Luna, who resumed her seat behind the table in the corner. They looked over at Weasley bound to a chair behind the glass partition. The last week had not been kind to the wizard that glared back at them. He had fresh bruises on his face like he'd been punched repeatedly recently and a scraggly growth of beard. His eyes though were what startled Draco the most. Hatred the likes of which Draco

getting you injured?"

"Mr. Malfoy, are you going to dump Mrs. Granger for someone without so much baggage?"

Draco could feel himself starting to lose control. He itched to hex the reporters into oblivion now. Hermione reached up and touched his face, exposing her cuffed wrist with the Malfoy crest fully displayed to the on-looking reporters. Draco nuzzled slightly into her hand, breathed deeply, and put an arm around her waist.

He returned them to face the reporters and Hermione rested her cuffed wrist on the lapel of his suit jacket. "Hermione and I thank you for your concern for our well-being and that of our family during this trying time."

"All right. That's enough," Harry called, pushing through the crowd at the head of a group of Aurors.

Harry greeted Hermione with a hug and a kiss on her cheek. Heshook Draco's hand, somehow managing to look pleased to see them and determined to get this over with all at the same time. Draco noticed the bruised knuckles on Harry's hand and looked at him in question. Harry just shrugged as a shoulder and turned to face the reporters. The flash of camera captured the entire interaction.

"Mr. Potter, how did it feel having to arrest your best friend for attacking his wife's lover?" a reporter called from the back of the group, the same reporter that asked about Draco dumping Hermione. Draco made a note of the man, short, balding, and paunchy. If he kept up his line of questioning, he would be out of a job before he could say Quidditch.

"Let's go," Harry said tersely, ignoring the reporter.

Harry led them to the bank of elevators. The elevator stopped several floors down on a level Draco had hoped never to see again. Draco shivered as he took in the black walls and chill, dank air of the Ministry dungeons. The echo of the shoes of the Aurors on the black marble floors brought back memories of the time he spent here awaiting his trial.

Harry stopped before a large iron door and unlocked it with

"Why did you beat him up?" Draco asked.

Harry looked hard at him, "I meant what I said back there. I'll take the secret to my grave."

"If it's about Hermione, doesn't she have the right to know?" Draco persisted.

Harry sighed, "I questioned him early this morning with Veritas serum about obliterating Hermione. I lost my cool, and I almost killed him. I still want to kill him. She doesn't need to know, and neither do you. I'm asking you to trust me that it's better this way."

Draco felt sick at what Harry was telling him without telling him. He didn't want to know the details. Sometimes it was kinder that way. He had a feeling that if he did know, he would go back and kill Weasley himself, slowly.

"I know people that are in Azkaban. My father's gone, but I could pull some strings," Draco offered. The world would be better without Ronald Weasley in it.

Harry gave him a look that made Draco wonder how many Slytherin tendencies The Boy Who Lived had lurking in his depths. "I know people too. Just go about your lives and forget about him. Ronald Weasley will truly be nothing more than a fading memory. For all of us."

## EbookDragon

*Christmas break and she loved it. She kissed me on the cheeks and she said she'd wear it every day. Love you, mum and dad. Give Rose and Tony and Nana a hug from us.*

*All our loves,*

*Minerva and Scorpius*

*P.S. (Scorpius) Florence says Minerva is doing fine. She said she slept through the night without any nightmares.*

"Good Lord, what have we unleashed?" Draco said with a laugh and set the letter down.

"I have a feeling letters to home are going to be much more interesting now," Hermione responded with a laugh, "Are you ready to head over to the Ministry?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Draco answered with a sigh and heaved himself up out of his chair. "Can we have a quiet day at home after this?"

"Hopefully," Hermione answered. "I have a feeling I'm going to need a nap after this morning's activities and the upcoming confrontation." Hermione took his proffered hand and stood, smoothing down her black sheath dress and slipping back into her red pointy-toed pumps that Draco loved because they made her legs look fantastic.

"We could stay here and take a nap," Draco offered, wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

Hermione smacked his chest playfully and led the way out of the dining room and into the study. "Stop stalling. Let's get this over with."

Their arrival into the atrium of the Ministry of Magic went unnoticed for roughly three seconds. Then a reporter called out their arrival loudly, and they found themselves swarmed by a dozen eager reporters all calling questions without waiting for any to be answered.

"How are you recovering from your attack, Mr. Malfoy?"

"What curse was used on you, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Mrs. Granger, can you tell us if your husband attacked your lover in a fit of jealous rage?"

"Mr. Malfoy, do you hold Mrs. Granger responsible for

## Finding Hermione

her chair. They took the Floo to school, and Rose ran off to play with her friends on the playground after giving him a smacking kiss on his cheek. Draco returned home to find Hermione still at the table smiling at a letter in her hand.

He kissed her temple and sat down to finish his breakfast. "Who's the letter from?" he asked in curiosity.

She handed the letter to him and said, "The children wrote to both of us."

Draco took the letter and read through it.

*Dear Mum and Dad,*

*(Scarpus) We decided to write our letter to save parchment and an owl. Still is going well here. We are helping Mione catch up on all her missed work. Pevs dumped my water all over James when he got stuck on the trail step on the Grand Staircase and Professor McGonagall scolded him for walking around the school in wet robes and leaving puddles before she dried his robes for him. He got a cold because of it.*

*(Mione) James was stubborn and refused to let me teach him how to dry his robes off. He had to go to the infirmary and get a Pepper Up potion. I am doing fine; I'm sure you're wondering. I haven't had any nightmares. The Slytherins have all been very supportive. No one has given me any trouble about all the changes.*

*(Scarpus) Of course, no one's given her trouble. The older Slytherins made such a big deal about her being the first Malfoy daughter in five centuries. She's practically treated like a princess. Snake has started calling her the Serpent Queen as a joke, not to her face of course.*

*(Mione) Mother, please apologize to Aunt Regine and Uncle Theo. I'm going to strange their son. What's if they're the Baby Snakes, does that make me their Queen? I think I could get used to that.*

*(Scarpus) Oh, dear. Merlin help us.*

*(Mione) Pevs won't help you, brother dear. I would like to request that my train be mended to me so that I may appropriately reign over my loyal subjects.*

*(Scarpus) She gets a train! If she gets a train, then I want the Malfoy train.*

*(Mione) Scarpus is putting because I told him Nana Gave gave me three trains.*

*(Scarpus) I'm not putting.*

*(Mione) It's putting. We have to go now. Scarpus has to take this to the Pottery before curfew, and I need to resume my studying before classes start tomorrow. Love you both!*

*Stand Rose our love.*

*(Scarpus) Dad, I gave Florence her bracelet since I didn't feel like doing it during*

## Chapter 33 The Life and Times of Lavender Brown

January 13th

A knock on the front door startled Draco out of his contemplations of the Malfoy estate business. He was currently perusing. He didn't bother to get up to answer the door. Tansy was home, and she could get the door. It gave them the excuse to politely turn away whoever was there stating he wasn't home if he didn't want to see whomever it was.

A moment later, Tansy appeared at the door to his study. "Master, a woman is at the door asking to see you and Mistress Hermione."

"Did you ask who it was?" Draco asked the elf.

Tansy nodded solemnly. "I tried to turn her away, but she said it was important."

"Well, who is it?"

"It's the woman that carried on with Mistress Hermione's husband."

Why in the world was Lavender Brown at their door, insisting on speaking with them? "I suppose you should show her into the drawing room," Draco finally said with a sigh of resignation. "It wouldn't do to leave her there on the stoop and have it splashed across the front page of the paper."

Tansy nodded and left the room, wringing her hands. He listened as the front door opened then closed. A clack of heels sounded in the foyer as their guest crossed to the drawing room, followed by the opening and closing of another door. Draco left his desk and exited the study quietly. Tansy was waiting for him when he emerged from his study.

"Please bring tea and biscuits about ten minutes after Hermione and I come in if she's still there," Draco instructed as he started to head upstairs to get Hermione.

He found her curled around his pillow in their bed, sound asleep. She'd pleaded the need for a nap when they got home from the Ministry due to exhaustion, both mental and physical. She still had on the black sheath dress that she'd worn to the Ministry. The dress rode up high on her thighs with his pillow resting between her knees.

He sat down on the bed behind her. The bed dipped slightly under his weight and she murmured sleepily. He ran his hand down her back. She hummed rowdily and stretched languorously. She rolled over to blink up at him.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead," he said with a smile.

"How long have I been out?" she asked, scooting back to sit up propped against the pillows.

"Hour, hour and a half," Draco answered, "I woke you because we have company."

"Is it Luna?" Hermione asked running her fingers through her hair.

"No, far stranger than Luna. It's Lavender Brown," Draco explained.

"What can she possibly want?" Hermione asked indignantly. "Not sure," Draco answered, "Tansy said she was insistent. I thought it best to let her in. I didn't want it in the papers that she was pounding on our door."

"Hmm," Hermione hummed, "I hope she's not here to beg for mercy for Ron."

"Easy enough to send her on her way if that's the case." Hermione scooted to the edge of the bed, "Let me just

"I'll miss Minerva's red hair," she answered looking forlornly at her breakfast.

Draco thought of Minerva's auburn locks and the way they'd fluttered in the breeze during their flight lessons. He also remembered how her hair had looked lying on the floor of her bathroom. "It was beautiful," he said solemnly.

She wiped away a tear and shook herself. "I'm sure it will look just as beautiful blonde, and she'll be happier now," she said with a hard expression.

"Imagine his expression when you tell him she's my daughter now," Draco said with a malicious gleam. He would look forward to watching Weasley's face as he realized Draco took one of his daughters from him.

"Should we even tell him?" she asked, looking unsure.

"It's up to you," Draco answered.

Rose bounded back into the room brandishing a hairbrush in one hand and green ribbons in the other. Hermione turned her chair so that Rose could stand between her legs and face Draco while she did her hair. Draco ate his breakfast and watched Hermione and Rose with fascination. He was suddenly glad Scorpius was a boy as he watched Hermione brush Rose's curly hair, part it down the middle, pull each side up into a ponytail, and secure the pigtails with ribbons. She did it with the practiced ease of a mother of girls and made the whole procedure look deceptively easy.

"How do I look, Daddy?" Rose asked Draco.

"Like a princess," Draco answered.

"Daddy, I'm supposed to look like a ballerina," Rose protested.

Draco laughed at her exasperated tone, "How silly of me. How about a princess ballerina?"

"It's time for school," Hermione interjected, turning Rose to kiss her on the nose, "and you look adorable. Be good and listen to your teacher."

Draco got out of his chair and held his hand out for Rose. He dropped a kiss on Hermione's upturned lips as he passed by

he came until he could feel their mingled juices dripping around him.

He collapsed in an exhausted heap onto her. Her arms came up around him, and she ran her nails up and down his back. He found the scratch of her nails oddly relaxing and hummed in contentment. He turned his head to kiss her passionately.

He moved to roll off her, but she held him in place by throwing her leg over his hip. He propped himself up on her arm and continued to kiss her. She moaned against his mouth and started undulating her hips. His softened cock responded immediately to her undulations.

"Again?" he asked, a little astounded.

"You did say you wanted me dripping," she responded, capturing his lips again. He growled against her mouth and set about claiming his mate.

XXX

By the time they wandered downstairs for breakfast, she had jelly legs and a delicious smirk on her face. She sank gratefully into her chair and asked him to fix her a bowl of oatmeal. She kissed Rose on the forehead in greeting.

"Mummy, we're going to be late for school," Rose informed them as she finished the last bites of her breakfast.

Draco checked the time, and sure enough, Rose had to beat school in fifteen minutes. "I'll take you when it's time," Draco said.

"Since you're already dressed and finished eating, go wash your face and brush your teeth," Hermione said, then reached out and twirled a curl of her daughter's hair around her finger. "When you get done, bring a brush down, and I'll do your hair."

"Can I have pig tails with green ribbons?" Rose asked as she hopped down from her chair.

"Absolutely," Hermione answered.

Rose skipped from the room, and the dining room door closed softly behind her. Hermione sighed as she took her first bite of oatmeal.

"What is it?" Draco asked, looking over at her with concern.

freshen up a bit and we'll go down and see what she wants."

Hermione was in and out of the bathroom quickly and they both made their way to the drawing room. Draco had a moment of indecision when they came to the door. His protectiveness warred with his innate good manners. Did he open the door and let her go in first, possibly opening her to attack? Or did he open the door and enter first, placing himself in the line of fire but was incredibly rude to his mate?

"Go in first," his mate said with mock exasperation, "I know you want to."

Draco smiled ruefully at her but silently blessed her for catering to his need to protect her. He opened the door and walked into the room. Lavender Brown, who had been seated in the armchair facing the door, stood up quickly and was wringing her hands and looking anxious. Draco noticed her wand and handbag were sitting on the coffee table out of her reach. Draco nodded in greeting to the woman and turned to offer his arm to Hermione.

Hermione placed her arm on his and allowed Draco to guide her over to the sofa. She smiled politely at the woman still standing there watching them warily. "Lavender, we weren't expecting you," Hermione said by way of greeting, in a regally cool manner that would have done his mother proud.

Hermione sat down and gestured for Lavender to resume her seat. Draco settled onto the sofa beside Hermione and resting an arm on the back of the sofa behind Hermione's head. His wand was tucked up his sleeve. As much as she hated the idea of hexing a woman, he wouldn't hesitate if she posed a threat to Hermione. Hermione crossed her legs at the ankle and tucked them to the side so that her foot rested along Draco's ankle.

"Thank you for seeing me," Lavender started hesitantly, "I'm glad that you've recovered, Draco."

Draco looked speculatively at Lavender. She was wearing a white and navy polka-dot button-down blouse and a flared navy skirt. Something always struck him as a little off about her ever since he saw her on the platform in September. She was plump

after having four kids, but that was understandable. At every encounter, her hair and makeup always seemed just a little too perfect. Even when she looked tired and harried that day on the platform, not a hair was out of place.

"Thank you," Draco answered formally, "I understand that you had a part in helping that day. Harry said you called the Aurors?"

This seemed to be all the prompting Lavender needed to launch into her accounting of the event surrounding Weasley's attack.

Lavender nodded and released a tense breath, her hands twisting in her skirt. She spoke in a high, girlish voice, "I called Harry. I came down the stairs right after Minerva. As I opened the door to the front room, I saw Minerva disappear with a pop. A moment later I heard another pop come from upstairs and the children shouting that Rose disappeared."

Lavender looked sadly over at Draco, "I found you on the floor with Hermione over you trying to heal you. I sent out a call for help, shot an Incarcerous spell at Ron, and started helping Hermione try to heal you."

Lavender kept her gaze on Draco, seemingly not yet ready to face Hermione. Hermione watched Lavender impassively. Draco wondered what was going through her mind. Was there still anger and animosity at Lavender for her continued affair with her husband?

"Harry stepped through the fireplace. I don't know how long it took. It seemed like moments and forever all at the same time. The Aurors with Harry transfigured my coffee table into a stretcher and took you and Hermione to St. Mungo's."

"Harry checked the house, looking for the girls. I told him they disappeared, so he called over at the manor, and found them there. He put my house on lockdown so that I couldn't leave and no one could enter. Then he took Ron away."

Lavender's gaze took on a faraway look as she relived the events. She took a deep shuddering breath before she continued with her story.

"Are you trying to distract me," he groaned, "or get me to think of ways to destroy Weasley?"

"Both," she answered with a sigh as he leaned down to kiss her neck. "Hmmm... feels good," she crooned when he bit lightly on the side of her neck. She started rubbing the head of his cock across her lower lips, coating him with her juices. He surged inside when she positioned him at her entrance.

"This is what I'm going to think about while we confront him," he said, starting to thrust and withdraw slowly, "That I get to make love to you every day." Her channel grasped him as he plunged inside, drawing him deeper into her wet coming heat. He dipped his head down to taste her lips.

"I'll be thinking about how my cum is going to be dripping down your thighs."

"Why in the world would you be thinking that?" she panted, arching up into him.

"It's going to be the only thing keeping me from killing him," Draco said, thrusting hard into her, "The only way I'm going to be able to be calm enough for you to do this is to think about how wonderful my life is because he fucked up. In probably the crudest way possible."

"There are times that I like it when you act like a caveman," she moaned, "Tell me what you're going to think about that's going to keep you calm."

Draco obliged her by letting the caveman loose. He pounded hard into her. The primal part of him urged him to mark his claim on her. "You're my witch. My children are growing in your womb. The mark of my family is on your wrist. My cum will run down your thighs, and every male will know that you're mine."

Her muscles were tensing around him. She arched under him, mewling in pleasure. She shattered around him, crying out loudly. Her wet, hot pussy squeezed his cock, and he groaned. She was so sensitive after she came that she jumped and cried out as he continued to thrust into her. The sharp spasms of her cunts sent him over the edge. His eyes rolled back in his head as

the crook of his neck, her warm breath tickling along his collarbones. She had an arm and leg thrown possessively over him. He could tell that she was fighting against waking up.

He ran his fingers through her curls. He trusted that she would be safe from harm. What toll would Weasley's sword have on her though? How much more harm could Weasley inflict on Draco's family? He worried the stress of the confrontation would cause her to lose the babies.

"I can hear you fretting from here," Hermione murmured into his neck.

"I wish you didn't need to do this," he answered.

"I know," she said quietly, "I won't put myself at risk, but I need to know why he attacked us."

"I could always ask him whatever you wanted and then share my memories with you," he offered, knowing full well that she wouldn't go for it.

She propped herself up on his chest, looking indignant. "Did you expect me to go along with you on that?" she asked seriously.

"No," he answered glumly.

"Stop worrying," she chided, "Harry's going to have him trussed up like a Christmas goose."

"I know," Draco allowed, "but words can hurt just as badly as a curse."

"He doesn't have the power to hurt us anymore," Hermione said, kissing his chest along the scar. Weasley left, "We're going to find out why he did what he did. Then we're going to give him something to think about while he rots in jail."

He flipped her onto her back and loomed over her. "What devious things is my lioness going to tell the Weasel to torment him during his lonely years in prison?"

XXX

She wriggled against him. Her soft hands teased featherlight caresses down his chest and across the planes of his stomach. "I thought maybe you could help me with that," she purred as she grasped his length in her hand.

"It seemed like he was gone for hours. I kept the kids out of the front room. I didn't know if I could clean up in there or if they needed pictures for evidence. There was blood everywhere," Lavender shuddered, "He came back with a bottle of Veritaserum, a purple Quick Quotes Quill, and a stack of parchment. He asked if I would willingly submit to questioning at my home or if he had to take me in."

"Harry questioned me about the events of Ron's attack. What I saw, what I did. What happened during the day before you arrived. Then he started going further back." She broke from her account of the story to look directly at Hermione for the first time since she had started talking, her gaze full of remorse, "I'm sorry, Hermione. I had no idea he was obliviating you."

Hermione stiffened and curled her lip into a sneer at Lavender, "Not to be rude Lavender, but why are you here?"

Tansy chose that moment to appear with the tea tray. Hermione's teacup was set off to the side since she only drank caffeine in the mornings now. She gave Tansy a list of teas that she liked to drink during her previous pregnancies. Hermione thanked the elf as Tansy handed her a teacup full of rooibos chai tea latte. She gave Draco his teacup next, Earl Grey with a slice of lemon.

Tansy turned to their guest and asked with polite indifference, "How do you take your tea, Miss?"

"Oh," Lavender said, looking uncomfortable, "Just a lump of sugar."

Tansy handed her the tea and moved the tray over so that the biscotti was in front of Hermione.

"Thank you, Tansy," Draco said to the elf.

The door closed quietly behind her. Hermione took the biscotti off her saucer and dipped it into her tea. "Now," she said quietly, looking squarely at Lavender, "back to my previous question, why are you here?" She took a bite out of her biscotti, the crunch resounding through the room aggressively.

Draco smiled into his cup as he took a sip of tea. Hermione's

## Finding Hermione

icy demeanor was unnerving her former housemate.

Lavender took a sip of her tea and set the cup on the table beside her. "Right," she said, squaring her shoulders bravely, "I came to apologize to you."

"For what?" Hermione queried coldly, reaching forward to take another biscotti.

"For carrying on an affair with your..." she drifted off at Hermione's glare, "with Ron," she finished.

"Why apologize now after twelve years?" Hermione asked, swirling the biscotti in her tea.

"Do you remember the final battle?" Lavender asked. Hermione and Draco both shot her looks of incredulity, so she continued, "Fenrir attacked me while I was down in that battle."

Hermione interrupted Lavender's story to coolly state, "Yes, I remember that as I was the one that kept him from mauling you to death."

Lavender looked down into her teacup. A pained expression crossed her face. "I know," she said quietly. She looked at Hermione, her gaze full of regret, "I didn't thank you at the time. I wasn't grateful. I wished you had let me die. But thank you for doing it. I owe you my life."

"You have a funny way of paying back a life debt," Hermione snapped harshly.

"I know," Lavender said again.

"Get on with the story," Hermione said, gesturing impatiently for Lavender to continue, "I assume there's more."

Lavender took a deep breath and continued, "The curse I was hit with just before he attacked me slowed my circulation down. It kept me from bleeding out when he ravaged my neck and shoulder and clawed my face. Pavarti got me to Madame Pomfrey and went back out to keep fighting. It was chaos in the Hospital Wing. Madame Pomfrey spent enough time on me to make sure I didn't die and then moved on to the next patient."

Lavender's hand went up to the left side of her neck. Her hand hovered there, not quite touching the skin, "The scars on my face, neck, and shoulder were horrific at first. People

## Chapter 32 *Confronting a Vexel*

January 13th

Draco woke with a pervasive sense of dread. He had no problems going to confront Weasley about his actions. He could even admit to looking forward to it. He had a few things he wanted to say to Weasley before he was locked away for good, a few choice words for Weasley to ruminate on for the rest of his life.

The part he dreaded was letting his soulmate anywhere near the man that tried to attack her. Harry had assured him repeatedly that he wouldn't let any harm come to Hermione and himself during the confrontation. Draco had insisted that Harry run him through every security measure he'd put in place for the encounter.

He'd allowed Harry to make the necessary arrangements. Partly because Harry had the skill set required for ensuring the safety of others. The wizard wasn't the youngest Head Auror in the history of the Ministry of Magic just because of his famous name. The other part was because Draco knew it was Harry's way of attempting to assuage his guilt for Weasley's attack. Draco thought that it would be a long time before Harry was able to move past the things Weasley had done to Hermione and Minerva.

His mate stirred against his side. She buried her face into

didn't want to be near me. They couldn't look at me. People would cross the street just to avoid me, like they thought I was dangerous or diseased, rather than someone who had fought Death Eaters while they hid in their homes. I was terrified that I would turn into a werewolf, even though Fenrir wasn't a wolf when he bit me. My parents didn't want anything to do with me. They thought I was diseased. They gave me some money and kicked me out. I wandered around, crashing on friends' couches until eventually, I went to the Hog's Head. Madame Rosmerta took pity on me, gave me a job waiting tables and pouring drinks, and a place to stay. She helped me work on my glamour charms so that I could have a somewhat normal life. It took a while before I could perfect the charms necessary to hide my scars fully."

Draco had to commend her for her bravery. She fought in a war, as a seventeen-year-old. When teenagers her age were worrying about partying or school, she was fighting against adults much more lethal than herself. Then, instead of being hailed a hero, she was shunned for the scars she bore.

Lavender fidgeted nervously with the handle of her cup, turning it around on her saucer, then turning it back. "Ron came in for a drink one day. I hadn't perfected the glamour charms yet so my scars were still visible. He treated me like I was a normal person like I was still that girl he went to school with. It... it was nice, to not have someone look at you with revulsion. We had a drink together. Then one drink became many and ..."

"I don't want to hear about your sex life with my former husband, Lavender," Hermione interjected sharply.

"I wasn't... of course... sorry," Lavender stammered, "I'm not telling you all this to make you feel sorry for me or to excuse what I did."

"Then why are you telling me?" Hermione said.

"I've always believed that in order to ask for forgiveness and truly be forgiven, the person you're asking has to know the reasons you're asking. I'm not telling you this to hurt you or to

absolve myself. I want you to know so that maybe one day you can understand, and find it in yourself to forgive me."

Hermione nodded pacified and leaned forward to set her empty cup of tea on the tray. "Go on then."

"I got pregnant that night. The wolf infection makes me more fertile and well, Ron is a Weasley," Lavender said with a shrug, and waved the comment away, "Madame Rosmerta wasn't going to let me stay. She started treating me differently after I took Ron up to my room that night. When I found out, I told Ron I needed to speak to him. I needed help. I couldn't raise the baby on my own with no job, no prospects, and nowhere to live."

Lavender reached forward and took some biscotti off the plate. Draco tensed beside Hermione as her hand came close to her wand resting on the table. She continued in a soft voice, "He helped me find a place to live. He gave me money so that I could stay at home. I think... I think it made him feel better about himself, how much I needed him. He felt more like a man."

"Are you saying I didn't make him feel like a man?" Hermione asked sharply.

Lavender looked at Hermione impatiently as she protested, her voice losing the timidity that she'd addressed them before, "That's not what I'm trying to say. Your relationship with him was different than my relationship with him. And come on, Hermione, be honest with yourself. You didn't need him. You didn't need him to protect you. You didn't need him to provide for you. You aren't a damsel in distress. You're a strong, independent woman. And some men want that. But Ron, an essential part of himself needs to be needed and to feel important. I catered to that. The wolf part of me sought an alpha to bow to. My subservience made him feel powerful."

Lavender continued her story before Hermione could interrupt again. "Kid after kid popped out and I needed him more and more. I felt guilty for deceiving you. For continuing an affair with your husband. There were days where I wanted

An interesting fact about the significance of the roses that Scorpius gives to Hermione. Six roses signify a need to be loved or cherished. White roses signify happy love. Pink roses signify joy and admiration. As always, please review. I enjoy reading them.

breezily and swept from the room.

Draco turned to Hermione then. All this debate about divorce and Weasley meant he hadn't been able to find out about Hermione's talk with Scorpius. "You have to tell me how it went in the outer office with Scorpius. You were both gone for a long time."

Hermione smiled and her hand grazed across her lower abdomen where their children were nestled. "It was very sweet. He told me the story Narcissa first told him about me. The one where I used magic to channel Astoria's love into him. I'd never heard the story but you can't really tell a toddler about breastfeeding."

She smiled up at him and traced patterns on his sleeve with her finger, "He asked if I would be his mum, even though you and I weren't married yet. He went on a tirade about how you had better marry me because I was pregnant even though you weren't supposed to ask a witch to marry you for that reason."

Draco laughed at her recount of his son's nervous ramblings.

"Then he got a little unsure of himself. He thrust the roses at me and told me he knew that I already had two kids and two more on the way, but he hoped that I wouldn't mind one more. He said he would do the same adoption ritual that Minerva did if I wanted. I told him no, probably a little forcefully. He thought I was rejecting him at first. I told him we didn't need to do the ritual. That I wouldn't disrespect his mother's memory by asking that of him. I told him that I already thought of him as one of my own, ever since he was a baby. And that when I gave him his mother's love, I gave him some of mine as well."

\*\*\*

A/N: I hoped you might like this chapter and enjoyed Narcissa's stories of Hermione. I think it's interesting to contemplate how the wizarding world would tell their children stories of the Golden Trio.

to tell him it was over and he needed to go back to you. Or I wanted to force him to make a choice and let one of us go. But I never could. He owned me. He knew that I would never do anything to put my children's well-being in jeopardy."

Lavender's face twisted into what Draco could only describe as a feral snarl, "Ron would fill Fred's head with this feeling of pride and self-importance that he was a Weasley, but then he would tell him he couldn't claim to be a Weasley because of your girls. It confused him and made him resentful. Fred, I believe, feels the weight of his bastardy more than my other children. He's a week older than Minerva, Ron's firstborn and son. He's tried so hard to emulate his father, to make himself into a son Ron would be proud of."

Hearing Lavender talk about Fred brought back painful memories of his own childhood. His own desire to please his father. The similarity made Draco feel, not for the first time, a bit sorry for Fred Brown. Draco didn't like that Fred had bullied his children, but he could understand his need to feel important.

"I overheard Ron talking to Fred a week before he was supposed to go to school. He was filling his head with nonsense about being better than other children," Lavender gestured at Draco, "like your son, Draco. He would tell him he was a Weasley and should be proud of that, but that Fred couldn't tell anyone because no one must know that he was Ron's son. I got mad then. My son was being filled with this nonsense that he was eating up because he just wanted to make his father proud. He was being told that he was better because of a name, but that he wouldn't be allowed to use it. He was making my son arrogant and insufferable."

Lavender shrank back in her chair in discomfort, "I... I let go of Arthur's hand that day on the platform. I knew he would run to Ron. We all saw him standing there with you. Arthur was too young to understand that he wasn't supposed to acknowledge Ron in public, and I used that to out Ron. I was tired of my children being relegated to the shadows."

Hermione hissed in response. A sharp intake of breath in shock that Lavender Brown had orchestrated the final demise of Hermione's marriage. Draco didn't know whether to be overjoyed that she had finally reached her limit that day or angered at the hurt she'd caused Hermione.

Lavender leaned forward, her hands clasped in front of her in her lap in a pleading gesture. Her gaze stayed on Hermione, her voice full of apology and remorse, "My actions hurt you and your daughters and for that I'm sorry. I'm sorry that you were hurt that day on the platform. I'm sorry for sleeping with him all those years ago and allowing him to keep me as his mistress all these years. I'm sorry that you were attacked in my home. I'm sorry that you were almost killed, Draco," she glanced briefly at him before continuing, "I hope that in time, you can understand and accept my apologies. In time, I hope that you can forgive me."

Lavender set her teacup down on the tea tray and took a deep breath. "I've taken up enough of your time today. Thank you for seeing me and listening to me. I'll show myself out."

She picked up her wand and handbag and got to her feet. Draco nodded good-bye to her cordially. Hermione was staring blankly at the fireplace. Her hand drifted to her abdomen.

"Lavender," Hermione called out, not looking over at the woman. Lavender turned with her hand on the door knob and looked over at Hermione. "I forgive you," Hermione said quietly.

"What?" Lavender asked, her voice full of disbelief.

Hermione turned to look across the room at her, her voice had more force this time, "I forgive you."

"Thank you," Lavender said quietly. "I didn't expect forgiveness so soon, if at all. May I ask why?"

"I don't agree with your actions concerning carrying on an affair with him for so long, but I can understand your reasons. Despite the pain you initially caused, I think I owe you a debt of gratitude for outing him that day on the platform. Who knows what our lives would be like without it? Probably more of the

"Alright," Draco said with a mock sigh of resignation, "After it is."

"You could've lead with that one," Theo said sardonically. Hermione shrugged, "Where's the fun in that?"

Harry slapped his hands on his legs and pushed out of the chair. "Now that that's settled, I have some plans to make." He came over and shook Draco's hand and kissed Hermione on the cheek. "I'll see you both at the Ministry in two days."

Theo got up as well, "I have my own wife to pamper at home."

"Give Daphne our love," Hermione said, kissing Theo on the cheek.

Theo and Harry were gone, leaving the two of them alone with his mother for company. Draco turned with Hermione's legs in his lap to face her fully.

"Mother, I have a bone to pick with you."

"By all means, pick away," his mother said airily.

"You kept it a secret for almost twelve years that Hermione breastfed Scorpius during your little errands."

His mother's gaze turned sharp and Draco was reminded of the woman that had lied to Lord Voldemort in order to get to him. "I kept her secret because that was the price to be paid in order to do what was best for my grandson."

"Draco, don't be mad at your mother," Hermione pleaded, "it was my fault. Your mother did what she was necessary to help Scorpius."

"I'm not mad," Draco said, "I just wish someone would've told me sooner. He's my son. I had a right to know."

"Yes, you did, Draco," Hermione said soothingly, rubbing her hands down his chest, "and I was wrong to keep it from you."

"Just no more secrets," Draco said, then looked at his mother, "and you have to stop telling the kids stories about Hermione. They're going to go out and rob a bank or get their teachers drug into the forest by centaurs."

"Well, I'm going to say good-bye to Rose," his mother said

Draco made his way back to the study. Molly looked up at him guiltily as he walked into the room. The normally vivacious woman looked haunted and much older than the last time he saw her.

Draco sat the tea tray on the coffee table. Hermione leaned forward to pour for him and Molly and handed each a cup before taking her own.

"How's your head?" she asked quietly.

"Better," he replied, squeezing her knee.

Hermione's eyebrow in silent communication. Why is she here? His look clearly said. Hermione shook her head slightly and frowned. You're not going to like it, she returned.

Draco sighed and took a fortifying sip of his tea. He was content to wait out the Weasley matriarch. He could guess what her intentions were in coming here today. They may have disowned their son, but he was still their son.

Molly set down her cup and saucer with a slight clink of the china. Draco watched her over the rim of his own cup as she took a deep breath. Draco imagined he could visibly see her gathering her courage around her, like a warm blanket on a cold, winter's day.

She gave them a pleading look as she started to speak, "I hope that you'll both hear me out. I know I have no right to ask this," she paused and took a deep breath. Draco could see the tears welling up in her eyes. "Please have mercy on my son."

"Molly..." Hermione started in a pained voice.

"I know he didn't mean it," Molly pleaded, "I know he's sorry. He can't have meant to kill you, Hermione. Not Ron."

Draco hated this. He hated seeing the pain and desperation

on Molly Weasley's face. She just couldn't fathom that her son would be capable of trying to kill his wife. Draco hated the pain that would follow tomorrow as Molly Weasley was forced to realize how far her son had fallen.

"Molly," Hermione started again.

He could hear the tears choking her voice. He felt sorry for Molly, but he was starting to hate her as well for putting Hermione through this. Draco set his cup down and took Hermione's from her. She leaned into his chest and started to cry. Draco drew her into a protective embrace. Hadn't she already been through enough at the hands of this family? Hadn't Hermione already given enough?

"He's not sorry," Draco said softly to Molly, stroking Hermione back, "As much as it pains me to tell you this, he did mean to kill Hermione. And me."

Molly started to shake her head in denial. Tears were streaming down her face.

"Molly, I'm sorry. I know you don't want to believe it. What parent would?" Draco said kindly.

"Please," Molly pleaded at him, her hands clasped together in front of her, "I'll give you anything. I'll get down on my knees and beg. Just have mercy on my son."

Draco swallowed hard. He was uncomfortable with this. He couldn't give her what she wanted. It wouldn't be right. His whole family would forever be looking over their shoulder in fear of Ronald Weasley. Minerva would probably relapse and start having nightmares again. He wasn't going to put them through that.

He settled his face into stern resolve. It wasn't right that she was putting them in this position. Her son attacked them. Almost killed Draco. Traumatized Minerva. Caused worry and grief for his family.

"Molly, I'm only going to say this once," Draco said in a hard

tone, ice laced with steel, "There will be no mercy for Ronald Weasley. He attacked Hermione with the intent to kill her. Had I not stepped in front of her, she would be dead, along with our unborn children. I am not the man my father was. I'm not cruel or unfeeling, but I won't ask for leniency for someone that tried to kill my soulmate or our children. He's going to spend the rest of his life in Azkaban. You need to accept that."

Molly's eyes narrowed at him in anger, "This is all your fault," she spat, "If you hadn't flaunted your relationship around for everyone to see, none of this would've happened."

Hermione burst from his embrace. He thought he could see sparks fly from the ends of her curly hair. She rounded on Molly. "How dare you!" she growled at the woman. "How dare you try to place blame on us for his actions!"

"I'm sorry," Molly said, trying to placate Hermione's anger.

"Get out," Hermione ground out, "Get out of our home."

"Please, Hermione," Molly tried again, rising from her seat, "How would you feel if it were one of your children?"

"Wouldn't you do anything in your power to try to save them?"

"I wouldn't place the blame on the victims," Hermione spat at her.

Draco rose from his seat and stepped between the two women. He guided Molly over to the fireplace, "Molly, it's been a very stressful day for us. I empathize with you, but we're not going to be swayed. It's time for you to go. I can't have you continuing to upset Hermione."

"He's my son, Draco," Molly murmured weakly.

Draco took a pinch of Floo powder and threw it into the fireplace, "I know. I don't know what I would do in your shoes." He gave Molly a little nudge, encouraging her to step into the fireplace. She stepped into the green flames and looked regretfully at the two of them before calling out, "The Burrow."

puttering around the kitchen looking unusual for her in a midnight blue empire waist dress with short, puffed sleeves.

"Tansy?" Draco asked in shock. He'd never seen the elf in anything other than her ridiculous leotards and tutus.

"Oh, Master Draco," Tansy squeaked, startled.

"You look nice," Draco said.

Tansy smoothed down the front of her dress and looked up at him with a half-smile, "Thank you, Master Draco. I have a date."

"Oh," Draco said in surprise. He didn't know that his elf dated, not that she was really his elf, come to think of it.

"I hope that is alright with you, Master Draco?" Tansy said nervously.

"Of course," Draco said. "I hope it goes well," he finished uncomfortably.

Tansy slumped in relief. She looked up at him speculatively, "Do you need something, Master Draco?"

"Oh, of course," Draco said, momentarily forgetting what he came in here for, "I am in need of tea. And do you have any of those scones left?"

Tansy nodded and started making the tea and setting up the tray. Draco went to the corner cabinet and unlocked it with his wand. He pulled out the small vial of the potion he took for his headaches and downed it. Draco sighed in relief as the pressure let up its vice-grip on his forehead.

He locked the cabinet back up and turned to find Tansy about to lift the loaded tea tray. He plucked the tray from her grasp.

"I've got this. You go enjoy yourself."

Tansy started wringing her hands again, "If you're sure you don't need anything else, Master Draco?"

Draco smiled down at the elf. "Go," he said gently, "You've earned a night off. Go have some fun."

"Thank you, Master Draco," Tansy said. She was gone in a "pop" leaving him standing alone in the kitchen holding a tea tray.

## Finding Hermione

fireplace, "Equality." Luna took a pinch of Floo powder from the bowl on the mantel and threw it into the fireplace. She called out, "Leaky Cauldron," and then she was gone.

Hermione sat down on the couch heavily. "I don't know how to feel right now," she admitted.

Draco had remained seated as Luna took her leave. He rested his head on the back of the sofa and stared up at the ceiling. He could feel the tick of a headache building across his forehead. He felt like he'd had enough emotional confrontations for at least a week, let alone one day. He desperately wanted a nap before Rose and all her exuberance came home from school.

"I say we don't worry about it until after the hearing tomorrow. Let's just take a nap here on the sofa until it's time to go get Rose," Draco said tiredly.

"Good idea," Hermione said, starting to stretch out again on the sofa.

Draco was just pulling off his loafers when the Floo chimed.

"For the love of all that is holy," Draco groaned.

Hermione laughed a little at this tone. "I'll see who it is," she said, rising from the sofa.

She answered the Floo call. Draco groaned inwardly as the sound of Molly Weasley's voice drifted into the room. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I was hoping to talk to you both before Rose came home from school. Is now a good time?"

"No," Draco grumbled uncharitably.

Hermione shot him a glare before she turned and answered Molly, "Now is fine if you would like to come through."

Draco groaned again. "I'm calling Tansy. I need tea and something for my headache."

"Be nice to Molly," Hermione chided him, "I'm sure this has been awful for her."

"Whatever this is about," Draco whined, "I'm sure it will be awful for me."

"You really do need a nap," Hermione said, patting his cheek in mock sympathy and smiling up at him.

Draco left the study in search of Tansy. He found the elf

"The nerve of the woman," Hermione huffed behind him. Draco crossed back over to the sofa and sat beside Hermione again. He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her into his embrace.

"Don't think too harshly of her," Draco said soothingly, "She's a desperate woman."

"I know," Hermione murmured, "I just can't believe she tried to blame us."

Trying to change the subject, Draco said, "Want to hear some interesting news?"

"Sure," Hermione replied with a shrug.

"I found out before I walked in here that Tansy is going on a date," Draco said enthusiastically.

Hermione squealed and clapped her hands in joy. "Now that is good news. I wonder who it is. We'll have to make sure she takes regular time off. Oh, what if he's not free? That's just not right, we'll have to make sure he's freed."

Draco let her ramble on about house elf rights. They would find a solution to any potential problems with Tansy's beau if it arose. He was just glad that the light had come back into her eyes again. It had been an exceedingly long day.

Draco went to get Rose from school. He placed an order for dinner at Samorn's Thai Kitchen. After Samorn's son delivered the food and left the house, Draco closed down the Floo for the house. No more visitors for today. He wanted to relax with Hermione and Rose and enjoy a quiet evening watching movies, just like the Muggles do.

"But it's intrusive," Hermione protested. "It's our private lives."

"Do you think it would stop if I stopped taking pictures?" Luna asked.

That seemed to cause Hermione to pause in her tirade. "Better the devil you know," Draco murmured.

"I just want to live a normal life," Hermione said dejectedly.

"You've been living a normal life, haven't you?" Luna said, not unkindly. "The times Dennis and I took photos of you didn't interfere with your normal day-to-day lives. Can you say the same would be true with another reporter? Or that they wouldn't publish photos that maybe you didn't want the public to see?"

"I see your point, Luna," Hermione said. "I just don't like it very much."

"I'm sure it will die down," Luna offered. "You'll be a boring married couple soon, so unless you get caught doing the dirty in a broom closet at the Ministry, I'm sure people will lose interest, which means The Prophet will lose interest."

Draco couldn't help but laugh at Luna's assessment, not to be mean or because he thought she was wrong, but just the thought of "doing the dirty" in a broom closet was laughable. He had a perfectly good office at the Ministry, thank you very much.

"Thank you for hearing me out," Luna said, rising from her seat. "Congratulations on the twins, by the way."

Hermione froze on her way to hug Luna goodbye. She cast a worried look over her shoulder at Draco, then turned back to Luna. "You won't print that, will you?"

"I'm not the monster here," Luna said impatiently. "If I were Rita Skeeter, then I would most definitely print that, but I'm not. And it wouldn't help our cause anyway."

Hermione looked curiously at Luna. "What is our cause then?"

"The same cause you've been fighting since you joined our community," Luna said as she started to turn toward the

## Finding Hermione

she been hiding this tough exterior? He thought he probably shouldn't be too surprised though. Time and war change people. Draco wouldn't believe her rapid façade anymore. He knew there was steel behind those eyes.

"If you're not apologizing for taking pictures of us, then what are you wanting to apologize for?" Hermione asked impatiently.

Luna looked both enraged and remorseful as she answered. "I didn't realize how the pictures would affect Ron. I underestimated his reaction to them. I'm afraid seeing those pictures of how happy you and your daughters were without him fueled his rage. I wanted to apologize for that. I didn't realize that I would be putting you in danger."

Hermione opened her mouth to retort, no doubt still angry about Luna's invasion of their privacy. He placed a hand on her knee to stop the angry words. He didn't want her to say something in anger she would regret.

"I think we can all say that we've aided in the buildup of this situation," Draco placated, "Whether it was inevitable is something we will probably never know now, but ultimately I don't think any of our actions is responsible for leading Weasley to try to kill Hermione and me."

Luna nodded in thanks to him. She turned to look at Hermione, her gaze thoughtful and a little unsure. Hermione sighed and returned her friend's gaze.

"Draco's right, Luna," she relented, "Our pictures in the paper were well-intentioned on your part. You couldn't have known what Ron's reaction would be to them, but ultimately, he's responsible for his actions."

"Thank you both," Luna said, looking relieved.

"Can you stop taking pictures of us now?" Hermione asked. Luna looked sharply at Hermione, "Do you have that sort of arrangement with other reporters?"

"No," Hermione answered.

"Then why do you think you can ask that of me?" Luna responded.

*Chapter 35  
The Trial of  
Ronald Weasley*

January 14th

Draco both dreaded and longed for this day. He was confident that at its end, Weasley would be gone from their lives. Draco would be able to raise Minerva and Rose as his own without worrying about Weasley undermining him. The blight of Ronald Weasley would be out of their lives. Draco had been willing to share, albeit reluctantly, but he would've done it if that was what was best for the girls.

Hermione would face him one more time – one last time. He didn't want her anywhere near Weasley. Irrational as his fear was, he worried that Weasley would attack her again. But this was the last time they would ever have to see him again. Then Ron Weasley could fade into obscurity. A bad memory of their past.

Draco and Hermione arrived at the Ministry early. They were currently in Draco's office avoiding the press in the atrium. Hermione was unable to sit still while they waited for the start of the trial. She paced nervously around his office. He was thankful that it was more spacious than her old office in the DME and she didn't have to dodge furniture.

Draco's office at the Ministry was decorated similarly to his study at home. Shelves of books lined one wall. Large magical windows lined the wall behind his desk, depicting the snowy gardens at Malfoy Manor. His desk was a duplicate of the walnut executive desk he'd had before he got the partners' desk for he and Hermione to share. Black leather chairs were positioned in front of his desk. Across from the bookcase was a seating area with a black leather sofa and matching armchairs.

Draco sat at his desk and opened The Prophet while Hermione paced around the room and was not surprised to see an article about the upcoming trial on the front page.

Ron Weasley On Trial Today

By: Luna Lovegood

The Wizengamot and Magical Law Enforcement will decide the fate of Ronald Weasley today. Weasley is one of the three people responsible for bringing down Lord Voldemort. He was the friend of Harry Potter and husband of Hermione Granger. After the Second Wizarding War, Weasley briefly trained to be an Auror with Potter, but dropped out before his training could be completed. After that, Weasley played keeper for the Chudley Cannons until his retirement a few years ago to become a coach.

Weasley was arrested on December 23rd for attacking his wife, Hermione Granger, in the home of his long-time mistress, Lavender Brown. Draco Malfoy stepped in front of Granger and was almost killed in the attack. As our cellsmith had Malfoy not stepped in front of Granger and taken the curse meant for her, she would now be dead.

Granger and Weasley have been separated since September when Granger found out about Weasley's long-time affair. Granger attempted to do the right thing in continuing to allow Weasley access to their children, despite finding out that Weasley had been keeping the affair from her for years through the use of Memory Charms.

Shortly after the separation, Granger asked the Minister of Magic to grant her a divorce from Weasley on the grounds of spousal abuse. Shacklebolt denied her request, citing that a wife was the property of her husband. When news broke of Hermione Granger's relationship with Draco Malfoy, Granger was given an ultimatum by Shacklebolt to return to her home and husband or lose her job. Granger chose her own safety

Not to mention, you two are considered a formidable power couple."

"I don't want to use my famous name to get me places or open doors for me. I want to earn the right to walk through those doors," Hermione said.

Luna leaned forward and placed her hands on her knees. She answered sincerely, "You helped save our world from the darkest wizard we've ever known. That should be enough to open any door you like."

"How do you know all this, Luna?" Draco asked, "I thought you just wrote for the Quibbler."

"I've done freelance work for The Prophet since the end of the war. The editor likes having a voice that directly opposes Skeeter's. Says it makes for interesting reading. As for how I know what the people are thinking, it's amazing what people will say in front of someone they think isn't paying attention."

"Luna," Hermione said, looking sharply at her friend, "You said you owed us an apology, but I get the feeling you're not that sorry about invading our privacy and taking pictures of us."

Luna's pale blue gaze met Hermione's. "That wasn't what I came to apologize for. The pictures," Luna hesitated, "they had unintended consequences."

"You mean other than exposing our private lives to the masses," Hermione retorted sardonically.

"Hermione," Luna said, her voice taking on a sharp, impatient edge, "You are a famous person in our world. You've hidden in the shadows since the end of the war, but that doesn't make you any less interesting." Luna gestured at Draco, "You're in a relationship with Draco 'freaking' Malfoy. That fact alone is newsworthy. So don't get in a huff with me because I took pictures of your relationship. You weren't even aware at the time of the pictures being taken; so don't act like it was terrible for you. You both were given space to live your lives without reporters and photographers hounding you. That's more than many famous people get."

Draco was so surprised by Luna's behavior. Where had

There was even a picture of them at the ball before they'd made their entrance. He'd backed her up against a wall. He was glad that picture hadn't appeared in the paper. Draco's hands were clutching a rather emerald-silk-encased behind and pressing her to himself while they devoured each other.

It was odd seeing their lives here in this book. Photos that were real and honest, not the posed photos that are often seen. It was also an incredible invasion of their privacy. They hadn't given Luna or Dennis permission to take photos of them or publish them in a paper.

"This is a gross invasion of our privacy, Luna," Hermione said sternly.

"I know," Luna answered with a sigh, "but you two are supposed to be together and you were taking so long. Mourning a relationship that was long dead."

"That's just an excuse, Luna," Hermione said angrily and pointing an accusatory finger at her friend, "You had no right to put our lives out there like that for everyone to see."

"I'm of two minds on this," Draco spoke up, "I will admit that I liked seeing the photos of us in the paper. I think it helped Minerva and Scorpius accept our relationship easier since they got glimpses of how we were around each other." Draco paused, "However," he let the word hang in the air as Hermione turned to glare at him, "that was an invasion of our privacy. I assume the articles published were you and Dennis as well."

Luna nodded at him.

"Why keep publishing the pictures and articles after we got together?" Hermione interjected.

"People love a love story. I'm not sure if you know this, but every day that pictures of you both appeared in the Prophet, the newspaper sold out. Newspaper subscriptions have increased dramatically since September and it's mostly because of your relationship. They like to see a former bad boy reformed by love. Hermione, you're still considered a heroine to the people. You haven't used that status in years, but it still holds sway.

and tendered her resignation as Head of the Department for Magical Education.

Dear reader, this story is much more than other reporters will have you believe. It is more than a jealous husband trying to kill his wife's lover. It is more than a former Death Eater tearing apart a happy family. This is about equality. This is about everyone having the right to feel safe in their own home with their spouse. This is about the Minister of Magic himself refusing to see to the safety of a person in need of further his own antiquated ideas of marriage and the place of women in our society.

The time has come where we as a society need to reevaluate how we treat each other. It wasn't that long ago that many of us fought a civil war and defeated those that believed there were those among us that were worthless because of their parentage. Will we now have to fight again for gender equality?

Many of you will argue that the two issues are different – that it is wrong to kill people because of their blood. How is this different? How is it acceptable to tell a woman that she is the property of a man? How is it we accept that it is wrong to kill Muggle borns but right to force a woman to stay in a abusive relationship with her husband? How can we argue against the enslavement of Muggle borns but justify that a woman is the property of her husband?

As we await word on the fate of Ronald Weasley, it is a time for introspection. A time to look at the women in our lives, our mothers, sisters, and daughters and ask ourselves if we would want to subject them to the same treatment that Hermione Granger has been subjected to.

Draco must have made some noise because Hermione was at his side in a moment peering over his shoulder at the article. He handed the paper to her, and she took it from him and leaned up against his desk while she read the article.

Draco took in her appearance. Hermione had tamed her hair up into a French twist that gave her a sophisticated look. She accentuated this with minimal makeup, pearl earrings and a strand of pearls. Her navy blue sheath dress accentuated her figure in a tasteful and understated way. Her cuff glimmered in the light from the windows. The press, or Luna more like, still hadn't commented on the significance of the cuff on her wrist.

Hermione hummed as she closed the paper and set it back down on his desk. "Interesting," she said, "An article about Ron's trial and less than half of it is actually about Ron."

"Maybe I should run this over to Weasley's cell," Draco teased darkly, "Get him all riled up about how unimportant he is in his own trial!"

"What if he gets off?" Hermione asked nervously.

Draco drew her into his lap and was both pleased and nervous by how willingly she allowed herself to draw down to him. She bit her lip as she looked down at him, looking for reassurance.

"We've already got a contingency plan in place, remember?" he reminded her.

"I hardly think the dungeons constitutes a contingency plan," Hermione responded drily.

"He's not getting off," Draco said, rubbing her back.

A knock sounded at the door, and his mother poked her head in before swinging the door open wider. She looked very similar to Hermione in a black sheath dress with diamond studs in her ears, a simple diamond necklace, and her blonde hair upswept in a chignon. Draco found it a little odd how closely their styles matched, but he knew it was all for show for the trial. The Malfoy family standing together.

"It's time," his mother said as she came into the room.

Hermione slid off his lap and smoothed down her skirt. Draco moved to the hook by the door and took his black Wizengamot robes off the hook with the large gold "W" emblazoned across one side and the Malfoy seal across the other. He swung the robes around to drape over his shoulders and fastened them closed. Hermione reached up and smoothed down the material to lie flat over his suit. Draco drew his arms through the wide sleeves of the robe.

The hallways around the courtroom were lined with press and spectators. MLE guards were keeping the people pushed back to allow those with a legitimate reason for being there in first. A flurry of flashes went off at their arrival as the

Hermione turned the page and there were a series of photographs across the two pages of his trial. He had been bound to a chair in the center of the courtroom facing the men and women that would decide his fate. He was gaunt and pale, except for the dark circles around his eyes. That day had been just another in a long line of horrors he'd had to face since his sixth year at Hogwarts. He was gazing at Hermione speaking to the tribunal with a look of relief on his face. Another was of Hermione gazing over at him with worry in her eyes. Her body looked like she was just about to rush to his side.

Another photo on the page was of her looking back over her shoulder as she was led from the courtroom by Weasley. She looked like she was fighting with herself in letting herself be led away from him. The photo directly opposite that one was of him looking at her as she was being led away like he would have rushed after her if he weren't bound to the chair.

"Where did you find these photos?" Hermione asked Luna. Another shrug of the shoulders that Draco was starting to find maddening. "The Prophet has archive photos of all the trials, even if they weren't published. I'm honestly surprised no one bothered to look back at them when you two got together."

Hermione turned the page and next were photos from the day on the platform. The day it all started. The first was when he'd stopped her to lunge at Weasley by grabbing her around the waist. Next was a photo of him standing between Hermione and Weasley with his hands on her shoulders. Then of him leading Hermione and Rose away from the group.

"You took these?" Hermione said with a note of accusation in her voice.

"No that was The Prophet."

The next page was of Rose's first day of school. Then page after page of their time together. Their lunches together when Hermione had been depressed about Weasley's betrayal. Her first visit to the Dragon's Den where she started shaking off the depression. Their walks in the park. The Quidditch game at Hogwarts on Parents' Day. So many pictures.

Photos captured glances that were gone in a flash. Looks that you didn't notice because you were distracted by the conversation going on around you. He didn't know about Hermione, but he'd poured over those photos when he saw them in the paper. Just like Minerva, he got to watch them falling in love with each other.

He took the album from Hermione's limp grasp and turned the page. He found himself looking at a picture of his fourteen-year-old self, eyes wide in shock, mouth slightly open in awe and wonder. He had stepped forward in the picture, unconsciously leaving Pansy Parkinson behind, to pursue what had ensnared him. He remembered that moment, not exactly his reaction to it, but he remembered what had captured his attention so fully. Hermione had floated down those stairs and he couldn't deny to himself anymore how he felt about her.

On the opposite page and slightly elevated from his picture was a picture of Hermione in her Yule Ball finery, taking that first tentative step down the stairs. Her innocent beauty shone through her in the way she bit her lip in nervousness and clasped her hands in front of her. The glow of a gentle light illuminated behind her, gave her an ethereal quality as if she were an angel stepping down from the heavens. In the album just as it had happened that night, he was looking up at her in wonder and dawning realization.

"How long exactly have you been following us?" Draco asked, interrupting Hermione and Luna's conversation.

Hermione looked over at the picture. Draco let her pull the album out of his lap, while he looked at Luna. Luna craned her neck to glance at the pictures he had been looking at.

"Only since September," Luna answered.

"Then where did these come from?" Hermione asked, gesturing at the Yule Ball photos.

"When I recruited Dennis Creavey, he started looking through his brother's old photos. There weren't that many of the Slytherins, but Colin managed to capture this photo of you. The photo before that was the one of Hermione."

photographers and reporters noticed them.

"Mr. Malfroy, how do you think the trial is going to go today?" a young female reporter asked earnestly. Draco idly wondered how old she was since she appeared not that much older than Minerva.

"I have every confidence that we will see justice done today," Draco answered.

"Justice for you, maybe, but what about justice for Mrs. Granger?" the young journalist said, then turned her attention to Hermione, "Mrs. Granger, are you upset that Ronald Weasley will not face trial for his abuses against you?" the reporter persisted. Draco admired her pluck.

The question got a flood of whispered comments among the reporters and spectators. Reporters stood poised with pens in hand to take Hermione's answer to the question.

Draco stood back so that Hermione was the focus of the group. He and his mother flanking her, supporting her, rather than the two of them supporting him as they'd done when they walked down the hallway to the courtroom.

Hermione gripped his hand tightly and smiled slightly up at him. Now was the time to start their campaign. "Yes, I am," she started. "I am disappointed that my husband was allowed to oblivate me for years and will receive no punishment for his actions. I am disappointed that there are women all across Britain who are in similar situations with no way to escape abusive husbands." Her voice rose and rang off the vaulted ceiling, "I am disappointed that the women in our society are still viewed as the property of our husbands by our government and many of those that are responsible for making or changing the laws."

Cheers and applause rose up from the crowd. Draco noted the faces that were approving of Hermione's speech, mostly the younger lot, and those that looked on reproachfully.

Someone started shouting at the back of the crowd, "Stand aside! Let us pass! Prisoner coming through!"

The photographers all had their cameras poised to witness

the meeting of these two groups. Ronald Weasley appeared in the center of four MLE guards, still in his rumpled clothing that he'd been wearing for weeks, though his face wasn't bruised like it had been yesterday. Someone had covered Harry's tracks after Draco and Hermione left.

Sparks of blue fury landed on Hermione and Draco when Weasley finally caught sight of them. His lip curled up in a snarl, especially when Draco put an arm around Hermione.

"Still a crusading bitch, I see," he shouted at Hermione. "If only you knew the things I did to you," he snarled cryptically, "You wouldn't be so quick to use your so-called abuse for political purposes."

The group of reporters heard him, unfortunately. They started directing their questions to Weasley, asking him what memories he had removed from Hermione. Weasley opened his mouth as if he wanted to divulge the information only to close it again when words refused to pour out. A look of angry frustration crossed Weasley's face as he realized that he wouldn't be able to answer the reporters' questions.

Hermione looked shaken by his statement. Until Draco saw Harry's knuckles yesterday and spoke with him about the reasoning behind it, neither one of them had considered the extent to which Weasley had obliterated Hermione. He, like Hermione, had thought it was only to keep her from finding out about Lavender. Harry found out yesterday that it was much more sinister than that, but he refused to divulge the information, going so far as to ensure that Weasley couldn't disclose the secret either.

Weasley was pushed into the courtroom by the MLE guards. Draco saw his mother grasp Hermione's hand tightly behind her back, out of view of the cameras. Draco watched with concern as Hermione pushed down her feelings about Weasley's cryptic revelation and let her face resume a neutral expression once again.

"Let's take our seats now," Draco murmured to them, wanting to get Hermione out of the spotlight for a few moments before

focused her gaze on Hermione. "Do you remember what I said when you asked me to be a bridesmaid at your wedding?" Luna asked.

The room was silent for a long moment before Hermione answered the question softly, "You weren't going to stand by me and watch me make the biggest mistake of my life."

Luna turned to Draco, "Do you remember what I said to you when you came to apologize to me for my imprisonment in Malfoy Manor?"

Draco thought for a moment. It took a little time to recall a conversation that occurred fourteen years ago. The apologies he'd made were always close to the surface though and he answered, "Hurry up and conquer my demons before the love of my life slips away."

She nodded, seemingly glad that they both remembered her words to them. "Neither of you listened to me. You were both so stubborn to walk your own paths without assistance. I despaired that you would ever find your way back to each other and your souls would have to wait until your next incarnation. Then that day on the platform happened." Her voice became wistful as she said, "It was like fate intervened and gave you both a chance to be together."

"Why the pictures though?" Hermione asked again.

Luna shrugged, a slight lift of her shoulders as if her next statement was of no importance. "I started following you after Draco took you away that day. I was curious. I wanted to see your epic love story unfold. Except you two didn't seem to be falling in love like I thought you would. I thought maybe you didn't really see how you looked at each other, how you've always looked at each other. So I decided to show you."

Draco had to admit to himself that her plan had worked admirably. He had accepted that he had feelings for her long ago. The pictures though, as annoying as he found it to have his personal life splashed across the papers, reinforced his love for her. He saw how he felt about her reflected back at him in the pictures. He saw how she looked at him.

her words now. "I hope you'll excuse my rudeness, but I know you both have had a trying day and I thought maybe we could just get this out of the way."

Hermione tilted her head in curiosity at her friend. "Luna, you know you're always welcome over here, but I'm not sure what exactly we need to get out of the way."

"Is it okay if we sit?" Luna asked.

"Of course," Hermione answered, gesturing Luna to a chair, and moved to resume her seat.

Luna sank down into the armchair nearest Hermione. Draco sat beside Hermione on the couch. An air of apprehension seemed to over come Luna as she opened a brown leather attache that had seen better days and took a black leather album out. She set it down on the coffee table and slid it over to Hermione.

"That is yours to keep," Luna said, gesturing to the album, "I had intended on giving it to you as a wedding present, but," Luna stopped and took a deep breath, "after hearing Ron's statement today, I thought maybe I needed to apologize as well."

"Why would you need to apologize, Luna?" Hermione asked, picking up the album and holding it in her lap without opening it. Her fingers trailed along the cover of the album.

Luna gestured to the album, "Go ahead and open it."

Hermione lifted the cover of the book. The album seemed to be full of pictures. The first was an enlarged picture of Draco and Hermione dancing at the Dragon's Den. It was the first time he'd danced with her after he'd gone to check on her during girls' night. It was also the picture that had appeared in The Daily Prophet.

"You were taking the pictures?" Hermione asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Luna answered, "Dennis Creevey and I took pictures of you and your family and sent them to The Prophet for publication."

"Why?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"You two have danced around each other for years, probably since you were eleven. It was clear to anybody that bothered to look that you were supposed to be together," Luna started. She

the trial began.

He guided them over to the benches faced the tribunal. Harry walked in with two of his Aurors that Draco remembered from yesterday. A petite, red-head and a large, craggy man flanked Harry. All three were dressed in the formal Auror robes, their black military style jackets with capes attached by a gold chain made for an intimidating sight. Harry acknowledged Draco with a stiff nod of his head and moved past him to sit beside Hermione. The red head sat on the other side of Harry, while the large man took up a seat beside his mother.

The Minister of Magic's podium dominated the center of the half circle of benches. Wizengamot members flanked either side with Magical Law Enforcement judges arrayed in a half circle around the Minister and Wizengamot in the benches above.

Judges in their gray MLE robes started filling in the seats behind him. Draco was surprised to see so many. Very rarely did so many judges show up for a trial. They mostly drew lots to divvy up the workload. Usually, the Wizengamot didn't participate in trials either unless the actions of the person on trial were particularly heinous or the accused was famous. For this particular case, one of the Golden Trio was on trial, and most were here for spectator value rather than any real desire to ensure justice was done.

Theo strolled into the courtroom with Daphne on his arm, both draped in Wizengamot robes. Greg wasn't far behind them. Blaise, Tracey, Hannah, and Neville were seated on the other side of the Minister's podium, near the witness stand.

Draco spotted Percy Weasley among the group of adult Weasleys seated across the aisle from them, also in his robes. Draco noted that Ginny was absent. Molly Weasley looked distraught; her face crumpled as she leaned heavily on Arthur.

Minister Shackbolt strode into the courtroom from a side door, black Wizengamot robes billowing out behind him. The front doors of the courtroom slammed close, thus starting the proceedings. He shot a look of disgust in Weasley's direction,

## Finding Hermione

bound in the center of the room, and curiously, a glare in Draco and Hermione's direction. Draco considered that the Minister must blame them in some way for this entire debacle.

Minister Shacklebolt banged his gavel on the podium in front of him, calling the courtroom to order. Silence fell across the room. Shacklebolt stared down at Weasley from his elevated perch.

Shacklebolt looked sternly down at Weasley before addressing him, "Ronald Bilius Weasley, you are on trial today for the attempted murder of Draco Lucius Malfoy. After reading the dictation of your interrogations, it is clear that you attacked on the afternoon of December 23rd with the intent to kill. Your failure in the attempt does not lessen the consequences."

Draco could hear Shacklebolt drumming his fingers on the podium as he looked pensively at Weasley. He continued with his address with a more thoughtful tone, "The thing I am having trouble deciding is if your actions are a result of mental instability and you should receive treatment instead of a prison sentence. Whether the therapy will help return you as an upstanding, productive member of society."

Shouts of protests rose up across the room among the spectators and tribuna alike. Shacklebolt banged on his gavel, the sharp raps echoing across the room. His booming voice called for order and threatened to clear the room.

Hermione had turned ghostly pale. She gripped his hand, so hard Draco felt the bones grind together. All hope of stoicism had fled her expression. She looked terrified. And enraged. Harry was visibly incensed. His face was a mottled red. The red-headed Auror beside him was having a difficult time restraining him. Draco thought his own expression probably mirrored Harry's. It would be a cold day in Hell before Draco allowed Weasley to skip by on a reduced sentence in the psych ward at St. Mungo's. Draco was mentally preparing everything they would need to kidnap Weasley from St. Mungo's and install him in the Malfoy dungeons.

Draco noted that the Weasley family stayed silent throughout

## Chapter 34 Confessions & Deals

January 13th

The quiet day Draco and Hermione had both wished for seemed like it wasn't meant to be. They'd managed a quiet lunch after Lavender Brown's intrusion and were enjoying their time together alone in front of the fire in the study. They were both caught off guard when Luna appeared at the Floo at two in the afternoon for tea, rather than half-past three when tea was traditionally served.

Draco held out a hand for the strange witch as she stepped out of the fireplace and into the study. Luna was still wearing her puce-green robes, radish earrings, and bottle cap necklace. Draco watched the strange witch speculatively as she took in her surroundings.

Hermione rose from the sofa, smoothing down her black sheath dress, and crossed to the fireplace to give Luna a kiss on the cheek in greeting. "Luna, it's good to see you," Hermione greeted, "We weren't expecting you for at least another hour."

The vagueness that usually plagued any conversation with Luna was absent. The serious expression on the witch's face made Draco wary. He understood 'dreamy' Luna. This 'down to business' Luna was a mystery to him.

"Yes, I'm aware that I'm early," Luna answered, seriously. She still had the breathy, dreamy voice, but there was steel behind

infuriated Harry?

"How does that matter?" Draco asked.

Hermione answered with a shrug, "She can keep a secret when necessary and she can reveal a secret when needed. She used to be very sociable in school. I think maybe we can send her out to talk to women. Spread the word to those that need help."

"We'll need to repair her image if we're going to do that. People are just going to see her as an attempted murderer's mistress. Or as the woman that split up the Golden Trio."

"Does that make you the man that split up the Golden Trio then?" Hermione asked with a coy smile.

Draco grinned and kissed her upturned brow, "Maybe I'm the man that saved the best part of the Golden Trio."

the commotion. A hopeful expression had entered Molly Weasley's countenance at the prospect of her son being sent to a psychiatric ward at St. Mungo's instead of prison.

The room quieted, and Shacklebolt spoke again, hints of anger in his voice, "We will hear testimony before deliberations, and a vote is taken. We'll start with," Shacklebolt scanned the room. His gaze lighted on Hermione before he spoke in a cold voice, "Hermione Granger."

A buzz traveled around the room as Hermione stood from her seat. She was still pale, and Draco noticed the tremor in her hand as she smoothed down her dress. Draco squeezed the hand he held and mouthed "Have courage" to her. She nodded and straightened her shoulders, once again the proud Hermione Granger. A hush descended the room as she walked past Weasley without looking at him and made her way to the witness box perched near the Minister's podium.

Hermione sat down on the chair provided and looked up at Shacklebolt waiting for him to begin.

Without preamble, the Minister started his questioning, "What was your purpose for being at Lavender Brown's townhouse on December twenty-third?"

Hermione took a deep breath and answered the question in a clear, firm voice, "We, Ronald Weasley and I, came to a visitation agreement for my daughters over the holiday break. That day was the first time Ronald was allowed any unsupervised visitation with either of my daughters."

"You say you weren't allowing Ronald Weasley unsupervised visitation," Shacklebolt stated, then asked, "Why is that?"

Hermione glanced over at Weasley; her mouth tightened in anger. "He attempted to kidnap my daughter, Rose, in early November. She was afraid of being around him after that."

"How can a father kidnap his own child?" Shacklebolt asked incredulously, looking around the room for support.

Feminine murmurs of outrage rose up around that question. Quite a few men looked disapproving at the Minister. The fear of not knowing where your children were was not something

the lifelong bachelor would understand.

"When he has no intention of letting the mother of his child know where she is," Hermione answered sharply. "Minister Shacklebolt, I am not the one on trial here. Ronald Weasley attacked with the intent to kill. By his own admission, he planned on killing me, then Draco Malfoy, and then tell my daughters that we abandoned them." Hermione looked beseechingly at the Minister, "He planned on killing us. He almost succeeded in killing Draco."

"But was he driven to his actions by your very public affair with Draco Malfoy?" the Minister retorted.

Hermione gripped the front of the stand. Here eyes narrowed at the Minister. "Draco and I are not some extramarital fling. Ronald Weasley was abusing me, prior to my finding out about his affair on the Hogwarts platform on September first."

Hermione looked over at Draco and her expression softened. "Draco saved my life. Not just on December twenty-third when he stepped in and took a curse meant for me. That day on the platform, he saved me from a lifetime of abuse, of eventually losing all sense of self as Ron continued to obliviate me. He saved me a few days later when I confronted Ron about his infidelity and Ron once again tried to take my memories away from me."

"So, you're with Mr. Malfoy out of some sense of gratitude?" Shacklebolt asked.

Hermione's gaze snapped back to the Minister in irritation. "I am with Draco Malfoy because he is my soulmate. We love each other and he treats my daughters as his own."

"That's quite a dramatic statement," Shacklebolt scoffed, "I'm sure many young witches have made that claim about some young wizard at some time or another."

Around of patronizing chuckles resounded throughout the room from the older men.

Hermione rolled her eyes at them. She brandished her cuff at the Minister. "Do you see this cuff, Mr. Shacklebolt?" At the Minister's nod, she continued, "This is no ordinary bauble. This

"I think it's worth letting her try," Hermione said, sitting in her chair behind their desk. "She really is a Gryffindor. I'd always wondered before when we were at school together. It took a lot of courage to come apologize."

"Why did you forgive her so quickly though?" Drack asked. Hermione turned from her letter and looked up at him, leaning against her side of the desk. "I think I realized that I was relieved that she was keeping him away from me some of the time." Then Hermione shrugged, "Plus if she hadn't outed him that day, we wouldn't be here together. So I can't hate her for sleeping with him, or having children with him, or for the pain she caused when the truth was revealed. Some good things came from all that pain. She was just as caught in her relationship with Ron as I was in mine. I felt bad for her and her children."

Draco was conflicted about the issue of Lavender Brown. Some good did come from the pain they had all suffered. The girls were undoubtedly better off with him as their father. Hermione was better off now. Despite all the drama, he was happier with his life than he'd been in years and it had all started with that painful revelation on the platform.

"Feel bad for her, fine, but you don't need to give her a job," Draco protested.

Hermione finished writing her letter and signed it, "She might actually do a pretty good job managing a women's shelter. She did manage to keep the fact that she was Ron's mistress a secret for over twelve years. She also kept four children a secret for that long. It was only revealed because she decided she'd had enough."

Hedidn't know about letting Lavender work for Hermione's shelter. He thought that maybe Hermione was a little too forgiving. Harry's words floated back to him from the end of their appointment at the Ministry. Had Lavender unknowingly helped keep Weasley away from Hermione all these years? Maybe lessening the damage done to her memory? Maybe keeping her temporarily safe from whatever abuses that had so

Mrs. Edvard, my former secretary, is in charge of managing the shelter. I'll send a note to her and she'll send you the address. She's the secret keeper for the shelter. Her position is only temporary, since I know she plans to retire in a year, so if you prove capable, then I will sign off on you being her replacement."

"You want me to run a women's shelter?" Lavender asked in disbelief.

"If you prove capable," Hermione allowed, "I'm not sure what to expect, but I don't think this will be an easy job. I'll understand if you decide you can't do this."

Lavender nodded, "I'd still like to give it a try."

"That's settled then," Hermione said, rising to stand. Lavender took this to mean their meeting was over. She stood as well and held out her hand to Hermione. Hermione eyed her for a second the shook the proffered hand.

"Thank you for this opportunity, and for accepting my apology," Lavender said. She turned and walked toward the door. Draco rose from his seat and followed Lavender and Hermione to the door. Lavender's hand was on the doorknob when she turned to look at both of them standing side by side. "I'm glad something good came of all this mess," Lavender said, gesturing to Draco, "You deserve to be happy and with someone that loves you. I've seen all the pictures in The Prophet. It used to drive Ron barmy, but Draco clearly adores you and your daughters."

"Thank you, Lavender," Hermione said, "I hope you find someone who makes you happy too."

Lavender looked sadly at Hermione, "I'm not sure that's in the cards for me, but thank you for saying so." She turned and left then. Draco heard the sound of the front door opening and closing quietly as Lavender showed herself out.

"Well, that was unexpected," Hermione said, crossing the foyer into the study.

"Are you sure about her working for your charity?" Draco asked as he followed her into the study.

cuff acts as a magical identifier for the males of the House of Malfoy. It only shows up when they've kissed their soulmate. Draco Malfoy is my soulmate."

Gasp of surprise resounded throughout the room. Draco's friends on the Wizengamot all displayed a myriad of expressions. Elation from Tracey. Daphne looked like she wanted to punch him for not telling her sooner. Theo was trying to hide a smile behind his hand so as not to draw the ire of his wife. Blaise was looking at him with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

"As interesting as your tale is, Mrs. Granger," Shacklebolt drawled in a bored tone, "I fail to see how that relates to this case."

"Quite right, Minister," Hermione answered smartly, "I also fail to see how my relationship with Draco Malfoy has any bearing on this case, but as you are the one that brought it up, maybe you would like to clear that up," Hermione answered with impertinence, causing the Minister to huff in annoyance.

"How had Ronald Weasley acted when you dropped off the girls?" Shacklebolt asked, trying to regain control of the situation.

"Relieved to see them, and angry at Draco and I," Hermione answered.

"You took Mr. Malfoy with you to drop off your children. Don't you think that's rather like pouring salt on an open wound?"

"Being as how I was taking my children over to his mistress' house, I didn't really stop to consider how Ron would feel about seeing Draco," Hermione answered archly and titters of amusement followed her answer, "And there was no way I was going to be alone with Ron, given his proclivity for using Memory Charms to get his way."

The Minister looked irritated by her cheek but continued with his questioning, "How did he seem to you when you returned later that day?"

"Angry again, which wasn't abnormal for our interactions, but it seemed like a different type of angry."

"How so?" the Minister prodded.

"Usually Ronald was a bit irrational in his anger, just lashing out, asserting that it was his property and trying to get me to fall in line. His anger was different. Determined. More focused."

The Minister nodded at her answer. He looked down at the stack of papers and shuffled them around. His eyebrows rose minutely as Shacklebolt read whatever was there. He looked over at Hermione then and asked, "I see in this statement from Lavender Brown that your daughters disappeared from the Brown residence shortly after the attack and were found at Malfoy Manor when Auror Potter went looking for them. Did you leave to take the children away?"

"No," Hermione answered, not offering further explanation.

"Then how did they disappear?" the Minister persisted.

"They were taken by the Malfoy house elves back to the Manor," Hermione answered with a sigh.

"So you called them?"

"No," Hermione answered again.

The Minister was getting frustrated with her answers and lack of explanation. Draco could see the vein at his temple starting to throb in annoyance.

"Then how did they know to take your daughters away moments after the attack?" the Minister asked impatiently.

"They were already there," Hermione answered.

"Why?" the Minister barked.

"The two house elves were there for the protection of my daughters with instructions to take them away should they be in any danger. Since the two house elves knew that Draco and I were at the Brown residence and that Draco had been hurt, they would've taken them to the Manor and Narcissa Malfoy," Hermione answered succinctly.

"So the children's unsupervised visit wasn't actually unsupervised?" Shacklebolt asked.

"No," Hermione answered.

"And you say that they were there for the protection of the girls?"

same, a continuous loop of unhappiness for both of us and our children. So I can forgive you because my children's lives and mine are better without Ron. As for apologizing for Ron's attack in your home, I have a feeling your wolf wouldn't let him do something that might harm your children."

"Nor yours," Lavender said quietly, "I would not allow harm to come to any child entrusted to my care."

"Be that as it may, you are not responsible for his actions. He is responsible for his actions. Now, you are as free from him as I am."

"Thank you," Lavender said, breathlessly. She turned to leave them again.

"Oh Lavender," Hermione called again, "One more moment if you have the time."

Lavender nodded and came back over to them. She sat down in her vacated armchair and looked warily at Hermione.

"Am I correct in assuming that you will be in some financial difficulty now that Ron is no longer supporting you and your children?"

Lavender stiffened, "No offense, Hermione, but we don't need charity."

"I'm not offering hand-outs. I had something different in mind," Hermione said, "A job."

"A job?" Lavender asked incredulously.

"Yes, a job. At a women's shelter."

"There aren't any women's shelters in the wizarding world, Hermione," Lavender stated.

"There are now."

"What would you have me do there?" Lavender asked, intrigued.

"I'm not sure, but I'm sure we can find something for you," Hermione answered.

"I'd be willing to give it a try," Lavender said, "but Arthur and Daniel aren't in school yet. I can only ask my neighbor to watch them so often."

"I don't have a problem with them going to work with you."

"I'm sorry," he murmured into her hair.

She went on, "A part of me wants to know what he did."

Draco shuddered at the thought. Whatever Weasley had done was bad enough to make Harry want to kill him. Draco didn't want to know. Didn't want to be tempted to end Weasley's life. He didn't want Hermione to know either. Hermione could be by far the scariest of them all. The things she could do to Ronald Weasley would probably make old Volody look like a pretty alright dude.

She hiccupped and continued, "The other part of me thinks that we're all better off not knowing. I don't know what to do. What should I do?"

Draco looked down into those beseeching eyes. He could tell her to let it go, to put the horrors that Weasley committed behind her. Right now she probably would do it. He hated that he had to do the right thing and not tell her those things. "I can't make that decision for you," he said softly.

Draco kissed the top of her head and held her so tight he thought the might bruise her. She started crying silently now. He felt like they sat like that for hours perched uncomfortably at the end of the bed. He was pretty sure he would have a bruise where Hermione's shoulder was pressed into his chest.

"I don't know what to do," she said finally. Her voice was hoarse from crying and being quiet for so long.

"You don't have to make a decision right now," he answered.

"I need a bath," she said, abruptly changing subjects.

"A bath?" Draco asked dumbly.

She wriggled out of his embrace and stood in front of the settee. Her hair was a disheveled mess. Tears tracked down her face. Here yes were red-rimmed. She ran her hand nervously up and down one arm.

"I need to wash him away," she said.

"Okay," Draco agreed.

Draco slid off the end of the bed and onto the settee, then stood up beside her. He took her hand and led her into the bathroom. He let go of her hand and started the water running

in the large, white porcelain soakertub. He summoned her body wash and squeezed some of the liquid into the filling bathtub. The warm smell of lavender and jasmine soon filled the air.

He turned to find Hermione struggling with the zipper at the back of her dress. He went over to her and pulled the tab down. Hermione drew her arms out of the sleeves, and the dress slithered to the floor. He opened the clasps of her bra, and that followed the dress in a heap on the floor.

Hermione stood facing the mirror over the vanity clad only in her knickers, white lacey things today. Draco drew them down her legs past her knees until they fell on their own to the floor. She kicked them into the pile of clothes near her feet. Draco came to stand behind her, still clothed in his dress shirt and slacks. He brushed his fingertips down the side of her neck, across the tops of her shoulder, and along her arm. He was careful not to brush his bare hand across her cuff. He didn't think the desire that it caused to wash over the both of them would be helpful in this situation.

"You are so beautiful," he remarked quietly.

"Does this change anything for you?" she asked hesitantly.

He turned her so that she faced him and tipped her chin up so that she was forced to look at him. "Nothing will ever diminish my love for you or our children." He placed a gentle kiss on her lips, then returned to gazing at her, "I will love you forever. I will desire you until the last breath leaves my body."

She slumped in relief. Then shook herself and stood straighter. Draco could see her starting to pull the fractured pieces of herself back together. The beginning of the rebuilding process.

He helped her settle into the warm depths of the bath. Bubbles floated up languidly out of the aromatic waters and popped. He brought the little white tufted stool from her vanity bench and sat down beside the tub. Draco stripped off his white dress shirt and threw it into the pile of clothes in front of the vanity.

Hermione soaked in the bath with her eyes closed. Only her

head and part of her neck visible above the waterline. Tendrils of her curls floated in the water, looking a bit like snakes swimming in water.

"What are you thinking?" Draco asked.

Hermione didn't open her eyes to look at him. She answered in a sad voice, "I'm thinking that I deserved it... what Ron did to me."

Draco choked a bit on his indignation that she would think she deserved whatever horrors Weasley might have inflicted on her. "Why on earth would you think that?" he asked, probably a little harsher than he intended.

She answered, slowly, "After what I did to my parents. Took away their choice to decide whether to stay or go."

Draco took up a sponge and started to wash her. He couldn't refrain from touching her anymore, not after what she said. He ran the sponge up the arches of her feet, lightly massaging each one before he let her foot drop back into the water.

"That's not the same, Hermione," he protested.

Hermione hummed a little in contentment as he started to work his way up her calves. Her voice was still sad as she answered him, "I still took away their memories. Sent them away. Made them forget that they had a daughter."

Draco started talking with soothing sincerity. He wanted to wash away all her troubles. He let the sponge glide soothingly over her skin as he spoke to her. "What he did to you... it's not the same. He didn't take memories away to protect you. Whatever else he did and wiped from your mind, it wasn't because he loved you and was trying to protect you. It was to protect himself or to feed some sick part that he was hiding from everyone."

Draco moved to stand behind her and had her lean forward. He rubbed the sponge up and down her back. "You have to forgive yourself. What you did to your parents came from a place of love. You were right to fear for their safety. Your parents weren't safe here. They would've been hunted. Taken to try to draw you out. You have no idea how much it frustrated

kneeled before her to take off the black pointed-toe pumps. She stared blankly around not taking in her surroundings.

"Hermione," Draco spoke softly.

He wanted some reaction, but tears or anger; he didn't rightly care which. Anything would be better than the catatonic state she was currently in. He started pulling out the hundreds of pins that were instrumental in holding up her hair. He winced when he pulled one out and ended up pulling on her hair. The pain in her scalp seemed to reanimate Hermione, and she swatted his hands away and started pulling the pins out herself. The rapid plink of the pins landing in a bowl beside the settee the only sound in the room.

Draco toed off his shoes and draped his robes and suit jacket over the blue damask chair in the corner of the room. He climbed upon the bed and moved to sit behind her with her resting between his outstretched legs.

"Hermione, talk to me," he said when she leaned back against him.

"He's gone," she said quietly.

"Yes," he answered slowly.

"I hadn't dared to hope. I thought I would be happier about it." She turned to look up at him, her eyes full of question, "Is it odd that I'm not happier about him being sent to prison?"

Draco caressed her cheek, letting his fingers trail down the silky smooth skin of her neck. "I guess that would depend on the reason you're sad," he answered her.

"I remember that boy he used to be, and I start to wonder where it all went wrong. I'm sad things couldn't have been different. That he didn't make better choices."

"You gave him plenty of chances. You gave him more chances than he deserved," Draco said kindly.

Tears started to fall down Hermione's face now. He wrapped himself around her as she turned and started sobbing into his neck. "He did things to me, Draco," she cried.

Draco gripped her tighter against his chest as if he could pull the pain from her body into his if he could only get her closer.

His mother moved down to the center of the aisle with Angus flanking her. The two of them distracted the press long enough for Harry, Draco, Hermione, and Artemis to move. Harry, Draco, and Hermione hurried along to the side door and stepped through just as the press caught on to the move. They disappeared in a flurry of camera flashes.

The blinding light from the cameras temporarily made it difficult for them to see as they stepped into the dark room. The glow of a fireplace in the corner offered the only illumination. From what Draco could make out, the room was a cozy study littered with books, plush armchairs, and spindly tables. A desk was hiding over in an opposite corner with mounds of parchment stacked high in a pyramid of rolls.

"Let's go," Harry said, hurrying them along.

"Harry," Draco said to get his attention, "make sure my mother gets home safely. Have her pick up Rose from school and keep her at the Manor until we come to get her."

Harry nodded, "I'll have Angus stay with her until they're both at the Manor."

Draco took a pinch of Floo powder and threw it into the fireplace. The flames changed from their merry reds and oranges to a more sinister green, reflecting Draco's mood. He thought he would be happier to see Weasley gone, and a part of him was. The other part knew that imprisonment wasn't enough for the harm Weasley had wreaked on those around him.

"Thanks, mate," Draco said as he and Hermione stepped into the fireplace.

He called out for the study at Spinner's End, and in a nauseating whirl, they were back home. Hermione reeled as she stepped out of the fireplace. Draco caught her before she toppled to the ground and then picked her up.

Hermione's lack of protest at being carried like a weak-kneed damsel in distress, as Draco was sure she would have said, was starting to worry Draco. He vaguely wondered if he should call for a healer as he carried her up the stairs to their room.

He sat her down on the settee at the foot of the bed and

the Death Eaters that they couldn't find you three."

Hermione nodded, accepting the truth of his words. He would know. He'd been there with the Death Eaters, knew their movements and frustrations.

After Draco finished scrubbing her back, he moved aside her damp hair and washed and rinsed her neck and shoulders. She tilted her head back to look up at him as she reclined back against the tub. The sadness in her eyes was starting to ebb a little. He hated seeing that anguish on her face. Hated hearing her blame herself for protecting her parents.

"I know you're right," she said finally. She heaved a deep sigh. "It's just hard. We knew that Ron took away my memories to hide his affair with Lavender and cover up Minerva's fall off the broom. I don't think I wanted to contemplate that there could be more."

Draco leaned down and kissed her forehead. "It's okay if you don't want to know the rest," he said gently. "He's gone, never coming back. You're safe. The girls are safe. I daresay Lavender and her children are better off too."

Hermione sighed again. This one seemed more of relief and relaxation than the others. She sunk deeper into the water. He settled back onto the stool and let her float in the tub. Only her face, the tops of her breasts, and her toes peeked above the waterline.

After a while, her face started to relax visibly. Draco was probably being fanciful, but he thought that she could actually see her shedding the specter of Ronald Weasley. Her eyes opened and he found himself looking into calm chocolate depths. She looked more at ease than she had in days, weeks maybe.

"Feel better?" he asked, shattering the silence in the bathroom.

Hermione moved to sit up. Water sloshed onto the floor as she moved back into her seated position in the tub. Her curly hair was plastered to her head. Her hands clung to the sides of the tub.

"He's gone," Hermione said in a quiet voice. "That's what

## Finding Hermione

matters right now. He can never hurt us again."

Draco thought that maybe she would be reminding herself of that fact many times in the coming days and weeks.

"We need to tell the children," Hermione said. "I don't want them finding out Ron's in jail through the papers."

Draco helped Hermione out of the bathtub and pulled the plug to let the water drain away. He wished her pain at Weasley's actions would drain away as easily. While she dressed, he went downstairs to Floo the headmistress and let her know that they'd like to visit with the children. She told them to come through before dinner time.

\*\*\*

The time came for Draco and Hermione to go to Hogwarts to talk to the children. They stepped into the headmistress' office and weren't that surprised to find Lavender Brown already there. They were, however, surprised to find Charlie and George Weasley flanking her on the sofa.

Hermione greeted the three warmly. She and Lavender hugged one another for a long time before they let go. Draco shook the hands of the Weasley brothers and settled himself down on the couch across from them. Hermione sat down beside him after she finished hugging Lavender.

Hermione looked between George and Charlie and finally asked, "I'm not surprised to see Lavender here, but why are you two here?"

The brothers both wore comical expressions of disbelief. George seemed to regain himself quicker and pointed a finger between Hermione and Lavender, "Are you two friends now?" "We've come to an understanding," Lavender answered with a quiet smile.

"Don't dodge the question," Hermione said, leaning back and threading her fingers through Draco's.

*Chapter 36  
The Aftermath*

January 14th

"Get me out of here, Draco."

Hermione's panicked plea echoed throughout Draco as he wondered how he was going to get them out of this crowded courtroom. The door had opened, and the press and spectators were milling about, all seeking a piece of them. The Weasley's wouldn't fare any better. The media would feast on their grief as if it were Christmas dinner.

His mother cast a worried frown in Hermione's direction. "How are we going to get her out of here?" she asked quietly. "And someone needs to make a statement, or they'll spin it however they want if we don't."

Harry heard her. Draco watched as the bespectacled man looked down at Hermione and then towards the closed side door that the Minister had just walked out of. He must have come to some conclusion because he nodded to himself and spoke in a quick, matter-of-fact voice, issuing orders like a general, "Right. Angus, you stay with Narcissa. Artie, you go over to the Weasleys. Tell them that Bill or Charlie will stay behind and I'll be back to take the rest out of here after I see Hermione and Draco off." He turned to Draco, "Let's go. I'll take you through the door to the Minister's private Floo."

Charlie settled back on the sofa and propped an ankle on his knee. The chain decorating his dragon hide boots chinked.

"Well, after you two made your dramatic escape, Harry was getting Mom and Dad out of the courtroom. Lavender, here," Charlie said, gesturing with his thumb at Lavender, "didn't escape quickly enough and got mobbed by the press."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Lavender," Hermione said, her voice sounding contrite.

"Don't worry about it," Lavender said, waving Hermione's apology away, "They would've been worse to you. I'm glad you didn't have to put up with that."

"Anyway," George interrupted, "Charlie and Bill managed to shove their way to Lavender and got her behind the rest of us."

"My glammers failed," Lavender whispered, looking down at her hands. "There was too much going on, and I couldn't focus."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Each seemed to contemplate the horror they'd gone through in that courtroom. Draco wondered if pictures of Lavender's werewolf scarred face would grace the pages of tomorrow's Prophet.

Charlie cleared his throat and broke the silence. "There's nothing wrong with how you look," he said gruffly, then continued the story in a light tone, "So I took Lavender home and stayed with her to help her tell the kids about Ron."

Lavender looked at Charlie with an interesting mixture of gratitude and testiness. He held her gaze, his face unreadable. Lavender finally looked away and back down at her hands. Tension seemed to fill the room.

The headmistress came through the door then and broke up the tense moment. Fred Brown was on one side of her, and Minerva and Scorpius were on the other side.

Lavender gasped audibly at Minerva's appearance, "She's..." "A Malfoy," Hermione finished.

Draco thanked the headmistress for letting them invade her office once again before Lavender could say much else about Minerva's appearance. Hermione rose from the sofa and guided

## Finding Hermione

Draco, Minerva, and Scorpius over to the windowed alcove away from Lavender, Fred, Charlie, and George.

Hermione drew both children into her embrace. Draco watched them as Hermione kissed the top of Minerva's head, then Scorpius. Minerva turned her head to cast him a worried glance as Hermione continued to embrace the children.

Draco came forward and cupped a pale blond head in each hand. Minerva's hair was longer now. Her curls were starting to emerge as the ends of her hair brushed the tops of her shoulders. Scorpius needed a haircut. His straight blond hair was almost the same length as his sister's.

Minerva extracted herself a little from Hermione's embrace. Scorpius stayed snuggled into Hermione's side since Hermione hadn't loosened her hold on him. Draco and Hermione each kept a hand on Minerva, keeping her within the family circle.

"Mum, what's going on?" Minerva asked, looking worried. She tried to cover up her fear by trying teasing tone as she said, "I don't think Headmistress McGonagall let you come up here for a hug."

"Ron's trial was today," Hermione said, touching Minerva's cheek.

"Is he..." Minerva started to ask, looking between Draco and Hermione in alarm and seeking reassurance.

"He's in prison," Hermione said quickly, reassuringly.

Minerva rushed back into Hermione's embrace. A cry of anguish coming from the couches resounded throughout the room. Draco looked over and saw Fred in Lavender's arms as she tried to calm her distraught son. Charlie and George both had a hand on Fred's back.

Draco felt sorry for Fred. He knew what it was like to lose a father. He'd seen his own sent to prison twice. Lucius Malfoy hadn't been perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but there was never a doubt that he had loved Draco.

"I'm glad he's gone," Minerva whispered vehemently. "He deserved it for hurting you."

Minerva didn't elaborate on which "you" she meant, probably

chair as venom poured from his mouth.

"I wish I killed them!" he shouted. "That bitch deserved to die, leaving me for Draco Malfoy. Fucking that piece of shit Death Eater scum. She was mine. My wife. Mine to do with as I pleased."

The Minister pointed his wand at Weasley and said contemptuously, "Langlock."

Molly Weasley's cries of grief echoed throughout the room and drowned out the hubbub from the other spectators. Two burly MLE guards came through the side door, one holding a set of handcuffs. Weasley was forced to stand and the cuffs were snapped in place. Then in the blink of an eye, he was gone. Gone from their lives. Gone for good, with the cries of his mother echoing after him.

Draco looked down at Hermione, whom he'd clutched to his side as the verdict was read. She was ghostly pale and shaking so much she felt like she was vibrating. The joy he'd felt a minute ago at Weasley being gone from their lives slid from his face as he now worried about Hermione and their unborn children.

"Hermione?" he asked concerned, trying to get her attention on him and not on the spot where Weasley had been moments ago.

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes, "Get me out of here, Draco."

not even looking around for his family. Draco didn't know if the Weasleys had come to support Ronald Weasley or just to be there to see what fate awaited him.

"That was quick," Harry said softly some moments later as the door opened and the tribunal started filing back to their seats.

The Minister walked out last and wasted no time in calling the room to order. Hermione sat up. She grasped his hand tightly as the gavel banged and the doors to the courtroom slammed closed.

A hush descended over the room as the occupants awaited the fate of Ronald Weasley.

Minister Shacklebolt rubbed the bridge of his nose in weariness. "Members of the MLE and Wizengamot, please raise your hand if you believe that Ronald Bilius Weasley is guilty of attempted murder," the Minister intoned.

One by one the tribunal raised their hands, some with more emphasis and quicker than others. Even the Minister voted that he believed Weasley was guilty. Draco wondered why he gave them such a hard time during their testimony if he thought Weasley was guilty the entire time.

"Ronald Weasley, this court finds you guilty of attempted murder," Shacklebolt announced with a bang of his gavel.

A cry of grief resounded throughout the room. Draco looked over and saw Molly Weasley weeping into her husband's shoulder. Arthur tried to console his grieving wife, his lip trembling as he tried to keep his own grief in check. Draco felt sorry for them, as he had many times over the past few weeks.

"The minimum sentence for attempted murder is the same as murder. Just because you failed in the attempt does not lessen the consequences; therefore this court sentences you, Ronald Weasley, to life in prison. You will be taken from here to Azkaban by Aurors."

The once silent prisoner erupted furiously at the news that he would be spending the rest of his life in Azkaban. Draco could see him fighting against the bonds that held him to the

both Hermione and Draco.

"Ron said some things. I don't know if the papers will report on it," Hermione said.

Minerva and Scorpius both looked up at her. "What kinds of things?" Minerva asked.

Hermione shook her head, "You don't need to know all the details." She hesitated then spoke again, "I don't think he was right in the head at the end."

George approached the mand called out, "Draco, Hermione, we'd like to talk to you all before Minerva kicks us out."

Scorpius let go of Hermione and moved to stand beside Draco. He looked unsure. He also looked like he was trying to mask his uneasiness with an air of confidence. Ever the Mafloy. Draco smiled down at his son and placed a hand on his shoulder. He heard Minerva hiss to Hermione, "I don't want to be anywhere near Fred Brown."

Hermione hissed back, "Benice. The boy just lost his father."

"He's better off without him," Minerva said, crossing her arms and coming to stand beside him.

"He doesn't see it that way," Draco said, looking down at her with a stern expression, "so show a little compassion."

Minerva harrumphed with ill-grace and kept her arms crossed over her chest. Scorpius looked mutinous at the thought of being nice to Fred Brown.

Draco called to George, "We'll be right there." Draco crouched down to face both children with their twin white-blond hair and steel gray eyes and matching expressions of self-righteous indignation. "You are Mafloys, and I expect you both to act like it. That boy over there is hurting. I know you don't like him. I know he said some horrid things to you when you first met, but you need to let that go." Draco looked at the aggrieved expressions of his children and added, "At least for now."

"But Dad," Scorpius protested, drawing the words out in a long whine.

Draco grasped both of their shoulders and shook them a

little to get their attention. "None of that," he spoke harshly, "I was that boy at many times in my life. I was the conceited prat and the son who only wanted to make his father proud. I saw my father go to prison twice. I never got to see my father again after he was taken from the courtroom after his trial. The last time I hugged him was when we were in a holding cell awaiting our trials, none of us knowing what would happen, and I was so mad at him for getting us all into that mess. I said things that I regret to this day." Draco choked a little on his words and cleared his throat. He continued with a hoarse voice, "So show a little compassion for Fred Brown because he just lost his father."

Tears rolled down both children's cheeks. Minerva fiddled with the crest on her necklace.

Hermione wrapped an arm around each child. She rubbed her hand up each child's arm in comfort. "Let's go over there."

Hermione guided each child back over to the sitting area, leaving Draco to follow behind. She sat the children between her and Draco on the sofa.

Draco looked at the occupants of the opposite sofa. Lavender still had her arms around Fred, who was still consumed by his grief over the loss of his father. Fred wept openly and loudly onto his mother's chest. Charlie, who was sitting beside the boy, kept a consoling hand. Fred's back and shot a warning glance at the two children.

George looked over at them, and he cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I know this has been a trying day for everyone. Hermione, how are you holding up? You were looking a little pale when you left the courtroom."

Hermione answered with a measured tone, "As you said, it was a very stressful day."

"You're fine, health-wise, at least?" George asked.

Hermione smiled, the first genuine smile Draco had seen all day, "We're fine, George."

Lavender shot a questioning look at Hermione.

Hermione answered the look by saying, "Draco and I are

Shacklebolt's question, the Minister chose to let the matter drop. With a hint of weariness in his voice, Shacklebolt excused Harry from the stand. He banged his gavel as Harry resumed his seat beside Hermione.

"The court will take a recess while the tribunal deliberates this case," Shacklebolt announced. He banged his gavel again and rose from the podium.

The tribunal filed out the side door behind him. The spectators started milling around talking amongst themselves, speculating on whether Weasley would go to Azkaban or not. The noise in the room rose to a dull roar around them.

Draco put his arm around Hermione's shoulder and bent to murmur in her ear, "How are you holding up?"

His other hand drifted to the swell of her abdomen. She wasn't showing yet, only the slight swell from her previous pregnancies showed through the sheath dress. He cupped his hand over the area, wishing he could spare her from this traumatic experience.

Her hand settled over his and she looked up at him. He could see the anxiety on her face. That she was barely holding it together. "We're doing okay."

They sat like that, both leaning on each other with their fingers interlaced over her abdomen. Harry and his mother made inconsequential small talk around them while the two Aurors kept the rest of the spectators away from them.

Draco thought that maybe Hermione had fallen asleep after a while. The early stages of the pregnancy made her sleepy. That combined with the stress of today's events, Draco wasn't surprised if she had fallen asleep.

Draco glared holes in the back of Weasley's head; somewhat hoping it would spontaneously combust. Weasley, uncharacteristically, had remained quiet throughout the proceedings. Draco had expected protestations or comments from the piece of shit bound to the chair in the center of the courtroom. Even now while they were waiting to hear his verdict, he remained quiet. He kept his head facing forward,

come over to her townhouse and that it was a matter of life or death. I took Artemis Fawkes and Angus Fitzgerald with me. We found Hermione Granger and Lavender Brown crouched over Draco Malfoy, both trying to stop his bleeding. Ronald Weasley was unconscious and bound on the floor. We transfigured Lavender's coffee table into a stretcher and Artemis and Angus took Draco and Hermione to St. Mungo's. I looked for Minerva and Rose and found that the Malfoyes had taken them to the Manor. I put Lavender's home on lockdown since I was unsure of her involvement in the attack."

"And was she involved in attacking Draco Malfoy?"

"No," Harry answered, "She did not know that Ron planned to attack them. Once she realized what happened, she secured Ronald Weasley and called for help."

Murmurs rose up again from around the room. Draco understood people wanted to vilify Lavender Brown, all convinced that she'd had something to do with his attack. All convinced that she'd lured Weasley away from Hermione. Lavender Brown represented some sort of evil temptress in their minds. Not the woman she was, a woman in a difficult situation with little recourse, as much a victim of Ronald Weasley's machinations as Hermione.

"What did you do next?"

"I arrested Ronald Weasley and turned him over to the MLE. He was being held at that time for attacking Draco Malfoy. We weren't sure whether he would be charged with murder or attempted murder at that time."

"In your opinion, do you feel the attack was caused by mental illness?"

Harry answered in a voice devoid of emotion. Factual. Cold. Not the head he'd once been. "Throughout the confrontations between Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger, Ron never once admitted guilt or apologized for his actions. He showed no remorse for abusing Hermione. Throughout his interrogations, he showed no remorse for his actions."

Though Harry's answer didn't exactly answer Minister

expecting twins."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Lavender said, "Congratulations. When are you due?"

"The end of September, most likely."

George looked over to Minerva. Tears were still streaming down the girl's face. Draco thought that it might be a result of Fred's crying than because she would miss Weasley. Draco felt himself tearing up a little just listening to the boy. His wailing had settled into a gentle sob but was still heart wrenching to hear.

"How are you holding up, Peanut?" George asked.

Minerva shrugged. She hiccupped then answered, "I'm fine."

"It's okay to be sad that he's gone," Hermione said, tucking a lock of Minerva's hair behind her ear.

"I'm glad he's in prison," Minerva said with vehemence.

Fred lifted his tear-stained face from his mother's chest and glared at Minerva. "I hate you," he spat at her, "It's all your fault."

"Fred, that's not true," Lavender admonished. "Apologize right now."

Fred looked mutinously up at his mother, "No. She's not even sad that he's gone. She's got a new dad now, and she doesn't even care that her old one is gone."

The Granger temper flared, and Minerva lunged for Fred before Draco could reach across and grab her. She crashed into Lavender and Fred, screeching like a banshee. Charlie, like a good dragon wrangler, wrapped a scarred and tattooed arm around Minerva's waist and hauled her off Lavender and Fred.

"You're right. I don't miss him," Minerva screeched as she flailed in Charlie's hold, "I hate him. He hurt my mum, and I hate him."

Charlie set Minerva down, and she rushed back over to Hermione and buried her face in her mother's neck. Hermione wrapped her arms around Minerva and spoke quietly to the distraught girl.

Charlie sat back down and made Fred turn and face him.

## Finding Hermione

His expression was thunderous. "I want you to listen to me and listen hard, boy. The only person responsible for our dad being gone is him. Ron made his choices, and he's paying for them. I understand you miss him and I understand you being upset that he's gone, but that doesn't mean you can go around blaming people for it. Minerva is a part of this family, same as you."

"She's not my family. She's a Malfoy now," Fred replied sullenly. "Death Eater scum just like them," Fred spat nastily and gestured at Draco and Scorpius.

The boy was smacked upside the head quicker than anyone could react to his words. Lavender Brown bristled in fury. Her eyes took on a feral glint as she looked at her son. In her anger, Lavender lost control of her glamour, and it shimmered away, leaving the real Lavender exposed. Minerva and Scorpius gasped in shock at the scars on her face and neck.

Four long lines of pink, puckered scar tissue ran from Lavender's left cheekbone to her mouth. She had a deep round scar above her right jawbone where Fenrir Greyback dug his thumb into her flesh to keep her from moving. Just visible beneath her hair were the scars of where he'd bitten her neck and the pitting of muscles that hadn't regrown fully. Draco didn't want to think about what her shoulder probably looked like. He and Hermione didn't recoil though. Everyone bore scars from the war.

"I did not fight and almost die in a war for my own son to bespouting bullsh\*t prejudicial ideas," Lavender growled at her son. The noise rumbling low in her throat, more wolf-like than Draco had ever heard the previously subdued woman. "You're not better than them because their family was on a different side. People make mistakes. People grow up not knowing any better."

Fred looked shamefaced at the floor, "I'm sorry, mum." Lavender's face gentled, and she stroked her son's face, "I know you are, son. Your father was wrong to teach you those things, and I wasn't strong enough to stop him. It stops now though."

more so than Ron, even when I didn't appreciate it much. She put herself in danger to help me defeat Voldemort. Hermione gave up her parents, erased her from their memories, and sent them to Australia because helping me was so important and she didn't want them used against us. She was never able to reverse the spell used on them. Her own parents don't know her. They never got to watch her get married. They've never seen their grandchildren. She sacrificed all those happy memories to help bring down Voldemort. For Ron to use that same spell to cover his adultery is the ultimate betrayal. He knew what she sacrificed to save our world. I could forgive the infidelity in time. Not the oblivation."

Draco could tell there were things Harry wasn't saying. More to why he wouldn't forgive Weasley but wasn't willing to say it in front of so many witnesses. Harry didn't allude once to the interrogation that had sent him into a murderous rage.

"You supported her decision to remain separated from Ronald Weasley?" Shacklebolt asked.

"I wanted to arrest him back in September when I found out that he'd been obliviating her to hide his infidelity," Harry answered. "She shouldn't have been fired from her job for entering into a relationship with Draco Malfoy," Harry said, his voice reproachful. "She sacrificed so much for the Order and the Wizarding World, and this is how you showed your appreciation, Kingsley?"

Kingsley Shacklebolt had the grace to look uncomfortable at Harry's chastisement. Shacklebolt cleared his throat and looked down at the parchment on his podium. "Tell us about what happened on the evening of December twenty-third."

"I received a Patronus from Lavender Brown," Harry started.

"How do you know it was from Lavender Brown?" Shacklebolt interrupted.

Harry recited the facts of Weasley's arrest as if it were any other arrest, not one that involved longtime friends. "I taught her, along with others, how to produce a Patronus during our fifth year at Hogwarts. It was a gray squirrel. She told us to

wiping tears from her eyes and longed to go over and embrace her. To envelop himself in her scent. To feel her heart beating next to his.

Silence descended on the courtroom. A snuffle could be heard here and there. Someone cleared their throat behind him. Draco let his gaze drift to Weasley, bound to the chair in the center of the room. He'd hoped to find an ounce of remorse in his face, but all he saw was the fervent wish that he'd managed to succeed in killing them. Draco hardened his gaze. Even now when his freedom stood on the line, Weasley couldn't find the error of his decisions. Draco wondered if maybe he was mentally ill, not that he thought it should get Weasley out of prison.

The Minister's voice cut through the silence like a knife, "Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Malfoy. You may resume your seat."

"Auror Potter, please take the stand."

Harry stood up, his face looking grim. Harry made his way over to the stand, his back ramrod straight, his gait stiff and clipped. The sound of his heavy military boots echoed off the walls around them. The medals pinned to his uniform jingled slightly as he made his way to the stand. Harry sat stiffly in the chair. His gaze turned thunderous as he looked over at his former friend.

The Minister's voice cut through the stare-down going on between the two, "You are friends with the accused?"

"No," Harry answered coldly, not taking his gaze from Weasley.

Excited murmurs rose from the spectators.

"Why?" Shacklebolt asked.

Harry turned an incredulous gaze at the Minister. "Are you seriously asking me why I'm no longer friends with him?" Harry asked, gesturing at Weasley. "You've sat here and listened to testimony from Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy. You've read the reports from his interrogations. Hermione Granger has been a true friend to me since we were eleven years old,

Fred nodded, still looking at the floor, "Yes, mum."  
"You should apologize," Lavender said in a no-nonsense voice.

Fred's head snapped up. Whatever protest he was about to make died as he took in his mother's expression. He turned to Draco and Scorpius. "I'm sorry for calling you Death Eater scum," he said sullenly.

"We accept your apology," Draco said to the boy. Here he reached over and tapped Minerva on the shoulder, "Apologize for attacking Lavender and Fred."

Minerva shot him a reproachful glare. Her mother glare with a raised eyebrow and a frown. Finally, she dropped her gaze and looked over to Lavender and Fred. She heaved a sigh of great reluctance and said quickly, "I'm sorry I attacked you, even though..."

"Enough," Draco interrupted sharply. He hated apologies with excuses or recriminations tacked on to them.

Headmistress McGonagall bustled back into the room surveying the group beneath her round glasses. "I'm afraid it's time for the children to take their dinner."

Everyone stood at the headmistress' entrance. The three children snapped to attention and started making their goodbyes. When Minerva came to hug him, he whispered for her to be nice and opened his palm to give her a green bead with an "M" on it for her bracelet. She hugged him again with a little more force this time. Scorpius got his hair ruffled by Draco, much to his annoyance, then smoothed back down by Hermione. Somehow in the confusion of hugs, Draco found himself being hugged by Fred, which left them both feeling a bit awkward.

"See yourselves out," the headmistress said, not unkindly, over her shoulder as she ushered the children back down to the Great Hall.

"You mean you're trusting us in here all by ourselves," George called mischievously after her.  
McGonagall narrowed her gaze at George, reconsidered

leaving the notorious prankster alone in her inner sanctum, and pointed at the fireplace. "Out now, Mr. Weasley," she said sharply.

Draco chuckled behind his hand, turning away from the headmistress. Hermione kept her expression serious, but he could see her struggling not to laugh.

George Weasley bowed with a flourish, "A pleasure always, Headmistress," and stepped into the fireplace.

When George was gone, Hermione turned to Charlie, "So, Charlie, how long are you in England for?"

Charlie smiled mysteriously, "A few weeks; then I've got to head back to Romania to wrap some things up there before I can move back."

"You're moving back?" Hermione asked, looking pleased, "I'm sure your mother will be happy to have you back."

Draco could tell Hermione was fishing. Lavender was looking to him for help, clearly begging him to take Hermione through the Floo. Draco just smirked at her and let Hermione continue her interrogation. Lavender huffed in irritation and put her glamorous back in place. Charlie sent her an exasperated look when he saw that she'd replaced the charms.

"Yes, mum will be thrilled," Charlie answered.

"And what made you decide to move back?" Hermione persisted. Draco caught a look at her face. She was enjoying her interrogation.

"Told Lavender we'd be helping her with the kids," Charlie answered, "George has the shop and his own three. Bill's busy with his kids. And Percy is, well Percy." They all laughed at Charlie's assessment of Percy Weasley. Charlie shrugged and continued, "I've wrestled dragons, how hard can a few sprogs be."

"That's kind of you," Hermione said, grinning at Lavender. "Don't you dare give me that look, Hermione," Lavender said testily.

"What look?" Hermione said, feigning innocence. Charlie started laughing, and Lavender turned on him,

distracted and didn't want to talk to him. I think maybe he thought they wouldn't come over or Hermione wouldn't hold up her end of the agreement. I think he said something to that effect to Hermione."

"Then what happened?"

"He and Hermione exchanged words. She reminded him about their agreement." Draco held up his hand imperiously when Shackbolt looked like he wanted to interrupt again. "When they discussed visitation over the holidays, she stipulated that he and Lavender not talk badly about Hermione and myself during the girls' visit and that the girls weren't forced to stay if they wanted to come back home. Weasley got mad about this. Didn't like to be reminded that he had to play nice for the sake of the girls. Asked us to leave since it was his time with the girls."

"After that, what did you do?"

"We left. Went back home. Scorpius and I had some Christmas shopping to finish up. We went back to the Brown residence as if we liked they'd agreed on. Weasley was waiting for us. His behavior was off. He was usually snarling at us, lashing out at any perceived slight. He was more determined, focused. The girls weren't in the room when we got there. He told us they were helping pick up the playroom. Hermione turned slightly and he pulled his wand out. I stepped in front of her just as he cast the curse. I fell in a heap on the floor. Thought I was dying. I probably was. Felt like my chest had been ripped open. The last thing I saw before everything went black was Ronald Weasley advancing on Hermione. She was on the floor, focused on me. I thought for sure he was going to kill her. That we were both going to die at the hand of Ronald Weasley and leave our children orphaned."

Draco let his emotions show. A Malfoy usually didn't let anyone see behind the carefully erected façade that they presented to the world, but he let the courtroom see his anguish. The fear he'd felt for her as he lay dying. How he'd felt when he thought her dead. He looked over at Hermione, who was

our relationship isn't an illicit affair, certainly not like Ronald Weasley's own relationship with Lavender Brown. In answer to your question about whether we sought to provoke him, no, Ronald Weasley and his feelings meant very little to us in our daily lives."

Draco could hear the Minister huff a little under his breath. Draco could tell the crowd and the tribunal were getting impatient with this line of questioning. There was much shifting around and muttering every time the Minister asked a question that seemed to focus more on his relationship with Hermione than the attack. The crowd didn't seem to like how the Minister was treating the victims of this case.

Keep it up, old man, Draco thought, you'll be out of a job soon if they really start taking Hermione's side.

"On the day of the attack, what did you and Mrs. Granger do?" the Minister asked.

Draco left out their early morning activities. No one needed to know that they'd made love in the early hours of the morning, that he'd probably gotten her pregnant then.

"We had breakfast with the children. There was an argument because Minerva didn't want to go to Ronald Weasley's house."

"Why?" the Minister interrupted.

"She said she had a bad feeling. She said I didn't get along very well with Fred Brown," Draco answered.

The Minister gestured magnanimously. The old goat needed to be knocked down a peg or two. "Continue, please."

Draco answered him in a succinct voice, "After breakfast, the girls got ready to go. At nine o'clock, Hermione and I took them over to Weasley's house. He was there waiting for us."

"What was his mood like?" the Minister interrupted again.

"He seemed relieved to see the girls."

"Why do you think that is?"

Draco allowed himself to sound thoughtful by the question. A hint of hesitation entered his voice as he answered. "I'm not sure. He'd had a visit with Rose earlier that week but he hadn't seen Minerva since the first Parents' Day at Hogwarts. She was

poking him in the chest. "Don't you encourage her. I told you I didn't need you giving up your job to help us. We'll manage just fine on our own."

Charlie swatted her hand away, his lip curling in a snarl. Draco watched as the dragon tattoo on Charlie's arm rippled when Charlie crossed his arm over his chest. Lavender growled back at him.

"You're not on your own," Charlie said heatedly, "Did you think we were just going to forget about you and the kids when Ron went to prison?"

"I do not need your charity," Lavender hissed.

"It's not charity," Charlie yelled, in a tone that indicated he'd probably said it a hundred times throughout the course of the day to the witch. "Weasleys take care of one another. My idiot brother may have led you to believe that we don't give a shit about family, but I'll be damned if I let you have to worry about taking care of four kids on your own."

"This is so fascinating," Hermione whispered to Draco, "I've never seen Charlie yell at anyone. He's always so mellow."

"Turn off the damn glimmers," Charlie yelled, "I feel like I'm talking to a damn mask."

"I hate how people look at me," Lavender yelled back.

"Nobody's fucking here," Charlie shouted.

"I think they've forgotten about us," Hermione whispered. Draco barked out a laugh. Two heads swiveled in his direction. Lavender snarled before she caught herself and apologized quickly. Charlie glared at her for apologizing.

Still laughing, Draco said, "As interesting as it is watching this lovers' spat, we need to get home to Rose."

Lavender edged away from Charlie. "We aren't... that's not... he's not..." Lavender spluttered.

"None of our business," Hermione said breezily, walking toward the fireplace, "though you could do worse."

"Hermione," Lavender protested.

Draco took a pinch of Floo powder and stepped into the fireplace with Hermione. He waved cheerily at the two co-

parents as they spun away towards the Manor. They stepped out of the fireplace in the receiving room of the manor and started wandering around looking for his mother and Rose.

They laughed about the fight they'd witnessed between Lavender and Charlie as they walked along the halls.

"So Charlie's going to help Lavender raise her kids?" Draco asked.

Hermione shrugged, "Looks like it."

"And you're encouraging them to get together?"

"You're the one that brought up the lovers' spat," Hermione pointed out.

"That's what it looked like," Draco said, "Don't you think it would look weird if Lavender ends up with Charlie Weasley?"

Hermione shrugged again. "I don't think people are ever going to fully accept Lavender Brown, with the werewolf scars, her affair with Ron, and what happened to you at her home. The kids need a good father figure, and Charlie seems willing to step up."

"He doesn't seem to care about her scars either," Draco added, "Seemed to get pissed that she covered them up."

They found Rose and his mother in the picture gallery. Rose was standing in front of a large portrait, talking animatedly with a group of Malfoy wives. His mother reclined on a chaise longue laughing at Rose's antics.

Draco cleared his throat to get their attention. Rose ran down the length of the gallery toward them, her arms outstretched and red curls flying around behind her.

"Mummy! Daddy!" she called.

She crashed into them, wrapping her arms around their knees. Draco placed a steady ingram around Hermione to keep her from falling as they returned Rose's hug.

"Daddy, I knew you weren't in jail," Rose announced.

Draco stared down at her, surprised that she would think he was in jail. He lifted her into his arms and balanced her on a hip. Hermione moved in front of him and asked Rose, "Why would you think Daddy's in jail?"

"How the hell am I going to follow that?" Draco murmured to Harry before he stood up.

Draco caught Hermione gently around the waist as she moved by him to resume her seat. He could see the lines of irritation and worry clouding Hermione's face. She was probably starting to doubt that Weasley would go to prison. He cupped her cheek as he gazed down and asked her if she was okay. Draco received a slight nod, and he let her go, sitting down between Harry and his mother.

Draco waltzed over to the witness stand, letting the Malfoy arrogance and entitlement show in his posture and walk. These people needed a reminder of who he was, it seemed. Draco made a show of adjusting his Wizengamot robes as he took his seat on the witness stand. He looked expectantly up at the Minister.

Shacklebolt gazed down at him, the animosity evident in his eyes. Draco was always one of the few people not afraid to stand up to the Minister.

"You interfered in the marriage of Ronald Weasley and his wife, Hermione Granger on September first?" the Minister asked as his opening salvo.

So that's how he wanted to play this then.

Draco looked up at the Minister with narrowed eyes, "What is the relevance of this question on these proceedings?"

The Minister's lip curled into a sneer as he said impatiently, "Answer the question, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco arched an aristocratic brow at the Minister and answered him, his voice dripping with disdain, "Mr. Shacklebolt, I refuse to answer that question as it has no bearing on this trial."

"Mr. Malfoy, did you seek to provoke Mr. Weasley by parading around your affair with his wife?"

Draco heaved a sigh of great reluctance, "Mr. Shacklebolt, my relationship with Hermione Granger is not relevant to this trial but I'll deign to answer your question as that seems to be your primary focus for this trial. As she stated earlier,

try to say that he did it because of a mental illness is ludicrous. This attack is the culmination of a long line of abuses. He obliterated me for the majority of our marriage, but I won't get justice for that. By his statement, before we walked into this courtroom, he's done worse to me than try to cover up his affair with Lavender Brown, and I won't get justice for that either. I asked you for help, Minister Shacklebolt after I found out that he was obliterating me and you wanted nothing to do with it. You shooed me out of your office, saying you weren't going to get involved because it was up to the husband to discipline his wife as he saw fit. The only reason he's on trial now is because he almost killed Draco Malfoy and I'll be damned before I let him walk away without punishment for at least that."

Hermione turned and gazed up at the MLE judges sitting there watching her, "I can see by your faces that many of you still agree that a woman is the property of her husband." She gestured to the room at large, "This is what happens when we allow domestic violence to go unchecked. When we continue to allow a husband to abuse his wife, the violence escalates and people die. Families are torn apart. The children are traumatized."

She turned to face the crowd and Weasley, "We cannot allow this man to go free. We cannot allow him to attack and cite jealousy or mental instability as the reason for doing so. We were not lenient on the Death Eaters at the end of the last war and we cannot be lenient now."

Heads were nodding among the crowded courtroom. Harry leaned over and whispered in Draco's ear, "That was bloody magnificent."

"Enough!" Shacklebolt boomed, "You're excused, Mrs. Granger."

Hermione left the witness stand with the shadow of a smirk on her face. Her hands were trembling though, from nerves or adrenaline Draco didn't know.

"Draco Malfoy, to the witness stand, please," Shacklebolt announced.

Rose took a deep breath, "Timmy, from school, said that my daddy was going to jail. I told him that my daddy wasn't going to jail. He said he was."

His mother came up to them, "Rose got into a little scuffle with this boy according to her teacher."

"I beat him up," Rose said proudly.

Draco laughed. He knew he shouldn't. Rose would think it meant she could get away with resorting to violence when someone disagreed with her. He tried to school his face into a serious expression. Hermione looked sternly at him when his mouth quavered again, and laughter threatened to spill out.

"Rose, you can't beat up the other children," Hermione admonished.

Rose pouted down at her mother, "He said my daddy was going to jail. He's wrong. My daddy is right here. Daddy will take me to school tomorrow, and I will show Timmy he's stupid."

"Don't call people stupid," Hermione scolded. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Timmy wasn't talking about Draco, honey," Hermione started. "He was talking about your other father."

"Oh," Rose said, quietly, "He went to jail because he hurt Daddy?"

"That's right," Draco nodded.

"Is he coming back?" Rose asked.

"I'm afraid not," Hermione answered.

Rose cuddled into his neck, "That's sad. Fred, Lydia, Danny, and Art won't have a daddy now." Rose looked at him, "Are you going to be their daddy too?"

"No," Hermione said quickly before the idea could latch on, "Uncle Charlie is going to help Lavender with Fred, Lydia, Arthur, and Daniel."

His mother looked at Hermione's pronouncement curiously. "I didn't think the Weasleys still kept with the old ways," she murmured.

Draco set Rose down so that she could run back to talk to the portraits. After she got out of earshot, Hermione asked,

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when a wizard died, leaving a widow and young children. The remaining family members usually made sure that the remaining parent had help and the children were well cared for. If there was a single brother, it was customary for the wizard to marry his brother's widow and take over raising the children."

"Levirate marriage," Hermione murmured, "Customary in patriarchal societies."

"Exactly," his mother said, "though that doesn't apply in Lavender Brown's case, since she was never married to Ronald Weasley and he's not dead, unfortunately. Technically, you would be the one Charlie would try to marry."

Draco growled at the suggestion that Charlie Weasley would try to take Hermione from him over some archaic family practice.

His mother laughed at his possessiveness, "I don't think he's going to try for Hermione since there's a claim already made, but it does make sense that they would make sure that Lavender and her children were taken care of. They are more in need than Hermione and the girls."

"Does Lavender have a choice in all this?" Hermione asked, looking worried.

"Of course," his mother answered, "Marriage is usually left up to the witch and wizard involved."

"Seems a little gross for a wizard to be having relations with his brother's wife," Hermione said.

"It's all a matter of perspective, Hermione," his mother chided, "It's perfectly normal for large families, like the Weasleys."

Draco interrupted before Hermione could get into full-on crusading mode. "I'm hungry," he whined, "Anybody else hungry because I'm starving right now?"

Lavender Brown could look out for herself. She seemed to have Charlie Weasley well in hand. Draco thought it was probably too soon to worry about any romantic entanglements going on

"That is correct."

"When you took them over to the Brown residence, did you feel that they were in any danger?" Shacklebolt asked.

Draco was getting impatient with this line of questioning. It wasn't even centering around Weasley's attack. It seemed to Draco that the Minister was trying to win sympathy for Weasley.

"I wouldn't have taken them over there if I thought that Ron might be a danger to them, but I wasn't taking any chances. Rose was reluctant to go and Minerva was pretty adamant about not going. I convinced them to go and give it a try but told them that they could leave if they hated being there."

"Since they appeared to have stayed the duration of the visit, am I correct in assuming that things went well?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Minerva got into an argument with Ronald at some point. Rose seemed to enjoy her time, mostly playing with Lavender's youngest children."

"What did Minerva get into an argument with her father about?" Shacklebolt asked.

"According to Minerva, Ronald was giving her a hard time about Draco teaching her to fly. Minerva became angry with Ronald because he was the cause of her initial fear of flying. Draco helped her conquer her fears, and their flying lessons made an appearance in the paper. She told Ron that Draco was a better father than he was."

"So this argument is probably what led Ron to attempt to take your lives. A desire to remove the competition in his children's lives."

Hermione stood up and pointed angrily at the Minister, the cuff on her arm sparkling in the light of the room, the reds of the alexandrite seemed to further accentuate her anger. If her hair had been down, Draco could imagine that it would be crackling in her fury. "Don't you dare try to place the blame for his attack," she pointed angrily at Weasley, "on my child. He is responsible for his actions. He should be held accountable for them and for you," she pointed back at Shacklebolt, "for you to

## Finding Hermione

Marcus's father."

Theo sat back in his chair and looked pensive, "I didn't understand Flint's reaction to the divorce bill initially, but if what you say about Marcus is true then his reaction makes more sense."

"Not in favor?" Draco asked.

"Kicked me out of his office," Theo answered with a grin.

"Why wouldn't he want his son to get a divorce?" Hermione asked.

"That marriage is probably the only thing keeping word of his son's sexual orientation from getting out. It's probably the only thing keeping Marcus from being open with his relationship with Wood, too," Theo said.

"So?" Hermione asked.

Draco heaved a sigh, "If it's true, Mr. Flint would not want his son getting a divorce so that he can be openly gay. Wouldn't be 'respectable,'" Draco finished making the air quotes.

"So he would doom his son to an unhappy existence hiding his true nature in order to appear respectable," Hermione responded indignantly.

"Pretty much," Theo said with a shrug.

This was the way the older purebloods lived. Appearances meant everything to them. The happiness of your loved ones was hardly a consideration. Draco was glad to be free from that way of living. He was relieved that his mother threw off the old customs after the war.

"That's horrible," Hermione said, looking horrified and for the first time sympathetic towards Marcus and Pansy. This had transcended the realm of gossip for her, her view of their marriage shifting.

Theo slapped his knees and made to stand. "So, tomorrow I'll go talk to Flora. See if I can get a firm answer from her."

"We'll talk to Ollivander and Parkinson tomorrow. I think we can count on Parkinson though," Draco said.

"Best to be sure. It's closer than I thought it would be," Theo said.

Hermione looked between the two of them. Her gaze landed on Draco. "I thought you said we were definitely going to win this," she said, and her voice held a note of accusation. Draco swallowed. Had he over sold their ability to push the vote through?

Draco answered confidently, "We have ten people who won't change their votes. People who will sit in that council room until we get our way."

"People know not to go against Draco when he has a probable majority vote," Theo interjected wryly.

"Okay," Hermione said, looking reassured, "so we'll definitely win."

Draco draped an arm around her shoulders and snuggled her into his side. "We're not leaving until we do."

Hermione worried her bottom lip, "Draco, we can't spend months in the council chamber."

"Twelve hours tops," Draco said with confidence.

"Care to make a bet on that?" Theo asked.

"Usual terms?" Draco retorted.

"What are the usual terms?" Hermione interjected, "and what are we betting on?"

"How long it takes us to get the bill passed and we usually bet a thousand galleons on it," Theo answered.

Hermione choked, "A thousand galleons!"

"What should we set the over-under at?" Draco asked, nonchalantly, looking over Hermione's head at Theo.

"A thousand galleons!" Hermione spluttered again, looking back and forth between the two goggle-eyed.

Draco grinned at Hermione. "Won't even put a dent in our vaults," Draco answered. He turned back to Theo, "Four hours. I say it won't take more than four hours."

"Oh, come on!" Theo said, "It's not going to take even close to four hours. That's not a good bet."

"Two hours," Hermione said.

"Deal," Theo said quickly.

Theo stuck his hand out, and Draco grasped it. Two hours

## Finding Hermione

was going to be tight.

Theo stood. "I'll be going now. Let's get together tomorrow for dinner, and you can grovel to Daphne at what horrible friends you are."

Theo bent down and hugged Hermione good-bye. Draco got up and walked him to the door.

"Enjoy the rest of your day," Theo said in parting with a waggle of his eyebrows.

Draco laughed and said good-bye. Theo apparated away with a faint pop and Draco walked back into the drawing room.

Hermione looked quizzically over at him. "Why are we groveling to Daphne?" she asked.

Draco resumed his seat beside her on the sofa and threw an arm on the back of the sofa. "Let's see: Soulmates, pregnant, and Minerva's adoption, all without letting her know," Draco summarized.

Hermione looked at him guiltily. "The trial was not exactly the way I wanted our friends to find out about us being soulmates."

"I'll have to talk to Blaise and Tracey about it," Draco said with a shrug. "Things just got away from us."

Hermione nodded, agreeing with him. It had been a stressful few weeks for them. Draco was looking forward to quieter days after the divorce bill was passed.

"So, what are we going to do with the rest of our day?" Hermione asked.

Draco grinned at her. Hermione raised an eyebrow at him, and he leaned forward and kissed her. He eased her back onto the sofa while he kissed her until he was looming over her on his knees between her legs.

"I thought we could continue where we left off," Draco said huskily as he started popping the buttons of her dress open.

they were on the same team."

"Maybe they work really well together," Theo said.

"Why would he marry Pansy if he's gay?" Draco asked.

Hermione shrugged. "I always thought they just had one of those open marriages or that it was an arranged marriage and she didn't care what he did."

Draco stood up and started pacing behind the couch. Draco knew that Pansy was the light of her father's life. Mr. Parkinson had showered her with affection and spoiled her rotten when she was younger, and Mr. Parkinson would expect any wizard that married his daughter to do the same.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Theo asked.

"I didn't hope to count on his vote, but if he thinks Marcus is treating Pansy shabbily and will never give him grandchildren, he'll do anything to get her free," Draco answered.

"Okay, so we need to talk to Mr. Ollivander and Mr. Parkinson," Hermione said. "Anyone else? Who else might not show up?"

"Fawley and Macmillan," Draco answered. "They hardly ever show up for council meetings and especially not for votes."

"Why not for votes?" Hermione asked.

Theo said with a grin, "They hate being locked into the council chamber until a two-thirds vote is reached."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Much like a Quidditch game, it can go on for days or months, and council members can't leave the room until voting is done," Draco answered from behind the sofa.

"Months?" Hermione asked, flabbergasted.

"Rumor has it that it only happened once," Theo said in reassurance. "During discussions of the Statute of Secrecy."

"So, we can pretty much count on Fawley and Macmillan being absent?" Hermione asked, looking slightly more relieved.

"Most likely," Draco said.

"They didn't seem very interested in the bill when I brought it up to them," Theo added.

"What about Flint?" Hermione asked. "I assume that's

turned the seat over to one of her children. And if she did turn the seat over..."

"They would vote with us," Hermione finished.

"What about Ollivander?" Draco asked Theo.

Theo thought for a moment before he answered, "It was difficult to tell. He didn't give a definite answer."

"So maybe we can persuade him," Hermione said, looking eager.

"It's worth a shot," Draco agreed. He turned back to Theo, "What about Mr. Parkinson?"

"He's back from Paris," Theo started, then leaned forward and sounded a bit like a gossip old lady, "and I hear that he sent a howler to his son-in-law as soon as he returned though nobody is saying why."

"Hmm," Hermione snorted as if that answered some question.

Both Draco and Theo looked at her quizzically. Draco finally said, "Care to enlighten us, Iioneess?"

She looked between the two of them mystified, "Really? You don't know. They're your friends."

Draco was confused, to say the least. What could Hermione know about the marriage between Pansy Parkinson and Marcus Flint that they didn't? Draco knew that Pansy spent most of her time in Paris focused on her fashion career. Marcus coached Quidditch professionally and was currently with the Montrose Magpies as a coach for their chasers. They lived apart and had no children, but having spent a great deal of time with Pansy, Draco couldn't really fault Marcus for staying away from her.

"Oh, for the love of Merlin, you two are so dense," Hermione said exasperated, "Marcus Flint is gay."

Draco felt his jaw drop. "No, he's not," Draco scoffed.

"It's true," Hermione defended, "I suspect he and Oliver Wood have been together for years now."

"No way," Theo said in apparent disbelief.

"Ever notice how they're always on the same team?" Hermione pointed out. "Even when they went to coaching,

## Chapter 38 Dinner at the Burreau

January 15th

Draco lay stretched out on the sofa in the drawing room, clad only in his boxers. His clothes were strewn around the room. His shoes tucked under the coffee table. His jeans were draped over the arm of a chair.

Hermione was currently wearing his midnight blue tee shirt. Her sheer nude bra was currently hanging by its strap on the cocked arrow of the Artemis statue perched beside the fireplace. Somehow her knickers had "mistakenly" ended up landing in the roaring fireplace when Draco had stripped them from her and thrown them over his shoulder, forever lost to the flames. Such a tragedy.

Hermione lay draped over his chest. Her fingers trailed up his side, tickling his ribs. One of her legs was nestled between his.

They had spent the afternoon making love on the sofa. Talking. Laughing. Making love again on the floor in front of the fireplace. They'd had to leave the room a few times. Full bladders and empty stomachs to be assuaged. Only to return quickly to the nest they'd built.

They had to pick Rose up from school soon, and that meant leaving the room to take showers. Draco wasn't ready yet to

break the tranquility they'd managed to create for a few hours. Draco ran a hand through her curls. He loved playing with her hair. Wrapping curls around his fingers. Combing his fingers from root to tip through the smooth tresses. Draco was sure he was making an unholy mess of her tresses, but Hermione's humors of contentment hopefully meant she wouldn't get scolded too harshly for it.

"Thank you for this," Hermione said quietly, her finger tracing part of the scar on his chest.

"For what?" Draco asked.

"A quiet, relaxing afternoon. Everything has been so busy lately. And emotional."

"We both needed it," Draco responded, tucking a curl behind her ear.

"I think we should take Rose over to see Molly and Arthur," Hermione said suddenly.

Considering their last conversation with Molly Weasley, Draco didn't know if that was such a good idea. Molly Weasley had been distraught the day before the trial of her youngest son. Draco didn't want to consider how she would be the day after his sentencing.

"Do you think that's wise?" Draco asked warily.

"It might be good for her," Hermione said. "She's lost another child. She might be afraid that without Ron around, we'll never let Rose and Minerva see them again. That's not what I want."

Draco wasn't interested in doing that either. The more people that loved his children, the better in his opinion. If something were to happen to him, he wanted to know that Hermione and the kids would all be well cared for and surrounded by people that loved them.

"If she starts blaming you," Draco started.

"I don't think that's going to happen again," Hermione said.

"And we can ask her about the Prewett seat."

"Okay, if that's what you want, then we'll go for a visit," Draco said, resigning to the fact that he'd be spending the evening

I know that line died out. Alright, let's narrow this list down. Who can we count on to vote with us?"

Draco took the list from her, though he had it memorized already. "Abbott, Black, Greengrass, Lestrage," here Draco looked pointedly at her, then continued, "Longbottom, Malfoy, Nott, Rowle, Shafiq, and Travers."

"Rowle, Shafiq, and Travers?" Hermione asked.

"Tracey, Blaise, and Greg, respectively," Theo answered.

"How is it they're able to claim a seat, but we're not able to fill the empty seats?" Hermione asked.

"They were heirs to those seats," Theo explained, "or given to them by a parent, in Blaise's case."

Draco chuckled at the memory of Blaise's mother storming out of Shacklebolt's office after a particularly loud argument with the Minister that Draco took to be a failed seduction. Blaise had shown up for the next council meeting and looked relieved when the Minister didn't challenge him taking his mother's spot. Shacklebolt was probably equally relieved to be rid of the seductress.

"Okay, so that's ten votes," Hermione said, "Who can we count on not to vote with us?"

"Worst case scenario," Theo started, "Carrow, Fawley, Flint." "Macmillan, Ollivander, Parkinson, Prewett, Shacklebolt, and Weasley," Draco continued.

Hermione looked victorious, "Well that's ten to nine, so we would win easily."

"We need a two-thirds vote," Draco reminded her. At Hermione's crestfallen look, Draco added, "but that was a worst case scenario."

"So realistically what are we looking at?" Hermione asked.

"Carrow votes with us because the bill isn't rubbish," Theo answered.

"I doubt Prewett will show up," Draco added.

"Why?" Hermione asked.

Draco said slowly, "The only Prewett left is Molly Weasley, and she hasn't ever shown up for a council meeting, nor has she

Hermione placed a consoling hand on his arm. "It wasn't your fault," she said sympathetically.

Draco shook his head sadly and took her hand in his, "I led them, Vince and Greg. Vince died because he followed me, so I bear responsibility. It's the cost of leadership."

Hermione tightened her grip on his hand. Having followed Harry during the war, Draco hoped that Hermione would understand that Vincent's death was not a burden he could just set down.

Hermione looked back down at the list. "Burke, and that one is blank as well."

"Died out without leaving a clear heir to take over the seat," Theo answered, "The family was broke by the end, and the last member didn't see the need to make a will apparently."

Hermione closely examined the paper, "Why does it say Potter and Flint in parenthesis?"

"Closest possible heirs," Draco answered her question. "Though neither is eligible to take the seat."

"Carrow," Hermione read with a shudder. Very few could see that name without repressing a shudder at the twins that had made the name infamous. "Flora Carrow."

"Hasn't committed to a vote yet," Theo said, "She said she'd decide once she read the bill."

"What were her reservations?" Hermione asked.

"She thought it was a good idea, but wanted to make sure the bill wasn't a poorly written 'hack job' to 'help Malfoy get what he wanted,'" Theo said, making the air quotes with his fingers.

"As if I would suggest a hack job of anything," Hermione sputtered indignantly.

"I told her that," Theo interrupted before she could launch into a tirade, "but she still refused to commit one way or the other."

"She doesn't matter," Draco said, "We don't need her vote." Once again, Hermione consulted the list, "Crouch. Well,

at the Weasleys.

Hermione got up off the couch and started to gather her clothes. His shirt hung down to her thighs, and she didn't seem to feel the need to put her dress back on for the walk upstairs to the shower. Draco got up and put his jeans on. He gathered his socks and shoes and followed Hermione out the door back to their bedroom.

"So we'll go over to the Burrow from the school," Hermione said over her shoulder to him as she climbed the stairs.

"That's thirty minutes from now," Draco said. "Isn't it a bit impolite to just show up?"

"Not at the Burrow," Hermione said, "Not when it's family." Draco wondered how much they were still considered family.

How much would they be welcomed in the Weasley household, even with Rose in tow?

"You're sure?" Draco asked again, "I don't want you or Rose upset."

"I'm sure."

Draco let it go. They dropped their clothes into a pile on the floor in the bathroom. Draco tried and failed, to stay focused on getting ready to leave. Hermione wasn't making it easy for him. She pulled his shirt over her head and let it drop onto the pile.

Hermione caught his hungry look in the mirror. "We don't have time," she admonished.

"I could make it quick," Draco said, half-joking half-pleading. "I'm a little sore," Hermione responded.

Contrite, Draco said, "I'm sorry. I'll put some salve on you after your shower."

Hermione rose up on her tiptoes and kissed him lightly. "You're wonderful."

Preening, Draco followed her into the shower saying as they went, "I know."

Hermione laughed at him and started washing. Draco tried to focus on his own tasks, but his hands kept drifting. Hermione just laughed every time he wandered over to "help."

Hermione and Draco made it to the school just in time to pick up Rose from school. The Floo network became flooded during pick up and drop off times. Apparition, while an easier mode of travel, was more dangerous for pregnant women and therefore inadvisable.

Hermione saw Ginny waiting to pick up Albus, and they went over to greet her. Draco was surprised and relieved when Ginny greeted them with her usual enthusiasm. Ginny had always supported Hermione's split with Weasley, but Draco worried that the trial might have caused a rift between the two friends.

Draco noticed a slight baby bump emerging beneath Ginny's Holyhead Harpies tee. He couldn't wait to see Hermione's bump when it came along.

The three were gaining some attention from the milling parents. The curious spectators no doubt expected Ginny to throw a fit at the sight of the people that were responsible for putting her brother in prison. Draco was sure the article this morning didn't help. Draco was suddenly curious about what was in the rest of the paper. He'd never gotten around to finish reading it.

"We were planning on heading to the Burrow after we picked Rose up from school," Hermione announced to Ginny after hugs were given.

Ginny looked thoughtful at Hermione's announcement. She nodded and finally said to them, "It seems great minds think alike. The boys are bringing their kids over, and we were going to head over there after I picked up Albus. George thought it might be good to distract mum with the grandkids."

Draco liked the idea. Hopefully, the Weasley matriarch would be too distracted by all the grandchildren to focus any residual ire on Hermione or himself. As much as Draco felt for Molly Weasley's feelings, he wasn't willing to let the woman blame the two of them for her son's actions.

"How's she holding up?" Hermione asked with concern. Ginny took a deep breath. "Not good," Ginny started, "She

with Theodore Nott at this moment. The wizard didn't seem to have a serious bone in his body and somehow found a way to turn everything into a dirty joke.

"Draco said we have people we need to sway to our side," Hermione said, ignoring Theo's question.

Draco pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket. It was a list of all the Wizengamot members and their probable votes or whether he thought they would show up. He smoothed the abused and much-folded parchment out on the table.

"This is a list of the Wizengamot council, as it stands now," Draco said.

Hermione took the list off the table and looked at it. She read the first family and seat holder on the list, "Abbot. Hannah Longbottom née Abbott. Yay"

"We can count on her and Longbottom," Theo said, "I had Harry confirm with them last week."

"Avery is blank," Hermione continued.

"Last of the line were convicted Death Eaters," Draco said without emotion.

"Black. Harry Potter. Yay," Hermione said.

Tansy strode into the room then bearing a full tea tray. Theo pounced on the blueberry scones. Tansy handed poured the tea and passed around the cups. The elf ignored with a sly smile all of Theo's attempts to get her to come work for him or give him her pastry recipes.

Hermione set down her teacup and resumed reading off the list. "Bulstrode," Hermione read, "Why is it blank?"

"Millie won't come," Theo said sadly, "Hasn't left Bulgaria since the war."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Vince," Draco answered, "They were betrothed, set to be married at the end of that last school year. She blames me for him dying."

"She had a bad dream last night," Draco responded.

"Doesn't seem to have affected your sex life," Theo said drily. "Hormones," Draco offered by way of explanation, not sure if that was really a reason, but it sounded good enough.

"Tell me about it," Theo said with a long-suffering sigh and a huge grin.

Hermione breezed into the room, attempting to act like Theo hadn't walked in on them minutes ago. "Good morning, Theo," she said, sitting on the sofa beside Draco.

"Good morning, Hermione," Theo said, his mouth turning up in a teasing grin, "You're looking positively radiant this morning."

Hermione leaned forward in her seat. "So how did it go?" she asked with excitement and nervousness in her tone.

"It's filed," Theo said. "Minister Shacklebolt wasn't pleased to see the bill. Not entirely surprised either." Theo heaved a sigh and continued with a bit of a whine, "I had to listen to him bitch for half an hour about how this bill will be the downfall of wizardkind."

Hermione giggled at Theo's tone. "I'm sure it was horrible," she said sympathetically.

Theo gave Hermione a sharp glance. "It was. Terribly tedious. The only thing that saved me was his assistant reminding him that he had an appointment; otherwise, I would've been there another half hour at least."

"Pity," Draco said sullenly.

"Don't be cross just because you've got a case of blue balls," Theo retorted.

"Leave him be," Hermione scolded at Theo, "I kept waking him up this morning."

"Rode him hard and put him away wet, did you?" Theo said laughing.

Draco was really starting to question his lifelong friendship

heard what Ron said right before he walked into the courtroom and then the rant he went on after his sentencing." Ginny shuddered visibly. "I think it killed any hopes he'd been holding onto that he was innocent. It's almost as bad as losing Fred was."

Hermione bit her lip and looked unsure, "Do you think we should go over there?"

"Yes," Ginny answered, "Mum needs to know that you don't mean to keep the girls from her. We're all still family."

Children came flooding out the main part of the school and into the atrium where teachers handed their charges off to parents. Ginny moved off to where Albus' teacher stood with her young charges. Draco and Hermione walked a little further down the atrium.

They found the familiar face of Miss Crow, Rose's teacher. The short woman with black, wavy hair and wide brown eyes barely looked old enough to be out of Hogwarts, let alone teaching twenty-five-year-olds. Miss Crow was a lovely girl though, and Rose liked her.

Miss Crow released Rose when she saw Draco's tall frame and distinctive blond hair. Rose came bounding towards them with a finger painting in one hand and pig tails swinging.

"Mummy, Daddy, look what I drew," Rose said excitedly, waving her picture around in front of her.

"Drew," Hermione corrected automatically. "Let's see your artwork," Hermione added enthusiastically, crouching down so that Rose could show Hermione the picture she painted.

Draco looked over Hermione's shoulder at Rose's artwork. It was a brightly colored finger painting of their family with each figure labeled with a name underneath. A stick figure version of Rose stood in the center with a cloud of red for hair and what Draco guessed was a tiara perched atop her smiling head. Minerva stood on one side of Rose and Scorpius on the other; both had similar clouds of almost invisible white hair. Draco was featured in the picture with a stick arm around Hermione, who had a very large cloud of brown hair around her head. On

the other side of Minerva were four red-headed stick figures varying in sizes. Lavender and either Weasley also made an appearance on the other side of the four red-headed children.

"That's a lovely picture, Rose," Hermione said. "I bet Grandma Molly would love to see it."

"Are we going to see Grandma Molly? Albus was talking about seeing Grandma at lunch," Rose asked excitedly.

Hermione stood and took Rose's hand in hers. "Yes, we're going to go see if we can cheer Grandma up."

"Grandma is sad," Rose asked with concern and sadness, her precious features drooping and a frown on her face.

"Yes," Draco answered, "Grandma Molly is sad because of what happened yesterday. Do you remember us talking about that?"

Rose shook her head solemnly, "Other Daddy is gone for hurting you."

"That's right," Hermione said.

They started walking to the fireplaces set at the end of the atrium and joined the queue behind other parents choosing to Floo rather than apparate.

Rose looked up at Draco, "Daddy shouldn't have hurt you, Daddy. That's bad."

"It is bad, but that doesn't mean that people like Grandma or Grandpa won't be sad. They're going to miss him, and it's alright if you miss him too," Hermione said.

Rose was quiet as they shuffled their way to the fireplace. It was difficult to gauge what to tell Rose and how much of what was going on. Hermione always leaned toward honesty when talking with the children, even if it was a watered-down version of the truth. Rose had a different experience than Minerva over Weasley's attack. Minerva rejected Weasley, however for Rose, she seemed to have two fathers that she accepted fully. Rose knew that Weasley had hurt Draco and knew that he was in prison because of it. To a five-year-old, it was just the way things were. Prison was probably like "time out" in her mind. It was their turn for the fireplace, and they all stepped inside.

got to enjoy the no bra part. Hermione giggled as she ran up the stairs. Draco shouted an admonishment to her to be careful running up the stairs, scared that she would fall and hurt herself. Hermione turned and stuck her tongue out at him.

"Promises, promises," Draco called after her.

Draco walked into the drawing room to find Theo sprawled out in a chair with one foot on the coffee table and a leg slung over the arm of the chair. He at least had the decency to take off his shoes before he put his foot up on the table this time. Draco shoved his friend's foot off the coffee table and took a lot of satisfaction in watching Theo struggle not to fall out of the chair. "I really hate you right now," Draco growled.

Draco threw himself onto the sofa with an aggrieved, long-suffering air.

"Nobody said you had to stop on my account," Theo replied.

"I doubt Hermione would have been comfortable continuing knowing you're across the foyer," Draco said.

"Daphne's mad at you two," Theo said, changing the subject.

"For what?" Draco asked.

"Oh, let's see," Theo said, holding up his hand and starting to tick points off on his fingers, "That you and Hermione are soulmates and haven't told your friends, that you adopted Minerva and didn't invite us to witness, and that you haven't told her you two were expecting."

"Sorry," Draco said automatically.

Things had been happening quickly lately around them, and Draco hadn't taken the time to keep his friends apprised of all the changes in his life. He really did need to have a talk with Blaise and Tracey before much more time passed. Draco remembered Blaise's suspicious look when the cuff was mentioned during the trial.

"I'm not the one you need to placate," Theo said. "How's Hermione doing?"

mione looked impishly down at him as if he'd fallen into some trap. Hermione let her knees fall open, and the skirt of her fuchsia shirt dress rode up around her open thighs.

Draco groaned at the sight that greeted his eyes. Hermione had taken advantage of his injunction against knickers under her dresses. Draco bit the inside of her thigh. Hermione squealed, and he licked away the sting of his bite.

"What are you doing to me, woman?" Draco growled.

Draco started licking, kissing, and biting his way up her thighs. Hermione wrapped a leg around Draco's back and urged him forward. Draco sucked her clit into his mouth and flicked it with his tongue. Hermione lay back on the desk moaning. Draco moved down and started feasting on the juices dripping from her pussy.

"Knock! Knock!" Theo called, strolling into the study.

Draco looked up from his feast at the unwelcome intrusion. He picked up a wand laying on the desk and shot a stinging hex toward Theo. Hermione squealed at the sound of Theo's voice and pushed the skirt of her dress down. Her bare feet dropped off the chair, and she started to sit up.

"Get out!" Draco growled.

Theo cast a shield charm and laughed. "I'll be in the drawing room. When you finish ... breakfast..." Theo left. His laughter hanging in the air.

When the door closed behind him, Hermione sat up, pushing the skirt of her dress down. Draco rested his head on her leg and groaned in frustration. Hermione started laughing, and after a moment, Draco couldn't help but start to laugh along with her.

Hermione scooted off the desk and smoothed her dress down. "I suppose I should go put on some knickers now," she said, "and a bra," she added as an afterthought.

Draco chased her from the room, growling. He hadn't even

Rose giggled as the green flames tickled her. Hermione said their destination and they were gone.

Draco kept an arm around Hermione's waist as they stepped out of the fireplace at the Burrow and into the familiar sitting room with its comfortable but well-worn sofas and chairs. Hermione looked a little green after the rapid movement from moving through the Floo network.

Ginny was nowhere to be found when they stepped out of the fireplace. The room was strangely empty though sounds could be heard throughout the house of children shrieking and laughing.

The door leading to the kitchen swung open while Hermione was getting her stomach under control.

Lavender Brown walked into the sitting room in faded blue jeans with rips at the knees and a bright pink turtle neck. She was calling over her shoulder as she stepped into the room, "I thought I heard," Lavender turned to find them standing there, "the Floo chime," she finished. Lavender stepped fully into the room and let the door swing closed. "Hi guys!" she said enthusiastically.

"Hi, Miss Lavender," Rose greeted and thrust her painting at Lavender, "Look what I drew," Rose said saying the word "drew" slowly and with thought.

Lavender took the proffered picture from Rose and exclaimed over it, "What a lovely picture!" Lavender crouched down to Rose's level, "Do you know who's going to see this?"

"Grandma and Grandpa," Rose answered happily, then her face fell, "Mum says they might be sad because Daddy is gone."

"I bet they're going to be super happy to see you though," Lavender said, "They're in the kitchen if you want to go show them your picture."

Rose looked over her shoulder at Hermione and Draco for permission. "Go on," Hermione urged, and Rose was through the door without further prompting.

Hermione greeted Lavender with a smile. "How're things going with Charlie?" she asked, grinning widely.

"Entertaining," Lavender said cryptically, "I don't think he knows a single thing about raising children."

The door swung open, and the topic of their gossiping walked into the room. Charlie Weasley walked into the room in a too tight black t-shirt and faded and dripped black jeans. His long, red hair was pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck.

Grasped in one hand were the ankles of manically giggling, half-naked, upside-down toddler. "Hey, Lavender," Charlie said, as he walked into the room. Charlie then realized that Lavender wasn't alone in the room. He walked over to them and still holding the toddler upside-down by his ankles, Charlie rested the boy's head gently on the coffee table. "Hey, guys," he said with a grin.

Lavender interrupted their greetings. She rounded on Charlie with an aggravated expression. "Why is my child upside-down and naked?" she demanded with her hands on her hips.

Charlie grinned rakishly at her, impervious to her aggravation. "Well, Danny boy here," and here Charlie wiggled the still giggling toddler's legs, "had a bit of an accident."

Draco noted that "Danny, boy" was starting to turn a bit red and while still giggling, if without less conviction than he'd started out with.

"I think you should turn him right side up before he pukes," Draco interjected.

"He's fine," Charlie scoffed.

"Did you remind him to go to the bathroom like I told you?" Lavender asked impatiently.

"You're supposed to remind them that they have to go to the loo?" Charlie asked incredulously.

"I told you that," Lavender said, "Put a fresh pair of drawers on him."

"And where are those?" Charlie asked, looking around the room for the appearance of a pair of children's underwear. Daniel by this point was almost puce and had stopped giggling.

coffee. Draco gave her a look that promised a pleasurable retribution and groaned when he felt her foot glide its way up his inner thigh.

Draco grabbed her foot before it could find its way to his hardened dick. Hermione pouted across the desk from him. "Thee's coming over," Draco reminded her. "He said he was filing the divorce bill with the Wizengamot this morning."

Hermione pulled her foot from his grasp, rose from her seat, and moved to sit on the desk beside his chair. Draco leaned back to look up at her. She still had a mischievous glint in her eye that meant she wasn't done torturing him.

"Why is it I couldn't submit the bill?" Hermione asked, her foot trailing up his thigh again.

"The Minister could fob you off, delay the bill," Draco said, panting a little, "Can't do that with us. Has to call a vote two days after it's presented."

Draco took her foot in his hand and planted it on the arm of his chair, his hand wrapped around her ankle to keep her in place. Hermione, undeterred, slid over on the desk and started trailing her other foot up and down his thigh.

"And what happens in the meantime?" Hermione asked.

Draco didn't really understand how she expected him to be this turned on and have a coherent conversation. He struggled to maintain some clarity when all the blood in his body was already located south of his belt.

"We test the waters," Draco answered gruffly, "See if we can sway anyone else to our side."

"Sounds fun," Hermione purred seductively.

Draco could hear the laughter in her voice. She was enjoying herself, and Draco couldn't fault her for it. He took her other foot that was resting under his balls and drew it up to rest on the other arm of his chair.

Draco looked up at her from between her spread thighs. Her-

the article. He watched her face, ready to take the newspaper from her at the slightest sign of distress to hell with the consequences. Draco would rather have Hermione angry at him rather than upset about what was in the paper.

Hermione snorted in derision as she read. A few "oh, give me a break"s interspersed with some "you've got to be fucking kidding me"s accompanied her perusal of the article.

Hermione set the paper back down on the table and took a sip of her coffee. Draco watched her warily, waiting for some sort of explosion, or the appearance of a jar with which to trap the beetle-y reporter.

"You needn't look at me that way," Hermione chided gently,

"I'm not about to fly off the handle in hysterics."

"You're not upset by the article?" Draco asked slowly.

Hermione waved the question away. "It's absolute trash," she said breezily, "She tried to compare every aspect of our relationship to mine with Ron, with you seeming to come up short at every turn. The only thing she seemed to leave out was a comparison of the size your dicks."

Draco choked on his sip of coffee, startled by Hermione's unusual crudeness. As Draco tried to clear his airway of coffee, he was glad that Rose hadn't been in the study to overhear and they didn't have to answer the inevitable query of what a "dick" was.

Hermione continued in a deceptively light tone, "Maybe I'll send her a note implying that it is the size of your trouser snake and the delicious way it slithers in as the reason that has inspired my devotion. What do you imagine the headlines would read tomorrow?"

Draco shifted uncomfortably in his chair as said trouser snake made its interest known. "Don't tease, lioness," Draco said huskily.

Hermione quirked an eyebrow and smiled at him over her

"In the bag that I told you to bring," Lavender said, thoroughly aggravated now.

"I think I left that on the kitchen table back home," Charlie said.

Lavender huffed in irritation, "Then I suggest you go get it. And it's my home, not yours."

Charlie winked at her and grinned, "Whatever you say, luv." He handed Draco the ankles of the silent toddler with a "Cheers mate," and apparated out of the house.

Draco lifted the toddler up off the table and at Daniel's whimper, "One second, buddy," he reassured the toddler, before turning and setting Daniel down slowly on the sofa. "Just lay there for a moment," Draco admonished when the child tried to get up and run from the room, "or you're going to puke up your lunch."

Draco turned to Lavender and said snobbily, "If he pukes on my shoes, I'm holding you responsible."

"They'll clean," Lavender said dismissively, looking down dispassionately at his pristine black trainers.

Lavender crouched down beside her son and smoothed back the hair on his head. Daniel was returning to a normal shade of healthy pink and looking ready to bound out of the room, sans underpants.

"See what I mean," Lavender fumed, "Doesn't know a single bloody thing about raising children and he insists on helping."

"I'm not that bad," Charlie said defensively as he walked back into the room with a brightly colored tote bag covered in cartoonish images of witches and wizards playing Quidditch slung over his shoulder. The big man that practically oozed a love of danger looked utterly ridiculous carrying a children's go-bag.

Hermione drew Lavender away for a whispered conversation. Hermione sent him a wide-eyed look, gesturing at Charlie and Daniel with her chin. Draco heaved a sigh and turned to Charlie, still holding the tote bag and looking a little put out.

"You'll get the hang of it," Draco said reassuringly, "Why

don't we get some pants on the little man before he starts running around the house with his winky hanging out."

Charlie sat heavily on the coffee table facing the sofa and set the bag at his feet. "I'm not sure if I'm cut out for this," Charlie said quietly.

Draco sat on the sofa by Daniel's feet and tickled the soles of the boy's feet and received a giggle. "I think all fathers feel that way at first. Takes a bit of getting used to," Draco said.

"I'm not their father," Charlie said, sitting Daniel up in front of him.

Charlie opened up the bag at his feet and pulled out a pair of blue boy's underwear that were clearly too big for the toddler. Charlie made to help Daniel put them on.

"Not those," Draco said, stopping Charlie who looked at him quizzically, "They're too big, probably Arthur's," Draco answered the unspoken question.

Charlie fished around in the bag again and found another pair of underpants in the same identical color.

"You have to check the tags," Draco said gesturing to the tag at the back of the underwear, "That way you can tell the different sizes apart."

Charlie nodded in thanks and tried to help the impatient toddler put his drawers on.

"I do," Daniel said in protest, stiffening his legs and refusing to help Charlie.

"Come on, Danny boy, let's get you dressed," Charlie said impatiently.

Daniel screwed up his face and looked like he was getting ready to scream.

"None of that," Draco said sharply, in his best "dad" voice. The toddler looked temporarily surprised at being talked to that way by a virtual stranger. Daniel stared up at Draco with wide eyes.

"Only big boys can dress themselves," Draco addressed the toddler seriously, "Are you a big boy?"

Daniel nodded solemnly at Draco and Draco said, "That's

What was the marriage of Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley really like? Was he driven into the arms of another woman because of Granger's ambition and coldness? Or was it a marriage riddled with abuse as Granger would have us all believe? Did Lavender Brown, horribly scarred by a werewolf attack, play on Weasley's pity and their former relationship in order to tempt Weasley from Granger's side? Or did Weasley flee to Brown willingly?

Ronald Weasley will spend the rest of his life in prison, a hero in the Second Wizarding War amongst Death Eaters and common criminals. Many would say that his sentence was too harsh. A wizard defending his honor by attacking his wife's lover.

Was the sentence too harsh? Did Ronald Weasley have justification for attacking Draco Malfoy? The relationship between Granger and Malfoy has been much photographed and reported on in the past months. We have all watched as Draco Malfoy slithered into the life of Hermione Granger, quickly taking Weasley's place as Granger's lover and father figure to the two girls.

Granger seemed to move on quickly from her thirteen-year marriage to Ronald Weasley.

Draco threw the article away from him in disgust. It seemed to go on and on, demonizing their relationship, giving everything a sinister twist. Where was Luna with a good spin?

"That good, huh?" Hermione asked sardonically as she took a sip of her one and only coffee of the day as they sat across from each other at their desk.

"I'm going to bloody ruin her," Draco vowed.

Hermione picked up the discarded paper. Draco tried to snatch it from her grasp, instinctively wanting to protect her, not wanting her to see anything else that would upset her today. Not after the nightmare. Hermione woke in a good mood this morning and Draco wanted nothing to mar it.

"Don't bloody read it!" Draco exclaimed when he missed grabbing it from her.

Too late, Draco watched as Hermione's eyes rapidly scanned

Was she remembering her lost memories? Or was her brain spinning its own version of whatever Weasley might have done to her? Either scenario worried him. Draco knew that sometimes not knowing was just as bad if not worse than knowing the truth. Draco also knew that Hermione was always in search of knowledge. He didn't know if she would be able to just let this slip by unanswered. Draco dreaded what would happen if she couldn't.

"I don't really remember," Hermione said, then hesitated and continued, "I know it was about Ron, and I remember being heartbroken, but I don't remember the details. And I woke up crying."

Draco continued to run his fingers through her hair. He almost breathed a sigh of relief that it wasn't a coherent dream of an assault. Hermione was starting to relax back into sleep at his touch.

"He's gone, and you're safe," Draco reassured her, wanting the words to penetrate into her subconscious.

Hermione took a deep breath, relaxing further. "Yes," she said sleepily, "he's gone for good now. We're all safe."

"Try to go back to sleep," Draco instructed quietly.

"I love you," Hermione whispered.

"I love you too," Draco responded, kissing her forehead.

### Ronald Weasley in Azkaban

By: Rita Skeeter

A member of the Golden Trio was sentenced yesterday to life in prison. Ronald Weasley was found guilty for the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy and taken from the courtroom yesterday directly to Azkaban Prison.

His words when entering the courtroom and after his sentence make us wonder at the marriage of Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger. Until September, we all thought they had a happy, boring marriage with two children and steady jobs. We were all shocked to find that Weasley had a girlfriend and four illegitimate children on the side.

what I thought." Draco leaned forward like he was imparting a secret, "Big boys try to remember to use the loo. Can you try to remember?"

Daniel nodded again.

Charlie started to hand the underwear to Daniel crumpled up in his hand.

"Hold them so that he knows which way to put them on," Draco whispered.

Charlie obediently held out the underpants facing the front towards himself. Daniel struggled to slip his legs into the holes. Charlie held the boy's elbow to steady Daniel as he pulled up his underwear. Daniel stood looking proud of himself upon successfully pulling on his own clothes and looked expectantly at Draco and Charlie.

Charlie, not needing any prompting, cheered, "Good job, Danny boy!"

Daniel beamed endearingly at Charlie. He successfully put on his trousers that Charlie correctly fished out of the bag. Charlie picked Daniel up under his armpits and set him back down on the sofa. Charlie found a clean pair of socks in the bag. He pulled out two pairs, checked the toes on each for the size, and handed Daniel the correct pair. The socks proved too difficult for the toddler to put on and he gave them back to Charlie with a pout.

"Good try, Danny boy," Charlie said. Charlie rolled down a sock and slid it onto Daniel's foot.

"I try," Daniel said, reaching for the other sock.

Charlie handed the sock to Daniel. Draco watched as Charlie's big, scarred hands helped Daniel's little ones roll up the sock, stick his little foot in, and pull it on. Charlie held up his hand for a "high-five." Daniel smacked his hand enthusiastically.

"Good job, buddy," Charlie said, "Go get your shoes from Grandma."

Daniel scooted off the couch and ran out the door calling for "Gamma Molly."

Charlie looked over at Draco with something akin to

gratitude. "Thanks for the help, mate."

"It's no problem," Draco said, leaning back and resting his arm across the top of the sofa, "I didn't know anything about raising children when Scorpius was born. My mum had to help a lot, and I had to figure out a lot myself."

"I don't know anything about raising kids," Charlie said, "I feel like I'm hopelessly blundering it and Lavender gets so frustrated with me."

"You've been doing it two days," Draco said, "Cut yourself a break." Shrieks of children could be heard in the background. Draco said, "You've been around children before. You can't be that bad."

Charlie shrugged, "I'm the fun uncle," he said, self-deprecatingly, "Once one of them starts emitting a bodily function or starts crying, I hand them back to their parents." Draco laughed. The sound drew the attention of Hermione and Lavender. The two witches rejoined them.

"What are you two laughing about?" Lavender asked.

Charlie rose from his perch on the coffee table and stood beside Lavender. He towered over the witch and threw an arm across her shoulders. Draco noticed that the previously frustrated witch grow still and breathless.

"Just talking about the joys of parenting, luv," Charlie joked. Lavender rolled her eyes at him and stepped out of his embrace. "We should head back to the kitchen," she said uncomfortably, "Everyone will wonder where we are."

The four of them filed through the door into the kitchen where the rest of the Weasley clan lay in wait. Ginny stood near her mother at the end of the kitchen. Ginny looked to be having a tense conversation with Molly while Molly stirred a large pot emitting fragrant smells.

Percy sat near his father at the head of the table. Arthur Weasley dandled a child on each knee. Bill and Fleur sat across from Percy. Both looked irritated by Percy. George and Angelina stood side by side in the doorway leading to the backyard, both looking outside and monitoring the screeching going on outside.

## Chapter 37 Preparing for Battle

January 15th

Draco woke to something warm and wet sliding down his bare chest. A snuffle brought him fully out of sleep. Hermione was draped over him; her hand curled around his neck. He cracked his eyes open and saw the top of her curly head in the dim light of the room.

Draco brushed a hand up the expanse of her back and asked sleepily, "Hermione?"

Hermione started blotting at her face with the sheet. "Sorry," she murmured tearily, "I didn't mean to wake you."

Draco tipped her chin up, urging her to look at him. "Why're you crying?" he asked.

"I wasn't crying," she responded defensively, but a tear trickled down her cheek, and Hermione wiped it away impatiently.

"Uh huh," Draco said. He caught another tear as it rolled its way down her face. "Am I to believe that you've suddenly sprung a leak then?"

He received a watery chuckle in reply. Silence drifted between them. Hermione rested her head back on his shoulder. Draco let his fingers comb soothingly through her curls.

"Do you want to talk about whatever it was that made you cry?" Draco asked.

"I had a bad dream," Hermione said into his shoulder.

"Oh," Draco said, "What was it about?"

Rose called attention to their presence in the kitchen. Awkwardly, it was Draco that she first called out to when she noticed them. Draco hadn't felt this tense in years as the room full of Weasleys turned to watch Rose bounce over to him.

Draco crouched and scooped up Rose. He focused on her smiling, cherubic face to avoid the silent Weasleys staring at him. Rose prattled on about her picture and how much Grandma and Grandpa liked it. She pointed it out on the wall at the far end of the kitchen, one of many children's drawings collected over the years.

George called over from the doorway, "Hey, Rosie Posie, why don't you come try out something new I made."

Rose looked overjoyed to be a product tester for her uncle and wriggled down from Draco. His shield from these possibly hostile Weasleys ran out the door without a backward glance.

Charlie clapped him on the back so hard Draco stumbled forward. "Don't be so uncomfortable. No one's going to bite," Charlie said grinning, then he shrugged, "Well, some of the young ones might."

Draco found himself guided by the imposing Weasley over to the large dining table. He was pushed down unceremoniously on the bench beside Fleur. Charlie walked around to the other side and sat across from Draco with a good space between Charlie and Percy.

Draco greeted the others at the table politely. Here received a stiff nod from Percy. A slightly warmer greeting from Arthur. Bill and Fleur were almost as friendly as Charlie in their "hello's" to Draco. Draco was relieved that he didn't become a tongue-tied mess when conversing with Fleur, as he had during his fourth year.

"So what's the newest Weasley Wizarding Wheezes product that the children are testing out?" Draco asked politely.

Fleur immediately looked enthusiastic and answered in French, "Oh, c'est merveilleux. Les enfants courent dans les bulles, rebondissent sur les autres et sur lesol. Personne ne se blesse." (Oh, it is wonderful. The children run around in

bubbles, bouncing off of each other and the ground. No one gets hurt.)

"Cela semble amusant," Draco answered her back in French. (That sounds like fun.)

Another one of Lavender's children came up to Charlie. The boy appeared to be around four and was rubbing his face sleepily. His red-blond hair stuck out at odd angles indicating that he'd just woken from a nap. This must be Arthur.

Young Arthur smiled winningly up at Charlie. "Uncle Charlie," the boy said in a tone to any experienced parent meant the child was going to ask for something he knew he shouldn't have, "can I have a cookie please?"

Arthur, Bill, Fleur, and Percy smiled behind their hands. Charlie's first forays into parenting seemed to be amusing the Weasley clan.

Charlie reached for a cookie, instinctively falling into his role as the "fun uncle" and started to answer, "Su..."

Draco kicked him under the table.

Charlie jumped and scowled at Draco, who merely smiled back at Charlie. Charlie drew his hand back from the cookie plate, and Young Arthur started to pout.

"Ask..." Charlie started again and received another kick to the shins from Draco. Charlie turned his attention back to Draco, "Are you going to kick me until I get it right or something?"

The others at the table started laughing.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Draco answered.

Young Arthur started tugging on Charlie's shirt. "Can I, Uncle Charlie?" the boy pleaded.

"Dinner is almost ready," Charlie said to Young Arthur.

The boy's shoulders slumped at Charlie's refusal, and he shuffled away in search of the other children. Draco watched as Young Arthur went up to George and pulled on his green tee shirt. The two went outside with the other children to play with their bubbles.

Charlie kicked Draco hard under the table. Pain radiated up

between the two. Time would tell, but it wasn't Hermione or Draco's place to intrude on their relationship, whatever it was. Convincing Hermione of that was going to be difficult.

Draco guided the women out of the portrait gallery. Rose skipped ahead of them, her hair swinging with each dancing step. Weasley was gone, and it was time to move on to the next stage of their lives.

Hermione looked coldly at the old wizard, her voice glacial as she said, "Sometimes saying nothing does far more harm than telling an uncomfortable truth."

Hermione harshly wrenched open the door and stalked out into the cold, London air. Draco quietly closed the shop door, not bothering to look behind him at Ollivander, and walked down the steps to join her on the sidewalk.

"I'm so mad," Hermione said heatedly when Draco joined her.

Draco was almost resigned to it. He could even understand Ollivander's actions in not saying anything to him. The old wandmaker had spent time as a "guest" in the Malfoy dungeons for a time. Draco considered himself lucky that the wizard had been willing even to sell him a wand. There was nothing they could do now to change Ollivander's actions. They couldn't go back and change any of the choices that led them away from each other.

"I know," Draco said, then shrugged, "Well, at least that answered a question."

He guided her down the street away from the front of Ollivander's shop in case the wizard decided to try to accost Hermione on the street with more apologies. It wouldn't do for The Prophet to catch a photo of Hermione hexing the beloved wandmaker in the street.

Hermione stopped and stamped her foot in anger and frustration. "Why aren't you madder about this?" she demanded.

"There's nothing we can really do," Draco said with an air of resignation.

"But we could've been together sooner," Hermione protested.

"We made our own choices too," Draco reminded her.

Hermione huffed a little at his statement. They ambled along the street, making their way back to the Leaky. Draco walked beside her with an arm draped over her shoulder. Hermione eventually wrapped her arm around his waist.

"We didn't ask him how he was planning to vote tomorrow,"

Hermione said quietly.

Draco looked down at her and smiled. "Well, we can go back and ask him if you want," he said still grinning.

Hermione looked incensed by the prospect of going back to ask Ollivander to vote with them tomorrow. "I am not going back there to beg for his vote," she huffed.

"I don't know," Draco started playfully. "He would probably agree to anything you asked of him right now," Draco finished with Slytherin slyness.

Hermione looked up at him and narrowed her eyes. A calculating gleam came over her face, but then she shook her head and said, "No, I'm just as likely to hex him right now as ask him anything."

Draco shrugged with a careless lift of his shoulder. "We can guilt trip him tomorrow then during the council meeting," Draco said with an air of unconcern.

was currently subjecting an infuriated Hermione too.

Ollivander's gaze snapped to Draco, and he looked bewildered for a moment by the statement. A shudder passed through Ollivander, and then he answered the indirect question as if the answer was evident to anyone with half a brain. Draco barely refrained from hexing the wizard, and only because the answers were far more important than his need to release his aggravation on the old wandmaker.

"Well, they won't duel against one another, that's obvious." Ollivander ignored Hermione's growl of impatience and started pacing around the front of the shop. "Wands are made to be protective of their owners, but mated wands are difficult because they are often times more protective of their mates to the point where they might risk their owners in order to protect their mate from harm."

Ollivander stopped pacing and looked at them. "That's why wandmakers don't use them. People don't want wands that might not protect them."

Ollivander started pacing again, and Draco's hand twitched on his wand, wanting to immobilize the wizard and get him to hurry up with his explanation. Hermione didn't seem to be in a better state. Her hair was starting to fluff out with little blue sparks zinging out the ends.

"They're notoriously difficult to pass down to family members. The two wands can't go to just anyone," Ollivander muttered as he wore the floorboards down in front of them.

"Don't you think," Hermione spluttered in rage. She stepped in front of Ollivander to stop his pacing and wagged an admonishing finger in his face. "Don't you think it would have been important for us to know this when we got our wands. It would have been nice to know at least that my wand had a mate that it couldn't duel against."

Hermione spun on her heel and stalked towards the door. Draco followed her. She had her hand on the door knob when Ollivander called after her.

"I'm sorry, Hermione."

"Wandmakers usually don't use heart strings from Antipodean dragons if the dragon was mated because both must be used, and then there's the risk of using a mated wand, but I was short on supplies, and I was willing to use whatever I could get. They are rather cheap because wandmaker typically don't buy them." Ollivander got distracted by his thoughts and muttered wistfully, "But they came out beautifully though. Some of my best work."

"That still doesn't cover why you chose not to say anything for fourteen years," Hermione interjected sharply.

Ollivander jerked, pulled from his reverie. In a quiet, pleading voice, Ollivander tried to better explain himself, "The war had just ended, only a month gone by, when you came in, Hermione. I didn't mention it when the wand picked you. I didn't think it mattered. When young Malfoy came in a year later, and your wand's mate chose him, I didn't mention it to him. You were tortured in his home. I still remember what your screams sounded like as his aunt tortured you. He was a Death Eater. I wasn't going to tell him that his wand had a mate. That it meant you two were supposed to be together. I thought it was protecting you."

Draco didn't like the excuse, but considering what had happened to Hermione in his home, he could understand why the old wizard didn't say anything to him. Ollivander probably thought he would be handing Hermione over to be abused again, not that he would possibly be saving her from years of abuse at Weasley's hands.

Draco rubbed his hands down Hermione's arms, trying to calm her. Hermione was quickly losing her patience with the wizard. No doubt envisioning everything that could have been different in their lives had she known that one detail. Once again a choice had kept them apart, delayed him finding her, and it was difficult for Draco to accept.

"You mentioned something about the risks of using a mated wand," Draco said, trying to direct the wandmaker's attention to himself instead of the desperate pleading the wandmaker

## Chapter 40 Tea at Parkinson Lodge

Afternoon of January 16th

Hermione's innate curiosity soon overrode her anger at Ollivander. They found that the wands indeed refused to duel against one another.

"We should try a Patronus," Hermione suggested. She was practically bouncing in excitement around the study.

Draco rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know how to cast a Patronus," Draco admitted. "I don't think I even can."

"Oh," Hermione said, "I can show you how."

"Yes, but I don't think I can," Draco persisted.

"Why?" Hermione asked her hands on her hips and tapping her foot in impatience.

Draco wondered if she was being deliberately obtuse or if she'd forgotten in her excitement. Draco decided to err on the side of caution and decided that she'd probably forgotten.

"Hermione, Death Eaters can't cast a Patronus. It's well known," Draco said calmly.

Hermione closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around his waist, and he wrapped his arms around her. Draco thought that maybe she realized that it was hopeless to try to teach him the spell and was consoling him.

Hermione looked up at him and smiled. "I think that is pure rubbish," she said. "Will you at least give it a try?" she wheedled.

Draco sighed. He couldn't very well turn her down, and when he failed, she would be the only one that knew he couldn't do it. He nodded in acquiescence.

Hermione squealed in happiness and bounced out of his embrace. She started speaking rapidly, "Okay, so the first thing you have to do is think happy thoughts."

"And you're going to sprinkle pixie dust on me, and we'll fly away to Neverland," Draco responded sardonically.

Hermione glared reprovingly at him, "Funny. Try to take this seriously."

"Lioness," Draco protested, "I don't think I can do this."

Hermione smacked his chest. "You can do it. I have faith in you."

Hermione poked and prodded him until Draco relented and stood up straight. Draco pointed his wand at the bookcase.

"Now, think of a happy memory. Let it fill you up. Then say the incantation: Expecto Patronum," Hermione instructed.

Draco closed his eyes and thought of a happy memory. Scorpius immediately came to mind. The first time he'd ever been truly happy was after Scorpius was born. Draco held the tiny boy in one hand and ran his other across his son's perfect nose. Scorpius grasped his finger and held on so tight.

Draco opened his eyes and said, "Expecto Patronum."

Wisps of white smoke shot out of his wand before evaporating. Hermione clapped her hands. He tried several more times, only producing the thin wisps of white smoke.

"That's really good," she cheered. "Try again. Pick a more powerful memory. Really focus on it."

Draco closed his eyes again. He'd never been happier than when Hermione, Minerva, and Rose came into his and Scorpius' lives. It was like a missing piece clicked into place. Hermione's unwavering love. Becoming a father to Minerva and Rose. Giving Scorpius the mother he always wanted. The two new impending additions to their family, unexpected but welcome nonetheless. He allowed the happiness to fill him up.

"Expecto Patronum," he said with his eyes still closed.

shop back up yet. Thirteen inches, cedar wood with a dragon heartstring, reasonable springy."

"Yes, but why..." Hermione tried to interrupt.

Ollivander turned to Draco, gesturing at him with an open hand and ignoring Hermione's attempt to interrupt. "And then you came in a year later. Your wand was not responding to you anymore. It was really no wonder with everything you'd gone through. The wand that chose you was very much like the Mafloy wand. Very sad that it was destroyed. Very old, very old."

"Okay, but why..." Hermione tried again.

"It's the cores," Ollivander said as if it were apparent.

Dragon heartstring cores weren't that uncommon. Draco didn't understand why it should seem obvious that their wands responded to each other.

Ollivander sighed dramatically at Draco and Hermione's identical blank looks. "Antipodean dragons mate for life. Your cores came from a mated pair. The wands are mates," Ollivander made his hocking announcement and started pacing the front of the shop. "I didn't think anything of it until young Mafloy came and claimed the second wand, but I've known you two were supposed to be together for fourteen years."

Draco didn't quite care for how smug the wizard looked as he imparted that information.

"Why didn't you say something?" Hermione asked aghast.

The smug look fell from the wizard's face at Hermione's tone. "I... I didn't think... You weren't together," Ollivander stammered helplessly.

"You didn't think that it would be important for either of us to know that our wands are mated," Hermione snarled. "You didn't think it was significant for either of us to know that we're supposed to be together."

Ollivander seemed to wither under Hermione's sharp glare. Draco was just impressed that she hadn't pointed her wand at the wizard.

"The wands are rare," Ollivander tried pathetically to explain.

The chime above the door rang as Hermione and Draco stepped inside. Ollivander's shop was as it had always been. Wands in their boxes were stacked on shelves behind the counter organized in a way that probably only Ollivander knew.

Garrick Ollivander wandered up from the back of the store. The old wandmaker hadn't changed much over the years. His graying hair stuck out at odd angles as if he'd gotten frustrated and starting pulling on his hair. Ollivander spotted Hermione first, and a toothy grin broke out on the old wizard's face, deep lines bracketing his mouth.

Ollivander grasped both of Hermione's hands in his. "It's so wonderful to see you again, my dear," he beamed.

"Always a pleasure, Mr. Ollivander," Hermione said, smiling up at the wizard.

Ollivander let go of Hermione's hands. "I've been wondering when I would see you two in my shop. I've been expecting you for months now." Ollivander smiled at the two of them.

"I'm sorry," Hermione started, unsure, looking between Draco and Ollivander, "Why were you expecting us?"

"The wands," Ollivander said, looking like that should answer their question and not raise more. "Let's see them," he said, gesturing impatiently for them to hand over their wands. Draco followed Hermione's lead and handed his wand over to the wizard. Ollivander held a wand in each hand and looked up at them in wonder.

"Very rare, very rare," Ollivander muttered to himself.

"I've been meaning to ask," Hermione began, "Why is it that I can use Draco's wand just as easily as mine?"

Ollivander looked at Hermione as if he had expected her to have already figured it out. Draco looked sharply at the man. It had been a long month. Neither of them had devoted any time to contemplate why their wands responded to each other's commands.

Ollivander handed their wands back to them. "I remember when you came to get your replacement wand," Ollivander said to Hermione with a distracted air, "I hadn't even opened the

"Oh, yes. That's it," Hermione said, clapping her hands again.

Draco opened his eyes in time to see stronger, wisps of white smoke emitting from his wand. Hermione tugged happily on his free arm.

"That's wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I think you might be able to produce a corporeal Patronus. Try again," she urged, pushing on his arm.

"One thing," Draco said, looking at her seriously, "If it's a ferret, you can't tell Potter."

Hermione laughed. "Try again," she said between snorts of laughter.

Draco sighed. He knew he would never live it down if his Patronus ended up being a ferret. He tried and failed several more times. It was starting to get exhausting and emotionally draining.

Draco dropped his arm wearily. "Hermione, can we stop for today?"

"Just one more time. Please, please, please," Hermione begged. "You've almost got it."

Draco nodded and closed his eyes. He allowed the memory of the time he and Hermione stared into each other's eyes as they made love. Him claiming her as his mate. Her reciprocation. The thread of gold that bound them together after they claimed each other.

"Expecto Patronum!" Draco shouted.

Hermione shrieked. Draco opened his eyes and looked at her. His Patronus circled her. It took Draco a moment to realize that it was a dragon.

"He's beautiful," Hermione said in awe. "An Antipodean Opaleye, just like your wand core. I wonder..." Hermione said, then pointed her wand and shouted, "Expecto Patronum!"

Hermione's otter Patronus did not shoot out of her wand like Draco expected. Instead, another Antipodean Opaleye dragon shot out of her wand. It was obvious that it was the mate to Draco's Patronus by the way the two silvery dragons

swirled and frolicked around each other before disappearing.

"It changed," Draco said when the wisps finally died away.

"That's what I thought would happen," Hermione said, pacing the room in thought.

"You thought dragons would appear as our Patronuses?" Draco asked, watching her pace around the room.

Hermione stopped pacing to look at him. Her mouth was lifted up in a mischievous smirk. "No, I honestly expected them to be ferrets. Have you ever tried to find out what your animagus form is?" she teased.

"Malfyos don't transform into animals," Draco responded stiffly. Mostly because he was afraid it would be a ferret.

Hermione laughed and then continued to pace the room. She picked at her nails and gnawed on her lip, deep in thought.

"Care to share with the rest of the class?" Draco asked.

Hermione stopped her pacing and looked over at him. "I was thinking about soulmates. Love can change a Patronus. I've seen that before," Hermione said and started pacing in circles around him as she explained. "I wish we knew what your Patronus was before we got together, whether it's always been a dragon, or if it changed as well. Since our wands are mates, it makes me wonder if that affected the Patronus incantation."

"But we've both had our wands for years now," Draco interjected, "and we know that your Patronus was an otter before today."

Hermione thankfully stopped pacing. Draco was getting dizzy trying to keep up with her. "That's true. Maybe there's a certain amount of acknowledgment needed."

"But the cuff appeared on your arm without either of us knowing what was going on," Draco pointed out.

Hermione looked at him in exasperation. "Will you stop poking holes in my theories?" she said huffily as she stamped her foot.

Draco laughed. He wrapped his arms around Hermione's resisting front. "Don't be mad," Draco breathed into her ear,

means a lot to me that this passes."

Draco kissed her temple again. "I know. It means a lot to me too."

They took the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron. The two of them stepping out of the fireplace caused a few curious stares among the few patrons scattered about the pub. Hannah waved to them from behind the bar and called a greeting. They called their "hellos" back to her but didn't stop to talk.

Hermione and Draco exited the Leaky and made their way onto Diagon Alley. The street was quiet with morning shoppers strolling leisurely down the street. The cold, rainy weather that pervaded Muggle London didn't affect the wizarding shopping center. It would not do for witches and wizards to be slipping and sliding down the cobbled streets.

Draco opened the door to the dark and musty wand shop. He'd been to Ollivander's three times in his life. Draco's first visit was like many witches and wizards. The pompous youth entered Ollivander's with his mother and father to pick out his first wand.

After the war, the wand never seemed to work right for Draco. After his probation was lifted, he'd gone to Ollivander's to ask for help. Draco was surprised to find that his changed nature was the reason the wand wouldn't work anymore. He simply wasn't the same person he'd been at eleven, which didn't seem much of a surprise to Ollivander.

Draco's second wand was chosen. An eighteen inch, elm wand with a dragon heartstring core. It was very similar to the Malfoy wand that had been passed down for generations before being destroyed by Voldemort, a wand that was rumored to have belonged to Armand Malfoy. Ollivander behaved oddly when this wand chose Draco but refused to explain himself. Just stating that it was "curious" that the wand had chosen him.

The third visit was like many parents' visit to the shop, accompanying their excited offspring as they took up their heritage and were paired with their first wands. Scorpius came home with an eleven inch, cedar wand with a unicorn hair core.

the journalist writing the article. The society page was full of speculation on the fate of Draco and Hermione's relationship should the bill pass or not pass. Both sides seemed to agree that the divorce bill would have no impact on the longevity of their relationship, but should the divorce bill pass, speculation abounded on when they could expect an announcement of upcoming nuptials.

Hermione returned to the dining room just as Draco was closing the paper. She was dressed warmly for a visit to Diagon Alley in a lilac cashmere sweater and navy dress pants. She had her navy peacoat draped over her arm.

"What if he says he won't vote with us?" Hermione worried as Draco helped her put her coat on.

Draco wrapped his arms around her waist. Hermione leaned back into his embrace. Draco planted a kiss on her temple.

"Stop worrying so much," Draco said with assurance, "Everything will turn out just fine."

Draco approached this divorce bill as he'd approached many things in his life. His typical Malfoy self-assurance didn't allow room for any doubt that he would fail. Draco was determined to get what he wanted, and he'd done everything in his power to ensure that his aims were achieved. Hermione would be divorced tomorrow. Draco was absolutely assured of that result.

"I know. I just..." Hermione said, worrying her lip and wringing her hands.

"You just want everyone to vote with you because you think you're right," Draco said. Hermione stiffened ready to defend herself. Draco continued cajolingly before she could interrupt, "And you are right in this instance, but you'll never get everyone to agree with you. That's just not how politics works."

"But it's the right thing," Hermione protested, "People deserve not to be forced to stay in unhappy marriages."

"I agree with you," Draco reassured her, "But you know the world isn't always black and white. People don't always agree what is right and wrong."

"I hear what you're saying," Hermione said haltingly, "It just

"It doesn't always have to make sense right away."

Hermione relaxed into his embrace. Her hands rested on his clasped around her middle. "I don't like unanswered questions," she responded.

Draco didn't remind her that there were a few unanswered questions about the relationship with Weasley. He didn't want her dwelling on that emotional trauma. Not in her condition. Not when he agreed with Harry that there was more harm in knowing than not knowing.

"Sometimes," Draco said, nuzzling her neck, "magic defies logic."

Hermione nodded her head. "What's your theory?" she asked in curiosity.

Draco sighed, knowing Hermione wouldn't be able to let it go without some answer. "I think it's largely been chance and circumstance. We both got our wands when we were children before we even knew each other. Before we really knew ourselves. Circumstances of birth and upbringing pushed us apart. Our choices and those of others kept us apart. Chance brought us together again, gave us another chance to find our way to each other. We knew each other when we each picked out our second wands. Old enough to know ourselves better. How many people need to get a second wand in their lifetimes? Wands last for generations and are often passed down. My father's wand was rumored to be a thousand years old. The wand of Armand Malfoy."

"Maybe it's fate," Hermione said in thought.

Hermione moved out of his embrace and went to sit on the sofa in front of the fire. Draco followed her. He sat on the other end of the sofa and faced her with his knee pulled upon the sofa and his back resting against the armrest.

"How so?" Draco asked.

"The Malfoy wand was destroyed. A wand that was believed to have been owned by the wizard that created the cuffs that appear on Malfoy soulmates." Hermione took a deep breath and looked up at him. "Your wand," she continued, pointing at

him, "is a replica of sorts of that wand. Maybe it's fate that we have these mated wands."

"Maybe so," Draco answered.

Draco looked at the clock on the mantel. They had to leave for Parkinson Lodge soon. Then there was the dinner party Daphne was throwing that evening.

"We've got to leave for tea with the Parkinsons soon," Draco said.

Hermione rose off the sofa. "I should go freshen up then." At the door, she turned to look back at him. "You remembered to ask your mother to pick up Rose?" she asked.

Draco smiled at how domestic their lives seemed at times. "Yes, I remembered," he answered. "She said she'd meet us at the Nott's for dinner."

Hermione looked confused for a moment, then her face cleared. "Oh, that's right. We're supposed to be grovelling tonight."

Draco laughed as Hermione walked out the door and up to their room to freshen up. Grovelling to Daphne about how horrible they were wasn't the only thing they had to do tonight.

Draco went over to his side of the desk and opened the bottom drawer. He tapped his wand on the false bottom of the drawer, and the panel popped up to reveal a scroll tied with green ribbon. The scroll was heavy with all the blank seals already affixed to it.

Draco called Tansy, and the elf appeared by his side in an instant. He handed the elf the scroll.

"Take this to Theo, please, Tansy. Tell him to keep it safe for me but not to open it or he'll ruin the enchantments on it," Draco instructed Tansy.

"Yes, Master Draco," Tansy said cheerily and was gone with a snap of her fingers.

The receiving room of Parkinson Lodge was like many in large, ancestral, pureblood manors. All were meant to impress the importance of the family that owned the manor.

Parkinson Lodge was no different in this instance. Draco

Draco chuckled as he set down the paper. "Who was Luna's reliable source?" he asked Hermione.

Hermione set down her spoon and looked over at him in amusement. She dabbed at her lips with her napkin. The bit of drool was flaking off slowly from the side of her mouth. "I might have sent her a copy of the proposed bill with notes on what some of the legal jargon meant."

Draco wasn't surprised. He was a little disappointed that he hadn't thought of it first. Draco shrugged off his disappointment though. It was Hermione's right to spread news of the bill she had a hand in creating as she saw fit.

Draco picked up a letter and opened it. He smiled as he scanned the contents.

"Who's that from?" Hermione asked curiously. She spread a generous helping of butter and raspberry jam on her toast before returning her attention to him as she took her first bite. A glob of jelly slid off her toast, and Hermione made a grab for it but missed, and the jelly landed with a splat on her pajamas.

"Mr. Parkinson," Draco answered with a grin, resisting the urge to laugh outright, setting the letter back down on the table, "We've been invited to Parkinson Lodge for tea this afternoon."

"That's good news," Hermione responded as she cast a quick scourgy on herself. "I suppose we should go to Ollivander's first and see what he has to say."

"Well, you're the one that slept in this morning," Draco said wryly, calling attention to their differences in attire.

"I was tired," Hermione said defensively, "Did Rose get to school okay?"

"It was fine," Draco reassured her.

Hermione finished her breakfast, kissed his cheek, and wandered upstairs to get ready for the trip to Ollivander's. Draco finished reading the newspaper while he waited for Hermione to return.

The Daily Prophet was littered with editorials concerning the divorce bill up for vote, both for and against with accompanying comments from various Ministry officials with similar views as

He turned his attention from Hermione and her rather impressive bed head and returned to reading the article on the front page.

Divorce Bill Comes to a Vote Tomorrow

By: Luna Lovegood

Tomorrow we'll hopefully take one step closer to equality and freedom in our society. A divorce bill, created by Hermione Granger and Theodore Nott, goes before the Wizengamot tomorrow. This bill will allow unhappily married couples to sever the bonds of matrimony.

I obtained a copy of the bill from a trusted source. The new laws outlined will be ground breaking for our society. There are provisions in the new bill for immediate divorce for spouses on the basis of imprisonment, abandonment, or abuse. If you don't fall into one of those categories, have no fear. One of the new laws would allow No-Fault Divorce, which means that a couple can amicably decide to split and go their separate ways, no harm — no foul.

Now dear readers, I can practically hear some of you screeching "What about the children? We need to think of the children!" To answer this, I ask you to think for a moment. What do you think is best for children: two parents living together who are miserable in their marriage and make their misery in different ways known to all around them or parents who live happily apart and (hopefully) raise their children cooperatively? Happy parents usually mean happy children.

Some of you are probably thinking "I'm not planning on getting a divorce. This bill doesn't apply to me. Why should I support it?" We are so happy that you marriage is successful. What if some day your children aren't so successful in their partners? You would want them to have the means of freeing themselves from an unhappy union.

Also, ever fancy a career in the Ministry? This new bill will create new jobs within the Ministry. A whole new department would open up with the passing of this bill. The Department of Family Law will need many wizards and witches interested in providing help in ending marriages, mediating property disputes and divisions of assets, and mediating custody arrangements. Parenting classes and family counseling will also be offered and will need teachers and mind healers for those services.

Article continued on page 8, second column.

and Hermione stepped out of the Parkinson fireplace onto the black and white checked, marble floor. Paintings of important Parkinson ancestors adorned the walls in their gilt frames. A rather imposing portrait of Perseus Parkinson who was the Minister of Magic from 1726 to 1733 held the place of honor directly across from the fireplace.

Draco rather hoped that Perseus kept his anti-Muggle sentiments to himself. It simply wasn't done to incinerate a painting while a guest in someone's home.

Posie Parkinson saved her husband's ancestral painting by gliding into the room. And by gliding, Draco meant clomping in on her stilettos like a Clydesdale. Despite her daughter's fashion success, Posie had never managed to look good walking in heels. Draco imagined it grated on Pansy's nerves that her mother persisted in wearing the shoes. The peach dress she wore though was flattering on her voluptuous figure.

Posie held out a manicured hand to Draco and Hermione. "It's so wonderful to see you both," the witch gushed in a raspy voice.

Draco grasped the manicured hand and kissed the air over her bejeweled fingers, causing the woman to simper. "Very lovely to see you again, Mrs. Parkinson." Draco released Posie's hand and turned her attention to Hermione. "Allow me to introduce you to Hermione Granger."

"Silly boy," Posie chided him with a wave of her hand, "we met at the ball." Posie leaned forward and kissed the air beside each of Hermione's cheeks. "Lovely to see you again, darling. You are simply glowing. You must tell me what skin charms you use."

Posie hooked an arm through Hermione's and steered her out of the room, the pair of them looking slightly inebriated as they crookedly made their way out of the receiving room to the solarium where the Parkinson's traditionally took tea.

Jonathan Parkinson stood with his back to them by one of the large windows. Judging by the smell of tobacco and flowers in the air, Draco guessed that Jon was trying to have a discreet

smoke while his wife was away. Draco saw a cloud of smoke drift past the window before Jon turned with a smile.

Jonathan Parkinson was a rotund man with a definite receding hairline. He wore a black pinstriped vest over a white long-sleeve shirt. A bit of ash had landed on the front of his vest. He came forward to shake Draco's hand in greeting.

"Good to see you, my boy, good to see you," Jon greeted exuberantly while he pumped Draco's hand.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Parkinson," Draco responded with a smile, "Thank you for inviting us to tea." More quietly, he said, "Dust your vest off."

Jon looked down and noticed the bit of ash clinging to his vest. He brushed the ash away and winked conspiratorily at Draco. Jon then turned his attention to his wife and Hermione admiring Posie's roses growing in an ornate planter by one of the windows.

"I see you've brought the great Hermione Granger with you," Jon boomed to gain the ladies' attention.

Jon crossed the room and lifted Hermione's outstretched hand to kiss the air over it.

"Lovely to see you again, Mr. Parkinson," Hermione said, smiling at the man.

Posie led them over to the spindly, Victorian sofas facing each other in the middle of the room. The uncomfortable-looking sofas were upholstered in white and gold damask and looked like they would fall apart if anyone dared to place their posterior on one of them.

Draco tried to look casual as he perched on one of the sofas, ready to catch Hermione should he hear any threatening cracking noises. The sofa across from them seemed to bear the weight of the portly Parkinsons with ease, leading Draco to believe that the fragile-looking furniture was magically reinforced.

A house elf wearing a pastel pink, girl's party dress walked into the solarium pushing a tea cart. The elf placed a platter of macaroons, biscotti, and chocolate biscuits on the table between the two sofas.

## Chapter 39 A Trip to Oliver's

Morning of January 16<sup>th</sup>

Draco opened his morning paper to find an article from their not-so-secret stalker gracing the front page. He was going to have to make good on that promise of a house that he'd told Hermione he'd give whoever was publishing photos of them.

Draco looked over the top of the paper at Hermione sitting in her seat beside him and smirked. She barely looked awake. Her hair had a decidedly rumpled look. She still had a bit of dried drool trailing down the left corner of her mouth. Draco wasn't going to point out that it was there though. She'd hastily donned his Slytherin Quidditch jersey and a pair of blue and white striped pajama bottoms before coming down to breakfast.

Rose was already at school. Tansy thankfully got her ready and Draco took her while Hermione refused to get out of bed this morning. The desire to sleep was seemingly hit her more forcefully this morning. Draco figured it was the result of her pregnancy.

Draco couldn't help but chuckle to himself as he remembered trying to wake her and her mumbled protests to be left alone to sleep. Draco slid out of bed, detaching himself reluctantly from her grasp. Hermione stole his pillow as he moved away and seemed to think it was just as good to wrap herself around as his torso.

"Tulip," Posie addressed the elf, "Would you please be a dear and pour for us?"

"Of course, mistress," Tulip said in a high, chirpy voice.

The four of them talked of inconsequential things as Tulip prepared and handed them their tea. The weather. A dragon sighting off the coast of Wales. The Puddlemere Keeper than ran off with a tavern barmaid.

Tulip handed Hermione a cup whose contents were very different than everyone else's and very similar to the tea Hermione now drank at home. When Hermione looked questioningly at the elf, Tulip explained brightly, "Tansy tell me this afternoon that mistress needs special tea so as not to hurt the babies. Tulip made mistress' favorite tea for her."

"Oh," Hermione said, turning a bit pink, "Thank you very much, Tulip."

Tulip bobbed a curtsey, oblivious to the uncomfortable air that hung over the room, and left them to their tea.

Draco looked over at the Parkinsons expecting to see censure in their expressions. Posie looked pleased, not necessarily pleased that Hermione was pregnant, but more like pleased that she had gossip that the other witches in her social group didn't have and she couldn't wait to tell them. Jon, on the other hand, looked relieved, which Draco thought to be odd.

"Well, my boy, that explains why you're pushing this divorce bill through. Can't have the Malfoy progeny born on the wrong side of the blanket," Jon guffawed, good-naturedly.

Posie smacked her husband's arm with the back of her hand. "Jonathan," she said in mock exasperation.

Draco then realized in an instant why Jon looked so relieved to find out about Hermione's pregnancy. While Jonathan Parkinson might want a divorce for his daughter, he didn't necessarily want the entire Wizarding community to know that it was because Pansy's husband was gay. Jonathan Parkinson didn't want any negative attention that revelation might cause tainting his daughter.

Draco took Hermione's free hand. The blush was fading from

her cheeks. He squeezed her hand, hoping she'd understand and play along.

"Yes," Draco said, "We're quite eager to see this divorce bill get passed through as quickly as possible."

Posie leaned forward eagerly, "Did I hear Tulip correctly when she said babies, as in more than one?"

Hermione placed a hand on her abdomen. "Draco and I are expecting twins," Hermione said happily as if she were imparting this information to a cherished aunt.

"Such a blessing," Jon beamed.

"And when are you due?" Posie asked.

"The Healers say around early September," Hermione said, fudging the timing a little. Hermione then leaned forward and said conspiratorially, "They'll be born right around the same time as our friends' baby. Harry and Ginny are expecting their third around June."

Posie Parkinson practically glowed at this juicy bit of gossip. She had gossiped on the newest Potter addition before even the Prophet had started to speculate.

"Of course, we're keeping this news to our close friends and family for the time being, since carrying twins is considered a complicated pregnancy," Hermione said, not adding the implied and you thus giving the impression that the Parkinsons were of course included in their close circle of friends.

"That's quite wise," Posie said sympathetically as if she thought Hermione was fragile. Though maybe the look was from a sense of shared loss.

Hermione steered the conversation with Posie to all things baby-related. Draco's mind boggled listening to the two women chatter about morning sickness, food cravings, or how Pansy

Percy didn't bother to go to another room to apparate. A loud pop resounded throughout the room at his leaving.

"I won't be there on Friday," Molly said quietly to Draco and Hermione. "I'm not going to vote for or against this. You'll have to win without the Weasleys."

Hermione stood, "I'm sorry it came to this, Molly. I hope you believe me when I say that I never expected things to turn out the way they did."

Molly stood, nodded once at Hermione, then walked from the room. Rose came running into the kitchen just as Molly left.

Draco helped Hermione throw her leg over the bench and climb out. Hermione took Rose's hand, and they walked through the doorway to the living room.

Arthur stood near the fireplace, looking uncomfortable, "Thanks for coming," he said awkwardly. "I know she doesn't mean what she says. She's just having a hard time accepting the truth about Ron."

"We'll come back when she's feeling better," Hermione said meaningfully.

Arthur nodded in understanding. He bent and kissed Rose on each cheek, saying goodbye. Arthur kissed Hermione's cheek as well. He shook Draco's hand.

They left the Burrow, not really accomplishing anything. The rest of the evening was spent in front of the television, watching cartoons, and trying to regain some of the peace that had fled during their visit to the Weasleys.

stiffened and refused to tell anyone goodbye as if he could keep playing if he never took his leave of the adults. Daniel tugged on Charlie's pant legs and demanded to be picked up. Charlie picked Daniel up and balanced him on his hip just as Draco had done with Rose earlier.

Lavender said a weak goodbye to the room. Arthur got up from his seat, shooting a hard glance at his wife, who remained stubbornly seated. He swung Young Arthur into his arms with an exaggerated "oof" that had the boy giggling. They all left the room, the door swinging quietly shut behind them.

Bill and Fleur got up. Bill said, "We'll be leaving too." Quiet goodbyes were made, and Molly hardly protested their leaving. The couple went out the back door, and after a shriek from a disgruntled child, they too were gone.

"Well, this was a nightmare," Ginny said. A hand rested on her faintly rounded belly. "Go get Albus, Harry, and we'll take off too." Harry walked off to collect his offspring, and Ginny turned to face her mother, "I know this isn't easy for you, mum," Ginny started, "but you can't blame others for Ron's actions. I thought you were accepting that." Ginny hesitated and said haltingly, "He wasn't a good man, mum. Hermione and Lavender want us to be a part of their children's lives, and instead of being thankful, you're throwing accusations at them."

Molly looked down at her hands. Chastised by two of her children in one day. Draco could see the red that mottled the older woman's complexion.

Ginny kissed her mother on the cheek, said goodbye to Hermione, Draco, and Percy, then followed her husband into the living room to Floo home.

Percy stood and glared at Hermione and Draco. He placed a consoling hand on his mother's shoulder. Molly reached up and patted his hand.

"I'm not voting with you on Friday," Percy said. Draco didn't bother to respond to the hostile tone or look Percy gave him. He didn't care about Percy's vote. They didn't need it, and they knew better than to expect it.

apparently had the hiccups all the time in utero.

Jon interrupted the two ladies, "I think I'll take Draco for a turn around the kennels."

Draco followed Jon out of the Parkinson's solarium and across the snow-covered lawn to the large converted stable tucked back in the corner of the lawn. A fenced-off area surrounded the kennel, though all the doors leading outside were closed because of the cold.

Jon opened the door of the kennel and heard Draco stepped inside out of the cold. The sound of yapping crups greeted them. The horse stalls were now converted into spacious areas for litters of crup puppies. The puppies crowded around the doors to their stalls, yapping madly for attention.

The puppies eventually grew bored with the two wizards and went back to their own games, some with their small forked tails wagging.

"So you'll marry the girl as soon as this divorce bill passes?"

Jon asked with a paternal air.

"Yes, sir," Draco answered, "As soon as we can get the wedding planned."

"And how many votes can you count on?" Jon asked.

"Ten," Draco answered.

Jon looked astonished by the news. "Ten, you say. How'd you get so many?"

"Hermione's friends and my friends make up a majority of the council, even if they don't always go to meetings. I've convinced them to take a more active part in our government over the recent months," Draco answered, trying not to sound smug as he delivered the news.

Jon looked impressed. "That's still not a two-thirds majority if everyone shows up," Jon said.

"That is true," Draco allowed, "Hermione and I were hoping to gain your support." Draco wandered away from Jon further into the kennel. "Hermione's had a very difficult time," Draco said, barely loud enough to be heard over the sound of the crups.

"Yes, I imagine it isn't easy finding out your spouse cheated on you," Jon said.

"I'm afraid it was more than just cheating," Draco said, not elaborating further, "Then with the attack and his trial, I'm afraid it's been very stressful for Hermione."

"Not very good for a pregnant woman to be subjected to such environments," Jon added supportively.

"And there are her daughters to think about as well," Draco added solemnly, picking up a small, white puppy with brown patches on its ears and feet. The pup's forked tail wagged happily as Draco pet the dog.

"They'll need a strong father figure now," Jon said pompously, "certainly one that can provide better for them than a Weasley." Draco set the puppy back down; it still with its littermates. He had to hide the grin on his face from Jon. The discussion was going better than he hoped.

"Scorpius, of course, adores Hermione," Draco added with a small smile.

"So sad for a boy to be without a mother for so long," Jon said, "Of course, I'm sure your mother did the best she could."

"My mother was a godsend," Draco said, "We would've been completely lost without her. Of course, it's not the same though." Draco sighed.

Jon nodded sympathetically. "A man is in need of a wife's softening influence to make life more bearable."

"I'm so glad you understand," Draco said, looking at Jonathan Parkinson as if he'd found a kindred spirit.

Jon clapped his hand on Draco's back warmly. "Of course I understand. I'm a family man, much like yourself." Jon led the way out of the kennels. "Let it never be said that Jonathan Parkinson refused to help a woman and her children in need," Jon intoned, waving a plump finger in the air.

Draco sagged in pretend relief and turned away as if overcome by emotion. They all had their parts to play after all.

"You've no idea the weight you've lifted off my shoulders," Draco said with emotion.

offer their support.

Molly wiped her face with her apron. "I'm sorry," she said tearily, looking around the room. Her gaze focused on Hermione and Draco, then shifted to Lavender before quickly moving on. "I'm sorry. I know it's not any of your faults. This is just very hard for me to accept."

Draco just nodded. Anything he had to say probably wouldn't help the situation.

Charlie didn't seem to be as accepting of his mother's apology, "Mum, I know you're grieving, but you've got to stop acting like Lavender's to blame for any of this."

Molly bristled at her son's chastisement. "Ron cheated on Hermione for years with her," she said heatedly. "Now she's got her hooks in you."

Charlie stood up angrily. Lavender clutched at his arm. "It's alright, Charlie. Leave it alone," Lavender said desperately.

"It's not alright," Charlie said to Lavender, "Go get the sprogs, we're leaving." When Lavender left the kitchen with George following behind her, Charlie rounded angrily on his mother, "You might not like how those four kids came to be, you might blame Lavender for Ron cheating, but she's as much a victim of Ron's bullshit as Hermione was. She had children to take care of and no one she felt she could turn to. She did the best she could with a bad situation, and I won't have you making her feel worse about it."

Charlie stopped when he heard the sounds of children at the kitchen door. He turned back to his mother and said quietly but harshly, "She's family and those kids are family. You need to accept that. And you need to apologize to Lavender."

The three children burst into the room, Young Arthur and Daniel whining because they had to stop playing. Lydia followed them looking glum. Lavender came back to the kitchen, trepidation clear on her face.

"It's time to go, kiddos," Charlie addressed the three children, "Say goodbye."

Lydia murmured a half-hearted goodbye. Young Arthur

that it was great because everyone laughed.

With clean bowls and sated bellies, the children asked to be excused and demanded to be returned to whatever bubble game they'd been playing. With the children gone as buffers between the adults, that left Draco feeling uncomfortable again. Logically he knew that most of the Weasley clan present didn't bear him any ill will.

Draco's last interaction with Molly Weasley hadn't ended on a positive note. He wasn't sure if the matriarch was closer to coming to terms with her youngest son's imprisonment or if she still felt that Ronald Weasley's actions were in some way Hermione and Draco's fault.

Molly Weasley, never one to beat around the bush, looked steadily at Hermione and Draco. She pursed her mouth as her gaze roamed across the table and landed on Lavender. Apparently, her son's former mistress wasn't in the matriarch's favor yet despite being welcomed into the Burrow.

"I received a copy of your divorce bill by owl today," Molly said, "I take it that's the reason you've come for a visit."

Draco bristled at the accusation. They'd come to do this woman a favor. To help her feel better.

"Mum, that's not fair," Ginny spoke up, looking crossly at her mother.

"Those three," Molly said, wagging a finger between Draco, Hermione, and Lavender, "ruined my son's life."

Harry, who'd come in halfway through dinner, stood, looking thunderous, and pounded a fist on the table. "Ron ruined his own fucking life," Harry shouted. "You were pissed off when you found out he'd been cheating on Hermione. I don't understand why you're acting this way, but it stops now, or my children aren't coming over anymore."

Molly looked utterly defeated. She visibly deflated under Harry's tirade after the initial shock wore off at having Harry yelling at her so forcefully. She buried her face in her hands and wept softly. Arthur wrapped an arm around her at a loss. They all sat uncomfortably at the table, unsure whether to leave or

"I'm happy to help, my boy," Jon said, gripping Draco's shoulder tightly.

They returned to the solarium. Hermione and Draco took their leave of the Parkinsons. Hermione promised to return with Draco's mother for tea at a later date.

Draco flopped down on the sofa at Spinner's End, pleased with the way things had gone at the Parkinsons. Everyone had gotten something by the meeting. Posie Parkinson had juicy gossip that would no doubt be making the rounds of high society by the end of the week. Draco really needed to warn Harry and Ginny. Jonathan Parkinson got to look like he was helping Draco and Hermione get their happy ending, without having to reveal his true intentions. Draco and Hermione got the vote they wanted.

Draco kissed Hermione's temple as she sagged down beside him, giggling slightly. "You would've made an admirable Slytherin," he praised her.

"Not as good as the lion you're turning out to be," Hermione said, kissing him before he even had a chance to pretend that it was an insult.

his left shin, and Draco yelled loudly. Louder laughter ensued around the table.

Charlie rounded angrily on his family members, "Thanks for the bloody help."

Bill wiped tears from his eyes and laughingly said, "It's just too funny to watch."

"You could be giving me some pointers instead of laughing while I fail," Charlie grouched, "At least Draco is nice enough to show me a few things."

"And see the thanks I get," Draco sniped, rubbing his abused shin.

Draco could tell that dinner would be ready soon. Molly started transferring the contents of the large soup pot into a white porcelain soup tureen. George wandered outside to begin releasing the reluctant children from their bubbles. Whining and shouts of protest could be heard from the little product testers. Hermione came and sat beside him on the bench. "How's it going?" she asked him curiously.

"Charlie kicked me," Draco whined petulantly.

"Hey, he kicked me twice," Charlie defended.

"You're as bad as the children," Hermione said, but she leaned over and kissed Draco's cheek.

"Hey, who's going to kiss my owies all better?" Charlie protested jokingly.

Children filed in with clean hands and a slightly depressed air. Rose came over and insisted she sit between Hermione and Draco. Lavender sat across from them with her three children in between her and Charlie.

Dinner with the Weasleys was always a lively affair. Food was grabbed as quickly as possible. Everyone was loud and boisterous. Several different conversations whirled around one another with people interrupting one conversation or shouting to be heard over another.

Young Arthur overturned his bowl of soup onto Charlie's lap, much to the amusement of everyone there. It was a terrible example to set for the four-year-old, who undoubtedly thought

seals lined each side under Draco and Hermione's with blank lines for their witnesses.

The group left their seats to gather on either side of Draco and Hermione. Harry stood close beside Hermione with Ginny, Neville, Hannah, and Luna beside him. Narcissa stood between Draco and Hermione. Greg, Helena, Blaise, Tracey, and Daphne lined up on the other side of Draco.

Theo tapped his wand over a blank seal between the places for Draco and Hermione's labeled "Officiator." Navy blue filled the blank seal. Atop the blue ink was a black circular shield with a Celtic warrior knot in silver. A circle topped the knot and inside was a pair of crossed wands and the phrase "Invictus Maneo" scrolled around the outside of the circle along with Theo's full name. (I remain unconquered)

Theo looked at Draco and said officiously, "Do you, Draco Lucius Malfoy, willingly cede all rights and responsibilities of the Lestrane seat to Hermione Jean Granger?"

"I do," Draco said to Theo and then smiled down at Hermione.

"Do you bestow these rights to Hermione and her heirs in perpetuity?"

"I do," Draco said again.

"As the House of Lestrane is no more, do you allow Hermione to change the seat to reflect the new house now occupying it?"

"I do," Draco said, and his personal seal appeared on the white waxy surface, a silvery-blue dragon standing guard in front of a golden tree with golden apples hanging from the branches. The tail of the dragon circled the trunk of the tree, its large barbed tail acting as a deterrent to those that would steal the apples. Around the outside circle of the seal were the words "Quaerite et redemptio" along with Draco's name. (I seek redemption)

Theo smiled and turned to Hermione. "Do you, Hermione Jean Granger, accept the seat of the former House of Lestrane?"

"I do," Hermione said with confidence.

"Do you vow to rule on the Wizengamot with wisdom and fairness?"

"I do."

"Do you vow on your magic to put the concerns and the welfare of Wizarding Britain before your personal gain or beliefs when acting as a Wizengamot council member?"

"I do," Hermione intoned a final time.

Hermione's newly created personal seal appeared underneath her wand, and they all watched with rapt attention. Muddy water appeared at the bottom of the seal. A fully-bloomed, red lotus flower floated on the muddy waters with a blue sky filling in the rest of the circle. The ring around the seal filled in with her name and the words "Ego perpetuo resido." (I am unbroken) Ooh's and aah's filled the room as they all took in Hermione's personal seal. Quite a few looked like they wanted to start asking questions but were staved off by Theo's hands indicating they should wait.

"Hermione Jean Granger, you are now a member of the Wizengamot council. May you rule with justice and wisdom in your heart," Theo intoned. He looked over at Hermione and asked one final thing, "Would you like to change the naming of the seat now and create your family Coat of Arms?"

"Yes," Hermione answered, "I'd like to rename the seat. It's time to allow the House of Lestrane to fade into history."

Another round of "hear hear's" greeted Hermione's statement. Draco was pleased with this decision. They hadn't discussed it other than for Draco to let Hermione know that she could change the name. He didn't want to influence her decision one way or another.

"Place your wand over the blank Coat of Arms," Theo instructed.

Draco watched in wonder as the blank Coat of Arms started to change. A wyvern and an owl cradled a shield between outstretched wings. The shield was a quartered field of azure with a gold letter "G" in Old English dominating the center.

Four heraldic symbols took up a quartered section of the shield. An open book occupied the top left quarter of the shield. A shooting comet took up the top right quadrant. A lion rampant stood on the bottom left. On the bottom right was a set of balanced scales. The wyvern and owl each clutched the end of a banner with a motto written across its length that read: *Nihil pretiosum adeptus est facile*. (Nothing precious is easily obtained)

"Very true," Theo said, looking at the banner across the bottom of the Coat of Arms. "We need three witnesses for each side now to make this deed official," Theo continued.

Harry slid the parchment over so that it was in front of him. "I would like the honors of going first," he said with a smile and placed his wand over a blank seal below Hermione's name. Harry's name appeared along with his seal, a phoenix rising from the ashes. The motto that appeared around the seal read: *Ego renascitur*. (I am reborn) Harry kissed Hermione's temple, and he and Ginny moved aside to stand beside Theo on the other side of the table.

Neville silently took Harry's place as a witness and placed his wand over a blank seal with little ceremony. A rearing golden lion appeared in the middle of a green field. The motto read: *Ego sum dignus*. (I am worthy) Neville gave Hermione a quick hug and moved to stand beside Harry.

Hannah quietly took Neville's place and placed her wand over the last blank seal. A white, orange, and black koi fish appeared in blue waters. Around the seal read the words: *Difficultates et incommoda*. (I surmount all difficulties)

Daphne gestured for the scroll to be passed to her. "I'll represent our family since Theo is unable to act as a witness." A dolphin swimming in a blue-green sea appeared on the seal below Draco's name. Her motto read: *Ego aere sunt ititrepidus*. (I am undaunted)

Blaise took the scroll from Daphne and silently placed his wand over the seal next to hers. A fox romping in a meadow appeared in the empty seal with the motto around the outside: *Sonodegno diamore*. (I am worthy of love.) He smiled at Draco

Wizengamot members not to cuckold their husbands. Or at least make sure children don't result from illicit liaisons. Not that he could blame some of the pureblood wives for seeking pleasure elsewhere. Draco was relieved that arranged marriages were a thing of the past.

"Yes, I remember the story too," Draco said, calling attention back to himself and not the buzzing conversation swirling around them. "Hermione's safety is my utmost concern. I wouldn't be suggesting this if I thought she would be harmed in any way." The reassurances seemed to mollify the group and Draco continued, "Magically speaking, the council seat will accept just about anyone in that seat now. Legally, as inherited the Lestranges' fortunes and properties and the Wizengamot did not strip me of my rights after the war, I can do anything I want with the seat. The seat is considered property, so it can be given over to another person or inherited."

"Alright," Theo interjected, "Does everyone understand what's going on?"

People stopped asking questions and nodded. Theo used his wand, and the coffee table rose to hip height. He stood on one side of the table facing Hermione and Draco.

"Draco, Hermione, if you'll stand here in front of the table," Theo directed, and they did as asked. "Draco, place the scroll on the table, and both of you place the tips of your wands on the wax seals beside your names."

Draco rolled out the parchment. He had to be the one to open it or the magic in the scroll would erase the deed to keep it from being found before Draco wanted it too. Across the top were the words "Deed of Conveyance" written in Old English script. The Lestranges' family Coat of Arms dominated the center of the parchment with the Malfoy Coat of Arms on the left and a blank space with the outline for a Coat of Arms on the right. Below the Coats of Arms was all the legal jargon for transferring Draco's rights of the Lestranges' seat to Hermione. Draco and Hermione's names were written in neat script down at the bottom of the deed along with two blank seals. Three

answered.

Theo drew the roll of parchment out of his pocket and handed it to Draco.

"If I could have your attention for a moment," Theo called to the room. "Draco has something important he needs to say."

Attention in the room shifted to Draco. Daphne snorted as she jerked awake. Theo sat on the armchair beside her and wrapped an arm around Daphne's shoulders. Daphne leaned her head on her husband's hip and yawned delicately into her hand.

"If you could all take a seat," Draco started gesturing at the seats circled around the round coffee table. Draco waited until everyone took a seat, then he started again. "A few months ago, I promised Hermione a seat on the Wizengamot so that she could cast a vote for her own bill. It should have been given to her years ago."

That statement was met with a few "hear, hear's" from everyone in the room. Rose and Albus joined in repeating "hear, hear" several times before being shushed by their mothers.

Draco brandished the scroll to the room. "This is a deed giving Hermione and her heirs the right to occupy the Lestrage seat in perpetuity and rename it."

"Will it work?" Daphne asked, her voice full of concern.

"No one's ever given a seat to a non-family member."

"The family magic worked into the seat has died since the last of the Lestrages died out. The seat itself merely waits for another occupant to claim it," Draco started to explain.

"Wait, wait," Greg interrupted, "Are you sure that's right? I remember the story of Barty Crouch, Senior's elder brother. Well, half-brother as it turns out. The seat damn near burned his arse off when he tried to take it over from his father. Well, the man he thought was his father. Caused quite the scandal to find out old Mrs. Crouch had a few cuckoos in the nest."

Draco remembered hearing the story. It had been passed around as a lesson not to try to take another's seat at the council table. It also served as a warning to the wives of the

and Hermione. "I hope this will begin to make up for my earlier idiocy."

Draco grunted as a response. It was unclear whether the grunt was affirmative. Draco wasn't exactly ready to forgive. Blaise seemed to let the matter lie.

Greg took the scroll from Blaise. He placed his wand over the last seal. A large, black bear with a mountain range behind him filled in the seal. His motto: *Intracertamen go in veni veni a vires*. (Within the struggle, I found my true strength)

Theo summoned the scroll from the end of the table. He rolled it up and secured it with a blue ribbon. Theo then placed the scroll in Hermione's hands.

"Congratulations, Hermione. You are now a member of the Wizengamot at long last," Theo congratulated.

Draco wrapped an arm around Hermione, and she beamed up at him as she wrapped her arm around his waist.

"Thank you for this," Hermione said quietly.

Draco kissed her softly. "You deserve it."

Hermione whistled loudly calling all attention to her, "I just want to tell you all thank you for being a part of this. It means so much to Draco and I that you are a part of our lives."

Hermione released her hold on Draco's waist and moved off in one direction to say goodbye to their friends. Draco moved off in another. He hugged Greg and kissed Helena on the cheek. Tracey was over talking to Hermione.

Draco wrapped an arm around Blaise's neck in a tight hold.

"The next time you call a child of mine 'a little shit,' mate, you won't need to fear Hermione, because they'll never find your body."

Blaise's dark skin took on a satisfying grayish cast. Draco dropped his hold on Blaise and faced him.

Blaise rubbed his neck and looked uncomfortable. "I'm really sorry about that, Draco. I know I overreacted, but she's my little girl. I don't want her growing up knowing that she has no choice in who she marries," Blaise said in a tone that pleaded for Draco to understand. Blaise gestured over to the

## Finding Hermione

sofa where Rose and Albus were sleeping. "How would you feel if someone told you that their son was destined to marry your daughter?"

Draco kept his gaze on Rose's angelic face. "I hear Azkaban isn't that bad anymore," Draco said lightly. "Aside from the company," he added derisively. He turned and faced Blaise seriously, "I understand wanting to protect your daughter, but I'm not going to tolerate my son being disrespected. He didn't ask for this either." As a parting remark, Draco said, "Just so you know, when we told Scorpius about the cuff, his first concern was your daughter and not taking away her choice. His first reaction was to put your daughter's happiness over his own."

Draco left Blaise standing in the middle of the room looking flabbergasted and slightly defensive.

Draco walked over to where Rose and Albus were sleeping soundly on the sofa. Harry stood in front of them gazing down at the two angelic-looking children.

"They always look the sweetest when they're asleep," Harry said in greeting when Draco drew up level with him.

"I think it's nature's way of reminding you not to strangle them when they're acting like a bunch of demons," Draco responded.

Harry huffed a quiet laugh.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Draco looked around the room to make sure they weren't going to be overheard. Hermione was talking with his mother and Helen now. Draco grabbed Harry's arm, and Harry looked over curiously at him.

"What was the look for at dinner?" Draco whispered.

Harry looked down at the children before he returned his gaze to Draco. "Nothing," he answered.

"Don't lie to me," Draco whispered harshly. "I saw you when Hermione's pregnancy with Rose was mentioned. What was wrong with Hermione's pregnancy?"

Draco's gut clenched at the thought of unknown complications. Hermione never mentioned anything, but Draco

## Chapter 42 Nothing Precious Is Ever Easy

Evening of January 16th

They returned to the parlor. Blaise gave Hermione a wide berth and Draco had a feeling he was practicing his shield charms just in case. The some of the group were gathered around a plate of cookies on the table.

Theo shot Draco a curious look when they entered the room again. Draco shook his head. Their conversation with Blaise and Tracey wasn't something that needed to be revealed right at this moment.

"Do you have it?" Draco asked Theo when he got close to him.

Theo patted his jacket pocket. "Is now the time?"

Draco looked around the room. Rose and Albus were getting whiney. Hermione was also looking a little tired after coming down from her adrenaline rush. Ginny seemed to be wilting around the edge too. Daphne's head was lolling on the back of her armchair, and she was snoring delicately.

"Yes, the kids are getting tired. We'll need to go soon," Draco

contrite. Now that she'd calmed down, Draco thought that she was probably feeling guilty for attacking Blaise. Draco didn't feel remotely sorry for Blaise. He deserved the welts that were no doubt peppering his chest right now.

"It's not a curse, Blaise," Tracey said impatiently, "When she's older, Florence can be with the one person she's meant to be with. Isn't that what you want for our daughter?"

"This is too soon," Blaise said, grumpily, "She's only eleven."

"It's not like she's getting married tomorrow, Blaise," Tracey said with a smile.

"We just want to be able to talk to you about this, be open, so that we can prepare the kids for when they're older," Draco said placatingly, "The children can make their own decision about what they want to do when they're older, when they're ready. If our suspicions are correct."

"No betrotals," Blaise said to Draco.

Hermione made to lunge for the wands Draco held in his hand.

"Don't hex me!" Blaise squealed in terror, throwing his hands up to cover himself.

Tracey smacked Blaise with a throw pillow as she said each word, "Then don't say stupid things!"

Hermione pointed a manicured finger at Blaise. "Let me make one thing perfectly clear, Blaise Zabini. I will not entertain any more nonsense about betrothing my son to your daughter. It's not going to happen."

"I think we should return to the group," Tracey said. "Thank you for taking us aside to tell us." She glared at Blaise before turning back to look at Hermione and Draco. "I'm sure Blaise will be much calmer when we discuss this in more depth later."

was sure she wouldn't want him to worry more than he already was.

"It was nothing, Draco," Harry said quietly. There was a firmness in his voice that Draco had never heard before. "There was nothing wrong with her pregnancy."

"You're not going to fob me off with that non-answer. What the hell was with that look?"

Harry shrugged off Draco's hand and resumed looking down at the children. "I'll never tell," he said quietly.

Achill settled over Draco at those quietly whispered words. That day at the Ministry came flooding back to him. Harry's bruised knuckles. Weasley's battered face. A hatred that Draco had never seen in Harry before. Draco hadn't wanted to think about what Harry knew. He'd been actively trying to put it from his mind.

Now this. Those words. Draco's mind started racing. Hermione's pregnancy with Rose. She hadn't wanted more children after Minerva. Hermione's obliviation after Minerva's fall off the broom. A thought so horrible, Draco's mind refused to even think the words.

"No," he choked out. "No, no, no."

"Control your face," Harry said harshly, looking over his shoulder. "She can't know. She doesn't need to know."

"How can you expect me to," Draco started.

Harry interrupted. "Look at her," he said as he gestured at the sleeping Rose. Harry turned and nodded his head over in Hermione's direction, "And her."

Hermione was smiling and laughing. She was surrounded by their friends.

Harry continued, "They're happy. They're better off now." Harry bent down over the sofa. Draco watched as Harry brushed a red curl off Rose's face and kissed her cheek. He scooped up Albus. He straightened and patted his son's back soothingly.

"How am I supposed to know this and not say anything to her?" Draco protested vehemently. "I love her. I don't know if

I can keep this from her."

"Do you think that I don't love her? She's been my best friend since we were children, like a sister to me. You'll do it for the same reason I do," Harry said quietly. "The one thing he did right was leave her with no memory of what he did to her. The best thing we can do is not tell her about what she doesn't remember."

Draco nodded and sat heavily on the sofa beside Rose. She murmured a sleepy protest. Needing some comfort, Draco picked Rose up and held her limp form in his lap. She curled into his side and held onto his shirt. They'd sat like this so many times. His sweet Rose.

"Does knowing what you know change how you feel about Rose?" Harry asked, looking down at the two of them.

"No," Draco answered truthfully. "He deserves to die, Harry."

Harry looked coldly at him. "Death would be too quick for him."

Ginny called over to Harry. Harry looked at his wife then turned back to Draco. "Have a good night, Draco. Try not to think about it too much."

Harry left Draco sitting on the sofa cuddling Rose. Draco watched as Harry walked over to Hermione and Ginny. Harry hugged Hermione and wrapped an arm around Ginny's shoulders.

Draco should have asked Harry how he did it. How he acted so normal around Hermione without giving anything away.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Hermione walked over and sat down beside him. Draco wrapped his free arm around her shoulders. She smiled up at him, her gaze so full of love. Draco didn't think he could turn that gaze into one of pain and horror. He couldn't tell her. He wouldn't tell her if he didn't have to.

"I love you," Draco said simply. Those three little words weren't enough to convey how he felt about her. That he would do anything for her, even suffer with this knowledge alone to

mouth. "After they are seventeen," Hermione added.

"I'm taking her out of Hogwarts. She's going to Beaumonts next year," Blaise said sullenly. "There's no way that little shit is getting anywhere near my baby girl!"

Tracey gasped at Blaise's statement. Draco stood, about to beat some sense into his friend. Hermione reacted faster than him. She shot a stinging jinx at Blaise from her place on the sofa. She snatched Draco's wand out of his hand and held both while she shot another stinging jinx at Blaise. Streams of red sparks shot out of both wands and hit Blaise in the chest. Blaise fell off the sofa and writhed on the floor at Tracey's feet.

Hermione stopped her assault and moved the coffee table out of the way so that she could look down at Blaise. Her hair billowed out around her. Draco could hear her magic crackling from the ends of her hair.

"How dare you talk about my son that way," Hermione said with quiet menace. She shot him with another stinging hex.

"Stop, stop," Blaise panted, clutching at his chest and wincing when his hands made contact with the welts beneath his shirt. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry."

Draco stood behind Hermione and placed his hands on her arms. "Lioness, give me the wands," he said quietly, "We don't want to hurt Blaise anymore."

Hermione dropped her arms and allowed Draco to guide her back over to the sofa. He took both wands from her unresisting grip. Hermione panted, and her hair crackled as she came down from her anger.

"Shit, she's scary when she's angry," Blaise exclaimed, wincing as he sat up.

Tracey looked dispassionately at her husband and cast a cooling charm on him. "You were out of line, Blaise," she said firmly.

"I know," Blaise said glumly, "I'm just not thrilled that this curse is going to take my baby's choice away from her."

Draco wanted to interrupt, but Hermione placed a finger over his mouth. Hermione was breathing deeply and looking

"Actually, that's what we wanted to talk to you about," Draco started trying to sound calm.

"I'm not betrothing my daughter to your son, Draco," Blaise interrupted.

"No, that's not what I wanted to talk to you about," Draco said. He gestured to Hermione's bracelet. "It's about the Malfoy cuff. There are signs when a Malfoy has met his soulmate, long before the cuff appears."

"What do you mean?" Tracey asked with curiosity. Blaise kept his gaze on Draco and looked suspiciously at him.

Hermione started to explain, "Before puberty, it's straightforward, just a sense of comfort and friendship when they're around one another."

"And after puberty?" Blaise interrupted harshly.

"A more romantic interest can develop," Hermione said slowly.

Blaise stood up and started pacing the room. Draco could hear him muttering Italian to himself.

"And you are telling us this specifically because..." Tracey said, ignoring Blaise's tirade behind her.

Draco took a deep breath. His gaze flicked between Blaise and Tracey. "I believe that Florence is Scorpius' soulmate."

"Nope. No way. Not happening," Blaise exploded. He stormed over to Draco and got up in his face and started poking Draco in the chest. "I'm not taking my daughter's choice away. She's going to marry for love... when she's thirty-five, and I'm dead."

"Blaise," Tracey chided, "come sit down, please. Stop threatening Draco."

Blaise backed off of Draco and went to flop down on the sofa beside Tracey with a sullen expression.

"When does the cuff appear?" Tracey asked, looking at Hermione.

"Within twenty-four hours after their first kiss," Hermione said. Blaise looked like he was going to interrupt again, but Hermione pointed her wand at him, and Blaise closed his

protect her.

Hermione leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on his lips. "I love you, too."

Theo cleared his throat, and they turned their attention to Daphne and Theo sitting in the chair beside them. Theo had drawn Daphne down to sit on his lap. Draco saw Theo's thumb graze over the skin of Daphne's waist under Daphne's shirt.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" Theo asked.

"I think as ready as we'll ever be," Hermione said. Hermione took a shaky breath. She placed a hand on his thigh. "We wanted to tell you something. Without the others around."

Daphne cast them a concerned look. "Is everything okay?"

"It's about Scorpius," Hermione said. "When we took Minerva back to school, Scorpius pulled me aside and asked me to be his mother. And I said that I would."

Daphne looked shocked. "Are you going to adopt him like Draco adopted Minerva? Erase his mother from his blood?" she asked tearfully.

Theo rubbed Daphne's back soothingly.

Hermione leaned forward and looked directly at Daphne. She spoke kindly but firmly to Daphne. "I'm not going to adopt him like Draco adopted Minerva. There is no need and I'm not going to disrespect Astoria's memory by doing that."

Hermione sat back and took Draco's hand in her own. Daphne nodded at Hermione.

"This isn't about Astoria," Draco said sympathetically to Daphne. "Scorpius wants a mother. He needs more than just the stories we can tell him about his mother."

Daphne sniffed. "I don't want my sister to be forgotten."

"She won't be, Daphne," Draco said, "but I'm not going to deny Scorpius this. It's what's best for him, and I think Astoria would agree."

"Thank you for telling us without the others around," Theo said quietly.

Daphne nodded and slid off her husband's lap. She came over to their sofa and sat beside Hermione. "I'm sure Astoria

would approve of you taking care of Scorpius since she couldn't be here to do it herself," Daphne said to Hermione.

Hermione hugged Daphne. Draco heard Hermione murmur to Daphne, "Thank you for understanding."

Draco stood and settled Rose higher up in his arms. Rose buried her face into his neck and used the hair at the nape of his neck to hold on to. Draco heard her whisper a sleepy "soft" against his neck.

Draco gave Daphne a awkward one-armed hug and clapped Theo on the back. Draco, holding Rose, and Hermione took the Floo back to Spinner's End. They all went straight to bed upon arriving home. Tomorrow had the possibility of being a long day, and they needed their rest to be fully prepared.

irritated.

"Studies have shown that children whose parents are affectionate in front of them go on to develop healthy relationships in adulthood," Luna spoke up from down the table.

"See," Draco said smugly, "We're furthering Rose's development. Luna says so."

Draco never thought he'd use the words "Luna says so" to make a point in an argument. Theo apparently thought it was hilarious and dissolved into guffaws of laughter.

Daphne crossed her knife and fork over her dinner plate. A quiet pop sounded from outside the dining room. Mr. Carson appeared with three house elves following behind him, one in a tuxedo similar to Mr. Carson's and two in starched black dresses with white aprons.

They filed out of the dining room. Draco grabbed Blaise's arm and gestured to a door across from the parlor everyone was filing into. Draco opened the door, and the lights flared on to illuminate Theo's study.

Draco always teased Theo about the sparsity of books in his study. Instead of floor to ceiling shelves of books like in Draco's study at Spinner's End, Theo's had waist-high shelves, drawers, and glass covered cubbies where scrolls could be seen resting inside. Prints of magical creatures lined the walls.

Blaise and Tracey sat down on one of Theo's black leather sofas. Hermione sat down opposite them. Hermione took his hand in reassurance.

Draco wasn't looking forward to this conversation with Blaise. Blaise was overprotective of his only daughter, and Draco worried that the news that Florence was possibly Scorpius' soulmate would not be received well. Draco could pretty much guarantee that it wouldn't be accepted calmly.

"I have a bone to pick with you, mate," Blaise said, all affability gone from his face. Blaise snapped the word "mate" as he looked at Draco. He started pointing angrily at Draco. "Why is it your song gave my daughter a bracelet for Christmas?"

## Finding Hermione

could calmly impart their news.

"Hah! Theo exclaimed and pointed at Harry, "I told you he would say it first. That's ten galleons you owe me."

Harry good-naturedly passed down a bag of coins to Theo. "I thought for sure she'd be bursting to tell everyone."

Ginny smacked Harry on the arm. "I told you not to make that bet," Ginny scolded.

"But she practically pounced on us with the news when she was pregnant with Minerva," Harry defended himself.

"She was three months along then. That's a normal time to tell people you're expecting. Plus, she was over four months along when she told us about Rose," Ginny said reasonably.

Hermione was accepting congratulations from Blaise and Tracey and didn't notice the look that clouded Harry's face when Hermione's pregnancy with Rose was mentioned. Draco watched as Harry looked down the table at Rose. A smile returned to Harry's face after a moment and Harry met his gaze.

"Five children," Harry said, "Are you going to be able to handle all that work?"

"Well, I was hoping to start my own Quidditch team, but I think Hermione isn't on board with that plan," Draco quipped. Hermione patted his hand and said sweetly, "Darling, if you want any more to round out your Quidditch team, you can carry them. My womb is closed for business after this."

Draco grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips. Draco was pleased with the breathless, glazed look that came over Hermione as he stared into her eyes while he kissed her hand. "Whatever you want, love," Draco said quietly to her.

Something smacked Draco on the side of the head and clattered onto his plate. Draco broke his eye contact with Hermione to throw an irritated look at Theo and the bread roll lying on his plate.

"What was that for?" Draco asked indignantly, feeling to see if there was butter in his hair.

"There are children present," Theo said with a grin.

"I'm well aware that my daughter is present," Draco said

## Chapter 43 The Mugglemanor

January 17th

Draco had been up half the night. Dwelling on what he knew while he held Hermione in his arms. As the clock struck midnight, Draco started the process of pushing the disturbing revelations of the night before into a box. He packed the box away in the recesses of his mind. It was how he'd survived the war. The process took much more time than it used to. He was out of practice after all these years.

Draco awoke not quite as refreshed as he hoped he would be. He brimmed with excitement as he greeted the day. The day had finally arrived. Four and a half months since that day on the platform. Such a short amount of time, yet so much had happened within the span of those four months.

Draco already looked forward to the end of the day when they could walk from the council chamber, and Hermione would have the ability to set herself free from Ronald Weasley.

While Draco was full of self-assurance that the day would go as planned, Hermione was a mass of nerves. She'd spent the early morning with her head hanging over the toilet, trying to wring up the non-existent contents of her stomach. Whether

her dry-heaving was the result of nerves or the early arrival of morning sickness, Draco wasn't exactly sure. He tried to be a supportive partner and hold her hair but was resoundingly shouted at for being in the bathroom while she was trying to 'turn her stomach inside out.'

Hermione came down to breakfast looking decidedly green. When he rose to fix her a plate of food, she glared at him. Draco took that as a hint that she wouldn't thank him for waiting on her hand and foot at the moment.

An under-filled plate of food was set down in front of her seat with a snap. Draco rose and pulled out her chair for her. She sullenly allowed him that small courtesy.

Draco kissed the top of her head after he pushed her chair in and murmured, "Everything will go fine today, love. You'll see." Draco sat down and saw Hermione gnawing on her lip rather than eating the meager amount of eggs that she'd placed on her plate.

"Everyone is going to vote against me," Hermione fretted. "I just know it. This is going to be a catastrophe, and I'm going to be the laughing stock of Wizarding Britain. We're going to have to move to France. No, that won't be far enough. We'll have to move to America. That's a big place. They won't know who we are there."

Well, at least she was planning on taking him with her on her panicked and disgraced flight from the country. Draco was secretly amused that she thought they would lose today. He knew it was just nerves. He remembered being unable to eat before his first council meeting.

"We're not going to have to emigrate to America, Ionesse," Draco said reassuringly.

"How do you know?" Hermione retorted.

Draco started rattling off the names of the people they knew were going to vote with them. "Harry, Greg, Theo, Daphne, Tracey, Blaise, Neville, Hannah, Mr. Parkinson, you, and me," Draco said, pointing at Hermione and then himself for the last two. "That is more than enough to win, and none of those

"Will there be anything else, Madame?" Mr. Carson asked Daphne.

"Thank you, Mr. Carson," Daphne said regally, "That will be all for now. This looks sumptuous. Please give my compliments to Biscuit."

The house elf bowed stiffly and exited the dining room. Theo raised his glass in a toast, and everyone copied his gesture, even Rose and Albus with their raised glasses of milk.

"To good friends and good health," Theo said. "Cheers!"

"Cheers!" they all said, and the sounds of children's voices could be heard over the rest of the group.

Glasses were clinked against one another with sounds of crystal chiming in the air. Rose and Albus clinked their glasses together with a bit too much enthusiasm. Milk sloshed amid childish laughter. Narcissa's wand was pulled out, and the mess cleaned up before the house elves could sense a disturbance in the force and pop in to investigate.

The children were chided back into an air of civility by Narcissa and Helena, and stern looks sent down the table by Hermione and Ginny. Dinner passed quietly with inconsequential small talk filtering between groups amid bites of food.

"Hermione," Blaise started with a curious tone and a mischievous grin.

"Yes, Blaise," Hermione answered, taking a sip of her cider and setting the flute back down on the table.

The others around the table stopped eating and talking to look at Hermione. Rose and Albus continued their conversation of which was better: a dragon or a unicorn.

"I notice that you're not drinking the elf wine. Is there some happy news you'd like to impart to us?" Blaise finished with a smirk into his wine glass.

A few giggles and smirks passed around the table. It wasn't like there was a need for an announcement. It was evident that Hermione's pregnancy was a well-known secret among their group.

"Hermione's pregnant," Draco blurted out before Hermione

she wears.”

The group adjourned to dinner doing their best to do an on-giggling imitation of lords and ladies. The large dining table was decked out in the Nott's best linens and silverware. Draco was sure the Nott china was under the domed silver cloches on the table. The walls of the dining room were papered with a red and gold filigreed wallpaper. Draco wondered if it was Daphne's doing to put such Gryffindorish colors on the walls. He couldn't remember what the dining room had looked like while the manor was under the control of Thoros Nott.

Draco and Hermione found themselves seated to the left of Theo at the head of the table. Traditionally, it was an honored distinction to be seated to the left of the host. Considering how “upset” Daphne supposedly was at them, Draco would have been more surprised to be at the end of the table near the children. Rose and Albus took up the foot of the table, seated on a cushioned chair that had been elevated so that they could eat comfortably.

Elves guided the rest of the guests to their seats. Harry and Ginny were placed next to Daphne with Neville and Hannah on the other side of Ginny. Blaise and Tracey sat next to Hermione with Greg and Helena at the end of the table. Luna and Narcissa took up the other end with Narcissa seated closest to the children.

Mr. Carson snapped his fingers and wine glasses were filled with elf wine or sparkling cider for the three pregnant ladies. Glasses of milk were filled for the two children. Another snap of the butler elf's fingers and the cloches were lifted off the plates and stacked neatly onto the sideboard.

Beneath the cloches were slivers of thinly cut pork roast with its juices used as a gravy, roasted fingerling potatoes, and fresh green beans sautéed in garlic and lemon butter. The savory smells of the roast pork battled with the yeasty aroma of the hot rolls on their own small plate in front of the main course. Draco could feel himself start to salivate in anticipation. He'd worked up an appetite while trying to conjure a Patronus today.

people will change their votes.”

Hermione sighed. “I'm being silly,” she said looking a bit embarrassed.

“It's normal to be nervous,” Draco reassured her.

Tansy appeared at the doorway connecting the dining room to the kitchen. She handed each of them an envelope bearing the seal of the Ministry of Magic in red wax on the back. Draped over one arm were Hermione's Wizengamot robes with her family Coat of Arms embroidered on one side and the large “W” on the other.

Draco took the envelope addressed to him, broke the seal, and pulled out the folded parchment. He unfolded it to read the familiar lines that he'd received many times during his time serving on the Wizengamot.

Draco Lucius Malfoy

Representative of the Most Noble House of Malfoy

Mr. Malfoy, you are hereby summoned to represent your family on the Wizengamot council. This closed council session will be torule on Bill Number 523,583; otherwise known as The Granger Bill.

The council meeting starts at ten o'clock in the morning, today, the seventeenth day of January. Council will be held in the private council chambers. The doors will lock precisely at ten o'clock sharp and will not reopen until a two-thirds majority is reached. House elves are permitted to bring food and drinks while council is in session.

Sincerely,

Kingsley Shacklebolt

Minister of Magic

Representative of the Most Noble House of Shacklebolt  
“Most Noble House of Granger,” Hermione said with some amusement. “Sounds a bit pretentious.”

“Just a bit,” Draco smirked. “It's tradition.”

“I'm surprised I didn't receive a howler from Kingsley instead of a summons,” Hermione said with some curiosity.

“He likely doesn't know that you're a council member yet,” Draco said. “The summons are all written magically.”

“Here are your robes, Mistress Hermione,” Tansy interrupted,

holding up the Wizengamot robes for Hermione to inspect.

"Thank you, Tansy," Hermione said, taking the robes from the elf. She looked over at as she stood and slipped the robes on and smoothed them down. "I suppose we should go in case the Floo is busy."

"Do you plan on going to the Ministry in your pajamas?" Draco pointed out.

Hermione looked down at her Wizengamot robes draped over her pajamas and laughed. "I'm pretty sure I had a nightmare about this once."

Draco wagged his eyebrows. "We could go upstairs and see what you look like in just your robes," he suggested with a grin.

Hermione grinned back at him. "Later," she tossed over her shoulder as she sauntered out of the room with a sashay to her hips that Draco found immensely alluring.

With contemplations of victory sex occupying his mind, Draco sent a Patronus, his new favorite mode of communication as he got to show off his dragon Patronus, to his mother and asked her to keep Rose over night. He received a reply not ten minutes later in the form of a hastily penned note delivered by her personal house elf, Petunia.

Draco, I am of course happy to have Rose over for the night. I will take her to school in the morning. While I am proud that you are able to produce a corporeal Patronus and that it is a dragon, having such a large Patronus burst in on me while in the bath will likely lead me to an early grave.

With love,

Mother

P.S. Good luck today and give my love to Hermione.

Draco chuckled and returned upstairs to finish getting ready.

They were at the Floo all too soon for Draco's liking. Hermione refused to be distracted by Draco's wandering hands. He got swatted at quite a few times for his trouble. Hermione did look tempting in her champagne colored dress with a long sleeve black lace overlay and a flared skirt.

Hermione was gnawing on her lip as Draco threw the Floo

new to. Others smiled faintly, knowing the reasoning behind such an action.

"Why?" Helena asked delicately, looking with curiosity between Hermione and Draco.

"Minerva had a difficult time dealing with Ron's attack," Hermione explained, "She had an identity crisis and needed a change."

"She looks like Scorpius," Neville spoke up, "It's a little eerie how similar they look. Practically twins."

"How in the hell did you make her look like you?" Theo asked with incredulity from his place by the fireplace.

"Blood magic," Hermione answered simply.

A house elf in a stiff looking miniature tuxedo came into the room and bowed low. He looked over to Daphne and intoned solemnly, "Dinner is served, Madame."

"Thank you, Mr. Carson," Daphne said with a kind smile. The elf exited the room, the door closing soundlessly behind him.

Hermione broke into peals of laughter and Daphne smiled at her, trying to suppress her own laughter.

"Hermione, stop," Daphne chided, "You can't be laughing when we go into the dining room."

Hermione sobered a little. Little snorts of laughter escaped, and she wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. I just had trouble picturing it when you told me that your house elf watched too much Downton Abbey."

"He's got the elves dressed to the nines every day," Daphne whispered loudly with an air of exasperation, "I feel like we should start dressing for dinner just to keep up with them."

"You freed your house elves?" Draco turned to ask Theo. Theo shook his head. "They made the clothes themselves. Bertie, or Mr. Carson now, started watching that show on the telly and informed us that they would all be wearing a uniform from now on," Theo said with wry amusement. "Be glad your house elf wears a tutu."

Draco shrugged, "Well she's free, and I don't really care what

"Wait," Harry interjected, "you got Hermione to apologize for something."

The Gryffindors laughed again. Hermione looked like she wanted to throw something at her best friend.

"I am fully capable of admitting when I'm wrong," Hermione protested, then she added smugly and crossed her arms over her chest, "It just so happens that I'm not wrong that often."

Draco picked up the story then, amid the laughter hanging in the room. "Mother helped calm Hermione's panic, and that's how we found out that we're soulmates. An ancestor with misguided romantic notions decided to create a spell that would cause the cuff to appear on the arm of his soulmate and those of future generations of Malfoy mates, though each cuff is different for each couple. Seemed to think a witch wouldn't mind a cuff with the Malfoy seal appearing suddenly on her arm without warning."

Their audience listened wrapt to Draco and Hermione's story. The ladies looked to be melting by the news that they were soulmates.

"We didn't tell any of you at first," Hermione looked pleadingly around their circle of friends, "It was a lot to take in. Certainly more than either of us expected in a newly formed relationship."

Hermione sought out Draco's hand and grasped it tightly. He smoothed his free hand through her curls.

"We were going to tell you after the ball," Draco explained. "With everything that happened though," Draco paused and shrugged his shoulders, "it just got away from us."

A quiet moment settled over the group. Draco imagined the stress that they all went through while he was in a coma. The betrayal that some, like Harry and Ginny, must have felt at Weasley's attempt to kill Hermione. Hermione's guilt and worry. His mother's fear for his life.

"I adopted Minerva," Draco announced to end the pall that hung over the room. Heads jerked suddenly in his direction, those that this was

powder into the fireplace. He called out for the Ministry of Magic, and they stepped in. They seemed to spin for longer than necessary while waiting for a Floo connection at the Ministry to open up. By the time they stopped spinning, Draco was feeling a little nauseated. He looked down at Hermione in time to see her slip an anti-nausea potion out of her purse and down it. A ginger scented burp escaped her before she could stifle it.

The atrium of the Ministry of Magic was filled with a cacophony of noise. Witches and wizards of all ages filled the atrium as they milled around talking. They all seemed to be awaiting something. Flashes of light burst randomly throughout the area.

"What is going on here?" Hermione asked Draco quietly. "I haven't seen it this crowded since the end of the war."

Draco had to take her word that it had been busy during the Death Eater trials. He had been locked up in a cell in the dungeons of the Ministry awaiting his fate.

"It's Hermione Granger," said an older, brown-haired witch wearing a large, black witch's hat with peacock feathers sticking out of the brim.

The crowd around them heard and turned to stare at Hermione and Draco. A buzz rose up around them as the arrival of Hermione Granger traveled throughout the crowd.

Draco wrapped a protective arm around Hermione. He was never really comfortable around a crowd this size. He was about ready to grab Hermione and Floo to another place in the Ministry when Luna and a bemused-looking Harry shouldered their way through the crowd.

"Why are they all here?" Draco asked Harry as he shook Harry's hand in greeting.

"To support Hermione, of course," Luna answered.

"Well, we're going to get locked out if we don't get through this crowd," Draco fretted. Theo was not going to be happy with them if they got locked out of this council meeting.

"I've got this," Hermione said and cast a Sonorous charm on herself. Her voice boomed out and echoed across the atrium,

"Thank you all for coming out to show your support of this bill. It means the world to me to see you all here. We need to get through to get to the council chamber so that we can vote on this important bill."

Hermione wasn't a politician. That much was certain by the very politely phrased 'get out of my way' but it worked, and the people parted like the Red Sea. She had the love of the people though. She was their Golden Girl. Draco followed behind as the Chosen One, and the Golden Girl made their way through the throng of people.

Draco spotted the dragon-like features of Mrs. Edvard in the crowd. Beside her stood Lavender Brown. Draco almost stopped in his tracks as she took in the appearance of Lavender Brown. Her dirty blonde hair was brushed back away from her face, and the werewolf scars that marred her features were purposely left visible for those around them to see. Lavender had a defiant expression, and Draco noticed that there was a gap in the crowd between Lavender and the people beside her.

An elevator door was held open for the three, and they made the trip to the Wizengamot council chamber in nervous silence. The elevator pinged when it reached their destination, and the doors slid open to reveal the cheery, brightly lit Wizengamot lobby. A large and slightly elevated receptionist's desk guarded the entrance to the Wizengamot offices and council chamber.

They passed through the door behind the receptionist's desk. Fourteen doors lined either side of the long hallway with fourteen desks set off to the side of each of the doors on either side. Many of the oak desks showed obvious signs of occupation, while others looked like desolate islands.

Draco pointed out Hermione's new office to her as they passed, the sixth door down on the right. She was directly across from Daphne's seldom used office. The LeStrange crest on the door had not changed yet and would not until Hermione took possession of the office.

Theo paced in front of the open double doors of the Wizengamot council chamber. He looked up when he heard the

along.

"We've certainly come along way from Hogwarts," Hermione acknowledged.

Daphne turned to them with her hands on her hips and gave them a stern look. "Now," she said in a no-nonsense tone, "you two have some explaining to do."

Draco bit back a grin. "Do you mind if we explain only once to the room?" he asked.

"By all means," Daphne said loudly, gaining the attention of the others in the room. "I'm sure the rest of your friends would like to know what's going on in your lives."

The rest of the room went silent and stared at Draco and Hermione in expectation. Draco led Hermione over to a vacant armchair and sat on the arm while she settled herself in the cushioned depths of the chair.

"Well, where to begin?" Hermione asked, looking up at Draco and biting her lip.

"The beginning is always a good start," Harry prodded good-naturedly.

Hermione pulled up the sleeve of her sweater to reveal the glittering Malfoy cuff. "I guess this would be the beginning then. In November, I woke up with this small bit of bling on my arm. Draco and I had just kissed for the first time the night before and decided to be in a relationship. So, of course, I acted in a calm, mature manner when I woke up to find myself adorned in jewelry that I couldn't get off." Hermione smiled wryly as she said the last sentence.

Draco snorted. He wasn't alone in his reaction. All the Gryffindors in the room made similar sounds of disbelief.

"How bad did she hex you?" Ginny asked with some amusement.

"Forgo the wand in her bedroom when she came pounding on my bedroom door to yell at me," Draco answered drily.

"Thankfully," he added.

"Once I finally calmed down," Hermione started again.

"And apologized," Draco added.

the coffee table were a collection of light gray armchairs and slightly curved sofas.

Astoria had thought it immensely hilarious when her sister had created a round sitting room for hosting parties. She'd teased Daphne about trying to recreate King Arthur's round table. As a joke, Astoria gave her sister a painting of Camelot for her birthday the year before she died. The painting held pride of place over the mantel and roaring fireplace. On either side of the painting stood two miniature suits of armor on the mantel.

While the room had always reminded Astoria of King Arthur, it had always reminded Draco of an informal version of the Wizengamot council chambers. Draco, Daphne, and Theo had all told Astoria about the council chamber and how it was decorated, specifically with the round table and the family crest magically emblazoned on the table. They all found the room cold and pretentious.

Rose and Albus were running madly around the inside of the circle, narrowly missing crashing into the furniture and ignoring the admonishments of the adults to slow down.

Ginny sat in an armchair with Harry perched on the arm. She appeared to be telling some story that had the rest of the group laughing uproariously.

Blaise was taking up another armchair with Tracey in his lap. Helena and Greg were taking up one sofa to themselves. Greg narrowly caught Albus as he tried zipping by them and got caught up on Greg's feet. Theo was standing in front of the roaring fireplace, a grin on his face as he surveyed the group. Hannah, Neville, and Luna took up another sofa and were talking to Narcissa, seated in an armchair beside them.

The door opened behind them, and Draco had to dance out of the way to keep it from hitting them. Daphne entered the room. The three of them stood in the doorway, unnoticed by the rest of the group.

"Did you ever think to see such a thing?" Daphne asked, gesturing at the group in front of them, laughing and getting

sounds of their footsteps. He checked his watch and gestured for them to hurry. "Come on, come on. You're cutting it a little close."

They sped up their pace, and all four walked into the room just as the clock hanging beside the door starting chiming the hour. As the tenth chime sounded, the heavy oaken doors of the Wizengamot swung shut with a resounding thud and the clicking of locks could be heard.

Hermione turned from her perusal of the magical door, and the milling members got their first look at a different face in the room. Hermione's appearance was no surprise to the people who witnessed her induction the previous evening.

Kingsley Shacklebolt reacted as Draco suspected. "What is the meaning of this intrusion, Mrs. Granger?" he bellowed. "You are in the Wizengamot council chamber. This is a closed Wizengamot council session."

"Marvelous. I'm then the right spot then," Hermione said airily. She looked around the room. "Now where is my seat?"

"Seat?" Shacklebolt choked.

Draco tried with difficulty to hold back his laughter. Shacklebolt was completely at a loss for how to deal with Hermione's breezy attitude in the face of his anger. Draco heard Theo snort and tried to cover it up as a sneeze.

"Yes, seat," Hermione answered with an innocent smile.

"You did send me a summons."

"I most certainly did not," Shacklebolt spluttered indignantly.

"Oh, where is it?" Hermione said as she made a show of fishing around in her purse. She pulled out the summons with a flourish and opened it deliberately. Hermione then started to read the form letter aloud,

"Hermione Jean Granger.

Representative of the Most Noble House of Granger.

Mrs. Granger, you are hereby summoned to represent your family on the Wizengamot council. This closed council session will be to rule on Bill Number 523,583; otherwise known as The Granger Bill.

## Finding Hermione

The council meeting starts at ten o'clock in the morning, today, the seventeenth day of January. Council will be held in the private council chambers. The doors will lock precisely at ten o'clock sharp and will not reopen until a two-thirds majority is reached. House elves are permitted to bring food and drinks while council is in session.

Sincerely,

Kingsley Shacklebolt

Minister of Magic

Representative of the Most Noble House of Shacklebolt." Hermione folded up her summons with a self-satisfied smirk. She tucked the letter back into her purse.

"This is not possible!" Shacklebolt boomed.

Draco rolled his eyes. The Minister was starting to remind him of Scorpius when he was three and started throwing temper tantrums when he didn't get his way. It would make Draco's day to watch the Minister of Magic throw himself on the floor, kicking and screaming.

Theo cleared his throat, and Draco looked over at his friend. The cocked his head over to where Daphne was already seated.

"Allow me to show you to your seat, my love," Draco said sweetly.

"Thank you, darling," Hermione responded just as sweetly. Draco wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist and guided her over to where Daphne was seated.

A large circular table dominated the center of the room. The center of the circle was hollow and showed the gleaming black marble floors. Around the council table were twenty-eight high-backed chairs. The backs of each chair were carved with the Coat of Arms of each house.

"Hold your scroll in your hand," Draco instructed Hermione as they neared Hermione's place at the table.

Hermione took out the scroll giving her ownership of the Lestrage seat and held it in her hand.

"You know what to do from here?" Draco asked. Hermione nodded and bit her lip nervously.

## Chapter 41 Dinner with the Notts

Evening of January 16th

Draco and Hermione stepped into the receiving room at Nott Manor at half-past six o'clock in the evening. Since Theo became "Lord of the Manor" after the incarceration of his father, the ancestral Nott home became more of a home rather than an expensive showpiece.

They stepped out into a receiving room that had Daphne's stamp clear on it. White marble floors were covered in thick, rugs with a blue and green floral motif. Where the Parkinsons showed off notable ancestors, Daphne chose landscape paintings to adorn the walls.

Draco led Hermione out of the empty receiving room and to the downstairs parlor he knew Theo and Daphne used the most when entertaining. Draco pushed open the heavy oak door and found that they were the last to arrive.

The downstairs parlor was decorated in cobalt blue and lilac. The walls were painted cobalt blue. The large windows that dominated two of the walls of the room were hung with gauzy lilac curtains. A large crystal chandelier hung from the center of the room. Beneath the chandelier was a large glass coffee table with an ornate silver base curling out beneath it. Circled around

# Chapter 45: The Press Conference from Still

The atrium was still crowded with people. Their appearance brought with it a flurry of flashing lights from the cameras. The noise of all the witches and wizards rose to a deafening level. Draco took in the crowd still gathered. He spotted the remaining members of the Wizengamot mingled among the crowd.

Neville looked uncomfortable as he spoke to Lavender and Mrs. Edvard. Draco couldn't figure out if it was the crowds, Lavender, or Mrs. Edvard that was affecting Neville.

Mr. Parkinson had a group of eager journalists gathered around him. He gesticulated wildly at some dramatic point in his story and knocked a feathered quill flying. The journalist, without blinking, pulled another from his pocket and set it to work in place of its fallen comrade.

Not far away, Mr. Flint appeared to be giving the press a mournful statement about their loss. Occasionally, Mr. Parkinson or Mr. Flint would pause from their interviews to look over and glare at the other.

Never comfortable around large crowds, Greg appeared to have left the Ministry. Hannah and Flora were also gone.

Hermione led the group over to the front of the Fountain of the Magical Brethren. Draco, Harry, Daphne, Tracey, and Blaise moved off to the side so that Hermione and Theo could share the spotlight. It was their victory after all. They did the

work to create this bill. Hermione tried gesturing for them to rejoin her and Theo, but Draco shook his head once slightly.

Journalists and photographers gathered around in front of Hermione and Theo. Cameras flashed and the reporters started shouting questions all at once. The cacophony was going to give Draco a headache if he had to endure much more of it.

"Victory!" Hermione shouted, pumping both fists in the air. The word echoed across the chamber with the help of a Sonorous charm. "We have achieved victory today."

A thunderous cheer rose from the crowd. The noise reverberated off the vaulted ceiling.

"What now?" a journalist asked once the cheering died down. Hermione gave the journalist a sardonic smile. "Now the real work begins. We have to find people for the jobs needed to get the new Department of Marriages and Family Law off the ground."

Hermione dug in her purse and pulled out an immense sheaf of papers out of the bottomless bag she carried. She levitated the stack of papers, had them divide themselves up into smaller piles, and start floating around the room.

After Hermione dispersed the papers, she addressed the crowd. "We want to thank you for coming out today to show your support. I, for one, am glad to see our society take this step. Too long have we remained behind the times. Too long have we remained stagnant. It is time to march forward into the modern age."

Applause resounded throughout the room. Hermione stepped to the side to give Theo her place at the podium.

Theo waited for the applause to return to polite interest before he addressed the crowd. "You hold in your hands a pamphlet detailing information on the Granger Bill. One of the items you will find is a list of positions we need filling along with a description of the duties. We urge you to fill out an application with Human Resources within the next few days. We only have a small amount of time to set up this department and we need to hit the ground running. Thank you for your

attention. I'm going to hand the floor back over to Hermione." Polite clapping followed. Theo's statement. The floating pamphlets diminished rapidly as witches and wizards snatched them from the stacks. Duplication spells were performed throughout the room. Murmurs passed through the crowd along with the rustling of paper as people perused the list of positions available.

Hermione took center stage once again. "Thank you, Theo," she said. "I'm not sure if many of you know this, but once a bill is passed, it is effective immediately. Now to stem the potential rush of divorce filings, we are asking that only those with a severe need apply for a divorce at this time."

"What constitutes a severe need?" an eager witch in the front row asked. Her quill poised in the air ready to take down Hermione's answer.

Hermione took a deep breath in and let it out in a slow exhalation. "Abuse," she stated. Hermione held up her hands for silence as more reporters rushed to interrupt with questions. "I know we don't want to think about such atrocities going on within our community, but I fear we've ignored the issue for far too long." Another deep breath in and out. Her hand trembled slightly before she clenched it into a fist. "Victims of domestic violence may apply for and be granted an immediate divorce from their spouses without the spouse's presence being necessary for the proceedings."

Hermione then held a blank piece of stiff paper above her head and showed it to the crowd. Draco was confused and wondered what he was supposed to be seeing. It seemed that many in the crowd shared Draco's confusion.

"Too many of you this looks like an ordinary piece of blank paper," Hermione said.

"For those that are seeking safe shelter, they would see an image on this paper and know they can ask for help where this image is displayed. Many businesses in Diagon Alley, Cokeworth, Godric's Hollow, Hogsmeade, and other Wizarding communities around Great Britain have agreed to display these

Harry started rummaging again in Hermione's purse and came out with a baggy of granola bars. He handed one to Daphne and another to Hermione and both started munching slowly on them.

"You're pretty practiced in dealing with pregnant witches," Draco said to Harry.

Harry smiled a little. "Ginny's on her third pregnancy. I've had practice."

"Maybe you should lie down for a bit," Theo said to Daphne. "I'm fine. I just got too excited and I needed to eat something," Daphne soothed her worried husband.

Hermione stood and Draco made a sound of protest. "I'm fine. I'm fine. Let's get this press conference over with and go have some lunch."

"Ooh, how about Thai food?" Daphne suggested eagerly. "I'm craving curry."

"Did I hear someone mention Thai food? I'm starved," Tracey called as she came out of an office with Blaise behind her. Blaise was tucking his shirt into his pants, but his shirt was buttoned up wrong.

"I wonder why," Draco teased good-naturedly. "Your shirt's done up wrong, Blaise."

They all laughed and Blaise fixed his shirt before tucking it back in to his pants.

Tracey looked at Draco, then Hermione, and raised an eyebrow. "You have lipstick on your face, Draco."

ceremony or any big publicity, just signed and sealed on a borrowed desk in an empty hallway. She and her daughters were free of Ronald Weasley for good now. A jubilant smile broke out on Draco's face. He wanted to dance for joy around the room like an idiot.

Hermione looked up at him and the smile on her face was radiant. It may have been a trick of the lighting or Draco's love for her, but she appeared to be glowing once again. Hermione didn't share Draco's reservations against dancing around the room. She grasped Draco's arms and spun around with him once before kissing him soundly. She bounced over to Harry next and gave him a hug that knocked his glasses askew. Hermione went over to Daphne and they spun around holding hands and squealing in delight. She hugged Theo exuberantly but dizzily and Theo had to place a restraining hand on her back to keep her from toppling over as he handed her back to Draco.

"I think I'm going to puke," Hermione panted and leaned over, clutching her stomach.

"Yeah, me too," Daphne groaned.

The idea of two puking pregnant witches marshalled the three wizards into action. Theo grabbed a wastepaper basket from behind the desk and thrust it between Daphne's knees. Draco summoned a chair from behind a vacant desk and guided Hermione to sit in it. Harry grabbed another wastepaper basket and placed it at Hermione's feet.

"Hand me my purse," Hermione groaned weakly and made a retching noise.

"I know what anti-nausea potion looks like," Harry said impatiently and started digging around in Hermione's purse for the yellow vials of potion. "Good God, how much shit do you have in here?" he complained before he pulled out two vials with a triumphant "ah, ha."

Harry popped the corks with a flick of his thumbs and placed the vials into the nauseated witches' hands.

Draco rubbed Hermione's back as she downed the potion. She burped a little and relaxed into Draco's side.

signs on their store windows. Many medical facilities have also agreed to display these signs as well."

"What are the signs for?" someone chirped up from the middle of the crowd.

"These places will offer safe shelter to anyone that asks for it. They will then contact the ladies in charge of running our new domestic violence shelter and will be taken to a safe house for their protection."

"What is this domestic shelter called?"

"Granger House," Hermione answered proudly.

"Where is Granger House located?" another reporter asked.

"We have many locations but for the safety of the occupants, that information won't be revealed," Hermione answered.

"Who is in charge of running this shelter? You said 'ladies.' Are you not running this?"

"This is more than a one-person job. I expect it will also be psychologically difficult for all those involved. It is difficult to see the signs of abuse on a woman or her children day in and day out. To see the fear and the pain. To deal with the psychological trauma that has been inflicted on these victims. I have asked two ladies to be the main points of contact at the shelter whom I feel have the mental fortitude to handle these problems daily, as well as provide safety and protection for those seeking shelter. Allow me to introduce you to the manager and assistant manager of Granger House, Mrs. Methuselah Edvard and Miss Lavender Brown."

Mrs. Edvard and Lavender made their way to the front of the crowd to stand beside Hermione. Draco watched Lavender taking deep breaths as she turned to face the crowd. She stood slightly behind Mrs. Edvard and with her chin was tilted up as if she were looking over the crowd rather than at them. She appeared equal parts timid and defiant.

After a startled pause, "Why would you hire your husband's mistress?" was the first question to come out of a sneering reporter's mouth.

Hermione looked over at Lavender. Her gaze traveled to

Draco and he gave her an encouraging smile that he didn't feel. "Lavender and I have made our peace with one another and there are no ill feelings between us," Hermione answered.

"So you're fine with the affair she had with your husband for the majority of your marriage. And four children she had with your husband. You're willing to forgive and forget," the same reporter asked in disbelief.

Similar murmurings of incredulity greeted the reporter's statement. Draco could understand. He would not be so forgiving were he placed in a similar situation, but then Ronald Weasley had never been a good catch. He was never worthy of Hermione Granger.

"Today isn't the day to discuss my marriage to Ronald Weasley or his relationship with Lavender Brown," Hermione started. She held up her hands for silence when the reporter looked to interrupt again. "Let's get back to the matter at hand, these ladies and Granger House will provide protection and a safe home for the victims of domestic violence."

"Did you know about Ronald Weasley's affair with Lavender Brown before that day on the platform?"

"Did you make up the story of your obliviation to appear innocent of all knowledge of your husband's affair?"

"Is your relationship with Draco Malfoy an elaborate scheme to get revenge on your husband?"

The reporters rapid-fired questions at Hermione, not bothering to give her a chance to respond. Hermione shot a glance at Draco for help. Harry tensed as the questions became more accusatory.

Theo stepped forward. "That's all the time we have for today," he said, calling the press conference to a close.

"One more question," a young blonde witch spoke up with quill poised. "Are you now divorced from Ronald Weasley? You claim to have been abused by him, which allows you to have an immediate divorce. Have you divorced your husband?"

Hermione had started to turn away from the crowd when Theo called the press conference to a close. Draco caught the

we wrote the bill, I can get an immediate divorce with the signatures and seals of three Wizengamot members or three Ministry judges."

Draco eagerly moved forward to place his wand on the document.

"Nope, not you, mate," Theo interjected and placed a restraining hand on Draco's wand arm.

"Why not?" Draco asked affronted. "I'm a Wizengamot member just like you." Draco wanted to be one of the ones to set Hermione free from Weasley.

"It will look bad if your name is on the decree," Daphne said.

"A serious conflict of interest," Harry agreed.

"And you signing isn't a conflict of interest?" Draco retorted.

"Considering I'm not planning on marrying Hermione and she isn't currently carrying my children, I would say my conflict of interest isn't nearly as severe as yours," Harry responded. Draco moved aside with a disappointed pout.

"Don't pout, mate," Theo said drily, "we'll let you sign Hermione's marriage certificate."

"Funny," Draco responded with a glare, but the corners of his mouth quirked up in a reluctant smile.

Harry stood with his wand poised over the scroll. He stopped before he was about to place the tip of his wand on the seal and looked at Hermione. "Are you sure you don't want more people around to witness this? It's the first divorce in Wizarding history. It's a momentous occasion."

Hermione shook her head. "No, let's get it over with. I want to be free of Ron and move on with my life. And he doesn't deserve any of the attention this will bring."

Harry nodded his understanding and tapped his wand over the seal. The phoenix rising appeared in the waxy surface.

"Menext," Daphne said cheerily. She tapped her wand over the seal and her dolphin appeared.

Theo tapped his wand over the scroll without comment. The first divorce in wizarding history was done without

## Finding Hermione

my theory is that it has something to do with Draco and I acknowledging our bond as soulmates and the way in which we did." Hermione blushed crimson as she stated the last part but continued on in the same light tone, "I think it destroys any other romantic bonds."

"I don't want any details," Harry said, holding up his hands and looking sickened.

"So, divorce," Draco said, trying to speed up the proceedings and redirect the conversation.

The sooner Hermione divorced Weasley, the better. Then Draco could ask her to marry him, which he'd only been putting off because she was still technically married to another man.

Draco saw the smile Hermione hid at his eagerness as she dug around in her purse for something. She pulled out a roll of parchment with a small sigh of satisfaction. Hermione unrolled it and set it on the desk. The words "Divorce Decree" headed the top of the scroll.

"So this states that I get everything," Hermione started.

"Considering Ron's prison sentence, I receive all monetary and property assets. I also retain sole parental rights of Minerva and Rose."

"Wait," Draco protested. He felt a little hurt by this knowledge. He was going to help praise Minerva and Rose. He'd already adopted Minerva and fully expected to adopt Rose when she got old enough to understand the ritual. "What about me? What about my rights?"

Hermione placed a hand on his arm. "This removes all legal rights Ron has to Minerva and Rose. Magically, you are already Minerva's father and you know that Rose thinks of you as her father. This is just a formality that means Ron doesn't have a say in how they're raised or if they're adopted by another wizard."

"This document isn't about your relationship with Hermione. It's about ending hers with Weasley," Theo broke in. "Don't get hung up on the wording."

Draco nodded and Hermione squeezed his arm.

"That's it," Hermione continued. "And because of how

look of exasperation she quickly stifled before she returned back to the reporters.

"As I've said before," Hermione answered patiently, "my relationship with Ronald Weasley isn't the focus of today. The focus of today's events should remain on the passing of The Granger Bill and the founding of our first domestic violence shelter. I thank you all for coming out today and showing your support. I would like to thank all the businesses and medical facilities that graciously signed up to be safe harbors for the victims of domestic violence."

Hermione turned away from the crowd that was blocking their way to the fireplaces. Draco and the rest of the group walked along with her back to the bank of elevators. Hermione, Draco, Blaise, Tracey, Theo, Daphne, and Harry crammed together into one elevator. As the doors were about to close, they heard a commotion coming from the fountain.

"What's going on?" Draco asked. He was crammed at the back of the elevator with Hermione. He craned his neck but couldn't see over Theo's head.

"Shit," Harry spat, closer to the front. "It looks like they've started in on Lavender since they couldn't get answers from Hermione. Go on without me." Harry stepped out of the elevator to go to Lavender's rescue. The doors closed behind him.

"It's all my fault," Hermione said quietly. "I shouldn't have put the spotlight on her."

"Well, Lavender is a person of notoriety right now," Tracy pointed out. "She's going to have to learn how to live with the image that she's given people of herself."

"I can't believe that you would deign to be in the same room as her. Let alone hire her to help you run a domestic violence shelter," Daphne said in disbelief.

Hermione sighed, "I know it must be hard for you to believe, but I forgave her."

They exited the elevator into the waiting room of the Wizengamot offices. Hermione paced around the center of the

floor. She gnawed on her lip and clenched and unclenched her hands.

"God, how could I have been so stupid," Hermione berated herself.

"It's not your fault," Tracey said, trying to placate Hermione. Hermione looked over to where they were standing clustered in a group watching her. She met Tracey's gaze. "It is my fault though."

"You aren't responsible for watching out for Lavender Brown," Daphne said a bit impatiently. She spat Lavender's name like it tasted foul. "You have completely discredited your shelter by hiring that woman."

"Daphne," Draco said warningly.

Daphne rounded on Draco and glared at him. "Don't 'Daphne' me, Draco. Someone needs to say it. It's completely crazy that she would even want to be in the same room as that woman."

"She saved me from him!" Hermione shouted at Daphne. Daphne and Tracey froze. "What do you mean, Hermione?"

Tracey asked.

"I don't think he was just obliterating away my memories of his affair," Hermione whispered. "I think he was doing other things to me."

The elevator dinged behind them and the door slid open to reveal Harry, Neville, and Lavender. Harry and Neville looked angry, but Lavender looked defeated. She didn't look up at anyone as she exited the elevator. Her hair hung down covering her bowed head and she slunk to a corner of the room and sat down in a chair.

"Don't hate her," Hermione beseeched the group. "She kept him away from me. She outed him that day on the platform."

"That doesn't make her a hero," Daphne hissed at Hermione. "It doesn't make her a villain either," Hermione retorted. Blaise and Theo looked questioningly at Draco. He shrugged his shoulders. He didn't care much for Lavender Brown. If Hermione wanted to forgive her, then so be it. Draco couldn't

"That's a nice shade of lipstick you're wearing, Draco," Daphne called from across the way.

Draco wiped at his mouth with the cuff of his shirt. Daphne sat behind the assistant's desk in front of her office wearing a smirk as she looked over at Hermione and Draco. Theo was half sitting on the desk looking over his shoulder at them. He was having a hard time not laughing at the two of them. Draco didn't bother to try to correct their assumptions.

"Now that the office is christened," Theo began, "we still need to make a statement to the press. Hopefully, we'll have a flood of applicants in the next few days so that we can set up some semblance of a department to get us off the ground."

Harry came stomping back down the office space looking irritated. "Where the hell have you been, Hermione? The atrium is still crowded and everyone refuses to leave until you make an appearance."

"Tone, Potter," Draco growled.

Harry stopped, took a deep breath, and forced his face to relax into a more amiable expression. "Sorry."

Hermione explained, "Draco was showing me my new office."

"Let's get going before the crowd starts rioting to see Hermione," Theo said jokingly.

"Westill have the matter of a divorce to deal with," Hermione said before they could head off toward the elevator.

"And who's going to break the matrimonial bond?" Theo asked. "I know how but I'm not exactly comfortable using you as my first test subject."

Hermione waved the comment away and Draco tensed. "We won't need anyone for that. The bond broke the night before Ron attacked us."

Stunned silence followed the pronouncement.

"How?" Daphne asked as if she were afraid that broken matrimonial bonds were common.

Hermione moved to set her bag on the desk Daphne was still sitting behind. She shrugged. "I'm not exactly sure, but

With that pronouncement, the Ministers spun on his heel and slammed the door behind him. Hermione jumped at the noise.

"What an arse," Theo mumbled.

"No arguments there," Draco agreed. "I'm going to show Hermione her new office."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Theo called out as he walked away from Draco and Hermione.

Draco guided Hermione over to her new office.

Hermione tapped her wand on the family Coat of Arms and the last of the Lestrage Coats of Arms at the Ministry of Magic disappeared. The Granger Coat of Arms filled in the blank space and the door clicked open.

Draco followed Hermione inside the office and the smell of musty air greeted them. Empty cherry wood, built-in bookshelves lined one wall. A matching scarred and battered, cherrywood desk that nobody wanted took up the center of the room. Those were the only furnishings left in the office. Canary yellow paint covered the walls. The room was a bit nauseating.

After her perusal of the bare room, Hermione turned to face Draco with a smirk on her face. Draco closed the distance between them. He cupped the back of her neck and pressed his lips to hers. Draco poured every feeling he had for her into that kiss. His love and desire. Admiration.

Hermione responded eagerly to his ravaging. She massaged his tongue that snaked its way into her open mouth. Her fingers carded through his hair and her body pressed up against him as she tried to get closer to him.

Draco reluctantly broke the kiss. His face broke out in a grin when Hermione whimpered at the loss of contact. He wanted so much to keep snogging her and to make use of the desk behind them. People would come looking for them soon though and Draco didn't fancy getting caught "doing the dirty" as Luna would say in a Ministry office.

Draco and Hermione exited the office. Hermione's hair was a little wilder than when she'd arrived at the Ministry. Her lips were noticeably more swollen as well.

hate her because her actions led them to where they are today. Draco pitied her, but he didn't like the difficulty that Lavender Brown brought to their lives.

Neville cleared his throat. "I need to get back to the school," he said. Neville turned to Harry, "You said there's a way out from here."

"Yeah," Harry said, "come on. I'll show you where."

"I should go too," Lavender said softly, standing up and skirting around their group to stand near Harry. She looked up for the first time. Her anguished and scarred face looked for and found Hermione in the center of the group. "I'm sorry for the trouble I caused. I shouldn't have come today."

Hermione broke from the group and went over to Lavender. Hermione stopped short of touching Lavender. "Everything will be fine," Hermione said unconvincingly.

Lavender let out a mirthless laugh. "No one will ever see me as anything other than Ron Weasley's whore," Lavender said bitterly.

"You're not a whore and I don't give a shit what the world thinks, and neither should you," Hermione said passionately.

"That's easier said than done," Lavender said wearily, "especially when it's your friends that think you're the fool." Lavender turned away. Draco caught the defensive looks that Daphne and Tracey shot at Lavender's back.

"Hermione, we don't think you're a fool," Tracey started.

"We just don't understand," Daphne finished.

"I know," Hermione said in placating tones. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Listen, it's been a long day. Let's get together another time."

Hermione looked tired and defeated. Draco went to her side and slid an arm around her waist. She leaned into him and pressed her face into his side. Draco could hear her inhaling and exhaling deeply. Draco stroked her hair to calm her.

"Hermione, don't leave mad," Tracey pleaded. Blaise had moved to Tracey's side. He was trying to urge her back to the bank of elevators, away from Hermione and Draco.

## Finding Hermione

"I'm not mad, Tracey," Hermione said. "It's been a tough day and I'm upset that the Granger House didn't get the reception I thought it would."

Tracey nodded. "Okay, Hermione. Well, we're here to help in any way that we can."

"Thanks. I appreciate everything you've already done," Hermione said, not meeting anyone's gaze.

Hermione and Draco said goodbye to everyone. More Dracos saying goodbyes and Hermione standing quietly beside him. They went down the same corridor Harry, Neville, and Lavender had gone down. The corridor was narrow, only fitting two people walking side-by-side, and often overlooked. It was an escape floor for the Wizengamot. A backup should they ever be unable to disappear from the Ministry.

They arrived in the study at Spinner's End. Hermione stumbled out of the fireplace and resumed her pacing.

"Hermione," Draco said trying to get her attention.

It was starting to worry him how much she was stressing out about Lavender Brown.

"I've messed all this up and I have to figure out a way to fix it or no one will ever seek help at Granger House," Hermione said as she continued to pace and gnaw on her lip.

Draco stopped her as she tried to pass by him. He put his hands on her shoulders and forced her to stop and look up at him.

"You didn't mess it up and we will figure out how to smooth this over," Draco told her.

"I shouldn't have introduced Lavender as one of the people running the shelter," Hermione admitted.

Draco didn't disagree, but he couldn't stand the dejected look on her face. He enfolded her into his embrace. "It will be okay. We'll figure something out."

"She was there and I wanted people to start seeing the real Lavender," Hermione murmured into his chest.

Draco didn't know how he was going to convince Hermione that Lavender Brown wasn't someone she needed to fix.

*Chapter 44  
Free at Last*

January 17th

Theo made a dramatic show of looking at his watch. Draco already knew he lost the bet. He'd heard the chiming of the clock outside as Greg finished speaking. Greg surprised him today. He wasn't one for talking about his family, especially his mother, to a room full of strangers.

"It is currently half past twelve. I figure the doors didn't unlock until ten after twelve, which means that you," Theo said, pointing dramatically at Draco, "owe me a thousand galleons." Theo held out an open palm and wiggled his fingers. "Pay up." Draco took out a black leather purse full of galleons and plunked it into Theo's outstretched hand. Hermione rolled her eyes at the two of them. Draco thought he heard her mumble "idiots" under her breath.

The door crashed open then ricocheted back to hit the angry wizard standing in the doorway. Kingsley Shacklebolt looked at the door like he wanted to incinerate it. He held on to the doorknob to stop the door's movement.

The Minister glared at Draco, Hermione, and Theo. He pointed menacingly at them. "You three can be responsible for getting the public and Ministry ready for the end of our way of life since you're so determined to tear it apart. Good luck finding the funding for this little venture."

She turned her face up to his and smiled tremulously.

"We won," Hermione said in disbelief.

Draco grinned down at her. "Was there ever a doubt?"

"I didn't dare hope that we'd win, and then Ollivander made that speech about the mental health of the children, and I thought for sure we'd lost."

Hermione stood and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Draco hugged her back and kissed the top of her head.

"We really won," she murmured in his chest. "I'm going to be free of him."

The group made their way out of the Wizengamot council chamber. The doors closed softly behind them. Shouting could be heard emanating from Shackbolt's office.

Draco knew that there was a lot of work to do to prepare for the bill to become available to the majority of Wizarding Britain on the first of February. Those that could prove they were in danger by staying with their spouses could be granted an immediate divorce starting now. There still would have to wait.

They had a department to set up, people to employ, and copies of the new laws made available to the lawyers. Judging by the shouting coming from behind the Minister's door, he would push the workload onto them in retribution for pushing this law through.

But that was a problem for another day. They had won, and Hermione would be free of Weasley. Permanently and irrevocably.

Lavender needed to fix herself. Maybe she already started and didn't need Hermione's interference. She showed up today without her glammers for the first time in years.

"Hey," Draco coaxed, tipping her chin back up.

Hermione looked up at him in curiosity.

"I don't know if you know this, but you got divorced today, and I've been looking forward to this occasion for months," Draco teased.

He wagged his eyebrows at her suggestively and grinned roguishly at her.

Hermione grabbed onto the distraction with both hands and laughed up at Draco. She started running her finger up and down the silk of his silver tie. "We definitely should celebrate such a momentous occasion."

thirteen to three vote.”

The locks on the doors clicked open. The Minister, not bothering to wait for anyone else, stormed from the room. They could hear the sound of an office door slamming down the hall.

Marley Flint wasn't far behind the Minister, though he left the room with far less emotion.

They all started to get up from their chairs and gather in small groups talking together.

Ollivander caught Draco's arm and pulled him away from his conversation with Theo. "I have done some reflection since yesterday," Ollivander started. His gaze flicked over to Hermione's chair. "I feel I may have done great harm when I said nothing all those years ago."

"I understand that you thought you were protecting her," Draco said.

"I'm glad that she'll be able to get a divorce," Ollivander continued. "Just remember an old wizard's plea from time to time, and think about the welfare of the children. I see so many pass through my shop, so full of excitement and magic. It would break my heart to see that light fade from their eyes."

Draco nodded, and the old wizard shuffled his way from the room.

Draco looked around for Hermione. He couldn't find her in any of the little groups around the room. Daphne caught his gaze, and her eyes flicked to the chair she was standing behind. Harry, Hannah, and Neville stood with Daphne, trying to carry on a conversation with one another, though all four looked concerned.

Draco made his way quickly over to them. "What's going on?" he asked before he went over to Hermione.

"I think she's just overwhelmed," Daphne explained.

Draco moved past them to stand in between Daphne's and Hermione's chairs. He found Hermione sitting in a state of shock, staring blankly in front of her. Draco noticed that her hands were trembling in her lap.

Draco tucked a curl behind her ear and Hermione startled.

the room. "My mother's name was Melanie Travers. I imagine many of you knew her. She was a Hufflepuff. Unusual for a Travers," Greg said with a sardonic smile. "She was warm and good. She made the best chocolate chip cookies. She was forced into an arranged marriage with my father. My father was a hard man, a bully. It wasn't a good match. They fought a lot."

Greg looked over at Ollivander and addressed him, "I understand your concerns, but parents will fight whether they're married or divorced. I know arranged marriages aren't common anymore, something I know we're all thankful for, but that doesn't mean that people will choose their spouses better. That doesn't mean that people don't fall out of love, grow apart, or have issues that no amount of therapy will fix. Children deserve to grow up in happy homes, and I believe that this bill gives them a good shot at that."

Hermione's supporters started knocking on the table in support of Greg. Greg sat down, his cheeks and neck flushed crimson.

The Minister looked around the table. He wasn't able to hide his angry expression. He'd lost, and he knew it. Draco just couldn't understand why he was fighting this bill so hard. Why did it matter to him so much that divorce not be introduced into their legal system?

"Flint," Shackbolt addressed Marley Flint, "anything to add?"

Flint shook his head. "I don't think it would matter. We lost before we walked in here."

The Minister sighed in resignation. He waved a hand at Percy in an "alright, let's get this over with" gesture.

Percy stood and said with a defeated air, "On the matter of Bill Number 523,583; otherwise known as The Granger Bill, please indicate your vote."

The only change was Ollivander, who voted for the bill instead of against it. The Minister shot the old wandmaker a betrayed look.

Percy intoned wearily, "Bill Number 523,583 passes with a

## Chapter 46 Appreciation

January 17

Hermione patted Draco on the chest and stepped out of his hold. Draco watched as she crossed the study to stand in front of their desk.

She turned to face him, looking stern and Draco wondered what happened to warrants such as change in her mood. Hermione leaned her hip against the desk and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Mr. Malfoy," Hermione said to him in a commanding voice, "my assistant tells me that you have a proposal I simply must hear."

Draco stood looking at her. His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. What did she want from him? Surely she wasn't demanding a marriage proposal.

Hermione arched an eyebrow at him. He caught the faintest quirk of her mouth before she spoke again. "Mr. Malfoy, I don't have all day to stand here watching you gape like a fish. I have many Wizengamot matters to attend to, and I only granted you this meeting because my assistant assured me that it would be worth my time."

Draco's jaw snapped shut as he finally caught on to Hermione's game. He grinned roguishly at her from across the study and locked the doors with a flick of his wand.

"Yes, Ms. Granger," he said with an aristocratic drawl, "I have a proposition for you that I believe we may both find mutually beneficial."

Hermione straightened and walked toward him, meeting him halfway. "Mr. Malfoy, did you know that I have been waiting for such an occurrence since I became a Wizengamot council member?"

Draco arched an eyebrow at her. "And what exactly have you been waiting for, Ms. Granger?"

"The opportunity to make you beg, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione stated.

Hermione started to circle him, like a lioness hunting her prey. Draco stood up straighter and smoothed down the lapels of his jacket.

"You are mistaken, Ms. Granger. A Malfoy never begs," Draco said with pretend stiffness, though other parts of his anatomy were becoming noticeably stiffer with Hermione's commanding tone.

Hermione stopped circling and looked challengingly up at him. "We'll see about that. What exactly are you proposing, Mr. Malfoy?" she questioned him sharply.

"An alliance, Ms. Granger," Draco suggested with haughty stiffness.

"An alliance," Hermione said breathlessly. Draco looked down at her. She seemed a bit overwhelmed and was breaking character. Hopefully, she didn't think that this was the way that he would propose to her.

"Yes, Ms. Granger, an alliance. You are new to your position within the Wizengamot. I can provide you with the funds and social connections to fuel the no doubt endless projects you have in mind," Draco said, resuming his aristocratic drawl.

Hermione took a deep breath and stiffened her shoulders. She resumed the role of stern, Wizengamot council member. "And how exactly would you benefit from this alliance, Mr. Malfoy?"

Good girl, Draco thought. This was only a game they were

"Did you not bother to read the bill, Mr. Weasley?" Flora asked. Flora didn't bother to rise to address Percy. "There is an entire section detailing how to break the matrimonial bonds without any damage to either party. Anyone who bothered to read it or has any knowledge of matrimonial bonds would understand that."

Theo leaned back in his seat and made a show of scratching his stubble to hide the smirk on his face.

Percy flushed crimson at the rebuke. He sat back in his chair and appeared to deflate.

The clock struck half-past eleven. Theo made a show of looking at his watch.

Garrick Ollivander spoke up from between Theo and Jonathan Parkinson. He didn't bother to rise to gain the everyone's attention or control the floor. "My concern with this bill is not with the couple getting divorced, but their offspring. Divorce is not always going to be an amicable splitting of two parties. Parents will fight. Parents will bring their children into the fight, and the children may be forced to pick a side, to pick one parent over another. The mental health of these children in these divorced homes is my primary concern and objection."

The room fell quiet as they took in Ollivander's heartfelt words. If anything could sway people from Hermione's side, this was the argument. Shackiebolt and Flint looked smug. Percy looked like there still might be hope of a win.

A throat cleared, disrupting the quiet in the room. Greg shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He rose slowly to his feet. Greg stared down at the table in front of him. His hand brushed across the Travers family crest on the table.

"My family," Greg started gruffly, addressing the wood of the table in front of him. He cleared his throat and started again. "My family were Death Eaters." Greg looked uncomfortable by this admission. "They held tight to the pureblood ideals. Preserving the purity of blood and family. Making alliances through arranged marriages."

Greg released a deep breath and looked up to gaze around

That thought made Draco wonder about Kingsley's views. Was it all women he was trying to keep down or just Hermione? If it was only Hermione, then that posed the question of why? It brought back the question behind Hermione's less than meteoric rise within the Ministry.

Draco watched as Hermione's gaze swept across the table. Here yes, methis, and her mouth quirked a little in a small smile.

"We fought a war," Hermione started again more quietly. "People died on both sides because one man believed that certain people in our society are better than others. How can we claim that the Light won the war when we still believe that certain members of our society are better than others?"

The pounding of fists on the table resounded throughout the room.

Hermione continued, "This bill is not just about me trying to get a divorce from my husband, Minister. This bill is about a basic right that all wizarding folk should have. We will not destroy society by allowing divorce. We will strengthen it. I ask that you look into your hearts and consider what you think is best for Wizarding Society, and that you vote with your heart and your conscience."

Hermione resumed her seat to thunderous applause. She smiled triumphantly as she looked around the room.

"She is quite extraordinary," Theo said with appreciation.

"That she is, Theo," Draco said, smiling over at Hermione. Percy Weasley stood, and Draco barely suppressed a groan. He hated Percy's speeches. Pompous windbag.

"Judging by your faces and who you all are, I'm certain that this vote is a foregone conclusion. I ask that you consider what you are setting loose on our society. Matrimonial bonds are not meant to be broken. They are entwined with our magical cores. You could damage the magical cores of people seeking a divorce. You could be condemning our people to live their lives without magic."

Theo made to rise to speak but Flora's impatient voice cut across the silence in the room.

playing. He had to think about how he was really going to propose though. Hermione looked at him like she was expecting an answer and he shoved thoughts of his real proposal aside.

"The Malfoys would benefit from tying our name to your many good works," Draco made up on the spot. It wasn't something that Malfoys in the past would suggest and knowing this, Hermione arched an eyebrow at him.

Draco broke character for a moment and just shrugged at her. It was only a game after all.

"As interesting as your proposal is, Mr. Malfoy, I'm afraid I'm going to need more convincing," Hermione said, walking away from him and moving to sit on the sofa.

She looked expectantly over the back of the sofa at him. Draco moved to sit on the couch near her. He took her hand in his.

"Ms. Granger, how can I convince you of the seriousness of my offer?" Draco asked.

"I'm sure that such a powerful and handsome man such as yourself can find a way to convince me of the ardor of your proposal," Hermione said suggestively.

Finally, Draco thought, they were getting to the fun part of the game.

Draco slid off the couch and knelt before Hermione. She arched an eyebrow at him.

"I thought Malfoys didn't beg, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco took Hermione's stilettoed foot in his hands. He slid the shoe off and massaged her foot. Hermione's head dropped back, and she hummed in appreciation.

"This isn't begging, Ms. Granger," Draco said huskily. He slid the other shoe off and gave her other foot the same treatment. "This is appreciation for all the hard work you do."

Hermione hummed again. "I like your method of showing appreciation."

Draco's hands moved up to massage her calf. "We Malfoys know how to show appreciation to those that help them." Draco switched to massaging her other calf.

Hermione opened her legs a little for him. "I cannot wait to see how else a Malfoy shows his appreciation."

Draco grinned wolfishly at her. His hands slid up to each of her legs. He ran his thumbs along the inside of her thighs and opened her further for him, pushing the skirt of her dress up as he went. The scent of her arousal filled his nostrils, and his cock strained against his trousers.

"May I continue to show my appreciation, Ms. Granger?" Draco asked. He wanted to make sure that she was still willing to play this game before they continued with anything more sexual.

"I am still not satisfied that you are serious about your proposal, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione purred.

Draco chuckled. "I can assure you, Ms. Granger; you will be fully satisfied with my proposal by the end of our meeting."

Hermione laughed joyfully. "I can't wait to see what else you have up your sleeve to convince me, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco leaned forward and crushed his mouth to hers. Hermione tugged on his tie to keep him from pulling back. She bit his lower lip lightly, and Draco growled into her mouth. Her tongue twined with his in a battle for dominance. She tasted of the granola bars she'd eaten earlier, and Draco remembered that they hadn't eaten lunch yet.

Draco reached behind Hermione and slipped down the zipper of her dress. He unhooked the clasp of her bra while he was there.

Hermione pulled the sleeves of her dress down and off so that the top of her champagne and black lace dress pooled around her waist. Draco pulled off the nude bra that hung limply on her.

Draco licked his lips in appreciation at the sight of her full breasts and pink nipples tightened in arousal.

"You're absolutely perfect," Draco said.

Draco cupped her neck in one hand and kissed his way down the other side. His hand slid down her shoulder to cup a fleshy globe. Hermione moaned loudly as his thumb flicked across her

Minister with narrowed eyes. Greg looked genuinely bored. Percy Weasley was watching the reactions of those around him, just like Draco, and shaking his head. Percy at least realized what the Minister didn't. Attacking Hermione wasn't going to win him any points.

Kingsley sat at the end of his speech and looked around him, only then did he seem to take in the expressions of those around him. His jaw clenched in anger, and he glared around the table.

The clock struck eleven o'clock.

Hermione stood and brushed her fingertips across the wood of the table in front of her. "Minister, you claim that this bill is merely a creation of mine and Draco's in order to force through a divorce because of our relationship. On September 26th, long before Draco and I entered into any relationship, I came to your office and pleaded with you to grant me a divorce. I told you my husband was abusing me. I offered to allow you to inspect my memories. What did you tell me, Minister?"

Hermione paused to allow the Minister to answer. Shackbolt stared stonily at her.

"You said that I was my husband's property to do with as he saw fit," Hermione continued. "You, Minister, said that I, Hermione Granger, War Heroine, Order of Merlin First Class, was the property of my husband." Hermione pointed at the Minister as she spoke. "You tried to force me back to my husband, my abusive, lying, cheating husband. You forced me to resign my job in order to preserve my safety."

Flint seemed to be the only one not disgusted by this revelation. Draco's estimation of Percy Weasley rose considerably at the look Percy was giving the Minister. Weasley may not like the bill, but it wasn't because he brought it into the subjugation of women. Draco and Percy never got along. Percy always seemed too object to whatever Draco proposed more on misguided rivalry than any flaw with Draco's proposals. Plus, Percy had always been a kiss ass, and Kingsley was obviously strongly opposed to the bill.

Opening arguments may commence."

A loud 'bong' resounded throughout the room. Half-past ten then.

Kingsley Shacklebolt stood and looked around the room, meeting the eyes of everyone assembled. His gaze stayed on Hermione as he started to speak. "This bill is nothing more than two people trying to manipulate our legal system in order to have their way. Are we going to destroy our culture and our community for the sake of two people? The well-being of the Wizarding Community of Britain means more to me than the wishes of two people. Are we seriously going to sit here and contemplate this ludicrous bill so that Hermione Granger can rid herself of an inconvenient husband? How can we allow her to get away with this? How can we allow Hermione Granger to destroy our values and beliefs?"

The Minister continued. Attacking Hermione and her motives for bringing up this bill. Attacking Draco for entering into an adulterous affair with Hermione. The both of them bringing about the downfall of Ronald Weasley. And dire predictions of the fate of Wizarding Britain should this bill be allowed to pass.

Draco remained quiet throughout Shacklebolt's vitriolic speech. He watched the group of people assembled. Harry looked enraged and seemed that his white-knuckled grip on the arms of his chair was the only thing keeping him from launching himself at the Minister. Florar rolled her eyes impatiently. Marley Flint was nodding along with the Minister's points and drapping his knuckles in agreement on the table in front of him. Daphne appeared to listen with a studiously blank face. Hermione smiled serenely at the Minister. Neville huffed and crossed his arms in front of his chest. Theo leaned an elbow on the arm of his chair, covering his mouth with his hand in a contemplative way. Garrick Ollivander looked offended by the Minister's speech. Jonathan Parkinson glared across the table at Marley Flint. Tracey affected an air of boredom and yawned widely into her hand. Blaise, who had the seat beside Shacklebolt, watched the

nipple.

Draco laved at her collarbone. He moved down to suck her taut nipple into his mouth. He pulled hard on her peak and pinched her other between his thumb and forefinger.

Hermione's hand came up and gripped his head in her hand. Her hand threaded almost painfully into his hair as she grasped him to her so forcefully.

"Oh God, yes!" Hermione shouted.

Draco looked up to find Hermione's head thrown back in pleasure. The creamy expanse of her throat was taut and flushed. Her curls cascaded wildly down her back.

Draco switched his worshipful attention to her other breast, sucking and flicking the sensitive flesh with his tongue.

"I need more, Draco," Hermione beseeched him.

Draco sat back on his haunches. He took her hands in his. "Stand up. Let's get this dress off of you," he instructed as he helped her to stand.

Hermione stood on shaky legs. She reached out and smoothed his hair down. Draco looked up at her to find her smiling down at him. Her eyes seemed to glow gold with emotion.

"I love you," he whispered to her.

"I love you too, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione answered impishly. He grinned up at her as he started to tug her dress down off her hips. Or at least tried to. The dress was stuck on her hips and wouldn't budge. He was half tempted to rip the thing off when Hermione giggled at him.

"You have to unzip it the rest of the way," she told him.

Draco could feel his cheeks heat up in embarrassment. He reached behind her and found the tab of the zipper. He pulled it down the rest of the way and the lace and satin slipped effortlessly down her hips to pool at her feet.

Draco smiled to see her lack of undergarments. He raised an eyebrow at her.

"No knickers, Ms. Granger. How naughty!"

Hermione let loose a throaty chuckle. "Yes, it's a personal rule of mine not to wear knickers under my dresses. I find it

rather freeing.”

“I’ll have to remember that, Ms. Granger,” Draco responded. Hermione sat back down on the sofa. Draco gripped her knees and pulled her so that her bum was perched on the edge of the couch.

“Such beauty, Ms. Granger. I am in awe,” Draco complimented her.

Hermione reached out and grasped Draco’s hand in hers. He kissed the tips of her fingers before he moved his legs out from under him so that he could sit more comfortably between her open thighs.

He admired the beauty spread out before him. Hermione’s wild curls were cascading behind her and onto the cushions of the couch. She was propped up on her elbows. The position thrust her breasts up. Those luscious milky breasts with their dark pink, hardened nipples. The slight bumps she had between her hips where she carried their children with the faint white stretch marks showing in the overhead light. The small thatch of curls neatly trimmed and groomed. The lips of her pussy were parted slightly and glistened with the evidence of her arousal. He could stare at her like this all day. He could worship at the altar of her body for the rest of his life.

“So beautiful,” Draco murmured and kissed the inside of her thigh.

He kissed and licked his way up to the apex of her thighs. Hermione was writhing in his hold as he kissed his way closer to her core. Draco chuckled when Hermione let out a groan of frustration as he moved to her other thigh and started kissing his way up.

Draco bit the inside of her thigh close to her dripping pussy. He smiled at Hermione’s hissed “yes” as he gave her nether lips one tentative swipe of his tongue. Her back arched even further on the couch, and she wrapped a leg around his shoulders and used it to urge him to continue.

“So greedy, Ms. Granger,” Draco purred. Hermione looked down at him. “Don’t tease me, Mr. Malfoy.

Draco pressed a quick kiss to her lips and walked over to take his own place beside Theo. The other council members had moved to take their own seats while Draco escorted Hermione to hers.

A hush fell over the room as they watched Hermione step up to her place at the table and set her scroll over the LeStrange family Coat of Arms. They all watched as the Coat of Arms faded to white on the table, the chair behind Hermione, and the tapestry on the wall. The Granger family Coat of Arms replaced the blanks.

Hermione took her seat behind the table. A few people leaned forward, waiting to see if the seat burned Hermione. Shacklebolt sat back with a sigh of disappointment. Draco shot the Minister a glare and made a mental note to start ruining his career if the Minister didn’t start shaping up his act.

“The council recognizes Hermione Granger as the representative of the most noble House of Granger,” Percy Weasley said haltingly.

“Fine,” Shacklebolt said impatiently, “Let’s get on with this nonsense.”

Shacklebolt opened up a file and started reading in a disinterested voice, “We are here today to make a ruling on Bill Number 523,583; otherwise known as The Granger Bill. We will start the proceedings by taking a preliminary vote. Those prepared to place a vote, please do so now.”

Draco slapped a hand firmly on the “Yay” circle on the table in front of him. A green light appeared in the front of his portion of the hollowed out circle of the table. Other green lights appeared around the circle just as quickly. Four red lights lit up around the table as well.

Percy stood again to announce the results. “Twelve votes, yay. Four votes, nay. The families of Abbott, Black, Carrow, Greengrass, Granger, Longbottom, Malfoy, Nott, Parkinson, Rowle, Shafiq, and Travers have registered “yay” votes. The families of Flint, Olivander, Shacklebolt, and Weasley have registered “nay” votes. A preliminary majority has been reached.

## Finding Hermione

He and Hermione looked expectantly at Hestia as she crossed over to where they were standing after she closed the door to her room.

"It's nothing bad," Hestia started. "I just thought I might offer you the use of my Floo if you needed to visit the children in the future."

"That is a very kind offer and we appreciate it," Hermione said. "We are hoping that all the drama is finally at an end and the children can enjoy a more normal school year."

"Nonetheless, the offer is always there if you need it," Hestia reaffirmed.

"Would you tell the headmistress that we've left?" Hermione asked. "I don't want to keep her waiting for us."

"Absolutely," Hestia nodded.

Draco guided Hermione over to the fireplace. "We'll get out of your hair now. We really appreciate everything you're doing for the children."

Hestia waved the comment away in an "It's nothing" gesture. They left Hogwarts and went back home to rest before what Draco had no doubt would be another busy day.

## Chapter 48 Morning In

Draco groaned as he opened the paper and looked at the front page. It was as predicted. Speculation abounded at how much Hermione knew of her husband's affair. The only mention of Granger House appeared as a connection to Hermione and Lavender's supposed collusion.

"What is it?" Hermione asked as she walked into the dining room.

Draco looked up at the worried frown on Hermione's face. "Just what we thought it would be," he said dismissively.

Hermione fixed herself a plate of food from the buffet and came to sit down. Draco pulled her chair out as always and dropped a kiss on her upturned lips. He lingered over her mouth. He delved in to find the taste of peppermint still lingering on her tongue. She moaned against his mouth.

It was occasionally beneficial to not have to worry about propriety at the breakfast table. Draco and Hermione wouldn't be able to do this if Rose were here, though he missed her bright chatter this morning.

Draco's hand drifted down, and he squeezed her breast softly. Hermione moaned again and arched into his touch. He wasted no time to haul her up onto the breakfast table and make a meal of her.

"For the love of God, don't you two have a bedroom for that," Theo complained as he walked into the dining room. He went over to the buffet and started heaping his plate with bacon, eggs, and toast.

## Finding Hermione

"By all means, help yourself, Theo," Draco drawled sarcastically. He dropped a quick, disappointed kiss on Hermione's lips before retaking his seat.

Daphne walked into the dining room looking a little green about the gills. "God, I hate Flou travel," she complained.

Theo helped Daphne seat herself across from Hermione. He gave his wife a worried glance before sitting down beside her. Daphne reached over and plucked a piece of dry toast from Theo's plate.

The room's four occupants fell into silence. The sounds of silverware lightly scraping on china seemed unnervingly loud.

The two witches in the room seemed to be in the iron battle of wills. Hermione looked over at Daphne, but when Daphne looked up from the small plate in front of her, Hermione would look down again. Daphne would then repeat the process.

Theo sighed loudly when he finally looked up from hungrily wolfing down his breakfast and saw the strange avoidance game the two were playing. He opened his mouth to make what Draco thought would be some snarky comment for the two to kiss and make up. Draco shook his head to silence Theo. The two witches were both stubborn, but fully capable of fixing their friendship themselves and probably wouldn't welcome Draco or Theo's intervention.

Finally, Hermione set down her fork with a sharp clink on the plate and looked over at Daphne. "I know you don't understand why I forgave Lavender, but it's my decision," Hermione snapped defensively.

Not the best start to a reconciliation, Draco thought.

Daphne looked across the table at Hermione with a stubborn set to her jaw. "No. I don't understand how you could forgive her. She slept with your husband." Daphne practically screeched "husband" at Hermione. Daphne took a deep breath trying to calm herself. "I keep trying to put myself in your shoes, but I can't do it. I can't understand forgiving her. If some bitch put her hands on my husband," Daphne said clenching her fists in anger at the thought, the dry toast in her hand was ground into

was shown.

"Monitoring charms," Hermione commented.

Hestia puffed up in pride as she turned to survey the paintings. "Yes, I got the idea from watching a Muggle TV show called Las Vegas the summer before I became the Slytherin Head of House."

"Now wonder your Slytherin sarsowell behaved," Hermione said.

"Well, they still get into mischief from time to time, but that's to be expected," Hestia said, smiling indulgently at the screens and at Scorpius and Minerva, who were watching the paintings with rapt attention. Hestia turned to Hermione and Draco and said, "I'll give you a few moments to say goodbye, but please knock on my door after. I would like to have a few words with you both."

Draco nodded his assent and watched as Hestia retreated through another door in the room. The Head's office was much more cheery than when his godfather resided here. A warm light glowed from overhead. Blankets and throw pillows adorned the leather seating area. Bottles of potions and various ingredients lined a wall beside the desk. On the other wall was a set of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves completely stuffed with books.

Draco turned back to find Hermione with an arm around each child, murmuring goodbyes and endearments, and probably a few admonishments in as well.

"Come on. Let's let them get back to their friends," Draco said.

He hugged Scorpius, resisting the urge to ruffle his hair again. Minerva came to him next and gave him a fierce hug. He saw Scorpius sneak one more hug from Hermione before leaving the room. Minerva released him and said a quick "Love you," to both of them before following Scorpius from the room.

Draco went over and rapped once on the door of Hestia's private quarters. He walked back over to where Hermione was standing near the fireplace to give the professor some privacy as she came out of her personal space.

Draco amended hastily as he caught sight of Hermione's arched eyebrow. Headed, "You're on the Wizengamot now, you could assign yourself to Magical Education if you wanted."

Hermione sat there mulling over his words.

"Mum," Scorpius interjected, pulling Hermione out of her thoughts.

"Yes, dear," Hermione responded, casting a curious glance at Scorpius and Minerva.

"We're glad to see you and all," Scorpius started uncomfortably.

"But we have a test tomorrow in Herbology," Minerva finished.

Draco frowned a little to himself to find that he was being dismissed by his children in favor of studying. He looked over to the table the kids had vacated and found James, Drake, Florence, and Miore still over there with their heads down, studying.

"Of course, you should go back to studying," Hermione said. She stood and they all followed her example by standing as well. Hermione looked around the room one last time. "It is so odd being in here," she mused.

Hestia came out such with impeccable timing that Draco wondered if she used charms to monitor the goings-on in the common room. Considering the shenanigans he got up to in this room, he felt a little relieved by the idea.

"Oh, I'm glad I caught you before you left," Hestia said in a rush as she walked over to where they were standing. "I thought I would save you the trek back up the stairs and offer the use of my Floo."

"That's so thoughtful of you," Hermione gushed.

Hestia guided them over to her quarters and gestured for Minerva and Scorpius to follow along. When they passed through into Hestia's office, Draco saw that there were indeed monitoring charms set up in the common room. Framed paintings stood in two rows of three paintings on either side of the door. In each painting, a portion of the common room

crumbs on the table.

Theo reached over and put a calming hand on one of her clenched fists. He gently pried her fingers apart and removed the remains of the toast from her hand. "Hey. Look at me," Theo coaxed. When Daphne complied with his request, Theo reached up and ran a finger down her cheek. "You know that I would never disrespect you like that, even if I didn't love you more than life itself."

Daphne nodded and set her free hand on his. "I know. I'm just trying to put myself in her shoes," Daphne said nodding her chin over at Hermione.

"I think there's a reason you can't understand, Daphne, is because you know that Theo would never put you in a similar situation," Hermione said kindly. She reached over for Draco's hand, and he placed it in her upturned palm. "Just as I know that Draco would never put me in that situation either."

"Damn straight," Draco said, rubbing his thumb across her hand.

"Then why?" Daphne asked plaintively. "Help me understand why?"

Hermione clenched Draco's hand. "Lavender came by the day before Ron's trial."

"How dare she!" Daphne cut in indignantly.

Hermione held up her free hand and made a shushing motion at Daphne. "I had a similar reaction when Draco told me that she was in our living room. I thought she was going to beg for leniency for Ron."

Daphne snorted in disgust.

"But, I was surprised to learn that she only came over to apologize to me. She told me her story."

Daphne looked like she wanted to interrupt and ask what the story was, but Hermione forestalled her again.

"That's her story to tell if she wishes it. I didn't agree with the path she took, but I empathized with her. There's not much I wouldn't do for my kids, so I understood why she felt being with Ron was the only option she had," Hermione said.

## Finding Hermione

Daphne looked like she still wasn't convinced. "Okay. Understand her reasoning. I can get that, but why forgive her. She was the reason Weasley was obliviating you."

"At first, yes, hiding her was the reason," Hermione answered. Daphne looked vindicated.

Draco felt his breakfast settle like a lead weight in his stomach at Hermione's words. He wanted to pull Hermione into his lap to convince himself that she was there and safe. To make himself feel better about not rescuing her sooner. He hated that he hadn't been apart of her life sooner. Hadn't known that something was wrong.

"Ron was responsible for his actions though, not Lavender," Hermione continued. She held up her hand again. "And before you say it, I don't think she had any knowledge of what Ron was doing to me."

Daphne nodded solemnly. "You said 'at first,'" she said quietly.

"Yes," Hermione acknowledged. "I have a feeling that Ron liked having that power over me and used it to take advantage of me. Even though I don't know what he did to me, I have accepted that he raped me, even if I gave consent at the time. I wouldn't have stayed with him or consented to have sex with him if he hadn't obliterated me into forgetting about his affair."

Daphne wrenched her hands from Theo's grasp and covered her mouth with them. She stared at Hermione in wide-eyed horror. Tears welled up in her eyes. Theo set a consoling hand across Daphne's shoulders.

Hermione leaned across the table with her hands outstretched. Daphne met her halfway and grasped Hermione's outstretched hands firmly.

"I forgave her because I needed to heal. I needed to be able to put this behind me and move on with my life. I gave her a job so that she could move on with hers too. So that she wouldn't be dependent on a man to provide for her," Hermione said quietly.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," Daphne choked out.

matter," Draco joked. When Scorpius looked like he was going to interject more, Draco held up his hand, "You got to pick out the ring, so don't act like you're being left out."

"He got to pick out the ring!" Minerva complained.

Scorpius and Minerva started squabbling good-naturedly about their roles so far in their parents' upcoming nuptials, as well as future roles to come. Draco tuned them out and stared unseeing at the aquarium wall.

He wanted to ask her to marry him soon. He didn't want to wait until Valentine's Day which was almost a month away, besides that was too trite. He wanted them to at least be engaged when word broke of her pregnancy. He didn't want people to be counting back on their fingers and thinking his children might be the Weasels's, though many probably would try anyway.

Hermione returned from her meeting with Neville. Draco raised his wand and quickly canceled the Muffliato charm. That would surely raise questions from Hermione on why he felt the need to cast the spell. Minerva and Scorpius flawlessly changed their argument to a Potions argument.

Hermione sat down on the leather sofa beside Draco. "What did I miss?" she asked, looking at the three of them in turn.

"No-thing," Scorpius and Minerva sing-songed in unison.

"Smooth," Draco teased. He turned to face Hermione. She looked suspiciously at him. Draco hoped to distract her by asking, "What did Neville want?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Draco but answered the question anyway. "He wanted to let me know that we'll need a new Care of Magical Creatures professor soon."

"Please tell me you're not going to appoint Hagrid," Draco groaned.

"No," Hermione laughed. "I love Hagrid dearly, but he is not cut out to be a teacher. Besides, I'm not officially the head of Magical Education anymore, so I don't have a say over who gets appointed."

"Thank God," Draco sighed dramatically. "Not thank God that you're not the head of Magical Education anymore,"

saying "Muffliato." Draco noticed a few shoulders hunch in disappointment at being denied gossip.

"Try for a little discretion, son," Draco chided. "And no, I haven't proposed yet. It seems a bit gauche to propose marriage before the ink is dry on the divorce decree."

Scorpius looked chastened to be scolded by his father.

Draco softened his chastisement by saying, "There are also proprieties that must be observed."

"Such as," Minerva prodded, looking amused.

Draco leaned forward and rested his elbows on his thighs. He looked seriously at Minerva. Draco's mouth felt suddenly dry as nervousness overcame him.

"It is customary for the man to ask his intended bride's father or brother, if the father is deceased, for permission to ask for their intended's hand," Draco answered. It took all his fortitude not to stammer the rest out. "Since that's not really an option, I thought I would ask you, Minerva."

"Me?" Minerva asked incredulously.

Draco smiled at the astonished look on her face. "Yes, you." Draco took both her hands in his. He felt a faint tremor and didn't know if it was her shaking or him. "Will you give me your blessing to ask your mother to be my wife?"

Minerva withdrew her hands from his grasp. Her lip trembled and a single tear slid down her cheek. She nodded her head twice slowly looking down at her trembling hands clasped in her lap before she looked up and met his gaze.

"I give you," she started hoarsely and then cleared her throat and started again with more assurance, "I give you my blessing on behalf of myself and my sister."

Draco cleared his own throat. He was struggling not to become overwhelmed with emotion. He could only imagine how interesting everyone would find that.

"Hey," Scorpius interjected, "What about me? Are you going to ask me for my blessing?"

Draco broke out into loud laughter. He reached over and ruffled his son's hair. "I think we know your feelings on the

Hermione ducked her head, and Draco couldn't stand not touching her anymore. He got up from his seat and moved Hermione's chair back causing her to lose her grasp on Daphne. Draco picked Hermione up out of her chair and sat her back down in his lap with her legs dangling over the side of the chair. Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and tucked her head under his chin. Draco squeezed her to him as if he were trying to absorb her pain into himself.

Hermione moved back and looked up at him. Draco wondered what his face looked like because concern was the foremost emotion etched on Hermione's face. Her hand moved from behind his neck and came to rest on his cheek. Draco leaned into her tender touch and stared into her eyes.

"I'm okay, Draco," Hermione soothed him.

It made Draco feel like shit that she was soothing him over her pain. Her experiences. That wasn't how it was supposed to work.

"I should have done something sooner," Draco told her, his tone full of remorse.

Hermione leaned forward and kissed him on his nose. Draco couldn't help the unwilling smile that was forced onto his face at the childish cute gesture.

"You didn't know. I didn't know. No one knew what Ron was doing to me. There was nothing that any of us could have done differently. It's over now. It's time to move on with our lives," Hermione told him with determination.

Draco nodded in agreement. "I think you're right."

"Hermione," Daphne said, calling their attention back to her, "I have to ask. Do you want to find out what memories he took from you?"

Hermione shook her head. "I think it's for the best to just let this sleeping dog lie. For my mental health and my current condition, I'm going to let it go and console myself with the knowledge that Ron is paying for his crimes."

"I thought we could work out a rough plan before our meeting with the Minister this morning," Theo said, not unkindly, but

wanting, Draco was sure, to draw the conversation to less distressing topics.

Hermione shifted off of Draco's lap and moved into the chair next to him. "So our goal should be to get leadership or oversight roles in as many departments as we can without making it look like we're trying to take over the Ministry," Hermione addressed them.

Theo nodded, agreeing with Hermione's assessment. "We're going to have to play this pretty smoothly to get Shacklebolt to agree to give us anything."

"I've been thinking of a plan," Hermione said.

She pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket, unfolded it, and spread it out on the table before her. A quick replication spell was performed, and they all had copies sitting out in front of them.

Hermione had made a list of all the departments in the Ministry of Magical Long with possible names written alongside the name of the department.

"What do you think of my initial plans so far?" Hermione asked after she gave them a minute to look over the list.

Theo looked up from the list. "I think I would prefer Magical Creatures over International Magical Cooperation." He looked over at Draco, whose name was beside Magical Creatures, and asked, "Are you fine with that?"

"I'll trade with you," Draco answered. He looked down at the list again. "As much as I hate to say this, Percy should be in International Magical Cooperation as well," Draco said with a long-suffering sigh at the thought of having to be around Percy Weasley on a daily basis.

"Really?" Hermione asked.

Draco shrugged. "He's good with all of those international laws and schmoozing with all the diplomats that visit the Ministry. I don't have the patience for them. I'll limit my focus to International Trading. I think Shacklebolt would be more accepting of that."

Hermione took out a pen and started making adjustments.

He plunked down in the armchair next to Hermione and looked around at the room. "I never get used to this common room."

"You needn't have rushed, Neville," Hermione said. "Is everything okay?"

"Hmm," Neville asked, looking startled by the question. "Oh, yes. Everything is fine." He waved his hand in a frustrated but dismissive gesture. "I just wish my Gryffindors behaved as well as the Slytherins."

"Oh? Why is that?" Hermione prodded.

Neville looked around. Minerva and Scorpius were listening avidly, no doubt eager to hear the latest gossip from a teacher. They would have to learn to feign bored disinterest if they ever hoped to get information they weren't supposed to have. "I can't really tell you," Neville hedged. "I don't feel right violating the student's privacy by spreading gossip."

"Oh," Hermione said disappointed. Then in a more businesslike tone, she asked, "What was it you wanted to talk to us about?"

Neville looked uncomfortable. He squirmed in his seat, causing the leather to emit a loud farting sound that seemed to echo off the glass wall. Minerva and Scorpius both giggled quietly behind their hands. Hermione smiled. Draco decided to spare Neville and pretend the whole thing didn't happen and kept his face impassive.

"I was hoping I could talk to you alone, Hermione," Neville said uncomfortably, his face tinged red with embarrassment. Hermione looked reluctant to leave but with a murmured "be right back," she stood obligingly and followed Neville to the door of the common room.

As the door swung closed behind them, Scorpius sat forward and looked accusingly at Draco. "You haven't proposed yet!" he exclaimed indignantly.

His loud exclamation caused the area around them to go silent.

Draco pulled his wand from his sleeve and flicked it,

dismissive tone. "Yes, well, I didn't want to just send that in a letter." Hermione's voice took on a teasing voice, "Dear Minerva and Scorpius. I'm divorced from Ronald Weasley. Please keep up with your studies. Love, mum."

Draco chuckled to himself. Scorpius leaned back on the sofa and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked expectant and hopeful as if he expected another big announcement to follow the unimpressive news of Hermione's divorce.

Minerva smiled faintly. "Mum, it's not like it was a surprise to us that you were trying to get a divorce."

Hermione took a deep breath. "There's also probably going to be some unflattering things said about Draco and I in the paper over the next few days," Hermione said hesitantly. "As well as some things about Lavender and Ron."

"Why?" Scorpius asked.

"I hired Lavender to be a co-manager of the domestic violence shelter that Draco and I started. It wasn't received well when I announced it at a press conference," Hermione explained to both children.

"It's so odd that you two get along now," Minerva commented, looking skeptically at her mother.

Hermione sighed heavily again. Draco thought she was probably getting tired of people questioning why she would forgive Lavender for sleeping with her husband.

"I know it seems odd to you and everyone else, but sometimes you have to forgive to move on and heal," Hermione explained.

"So you forgive her so that you can move on with your life?" Minerva asked.

"There's more to it than that, but essentially yes," Minerva nodded in understanding. "Alright then."

The door to the common room opened and they turned automatically to see who was entering. Neville stood on the landing looking around the room until he spotted them and walked over. He looked a little out of breath and slightly frustrated.

"I'm glad I caught you before you left," Neville wheezed.

"Blaise would probably worship the ground you walked on if you let him oversee Magical Sports," Theo said laughingly. Hermione huffed a little, still not happy with Blaise's attitude when they told him about the cuff, but she wrote his name down next to Theo's suggested department.

"I imagine Potter will want Law Enforcement?" Draco queried, looking down at Harry's name written next to that department.

"Probably not, but he's getting it anyway," Hermione said wryly.

Daphne was looking down at the list. "I think Tracey and I would be fine with Marriage & Family," Daphne spoke up.

Daphne, Tracey, Blaise, and Greghadn't been assigned spots on Hermione's preliminary list.

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, I think we can do a good job. We're both familiar with the new laws," Daphne answered. "I don't want to try to take it away from you. I know it's your baby," Daphne hastened to reassure Hermione.

"Actually it would be a relief," Hermione answered, surprising them all. She looked around the table at their mirrored look of astonishment. "What?" she asked.

"Well, I know," Draco said, taking her hand. "I thought we'd have to talk you down about taking on the responsibilities of more than one department."

"That's why Daphne and I came over before the meeting," Theo added.

"Well, it wouldn't make sense if we took the work from Kingsley and just piled it on me," Hermione huffed in irritation.

"Then it would look like I'm trying to take the Minister's spot," "Yes, well we know that Hermione," Theo said teasingly.

"We just worried that you may not know that."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "It's almost nine," Hermione said, looking at her watch, "Is there anything else that we needed to discuss before we left?"

Draco slid the paper across to her with the front page

prominent. "How do you want to handle this?" he asked.

Draco watched as Hermione's eyes quickly scanned the articles on the front. Her nostrils flared in rising anger. Hermione then slapped the paper down on the table.

"I am so sick and tired of this paper printing complete rubbish," Hermione vented. "I keep thinking they're going to change and print properly sourced news, and then this happens."

"You may have to..." Draco ventured.

Hermione cut him off with a raised hand. "Do not say 'Fire Lavender.'"

"Okay," Draco said in resignation. He sat back in his chair and folded his hands across his middle. "I won't say it, but that doesn't mean that it's not the best solution to our problem."

"Maybe," Hermione conceded, but stopped Draco before he had a chance to think that she might actually change her mind on this, "but what kind of person does that make me if I fire someone who needs a job and the safety and acceptance that comes with it?"

"Smart," Draco shot back. "You're thinking about the organization you started, and the best option to keep it afloat to help other women who need a safe place. The needs of the many sometimes have to outweigh the needs of the few."

"Draco, you're not changing my mind on this," Hermione said stubbornly. Draco could tell by her clenched jaw and narrow-eyed look that she was done listening to his suggestion.

"Fine," Draco threw his hands up dramatically in defeat.

Daphne and Theo wisely stayed out of their little spat.

Theo pushed his chair back and stood up. "Well, let's not keep the Minister waiting," he said, helping Daphne from her chair.

\*\*\*

Thankfully, the atrium was clear of press and crowds as the

Draco noticed that she conveniently didn't mention she wouldn't have been welcome in this room to watch the fish swim by. Times were so different now than when they were children at this school. It made him feel old like a lifetime had passed since they were here.

Draco led Hermione over to the two black leather sofas nearest the glass wall. Plush blankets with green and silver patterns were thrown over the backs of the sofas. It was one of the many new additions to the common room. A welcome addition as the dungeons got cold during the winter and the leather and aquarium wall didn't help matters much.

The children settled down on the sofa across from them. They looked at them expectantly.

Hermione cleared her throat. "So, I'm sure you're both curious why we're here. It's nothing bad for once."

Draco couldn't help but chuckle at the "for once" comment. "The bill passed today," Hermione continued.

Scorpius nodded. He looked over at Draco and quirked an eyebrow in silent inquiry. Draco quirked an eyebrow back at him. What did his son expect, for him to get down on bended knee before the ink had even dried on the divorce decree? Probably. Scorpius wasn't the most patient of children. Draco had no idea where he got that from.

"You're divorced now," Minerva said. "It's finally over."

Minerva's voice sounded both hopeful and relieved. Draco didn't know exactly how to feel about Minerva's reaction. Sad that she was relieved that her mother finally got a divorce. Overjoyed because there weren't any tears or tantrums. But that made him sad for her as well. Sad that after everything she'd gone through, she didn't mourn the loss of Ronald Weasley from their lives. How horrible was it that a child was relieved at the absence of a parent.

"Yes, dear. It's finally over," Hermione answered.

"Is that all you came to tell us? You could've written that," Minerva asked.

Hermione looked momentarily flustered by her daughter's

gestured over to the study area. "I'm sure you spotted them already. Can't hide those two anywhere," she joked.

"Thank you, Professor Carrow," Hermione said. "Professor Longbottom mentioned that he wanted to speak with us after he met with Headmistress McGonagall."

Hestia turned to Rory. "Rory, please direct Professor Longbottom to Ms. Granger and Mr. Malfoy when he arrives."

Rory nodded and went back to the couches with his friends.

Draco led Hermione over to the study area and the table where all six of the children were seated. Their arrival had attracted the kids' attention already and their books were already packed away in anticipation of Draco and Hermione's arrival. Minerva and Scorpius looked apprehensive at their unannounced visit.

"Mum, Dad, is something wrong?" Scorpius asked.

"Of course not, dear," Hermione answered.

She went around the table and hugged both children to her, dropping a kiss on the top of both of their heads. Minerva whined in protest. Scorpius remained silent but Draco noted that his ears turned pink.

James started laughing at Minerva and Scorpius's embarrassed expressions. Hermione went over to the end of the table and planted a wet, smacking kiss on his cheek, leaving a smear of red lipstick behind. Draco noticed Drake hiding his laughter behind his hand for fear of receiving the same treatment.

"Do you need us to leave?" Florence asked uncertainly. Her fingers twitched over a book that was still laying out in front of her, closed for the sake of politeness, but ready to be opened again at the first opportunity.

Hermione, recognizing a fellow bookworm, smiled at Florence. "No, that won't be necessary. I think we can take a seat over there and talk," Hermione answered, gesturing over to a vacant group of chairs near the aquarium wall.

"You just want to see the fish," Draco teased.

"It is rather interesting," Hermione responded. "I wish I'd known about this when I went to school here."

four made their way to their meeting with the Minister. They arrived at the Minister's office right as the clock chimed the hour. Blaise and Tracey sat on a conjured loveseat looking bored. Percy paced in front of the door. Harry looked irritated as he leaned up against the wall watching Percy pace. Harry ignored Percy as Percy walked by Harry and asked, probably for the hundredth time what the meeting was about. Greg stood in a corner looking confused as to why he or all people was asked to be here.

Minister Shacklebolt stuck his head out of the office, sighed, and gestured for them to come inside the office with a perfunctory "Come on in."

They filed quietly inside. Shacklebolt resumed his place behind his desk as he watched them get settled. Draco took Blaise or Tracey's side and conjured a cream, tufted, wingback settee for Hermione and himself. Hermione smirked at him as she took a seat on the conjured sofa. It was an ostentatious transfiguration for a meeting.

Once they all got settled in their own conjured chairs or in the seats scattered around the room, Hermione addressed the Minister, "I trust you had a pleasant night?"

Draco was unsure if the meeting would go in their favor if it started out on such informal grounds. He had to trust Hermione's judgment on the matter though.

Hermione's informal title was rewarded with a very slight smile from the Minister. If Draco hadn't been looking, he would've missed it.

"Excellent, Kings," Hermione said. She opened her black leather bottomless bag of tricks and pulled out her list. "Now," she started, all business, "I have a list of..."

Several people in the room groaned loudly at Hermione's mention of a list, including the Minister. Draco couldn't help but smile to himself. Hermione's methodical organizational skills were well known, as well as her ability to over-prepare for everything.

"As I was saying," Hermione said sternly, looking around

the room at everyone. "I have a list of the departments and the people I think would be best suited to assist you in overseeing the day-to-day operations of each department at the Ministry."

She handed a list to Kingsley. He pulled out a pair of black plastic framed reading glasses and perched them on his nose. "What exactly do you see me doing?" Kingsley asked with a bit of suspicion.

"Well, Kings," Hermione started in a conciliatory fashion, "I'm sure there's a great deal for you to do. The Minister of Magic shouldn't have to concern himself with the day-to-day operations. He has the bigger picture to consider."

Draco thought for sure the Minister wouldn't be fooled by Hermione's flattery, but Draco was wrong. Shacklebolt was eating it up as Hermione continued to tell him how he was too important to be dealing with these small mundane matters. How he had trusted employees to deal with these issues.

Finally, Shacklebolt was buttered up like a hot bun right out of the oven. "Alright. You make some good points, Hermione. We'll try this out for a month, but I want daily meetings on what's going on. I want to stay apprised of any situations."

"How about a weekly meeting?" Hermione countered.

"I don't like that," Kingsley protested. "I can't agree to so little contact."

"If I may," Percy interjected. The Minister gestured at him in a "go ahead" motion. "How about a meeting on Monday morning to go over new business, projects, or any ongoing or long-term situations, then on Friday afternoon, another meeting to wrap up the week?"

"Wonderful plan, Percy. We'll do that," Kingsley exclaimed before Hermione could make a counteroffer.

Percy, of course, beamed at the praise.

"If that's all," Kingsley started, "I have work to do before my next meeting. I'm sure Hermione has copies of your assigned departments for you all."

Dismissed from the Minister's office, they all gathered in the waiting area outside where Hermione gave them their

Draco got a chance to look around at his old common room unobserved.

The common room was crowded with young adults. Some were working on their homework at the tables. Others were lounging on the black leather chairs and sofas reading or talking. Some of the students were wrapped up in green and gray patterned throw blankets. Groups were also gathered on the benches that lined the aquarium walls and watching the creatures of the lake swim by.

"Is this what it looked like when you lived here?" Hermione whispered.

"It's a lot homier than it used to be," Draco answered. They were finally noticed by the young adults in the room. Someone ducked out to a door on the side, presumably Hestia Carrow's office and living quarters. One of the prefects stepped away from their group of friends to greet them.

"Hello, Mrs. Granger and Mr. Malfoy," a red-haired young man with a shiny Prefect's badge greeted them. "I'm Rory McDougall."

"It's lovely to meet you, Rory," Hermione said to the young man.

Draco looked around the common room to see if he could spot the telltale signs of two voluminous blond heads. He thought he spotted them sitting at one of the tables in the study area of the room. He was just about to guide Hermione over to them when Hestia Carrow burst into the room. She looked to be dressed for bed already. She had her brown hair up in a messy bun. She was wearing an oversized Slytherin tee and a pair of green yoga pants.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her voice full of concern when she caught sight of them.

Draco looked at her in confusion. "We needed to have a talk with Minerva and Scorpius. I thought the headmistress would have warned you since she sent us down here."

Hestia slumped in relief. "She must have forgotten. I thought something bad had happened." She smiled at them and then

to them when so much is going on.”

McGonagall huffed and pursed her lips in annoyance at the two of them. “Minerva and Scorpius are currently in their common room. I assumed that would be a better meeting place than my office.”

“Thank you, Headmistress,” Draco said politely. “And what is the password to get into the Slytherin common rooms?”

“Honor.”

Draco and Hermione left McGonagall’s office and made their way down to the dungeons. They received curious glances and whispers from the students.

They crossed paths with Neville just before they were going to make the turn down the stairs to the dungeons. He was huffing his way up the direction they had just come from.

“Hey guys,” Neville greeted them.

“Hi Neville,” Hermione responded warmly. She hugged him quickly.

“It’s lucky you’re here. I wanted to have a word with you. I’ve got a meeting with McGonagall right now. Are you going to be around for long?” Neville asked, glancing at the watch on his wrist.

“We came to talk to the kids about what happened today,” Hermione explained. “You can find us in the dungeons when you’re done.”

“Okay thanks,” Neville said and took off up the stairs.

Draco had to give him credit. Neville moved up those stairs much faster than Draco had in his prime. He didn’t want to think about the fact that they had to climb back up those again to get out.

They continued their trek down to the dungeons. The temperature in the stone corridor stirred and noticeably chilly the further down they went. Finally, they came to a blank stone wall with the statue of Salazar Slytherin standing guard to one side.

“Honor,” Draco said.

Adoro appeared in the stone wall and Draco and Hermione stepped through. No one noticed them for a moment and

assignments.

Percy was both pleased and dismayed with his assignment. He looked overjoyed to be overseeing International Magical Cooperation. He wasn’t as delighted to find out that Draco would be his partner, despite Draco’s assurance that his interest would mostly lie with international trade.

“I’ll be keeping an eye on you,” Percy threatened.

“Let me know if you’d like any investment tips. I’m sure your family could use some help with managing their investment portfolio,” Draco snarked back.

“Boys,” Hermione chided reprovingly.

Percy made a rude gesture at Draco, then wandered off down the hallway.

“It seemed too easy,” Hermione fretted. “I didn’t expect him to agree so quickly.”

“Considering how much you stroked his ego, I’m surprised Draco’s not seething in jealous fury right now,” Harry retorted.

“Oh, Minister,” Harry started in a high falsetto and pretending to clutch a string of pearls at his neck, “you worked so hard to put the Ministry back to rights after the war. You got all those nasty Voldemort sympathizers out of the Ministry.”

Everyone started laughing at Harry’s impersonation of Hermione. Hermione grinned and swatted playfully at Harry.

“Oh, Minister,” Blaise took up the teasing, “you’re such a strong and wise wizard. We have ever so much to learn from you.”

“Oh, Minister,” Theo started with a grin, “you’re going to be considered the best Minister of Magic we’ve ever had with all your efforts during the restoration.” Theo started fanning himself. “Oh, I’m so overcome, Minister. You simply must sign my cleavage,” and Theo theatrically opened his robe up, exposing the white dress shirt underneath.

“Enough, enough,” Hermione wheezed between gasps of laughter.

They all laughed good-naturedly at Hermione, who took their teasing with good grace.

## Finding Hermione

"Don't you all have departments to get acquainted with?" Hermione asked archly.

Blaise, suddenly remembering that he was given control of Magical Sports, bowed from the waist with his arms outstretched in dramatic worship. "I'm not worthy," he chanted over and over again and trying to kiss the hem of Hermione's robes until Tracey elbowed him in the side.

"Ginny is going to be so steamed that you didn't recommend her for Magical Sports," Harry said, laughing at Blaise's antics.

"Well, these spots are for Wizengamot members," Hermione said. "If she can get Molly to hand over her seat to Ginny, then I'm sure Blaise would welcome help from a renowned Quidditch athlete."

"Yes, yes, yes," Blaise chanted. He looked like the only thing keeping him from dancing around the group in joy was Tracey's hold on his arm.

"Have her suggest that the Prewett seat pass down matrilineally," Hermione suggested, not bothering to be coy about her wishes that Ginny take over her mother's seat.

Harry nodded thoughtfully at Hermione's suggestion. "That brings up another point. I noticed that Greg didn't have an assignment."

Hermione returned to Greg and said apologetically, "I'm sorry. I didn't know where you wanted to be or if you wanted to help."

Greg shrugged and looked down at his feet and shuffled from side to side. "It's alright. I'm not really sure where I would fit into all this," Greg said. "I'm not very political."

"Actually, I brought it up because I would like you to help me in Magical Law Enforcement, Greg," Harry said to Greg.

Greg looked astonished at Harry's request. "But...but, why?" he asked in confusion.

"Well, you did a good job finding the Blakes. You asked for help to secure their safety. You thought of their needs before your own pride, which is more than I get from some of my Aurors," Harry told Greg matter-of-factly.

Greg's neck flushed a bright pink at Harry's praise. He

## Chapter 47 Blessings

Draco and Hermione stepped through the fireplace and into the cozy Headmistress's office. McGonagall was waiting for them behind her desk, surveying scrolls of parchment while she waited for them to arrive.

"I hear things went well today," McGonagall said in greeting.

"For the most part," Hermione answered.

McGonagall looked over her square-framed spectacles at them in question.

"Naming Lavender as a manager of my domestic abuse shelter wasn't received well," Hermione answered the unspoken question.

"I don't imagine that it was," McGonagall said primly. "It will not be easy for her for quite a while. Unfortunately, we have long memories for scandals such as that."

"Thank you for allowing us to come to talk to the children this evening," Draco said, trying to guide the conversation back to their reason for being there. He didn't want Hermione getting into another argument in defense of Lavender.

"I hope that this drama will soon come to a close so that we aren't constantly upending the children's day with parental visits. This is a boarding school after all and we do have days where you can visit your children now," McGonagall said in irritation.

"Well, if Hogwarts and the rest of this blasted world weren't so behind the times, we wouldn't need to keep coming here so that we can have a conversation with our children," Hermione snapped at the headmistress. Hermione took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Minerva. It's just very difficult not to be able to talk

shuffled from foot to foot in embarrassment. "Alright, but if I get in the way, I won't think badly of you if you send me packing."

"No worries, mate," Harry said, going over to Greg and clapping a hand on his meaty shoulder. "I'll have Artie kick you into shape if need be."

"Who's Artie?" Greg asked, looking apprehensive.

"Come on," Harry said, "I'll introduce you to the team."

The two left with a wave. Draco never thought he'd see the day where Harry Potter thought Gregory Goyle would be an asset to his department. Outside of their close group of friends, Draco knew Greg was used to being treated like the big, dumb lummo he was in school. To say Greg struggled in school would be an understatement, and eventually, he was just too discouraged to bother trying to learn. It was true that his magic wasn't strong, and even now Greg was more comfortable doing things the Muggle way, and usually more successful.

"I think we should go get started looking at those applications to set up Divorce Court," Tracey said, looking over at Daphne.

"Oh, please tell me that's not what we're calling it," Daphne groaned.

"Isle of Repentance?" Tracey quipped.

The two ladies kissed their husbands goodbye and made their way to the elevators and the ninth level, which was where the newly nicknamed "Isle of Repentance" was located.

"Let me know if you need any help!" Hermione called after them and received a thumbs up in response.

"Well, I'm going to go see if a certain Harry wants to offer me her congratulations on my new appointment," Blaise said, still over the moon. If he kept it up, Ginny was just as likely to hex him as congratulate him.

Blaise came over and gave Hermione a kiss on both cheeks.

"Use that Slytherin mind of yours to get her to convince her mother to give the Prewett seat to her," Hermione suggested.

"You mean like promise her a cushy job overseeing the Department of Magical Sports. I would never do such a thing,"

Blaise said with faux indignation.

Draco supposed that he should go and meet his new department. Percy had already beat him there and was no doubt hoping to sabotage Draco's influence with the International Trade Division. The thing that Percy likely didn't realize was that the Malfoys were known for investing in lucrative ventures, both domestic and abroad. Rumors of Malfoy interest in a company were likely to drive the stock prices up for said company. The size and depth of their vaults was proof that Malfoys knew how to pick successful ventures. Draco's input would be welcomed in the International Trade Division. It was probably the one department where he wouldn't be treated with suspicion.

Hermione stood on tiptoes and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Draco looked questioningly at her. "I'm going to go get reacquainted with my department. I'll see you for lunch?"

"I'll come get you at noon," he agreed. "Take it easy, please," Draco pleaded as she took off.

\*\*\*

Draco hadn't actually worked a full day at the Ministry since before Weasley's attack. By the time four o'clock rolled around, he was exhausted and ready to go get Rose from school and enjoy a quiet evening at home.

Rose broke free from her teacher's line as soon as she spotted them come through the Floo. She collided with their legs and squeezed them both so forcefully around the middle that both Draco and Hermione were almost knocked off their feet. Draco barely kept all three of them upright.

"I missed you," Rose said almost accusingly as if she hadn't seen them in weeks rather than a day.

"Well missed you, too," Hermione reassured her daughter. She smoothed a hand over Rose's hair, which looked like it had once been a braided chignon that was likely too old of a hairstyle for

"Make love to me, Draco."

Draco leaned down and kissed her. "As my lady wishes," he told her as he sunk his hard cock into her wet heat.

Hermione arched up against him with her head thrown back. Draco groaned against her neck.

"You feel so good," Draco said with a groan.

"I need you to move, Draco," Hermione begged, rolling her hips against him.

Draco started thrusting. He thought he would never get enough of how amazing it felt to be connected with her this way.

"I want to be on top," Hermione demanded breathlessly. Draco put his hands on her waist, lifted her up, and turned them so that he was seated on the couch with her on top of him.

Hermione started bouncing up and down experimentally. Draco supported her hips as she rolled on his dick. He tilted his head back onto the cushion of the sofa and luxuriated in the feel of her sinking onto his cock.

"That's it, baby. Ride me," Draco encouraged her.

"You're so deep like this," Hermione panted.

Her movements sped up until her cries became almost constant. Her pussy gripped his dick hard as she bounced up and down. Then she started moving jerkily as her orgasm approached. Draco took control and moved her hips forward and back.

"Come for me, lioness," Draco groaned. "I'm not going to last much longer."

Draco impaled her more forcefully on his cock. Hermione froze and shuddered on him with a cry of release. Draco exploded in her with a roar.

Hermione collapsed on his chest. Her hair fell forward, and Draco could feel it tickling his nose and trying to find its way into his mouth. Draco tucked her hair behind her ear.

Hethen started unbuttoning his shirt. Draco kept a smoldering gaze on Hermione as he dropped his shirt onto the floor. He broke his gaze with her long enough to pull his undershirt up and over his head. Draco grinned in satisfaction at the hitch in Hermione's breathing.

"So handsome, Mr. Malfoy," she purred at him.

Hermione's hands clenched into the cushion of the sofa as if she were resisting the urge to reach out and stroke her hands down his chest.

He kicked off his shoes as he worked open the buckle of his belt. Hermione looked hungrily up at him as he unzipped and unbuttoned the fly of his trousers. Her hot gaze focused on what would next be uncovered. He dropped his pants and stepped out of them. Draco stood before her in his black boxer briefs that showed off his prominent erection.

"You seem eager at the prospect of finalizing this alliance, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione said.

"Very eager, Ms. Granger," Draco admitted as he pushed his boxers down his legs and let gravity take care of the rest once they got past his knees.

Draco palmed his cock and stroked it a few times. Hermione hummed and licked her lips.

"I have a feeling we're going to work very well together, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione said.

Hermione shifted so that she was lying across the length of the sofa. Draco got onto the sofa and knelt between her legs. He drew her legs up, and she wrapped them around his waist. Draco propped himself up on his elbows over Hermione. He stroked her cheek with a thumb.

"You're the most amazing witch I've ever met," Draco told her in admiration.

Tears glistened in Hermione's eyes. She brought up her hand to his cheek and mirrored his hold on her.

"I can't believe how lucky I am to have you in my life," she told him, her voice husky with emotion.

"Always and forever," Draco told her.

a five-year-old. Her hair had come undone sometime during school and hung in unraveling braids down her back. "Did you have fun at Nana's?"

Rose nodded enthusiastically. "Nana Cissa let me play dress up with some clothes we found in the attic. I pretended I was a princess and I got to wear a giant crown. It was very heavy. I tried wishing for it to be lighter, but that didn't work, and Nana Cissa told me to wear a different one. She told me that princesses wear smaller crowns and queens only wear the big ones on really special occasions. Is that true, Mum?"

Draco guided them over to the queue for the Floo, while Rose continued telling them all about her sleepover with his mother. He hated waiting in the long lines to leave, especially today when he was tired. Draco tried to imagine his father waiting in line to use the Floo anywhere, and failed. He couldn't imagine Lucius Malfoy waiting his turn to use the Floo. Lucius would've marched to the front of the line, shoving women and children out of his way with his walking stick. Not that Lucius Malfoy would have ever let Draco go to a public primary school, even if it was for magical children.

Hermione, Rose, and Draco finally made it to the front of the line and arrived in the study at Spinner's End. Draco plopped gratefully onto the sofa, while Rose ran off to greet Tansy and wheedle a cookie or three from her. Hermione meandered over to their desk. Draco could hear a drawer opening, the clink of glass vials rattling around, and a cork popping, indicating that Hermione had downed another dose of anti-nausea potion.

"What's this?" Draco heard Hermione ask.

Draco propped himself up on his elbows to find Hermione holding up an envelope. Draco lay back down on the sofa.

"I don't know. Who's it from?" Draco answered lazily.

Hermione seemed to find out who the sender was because she then said, "This better not be what I think it is," with a hint of trepidation and anger.

I will not be pleased."

"Whatever the lady desires," Draco murmured. Draco sucked her clitoris into his mouth. He flicked the bundle of nerves rapidly with his tongue. Hermione's hand came down on his head, and she gripped his hair again.

"Don't stop, don't stop," she panted.

Draco kept up his ministrations on her clitoris and moved his hand so that he could circle the entrance of her pussy with his fingers. He coated his first two fingers in her juices and slipped them slowly into her eager cunt.

Hermione started flexing her hips as she rode his fingers. Draco had a difficult time keeping his hold on her clitoris. He settled for firm licks to the bud in time to her thrusting movements. He curled his fingers to stroke the top wall of her pussy. She was gripping his fingers tightly with her approaching orgasm. Hermione stiffened and started shuddering. Her cries of pleasure echoed off the walls of the study. Draco kept stroking her until she collapsed on the sofa in a boneless heap. Hermione was panting heavily. She brushed a curl off her face and looked at him with a sigh of pleasure.

"Is my lady satisfied?" Draco asked playfully. He slipped his fingers out of her pussy and brought the glistening digit to his mouth.

"I believe there is one more thing you could do for our mutual satisfaction, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione responded.

Draco stood and looked down at Hermione. He shook his legs to get the feeling back into his feet.

"And what would that be, Ms. Granger?" Draco asked.

"Take off your clothes," Hermione ordered.

"As you wish, Ms. Granger," Draco responded.

Draco loosened his tie and pulled it over his head. He dangled the tie over Hermione's stomach and breasts, tickling her with its silky texture. Hermione snatched the tie out of his grasp.

"Continue," she ordered.

Draco laughed as he complied with her demand. He worked his cuff links out of their holes and dropped them onto the table.

harsh reality of what they truly meant.

Heisjudged,oftenunfairly,forhisactionsasateenager.Forbecoming aDeathEaterattheageofsixteen.FortryingtokillAlbusDumbledore. I don'texcusehisactions;evenhedoesn'texcusethem.Howmanyofus cansaythatwewouldrefusetojoinVoldemortwhenhethreatenedtokill thosewelove?Howmanyofuscansaythatwewouldnotdoanything wecouldtokeepthattyrantfromhurtingourfamilies?Iempathizewith hisactions,andassomeoneewhosawhisstrugglesduringoursixthyear,I knowthattwasn'taneasytask,thathisconsciencestruggledwithwhat was expected of him.

DracoMalfoyturnedintoanadmirableman,alovingfather,a supportivepartner,andconsideringhisearlylifeandtheexampleshewas given,Ibelievehiswasnosmallfeatforhim.Thisistosaythatthis parentsarenottovingpeople,IknowitishardtoenvisiontheMalfoysas lovingindividuals.However,IknowforafactthathereinnothingNarcissa Malfoyholdsigherthanherloveoffamily.ShedidletVoldemort'sface tofindersonafterall.Thoughsheprobablywon'tthankmeforrevealing suchvulnerabilitiesabouther,Ifinditadmirablehowfarshewaswilling togotoprotecther son.Andhavingchildrenofmyown,Icanunderstand thatthere isn't anything a parent wouldn't do for their child.

ThroughabitofoldMalfoymagic,IfoundoutthatDracoandI aresoulmates.Itwasquitestartlingatfirst.IhavetoadmitthatDraco andIhadarowaboutit.Iunfairlyaccusedhimofputtingthebracelet onmewhileIseptasameansofclaimingmeashisinsomepureblood, Neanderthalmatingritual.He wasjustassurprisedasI wastofindthe braceletonmywrist.Hismotherwasnotsurprisedintheleast.Youcan't seem to get anything past Narcissa Malfoy.

Thesurprisehaswornoffconsiderablysincethen.Nowitseemsfitting, theknowledge thatwewerealwaysmeanttobetogether.Evenwithallthe conflictaroundus,IamhappierthanIhaveeverbeen,andthatisbecause

Iknowhisbymysidenomatterwhat.Theroadthatledustoeachother hasbeenlongandwinding,andatimesfullofpotholes,butitmadeus who we are today. It made us ready to love the other.

JustaswelearnedwhenHarrydefeatedVoldemort,loveistheonly way.Dr.MartinLutherKing,Jr,oncesaid,"Wemustdiscoverthe poweroflove,theredemptivepoweroflove.Andwhenweliscovethat,we willbeabletomakethisoldworldanewworld.Loveistheonlyway".Dr. Kingknewafewthingsaboutfightingdiscriminationandsocialprejudice. Hespokeoutforequalrightsforallpersonsofcolor.Hespokeoutthata personnotbejudgedbythecoloroftheirskinbutbythecontentoftheir character.

Dr.Kinghadadreamforequalrights,justaswehadadreamfor equalrights.Iwasoncejudgedbasedonthe purity ofmy bloodandnot the strength ofthemagicwithinme.LikemanyotherMuggleborns,Iwas onceunitedandtorturedbecauseIdaredtobemagicalwherenoneothers before me possessed magic.

Dr.Kingmaynothaveknownaboutthemagicalpowersoffove,how itcansavealife,howitcandefeatthoseincapableofit.But,Dr.Kingdid understandthatlovecanmovemountains.Lovecanmaketheimpossible possible.Letusnotforgetthelessonswelearnedwiththespilledbloodof those thatfell duringthelastwar.So,mybrothersandsisters,Ibeseech you toletloveintoyourlives.Letloveforyourfellowneighborovercome hurtsandprejudice.Letloveforyourchildrenguidethem tobekinder tothosewhoaredifferent.Letloveshowyouapath toforgivenessand understanding.Letuscreateanewandbetterworldforourchildrenand grandchildren.

*With Love,  
Hermione Granger*

Dracohadto setthepaperbackdownonthetable.Hiscoffee andbreakfasthadlongsince gone coldas her readHermione's letter.Tears blurred his visionas Draco looked unseeing at the wall in front ofhim.He was moved by her public and heartfelt declaration of love for him. He was in awe of how she made her letter both about her relationships, the scandals revolving

around them, and the issues in their society.

Hermione walked through the door into the dining room. She looked so fresh and beautiful. Her hair was braided into a crown around her head. She had donned an eggplant-colored, three-quartered sleeve, cable-knit sweater, and light gray slacks for the day. Her cuff glittered on one wrist while her three infinity rings glittered on her right ring finger. Simple round diamond studs adorned her ears. How Draco longed to shower her in jewels though he knew Hermione felt no need for such things.

Draco wiped the moisture from his eyes and walked over to intercept her before she started filling her plate with food.

"What is it?" Hermione asked right before Draco crashed his mouth down upon hers.

She tasted of everything Draco had ever hoped to have in his life: love, acceptance, forgiveness, belonging, and family.

Draco dropped to one knee and held out the ring Scorpius picked out. "Marry me," Draco blurted out.

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, Draco."

Realizing that he'd just blurted out his proposal, Draco apologized, "I'm sorry. You deserve a better proposal. I've carried this ring around for a while now, and I've been waiting for the right time. I love you. And I want to have babies with you. And raise our children together. And grow old together. And I couldn't wait another second to do all that with you."

"Oh, Draco," Hermione said again. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She held out her left hand for him to put the ring on. "I want all of that with you. And I love you too. Of course, I'll marry you."

Draco, with trembling hands, slipped the ring onto her finger. Draco rose to his feet and gathered Hermione into his arms. She stretched out her hand and gazed at her engagement ring.

"Are you disappointed?" Draco asked.

Hermione pulled back to look at him, her eyes brows wrinkling down. "Of course not. Why would you think that?"

Draco raked a hand through his hair. "I didn't exactly make

with a safe place to go if they were in abusive situations, I asked Lavender to co-manage the shelter with my former assistant, Methuselah Edvard. I asked Lavender, not because we were in collusion and not out of gratitude, but so that she could have a place of her own to work and do good. Where she could make a life of her own. Where Lavender could be accepted for herself, rather than the image the world forced on her. After the media backlash surrounding the announcement that we were working together, Lavender tried to resign. She didn't want women to not seek the help they needed because of her.

If you don't recently that Lavender's children are also bearing the brunt of the media backlash surrounding Lavender and Ron's affair, as well as Ron's attack on Draco Malfoy and myself. As someone who has built a career educating children and ensuring that we do not repeat our past mistakes, I find this difficult to excuse. What does this say about us as adults that we would punish children for the sins of their parents? What does this say about us after all that we have been through, after all that we fought against, that we would bully children? That we would let a child allow our child to be bullied by others for something they have no control over. You punish them for being illegitimate or for their father being in prison. How are either of these things their fault? How is this different from the pure blood prejudice that we fought against that people died fighting against?

I've saved the best for last, and I'm sure it's the bit of gossip that you're all dying to read about. I LOVE Draco Malfoy. I cannot say it any more plainly than that. I love Draco Malfoy. Looking back now, I know that it was odd that I chose to leave with him that day on the platform and even odder that I chose to stay with him. I knew that it would drive Ron insane that I stayed with him, but that wasn't the reason. I trusted him. I trusted him with my daughter. I trusted him as he helped me through the pain of Ron's betrayal. Every day he proved himself worthy of my trust. He protected me when Ron tried to attack me more than once, even going so far as to throw himself in the line of fire. He showed me what a good, healthy relationship was that's not to say that we don't fight because we are both head-strong individuals. Draco is not the boy I knew in school. He's a man, tested by the circumstances of fate and upbringing. A man that was forced to confront the ideal of his upbringing when presented with the

was your only consideration.

Solams speaking out about my relationships, I am her to set the story straight. I loved Ronald Weasley for much of my young life, even though he was too oblivious to notice me. We married young, probably much too young, considering we had both just survived a traumatic event. Helo's brother and me, my parents, and so much loss tend to make you cling to those around you, even if they aren't good for you. Even though we were hardened by war, we were still children. Children who hadn't been given a chance to find who they were.

When I found out that Ron was oblivious to me, I wondered where we went wrong. What road had we turned down to make this horrible thing possible? It was hard to imagine that the boy I had known since we violated me so horribly, I thought a great deal about Ron's actions. I'm sure they started in innocent enough, an act of self-preservation, which isn't innocent but oddly understandable. There's a Muggle saying about power: "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." And what better example of absolute power can you have over another person than to have complete control over their memories. So believe and have to believe that what started as self-preservation corrupted Ronald Weasley to do unspeakable things to me.

I am grateful that the relationship with Ron ended when it did. That I found out the way I did. If it weren't for the actions of a tired and frustrated woman and a small child, who knows what would be left of my mind and possibly my body. Many of you wonder how I can forgive Lavender Brown, even my friends and family find it odd. She saved me that day. Lavender Brown saved me from years of abuse at the hands of my former husband. So I forgave the woman that slept with my former husband for years because she publiclyouted her relationship with him and let herself be painted as a home-wrecking hussy, to the media because she was tired of hiding, because she wanted better for her child, renthan to be kept as a shameful secret, because she was a woman in an impossible situation. I can forgive her the sins she committed against me for so many reasons.

Lavender Brown and I received much speculation and ridicule over the last few days with the unveiling of the non-profit organization I started, Granger House. I started Granger House to provide women and children

it very romantic for you. Blurting out a proposal before you've even had a chance to eat breakfast."

Hermione turned in his arms and placed a hand on his cheek. "It was perfect." She rose on tiptoe to kiss him.

"Eww, gross," Rose protested as she came into the dining room for her breakfast.

Draco and Hermione broke apart. Hermione appeared a little dazed by what just happened between them. She looked questioningly up at him; her left eyebrow arched to punctuate her confusion.

"I love you, and you have made me the happiest man alive since the day you walked into my life," Draco told her.

## Chapter 51 Spilogue

The year of Hermione and Draco's life sped by as years are wont to do. They had good years and bad. The good outweighed the bad and even during the bad, their love for one another helped bolster them through the storm. Their love for one another grew stronger every year. The hope that Draco always harbored to make the world a better place was realized through the hard work of the Wizengamot with the leadership of Hermione. They never had to worry about their children or grandchildren fighting in a war like they had.

Hermione steadily made her way through the Malfoy library. It was her birthday and one hundred years had passed too quickly for both of them. Her small frame had shrunk a little bit over the years. Her once bushy, chestnut hair had gone gray, then white over the years. Her beautiful, smooth face was still beautiful to Draco even if it was lined with wrinkles around her mouth and eyes. Here yes. Those beautiful, chocolate eyes still sparkled with intelligence and still shone with love whenever she looked at him or their large family.

Draco was still the tall, proud man he had always been. He needed a cane now to help him walk around the Manor and trying to climb the stairs had become difficult. His platinum blonde hair had steadily receded until there was only a few wisps of white left. The smile lines around his mouth and eyes from his many years of happiness with Hermione had carved deep wrinkles in his once smooth face.

She stopped, as she often did, at the book that stood in a case in the middle of the room. Draco stood beside her,

## Chapter 50 The Proposal

Draco opened the paper and was not surprised to see Hermione's letter gracing the front page of The Daily Prophet. After her explosive argument with Lavender, Hermione had worked on it furiously for a few days. She wouldn't let him see it before the letter was finished and sent off to the editor, and Draco was positively dying with curiosity.

Dear Witches and Wizards of Britain,  
I am not going to both to hide behind a name and anonymity. I am Hermione Granger. I am the Hermione Granger who stood beside Harry Potter when none of you believed Voldemort had returned. I am the Hermione Granger, the warrior witch, who withstood being tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange and would have died rather than betray Harry or our plan to defeat Voldemort. I am the Hermione Granger who publicly found out about our former husband's affair on our children's boarding school train platform. I learned a lot more about my husband in the days and weeks that followed. Things that I would never have believed of the boy I grew up with and loved for most of my life if not confronted with proof of it.

I have stayed mostly silent on my relationships, the end of my marriage with Ronald Weasley, the beginning of my relationship with Draco Malfoy, and my inclusion of Lavender Brown in the managing of Granger House. Despite being considered a war hero in and the Brightest Witch of Her Age, I have always considered my private relationships just that, private, but you have not respected my privacy. You have not respected my right to choose my relationships. You have not considered the children involved in these tumultuous upheavals, their right to privacy, mental health, and overall well-being. Your apacious need for gossip and to sell newspapers

# Finding Hermione

"I know. I do too," Draco agreed. "But it's not for us to sort out. I'm sure that Scorpius and Minerva aren't part of the group that's bullying Fred. Charlie assured me that the children weren't on either side of Fred's altercations."

"That's good to hear, at least," Hermione said in relief.

She moaned as Draco dug his thumb into the arch of her foot. Draco loved the sound of that moan as it fell from her lips. He continued massaging her feet. Then he started sliding his hands up to rub her calves, earning himself another moan in appreciation.

"You tempt me so when you make those noises, lioness," Draco said huskily.

Traco said huskily.

Hermione gave him a saucy look. "Why don't we head to bed then so I may tempt you further?"

## EbookDragon

looking at the book. He had asked over the years what the book was but Hermione always refused to tell him. It had appeared there on the day of their wedding, thin like a newly started book. As the years went by, the book grew, each successive year adding more and more pages to the book.

"The last one," she said.

"I never would have expected you to be able to read all the books in the library."

"Well, you didn't make it easy. Every time I got close, you would add more books."

"I had no intention of letting you win the bet."

"Cunning snake."

"Stubborn lioness. So what are you going to ask for when you win?"

"Do you know what this book is?"

"No, you've always been rather mysterious about this book."

"I know you've noticed that this book has grown over the years."

"Yes, but what is it?"

"It's a book that neither one of us needed to read, nor would it ever be completed for either one of us."

"Why would we never need to read it?"

"Because we lived it. It's a book about our love, about finding ourselves and each other."

"It can never be completed because we still live. You never had any intention of winning that bet, did you?"

"I wasn't willing to pass up the opportunity to live another lifetime with you."

Draco grinned at her. Just like his witch. If she was going to lose, it would be deliberately and on her terms. He took her hands in his and brought them to his lips, moved by what she was saying she wanted from him. "I will find you. I will always find you. In every incarnation, in every time, I will find you." He'll ~~find~~ *find* ~~you~~ *you* ~~in every incarnation~~ *in every time* retired to the will of ~~the gods~~ *the gods* ~~to die~~ *to die* ~~in the underworld~~ *in the underworld*.

room that they had shared for over a hundred years. After changing into their nightclothes, they laid down facing one another with their hands clasping and noses almost touching.

"I love you, my lioness."

"I love you too, my dragon."

At close to midnight, a soft exhalation left Hermione, her hands going soft and slack in his grip. Draco breathed one last time, his last breath mingling with hers. A younger version of Draco and Hermione stood looking over the still bodies of themselves.

He held his hand out to her, saying, "It was one hell of a ride."

She took his hand in hers. "That it was. I wonder what the next one will bring us."

They walked off together towards the white light, hand in hand, to cross beyond the Veil.

getting rather hungry."

"Why don't you go put the dolls away?" Draco suggested. They left Lavender's house with quiet and stilted goodbyes.

Awkward because they were the invaders in this home. Welcome, but not exactly.

"I forgot to ask," Hermione said after Rose was put to bed that night after three stories had been wheedled from them before Rose fell into an exhausted sleep. "What's going on with Lavender's children?"

Draco sagged down on the couch. Hermione sat down on the opposite side and put her feet in his lap. Draco started massaging her feet and calves. He told her what Charlie confessed to him about Fred, Lydia, and Arthur.

"Oh, that's so horrible," Hermione said, aghast. "We should write to Scorpius and Minerva and tell them to befriend Fred."

"No," Draco spoke the word firmly. He did not want the children to feel forced into a friendship with Lavender Brown's children. Fred had bullied them at the beginning of the year. If Scorpius and Minerva wanted to forgive and forget, that was up to them to decide.

Hermione looked stubborn with her jaw set as she started to try and pull her feet from his grasp. Draco grasped her ankle to keep her in place.

"Hear me out," Draco coaxed. "They're old enough to decide who they want to be friends with without our interference. I know I didn't much care for my father telling me who I could be friends with at that age." Draco shrugged to himself. Mostly it had been who he could not be friends with. "Would you have wanted your parents telling you that you had to go make friends with someone you might not necessarily want to be around?"

Draco asked.

He could tell that Hermione wanted to deny his assessment of the situation. However, honesty made her agree that she wouldn't have welcomed her parents' interference in her friendships.

"I just feel so bad for them," Hermione said.

could be heard drifting up the stairs.

"Should we go down and put a stop to this?" Draco wondered. He didn't like it that Hermione was so getting so worked up. He knew stress couldn't be good for her or the twins.

"Nah," Charlie said, "they'll both either calm down soon or storm off in opposite directions."

"Gryffindors," Draco said with an eye roll.

"Witches," Charlie shot back with a grin.

Stomping now echoed up the stairs, and soon Hermione's curly head appeared at the top of the stairs.

"We're leaving," she announced to the room.

"Have a nice visit," Charlie said sardonically.

Hermione shot him a nasty look. "She's being stubborn," Hermione seethed quietly. Draco supposed that it was so Lavender's children wouldn't hear her talking negatively about their mother. "She doesn't need to be so self-sacrificing, so."

"Like a Gryffindor," Charlie interrupted.

Hermione looked like she was ready to protest Charlie's assessment, but Charlie held up his hand.

"You need to go easy on her," Charlie urged. "She's having a rough time right now with the kids and school. She's very stressed out. She thinks she's doing the right thing by quitting, even though she didn't want to do it." Charlie paused before he told Hermione, "She was excited to be able to do something good for others."

"That's why we shouldn't let her quit," Hermione said. "She wants to do this, and I don't think we should let negative publicity keep her from it."

"Just give her some space. Let this die down," Charlie urged again.

"Let's go home, Hermione," Draco said. "It's getting close to dinner time anyway."

Hermione's stomach growled loudly enough for it to be heard by everyone in their small group.

"Are you hungry, mummy?" Rose asked.

Hermione smoothed her hand over Rose's curls. "Yes, I'm

Scorpius stood with Minerva looking at the still bodies of their parents. Scorpius had gone up to check on them when they hadn't come down to breakfast. When he found them, he called Minerva to come over. "They look like they've just fallen asleep. I keep expecting them to wake up and yell at us for being in their room," he said, his voice choked with emotion.

Minerva nodded, tears streaking down her face. "At least they went together. I dreaded what would happen if one went before the other."

"I never got to tell them they were going to be great—great grandparents," Scorpius said.

"Leo and Persephone finally got pregnant?"

"Due in June. They don't know the gender yet."

## 12 years later

### September 1st

"Have you seen a toad?" Astor looked up from his book to find a girl with long, brown, curly hair standing in front of him. His light gray eyes met the most amazing pair of chocolate brown eyes he had ever seen. He felt a tug in his chest, looking at her, and rubbed his hand over his heart unconsciously.

"No. Is it yours?" he answered.

He caught her rubbing the place above her heart as well.

"No, a boy named Neville. It's his toad. I'm Lilliane, but everyone calls me Lily," she stuck out her hand sideways for a Muggle handshake. Muggle-born then.

He took her hand in his, "Astor Malfoy," he said before bringing her hand up to his lips. She giggled as he released her hand. "Would you like some help looking for this escaped

"What's going on?" Draco asked. He wanted not to care, but Hermione considered these people a family. He had developed a reluctant liking of Charlie Weasley. Draco set Rose down on the floor at his feet to play with the dolls.

"I never realized how cruel kids could be to each other, especially at their age," Charlie said, gesturing to Lydia and Arthur. "I know the kids are just repeating what their parents are saying about Ron and Lavender."

Draco knew how brutal children could be to one another. He'd been one of those cruel children. He bullied anyone he viewed as beneath himself, and that was almost everyone. He didn't really grow out of it until his seventh year. He was still required to act the part. He was too scared not to.

"We've been up to Hogwarts every day this week," Charlie continued. "Neville is at his wits end about what to do with Fred."

Curious, Draco asked, "What's going on with Fred?"

"Fighting, jinxes, the usual," Charlie told him.

Not that it mattered, but Draco pressed on, "Who starts it?"

Charlie sighed and rubbed a rough hand over his face.

"Sometimes it's Fred. Sometimes it's the other kid. I'm starting to think that when it's Fred, he attacks first before the other kid gets a chance to attack him."

Draco and Hermione hadn't received any letters from Scorpius or Minerva saying that Fred was bullying them. Draco made a mental note to ask in his next letter to the children.

"I see you worrying about if it's your kids," Charlie commented.

Draco mentally kicked himself for being so transparent. It was a very un-Slytherin thing to do.

"Don't go all poker face on me," Charlie said in a teasing tone. "Given their history, I was sure Fred would be targeting them."

"Yes," Draco agreed, "I was worried he would be targeting at least Minerva as the 'source' of his grievances."

Muffled sounds of Hermione and Lavender still arguing

## Finding Hermione

"Say it like you mean it," Charlie said. Another sigh from Arthur, and he shouted, "SORRY FOR KICKING OVER YOUR BLOCKS!"

Charlie rolled his eyes and let the matter drop. "Play nicely now, please."

While this whole altercation had gone on, Rose moved over to the window seat where Lydia was. Rose seemed to be determinedly trying to get the older girl's attention without flat-out demanding it. But, unfortunately, Lydia seemed just as determined to ignore the younger girl.

"What are you reading?" Rose asked Lydia.

Lydia didn't respond but held the book up higher where Rose could read the cover.

"What's it about?" Rose tried asking.

Lydia continued to ignore Rose.

"Can I play with your dolls?" Rose asked.

Lydia shrugged in answer. Rose left the window seat and went over to grab a few dolls from where they were lined upon a shelf in the corner of the room. Rose went back over to the window seat and held out a doll in offering to her.

"Would you like to play with me?" Rose asked.

Lydia snapped her book shut with a loud crack. "I just want to read," she shouted at Rose. "I want to be left alone so that I can read. I don't want to play with dolls. I don't..."

"Lydia," Charlie barked. "That's not a way to treat your sister or a guest in this house."

Draco went over to Rose, who was looking tearfully at the dolls in her hands. He picked her up, dolls and all, and carried her over to a couch against the wall and sat with her in his lap.

"Why she don't want to play with me?" Rose asked tearfully.

"I don't know, princess. Maybe she just wants some quiet time," Draco offered.

Charlie came over and sat at the end of the sofa. "I'm sorry," he said in weariness. Charlie raked a hand through his long hair. "They're not having an easy time at school, and it's gotten worse since the trial."

"We don't throw things, Danny boy," Charlie admonished.

"He kicked over my blocks!" Daniel protested.

"I know, and I'm going to have a talk with him next. But we're talking about you now," Charlie said.

"But he," Daniel started to protest again.

"No," Charlie said firmly, "you don't throw things at people.

Why don't we throw things?"

"Because someone could get hurt," Daniel replied with a pout.

Arthur was slowly inching his way around the room. Draco could tell the boy was trying to get down the stairs to avoid being yelled at. Draco was still standing at the top of the stairs and blocking the boy's path. Draco wondered if he thought Draco wouldn't interfere.

Charlie snapped around and leveled a severe look at Arthur.

"Don't you move one more step," Charlie told Arthur in a pretty impressive "dad voice."

Charlie seemed like he was catching on pretty well to his new parenting role, especially compared to the last time Draco spoke with him.

Arthur sullenly looked down at his feet and shifted from side to side.

"Why did you do that to your brother?" Charlie knelt down and asked Arthur.

"I don't know," Arthur mumbled.

"Do you think that was a nice thing to do to your brother?" Charlie persisted.

Arthur shook his head "no."

"No, it wasn't," Charlie agreed. He lifted Arthur's chin up and made him look at him. "I want you to go over there and apologize to Daniel for kicking over his blocks."

Arthur shuffled reluctantly over to Daniel and muttered a sullen "sorry."

"Sorry for what," Charlie prompted.

Arthur heaved a sigh and said in a rush. "Sorry for kicking over your blocks."

## Finding Hermione

"And Hermione?" Draco prodded, curious to see what the older man's take on Hermione's behavior was.

"I don't need your help!" Hermione screeched.

Draco and Charlie shared a look at Hermione's statement.

"Well, Hermione's always been much more selfless than other Gryffindors," Charlie started.

"Good, then you don't need me working for you!" Lavender practically growled.

Draco nodded in agreement. He knew the only reason Harry and Weasel passed their classes was that Hermione "helped" them with their assignments. And by "help," he meant he was pretty sure they copied off her exhaustive papers.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it!" Hermione said in frustration. "This scandal will blow over in a few days. But, that's no reason to just throw away a good opportunity."

"Tell me if you think I'm wrong, but it seems that Hermione is almost compelled to help those in need, even if it's at her own expense," Charlie continued.

"It feels like she's overreacting a little bit, doesn't it?" Draco confessed.

"She's stubborn. You know that," Charlie said, waving off Draco's concern. "Hates to be wrong about anything."

"Hermione, people aren't going to trust me," Lavender said with a pleading tone.

Charlie rose from his lounging position at the table. "Why don't we go upstairs and let these two figure it out?" he suggested.

Draco rose as well and followed Charlie upstairs to the loft. Lavender's three children still at home were there. Lydia was curled up on the front window seat, reading a book. Daniel was sitting in the middle of the floor, surrounded by blocks and building little towers out of them. Draco watched as Arthur came over to Daniel and kicked over his blocks. Daniel wailed at his brother and picked up a block. Then, just as his arm was cocked back and ready to launch the block at Arthur, Charlie sprung forward and plucked it from his tiny grip.

with his feet kicked upon the bench. Charlie was also munching loudly on popcorn and appeared to be watching an entertaining show.

"What the..." Hermione screeched, caught sight of Draco and Rose in the doorway, and amended, "French toast!"

"What are you doing here?" Hermione asked Draco.

Draco went over to Hermione and dropped a kiss on her brow. "Sorry to intrude," he apologized to Lavender.

"Why not? The more, the merrier," Lavender huffed at him. Draco turned to Hermione, "I just thought Rose would like to see her Uncle Charlie."

"Uh-huh," Hermione said, not buying his excuse. She turned back to Lavender and said, "Draco thinks that I should just let you resign."

"Don't get me involved with this," Draco protested, not wanting to be drawn into an argument between the two witches. He had no problem disagreeing with her, but he wasn't going to take someone else's side against her.

Draco moved over to where Charlie and Rose were sitting and sat on a corner of the bench.

"Popcorn?" Charlie asked, holding out the bag for him.

"No thanks," Draco replied. "What's your take on this?"

Charlie stuffed another handful of popcorn into his mouth and munched thoughtfully on it. "Typical Gryffindors, the both of them," he said after he swallowed.

"You can't do this to me, Lavender!" Hermione yelled.

"Care to elaborate?" Draco asked.

Rose was sitting between Draco and Charlie. He caught her sneaking handfuls of popcorn out of Charlie's bag and thoroughly ruining her dinner.

"I'm trying to help you, you daft witch!" Lavender yelled back.

Charlie gestured over to Lavender. "Well, Lav is trying to be noble and quit so that Hermione doesn't feel like she has to fire her, and she feels guilty about all the bad publicity she caused Hermione."

## Finding Hermione

Tansy had given her and placed them on a baking sheet.

Draco went over and kissed Rose on the forehead. "Let's get you cleaned up, princess," he said.

"But I'm helping Tansy make dinner," Rose protested.

Draco thought about just leaving her here with Tansy, but he didn't like the idea. Tansy wasn't Rose's nanny. While Tansy didn't protest at being asked to look after Rose, Draco didn't want to get into the habit of expecting Tansy to take care of her whenever they popped out for a while. Besides, he and Hermione hadn't spent any time with Rose since yesterday morning before dropping her off at school.

"I just thought that maybe you'd want to go with me to visit Uncle Charlie," Draco wheedled.

"Uncle Charlie!" Rose exclaimed, clapping her hands and sending a cloud of flour into the air.

"These biscuits look great," Tansy praised. "Thank you for your help, Miss Rose."

"Thank you, Tansy," Draco told the house elf.

Tansy bobbed her head, and her cheeks tinged a little pink. "You're welcome, Master Draco."

Draco stepped out of the Floo with Rose into Lavender's living room. Sounds of arguing could be heard from deeper within the townhouse.

"Earmuffs, princess," Draco instructed.

Rose gave him a scrunched-up look of confusion. Draco placed her hands over her ears, and Rose giggled. Draco smiled to himself and led Rose through the living room to the kitchen, where the source of the arguing was.

He pushed open the swinging door to find Hermione and Lavender on opposite sides of the center island. Draco stopped just inside the entrance to look around the room. Lavender's kitchen was decorated simply. Unlike her living room, which was a testament to her name, the kitchen had white cabinets with black marble countertops.

While Lavender and Hermione were battling it out across the island, Charlie was lounging on a corner farmhouse table

stiff from down to sit beside him on the couch. Draco rubbed Hermione's arms reassuringly. "I'm sure she just thinks she's doing you a favor in quitting so you don't feel like you have to fire her."

Hermione jerked away from him and grabbed the crumpled-up letter. "I'm not going to let her do it. This organization is about helping women, and she needs help."

Hermione stood and went over to the fireplace.

"Hermione," Draco called after her, "please, just respect her decision or at least sit on it for a day or two and let things mellow out."

"I'm going to talk to her, Draco, and you're not going to stop me."

With that pronouncement, Hermione was through the Floo and off to lay siege to Lavender Brown.

Draco huffed as he watched Hermione leave. Please let it be hormones, he prayed. He knew Hermione's Gryffindor bleeding heart wouldn't let her just abandon someone she decided to help, which was why he loved her so much. She was so different than a Slytherin. Sure she had her moments of craftiness and cunning, but deep down, she cared too much about people. Slytherins were different. Yes, they cared and loved people, but usually only those closest to them. Those that had earned their respect and loyalty. Draco wouldn't have bothered to help Lavender Brown if he were in the same position as Hermione. Forgive, maybe — eventually. But to help her, and often at Hermione's expense — never.

It wasn't his decision, though. If Hermione was determined to help Lavender make something of her life, Draco would support her decision. Draco nodded to himself as his decision was made, not that it was a difficult one. He went in search of Rose so that they could chase after Hermione.

Draco found Rose and Tansy working side by side on making their dinner. Rose was up to her elbows in flour with it liberally sprinkled over the hunter-green jumper his mother had addressed her in that morning. She cut biscuits into circles with a cup

## Finding Hermione

*employment with Granger those few days even one woman from seeking the shelter she needs  
from an abusive spouse*

*Sincerely*

*Lavender Brown*

"Well, it seems that she's taken care of this problem for us," Draco said, folding the letter back up and handing it over to Hermione.

Hermione took the letter from his hand and smacked his shoulder with it. "That's what you'd like, isn't it?" she practically growled and struck him again with the letter. "For me to just abandon her!"

Draco took the creased letter from her hand before she could start hitting him again. "You're not abandoning her, but it'd be odd for you to want her to be a part of our lives. I don't understand why you're this upset that she decided to quit rather than continuing to damage the reputation of the domestic abuse shelter you created."

Hermione paused and looked thoughtful. Draco hoped for a second that he'd gotten through to her, and they could put this behind them, so he could go back to lazing on the couch. His hopes were dashed though a moment later when Hermione stubbornly stamped her foot.

"I gave her a job when no one else would. When people would question why I would want to associate with my former husband's mistress. She shouldn't just quit because times got tough," Hermione snarled, throwing her hands up in the air in frustration.

Draco narrowed his eyes at her as if he were trying to penetrate into her brilliant mind. Were these pregnancy hormones? Gryffindor stubbornness? Did she feel like Lavender was abandoning her?

Draco took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose as he tried to genuinely understand why she was upset about this. "I don't think she quit because times got tough, love," Draco said consolingly. He reached out and pulled her

# Chapter 49

Draco groaned as he heard the words that ruined his perfectly well-thought-out plan to remain on this couch for the rest of the afternoon.

"Who's the letter from, love?" he asked, his arm still draped over his eyes.

"What the hell?" Hermione screeched.

Draco sat up now. He was starting to worry that the letter was hate mail or something from Weasley that a sympathetic guard smuggled out of Azkaban. "Who is the letter from?" he asked again in a tone that meant he wanted an answer.

Hermione responded by handing over the letter with an angry "Here." Draco grasped the letter and bypassed all the contents, and went for the signature at the bottom. The name "Lavender Brown" was scrawled across the bottom of the page, and Draco let out a sigh of relief that it wasn't something worse. His eyes moved back up to the top of the page to read the letter.

January 18th, 2014

Dear Hermione,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your generosity in hiring me for the position of Assistant Manager of Granger House. It meant the world to me that you saw something in me that recommended me to this position. I want you to understand how much it meant that you would offer me employment and find a place for me in your foundation.

I feel that I must resign from my post as Assistant Manager. My actions and reputation appear to be a detriment to the respected organization you are trying to create. I apologize that my notoriety has created negative publicity for you and Granger House.

I hope that my resignation will cause the negativity directed at you and Granger House to subside me to leave, however, I believe it to be for the greater good. Without me, your organization will grow. Without my presence, people will trust you again when you say that you offer protection to women and children in abusive situations. I would not want my continued