Relicta Animarum

by Poetgirl616

Summary

Voldemort was defeated, but at a terrible price. Now, extreme measures are being taken to rebuild the world after the war. The future hinging on names sealed in an innocent envelope . . . and whether or not the matches survive one another before and during their marriage. . .
The Second Wizarding War was over. The Dark Lord and his army defeated, this time with unquestionable finality.

Buildings, homes, and lives were still in the process of being rebuilt.

However, the cost for such a victory was unimaginable.

Hundreds dead on both sides during the battle itself, but so many more over the years leading up to the Final Battle. The numbers for the records were steadily climbing, to the Ministry's dismay. Hermione attended the mass funerals and the smaller funerals, crying more than she knew she was able to.

To add insult to injury, a plague swept through the Wizarding community like wild fire, stemming from Hogwarts. More specifically, the site of Voldemort's demise. According to witness statements an unnatural cloud of an unnamed substance burst forth from the scene moments after the event that ended the war. At first, it was thought to be a side effect of the curses slung between wizards at the time or a failed attempt at self preservation. Medi-witches has since confirmed that it was indeed a curse, but not the one they originally suspected.

Lord Voldemort's curse had struck hard and without mercy. Wizards, witches, and squibs from all walks of life had been killed by the illness. Panic surged, hospitals all over the world were overrun with the dead and dying. Hope plummeted every day a cure stayed out of reach, until it appeared as if all was truly lost.

The Weasley family suffered even more loss. Fred fell to the disease shortly after the battle was won, making the victory feel more like a failure. The taste of the celebration turned more bitter than sweet.

Days turned to weeks, weeks to months, and the list of the dead multiplied rapidly. The numbers swelled until the patient traffic resembled a horrific force of nature. Until one day, the roaring waterfall of bodies became a fountain and then a trickle, then---lastly---a droplet.
Molly, dear and ever sweet Molly, was the last patient to become infected with the disease. She survived just long enough for her remaining family to gather around her bedside to say goodbye. Her loss was by far the most difficult. Arthur secluded himself in his home, leaving only rarely, surrounding himself with surviving family and self assigned work.

The plague was over as suddenly as it had appeared. Days passed without a death, without sickness, and the community dared to hope again.

Unfortunately, the combination of war and the disease devastated the Wizarding population. Squibs outnumbered Purebloods and Muggleborns. Men outnumbered women and children were fewer than had been seen in decades.

Once last of the dead had been buried and the majority of the buildings reconstructed, news was spread that newly appointed Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt had called a special meeting with what remained of the Wizengamot. They were in session for the better part of six hours, when they emerged and Kingsley asked for a press conference. Reporters from the Daily Prophet, Witch Weekly, the Quibbler and every other news outlet gathered outside of the Ministry of Magic the next day. The Minister took his place on the podium and announced spirit raising, but equally shocking news.

A solution to the population crisis had been found.

The Wizengamot passed a marriage law.

The next day, the Wizarding World exploded in frenzied chaos as the post dropped the proverbial bomb on the community.

Hermione stared, speechless, down at the paper.

The Daily Prophet headline read Marriage Law To Fix Population Crisis?

She quickly flipped to the page number offered for more information.

Minister Shacklebolt called a press conference outside of the Ministry of Magic yesterday to discuss a possible solution to the crucial population crisis. The Minister has announced the unanimous passing of the Marriage Law. The Minister has described what this Law is to entail and the information we've received is printed below.

An elaborate system of enchantments and current consensus profiles has been used to match one witch to the wizards that best suits her.

Witches and Wizards starting from the age of fifteen and ending at the age of seventy five are required by law to participate. Failure to comply will result in six years in Azkaban prison.

All marriages prior to the Marriage Law are now nullified and void.

The matches will be sent to each person in the form of a letter. The matches are to be wed no longer than three months from the date of receiving their letter and the Marriage is to consummated. No exceptions!

Two children are expected from each wizard the witch weds. Failure to comply will result in twelve years in Azkaban prison.

Keep your eyes and windows open, your future will soon arrive via owl.
Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. A Marriage Law? Surely Kingsley could see how badly received that would be? Especially so soon after the war. Witches and wizards were being forced into marriage and parenthood no matter their wishes.

A Marriage Law.

This couldn't be happening.

The young witch promptly tossed up her lunch in the nearby garbage bin and sent Harry an urgent owl.

She couldn't do this alone.

They were going to push her into marriage and then into bed with people she probably didn't know. Oh, Merlin, what if they were on the tail end of the required age?

She couldn't do this.

She dry heaved over the garbage bin, her entire body trembling.

She couldn't do this.

Hermione paced the kitchen, waiting anxiously for Harry to come.

He should have been here by now.

He could be at work. If that's the case, she could have her letter in her hand by the time he arrives. She couldn't open the letter, read the names that sealed her fate, if he wasn't there with her.

He's her best friend.

She glanced at the clock for the fifth time, wringing her hands.

He should be off work soon.

Hermione walked to the living room, deciding to wait for Harry there.

She sat and stood, alternating the movements, growing more restless with each action.

The fire roared to life, the flames changing from a vibrant red to an eerie green, and a familiar soot covered figure stepped out. Harry quickly dusted the excess soot off his clothes and strode across the living space to stand in front of her.

"Has it come yet?" He asked, his green eyes studying her face.

She shook her head. "Not yet."

"Mine either." He sagged a bit, relief filling his features. "I'll wait here with you. We'll read our letters together when they come. It's going to be okay, Mione."

She smiled weakly at him.

She really wished she believed that.
Chapter 2

Disclaimer: I do not own the Harry Potter series or its characters. Any unrecognized plot or characters are mine.

Chapter One

*~Hermione~*

I clenched my hands together tightly on my lap, skin paper white and nails biting into my skin.

Harry sighed, sitting next to me on the couch, untangling my hands and holding one in his warm grasp. I clung to his hand like a lifeline, he was familiar and safe. I needed that right now.

I knew logically that the chances that my list of names would be constructed of multiple walks of life and not necessarily all Death Eaters.

Still, my treacherous mind provided me with images of men with blurred faces. Bone white masks and black robes were present on some of them, but others were dressed in casual robes or muggle clothing. There are increased chances that at least one of my matches will be a complete stranger, as well as at least one of my matches may be a Death Eater.

Neither thought gave me comfort.

"Hey, it's going to be okay." Harry assured me, giving my hand a gentle squeeze.

"What if I'm matched to a Death Eater?" I whispered, staring down at our joined hands.

"That won't happen, Mione." He promises. I knew he didn't have the power to make such promises, but his reassurance did make me feel a little better.

"You can't promise that." I said, nudging his shoulder.

"Sure I can. You'll probably marry some rich, good looking guy and you'll be so disappointed because he isn't a genius. Maybe you get a guy that discovered something cool and important, if you're lucky." He teases, nudging me back.

I smacked his arm, fighting down a smile. "Shut up."

"You know it's true, Mione." He told me with a grin. "You deserve the dry dinner conversations about runes no one else really cares about, or equations that make absolutely no sense."

"How sweet of you to say." I murmured, rolling my eyes.

He was such a dork, but his relaxed attitude helped me forget for a minute how terrifying this was supposed to be.

A hoot from the kitchen sucked out all the atmosphere we'd built in the past few minutes, wiping the grins from our faces.

Time was up. The letters were here.
Harry attempted a smile, to lighten the mood again. It didn't reach his eyes.

Fear stared back at me.

I swallowed, tracking him as he walked to the kitchen window and came back holding two letters. My heart kicked up a few beats and jumped into my throat.

He sat down beside me and placed my letter in my trembling hands. He held my gaze as he poised his shaking hand over the seal of his envelope. "On the count of three."

I nodded, copying his position.

"One. . .two. . .three!" He shouted the last bit and we tore into the envelopes, drawing the parchment containing our matches into the light.

I unfolded the parchment as slowly as my hands allowed, part of me wanting to put off reading the names as long as possible.

I heard a sigh of relief beside me, but ignored it in favor of reading through my letter.

Ms. Granger,

The Ministry has run your information and has confirmed your best matches. Under the requirements listed for the Marriage Law, you have three months to marry the men listed below.

Neville Longbottom
Draco Malfoy
Lucius Malfoy
Severus Snape
Charlie Weasley
Arthur Weasley

Wishing you and your future husbands' many happy days,

Mathilda Hodgins

Blood drained out of my face and my entire body went cold.

No.

Not them. Anyone but them!

There had to be an error, some kind of typo or a botched result. I couldn't be matched to them.

Neville wasn't a bad choice. I knew him, I trained with him in Dumbledore's Army and fought with him during the war. He could be a bit of a walking disaster sometimes, but I trusted him with my life.

The Malfoy's had me captured and tortured under their roof. The younger having done his best to make my days at Hogwarts as terrible as he could over the years.

Severus Snape was my Potions Professor!
I didn't really know Charlie, he occasionally showed up at the Burrow for holidays such as Christmas, but I've never talked to him I don't think.

Arthur was mourning the love of his life. They had had decades of love, friendship and marriage. They had had plenty of children together as a result of such a love. They were like love struck teenagers in an older couples bodies. They truly were halves of the same whole, one soul in two bodies and all that super romantic, totally and completely meant for each other nonsense I tried not to take too much stock in.

It was hard to ignore, though, how ridiculously made for each other the Weasley's parents were.

Now I am expected to marry him.

I couldn't be the one to trample all over the Weasleys' late monarchs memory like that.

Oh, Merlin. I would be a dirty

I ran for the garbage bin, then I proceeded to painfully and violently dry heave as there was nothing in my stomach to toss up.

When the heaving finally stopped, I dropped to the floor and cried.

I would hurt the people I love, people who have loved me in return, and I had no choice in the matter.

Molly will surely come back and haunt me for this. She took me under her wing, cared for me, fed and protected me since I stepped foot in the Burrow all those years ago.

Guilt and shame ate away at my insides.

"Mione? What is it? Who did you get?" Harry asked, concerned. From the closeness I could guess that he was kneeling in front of me.

I handed the letter to him.

"What the does the Ministry think they're playing at?! Half of these are Death Eaters!" Harry growled angrily, his green eyes flashing and his knuckles white around the letter.

"Read the last name." I whispered, knowing he hadn't reached that name yet.

His face paled. "Arthur?"

I nodded, my eyes stinging with tears.

This was where Harry would rant about how I would be ruining the Weasleys marriage, tell me how much of a filthy home wrecker I am, how much of a terrible person I am, and storm out.

I wouldn't blame him for it.

He sighs, running a hand over his face. "Come on, Mione. Get cleaned up, we have to go."

I blinked at him. "What?"

I wasn't expecting that. Where was the yelling? Where was the anger?

"I'm taking you to the Burrow. If the Weasleys don't know you were matched with Arthur and
Charlie by now, they will soon and you should talk to them. You will be part of the family soon and it will technically be a family meeting, so that's that." Harry stood and folded the letter, sticking it in his jeans pocket.

"I can't go to the Burrow, Harry! I'm breaking apart our best friends parents marriage, I highly doubt that they would want to see me!" I couldn't believe that he suggested that I just waltz in like I didn't signify the end of something beautiful.

His face turned sad. "Mione, if anyone is to blame, its the Ministry. Not you. You need to talk to Arthur, at the very least. You're going to be married, you need to get used to discussing things with him."

A part of me knew that he was right.

I reluctantly stood from the floor, washed my face and changed into fresh clothes.

I clutched Harry's hand rightly as he prepared the Floo. Oh, Merlin, I was actually doing this.

"Just breathe, Mione. Everything will be okay." He reassured me before he stepped into the fireplace. "The Burrow!"

I watched my friend and support system disappear with a flash of green flames.

Okay, Hermione, you can do this. Harry is waiting on the other side of this Floo trip, he will be there the whole time. I told myself, taking deep breaths to calm myself.

I grabbed a big handful of Floo powder, stepped into the fireplace, squeezed my eyes shut for a bit of Gryffindor courage and shouted the name of one of the last places I wanted to be at the moment. "The Burrow!"

Roaring in my ears let me know that I left my loft.

Loud voices shouting over each other in efforts to be heard first alerted me that I had arrived at my destination.

I crept toward the source of the noise, the kitchen, naturally. The closer I got, the easier it became to distinguish individual voices and understand what they were saying.

"How in the bloody Hell did I get paired off with Looney Lovegood?!" Ron shouted angrily. "We have absolutely nothing in common! This Law is a bloody crock!"

I could picture how his face would probably be blotchy and red, the large furrow in between his eyebrows.

"Alright! That's enough out of the lot of you!" Harry yelled, voice carrying over the din. "Mione and I received our letters just a bit ago, we can all talk about our matches calmly and in a civilized manner."

I noticed that the last part he said to Ron specifically, if the pointed look was any indication.

I edged into the kitchen now that it had settled, glancing around the room, but avoiding Arthur's direction. Charlie was there, Ginny, Ron, Harry, and of course Mr. Weasley. Everyone was standing around, most were glaring down at their letters.

Charlie stared at me like he had never seen me before, probably surprised by the fact that he'd been
matched to his kid brothers friend of all witches.

Oh, Merlin. Arthur hasn't opened his yet.

Charlie, the nearest person to the patriarch, also noticed this. "We've all opened our letters, you should open yours."

No, not here. Not in front of them all. I whispered in my mind, pleading to whatever or whoever was listening.

Merlin, God, or whoever was up there did not hear my pleas. Or if they did, they had a cruel sense of humor.

Arthur was frozen, his head still bowed over his letter.

"Did you get exempt?" A hopeful Ginny asked. Her childlike hope stabbing me in the heart and giving the blade a brutal twist for kicks and giggles. She had advocated since the very moment the Law was a budding rumor among back alleyways that her father should be exempt from the stupid Law. He was a grieving widower, he had plenty of children and her mother was the love of his life. The only woman she could picture standing beside him, the only woman he should ever love in that respect.

I stared at the floor, guilt gnawed at my insides with greedy enthusiasm. I couldn't look at any of them.

"No, sweetheart." Arthur answered softly.

The quiet words were worse than Ginny's hope. They were almost a physical being stomping ruthlessly on the blade in my heart, slicing and cutting the organ to a bloody pump.

I did this.

I was the single most horrible witch that has ever lived.

The kitchen was silent for five seconds before the Weasley children expressed their opinions.

"Why?!"

"What does the Ministry think they're playing at?!!"

The others were more. . .creative expletives. One even involved a rather unpleasant scenario with a dragon and a Dementor.

"It's the law now. In order for us to repopulate we need multiple couples and as many gene combinations as we can produce." Arthur explained to his outraged children. "The Ministry fears that the Wizarding population will become completely extinct in less than a century, so they have sunk to extreme measures to prevent such disaster."

There was grumbling and grudgingly admitted statements of understanding.

"Wait, dad. Who did you get, if you weren't allowed to be exempt?" Ginny asked, frowning.

Arthur's eyes darted to me and back.

I shifted nervously on me feet. This was the moment of truth.
He cleared his throat and turned so he was addressing all of us at once. "I have been paired with Hermione."

The kitchen exploded.

Glass shattered, wood objects splintered and voices shouted.

"What the bloody hell is this?!" An enraged Ginny demanded, rounding on me, her eyes flashing. In her anger, her face darkened, beginning to match her vibrant red hair. Her hair looked like it had a life of its own, the uncontrolled web of magic pulsing around the red headed girl. "You were supposed to be my friend, my mum is barely cold in her grave! You have no right!"

Ron looked like he very wanted to hit something. The color of his face almost rivalries the color of his hair.

Charlie seemed to be the calmest of the three, at least he wasn't yelling, but even he was obviously not pleased with the news. Sharing a wife with his father, said wife filling his recently deceased mothers role in his life and home. Neither could be easy pills to swallow.

Each reaction hurt, a lot, but I knew I deserved it.

"That's enough, all of you. Give us the room." Arthur ordered, his face and voice sterner than I'd ever seen it. He was usually the laid back parent who wanted to hear all the details about his children's mischievous adventures.

He waited until the Weasley children left the kitchen, then threw up wards and silencing charms.

I turned pleading eyes on Arthur, hoping he could forgive me.

I couldn't hold the sobs in anymore as I spoke to the man I was supposed to marry. "I'm so sorry, Arthur. I can't even tell you how sorry I am. If I could change it, any of it, I would."

"Oh, Hermione." Arthur sighed, setting his letter down on the counter and walking closer to me. "It's not your fault, sweet heart. The Ministry created the law they did all this. It couldn't be stopped or changed by any of us. I'm not angry with you, so please stop beating yourself."

I stared at him, shocked. How could he not be angry with me? Even if what he said was true, I was replacing Molly, the woman he loves. "But-"

"Now, no buts. Listen to me, Hermione. I'm upset with the Ministry for making this mess and involving you. You haven't had a real chance to see the world, experience love, and now you're going to be bound to not just one, but multiple husbands. You don't need to be tied down to an old man like me. It isn't fair to you."

I blinked. "You aren't old, not really."

"Old enough, I'm afraid. Our ages aren't terribly far apart, but they aren't as close as I'm sure you would prefer."

"I'm sorry."

"Hush. As I've already told you, this isn't your fault and I'm not angry with you." He assured me patiently as always.
I swallowed my response, nodding.

"I have had many wonderful years with my Molly, all of them full of love and companionship. I have enough happy memories from those years to last me the rest of my life." He smiled tremulously, his blue eyes getting a bit watery.

I clasped our hands together, my heart giving a painful twist. "I could never dream of replacing Molly in your heart or home. You have loved her longer than I have lived. She was the love of your life, the mother of your children, both bonds that run deep."

"Too right. As usual." Arthur's shoulders sagged, the tension leaving his body. "Why don't you tell me who else you have?"

I summoned a bottle of Ogdens from a hidden stash I'd known about since fifth years, sliding the bottle over to rest in front of him. I took a deep breath, preparing myself for every possible outcome once the names were out in the open. "Take the bottle, you'll need it."

Technically, he only needed it for one name. Or two, depending.

He accepted it, his eyes wary.

"Neville Longbottom, Severus Snape, C-Charlie, Draco Malfoy and... Lucius Malfoy." I said the last name slowly and reluctantly then immediately hunched in on myself, watching Arthur nervously. His strong negative feelings for Lucius were very well known in The Burrow and among the Order members.

I honestly didn't know how he would react to the news that I was also marrying his son.

Silence.

I picked at my nails, giving him time to process the information.

The silence stretched on.

I bit the bullet, so to speak, and risked a glance at Arthur. Maybe he hadn't heard the last one?

I wasn't sure if I was hoping if he had or he hadn't.

The only visible sign that he had indeed heard me was the firm set of his lips and the tightening around his eyes.

After another moment, he nodded. "Very well, then. Nothing to be done about it. We should call a meeting with the other husbands to be and discuss some important points before we proceed. If you would like to owl them, Hermione, I'll set up a neutral location for the meeting."

I watched him mull over his thoughts. I noticed how his lips shifted to the side whenever he is deep in thought.

"I believe Diagon Alley should be neutral enough. If you don't mind." He added, nodding toward me. "The Leaky Cauldron was destroyed in the war, but the land exchanged ownership and a new bar was built in its place. The man who owns it didn't fight on either side, so I imagine that's as neutral as we can hope for."

"It could work. Do you know what he's calling it now?"

"The Labyrinth, I believe. I've heard it's supposed to be bigger than the Leaky Cauldron, so there's
bound to be somewhere we can meet that's relatively private. A secluded section, maybe."

"Okay. Now we need a time. How is four o'clock?" I asked, wanting to be sure Arthur was free at
the mentioned time and that he approved.

"That will do nicely." He agreed, smiling at me.

I wasn't aware how much his approval meant to me until I had it, and I was surprised at how happy
and relieved that made me.

"That gives us two hours, so why don't we each make a list of topics we can discuss at the meeting.
Go ahead and disclose the suggestion in the letters to make things as equal and fair as possible." Arthur suggested, watching my face for approval.

"Prefect idea. I'm going to go home and prepare mine, I will see you at four o'clock at The
Labyrinth." I replied, relieved that we were of similar mind on this matter. It made it a lot easier.

We stood from the table and slid the chairs back in place. Then we hugged, warm and familiar.

I exited the kitchen lighter and more at ease with my situation.

Harry was sitting on the couch with a bottle of Ogdens.

I approached, stopping next to the end of the couch and cleared my throat. Harry's head snapped
up, he discreetly tried to hide the Firewhiskey behind his back.

"May I?" I asked, gesturing to the cushion to his left.

"Yeah, go ahead." Harry nodded to the seat, relaxing when I didn't comment on the Firewhiskey.
"How did it go with Arthur?"

I thought over our conversation, choosing my words carefully. "It was... enlightening."

His eyebrows shot up, disappearing into his hair.

"What?" I asked, feeling a little like it was almost time to get defensive.

"Enlightening? Really, Mione, how did it go?" He repeated, his voice betraying that he was
anxious.

I noticed how tense he was. I only saw him like that when bad news, danger, or Death Eaters were
involved.

I snatched the bottle from behind Harry's back and took a hefty swig, savoring the burn as it went
down. "We discussed the whole Marriage Law mess and that it sucked for everyone left in the
world."

"And?" He promoted, poking me in the arm impatiently when I took a slow swallow.

"I have meeting with all of my future husbands in less than two hours." I answered, passing the
bottle without fuss.

He winced in sympathy. "Do you want me to come with you?"

I bit my lip, contemplating the pros and cons of such an action.
I sighed, shaking my head.

"You sure? They outnumber you." He wheedled, taking a hefty swig from the bottle.

"I need to stand on my own ground with them as much as possible now or they will spend the rest of our marriage doing their best to run over me. It's best I go alone, Arthur is there to lend me support if I need it."

"If you change your mind, you know where I will be."

"Yes. Now, I'm going to go home and prepare for meeting Arthur, I will see you later." I replied, standing from the couch. He stood up as well, so I leaned forward to hug him goodbye, my mind already bursting with questions and thoughts for tonight.

I would need to shower and probably eat before I left, but first things first.

I had to make a list.
I checked the clock, patting down my pockets to make sure that I had my list.

The list is there and it's almost four o'clock.

I locked up the house, closed all the windows, shut off the thermostat and turned off all the lights. The only source of heat was now the fireplace in the kitchen.

I stood in my kitchen and bit my lip, but didn't scoop up a handful Floo powder.

I didn't know how long the meeting would last. It could be hours.

Also, The Labyrinth may not be connected to the Floo network. The possibility hadn't occurred to me, while we were discussing the meeting place. It should have and I was a bit mad at myself for not thinking about asking. There was nothing I could do now.

In a last minute decision, I grabbed my purse from the table and stuffed it with galleons in case drinking was involved afterward. I gripped my wand tightly and pictured the sign with the name of the street the Leaky Cauldron used to sit on.

I was left standing across the street from The Labyrinth. I stood frozen, staring at the green sign on the front of the building.

I had no idea what to expect from tonight.

I've never been in a room with all my future husbands at once, thinking back. It's either been one small group together or another and usually with a bit of spacing between.

Or fighting on opposite sides of the war.

I didn't know what they would want from me, or from each other.

I couldn't stand here all day. I was already on the receiving end of strange looks.

People were waiting on me inside. I could do this.

I rode on the back of a dragon from Gringott's to Hogwarts. I played a hand in defeating one of the most powerful Dark Wizards of all time. I could handle a meeting with my future spouses.

I had to go inside. I am going inside. . . now. As I thought the last word, I strode across the street and walked into the building without giving myself a chance to second guess my actions. The sooner this is held, the sooner I could plan and prepare for whatever future I'd have to live in.
The differences between the old building and new building were noticeable.

In the Leaky Cauldron, the interior design and everything else about the place reminded her of the taverns she saw in the films she watched with her parents when she was growing up. Lit with candle chandeliers, with large, solid wood tables and chairs—almost like taverns before electricity had been invented. Kinda dark and gloomy, gothic.

The Labyrinth was a completely different story.

The interior was much like a muggle bar would look except for the jukebox, slot machines and ATM machines. Instead, there were more magical artifacts and liquors, especially along the counter space of the bar. There were easily twenty tables spread out with more than adequate space left in the middle of the room for a dance floor.

I immediately caught sight of them.

Charlie, Lucius, Draco, Neville, Arthur and Severus were seated at the table nearest the bar on the left side.

*Here goes nothing.* I thought, taking a deep breath and walking to our table.

Severus looked like he would rather be bitten by Nagini again and be left to die somewhere than be here, I didn't blame him one bit. Both Malfoy men glanced around like the entire place was covered in the most disgusting substances.

Arthur stood once he saw me walking toward the table and met me halfway, greeting me with a smile, his blue eyes kind. "I'm glad you came."

I gave him a little smile. "I hope that you won't be offended that I considered running."

"It's understandable." He assured me, eyes kind and warm as they always were. He turned a bit so he was almost sideways and held one of his arms out for me. He leaned toward me a little, his voice lowering to a stage whisper. "I wouldn't want to marry this lot either, if I could help it."

I grabbed the arm he offered me, squeezing it as I laughed. I was very grateful for his effort to lighten the mood.

The small smile left my lips as I glanced at the table my other spouses occupied. I was very outnumbered here and the idea of facing all six at once was intimidating at the moment.

"Stay with me?" I asked, my voice small and vulnerable. An exact representation of how I felt.

Arthur's eyes softened.

"Of course." He answered, honest and sincere.

The grip anxiety held over me eased. I nodded to him, and he took that as his cue to begin walking to our table.

All eyes were on Arthur and I as we approached.

Lucius stood first, his posture stiff and regal, his spine straight as a rod. He held his silver snake head cane slightly in front of his body, the jewels of its eyes glinting in the light. His trademark smirk was on his face and his grey eyes trained on me, much like a predator and his prey. "Miss Granger, it has been a while since last we met, though the circumstances seem slightly better in this
meeting."

My spine stiffened and I gripped Arthur's arm tighter, partly so I wouldn't do something rash like hex Lucius or strike him with my hands. "Yes, I hear that you had to remodel your sitting room. Such a pity, the chandelier was quite lovely."

It didn't need to be spoken which chandelier, he understood perfectly from the barely visible twitch his right eye displayed. Immediately after our exchange, he straightened up even more and bowed to us, his eyes cooler and posture more tense. He took his seat, my guess is the last bit was to preserve what dignity he had left after our chat.

Arthur didn't comment on what had just occurred, he merely passed the newly occupied seat so we could greet the next of my spouses.

Draco stood, expression blank and grey eyes without any discernible emotion. He bowed and kissed the back of my hand, lips barely touching the skin, a smooth motion that ended when he stood straight once more. He waved a hand and produced a rose that almost looked silver with a small amount of blue just near the stem, then offered it to me. "Miss Granger, I am pleased you have joined us. The noble house of Malfoy greets you and welcomes you into our long family line. We promise that you will want for nothing and that we will do our level best to make you happy in the years we will be one."

I blinked, the entire encounter unexpected. His face remained blank and his voice was almost emotionless, even though he had been talking about welcoming me and becoming one, the words sounded very rehearsed. Well, robotic would probably be a better description.

A single prod to my arm reminded me that I was expected to respond.

I mentally shook myself and accepted the rose, carefully taking it from his loose fingers. "Thank you, mister Malfoy, I hope that I will not disappoint you."

I internally grimaced at my choice of words, but it was the best I could do given the situation. He threw me with his speech, no matter how rehearsed, and the offering of the beautiful rose. I lost my chance at taking them back or adding something less disturbing when he reclaimed his seat beside his father.

Okay then, moving on. I thought, wanting to bang my head on the table a few times.

Charlie was next, his smile a bit strained as he stood. "You made it."

I attempted to smile back, shrugging my shoulders and making an eh sound.

"I didn't have anything better to do today." I tried to joke, but it fell flat since Charlie just blinked at me before he sat down again.

I grimaced, internally smacking myself in the forehead repeatedly. Smooth, Granger, really smooth.

I moved on, but stopped short at the following chair.

Neville looked like he hadn't shaved in a week or slept in days, his face scruffy and dark circles under his eyes.

His eyes.
His normally lively hazel eyes were dim and bloodshot, almost lifeless. He didn't even seem to see me, more like he saw _through_ me and into a memory. His clothes were a bit on the ragged side and musky.

"Neville?" I called, hoping to get through to him before the meeting officially started.

His eyes snapped to mine and a little more life returned to them.

"Hey." He murmured hoarsely.

"Do you need a minute? We can wait, or we can do this another time if you need us to. Just . . . please tell me what you need." I hated seeing Neville like this. Something was obviously wrong.

"No, no, I'll be fine. Besides, it's best to get it over with now." His lips turned up in a tiny smile, but it didn't reach his eyes.

I bit my lip and accepted it, it's what he wanted for now.

I moved on to the last wizard, the one I was dreading facing the most after Lucius.

Severus Snape, my former Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, and once temporary Headmaster of Hogwarts. He looked much the same as before the battle at Hogwarts, except for a scar on his neck that even the Healers at St. Mungos couldn't heal completely.

Black eyes bore holes into me, his usual cold and emotionless glare very much present. "Sit down so we can get this nonsense over with."

Arthur frowned disapprovingly, but stayed silent and led me to our seats which were thankfully right next to each other.

I sighed in relief and sank into my chair, settling my purse in my lap for safe keeping. "So, how do we do this?"

Arthur cleared his throat and clasped his hands together. "Well, I believe the general idea is for us to decide on the basic necessities involved with the Law and its requirements."

I glanced around, the fact that we were the only people in the place bugging me. "Why aren't there other people here? This is a bar, there's usually many more bodies and noise involved with an open bar."

Truthfully, I was counting on the public nature of this meeting to keep things from becoming too hostile. I didn't trust the Malfoy's as far as I could throw them without the aid of magic.

Arthur smiled, obviously expecting the question. "I wondered when you were going to ask that question. I asked that the owner keep it closed to other people until the meeting is finished as a favor, my father knew his father. They went to Hogwarts together, actually."

I blinked at him, surprised. "Oh. Okay. That makes sense."

"Alright, we should get started." Arthur announced, pulling a folded up parchment from inside his breast pocket. "I asked you to write down questions, concerns or thoughts that you would like to address while we are discussing topics. I suppose we should begin by deciding who would be the head of the house."

"You should do it." I told him, thinking about his years of experience managing a wife and seven
children. "You have experience managing a large family and the rest of us either haven't been married or have been married but had only one child. You are the optimal choice."

He nodded, contemplating. "Does anyone disagree with Hermione's proposal?" He asked, glancing around the table.

Silence.

"Alright then, it's decided, I am head of the family. First order of the family meeting, the date of the wedding. Any thoughts?" He inquired, quill poised over a blank sheet of parchment for notes.

"The Daily Prophet said the Ministry is giving us three months to marry. We can choose any day between now and then." Draco drawled his voice expressing boredom, his grey eyes on his nails as he picked at them.

"I think we're looking for a certain day in particular, Draco." Arthur replied, not impressed in the least by the younger Malfoys' behavior.

"What does it matter? The sooner this infernal event is over, the better." Severus cut in coolly.

I balked, his words and attitude hitting my skin like stones. I was getting fed up with said attitude. Quickly. "It matters, Severus, because according to the third page of the letter we are to submit paperwork detailing the wedding date and a guest list."

"I'm sure we can find a date that we all agree to. Why don't we start with tomorrow and go from there?" Arthur suggested calmly, snipping the building argument in the bud.

I lowered my eyes, taking deep breaths to cool down.

Footsteps approached, echoing in the newly established silence of the room. All heads turned to look at the newcomer.

A man in his late thirties or early forties with closely shaved dirty blonde hair, sky blue eyes and sun kissed skin was walking toward our table. He had on ripped blue jeans and a tight black t-shirt, Dragon fang earrings decorated both ears. He stopped about four inches from us, shoving his hands in his pockets and rocking back on his heels. "I know I was meant to keep people out, but this redhead dude is insisting that I let him in."

I frowned. Redhead?

"What is his name?" Arthur asked, equally curious and cautious.

"Bill Weasley."

I blinked, fighting the urge to clean out my ears and then ask the owner to repeat himself.

"Did he say why he wants inside so badly, Jimmy?" Charlie asks warily, eyes narrowed.

The owner, Jimmy, shrugs. "He says it's important, but he wouldn't specify what the 'it' he was talking about. I asked like twenty times, so yeah, he ain't budging."

I glanced at Arthur's face, unsure. He hadn't told me what had happened after Harry and I left the Burrow. Was that a good thing? Was that a bad thing? Did something happen after we left?

Arthur was as serious as I had ever seen him. He was silent for a little while, eyebrows furrowed as his blue eyes bore holes into the surface of the table. Finally, he lifted his eyes from the table and
looked at Jimmy. "Let him in, Jimmy. If I know my son, when he says something is important enough to interrupt a private meeting, then it's important."

Jimmy nodded and turned away to do as he was told.

I bit my lip, debating. Curiosity and caution urging me to do two separate things.

Curiosity wanted me to ask what Arthur suspected about Bill's arrival. Caution warned me that it might not be wise to do so, it might be a private family sensitive matter and he might not be ready to discuss those things with me yet.

I chose caution and kept my tongue.

The door swung open and every head at the table swung to take a look.

Bill stepped into the bar, hesitating momentarily at the door. Jimmy gestured a hand to our table as he closed the door behind them and then slipped into a room marked Employees Only at the other side of the bar.

Bill walked slowly toward us, regarding us warily as he came forward. He paused before he reached the table, about a foot in between us and him. A lot of eyes were on him, but he only had eyes for his father.

I glanced between father and sons.

Okay, this is either a good thing or a bad thing. I thought, a little nervously. I wouldn't be able to tell until one of them speaks.

"Mum sent me." Bill said, stance and tone normal. Both were good signs.

Arthur raised both eyebrows. "Your mother sent you?"

Wait. What?!

"Yeah. Something came for you after you left home, it has the Ministry's seal but I don't recognize the stamp." The curse breaker replied, his left hand digging in his chest pocket. He made a triumphant sound and pulled out an envelope similar to the one I received earlier today.

Arthur held out his hand and Bill obediently passed the envelope to his father. The older Weasley quickly opened it and scanned the contents, his face becoming more grave. Finally, his head lifted and he folded the paper but didn't tuck it away. "Thank you, Bill. Please thank your mother for me and tell her I'll visit as soon as possible."

The curse breaker nodded, his expression changing from curious and a tad anxious to downright uncomfortable.

My heart sank.

Why would Arthur visit his own home? Why wouldn't he tell Molly himself?

Oh. Oh. He was distancing himself from her. I suppose that was best, to make it easier when we move in together and begin . . . building a family. But . . . where was he staying now if not at The Burrow?

Arthur said nothing as Bill left the bar, not making eye contact with anyone at the table. Not even me. Once the door swung closed and the silence stretched for a few moments, he cleared his throat
and set the letter aside in favor of his original parchment. "I apologize for the interruption. Where were we?"

I swallowed the questions I wanted to blurt out and focused on the topic we were supposed to be discussing. We need a wedding date. "We were discussing a date for the wedding."

"How about two weeks?" Charlie offered. "That should be enough time to put together a wedding and a guest list to submit to the Ministry."

Arthur hummed, blue eyes calculating. "I have no objections. Hermione?"

"It sounds about right." I decided, nodding. "So, who wants to take care of what?"

Severus didn't move a tick. Draco raised a single brow in a barely noticeable movement.

"What? Did you expect me to do everything?" I demanded, glaring at each male around the table as my temper flared. "Just because I'm the girl, it doesn't mean I have to take care of all of the wedding nonsense. You all are involved in the whole marriage process, you can take care of some of this nonsense, too."

Charlie chuckled, but quickly hid it with a cough.

"Wedding planners and florists will need to be hired. Luckily, I happen to be acquainted with the best florist in the world, discreet and available at any time I require. Being a Malfoy, I know at least one person in every position that is of importance. The wine for the reception will, of course, be provided by the Malfoy apothecary, selected from my own private collection." Lucius drawled, his tone switching between smug arrogance and cool indifference.

"I can contact our private tailor and have his team provide custom tuxedos for the occasion." Draco murmured, traces of boredom in his voice.

"Now that the date is decided, we should talk about the location." Arthur announced, his quill sliding across the width of his parchment like he was crossing something out. "I believe to save on time and cost, we should have the wedding take place on the property we will use as our family home. That said, we should make a decision on where that location and property will be."

Lucius pounced. "Obviously, Malfoy Manor is the best choice."

I stiffened, my teeth clenching. I wouldn't step foot in that place again as long as I drew breath. "Absolutely not!"

A blonde head whipped to me, grey eyes narrowing into slits. "Do you have something to say?"

I met his stare with equal hostility. He didn't scare me anymore.

"There's no way in hell I am going to take one step in that place again, much less live there." I snarled, the air starting to crackle around me.

"Are you insinuating that Malfoy Manor isn't good enough for-for you?" Lucius hissed dangerously, a slight pause near the end making me certain he was going to say something very different.

"No child of my blood will be raised in that hell hole! Not after what you did to their mother!" I screamed, my face heating to a bright lobster red in my fury. "You let me be tortured in that house! Your wand didn't cast the curse but your refusal to interfere makes you just as guilty of the crime."
The negative energy level was rising rapidly as the arguing escalated.

Frustration and annoyance bubbled inside my chest like a potion boiling in a covered cauldron, until finally it exploded.

In this case, I was the covered cauldron and the potion was my emotions.

They were intent on disrespecting me.

I had had enough.

I stood, pushing off the table and sending my chair crashing to the floor with a loud crash with the force.

"I have had it with the disrespect!" I snapped, my voice cutting off whatever Lucius was going to say next and glasses shattered on the bar nearby.

Stunned silence greeted my outburst.

"I understand what you think of my kind, Mister Malfoy, and I don't care much for you either." I growled, nails digging into my palms. "Neither of you."

Both Malfoys drew themselves up in their seats, affronted.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Any of it. Blood purity, social status, what side of the war we were on, none of it. It stopped meaning something the second we buried the infected and the population went to shite." I leveled each male with a glare. "We are going to have to get married and live together whether we like it or not. At some point soon we are also going to have to have children together. We have no choice in any of those things and we can't change any of it no matter how much we try."

Lucius tightened his gloved grip on his walking stick and kept narrowed eyes on me. Neville looked haunted. Severus' expression was indifferent and his black eyes cool. Arthur hummed in agreement, blue eyes thoughtful. Charlie looked downright amused.

I took a deep breath to cool down and continued. "Look, we don't have a choice about who we marry, who we have children with or when we have them. We can't change that, we also can't change the past or how we treated each other then. However, what we can do is choose how we act from here on out. We could keep arguing, keep hurting each other in all the ways we can. . . Or. . . we can try to get along. If we argue we will only be making ourselves and any children we have absolutely miserable. We will be punishing them for our differences and that's not fair to them, I don't want that for them."

Facial expressions changed. The men I knew as friends softened, the men I didn't know at all were only slightly less indifferent.

I sighed, biting my lip as I fought to find the words I needed. "I know there's a high probability that you will never love me, and I'm not asking you to love me. All I ask of you, of each of you, is that we try to be civil to one another. Please, just try. If it doesn't work out then. . . then we will cross that bridge when we come to it. So. . . what do you say? Can we try to get along, for the sake of our children?"

"I agree." Arthur murmured, smiling gently at me.

Charlie shrugged. "I can do that."
Neville nodded, not speaking.

Draco and Lucius didn't answer immediately, making me nervous. They were a big part of this effort, I needed them to agree if things were going to truly change between us.

Finally, they each gave a single hum of agreement.

I turned my eyes to Severus last, the nerves magnifying until it felt like butterflies the size of baby dragons fluttered rapidly and chaotic inside my stomach. He was the hardest nut to crack, the key to this whole idea coming to fruition. If he wasn't on board, there was no hope of peace.

"It seems that I am the last." He hissed in his scarily soft and smooth voice that hadn't changed after healing from Nagini's poisonous bite. "It also appears that willingly or not I'm to be saddled with a bride, or be stripped of my magic and tossed in Azkaban. Neither are appealing, but I suppose you aren't completely intolerable."

I had to bite back a sharp retort, counting to twelve in my head.

We had agreed to be civil, he was included and there was also less cruelty in that sentence than there could have been. I knew for a fact that he could be so much meaner than he was just now, our years at school taught me that.

Arthur cleared his throat, sparing me from having to think of a response that wasn't sporting hidden barbs or thorns. "Let's continue. We were discussing a property to house us and our future children, suggestions have been made. Lucius has submitted Malfoy Manor for consideration."

I stiffened. Malfoy Manor was beyond out of the question!

"A cabin in Romania isn't the best option for a big family." Charlie merely said.

"Spinner's End doesn't have the space for a small family of four, let alone twelve." Severus drawled lazily.

Arthur hesitated, then sighed and offered up his suggestion. "The Burrow has a great deal of room, but it would still need a few few extensions here and there for comfort."

"No, Arthur, we aren't going to live in The Burrow." I immediately protested. "Molly should have it, and if she doesn't want it then maybe Ron or Ginny will want to start their family there. The Burrow has been their home as long as they've lived, it's their birth right, I won't take that away from them."

His responding expression was gratitude.

"Longbottom Hall has more than enough room." Neville suggested, running a hand over his face, like he did when he was going over things in his mind. "The rooms are just sitting there empty, waiting to be used. The grounds are large enough for an event like an outdoor wedding and there's even a space inside Gran made into a sort of ballroom where the reception could be held."

I raised my eyebrows, impressed. It certainly sounded like it met all of our needs.

I glanced at Arthur, curious to know his opinion.

The eldest Weasley hummed thoughtfully, blue eyes calculating, comparing the factors of the property with our needs. "I believe it's a solid choice. Show of hands, who's in favor?"
I raised my hand. Charlie, Neville, and Arthur joined me. Severus was scowling, but finally grudgingly raised his hand.

Lucius stubbornly refused. Draco examined the cuffs of his suit resolutely.

Arthur sighed. "Four in favor, two opposed. Longbottom Hall will be the family home and site of the wedding. Each spouse is required to spend a minimum of four days in the family home. We've decided on the property business, now it's a good time to discuss the contents of the letter I received."

"What was it?" I asked, curious.

"It was a letter with more detailed information on what is expected of us, of you." He responded vaguely, picking up and unfolding the letter in question.

I waited patiently as he skimmed the no doubt unnecessarily lengthy start of the letter.

"You are to have relations with at least one of us weekly until a child is conceived and this will continue until each of us has the required number of children. You are within your rights to refuse to have relations with us while pregnant and during your monthly courses." Arthur's cheeks and ears were flaring tomato red by the time he stopped reading.

My cheeks were also hot and I imagine mirrored his.

Clearing his throat, he continued. "You are not required to have relations with us for up to three weeks after the birth or if seriously ill as diagnosed by an experienced medi-witch. All relations will resume after recovery."

I took a shaky breath. Okay, so I can refuse them certain times. That doesn't sound too terrible, compared to what I imagined, but it still isn't what I wanted for my life as a married woman.

Arthur tucked the letter away and turned to look at me expectantly.

I blinked. What was he waiting for?

Then it dawned on me that he had always referred to me for my opinion on everything we had discussed. Why would this be any different?

I cleared my throat and hoped my voice stayed steady. "It sounds reasonable, considering."

I made a face at my answer, before elaborating.

"What I mean to say is that it could be worse for all involved. I acknowledge that the six of you have needs, and I won't deny you those needs on the condition that I am treated well and my wishes are respected." I explained, not concerned with their possible responses.

That was my condition and I won't change it.

As I predicted, there were three men who stiffened and their expressions cracked a bit.

"That is a fair condition." Arthur spoke up before either Malfoy or Severus could comment negatively. "I think that's all for now. Does anyone have something they wish to add?"

I shook my head.

None of the other men said anything.
"Very well, make out individual guest lists and we will hammer out the final list next week. I'll send a copy in to the Ministry with a copy of the family home address and wedding date." Arthur smiled around the room once and then stood to leave.

Severus was one of the first to shoot out of the door as fast as he could while still dignified. Lucius and Draco were very close behind him, their heads held high.

I paused in the act of standing once I noticed that Neville had stayed seated, showing no signs of leaving anytime soon.

"I think I'll stay a little while." I told Arthur when he hesitated by my chair, smiling at him so he knew I was really okay.

"Okay." He replied, dropping a kiss on the side of my head on his way out.

The door swung closed, and silence stretched. I fidgeted as I tried to think of something to say to Neville that wasn't stupid or painfully obvious.

I had nothing.

It appears I didn't have to.

"You can go home, Hermione. I want to stay, check out the place." Neville rasped, breaking the silence.

"I would rather stay." I murmured, acknowledging that he was trying to dismiss me, but not willing to leave him alone in a bar. His behavior and physical appearance concerned me.

He had walked to the bar and grabbed a glass from behind the counter, followed by a bottle of Ogden's. He poured a glass, knocked it back and poured another.

"Neville."

"I don't need you to babysit me, Hermione. I don't need you here watching me, judging me."

"I'm not-"

"You are. I can feel your eyes boring into the back of my head."

"I'm concerned, there's a difference."

"Why didn't you tell them?" Neville demanded, spinning to face me.

I sucked in a breath in sharp gasp.
Dark Promises

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or it's characters. Any unrecognized plot or characters are mine.

Okay, guys, I will only say this once. This is not Ten Too Many. This is a completely different story, I am the original author and any similarities are purely coincidental.

Also, I know a few of you at least will be happy to read this. :) Enjoy!

~Dark Promises~

"Neville. . ." I trailed off, unsure what to say.

What do you say to a question that loaded?

I watched apprehensively as Neville approached the table, bottle of Firewhiskey and a pair of glasses in hand.

"What? Nothing to say after your long speeches before?" He asked, pouring a generous amount in his glass and swallowing half in one gulp.

"Not if this is how I'll be treated." I answered, foreseeing the fight that was brewing.

His face turned stormy and he burst from his chair into a standing position, almost knocking the bottle of Firewhiskey over. "How you'll be treated?! How about how I was treated? Did you ever think of that?!!"

"Neville, you never let me explain." I shot back, anger rising.

"What the bloody hell was there to explain? It was pretty clear to me!" He snarled, eyes blazing.

I growled, frustrated. "I didn't want--"

"That's a load of rubbish!" He roared furiously, slamming his hand on the table. "Don't tell me you didn't want it to happen! You kissed me back!"

"I know I did!" I screamed back, my hands twisting into my hair. "I didn't know what I wanted! We were in the middle of a war and Harry needed me! I stopped you from kissing me again because I needed to figure out what I wanted, what I needed, what I should do."

"I left Luna for you, because I love you!"

"I never asked you to!"

Neville surged forward, slamming his lips onto mine in a flurry of heat, pressure and limbs. I inhaled sharply, the taste of Firewhiskey and Neville making me dizzy. Heat and tingles rushed down my spine, all I could feel and smell was him. Hands grasped my rear, crushing me into him, grinding me against him. I whimpered, pressing closer. A persistent throb in my lower regions growing stronger with each passing moment.
The grip tightened, boosting me up, my rear touched the tabletop. He crowded in, pressing closer, until my back met the cool metal.

The loosening of my shirt jarred me out of lust riddled haze.

"Wait, please. Wait." I gasped, breaking away for air and pushing on his chest. My breathing labored, heat pumping through my veins instead of blood.

He pulled back, chest heaving, pupils blown wide and hair mussed. I didn't remember my hands threading through his hair.

"I--I'm a virgin. I didn't picture my first time on the top of a bar table." I whispered, careful to look him in the eyes during my confession.

He left my body, the sudden loss of his body heat making me shiver. He fell into his chair, shocked. "You-I thought-Ron?"

I sighed. "We didn't work out. We were just too different, he didn't understand how I could want a career and a family."

"So you really haven't. . .?" He trailed off, watching my face.

"No." I murmured, biting my lip.

"And you haven't talked to Harry or Ron about. . .?" He asked with a grimace.

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry. I was a git earlier." He mumbled, shoulders slumped and face twisted with guilt.

My heart twisted.

"Pass me that glass and all is forgiven."

With a grin, Neville poured the Firewhiskey and passed it over.

After the argument was done with, talking with Neville had been just like old times. I missed talking like that with someone from the good old days, it had been nice to reminisce memories not full of terror and pain.

Between the two of us, the Firewhiskey was gone in no time, and we both had a nice buzz going.

I was glad that we finally cleared the air about what happened.

I landed on my street, a few buildings away from my loft, stumbling a little bit. With a glance either direction to make sure the coast was clear, I left the small alley and headed home.

I walked up the stairs to my loft, fishing for my keys in my purse when I was almost to my door.

I went straight to the kitchen, grabbed the Firewhiskey I had stashed in the back of the fridge, and poured a generous amount in a tall glass. I tossed half of it back, enjoying the burn as it went down.

I was tired of today.

Today had been a mess of emotions, arguments and tension.
I nursed my glass as I sat on my love seat in the living room and stared into the fire, thinking about what had been agreed.

I was marrying two people I had fought for years, ever since I was eleven.

How did that happen? Life was weird and crazy and I didn't know what it was about anymore.

The fire roared to life, the red flames turning green as a figure clad in dark blue robes stepped out. Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic, dusted himself off on the rug in front of my fireplace.

"Kingsley?" I asked, blinked at him. "What are you doing here? It's well past eight."

"Hermione, I'm glad you're home. There is an urgent matter I need to discuss with you." Kingsley said in a rushed manner, already walking toward me.

"Urgent matter?" I repeated, immediately concerned.

What could have happened in such a short time that was urgent? Why come to me? Did something happen to Harry or one of the others?

I just left Neville, so it couldn't have been him. I hadn't received owls or news of anyone being in the hospital, so I doubted that was the issue.

"There has been a grave error made at the Ministry." He sighed, his expression worried and eyes tired. "I regret to inform you that the mistake involves the selection of your husbands. It's possible that you could have more husbands that weren't listed, or that you were mistakenly given more husbands than you were matched with. I'm not sure."

I stared at him, the glass of Firewhiskey falling through numb fingers. I could feel all the blood drain from my face.

He-they-what? I couldn't think straight. It didn't make sense.

"W-what?" I rasped, my voice unsteady. "I-I don't-"

I couldn't have heard right.

"I wanted to tell you in person, also, this isn't something someone would generally put in a letter. With the Ministry short staffed, the damn thing most likely would've got lost or mixed up, like your list of matches. I'm looking into this matches mess, I'll let you know if I find something." Kingsley sighed, running a hand over his face and shaking his head. "I'm so sorry about all this, I truly am. I'll fix it as soon as I can, I promise."

Fury gripped me. "You're telling me that after putting us through all this that I may or may not have a significant change in husbands?! We just met and went over plans for the future! We decided wedding details, where we were going to live! Now you're saying-"

I cut myself off, words failing me as I grew more and more angry. I twisted my hair in my hands, tugging at it harshly in my agitation.

I wanted to hex Kingsley.

I wanted to inflict every curse and hex I had ever read about in school on him for this.

Instead I wordlessly and insistently flung a hand at the fireplace, urging him to leave. NOW.
Before I changed my mind and reached for my wand.

The roaring of the fire and a flash of green told me he had heeded my silent warning.

I was left alone, my thoughts in chaos and my feelings in upheaval.

A marriage had been ended, something made even worse by the fact that it may have been for nothing at all. Arthur might not even be one of my matches and his marriage could have been broken for no good reason.

Thinking about it, truthfully the idea of us being a match made absolutely no sense. I don't think we have much in common, other than family values.

If Arthur isn't a match, there's a chance some of the other men I spoke to tonight are also not my actual matches.

Where did that leave us?

Everything we had decided, everything we had worked on for so long today was now in uncertain shambles.

With no way to be completely sure who really is my match, no concrete decisions could be made, including living arrangements.

There was another problem to add to my mounting list of problems.

My lease was up in a less than a week.

I'd searched for open flats endlessly. All the flats in my budget are taken and the rest that are open are also so far out of my price range its ridiculous.

What would I do?

I was terrified of the future in more than one way at the moment.

I had no idea who I was marrying.

I didn't have a clue where I was going to live after my lease was up.

How did everything go so wrong in an hour?

I paced, fighting tears as I twisted my hands in my hair.

There was only one thing I could think to do.

I went for the mantle over the fireplace, blindly grabbing a hand full of powder and throwing it into the fireplace. "Number Twelve Grimauld Place!"

The flames whisked me away in a blur of colors and shapes.

I stepped out to a familiar scene.

A wing backed chair in a horrid green, stained and firmly rooted in place with a powerful sticking charm. A rectangular mahogany table separating said chair from the tan love seat and matching armchair. The scratched up dark hardwood floor needed to be swept and mopped as soon as possible, it was absolutely filthy.
None of those things mattered near as much as the thin wizard who stood and walked around the armchair.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, glancing at the clock on the mantle. "It's late. Is everything okay?"

As soon as I saw him, heard his voice, the flood gates opened.

"Harry." I said, voice breaking on a sob and tears streaming down my face. A moment later I flew at him, flinging my arms around his waist in a vice tight grip and burying my face in his chest.

Harry stumbled a little, using his reflexes to recover and stabilize his footing. His arms closed around me, drawing me closer and stroking my back. "Mione? What's going on? I can't help if you don't tell me what has you upset."

"Kingsley stopped by after I got home from the Labyrinth. He-he told me that something went wrong at the Ministry when they were issuing the matches, they're short staffed and it messed up the distribution of names to their proper recipient. Harry, I don't know who I'm going to marry." I murmured against the front of his dark grey t-shirt. Safely encased in his arms, I felt free to tell him my worst fears. "What if I have more Death Eaters from the war?"

Harry immediately tensed.

"Kingsley wouldn't let that happen. If the person doing the matches tried, even then, I'd hex them until they didn't know their own name." He answered darkly, his voice full of sinister promise.

I am a horrible person, because that actually made me feel better.

Even if what he said were true, it could take weeks to sort through the mess at the Ministry.

I didn't have that kind of time. I needed somewhere to live in a few days.

"My lease is ending in less than a week. I didn't say anything before because, naturally, I'd live with my husbands and at the beginning of this day I thought I knew who I was marrying. Now... with what Kingsley told me... I don't know anything anymore and that terrifies me." I admitted, the weight already lifting from my shoulders.

"Mione, you don't have to look for a place to live. You can live here at Grimmauld Place with me until this matches business is sorted." Harry told me, giving me a reassuring squeeze.

However, it had the opposite effect.

I pushed away from him, shaking my head. "No, Harry, I couldn't. You have so much stuff here already that you still have to sort through, I couldn't add my mountain of junk to it."

He sighed, rolling his eyes. "We both know you don't own junk, Mione. You being here isn't a hardship or burden or whatever other nonsense is going through that brilliant brain of yours, so stop."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he shushed me.

"You are going to be staying here with me. I won't have you out on the street and that's the end of it." He told me firmly, green eyes challenging me to argue.

I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest.

He knows I don't like decisions being made for me, even if they are for my best interest.
Harry softened, his expression becoming open and honest. Almost like he was pleading me to believe him. "I don't mind, Mione, really. I have more spare rooms than I know what to do with anyway and it'll be nice to have one full. You can sleep in your chosen room tonight and return with your belongings tomorrow when you're ready."

"I have furniture..." I tried, sorely tempted to accept.

He shrugged. "I needed new furniture anyway."

I shook my head, smiling at him fondly. "Okay, okay, you win."

"Yes!" He exclaimed, pumping his fists with a big grin.

After being shown the choices, I chose my former room. It was the least dingy and depressing, the bed post less terrifying than some of the choices. My former room had hardwood floors instead of hideous, gaudy carpet present in several other rooms in the house.

I settled in to the familiar bed, pulling the blankets up to my neck. The exhaustion caught up to me instantly, the events of today vanishing from my mind in exchange for dreamless sleep.
I woke early, grabbing a quick breakfast of toast and eggs, then dashing off to my loft before Harry got up.

I had a lot to do today and I needed the space to think.

I checked that the door was locked and tossed my keys onto the coffee table, blowing out a breath as I scanned the room. Where to start first?

I would need the kitchen for food and refreshments while I worked, but utensils I didn't need for either could be packed up. Then I suppose I could work on the bedroom and bathroom after, working my way back to the living room.

There were mixed feelings as I set each object in a box.

I was leaving the life I had made for myself behind and since my matches aren't my matches, am being thrown into the unknown.

Kingsley's words wouldn't stop replaying in my head.

_There has been a grave error made at the Ministry. ...I regret to inform you that the mistake involves the selection of your husbands. It's possible that you could have more husbands that weren't listed, or that you were mistakenly given more husbands than you were matched with. I'm not sure._

My throat tightened and tears stung my eyes. My blurred vision forced me to stop packing spare pans and cooking utensils. I hugged myself, trying to curl up as small as I could.

The roaring and sudden burst of color lighting up the doorway took me by surprise.

"Hermione, dear?" Molly asked, her voice coming from the living room and echoing a little bit.

I wiped at my cheeks and sat straighter. "In the kitchen."

Molly entered the kitchen, pausing to grab a chair and drag it to sit next to me. "Harry spoke with Arthur this morning during breakfast. Would you care to guess what about?"

"He told you." I stated, closing my eyes tightly, shutting out the world for just one moment.

I didn't need to ask her if he had, I already knew that he had.

"He's concerned about you, Arthur and I are as well. Do you want to talk?" Molly offered, her tone kind and motherly.

I broke down.

"I-just-he-I-" I sobbed, clutching my chest as I struggled to breathe normally and form coherent words. I needed to vent all my doubt and fear. "I can't do this! I can't not know who they are! What
if they’re cruel? What if they are mostly people who hate me? What if one is a vicious animagus?"

"Kingsley wouldn't let that happen-not to you, not to anyone." Molly reassured me.

"What could he do?! The Ministry is badly understaffed-he didn't even realize I had the wrong matches until it was nearly too late!" I shouted, angry and hurt and terrified for my future. "I can't be sure that I'll be safe, that none of my husband's are vicious brutes, because I know nothing about them! I have no names, no ages, no personal files to study-nothing!"

Molly was silent. There really wasn't anything she could say to help me.

So, she pulled me to her and held me close, pouring all her maternal love into the gesture.

I let myself feel everything I needed to free myself of to move on, safe and loved in her embrace.

After my break down was finished, Molly gave me a minute to freshen up and get myself together. We whipped up some lunch, complete with tea, then we worked on packing up my loft.

The talk was lighthearted, bordering on gossip.

Apparently some interesting and amusing things had been happening to my old classmates. One had an encounter with a burping Pine tree of all things. The poor woman was covered head to toe with pine needles as a result.

I was light at heart when Molly left, a tray of freshly baked treats and a warm pot of tea welcome reminders of her visit.

Neither held off the knowledge that I had to speak to the group of men who believed they were to be my husbands about what Kingsley had told me. Arthur and Harry knew, I trusted them not to spill the beans so to speak, but I would have to inform the rest that some, if not all, may not be marrying me as we had thought.

How do you tell a person that kind of thing? You can't blurt out 'Hey, you know how we planned out our wedding and our life together? Well, it turns out that we might not need to. The Ministry messed up our matches.' It would be highly insensitive to the situation all of us are in.

I would start with a summons for a meeting.

I sat staring at the parchment, quill in hand as I fought to find appropriate words that wouldn't alarm anyone.

I settled for the vague aspect of the situation.

To the men it may concern,

I had a visit from Kingsley Shacklebolt yesterday evening. He offered new information that will interest all of us.

I politely request a meeting with all of you at my loft.

I enclosed my address, sealing it with a series of charms to prevent interceptors from being able to open it and tied it to the barn owl Kingsley loaned me until I married into a family. With my letters sent, I set my mind on preparing the loft for guests.

I had to put on more tea, for starters.
After a frenzy of preparing my greatly diminished loft, I hopped in the shower to freshen up and changed my clothes.

Charlie and Neville were the first to arrive.

Charlie began exploring immediately, ducking briefly into the kitchen. Neville hung back awkwardly, glancing around a few moments before choosing to sit on the couch. Arthur came through the Floo ten or fifteen minutes later, followed by Lucius and Draco in quick succession.

Lucius walked around the living room, pausing to scrunch his nose at my couch. His grey eyes met mine coolly as he came full circle around the room. Draco wore his shroud of indifference well. No matter how much I studied him, I couldn't read his face or eyes.

"Would anyone care for tea or biscuits?" I asked, my inner hostess smacking me on the head for not offering sooner.

Lucius crinkled his nose, answer enough, but he continued. "Would it be too much to ask for proper beverage and a more suitable setting?"

I tensed, glaring at him. Hostess be damned.

"I do not carry alcohol in my home except for special occasions. I can assure you, sir, that my accommodations are suitable enough for this meeting." I hissed, resisting the urge to strike the man with a hex or two to knock him off his high horse.

Arthur cleared his throat uncomfortably, but I didn't break my gaze away from Lucius' grey eyes. I wouldn't let him think he could walk all over me or treat me like a house elf.

The flare of the fireplace interrupted our staring contest.

Severus strode straight out of the fireplace and onto the hearth, his signature black robes billowing behind him. His black eyes surveyed the living room and kitchen in his usual bored manner, taking in everything he could. He caught sight of me near the love seat. "Your message mentioned information from Shacklebolt."

"Yes, it did." I sighed. He was going to really hate what I had to say. "You may all want to sit down."

Charlie, Neville and Arthur did so without question. The others stubbornly remained standing.

No surprise there.

I took a deep breath. It's best to just get it all out in the open. "Kingsley told me last night that a staff shortage at the Ministry has resulted in some mistakes. It is entirely possible that only a few of you will actually marry me, if any of you are matched with me. I am waiting for further information detailing the confirmed matches for each of us."

Lucius was the first to speak.

"You are telling me that I may have hired unnecessary personnel for a wedding that may not even happen?" He asked slowly, his voice hard and his eyes cool as a glacier. "The services I have paid for were not cheap."

"I don't have any answers for you." I snapped. "I just told you that I am waiting for more information. There is no need for you to get angry with me, this isn't my fault."
Severus jumped in, his silky voice had a hint more emotion than I was used to hearing. "Calm yourself, Lucius, the girl is innocent in this. We should discuss what should happen given there is the possibility that some of us, including I, may not marry you."

I appreciated Severus' support. He was an intelligent man and didn't mess with nonsense.

I had always liked that about him.

"Alright with me." Charlie shrugged casually.

"Fine." Lucius bit out, his hand tightening on his cane.

"I'm in." Neville murmured from his seat, giving me an awkward smile.

"So, where do we start?" I asked, glancing around at each face expectantly.

"How about with today?" Arthur suggested, smiling at me kindly. "We can deal with tomorrow as it comes."

"That sounds great."

I honestly don't know what I would do without the kindness and gentleness of Arthur Weasley.

It was decided that Lucius would put the wedding employees on hold until I had more information about if I was actually marrying him or Draco.

There was also a second awkward conversation regarding marriage...

"Draco?" I called softly the first moment I had him alone. "Can I ask something personal?"

He studied me with narrowed eyes. "That would depend upon the nature of the question you wish to ask me."

I bit my lip. "Where is your mother? I haven't heard anything regarding your family since the battle."

His shoulders dropped just a tiny fraction and his eyes changed. Barely enough for note, but I was an observant person. I always have been.

He turned his head away from me, staring into the fire. "Mother was in the second wave of casualties claimed by the sickness the Dark Lord brought upon this world. She died a month before the end of the epidemic."

Guilt and pity slammed into my gut.

Draco Malfoy had been a bully in school, but he was also a boy who had lost his mother only a short time ago.

"I'm so sorry, Draco." I murmured, feeling like an insensitive idiot. "The papers never said-"

"No, they didn't." He interrupted abruptly, his voice hard. "Father resolved to keep it from the news as long as possible."

"Why?" I was confused. That didn't sound like the Lucius I had seen tonight.
“To hinder any advances thought to be made by ladies of the court.” He answered as if it made all
the sense in the world. He made it sound like every part of it was natural, common knowledge,
even.

The realization of what he meant caused my stomach to roll.

"Who could do such a thing?" I demanded, outraged and sickened to the core of my being. "He has
just lost his wife, a part of him, forever. Those vultures!"

A small quirk on the side of Draco’s mouth was my only answer.

The conversation still played in my head the next day.

I poured cream and two sugars in my coffee, sighing as my mind worked at its usual break neck
speeds. For once, I wished it would stay silent and let me go one morning without thinking about
anything.

I was tired of thinking. It's all I did during school and the war.

I just wanted to. be. To simply exist from moment to moment. To do nothing but breathe as life
plowed on in the world around me. To sit and drink my coffee as I stared at the pretty view outside
my kitchen window.

The sudden appearance of a barn owl and the resulting scratching at said window ruined that plan
before it began.

I groaned and pushed away my steaming mug of bliss, forcing myself to stand.

The owl immediately flew to the nearest perch, which happened to be the chair I had previously
been sitting in before its interruption. The owl lifted its left leg and waited, hooting insistently until
I tugged the strings that attached the letter were loose. The envelope the letter came in was
midnight blue and bare except for my name and address printed neatly in gold ink.

I flipped it over, frowning. A small K was stamped into the middle of the envelope, where the seal
was originally placed in the seventeenth century.

My breath caught in realization.

Kingsley.

I tore the envelope open along the top, quickly unfolding the letter inside.

Hermione,

I am holding to my promise to inform you of what is happening with the matches. The matching
process has been started over, the necessary incantations have been recast and the results checked
several times by different eyes. Including my own.

I am pleased to inform you that your matches have been cleared and I have enclosed them in this
envelope.

I wish you and your matches many years of good fortune and happiness.

Sincerely,

Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic
I discarded the letter and withdrew a second piece of parchment, unfolding it as fast as I could without tearing any important portions of it. I skimmed over the dribble at the beginning that the Ministry covered the first time I received my 'matches'.

_Neville Longbottom_

_Severus Snape_

_Draco Malfoy_

_Charlie Weasley_

_William Weasley_

I stared down at the list of names, tears swimming in my eyes. A bubble of relieved laughter burst out of my chest, wet and loud.

It was finally over.

I know who I am to marry, definitely, without any doubts or complications.

I scrawled a note to all my former intended and my current intended. They were a polite request for a meeting at my address in an hour. I cast anti-interception spells on each and sent them on their way.

I decided to send a letter to Bill after I spoke with the men from my previous list.

I floated on feathers, feeling as giddy as a kid on Christmas as I made tea and snacks for my future husbands.

The men had spread themselves around the room.

Lucius and Draco remained standing, dressed sharp and wearing indifferent expressions as they did so. Aggravatingly enough, the gits still managed to make it look effortless and attractive. Arthur and Severus sat in armchairs they conjured for themselves while Neville and Charlie had taken the love seat.

I, myself, chose my favorite faded and patched armchair.

"We are all present, at this unholy hour, as requested. Now, what was so important you felt the need to summon us for a meeting a day after our last rendezvous?" Severus drawled, coal black eyes giving me his signature glare.

"I received my matches this morning." I blurted, my excitement making the words burst out of my mouth.

Arthur's eyebrows rose in surprise. "So soon?"

I nodded, fingering the parchment in my lap. The parchment holding my future. "Kingsley sent them with the reassurance that they had been checked numerous times for authenticity this time."
"You have read the names?" Draco asked, his bored expression in place. Not even so much as an eyebrow was raised.

"I have." I acknowledge, fidgeting with the parchment in my lap.

"And?" Severus prodded, none too subtly.

"All but one of you are on it." I glanced between the two men not on my list. "There is also an addition to the list."

"Who are they?" Arthur asked, blue eyes simultaneously curious and concerned.

"Which part?"

"Both." Lucius replied without missing a beat.

"Lucius, Arthur, you are not on my modified matches list." I began, shifting uncomfortably. I knew that for Arthur this could be a good thing. As for Lucius... that I was unsure about. "The addition is Bill Weasley."

"I don't suppose you need me anymore." Arthur murmured, smiling kindly at me as he stood from his seat. "I'm going straight to the Ministry to petition for Molly's hand."

"I hope you get another chance with Molly." I told him sincerely.

"Thank you. Good night and good luck." He replied, nodding to me once before turning to the fireplace and leaving in a flare of green flames.

"So we exchanged my father and a Weasel for another Weasel." Draco drawled smoothly. "How quaint."

"Don't talk about them like that!" I hissed angrily, glaring at the insufferable blonde.

"Perhaps we should discuss something else?" Neville suggested with a kind smile, turning his sole attention to me.

I nodded, settling down in my armchair.

A large speckled brown owl landed on my window sill, the air it exuded was regal, haughty and non-tolerant as two blond men I know.

"Would you kindly allow Arcturus entrance?" Lucius demanded in a way that made it clear he wasn't asking.

I reluctantly did so, barely avoiding getting scratched by talons or struck by the large owls wings.

Lucius took the letter it offered and the bird immediately retreated out the window.

Good riddance, I growled in irritation.

"What was so important that your... owl... felt the need to invade my home?" I demanded, my previous good mood very far gone at this point.

A new stiffness in Lucius' shoulders and his lengthy silence alerted me to potential danger.

"Lucius?" I prodded carefully, wary.
"It would appear that I have received my match." He answered stiffly, neatly folding the letter and trucking it away in his jacket pocket.

"You have?" I blinked, surprised. That was fast.

"Indeed." He ground out, his hand clenched tightly around his snake head cane. "It would appear that I am to marry Dolores Umbridge."
Hey, guys! I've received some reviews protesting my removal of Lucius, as well as my pairing for Lucius. All I can say in response is, the story isn't completely written, yet! ;)

~Gryffindor Heart~

I was speechless in my shocked horror.

My mind was a mess of jumbled thoughts. First and foremost though, is the most important question of the day.

How could Kingsley do such a cruel thing?

I mean, yes, Lucius could be an arrogant, self righteous, smug, conniving git. Yes, it was true that I had a history of wanting to hex the stupid man into the next century. Quite often, if we are being technically precise, but he was still a person. I wouldn't wish the fate of being married to that hateful, horrid toad of a woman on anyone. That would be a fate worse than death.

I didn't even want to attempt to imagine what kind of a life that would be.

I mentally groaned, squeezing my eyes shut as I inwardly cursed every trait ingrained in me.

Neville glanced at me, concerned.

"It would seem that you have fallen into a bit of bad luck, Lucius." Severus remarked dryly, a barely noticeable lift in one corner of his mouth the only thing hinting at his amusement at the situation.

"This is no joking matter, Severus! I am to marry one of the most vile women I have had the displeasure to become acquainted with." Lucius snarled, anger taking him for a moment and briefly lowering the indifferent mask he had been wearing until that moment.

"No, you won't." I sighed, my shoulders slumping with the weight of my decision.

Neville's eyes widened slightly, but he grabbed hold of my hand and squeezed it in silent support.

"It has been decreed-" He began to argue, but he didn't get to finish.

"No. I'll go to Kingsley and speak with him about a petition to reinstate your name on my matches list." I interrupted quickly, my patience thin as my mind worked overtime, planning and running
through what I could remember of the official documentation we were given to read. "There has to be something in the subtext that will sanction the petition."

"Why would you do that?" Lucius growled softly, narrowing his eyes at me suspiciously.

"Because, you ungrateful git, I wouldn't wish that fate on my worst enemy. Contrary to popular belief, I do not dislike you enough to watch a matching spell inflict that fate upon you." I snapped back, my head sore from the assault of persistent thoughts slamming around inside it.

Neville pulled me to the side before the blonde has a chance to respond.

"Are you sure about this? If you do this, there's a huge possibility that it can never be undone. You will be bound to him as you are that rest of us." My friend began, taking my hands in his own.

"I know that's a possibility, but I can't just do nothing knowing I could have tried to help him." I replied, needing him to understand.

"I love that you have a big heart, it's one of the things that I adore about you. Just...be sure this is what you want to do. Please." He implored me with his eyes.

My heart burst and I kissed Neville on the cheek. "I'm sure."

"You should probably go now, while there's still time to do what you need to. I'll send this lot on their way." He said, waving a hand toward the small flock of men with a reassuring grin.

"You're the best." I sighed, hugging him tightly.

"I know." He replied with a grin.

I fidgeted nervously as I waited beside the admittance desk, trying to keep from shouting at the woman currently gossiping on the enforced line, thus delaying me.

I glanced at the time. According to my wrist watch, I'd been standing here for fifteen minutes. This was getting ridiculous.

I cleared my throat forcefully for what felt like the tenth time, rapidly losing patience with her incompetence. I was ready to get this over with and did not in any way appreciate the unnecessary wait.

"Yes?" The woman growled, placing a manicured hand on the phone and shooting me a glare.

I glared back, refusing to cow to the weakness of hers. I have stood face to face with Voldemort himself, this little wisp of a witch wouldn't scare me.

"I have been waiting fifteen minutes to see the Minister of Magic, who is a personal friend, by the way. If I do not get into that room in two minutes, I will make sure that you never work in this position at a respectable office again." I paused for a moment, a darker part of me enjoying the sudden paleness to her face. "Now, once more, I am here to see the Minister."

"Y-yes. Go r-right in." She stuttered nervously, setting the phone in the cradle under my watchful eye.

"Thank you." I replied curtly, wasting no time as I headed for the door I required.
Kingsley sat at his desk, his head bowed over a small stack of papers. Larger piles were stacked on every available surface, both on and off his desk.

I waited a few moments to see if he had heard me come in. When he gave no inclination that he had heard my entrance into his office, I cleared my throat. I did not feel it necessary to do it as loud or rudely as I had with the secretary, but enough to grab his attention.

Nothing.

"Did you know that your Secretary is rude, so far beyond incompetent it is a mystery how she even received the job and spends an unnecessary amount of time on the secured line gossiping while you have guests waiting to see you?" I inquired, partly because the woman still irritated me with her existence, and partly to gain the Ministers attention.

Kingsley's head shot up, his eyes blinking at me in surprise. "Miss Granger? To what do I owe this visit?"

"I ask the Ministry for a petition to reinstate Lucius Malfoy as one of my intended husbands." I answered, smoothly, formally.

His eyebrows raised an alarming height, possibly would have disappeared into his hair line if he had had hair. "Is that so? I would have thought you would be relieved to be rid of the man. You spoke of his and his line's treatment of you with great disdain."

Twice. While drinking Firewhiskey. No one has let me live it down as of yet.

"Things have changed somewhat. You have paired him with a woman I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. Despite our... past differences, Lucius has become sort of an acquaintance over the past week and I believe he has suffered enough for his past grievances." I stopped myself from saying more, pushing down the sentence 'he lost his wife' as it was personal. I couldn't divulge that, not even to Kingsley.

The Minister eyed me with interest. "Why you? Why not another witch?"

*I suppose I'll have to divulge the vaguest aspect of the influence behind my choice, then. I sighed mentally.

"I have been informed of circumstances regarding Lucius' personal life. Certain witches have been known to seek out those with influence after such... circumstances in a bid for more power for themselves." I bit my lip, fighting the rage that filled me at the very thought of such women. "No one deserves to be used like that."

"I see." He simply said, bridging his fingers together.

I frowned at him.

Why wasn't he saying anything else? Was that a good sign? A bad sign?

A part of me wanted to shake him, demand answers. I was tired of waiting for someone to tell me things effecting my future.

"In order for the petition to be legal and binding, both parties must read, consent and sign the required documentation. Is Lucius here with you?" Kingsley finally asked, glancing behind me in search of the man in question.
I shook my head.

"If you want, we can wait until he is present-" He began to offer, but I knew where this was going.

I didn't want to wait any longer.

"No, thank you. I can fulfill my half of the requirements while I'm here and send him an owl when I get home." I stated calmly.

"As you wish." He reached into one of the piles on his desk and pulled out a blank parchment. His quill flew across the page as he wrote, murmuring incantations I didn't recognize until the page was finished. A quick drying spell was cast, then the petition was written and waiting to be used.

I accepted the parchment without complaint, my eyes immediately drawn to the first line on the page.

*Under the decree of the Minister of Magic, sanctioned by the Repopulation Law section 48 C paragraph nine, a petition has been made for the reinstatement of Lucius Abraxas Malfoy as a match to Hermione Jean Granger.*

As stated in aforementioned section, once the petition is finalized a legally binding contract has been made that:

A) Both parties must marry at a designated date and time. NO EXCEPTIONS.

B) Both parties must complete all duties listed and included in the Repopulation Law. An addition of mandatory counseling or random visitation of Ministry official to validate both parties are indeed obeying all aspects of the Law is non negotiable.

Visits may also ensure that neither party is inflicting abuse of any kind, forbidden magic, or the use of Animagus form upon the other party.

*Declarations*

*Read aloud this section under oath to the Minister and sign on the line required if content is given.*

*I, Hermione Jean Granger, do hereby swear on my magic that I will abide by the terms provided in this contract. I do hereby swear to take, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, as my intended husband and wed him as I wed my other husbands.*

*I consent to this petition, under the understanding that consequences such as wand breaking and sentencing will be swiftly carried out if I do not abide by the terms provided.*

I set the parchment on the desk. "I'm ready."

"If you would please raise your wand and repeat after me." Kingsley ran through the oaths word by carefully spoken word as I'd read on the petition. "Now, if you consent, please sign here and here."

I signed my name on the lines marked by my initials.

The door burst open, Lucius Malfoy striding toward us with the air of an angry God. "I have received summons to agree to a petition. What is the meaning of this?"

I turned from Kingsley, biting the line as it were. "I have petitioned for your hand, as I told you I would. All you have to do is read through it, say the oath included, sign your name and it's done. You won't have to marry Umbridge."
The silence coming from the elder Malfoy made me nervous.

Did he not appreciate my gesture as I'd thought he would? Would he storm out of the office now? Had I made a fool out of myself?

"Very well." Lucius murmured, passing me in favor of the petition.

The process I had just went through was completed by Lucius without unnecessary fanfare.

Kingsley checked the parchment over for any missed steps. Finding, none, we moved forward.

"By the power vested in me by the Ministry and the Wizengamot, I decree this petition finalized." The Minister declared in a voice that rang powerfully throughout the office.

It was final.

I am marrying Lucius Malfoy after all.
Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters. Any unrecognized plot or characters are mine.

~A Letter~

I didn't know how to feel about being engaged by contract to Lucius.

I know that I did it to help him. I know that now I have two Malfoys to marry instead of one.

The wedding would take place as planned with a few minor tweaks such as the names of the grooms on the invitations. Those were to be sent out tomorrow with the family owls.

I haven't spoken to Bill, yet.

I needed to.

I needed to do a lot of things to prepare for my wedding. Dress fittings and other minor things, but it would help keep me busy.

At the moment, the photos and descriptions of the flower arrangements our florist gave me earlier today were beginning to blur together into a meaningless mess inside a sealable folder. My eyes were aching and I was ready to throw the damn thing in the trash bin, be done with it.

Instead, I closed the folder and pushed it to the other end of the table.

I couldn't deal with wedding stuff right now.

A pressure alerted me that someone has passed through the wards I placed on my loft. The fact that they continued to the magic outside my front door told me that it was a friendly.

Rounding the corner and finding Arthur in my living room confirmed it.

I immediately noticed a few changes to his usually happy expression. His shoulders sagged and his blue eyes were sad.

"Arthur? What is it?" I asked, concerned when he didn't greet me warmly as he always had.

"The Ministry denied my petition for Molly's hand." He rasped, voice thick with grief.

"What?! How could they do that?" I raged, angry at Kingsley and the Wizengamot. They broke up marriages, soulmates, without saying so much as a 'I'm sorry'. Some of those soulmates have children together that will also suffer. I hated it, mainly that I couldn't do anything to stop or change it, no matter how much I wanted to. What made it worse was that Kingsley had met the Weasley's and knew how perfectly made for each other they are. He should have fought the Wizengamot to keep them together.

"Kingsley sat me down, explained to me that her matches are set and that redistributing the wizard I would replace would mean possibly throwing the process out of balance. It would increase the chances of maxing out matches for another witch or even leave him without a match. He couldn't
in good conscience grant me the petition with those risks."

"Oh, Arthur, I'm so sorry. Do you know who your match is?" I couldn't even imagine how much that hurt them both. The hope he had been harnessing just a few hours ago was crushed beyond fixing.

"I've been matched with Daphne Greengrass." He whispered, still not looking at me.

I hugged him, both of crying over his loss.

Arthur stayed the night, crashing on the couch.

I blinked awake, my eyes crusty and sore.

A very warm lump on my right shoulder reminded me of the reason for my sore, crusty eyes.

Arthur. He couldn't remarry Molly.

The clock on my bedroom wall revealed that it was one in the morning. Whoa, we'd been out for a while. The last time I remember on the clock was six thirty.

I wrote a quick note Harry explaining what happened and sent it to Grimmauld Place then crawled into bed to sleep as much of the remaining night as possible.

Arthur was gone when I woke up at five.

I sighed. I was up for the day, so I might as well make use of it. I could clean up the flat, make it presentable for the realty company later this week.

I vacuumed, scrubbed, dusted, swept and mopped every room----cleaned from top to bottom. It took me the better part of six hours to complete the entire flat.

I showered and power napped after, for two hours, then went out for groceries to take to Grimmauld. I realized that Harry didn't shop for food much, opting to go out for fish and chips or wing it on a weekly basis until he almost literally runs out of food.

I was in the middle of turning my key in the lock when I felt it. Pressure from my wards that announced an unexpected visitor. It wasn't insistent or heavy, so I didn't reach for my wand as I opened the door.

I was definitely not expecting to find Charlie sitting where his father had the night before. I hadn't gotten vibes that he welcomed our attachment, so him being here confused me. I thought he would prefer distance to get used to the idea, not show up here out of the blue. "Hey."

He blinked, looking up at me. "I didn't hear you come in. How did it go at the Ministry yesterday?"

Okay. Another twist.

"As well as can be expected. Kingsley gave me a contract that binds me to Lucius, so I am marrying him again. Lucius stormed in the office, he apparently likes to do that, and made a fuss at first. He calmed down and signed the contract, in the end, and then he left." I shrugged the final bit off, it didn't bother me any.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Hermione?" He asked, standing so we were on an even level. "I'm concerned about you, especially with what happened with the Malfoys during the war. Bill
and Ron mentioned a few things to me, not much to be honest, but enough.”

I swallowed hard, glancing down at the floor for a minute to push down the harsh flashes of memory that rushed to the front of my mind. Phantom pain echoed in my scar at the reminder, prompting me to clench my fists.

Warm fingers grasped my chin, gently tugging my head up. His kind face stared back at me, understanding and genuinely concerned. His face quickly became blurry and unfocused as tears filled my eyes. "Hey. You can talk to me."

"I know intimately how cruel Dolores Umbridge can be. I am aware of how Lucius treated me during the war and even now. I was raised to see the good in people. After everything that happened, all the death and destruction with the war----I wasn't sure I could do that anymore. I wasn't sure if there was any good to find. I can't do anything about a lot of things right now, I accept that. I also accept that there is a long list of people I couldn't save, but I can save Lucius. I choose to do the right thing, even if it means I have to marry someone I don't like in the least." I brushed the tears away with more force than necessary, taking a deep breath. "I choose to try to put the past behind me and forge ahead to build a better future for my children."

He waited, as if he could feel the but tacked on to the end.

"Part of me wishes I could let him marry that old toad and be done with it. They're both horrid and in some ways they deserve each other." I admitted shamefully, guilty for such thoughts. "If I did do it, let him marry her out of spite, I wouldn't be any better. I would be the biggest hypocrite in the world."

"Alright." He responds, drawing me into a hug. "I'm going to have to learn to live with the man----and his equally insufferable entitled son."

I laughed a little, nuzzling my face into his shoulder. The light feeling didn't last, though.

"Do you want me to stay?" He asked, rubbing my back in soothing circles.

"If you don't mind, that would be really great." I whispered, grateful that he knew I didn't want to be alone tonight. Usually I had nightmares after memories of the war or my time in Malfoy Manor surfaced.

I really hoped that there would be no more surprises regarding husbands or wedding stuff.

Charlie stayed the night. He and I talked about trivial things, I introduced him to a movie I loved since I was a child---he liked it. I made him popcorn, with butter and salt, which naturally fascinated him. We talked a while about what movies he might like to see in the future, I managed to find one of them in my belongings. I broke out the firewhiskey after the second movie, between the two of us we polished it off in what seemed like no time at all and eventually fell asleep.

I woke up, neck sore, head pounding and mouth dry at half past eleven.

I carefully slid away from his still sleeping body and slipped to the bathroom. I grabbed a Hangover potion from the medicine cabinet and downed it in one gulp. I placed a second one on the coffee table for Charlie when he wakes up.

I went through my morning routine, glad for the comfort of the familiarity of it.

That comfort was short lived, however, when I grabbed the morning paper.
I frowned at the front page of the Daily Prophet.

**Ministry Match Up Mess**

I quickly turned to the page the full story was listed under and scowled once I saw the reporters name.

Rita Skeeter.

*This reporter has received reports from multiple sources that the Ministry has not distributed the correct matches to an undetermined number of witches. Minister Shacklebolt has not commented as of yet on the mix up, but sources confirm the matches currently dispatched may not be the matches a witch is supposed to be assigned. Members of the Wizengamot have also refused to comment at this time.*

*Has the Ministry been approaching this problem all wrong? Is it possible for the matches to be fixed? What happens to those already assigned?*

*Those pressing questions will no doubt be on every witch and wizards minds this week. Answers may or may not be forthcoming in next weeks issue.*

I really hate that woman. She's already caught sight of her newest target and is set on destroying Kingsley and the Ministry. I should have left her in that jar longer, maybe she would be more hesitant to spread lies and slander, or generally stir up trouble, if I had.

I threw the paper in the rubbish bin, tempted to set it on fire for good measure.

The paper did bring to mind my own match dilemma.

I needed to talk to Bill. I was dreading it, procrastinating awfully even though I knew it wouldn't help matters. I'd been a coward yesterday, used my time with Arthur as an excuse not to write.

Now, I'm pulling on my big girl panties and doing this.

I summoned a fresh piece of parchment, my ink well and my quill to write my letter.

I also have to call all my future husbands together to conclude the wedding and living business. There was a new man added to the mix and new roles that needed to be assigned when it came to who does what for wedding and children's trusts.

Not to mention the dress and things I hadn't gotten to, yet.

Bloody Hell.

I sat among a pile of scrapped attempted letters, struggling for the right words.

How did someone tell a man still grieving a lost love that he would be marrying a sort of stranger friend of his siblings?

By telling the truth. As softly as possible.

Bill,

*I am aware that we do not know each other well and this is also the worst time for such a thing,*
but the new law passed states we are to be married. I apologize for the timing, your loss, and for, hell, for you having to marry me in the first place.

I don't expect you to be an infatuated fool, move on quickly or forget her. I don't blame you if you don't like me, I can't guarantee I will like you either. However, I want to try to get along the best we can for the sake of the children who are innocent in this. To prove my determination on this, I have decided to enclose some vows I am willing to make to you.

I vow to never lie to you or deceive you in any way.

I vow to never intentionally hurt you.

I vow to respect your wishes on every matter of discussion, even when I do not agree with a decision.

I suppose the rest is said in the other vows. I hope we can maybe become sort of friends some day.

_Hermione Granger_

I blew out a breath and sealed it, crossing my fingers that it would be enough.
I finally chose my wedding dress, tied up the odds and ends for the wedding. I had sent the letter to Bill, met with all my wizards for the last time before we are wed, and sent out the invitations to everyone on the joint guest list.

The meeting went about as well as I expected.

Bill looked terrible, hair limp and disheveled, skin pale and face thinner than I remembered. His clothes were baggy, practically hanging off of him, and torn in a lot of places. He sat as far from the others as possible without being excluded.

There was a lot of discussion, debates and flat out arguing-on the Malfoy side of the room-before everyone agreed on the new roles for wedding business.

Lucius was paying for the planners and florists. Draco and Bill are splitting the costs, ordering and pick up of the custom made tuxedos. Charlie and Neville are in charge of erecting the tent in the back gardens. Severus is brewing the potion to ease my pain, as well as a potion to increase the chance of pregnancy.

The date hit me like a ton of bricks.

I was getting married tomorrow.

A knock on the door broke me out of that terrifying reverie. "Mione, you have a visitor?"

A visitor? Everyone was busy with their assigned roles so I knew it wasn't any of my fiancé's.

I left my room, compelled by confusion and curiosity, following Harry to the living room. My confusion grew when we arrived and the room was pitch black.

"Harry-" I started, frowning.

The lights flicked on, blinding me temporarily. "SURPRISE!"

The sheer force and volume of multiple voices informed me that it was definitely more than one 'visitor'. My eyesight confirmed it once the spots cleared up. The females of my muggle family were gathered, scattered a bit to avoid disturbing the furniture too much.

"Val?" I squeaked, eyes trained on a particular slim figure standing beside the couch. Reddish hair down to mid shoulder, olive skin, taller than me by two heads and an athletic build.

"Hey there, little cousin!" She gushed, opening her arms wide. "Get over here!"

"What are you doing here? I thought you were in Chicago studying to be a firehouse paramedic?" I replied, hugging her obediently.

"And miss your bachelorette party? No way!" She exclaimed, as if that made all the sense in the world. "We need to do this right, even if it is a bit different. Never would've thought it was in you,
marrying more than one man at once."

"Ah, I wasn't planning on having a bachelorette party, Val." I informed her, and by extension everyone in the room, uncomfortably.

"No bachelorette party? Really, little cousin, you need to let loose and have fun before you tie yourself to all those men."

"I don't know, that's not really my thing."

"I know, which will make it even more fun."

"Show her." Aunt Mandy crowed, smiling wickedly.

That was never a good sign.

Val produced a large, plain white bag from the front of the couch and handed it to me. Her whole body practically vibrating and her face neutral, her eyes were the give away.

They were mischievous, excited, and eager.

I opened the bag warily, parting the crackly paper inside to reveal the contents.

Holy mother of Merlin.

They had to be joking. They were kidding, right?

I pulled out the lacy monstrosity, hands trembling. It was so tiny, and see through. There was no way in bloody hell it was meant to be worn, even though the thin straps said otherwise.

I squeaked and dropped it like it had fangs.

No. No way! Nope. Nuh uh.

"Thank you, but I don't believe that will be necessary." I said quickly, pushing the bag of devilry back to my amused cousin.

"Sorry, little cousin, it's nonrefundable." Val smirked, setting the bag on the couch.

"You can't-it's not staying here!" I squawked, beginning to panic a bit. There was no way. "You don't have to return it, just take it with you or sell it or something."

"It's not for us, cousin, it's for your men."

"..."

I had nothing. What am I supposed to say to that?! If I had my way, no one would ever see me in it as long as I lived.

Instead, I mutely walked it to my bedroom and tossed it in the far corner of my closet.

Aunt Mandy, Val, Cindy and Evony settled in.

We opened a bottle of firewhiskey, then another, and then another.

They took it upon themselves to give me unwanted pointers for . . .things. One was called a hand
job, I think.

Pointers, turned into tales of old boyfriends, that turned into the most embarrassing sex stories-told in great detail-to my intense mortification. Caught having sex in parents beds, sex injuries that made the doctors eyebrows raise, caught having sex during hay rides and in movie theaters.

So many cheek darkening details and stories.

Then came the cake and games.

We opened more firewhiskey. My family took the opportunity to make this night the Spanish Inquisition.

"How did you meet your husband's?" -Cindy-

"I met three of my husband's at school. One was my professor and two are in my year. Two are brothers of my friend and classmate, Ron. The other one is the father of one of my classmates."

"What are they like?" -Mandy-

"Neville is quiet, sweet, and studies botany. Bill and Charlie are the more wild child types, I suppose you could say. Lucius and Draco are refined, well put together Aristocratic types. Severus is . . . grumpy, intelligent, well educated and brave."

"Do you love them?" - Evony-

"No, not yet. Maybe not ever. But I do respect most of them a great deal."

"What are they like in the sack?" -Val-

I laughed the last one away, taking a long drink, a little self conscious.

"Does that mean mind blowing?" Val expanded with a wicked grin.

"I am not answering."

"Oh ho! That means something!" She crowed, a little too happy. "I bet you get more than three orgasms a day, you lucky woman."

"Mum is the word!"

"You're no fun!" she pouted.

Everything after that point was a fuzzy blur of color and noise.

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