Draco and Hermione bring Rory home from the hospital, and now the real fun begins.

Sequel to Baby Days. Both BD and BD2 follow A Writer of Fictions and Second Chapter.

Dramione Awards, Round One: Winner, Best Tale with a Baby or Kids.

Dramione Awards, Round Five: Nominee, Bundle of Joy (Best Baby fic category).
Prologue

"Is this the way it’s going to be?" Draco asked plaintively.

Rory had been crying nearly nonstop for hours. Five hours to be precise, ever since Hermione and Draco had arrived back home from the hospital that afternoon, baby in tow.

At two that afternoon, they had returned to the tidy attached house where they lived in wizarding London. Two-day-old Rory was swaddled snugly in her soft receiving blanket and cradled in her mother’s arms, her tiny face partially obscured by its folds, eyes shut in slumber. Their next-door neighbor, Beryl Mountbank, had been pulling weeds in her front garden as Draco, Hermione and the baby approached. She’d followed Hermione’s pregnancy with a motherly sort of fond fussing, often knocking on their door to offer rather lumpy scones or jam tarts, or to inquire about how the latest checkup had gone, and giving generally unsolicited advice on proper nutrition and exercise and the best teas and other decoctions which could be brewed for whatever might have ailed Hermione throughout the nine months. The older witch kept a small cauldron bubbling in her mudroom all the time, and curious odours sometimes wafted across the garden to the Malfoys’ kitchen window at odd hours. When that happened, Hermione knew to expect Beryl at her door before very long, a steaming cup of the latest potion in hand, a cheery smile on her face. But Hermione wasn’t bothered. Truth to tell, she had a bit of a soft spot for the older witch, knowing that Beryl thought of her as the daughter she’d never had and was really well-meaning, after all.

Draco wasn’t nearly so generous. He nursed a fond hope that one day the old biddy would take off on her broom for parts unknown and go bother somebody else for a change.

Please don’t notice us. PLEASE. He repeated the mantra to himself and crossed his fingers.

Unaware of the fact that a mere four feet away, her young neighbour was seriously considering Vanishing her on the spot with a nice, tidy Evanesco, Beryl took one look at them and dropped her trowel, pulling off her gardening gloves and stuffing them hastily into a pocket. She ventured closer to peer down at the little pink bundle in Hermione’s arms. Draco thought sourly that she looked rather like a spider advancing on a hapless fly.

Shit.
“Oh my!” Beryl trilled. “She’s beautiful, bless her! What are you going to call the little mite?” She reached out and patted the blanket. Rory turned her face slightly towards the sound and the touch, eyes fluttering open for a moment, and then settled back into sleep, her soft, pink baby mouth moving as if to suckle.

“Rory,” Draco replied, just a shade brusquely. “For Aurora Beatrice. Her names mean ‘the dawn’ and ‘bringer of joy.’ I picked them,” he added smugly. Much as he couldn’t abide the meddlesome old bat, he also couldn’t resist bragging just a bit.

“Oh, well, those are simply beautiful names for such a little angel! Aren’t we a little angel, my pet, yes we are!” Beryl wasn’t deterred by his cool tone, if indeed she’d even noticed it at all, and instead, stuck her face even closer to the baby’s, cooing and clucking at her. Rory remained completely oblivious. Draco, on the other hand, was feeling just a tad nauseated, and wished the nosy cow would just clear off already and leave them alone.

It was Hermione, however, who rescued them. She smiled sweetly at Beryl. "We really do need to get her settled now, Beryl, if you don’t mind. It’s time for a feeding, and I… um… need some privacy for that…” she trailed off, lowering her eyes modestly.

“Of course, of course, I wouldn’t dream of interfering!”

‘Bollocks,’ Draco thought basely.

The older woman took a step back then. “Now look,” she instructed, wagging a finger at them. “You’re not to let anybody get too close to the little precious! They’ll spread nasty old germs and make her ill! And we don’t want that, now do we, Angel?” One last “kooky-kooky,” her index finger prodding at the blanket, and she was gone, her generous behind jiggling as she waddled off round the back of the house, in search of more weeds to attack.

“Merlin be praised, I thought she’d never leave!” Draco groaned, smacking his palm against his forehead.

Hermione grinned, a decidedly wicked glint in her eye. ‘Oh, I don’t think we’ll have to worry about her. I’ve got a spell or two up my sleeve just in case, y’know.”

Draco quirked an eyebrow and grinned. ‘Granger, I love you,’ he thought, a sudden and overwhelming sense of contentment with the universe washing over him.

That was at two. It was now seven in the evening, and the screaming, which had begun almost immediately after they’d attempted to lay Rory down in her cot, was earsplitting and shrill. Whatever contentment Draco had been fool enough to allow himself was now shattered.

It was such a lovely cot too. He’d put it together himself, something he would never have believed himself capable of. Nor would he have thought that he would ever be caught dead even attempting such a thing, if anybody had presented that particular scenario to him, joking or otherwise, as late as seventh year at Hogwarts. The very idea would have seemed ridiculously remote and beneath him, besides. Nor would he have imagined, all those years ago when he was a rich little brat, that he’d ever be living in a very comfortable, but certainly not opulent, attached house rather than in the luxury of Malfoy Manor or the like. It would have been completely inconceivable. However, life had a funny way of catching out those least expecting it, and the minute Draco Malfoy had surrendered to his undeniable and rather overwhelming love for Hermione Granger, it was all over. He’d been well and truly caught—and he wouldn’t have changed that for any amount of freedom or any number of nubile and willing young ladies. If marriage and a family with Hermione were jail, then Draco was surprised to find that he was one very happy inmate.

Just what was it about the cot that Rory detested so vehemently that she had to shriek at the top of her lungs hour after interminable hour? Her parents were stumped—and utterly exhausted. Hermione had hoped that maybe she could catch a nap while the baby was sleeping, but no such luck. She’d barely slept while in hospital, such a place not being exactly conducive to rest. Lights
were on almost all the time and mediwiches held conversations with each other at all hours, and even worse, they’d wake you for your healing potions even when sleep probably would have been more beneficial than anything else.

Wearily, Hermione picked Rory up yet again, trudging round the nursery in a well-trod circle, holding her close and rubbing circles on her back rather mechanically while whispering comforting nonsense. She felt as if she were on automatic pilot and that her body was functioning without benefit of her brain. Overhead, the ceiling stars had begun to wink gently down at them.

“Maybe it’s time to nurse again,” she muttered, and sank back against the nest of pillows on the sofa bed they’d installed in the nursery.

Unbuttoning her shirt, she opened the left cup of her nursing bra and drew out her tender, swollen breast. The bra was a big, ugly, white cotton monstrosity that had the single advantage of cups that opened independently of the rest of the bra, allowing a woman to bare her breast very conveniently when it was time to nurse her baby. (Of course, Draco appreciated this particular feature for an entirely different reason. Whoever had invented this rather ingenious item of clothing should get an award, in his opinion. Something Hermione had said was called “Velcro” kept the cups attached to the rest of it—so much simpler to manage, especially in a hurry, than those bloody hooks which held the backs of bras together! And there was something weirdly erotic about it too, just having the cups open while the bra was still on. Fodder for a whole new range of fantasies, always a happy prospect.)

Hermione had had some problems nursing while still at St. Mungo’s. The baby had seemed to be having difficulty latching on properly, and the whole thing had become increasingly frustrating for mother and daughter alike. Now that they were home, it was well on its way to becoming a full-blown disaster. A very sleepy Hermione hefted Rory up into the crook of her left arm and turned her so that she was being held “football” fashion, facing her mother’s left nipple, which Hermione raised up and tried to position in Rory’s questing mouth. That tiny rosebud mouth sucked the tip of the nipple right in and clamped down hard, jaws working feverishly. And she was getting milk—or not milk, exactly, Hermione knew, but the very nourishing yellow fluid known as colostrum, the pre-milk the breasts make just before the milk glands let down the mature milk. Hermione desperately wanted Rory to have the colostrum’s protective benefits. But as soon as the baby made contact, there was excruciating pain, starting from the ring of suction that her mouth had made and spreading in a fiery arc that radiated throughout Hermione’s breast, making her want to leap off the bed, shrieking. Tears of pain streaked down her face, but she gritted her teeth and held on. When Rory was finished on the left side, Hermione dutifully switched her over to the right, starting the cycle of pain all over again.

Draco came into the nursery just as she was taking Rory off the second breast. He saw Hermione wince and let out a soft gasp, a lone tear sliding out of the corner of her eye, as the baby released the nipple with a resounding pop, breaking the suction finally. This simply could not continue.

“Baby, you can’t go on like this,” he began, crossing over to the bed in swift strides and regarding her anxiously. Slipping his fingertips beneath her left breast as gently as he could, he raised it up a bit, peering at it closely. He frowned. The nipple was inflamed and the delicate tissue was beginning to crack open. A minute amount of nasty, yellowish stuff oozing from the small crack indicated an infection. It was painful even to look at. He could only just imagine how Hermione must feel with a tiny mouth pulling insistently on it every few hours. Or no, he really couldn’t imagine it, he supposed. But Merlin, it must hurt like the very devil, that much he was certain of.

“I know,” she groaned. “I’ll have to see a mediwitch who specializes in lactation problems. They gave me a couple of names in hospital in case this didn’t go away by itself. Maybe they’ll do house calls.” She flopped back against the pillows, and squeezed her eyes shut.

Draco had no sooner settled Rory in the cot and turned back to Hermione when the shrill wailing began again. Hermione cringed. Maybe the baby hadn’t had enough to eat and was frustrated. Maybe what she had taken was not good for her, somehow. A baby could be allergic to its own mother’s breast milk, after all. Maybe her breast milk would actually make her baby sick!
Hermione buried her face in Draco’s shirtfront, the tears flowing even harder now. Behind them, Rory screamed. Her father regarded her with a baleful eye and a growing sense of helplessness.

She hadn’t even been home a full day yet. And now the catastrophe was escalating. Hermione lay prostrate on the sofa bed now, a pillow pulled over her head. Draco was left to cope now, and he turned towards the cot, determined to find a way to defuse this nightmare. Just then, to his horror, a stream of lumpy, whitish fluid suddenly gushed out of the baby’s small mouth and ran down the side of her neck, pooling on the clean, new cot sheet and all over her fresh pair of jammies. So much for that particular feeding. And it was his fault. He’d forgotten all about burping her.

_Fucking hell._

The wailing intensified.

After a moment’s blank indecision, he grabbed a cloth nappie from the pile neatly folded on top of the changing table and began frantically mopping up Rory’s lost meal. She, her jammies, and her bedding all smelt of sour milk. Draco fought down the urge to gag, gritting his teeth and carrying on.

Finally managing to get her cot sheet and mattress cover changed, trying to stuff the fitted sheet ends down snugly over the rest and into the tight corners, jamming his fingers painfully between the mattress and the cot slats whilst Hermione held the baby, he’d felt rather like a contortionist. Now it was time to change Rory herself. Cheesy, noxious-smelling spit-up was all down her front and had puddled on her neck, clumping in the soft wisps of fine, white-blond hair at the nape. She was red in the face from crying and now seemed doubly irritated, if such a thing were possible. Taking her from Hermione, who collapsed back onto the pillows with a moan, he carried her to the changing table and managed to get the jammies off—bugger all those pesky snaps clotted with spit-up!—and strip away the sodden, poo-smeared nappie as well.

Progress.

Or was it? In the panic of the moment, he’d had his second serious memory lapse of the day: he’d completely forgotten he had a very handy wand and how to use it. Draco Malfoy was discovering the joys of having a colicky newborn the old-fashioned Muggle way.

“Okay, what next?” he muttered. “Ah. _Right._” He’d noticed a canister of moistened wipes standing amongst a frightening array of baby products, and plucked one out. “Your mum’s prepared, as always.”

Scrubbing furiously, trying to get into every possible crevice and not leave any of that vile stuff behind, he laid a finally clean Rory down, positioning her bottom on a fresh nappie folded in thirds inside a colorful cover which fastened around the baby’s legs and tummy with Velcro. He stopped just for a moment to gaze down at her in wonder. She was so very small, he marveled.

“Hello, Rory B.,” he whispered, leaning down and planting a soft kiss on the smooth, fresh, baby-scented skin of her naked tummy. At which point a spray of urine rose in a gentle arc from between her small legs straight down the neck of his shirt, soaking him, the nappie, and the changing table pad right through.

_Is this the way it’s going to be?_

It was all too much. Draco had never had a day quite like this one in his entire life. Who or what was this tiny creature who had suddenly invaded his peaceful, predictable, very comfortable life? Fluids erupting from every possible orifice, ear-splitting shrieks that threatened to bore a hole through his skull if they didn’t stop very soon—and a totally knackered wife who already had war wounds after only two days! Not to mention the eerie sensation that everything familiar and reliable had suddenly been supplanted by some weird alternate reality and he was trapped in it without a clue.

He sighed heavily. Time to start all over again.
And so he did. Never let it be said that a Malfoy gave up on a challenge.

Half an hour later, he and Rory sat in the big rocking chair, the floor creaking softly under the chair’s runners. Hermione had dropped off and was getting some well-deserved rest at last, and Draco was glad. Desperate to finally get his little girl to sleep as well, he’d cast about for something that could help, and his gaze had fallen on a collection of music CDs and a CD player Hermione had placed on a shelf, along with a variety of enchanted teddy bears, bunnies, elephants, kittens, and other plush toys that had been a present from Lucius and Narcissa. They all turned their heads to look at him as he approached. Grabbing the nearest disk, he popped it into the player, silently blessing Hermione for showing him how to use such Muggle devices years before, and pressed the “play” button. Then he dropped into the rocker, clutching a whimpering, all-cried-out Rory to his chest, and sat back, rocking slowly, more bone-tired than he’d ever been in his life. The music washed gently over them in a soothing wave.

Butterflies go up and down,
Fluttering above the ground.
Butterflies soar through the sky.
Someday, baby, you will fly.

Crickets call the whole night through,
Playing songs for me and you.
Crickets calling wing to wing.
Someday, baby, you will sing.

Close your little eyes. Sleep until you dream.
Tomorrow you will know... that you can do anything!

Sunbeams fall from up above,
Chasing clouds away with love.
Sunbeams touch your heart and mine.
Someday, baby, you will shine.

Close your little eyes. Sleep until you dream.
Tomorrow you will know... that you can do anything!*
Summer Solstice to the Autumn Equinox. Part 1: The Accident

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Early Saturday morning, 21 July

She: “What time is it?” (muffled, head under pillow)

He: (glancing groggily at bedside clock) “4:20.” (rolls over again)

Dead silence for sixty seconds. Then—there it was again. Undeniable and unavoidable.

The Cry.

She: “Your turn.”

He: “Mmm… nope. Yours.”

She: (sighing) “Right.” (unmoving)
He: “Hermione.”

She: “I know, I know…” (groans)

For Hermione, at least, the notion of day and night had become a quaintly obsolete concept. This was because everyday existence had taken on a wholly new dimension: everything was now backwards.

Her new waking hours were between one in the afternoon and about four or five the next morning, depending on when Rory had had her most recent late-night feeding; her time to crash and get some desperately needed sleep generally arrived soon after that and lasted until about noon or one p.m. the following afternoon. Interrupted, of course, by periodic feedings and nappie changes of at least half an hour at a time. Even though they’d worked out a system of sharing such that the two o’clock feeding would be his to do, using bottles of warmed-up breast milk Hermione had expressed and stored in the fridge, still, quite naturally, it was hardest on her.

This schedule had been entirely determined by one very small infant girl whose natural, though unconscious, ability to call the shots was astonishing in one so tiny. Aurora Beatrice Malfoy, otherwise known as Rory– or Rory B, as her daddy affectionately called her– had taken to the role of benevolent dictator like the proverbial duck to water. But an unfortunate complication remained. At nearly six weeks old, Rory was still screaming for hours at a time every night.

The mediwitch that a rather frazzled and bleary-eyed Hermione and Draco had consulted had merely smiled and assured them that colic was perfectly normal and quite common, really, and that they oughtn’t to worry.

Hah! Easy for you to say, Draco groused silently, as the grey-haired practitioner turned away for a moment towards the glass-fronted cabinet full of potion bottles of all sizes and colours. It’s probably been about a hundred years since you had a baby!

“Now, then, my dears,” Madame Philigree said, turning to face them again, her voice reassuringly calm. “This is a mild version of the Draught of Peace mixed with a key element of the Draught of Living Death; for this potion, the powdered moonstone and syrup of hellebore have been mixed with an infusion of valerian root. It will calm your baby down and she’ll be able to sleep much more easily and for longer periods. And then, of course, so shall the two of you. But I must warn you…” Here her face turned stern and her tone took on a definite edge, demanding their attention. “Do not be careless in administering it. Follow the directions on the bottle precisely. The complications of an overdose can be quite severe.”

She handed the vial to Hermione, whose eyes had gone wide as she accepted it. She glanced quickly at the instructions before stuffing the bottle into Rory’s supply bag. Three drops on the tongue every twelve hours. The mediwitch smiled brightly and continued, “Of course, there are other remedies you can and probably should try before resorting to this one.”

“Like what?” Draco couldn’t help feeling just a bit skeptical. He leaned against the wall, challenge evident in his cool gaze.

“Well,” she replied, unperturbed, folding rather fleshy arms across her ample chest, “let’s see. One thing I find very effective is motion. This often calms a fussy baby right down. There are lots of ways you can accomplish this. One is to levitate her -- not too high up, mind, and always directly over her cot, of course! -- and use your wand to create a very gentle rocking motion, finally lowering her down once she’s actually dropping off. It’s the gentle swinging that does it, you see. Many new parents have reported great success with that one.” She considered for a moment. “Then of course, there’s forward movement. You could always try attaching two brooms lengthwise, and fitting a baby seat to them; then you’d strap her securely in and fly her around slowly until she falls asleep. Bit risky, though. You have to stay very alert every single second so that you can control the brooms, or she’ll end up crashing into a wall.”

Draco only just managed to contain the derisive snort that threatened to explode out of him. It
would be a cold day in Hades before he’d strap his Rory to a broom and fly her around the room like a bloody kite! What was the woman thinking?! She must be mad, a complete incompetent! By Merlin, he would report her to… to… whomever one reported crackpot mediwitches, that’s who! People like her were an absolute menace!

Hermione, on the other hand, seemed at least marginally more collected than he was feeling at the moment. She smiled slightly, and cleared her throat.

“Um… is there anything else, anything at all?”

The mediwitch considered for a moment, her brows knitted into a V over the bridge of her nose. “Well… do you happen to know how to drive one of those Muggle vehicles -- an automobile? Because if you do…”

Hermione nodded that she did.

“If you do,” Madame Philigree continued, “you could always put her into one of those -- what do you call them? car seats, yes -- and drive her round until she nods off. You might prefer that to brooms. Though there is one potential difficulty. Once you stop the car, a baby can often detect the subtle change, and will wake up and begin fussing all over again. I’ve heard about Muggle folk trying this who’ve wound up trapped in their cars and driving around for hours just so they could have a bit of peace and quiet!” She shook her head, tsking loudly.

There didn’t seem to be much else to say at that point. Draco and Hermione stood up and prepared to leave. Checking a dozing Rory who was tucked into the Snugli sack carrier tied to Hermione’s chest, the pair found the nearest Floo point and returned home, a bit disheartened. Hermione forgot about the small bottle of potion that rested in an inner pocket of the baby’s supply bag.

An odd murmuring caught Draco’s attention as he walked down the hall past their bedroom door several hours later. He’d been heading towards the small study, intending to sit down with the novel he’d nearly finished. It was *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. Knowing he would like it, Hermione had left it on the bedside table one day, like bait on a fishhook, and he’d taken the bait immediately.

The description on the back cover had intrigued him: it was the story of a man who was physically beautiful but psychologically flawed, and what happened when that fatal flaw took over his life. Draco was fascinated by the notion of a painting which, rather like the Mirror of Erised, told the truth in some fashion -- Dorian Gray had wished for his portrait to age while he remained forever young and beautiful, but instead, the portrait showed Dorian Gray far more than he’d bargained for: he saw not only steady signs of aging but also a mirror of his corrupted soul, every bad thing he’d ever done making the portrait more and more hideous while he remained forever young and beautiful.

Some serious magic going on there, Draco decided, and considered the metaphor. The inner self is the true self, no matter what the outside world sees, and sooner or later, everything you do is going to catch up with you. Ugly is as ugly does, in other, simpler words. In the portrait, Dorian Gray gradually became a monster after years of self-destructive, hedonistic acts. Draco was very glad that Hermione had seen past the arrogant, obnoxious behaviour and prejudicial attitudes of his youth, forgiving all that and giving him a chance to grow up and finally accept some hard truths about his own life, not only in terms of his past but also what he wanted to make of his future and with whom. Otherwise, he could well imagine himself living as the sort of shallow, desperate, empty shell that was Dorian Gray.
There it was again. It seemed that Hermione was in the bedroom, conducting a conversation with herself. It had to be that. He knew the telly and the radio were switched off and nobody was visiting that he was aware of.

He doubled back and poked his head in. She was standing there in an oversized t-shirt she used for sleeping and not much else, studying her reflection in the full-length mirror that stood in the corner near the door to the en-suite. Unaware that he was standing in the doorway, she turned to the side and raised the hem of the t-shirt in a rather gingerly fashion, almost as if doing so were painful in some way. Higher and higher it went, until she’d peeled it over her head and tossed it to the floor. Standing there in just her bra and knickers, she scrutinised her reflection with a scowl.

“I’m fat. Bloody. Fucking. FAT. Oh gods!!” she moaned, her voice rising with every word. Even from where he stood, he could see the beginnings of angry tears shimmering behind her lashes.

She turned to the right and to the left, looking herself up and down, running her hands down her hips and then over her belly, her face screwed up in an expression of disgust. True, there was a little pouch there that hadn’t been before, and her waist was a trifle thicker than it used to be, Draco decided, but it was nothing dramatic and certainly nothing to get her knickers in a twist over. (In fact, if anything, since the baby’s birth, the little bit of extra weight had made her positively voluptuous in his opinion, not fat. Those tits in particular. Gorgeous. He fervently hoped that when the last of the baby weight had dropped off, they’d still be around in all their glory.) Now, he could think of lots of good reasons to get her knickers in a twist -- Twist them right off along with the bra and toss them into a corner. Too right! He licked his lips, momentarily distracted, but then reminded himself that being ravished was probably the last thing on her mind just at that moment.

Under the circumstances, it seemed, somehow, just a bit… well, smarmy… to continue standing there watching her without her knowledge, even for him -- and Draco realised he could do one of two things: either make a quietly tactful retreat so she’d never know he’d witnessed her feeling so humiliated, and then try to show her later with his actions how wrong she was to see herself this way, or he could walk right in and tell her she was being ridiculous. He opted for the latter.

Self-indulgent nonsense like this, particularly from somebody as intelligent and sensible as Hermione, was something he just could not abide. He much preferred dealing with things head-on, not tiptoeing around them. He’d never been known for great delicacy or tact, but he viewed that as a virtue rather than a fault. Better to be an honest bull in a china shop than an ineffectual little wanker.

No time like the present.

“Ugly, ugly, UGLY!” she spat at her reflection.

“Oh, come now. Really.”

Hermione spun around to see her husband lounging in the doorway, arms folded, an amused grin on his face.

“Do you think this is FUNNY?” she yelled. “I look like a goddamned hippogriff! I can’t fit into my jeans anymore! I’m still wearing maternity jeans, and that’s pathetic!”

His mouth twitched and he swallowed the laughter he felt bubbling so dangerously close to the surface. A little grin was one thing. But he knew if he laughed at Hermione now, it might be the last thing he’d ever do.

“No, no. Of course not. I don’t think it’s the least bit funny.” Actually, I think it’s fucking hilarious, you silly cow! “Hermione love, let’s not get hysterical, shall we?”
“I’m. Not. HYSTERICAL.”

He tried another tack. “So you need to lose a few pounds, so what?” Wrong. Oh, SO wrong. Foot not only in mouth, but halfway down throat by now. How in hell could I have said that?? Idiot!

“Oh, so you agree that I’m fat then?” She glared at him.

Shit. It was one of Hermione’s patented verbal traps, the spring coiled and ready. He had to think fast.

“Fat… ha ha…” he began rather weakly. “Who said anything about fat? No, you’re… you’re… well… bloody hell, Hermione, you just had a baby six weeks ago for fuck’s sake! Give it some time, yeah? And anyway,” he grinned, sidling up to her and wrapping his arms around her from behind, “I like my women a bit plump.” He nuzzled her ear and gave her bum a pinch. “More to love!”

She made to swing around and belt him one, actually had her arm up in the air to do it, but he deftly caught it in mid-strike, snaked his other arm round her waist and swept her closer. “Oh no!” he laughed and shook his head. “Can’t have that!”

“Draco Malfoy!” she spluttered, a furious blush sweeping her face. “You’re -- you’re -- incorrigible! “

“True,” he murmured, into her hair. “Not to mention devastatingly handsome, charming, talented, brilliant, witty, sophisticated… shall I go on? I can, you know.”

“Draco…” She suddenly became quite matter-of-fact. “I think we shall have to call a contractor immediately.”

“Whatever for?” Startled, he pulled his face away from her neck, where he’d been happily grazing.

“Oh… to enlarge the bedroom door -- raise it a bit, make it wider, you know?”

“Excuse me??” Now he really was confused.

“Surely you don’t think your head will fit through it otherwise,” she calmly replied, looking him in the eye. “Oh, and you forgot arrogant, conceited, pompous, self-absorbed git—“

“Git’s a noun, not an adjective.”

Shrieking, she belted him broadside with a huge pillow and he retaliated by throwing her onto the bed and tackling her. After a heated tickling session, things were progressing nicely when there it was.

The Cry.

And that was that.

*

That really wretched time of evening was rapidly approaching. Hermione was just finishing the eleven o’clock feeding. Nursing, at least, was going so much better now than at the very beginning. She’d been amazed that the solution had been so very simple. One visit from the lactation specialist at the hospital and it had been solved: she’d observed Hermione nursing Rory
and had spotted the problem immediately. A simple adjustment in the way Hermione was positioning Rory and she no longer clamped down on the nipple in that same disastrously painful way. That one change, plus a miraculous healing salve which began to repair the damaged tissues immediately, took care of the problem. Now, weeks later, Hermione could sit back, relax, and actually enjoy nursing her baby. And she did.

This evening, she sat on the opened sofa bed, legs extended and crossed at the ankles, large pillows propping her up behind. Draco was stretched out on his side next to her, keeping her company; leaning on one elbow, he idly fingered the pages of a magazine lying on the bed next to him.

Hermione had begun sleeping in the nursery every night right from the beginning, because of the topsy-turvy hours that defined her life now. Not wanting to cause Draco to lose sleep as well, she’d encouraged him to continue sleeping in their bed, away from the almost constant fussing, and from the music CDs, radio and telly Hermione relied on to keep her going until the baby finally conked out, exhausted, usually when the first birds had begun to trill their songs in the tree outside the nursery windows. This sleeping arrangement really was the most sensible. By the time Hermione herself fell into bed in those wee hours, she was close to comatose anyway, and would have been oblivious to the entire Slytherin Quidditch team showing up stark naked in bed with her, much less Draco. This way, at least one of them could get a fairly decent night’s rest. And Draco still needed to be up early in the morning, after all. He had a job to go to, while she was away from hers on an extended maternity leave.

For his part, much as he appreciated her selfless gesture, Draco discovered that he missed Hermione even more than he craved a solid night’s sleep, and often found himself wandering into the nursery at strange hours, often just after she’d fallen asleep finally, and crawling in close beside her. Somehow, he found it comforting just to be near her, even if she was completely unaware of his presence. He could still hold her for a couple of hours and bury his face in her cloud of fragrant curls.

“Me!”

She sighed contentedly and gazed down at the tiny infant who was slipping into a half-sleep, thoroughly sated by her meal. She dozed, her mouth still loosely forming an “o” around Hermione’s nipple, eyes half-closed. There was a faintly milky perfume about both Hermione and Rory now, that Draco had come to find curiously inviting. He reached out, one finger lightly stroking his wife’s bare upper thigh, sliding it gradually higher until it disappeared under the edge of her nightie. She was preoccupied, though, and he knew it. Already, she was hoisting the baby to an upright position, her small head at Hermione’s shoulder where a protective cloth lay just in case, and gently but firmly patting her back. His tentative caress had gone unnoticed.

The unique, timeless peace that characterised each nursing session was nearly over. Once Rory had been taken off the breast, burped, changed again if necessary, and then put down in her cot, that last part of the ritual was generally her signal to suddenly come wide awake and roar back into full-scream mode in a wrenching, blistering fashion. She often turned so red in the face that both her parents were frightened she would actually make herself ill, and even that had come to pass one night. She’d been screaming so hard and for so long that she’d actually thrown up on a thoroughly shocked and dismayed Draco as he’d walked her round the house, trying to calm her. Even in the midst of the chaos that was erupting all around them, Rory’s shrieks filling their ears, Hermione had had to bite her lip to stifle a laugh when she saw the look of utter horror on his face while warm, pungent baby puke dripped down his shoulder. Wouldn’t that make a wonderful photo on the “Where Are They Now?” page of the Hogwarts alumni bulletin, right alongside one of him resplendent in his sixth-year Seeker’s uniform. She smirked at the thought.
That was an experience he’d not soon forget. It became the star attraction in his repertoire of baby war stories, and if it hadn’t exactly been a thrilling experience at the time, at least it was good for a laugh or for smugly disseminating a bit of terror when friends expecting a baby of their own soon were visiting. These days that would be Ron and Pansy, who had heard so many of these stories by now that they were completely shell-shocked. Draco was positively in his element. After all, wasn’t it his duty to help prepare other innocents who were travelling down the road to parenthood behind him? It was a sacred obligation he took very seriously. That is, until he closed the door behind them and then roared with laughter until tears filled his eyes, at the sheer panic he’d induced. Hermione would shake her head, trying to look disapproving but barely suppressing a giggle of her own. Once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin. And she was married to their Prince.

Tonight’s crying jag had begun right on cue at 11:30 pm. Hermione had no sooner put her down and was trying to sneak away on tiptoe when the first shriek sliced through the air and shattered her delusion that maybe tonight, Rory just might sleep between feedings. She glanced over at Draco, who’d dozed off on the sofa bed. Wondering how in the world he could sleep through this din, she walked wearily back to the cot and peered over the rail. Rory was lying on her back, flailing her tiny arms and legs, her mouth open and her eyes squeezed shut. She was turning her usual furious tomato-to-port wine-red, her fine, white-blond hair thrown into stark relief against her deeply flushed skin, wreathed in a light sheen of sweat.

“Oh, Baby, what’s the matter? Why do you cry like this?” Hermione murmured, shaking her head and reaching out to stroke little Rory’s face. She felt so helpless. She couldn’t even properly soothe her child!

Suddenly she remembered that vial she’d been given much earlier that day. Hmm. If not now, then when? She decided it was worth a try. Then she glanced at the baby again.

Rory’s small face was now purpling with the choking shrieks that were forcing their way out of her lungs. She looked as if she were on the verge of not being able to catch her breath from the exertion of crying for such a long time. Her tearful cries came mixed with great, jagged gulps of air. Hermione swept her up out of the cot, swiftly wrapping her in a receiving blanket that was draped over the top rail, and screamed, “DRACO!!!”

He was on his feet before he even realised he was no longer asleep. For a moment, he swayed unsteadily, his heart pounding in a crazy rhythm as adrenaline coursed through his body, and then his head snapped in the direction of that shrill, panic-stricken voice.

“What—all’s wrong, Hermione?!” His heart had suddenly lurched into his throat.

“It’s Rory! She doesn’t look right! She’s been crying so hard, I don’t know if she’s breathing properly!” Hermione cried. “We’ve got to give her that potion! NOW!”

Thrusting the baby at Draco, who was still half-asleep and rubbing his eyes, and certainly not expecting to have a nine-and-a-half-pound infant suddenly deposited in his arms like a parcel, Hermione ran to the supply bag and frantically thrust her hand inside, fishing around for the vial. Her fingers closed around it finally, and she brought it back out, a small smile of relief belying the terror in her eyes.

“Look, you just hold her, all right, and I’ll give her the medicine,” Hermione said, her voice shaking a little. She swallowed hard, and opened the vial, drawing out the dropper. Her hands were trembling. “Three droppersful…” she muttered to herself, and slipped the tip of the dropper into the baby’s open mouth. Squeezing, she let the potion drip onto Rory’s tongue one dropperful at a time.

The transformation was very nearly instantaneous and really quite dramatic. The baby grew quiet almost immediately, her eyes closing, her facial muscles relaxing visibly. Her small mouth, which had been stretched wide in a rictus of howling hysteria, now closed into a soft, pink rosebud. Draco glanced at Hermione, who was still clutching the cot rail tightly, her knuckles white. Her gaze was locked on the face of her baby and she was utterly oblivious to anything else.
“Um…” Draco cleared his throat. “D’you — d’you think she’s going to be okay?” His voice was very low and hesitant.

“I hope so.” Hermione quavered, her face pinched with worry. She let out an explosive sigh. “We’ll just have to wait and see what happens.”

It was going to be a very long night, she was certain.

Turning away, her shoulders sagging, she sat down heavily in the upholstered armchair by the window; leaning forward, she buried her face in her hands. Quietly, Draco moved behind her and lightly rested his fingertips on her shoulders. He knew just where the knots of tension were likely to be whenever his wife was really upset about something. Pressing down and kneading small circles into the tops of her shoulders, he gradually moved long, supple fingers up the column of her neck and then back down, pressing on each vertebra as he went. Sighing, she rolled her head a bit to the left and then the right, trying to ease the painful kinks born of tension. This felt good, so good. Draco always knew what made her feel best. Those fingers of his were positively gifted.

Resting her head on the plush back of the chair now, eyes closed, she exposed more of her slender neck to his view, another contented sigh escaping her. Rory was blessedly asleep, thanks to the potion. Draco hesitated for a moment, uncertain, and then made a decision. Quietly, carefully, he came round to the side of the chair, leaned down, and kissed the soft skin of her throat. One delicate kiss and then another, and another. She smiled, eyes still shut, and turned her face just slightly in his direction, her breath catching as his warm lips reached her pulse point and he tickled it with his tongue. Without even opening her eyes, she reached up to him, pulling his head down to take his mouth in a sweet kiss, lips and tongues melting into each other’s warmth. Draco felt those deliciously familiar stirrings warming his groin and making him hard. He pulled away from the kiss to straighten up just for a moment, his back beginning to ache from bending over. Bed, he thought, and grinned happily. It had been so long.

“Hermione, darling…” he whispered, leaning down once more and nuzzling her cheek tenderly. When she didn’t move, he drew back, opening his eyes wider and taking a good look at her face in the dim light of the nursery. Her eyes were shut and her breathing had deepened, a soft snore escaping her. She was sound asleep. Draco straightened again and sighed. He didn’t have the heart to wake her. What sort of selfish bastard would he be even to consider his own pleasure when she was so obviously exhausted? Still, he couldn’t help feeling just a bit… disappointed. Well, that didn’t quite cover it, honestly, but it put the best face on feelings he recognised it would be immature to indulge, much less even acknowledge. Swallowing his frustration, he reached down and lifted Hermione, trying hard not to wake her, and half-carried, half-walked her to the sofa bed, gently laying her down there.

Celibacy was not something he’d ever had to deal with before, and after a month and a half of it, he just wasn’t sure how to cope. Even more difficult in its own way than the lack of actual sex was Hermione’s apparent lessening need — not only for sex itself, but also for him. Rory filled her up so much that it seemed there was very little room left for him. And what room was left over was usually sabotaged by fatigue.

Draco sighed again, fished out an old issue of Wizarding Wenches he’d stashed beneath a pile of jumpers in his bottom drawer, and retreated into the loo.

Later, slipping in beside her, he curled himself along her back, one arm draped over her waist, and drew the duvet over the two of them. Her breathing was deep and even, and she had a tiny smile on her face. Draco kissed her hair and shut his eyes against the loneliness that still threatened to well up.

*
The first rays of sunlight cast a bright banner across their pillows. Outside, birds had been setting up a racket for the past three hours. Hermione opened one eye. What a good night’s sleep she’d had, the best in ages!

Wait a minute. Morning?? How could… No. This wasn’t possible. She shot up in bed suddenly, and lunged for the bedside clock. Her disbelieving eyes told her it was 8:30.

8:30.

Bugger.

Because if it was already 8:30, then that would mean… it would have to mean…

“Draco!” She poked him and shook his shoulder violently. “Draco, please!”

Her husband rolled over and squinted as the sunlight hit him in the face. “No-o-o…” he groaned, pulling a pillow over his tousled, blond head. “Too early! Want to sleep!”

“Draco Malfoy, wake UP!”

By the time he’d managed to prop his eyelids open with his fingers, she was already at the cot, peering in anxiously. He joined her and looked down. Rory was lying there, breathing slowly— so slowly, in fact, that the rise and fall of her chest were nearly imperceptible. Her eyes remained tightly shut.

“Draco!” Hermione said sharply, ready to shake him because he seemed not to understand what was happening. “Don’t you see? She didn’t wake up for her two o’clock feeding, and she didn’t wake up for her five o’clock, and she didn’t wake up for her eight o’clock either!”

Eyes narrowing, she suddenly snatched the vial of potion from its place on the changing table. For several heart-stopping seconds, she studied the label and then her mouth opened in a perfect “O” and she clapped her hands over her face in horror.

“Oh MERLIN!” she cried in a voice suddenly gone high and quavery. “I’ve done something terrible!” And then, in a dry-mouthed whisper, “I think I’ve killed her!”

“What are you on about, woman? That’s utter bollocks and you know it!” Draco stared at her as if she’d totally lost the plot.

“No!” she wailed. “No, look, see? “ She showed him the bottle. “It said to administer three drops every twelve hours. Oh gods,” she gulped, the tears starting. “I think I gave her much more than that! “ She stopped and remembered just how much more, and blanched. She felt positively ill.

“Here, sit down, love. Come on,” he coaxed, and drew her back to the edge of the bed, sitting down next to her. “Tell me. How much did you actually give her?” He tried to hide the sick feeling twisting knots in his own stomach.

“I—I—I think,” she stammered in a near-whisper, ”I think I gave her more than five times that amount. I gave her three whole droppers of the stuff! Oh gods, Draco,” she wailed, “at the very least, I’ve probably caused brain damage!” She turned her face into his chest and began to sob.

For one moment, he sat very still, trying to process what she’d just told him. And then the warning the mediwitch had given them echoed in his brain.

*Follow the directions on the bottle precisely. The complications of an overdose can be quite severe.*

Okay, Draco. THINK, man.
Standing up abruptly enough that Hermione lost her balance and fell over onto the bed, he took off in the direction of the sitting room at a run, wand in hand, skidding to a halt in front of the fireplace.

"Incendio!" he yelled and flames shot up the chimney, sending flickers of orange light and shadows along the walls. Then he grabbed some Floo powder from a bowl on the mantel. Tossing it in the flames, he stuck his head in, shouting, “St. Mungo’s, Madame Philigree!”

The next thing he knew, he was peering at the room where he and Hermione had met with the mediwitch the day before. She was there all right, sitting at the table with her back to the fireplace, drinking a large cup of tea and dipping rounds of buttered crumpet into it. Butter pooled on the surface of the milky tea like small yellow oil slicks.

“AHEM,” Draco said, clearing his throat noisily. His head danced eerily in the flames; they gave his pale hair and skin a distinctly orange cast, making him look rather diabolical.

Madame Philigree started, dropping the crumpet into her cup where it landed with a messy splash, and turned to face him. Her expression deflated from the initial shock back to simple surprise, coupled with annoyance.

“Oh, now really, young man! You shouldn’t startle an old witch that way! You’ve made me lose my last bit of crumpet, and ruined my tea as well! My word!” she sputtered, quite put out. And then, “Well?? Is there something I can do for you?”

“That potion you gave us yesterday, remember? That infusion for our baby. Colic, remember?” Draco all but spat out the words.

She regarded him, one eyebrow raised, her voice low. “What’s happened?”

Draco swallowed. “It’s... just that... I think we’ve accidentally given her an overdose!” His embarrassed blush was fortunately undetectable in the flames.

Madame Philigree turned to him, arms folded, and asked, her voice deadly calm, “Just how much did you give her?”

Draco thought hard for a second to recall what Hermione had said. “Three droppersful,” he replied woodenly. It made him sick just repeating it. What if the baby really had been damaged irreparably?

The old witch’s face paled. She stood abruptly and went to the bookcase, drawing out a large, leather-bound volume, obviously very old and much used. Heaving it onto the table with a thump, she opened it and began rapidly thumbing through the pages, faster than Draco would have believed possible. Finally, she found the page she’d been searching for.

Running her index finger down the page, she finally stopped with a satisfied “Hmm!”

“What? What is it?” Draco was nearly frantic now. Behind him, in the nursery doorway down the hall, Hermione stood, silent and pale as a wraith, wringing her hands. Her eyes were reddened and her face blotchy with tears. She seemed incapable of speech now, struck mute by the horror of her mistake.

“You two have been terribly careless with a potion whose side effects can be potentially deadly if given in sufficiently high doses. For a tiny infant, a deadly dose is reached with much smaller amounts than for somebody older and larger! Fortunately, however, the amount you gave her isn’t quite as much as that. Come through, and I’ll give you the antidote.”

Draco’s entire body seemed to sag with relief, as he climbed out of the hearth in the mediwitch’s office and brushed himself down. His face was even paler than usual, his eyes suspiciously bright. Madame Philigree handed him a small bottle of brown glass with a cork stopper.
“Now listen very carefully. *Listen!*” she said sharply.

Startled, Draco snapped out of his frightened haze and stared at her.

“Here is the antidote. You are to administer five drops immediately, and another five tonight at nine o’clock. It’s to be given at twelve-hour intervals for two days. Continue to do this every twelve hours through tomorrow night. That will be four doses altogether. Do you understand, young man?”

He nodded, chastened.

“She will begin to rouse fairly soon after you give her the first dose, although she will probably seem lethargic for the rest of today and possibly even into tomorrow. Her appetite will most likely be somewhat diminished. Do not be alarmed at this and tell your lady wife, so that she will not assume the antidote has failed. After the fourth dose tomorrow night, discard the remainder. Its efficacy is very short-lived once the bottle has been opened.” Madame Philigree placed the vial in Draco’s outstretched palm and nodded curtly. “Right, off you go, then!”

She turned back to her tea, making ready to pour a fresh cup from the flowered china pot cloaked in a rather badly knitted tea cosy.

Draco turned to leave, and then stopped when a terrible thought crept back into his mind.

“Will she… has she been…?” He couldn’t bring himself to say the words.

The elderly mediwitch sighed, put her cup down and stood.

“No, Mr. Malfoy, I’m sure she has not. Although it was a very close call, and I hope that you truly understand the gravity of what has happened. Count your blessings now, and go reassure your wife.” Her stern gaze softened just a bit and she reached out to pat his shoulder. “Go on!”

Draco didn’t need telling twice.

He turned and Flooed back in record time -- *Don’t cock this up!* he told himself -- and ran to find Hermione. She was sitting on the sofa bed, arms wrapped around herself, rocking back and forth and staring at the floor.

“It’s okay, she’s going to be fine, I’ve got the antidote! Come on!” Draco grabbed her by the arm, nearly yanking her off the bed.

Together they ran to the baby’s cot. She lay there frightfully still, barely breathing, her color far too pale. Hermione scooped her up and cradled her, while Draco slid the dropper between Rory’s lips and began administering the antidote.

They spent a very tense hour afterwards, waiting and watching as she continued to sleep. Draco paced, flopped down in the armchair, and then paced some more. Hermione tried to busy herself in the kitchen and failed miserably, returning to the nursery frequently and peering anxiously down at Rory, as if each look would reveal some dramatic change she had somehow missed five minutes before.

Eventually, they’d both found their way to the armchair and were dozing together, Hermione on Draco’s lap, her arms round his neck. Her head was at an uncomfortable angle on his shoulder when she awoke, and she tried to massage the crick out of her neck. She glanced at the clock. It was 11:10 a.m.

Suddenly, a small peep came from the direction of the cot. And then another. The two of them shot out of the chair and rushed to look. Rory was lying there, almost preternaturally quiet, but alert at least. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and her eyes bright. She pedaled her tiny legs and seemed to reach up towards her parents, who expelled one long, pent-up breath in unison. Draco got to her first, hoisting her up out of the cot and hugging her close.
“Rory!” he cried, kissing her soft, pale hair, which was sticking up from her head in wispy spikes. He laughed, his eyes suspiciously wet. “Rory B! You’re all right!”

Hermione promptly burst into unabashed tears, encircling them both in a tight embrace. They stood that way for several moments, until a small cry from the tiny girl sandwiched between them reminded them that they had a baby who needed to be changed and fed. These were chores neither of them would ever again take for granted.

That night, probably because of the lingering effects of the original potion, Rory would sleep straight through from her eleven o’clock feeding until nearly five a.m the following morning. Not only that, but earlier in the evening, she would cry far less. This semblance of normalcy, a fleeting reminder of their life together pre-baby, was something of a shock to Hermione and Draco. A very pleasant shock, of course, but a shock just the same.

Having a quiescent baby sleeping peacefully in the cot suddenly gave Hermione all sorts of ideas about how she wanted to use this gift of time. They’d been sitting and reading companionably in the living room when she suddenly got up, gave Draco a somewhat mysterious smile, and disappeared. He quirked an eyebrow at that, felt a smile tug at his mouth, and willed himself to stay put and let Hermione do whatever it was she was planning. He had hopes that it might just include him.

Slipping out of her clothes and into her dressing gown, she turned the taps of the tub to run a bath, adding lavender-scented bath salts so that the tub began to fill with clouds of delicately scented bubbles.

Twenty minutes later, Draco was just dozing off, the book slipping from his hands, when he heard his name being called. He got up and walked toward the strip of light from their partially open bedroom door. The light was actually coming from the en-suite. There were faint strains of music too, something familiar. Warily he poked his head inside, only to find that the whole en-suite had been enchanted. What seemed like hundreds of lit candles, some floating overhead, many others lining the rim of the tub and the shelves, cast a soft, flickering glow. His favourite classical piece, Beethoven’s Pastoral, was playing on a small CD player. The tub was filled to the brim with creamy clots of scented bubbles. A bottle of wine and two long-stemmed glasses stood on a tray on the tub’s ledge. And in that tub was his beautiful wife, one bare leg dangling over the rim, a come-hither smile on her face.

Draco felt himself growing warm and couldn’t stop the delighted grin he knew was slowly splitting his face. In that moment, all his fears evaporated. He stood there, gazing at Hermione, drinking in her creamy skin all golden in the candlelight, her foam-laced chestnut curls made even springier by the steam of the bath and clinging damply to her shoulders, and her eyes. Oh, those dark eyes, gazing into his with such longing. He was quite certain he could happily fall into those eyes and stay there forever.

“Why are you still so far away?” she asked softly. “Come here, Draco.”

He was feeling slightly dazed, his legs carrying him there almost of their own accord. Seeing this, she reached out and brushed soapy fingertips against his, drawing him even closer, and then they slipped, feather-light, between his legs, tracing his already growing erection and causing him to let out a low moan.

Smiling to herself, she reached up and undid his trouser button and zipper, hooking her thumbs inside the waistband of his boxers and drawing everything down in one swift motion. He had the presence of mind to step out of them and then made quick work of his shirt.

After that, there was nothing left to take off.

“Oh…” she murmured appreciatively, and sighed. “Just… stand there a moment, and let me look at you.”
By candlelight, Draco was breathtaking, she thought. His white-blond hair looked positively incandescent, backlit by the soft glow. A sheen of gold lit his fair skin, accenting the lean, compact muscles of his arms, chest, and abdomen. Fine, pale hair covered his legs and lower arms and lightly dusted the smooth skin of his chest, glinting in the light. Reaching out, Hermione delicately traced the line of soft, dark gold hair that grew down from his hard lower belly to the thickly curling thatch around his cock, now fully erect, its head glistening. Leaning out a little further, she flicked the tip of her tongue over it and tasted him, smiling at his sudden, surprised intake of breath.

She extended her hand, then, inviting him in. Grasping it, he stepped into the tub, sinking down into the rich foam. The warm water felt marvellous, all the more after what had happened with the baby and the terrible fright it had caused. That stress had lodged in every muscle of his body, and it was delightful beyond words, feeling each one of those muscles begin to relax.

They lay there for some time, Draco cradling Hermione as she leaned back into his arms, her head resting against his chest and her bum sliding pleasurably against his hard cock, which twitched impatiently. But he was in no real hurry. It was her show and he wanted to let her set the pace. He sipped his wine and swirled it around in the glass, watching the candlelight turn the ruby liquid to a fiery elixir.

“Mmm, this is nice,” he murmured against her neck. “I’ve missed you so much, darling.”

“I’ve missed you too, Draco. A lot. I know I’ve neglected you. I never meant to, love, please believe me. It’s just been… you know, with the baby and all…” she trailed off, uncertain of how to adequately explain. There were no words, really, and she hoped that despite his hurt, he would understand, that tonight would go a long way towards reassuring him of just how important he was and always would be to her.

Relaxing though it was, there came a point when Draco had had enough of the unbearable tease that lying together in the tub had become. His right hand, which had been resting comfortably on her belly, slid upwards to find a nipple already hardened with desire for him. He caressed it slowly, sliding his fingertip around and then over the tip, then bringing two fingers together for a pinch and a tug, and then back to the slow, circling caresses. A couple of moments later, he commenced the same agonizingly delightful treatment on the other nipple with the fingers of his left hand. Hermione lay in his arms, hardly breathing for the exquisite twin tortures his talented fingers were causing.

When she could stand it no longer, she turned in the tub and straddled him, causing some foamy water to slosh over the side. Her smile, loving as it was, held just a hint of the predator in it, and seeing that, he felt a thrill deep in his groin. She leaned in and began nuzzling his neck, kissing and nipping sharply from the base up to just below his ear. Those bites would leave small red marks, and somehow that pleased her. She’d never had such wanton impulses with any other man before Draco, not that there had been that many, of course, and never anybody she’d been really intimate with-- but Morgana help her, the man had more innate sensuality in his little finger than most men could muster in a lifetime. And she very much liked the woman she had become with him, the woman he had discovered in her.

She gave his earlobe a tiny bite and then sucked it into her mouth, swirling her tongue around this small morsel of his flesh.

He sighed with pleasure and turned his head to give her greater access; she took it hungrily, nipping and sucking on his neck and along his jaw line until she reached his mouth. And oh, that mouth! She never tired of looking at his lips, so soft and full and begging to be kissed. And kiss them she did, a soft, sensuous kiss which gradually deepened as she drew her tongue over his bottom lip and then the top, finally sliding it inside his mouth to join with his own.

Their kisses were deep and breathlessly intoxicating, one leading into the next and the next after that, because they were everything but at the same time, never enough. They were drunk on each other, craving that which was more and deeper and harder, their bodies pressed so close together--wet, soapy skin on skin-- that they truly seemed one flesh, one heart.
Stopping for a moment to catch their breaths, they looked at each other and smiled.

“I love you,” they said together, and laughed.

Then Hermione dipped her hand back under the foam, and Draco shivered, his cock twitching in anticipation. A moment later, her fingers closed around his shaft and began a slow, slippery, upward journey. This was exquisite torture if anything was, especially under water. He was already so hard that he didn’t think he could last much longer. However, Hermione wasn’t quite finished surprising him.

“Close your eyes,” she instructed.

Smiling, he obeyed. While his eyes were closed, she quietly let out some of the tub water, so that his erect penis would be fully exposed, the tepid tub water pooling around his hips. Now, she bent over and flicked her tongue along its length, drawing a surprised gasp from him. His eyes flew open.

“Oh, Hermione, you don’t have to… I mean, I really don’t think…” he began.

“Just let me,” she whispered. “I want to do this for you.” And she proceeded to take all of him into her mouth as deeply as she was able, swirling her tongue around his cock and massaging its length with her lips, occasionally grazing the smooth skin lightly with her teeth.

Draco groaned and threw back his head, shutting his eyes but then opening them again, preferring to watch. The sight of his sweet wife going down on him was something he found spectacularly erotic. Her mouth on him felt so good, so deliciously warm and wet and…

All of a sudden, he’d reached the point of no return. He could feel his balls clenching unbearably, and then, he was rocketing over the edge, quivering, his body arching upwards off the tub floor, shooting his seed deep into her mouth, his cum running down her chin.

Hermione smiled and licked his semen off her lips rather like a cat that’s been at the cream, wiping her chin with her fingertips and then slowly popping each one into her mouth and licking them clean too.

“Thank you,” he whispered, and shivered a little, watching her.

“No,” she replied, shaking her head and smiling. “Thank YOU.”

He understood, then, what it had all been about. His darling girl had just told him so much more than mere words could have expressed.

Grasping her hands and drawing her close, he positioned her between his legs facing him, and leaned in to give her a soft kiss. Sitting back, he suddenly went very still, his steady gaze raising a slow blush on her cheeks.

“I want to touch you, Hermione,” he said finally, in a voice that was dangerously soft.

She closed her eyes, feeling a bit breathless, suddenly, with anticipation.

He leaned in once again and pulled her forcefully to his chest, commencing an assault on her mouth. They were wild, hungry kisses that left Hermione gasping even as he demanded more. Cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her eyes, nose, cheeks, and chin, and then reclaimed her mouth as if he were trying to satisfy an unquenchable thirst.

Hermione’s head was reeling. This was the very definition of being kissed senseless. She couldn’t think straight. All she knew was that his hand was moving on her thigh now, his lovely tongue was hot and wet in her ear, and she was on fire.

His fingers had reached her mons and briefly played with the dark curls there. The barest touch and her clit began a low thrumming. Those fingers dipped inside now, coating themselves with the
and her clit began a low thrumming. Those fingers dipped inside now, coating themselves with the cream of her arousal, and then withdrew, anointing her labia and clit until they were quite slick. They plunged back inside then, one and then another, pumping slowly at first and then faster, building up a rhythm. Periodically, they would slide out to attend to her clit, circling and gliding quickly over that nub of exquisitely sensitive tissues. At the same time, a trail of tiny, wet tongue kisses smouldered all along her neck. The sensations were becoming almost unbearable.

By this time, Hermione was lying back against the tub, all the water having drained away. Draco had slithered down far enough, lying alongside her, that his mouth could reach her breasts as his fingers continued to tease between her legs.

He bent his head and sucked a nipple deep into his mouth, tonguing it as his lips maintained the suction. And then a strangely disconcerting but rather wonderful thing happened. Suddenly, a very familiar tingly sensation radiated through her breasts, making them feel full and very tight. Droplets of sweet breast milk began to leak into his mouth, and instinctively he licked each one off the tip of her nipple before realizing quite what he was doing. Then it hit them both and he raised his head, a question in his eyes. He resumed, then, with great relish, suckling first one breast and then the other, appreciating once again their increased size and weight, how warm and fragrant they were, how sweet to the taste.

Later, slipping down further, he rested his cheek against her thigh for a moment, and then raised his head to look at her again.

“Hermione,” he said in that same softly imperious voice. “Look at me. I want you to see. Look at me, sweetheart.”

Watching him, his head between her legs, his tongue curling and stroking and probing where his fingers had just been, was a transcendentally erotic experience. His eyes never left hers the entire time, save when they closed in a moment of sharp pleasure, such as when a sudden moan would escape her. He loved hearing her moan; it did strange and wonderful things to him.

She was moaning now, nearly nonstop, as his tongue probed ever deeper inside her. She clutched his head to try and bring him closer, deeper still. A delicious pressure was building and beginning to spiral crazily out of control, and then… then he took her clit into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it and then sucking hard, and she cried out, shuddering and crushing his head between her thighs as her body arched off the tub floor and slammed down again, quivering with the intensity of her release.

Without missing a beat, Draco grabbed her legs and threw them over his shoulders, forcefully driving into her, plunging deeper with each angled thrust. Every movement caused his cock to rub up against her swollen clit, creating a delightful agony of friction. Another climax was near, and then suddenly, she shattered into a million pieces and the sensation of it sent him over the edge too, in a series of long, shuddering spasms that released his seed.

Neither one could move for long moments after that. They lay, arms and legs tangled, in the cold, empty tub. The candles sputtered low, and in that dim, flickering light, they felt curiously lethargic and heavy-limbed, but completely sated.

After a time, Draco lifted his head from Hermione’s breasts, where it had been comfortably pillowed, and looked down at her, his grey eyes soft with love and desire thoroughly satisfied. She opened her own and smiled lazily back at him.

“Malfoy,” she sighed happily, pulling his head down and brushing a lock of pale hair out of his eyes. “That” -- a kiss to his forehead -- “was” -- another kiss, to the tip of his nose -- “bloody” -- a third, to his chin -- “amazing!” She finished by kissing him soundly on the mouth.

“Naturally, Granger.” He grinned roguishly. “I do have a reputation to maintain!” He climbed out of the tub, flashed her another wicked smile and a wink over his shoulder, and ran bare-arsed into the bedroom. She could hear the springs of their bed groan suddenly, and then laughter.

“Cheeky!” she giggled, and gave chase.
In her cot, Rory slept on peacefully, a hint of a smile lifting her tiny mouth as she dreamed.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to my wonderful beta, Kazfeist.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this story. Only the original plot and original characters belong to me.
Saturday morning, 22 September

The Autumnal Equinox had arrived, marking the end of Rory’s first quarter year. That meant one very special event in the life of a wizarding baby and her family: The Naming. Draco and Hermione had thought very hard about where to have the ritual, and had decided on an ancient grove in the New Forest. How wonderful, Hermione thought, to be able to mark both the day of perfect balance between light and dark that celebrated the harvest, and the official bestowing of their baby’s name within a loving circle of their family and friends.

Wanting it to be perfect and truly meaningful, she had spent a fair amount of time thinking and planning, falling back on her trusty books to learn as much as she could. She’d spent weeks poring over everything and had finally woven together the most beautiful and most potent of the Old Ways into what she felt would be a unique and very personal rite.

The day dawned bright and cool with a slight snap in the air. Leaves had just begun turning bright autumn colours, tinges of which could be spotted on the tops of trees as they drove to their destination. Because the baby was still so young, and because it was such a lovely drive, Hermione had wanted to travel using Muggle transport, and so had hired a car for the day. She’d got her license at home the summer after fifth year, and had always enjoyed driving. She hoped perhaps she could talk Draco into learning one day, and then buying a car of their own.

Lucius and Narcissa had graciously opened their ample home to Hermione’s parents as well as to Harry and Ginny and the Weasley clan, as it was fairly close to the New Forest. More to the point, housing everyone together was a way to further extend the festivities. Hermione was struck once again by how far her in-laws had come, and found herself rather touched by their generosity of
Draco was frankly dumbfounded, even now, and he wasn’t afraid to admit it.

Arriving at the site where the ceremony was to be held, they parked the car and got busy. There was much to do before everyone else arrived. Rory was sound asleep, wonder of wonders, tucked up snugly in her pram. The grove was sun-dappled, surrounded by a thick growth of very old trees: oaks, beeches, aspens, silver birches, rowans, and hollies. In the centre of the clearing stood one of the oldest oak trees in the New Forest—tall and stately, the trunk wide with its many ages of growth, its thick boughs sweeping low, heavy with bright leaves and fat acorns. It was easily more than 400 years old.

From the boot of the car, they brought out a myriad of things: two small folding tables, and a basket of mixed seeds, acorns, rowan berries, and various nuts; a large box covered in pretty paper and decorated with colourful ribbons; plates of spiced, sweet cakes, and sliced apples and pears; a tall earthenware pitcher of honeyed mead, another of wine, and two large goblets; a small brass cauldron which Hermione filled with cut chrysanthemums, geraniums, and brightly coloured leaves; small bowls of salt, sage, and water, plus one of sand in which to burn incense. A single white candle in a clay holder completed the ritual’s inventory, along with their wands.

Hermione briskly set about covering the table with a silk cloth and then arranged everything just so, placing the cauldron in the centre, surrounded by the various bowls and the candle. The bowl of salt she placed north of the cauldron to signify earth, the bowl of sand, into which she stood a stick of incense, to the south to represent fire. The sage, symbolic of air, was at the eastern point and the water bowl was at the west. Thus were the four elements marked.

The second table was duly covered as well, and there she put the plates of cakes and fruits, and the pitchers; she poured some of the mead into one goblet and some wine in the other, and these she put on the main table, next to the cauldron. The large, beribboned box stood on the ground at the foot of this table.

At last everything was ready. All that remained was to await their guests, who would be arriving any minute now. Rory still slept soundly. The morning was her “nighttime,” and Hermione was more than a bit worried that waking her for the ceremony might produce spectacularly disastrous results, but there was no way around it. There were certain injunctions one had to follow where ancient rituals were concerned, and they were not to be flouted.

Eleven o’clock came, and suddenly, where a moment before they had been quite alone under the canopy of leaves, now excited voices could be heard echoing down the leaf-strewn paths. Before long, Harry and Ginny’s two-year-old son Taran burst into the clearing, yelling a boisterous greeting and running up to the pram, wanting to peek inside. His unruly black hair, so like his father’s, already had bits of twigs and leaves in it, which told a story of their own.

Harry and Ginny were close on his heels, smiling and warmly clasping their friends’ hands. They remembered the way they’d first learnt that little Rory was on her way and reminded Draco of that night. Spots of colour rose in his cheeks, but he grinned, squeezed Hermione’s hand tightly and laughed at the memory.

Before long, everyone had arrived: besides the three Potters, Ron and Pansy had come, Pansy already quite round in her sixth month. Molly and Arthur Weasley were there, too, as were George and Charlie. Bill and Fleur had come with their own five-year-old twins, Rachel and Peter, both brilliant redheads covered in freckles.

The proud grandparents arrived together, Lucius and Narcissa having just had their second, rather astounding ride in a Muggle automobile, their first not long after Draco and Hermione’s marriage. That one had been a relatively short ride. This time, the experience was longer and at higher speeds, and they arrived half shaken and half amazed, not entirely certain they ever wanted to repeat the experience.

Hermione’s parents, Richard and Claire, had driven them rather than face the frightening, first-time prospect of side-along Apparating with the Malfoys. They simply weren’t quite ready for a
here-one-minute-there-the-next sort of adventure. Neville Longbottom and his fiancée Luna Lovegood were last to arrive, having accidentally Apparated to the wrong part of the forest and become a bit lost.

Draco and Hermione had asked everyone to participate in the ceremony in some way, but the honour of directing the ancient ritual belonged by rights to the grandparents. The four of them took their places next to the tables. Draco wheeled the pram in alongside them, and everyone else fanned out in a large circle around them.

Then, he walked to its centre, holding his wand straight out in front of him. Slowly, he cast a large circle of power clockwise, enclosing the entire company in its magic. A subtle, shimmering change in the air seemed to ripple through each of them once the circle had been raised.

Hermione was next, taking the bowl of salt and sprinkling it around the perimeter of the circle in front of the guests’ feet, consecrating the circle with the sacred element of earth; Harry followed her, sprinkling drops of water in her wake, cleansing the circle. When he had finished, Ginny Incendio’d the small bowl of sage so that the sprigs of dried leaves were gently smouldering, and followed the clockwise path round the circle, gently spreading its smoky scent to represent the sacred element of air. Finally, it was Ron’s turn to bless the circle with the element of fire, which he did by dipping the incense stick in the candle’s flame and, like the others, walking in a clockwise direction, making swirls and dips in the air with its fragrant, glowing tip. Everybody felt the pull of the circle’s magic and took a step further inside the sacred ring.

Everyone except the Grangers, of course, and the small children chose to wear dress robes for the occasion. Lucius, especially splendid in his, walked magisterially to the middle of the circle and held out his arms.

“Welcome,” he began, waiting to be sure he had everybody’s attention.

“The children have asked Narcissa and me to take the parts of high priest and priestess, hearkening back to the ceremonies of our Druidic ancestors. It is a ritual as timeless as it is ancient. Hermione’s parents will be joining us as co-officiators of the ceremony.”

Lucius paused, reflecting for a moment. Over the past several years, his initial antipathy towards his daughter-in-law—indeed, his deeply ingrained resistance to the very idea of his son associating with a Muggleborn witch, much less bringing one into the Malfoy family—had evolved into something unexpected and quite surprising. Almost immediately, she had charmed him quite against his will, loath as he was to admit it. More significantly, though, she had very gradually won his grudging respect. There existed between them now a tacit understanding of a sort that went beyond a simple truce. Just what it was, precisely, was difficult to define, and yet it was there, making for a connection that was still disconcerting to everyone, considering his past beliefs and actions, yet, paradoxically, one that was smoother and easier than the one between Lucius and his own son.

“Hermione, being the thorough young lady she is,” he continued, “has given us copies of the ritual as she has crafted it, with instructions and parts to read aloud. We hope this Naming ceremony will be as meaningful to all of you as it will surely be to our two families. Now—” he cleared his throat—“I begin with the venerable words of one of our elders, Coifi, to mark this twofold celebration, for on this day we celebrate not only the Naming of our grandchild, but also the turning of the Wheel known as Alban Elfed, the Light of the Water—the Autumnal Equinox, a day of equal light and dark and a celebration of the harvest before the colder, darker days of winter set in.”

He took a piece of parchment out of a pocket and unrolled it, reading in a clear, strong voice:

“This is the Feast of the Autumn Equinox. The Light of the Sun in the Wheel of the Year stands in the West, in the Place of balance between the Light and the Darkness. This is a time of the Great Tides. This is the Gateway of the Year.
“This Feast is known by many names to many people, for the Truth is reflected from many mirrors. It has been celebrated as Alban Elfed and Harvest. Our ancestors called it by names long forgotten, and our children will call it by names as yet unconceived.

“At this time, our ancestors saw the Sun, for the first time in half a year, be unable to outshine the Dark. Although he still shines with strength, his strength grows weaker as the days grow shorter. Today he holds the Darkness in equal measure to the Light, but he is struck in his season with the wound of Time and from day to day the darkness will grow as the Lord of Light sinks into his Age, for the wound is grievous and will not heal. This is a time of farewell and gratitude for the Summer that has been.

“At this time, our ancestors saw the Lady who is the Spirit of the Land stand before her people with the full bounty of her Harvest. Here is the reward of labour and reverence of the Land. This is the fulfilled promise of the days of Spring and Summer. This is the Reckoning of the Year, for Harvest is now complete and the portions are set to feed folk and animals through the cold dark days that lie ahead. This is a time of wonder and gratitude for the gifts the Lady showers down upon her people.

“This is the time of the turning of the Light into Darkness. Let us step forward into the darkening days holding before us the divine promise of new Light at the end of the Dark Days, from year to year and life to life. This is the lesson of the Lord and the Lady. This is our knowledge and our affirmation.

“This is the Holy Word that is written in no less than the Earth and the Sky and in all things that are made. This is a wonder and a marvel.”

Everyone in the circle stood quite still, listening raptly. Narcissa stepped forward then, in royal blue robes that matched her husband’s in dramatic contrast to their fair colouring.

“Blessed Lady,” she began, in a ringing voice. “You who are the Spirit of the Land and our Great Mother, we exhort you to draw near. Bless the life of the little one who is here to be named, and the path she will tread.”

She held up a piece of the spice cake and continued, ”In honour of the Lady, our Mother, from whom all life flows, I offer and share this fruit of the earth.” She broke off a small piece and crumbled it, dropping the fragments on the ground, and then ate the rest. The plate of cakes was passed round the circle and everybody helped themselves. After all had finished eating, Lucius held up the goblet of mead.

“In honour of the Lord from whom comes the seed which is the source of all life, I offer and share this libation.” Tipping a small amount out onto the ground, he then took a sip, handing it to Narcissa, and she to the Grangers. Eventually, it traversed the entire circle, everyone taking a small sip from the communal cup.

Lucius signaled Hermione and Draco with a nod.

“We come together here at this time that is no-time, in this place that is no-place, to humbly ask the blessings of the Lord and Lady upon this child of Draco and Hermione, so that she may grow in strength, wisdom and love. We ask the Lord and Lady to look upon this infant and bestow upon her the blessing of their protection. Draco Aquila Malfoy and Hermione Jean Granger Malfoy, bring your daughter forward.”

Hermione lifted Rory out of her pram, still a bit dozy, and carried her to the circle’s centre, Draco’s hand on the baby’s back. The baby was dressed all in white, and wore a tiny circlet of woven flowers and leaves in her moon-pale hair. Hermione had made the wreath herself, and a larger one very like it graced her own chestnut curls as well.

Draco gently took the baby then, and held her up high, for the heavens and all those present to see.
As he did so, Richard and Claire Granger moved closer, facing their daughter and son-in-law.

“Dear friends,” Richard began, with just the smallest tremor in his hands as he held the parchment. “I ask you to look upon this child.” He paused and smiled proudly at the assembled company. “We welcome her as the newest member of our two families. May she grow strong and healthy as we care for her and love her.”

Claire gazed at her granddaughter, and continued, her own smile tremulous. “For her to be part of our family and community, she must have a name. What is this child to be called?”

Now that the moment was finally here, Hermione felt herself trembling and perilously close to tears. It was all rather overwhelming suddenly, and she looked at Draco, who instinctively moved closer so that their bodies touched. She felt strong arms bracing her and relaxed a bit.

Together, they replied, “She is to be called Aurora Beatrice. She is a child of the dawn and a bringer of joy.”

The four grandparents closed in a smaller circle around the new parents and their baby, and linked arms.

“Welcome, Aurora Beatrice,” the four read aloud. “We bring you peace and love. May they always be blessings in your life.”

Each bent and kissed the baby in turn, the two grandmothers clearly weepy in their happiness, the two grandfathers suspiciously misty-eyed themselves. Then they drew out small, wrapped gifts and placed them in the large, decorated box on the ground nearby.

Together, they read, “These gifts are tokens of our wishes for Aurora Beatrice Malfoy, that she may grow in health, wisdom and inner strength, and always know joy.”

Lucius opened his arms to the circle. “We invite each of you here sharing this special day to come forward and give Aurora your special wish and gift. This box will be set aside and given to her when she reaches her majority at seventeen. We ask too, in honour of the Equinox, you take a handful of seeds, nuts and fruit from the table here, after our ceremony concludes, so that you may leave an offering for the inhabitants of this noble and ancient wood. You may leave your offering at one or all of the four quarters of the circle: North, South, East or West.” Inclining his head in a slight nod, he waved a hand to signal that the well-wishers might begin approaching the centre of the circle, one at a time.

Each guest came forward bearing a small wrapped gift and offering his or her own special blessing or wish for Rory. After all the gifts had been safely placed in the box, Claire stepped forward and said, “Would Harry and Ginny Potter and Ron and Pansy Weasley please come forward?”

The four friends walked to the centre of the circle, clasping hands.

“They love you very much. You are very important in their lives. They trust the values that inform your choices, and the wisdom that helps strengthen and guide those values. They believe that there is much you can teach Aurora Beatrice. They ask if you are willing to act as guardians and teachers in case they are no longer able to. Will you accept this honour and responsibility?” Claire looked at each one, and in their shining faces, she knew their answers.

Both couples replied as one. “We will.”

With that, Lucius beckoned Draco and Hermione forward with Rory in their arms, and Narcissa drew near, holding the goblet of wine. Lucius dipped just the tips of his fingers in the wine and touched Rory’s forehead lightly, leaving a faint, rosy sheen there. She looked up at him gravely, and suddenly, twenty-five years dropped away. Suddenly, he was standing with Narcissa, holding their beautiful baby son, the future bright and full of promise as they gazed at the tiny boy with eyes exactly like Rory’s. Those eyes, once so soft and trusting and innocent, were now the eyes of
a grown man, shining with pride and love as he gazed at his own child.

The memory of that day and its attendant feelings rushed back with painful clarity. It was with effort that Lucius collected himself now and spoke.

“I anoint thee, Aurora Beatrice, with wine, in the name of the Lord who is the Summer King and Winter Child, the soul of humankind, Lord of the grain.”

He held a twin goblet of salt water out to his wife, and she dipped her fingertips in, likewise touching the baby’s forehead and saying, ”I anoint thee, Aurora Beatrice, with water, necessary to all life, in the name of the Lady who is the Spirit of the Land, our sacred Mother, and the Threefold Goddess.”

She stepped back and her husband came forward to face his son and daughter-in-law. Laying a hand on each of their shoulders, he looked into their eyes.

“Hear me now,” he told them gravely. “Bringing new life into this world and linking a very young soul to the ancient mysteries is a matter of grave importance. I ask that you look within and find the best parts of yourselves to give her. Love and nurture her. Respect her and challenge her, but always be there to give her comfort and support when she falls and when she is in pain. Teach her the heritage of the Old Ways; it is rightfully hers to command. Do you promise to fulfill these vows?”

Solemnly, both Draco and Hermione nodded. “We do,” they replied.

“So mote it be,” Lucius replied, and then a certain sadness—a keen awareness of his own abject failure to heed those same vows—flared abruptly, stabbing at him.

He knew that such thoughts must be in Narcissa’s mind as well. And then there was Draco, standing there so straight and tall and handsome, his fine, grey eyes full of old hurts and reproach as the irony of those ancient words hit home.

“Draco…” Lucius began, his voice very low now. “I know that I have not... that I have not been...” He stopped and cleared his throat. “Regrettably, I cannot change the past,” he continued somewhat brusquely now, “but… if you will allow it… perhaps…” He stood there stiffly, only his eyes betraying the smallest hint of vulnerability.

Draco’s eyes burned and he blinked once, twice, wanting desperately to banish the traitorous beginnings of tears that suddenly blurred his vision. He hadn’t expected or sought this, and he wasn’t sure what to do.

“All right,” he whispered at last, relenting. Wanting it. Hating himself for wanting it. Unsure of whether he could even trust it.

Tentatively, the two moved together, Lucius clasping his son in an awkward embrace. Draco’s arms remained at his sides, one hand coming up briefly to touch his father’s back and then dropping back down.

Quickly, Hermione handed Rory to her mother, and then she and Narcissa moved forward to draw their arms around their husbands, making a protective circle of their own. The two women exchanged a fleeting smile. This was more than either of them had dared to hope for: a day of unexpected healing, or its beginnings at least-- of new seeds planted in the heart that might just take root and grow.

Feeling he should distract their guests from the very private, emotional scene unfolding in front of their eyes, Richard Granger moved to address the circle. He gave everybody a wide, congenial smile. “Thank you all for coming and sharing our joy in welcoming Rory to our family.”
Suddenly, Draco remembered something. There was one final part that was his to play in the ritual. Turning from Hermione and his parents and holding his wand out before him, he walked counter-clockwise—widdershins—around the circle, unmaking what had earlier been made.

“The circle is open but unbroken,” he announced, and once again, there was an immediate, almost electric change in the air. The entire assemblage expelled a collective sigh and began to mill around, many coming up to him and Hermione to offer congratulatory hugs.

Rory’s circlet of flowers sat on her head just slightly askew as she rested her cheek against her mother’s shoulder, watching the scene with large, curious eyes. She was unaware of her many admirers and, indeed, of the momentous events she’d been part of that morning.

*  

The noon hour had come and gone. Shafts of bright midday light streamed down through a lacing of branches, lighting the leaves in a patchwork of greens suffused with hints of red and gold. The Grangers had just driven away in the direction of Malfoy Manor, where everyone else had already Apparated. The hired car was all packed up, and the baby was settled securely in her car seat, sound asleep after all the excitement. An afternoon of feasting awaited.

Still, Hermione and Draco lingered, arms around each other’s waists, gazing at the clearing in this ancient forest where so much had happened.

“Hey. Are you okay, love?” Hermione asked softly.

“Yeah,” Draco sighed, and then, “No. I don’t know.” He laughed briefly and rolled his eyes. “Listen to me. Blathering on like a complete idiot, aren’t I… Can you believe him, though?”

Hermione regarded her husband thoughtfully. “I can, actually. No, really!” she insisted, at Draco’s incredulous stare. “I think he was being sincere. I honestly believe he regrets the way things are between the two of you. He’s been trying to change for a long time. You’ve seen it for yourself.”

“Yeah, well… “ Draco kicked a stone, sending it skittering into the underbrush beyond the clearing where they stood. “He just couldn’t say it, could he.” His mouth was set in a grim line, his tone grudging, but there was something… something in his eyes…

Hermione took his hand, lacing her fingers through his. They stood there silently for a minute, and then she gave his hand a quick squeeze.

“No, not yet. But Draco… It’s got to come from you, too, you know,” she said quietly. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but… can’t you…”

Draco sighed deeply. There was silence for several moments more, and then one corner of his mouth lifted in a ghost of a smile. “Okay, Granger. I’ll try. For you. And for Rory. And my mother.”

Birdsong high in the sheltering canopy overhead filled the clearing, surrounding them. Slipping her arms around Draco, Hermione drew him close, resting her cheek on his chest and closing her eyes as she breathed in the clean, masculine scent that was uniquely his. She could feel his heart beating as his chest rose and fell gently.

*And for you, my love. For you, most of all.*
And for you, my love.

For you, most of all.

TBC
Autumn Equinox to the Winter Solstice: Quality Time

Saturday lunchtime, 28 October

“You need to get out more!” Ginny declared, her words muffled slightly by the remnant of shepherd’s pie she was still chewing. She and Hermione were sitting at the kitchen table, having a late lunch. Draco and Harry had left for a long-awaited Quidditch match between Puddlemere United and the Wimborne Wasps. Oliver Wood was back playing for PU after a recent injury to his knee, and they were anxious to see him.

“Why? I’m fine, honestly!” Hermione rolled her eyes, absently flicking a speck of dried rice cereal off her T-shirt.

“No. You’re not.” Ginny wore her determined look, the one that brooked no arguments. “Hermione Granger being content to sit around in a manky old shirt that’s a walking advert for what her baby ate for breakfast is a cry for help if ever I heard one! And I think I know just the thing to get you out of your rut.”

Ginny had just put her small son Taran down for his afternoon nap. Lunch with Taran Potter had been an education for Hermione. It turned out that he was quite a chatterbox, talking nearly nonstop about absolutely everything that popped into his head. Mostly flying (and how he was going to get his very own broom someday and be a Seeker at Hogwarts just like his daddy), and his new pet salamander that he’d named for his Uncle Draco. Hermione had very nearly choked, hearing that. Taran had nattered blithely on, though, finding his own toddler’s monologue vastly entertaining. Hermione had managed to swallow a strangled laugh, nodding gravely.

“Auntie Hermione,” Taran had bubbled, “you should SEE what Draco can do! He’s little, so he
can get in small places and hide!"

Two pairs of adult eyes had met briefly over his head and then flicked away again quickly, Hermione flushing and biting back another laugh. Ginny had let out a snort into her napkin, attempting to disguise it as a cough.

Taran had continued, oblivious. “Mummy says he’s ALWAYS getting in places he doesn’t belong! Right, Mummy?” He’d looked up at his mother for affirmation, beaming. Ginny had turned an unusual shade of puce. She cleared her throat.

“Uh… yes, sweetheart, of course…”

“Daddy says,” Taran had chattered, “someday Draco’s probly gonna get stepped on and SQUISHED. Maybe even EATEN. By a bird. YUCK!”

Bizarre mental pictures -- of a tiny, wiggly, red creature with Draco’s blond, patrician head, reminiscent of that classic American ‘50s sci-fi film, “The Fly”-- had been flitting through her head and now, with these last rather disconcertingly graphic images, she couldn’t help herself. Apparently, neither could Ginny, because the two of them had succumbed in that moment to a fit of the giggles.

At which point, Taran had promptly burst into mortified tears. He’d inherited not only his father’s unruly black hair, but also his sensitivity and tendency to brood. He’d been tearfully mollified, however, by a chocolate frog and the promise of a game of Junior Gobstones after his nap, allowing himself to be led off quietly to join Rory in the nursery as she slept. The two young women had been left with some quiet time, at last, to finish their lunch and talk.

“Whatever do you mean, ’rut’?” Hermione protested.

“You know, R-U-T, as in your entire life revolves around your baby every bloody waking minute! Tell me,” Ginny demanded, cupping her chin in her palm and looking Hermione straight in the eye. “When was the last time you did something -- anything -- for yourself that was simply fun and just for you, and completely unrelated to Rory or Draco’s needs?”

That simple question stopped Hermione cold. Embarrassing as it was to admit it, she really couldn’t remember. That was enough for Ginny.

“Right!” she said briskly. “Tomorrow, then! ‘Course, I’ll have to Floo round and make sure everyone’s available,” she muttered, more to herself than to Hermione. Suddenly she snapped back to attention. ‘You just keep tomorrow open,” she instructed firmly. “And tart yourself up a bit. Wear something nice, yeah?”

The next morning, Hermione and Draco were playing on the floor with the baby, a blanket spread out beneath them. She had just astounded them by rolling over for the very first time.

Rory had been lying on her back, batting at toys that dangled over her head from the crossbar of a colourful, standing play unit and pedaling her small legs in the air. Suddenly, she’d launched herself into a fluid roll from her back to her tummy and lay there, head raised, regarding her startled parents with a delighted little toothless grin.

“Wow!” Draco exclaimed. “Will you look at that, Granger! She’s--”

“I know!” Hermione cried. She scooped the baby up and hugged her, peppering her little face with mushy kisses. Draco grinned and shook his head.

“Brilliant,” he sighed. “She’s a genius. I bet Harry’s kid wasn’t doing that at only four and a half months!”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, darling,” Hermione chuckled, laying Rory back down, “but all babies do that at about this age.”
“Oh. Well. She’s still extraordinary,” Draco murmured. He stretched flat out on his belly, lithe and sensuous as a cat, and nuzzled Rory’s pink cheek. “Aren’t you, little one. I mean, after all. You are a Malfoy. And a Granger too, of course,” he hastened to add, seeing the mock indignation on Hermione’s face. “Definitely a Granger. Mmm…” He pulled her down for a quick kiss, nuzzling her and smiling into the fragrant, warm skin of her neck.

They were still basking in the glow of their daughter’s feat when they heard the sound of a throat being cleared.

“Ahem… Hermione!”

It was Ginny. Or rather, her head in the fireplace. Hermione was momentarily startled. She’d nearly forgotten their plans.

“Can you be ready by noon?” Ginny asked. “We’ll be back to collect you then.”

“Okay, yes…” Hermione answered, feeling a bit hesitant. Somehow it seemed not quite fair to be going off and leaving Draco alone to cope for an entire weekend afternoon. It would be the first time. And to tell the truth, she wasn’t sure he’d be able to manage. He didn’t always know where things were. And he just wasn’t quite as familiar with Rory’s routine. Would he remember that she liked to be sung to before a nap? Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all. Maybe…

“Oh, and Draco…” Ginny’s voice snapped them both out of their reveries, Hermione’s an uneasy scenario of unexpected mishaps and disasters, and Draco’s a sweet little daydream featuring the amazing Rory Malfoy, astounding the Wizarding and Muggle worlds alike with her prodigious intellectual and physical gifts by the age of three.

“Hmm?” he murmured absently, still grinning at Rory and running long, tickling fingers over her belly, making her giggle.

“Harry, Ron and Neville will come over to keep you company this afternoon while we’re out with Hermione. They can help with Rory. Harry’s already a dab hand at it, and it’ll do Ron good to get a bit of practice in. It’s only another couple of months now, for him and Pansy. And Neville—well, I’m not sure how much actual help he’ll be, but he’s good company and he can give you moral support. Right!” she said airily. “See you in a bit!” And with that, she was gone.

* *

At precisely noon, it was as if a small army had invaded Hermione and Draco’s sitting room. Ginny, Luna and Pansy surrounded Hermione, who was feeling overdressed in jeans and boots and a low-cut, black cashmere jumper that had felt deliciously sexy before the pregnancy but now just made her feel oddly… exposed.

They hustled her into the fireplace, Pansy tossing in enough Floo powder to get all four girls to Diagon Alley together. That left Draco, Ron, Neville and Harry, who had charge of Taran for the afternoon, standing there, all of them momentarily at a loss as to how to occupy themselves on their own. The ennui was broken when Taran began pulling on his father’s arm, demanding to see Rory. Harry shot a questioning glance at Draco, who quirked an eyebrow, hesitated a second, and then nodded. Taran took off towards the nursery, dragging Harry by the hand.
“Oh Merlin, I really shouldn’t…” Hermione protested weakly, pushing her plate away. It was piled high with a third portion of rather luscious-looking trifle, mounds of whipped cream topping layers of delicate sponge cake, custard, fruits and jelly.

Ginny, Luna and Pansy had decided on her behalf that a really sinful treat was just what the Mediwitch had ordered to start their afternoon together. Four steaming mugs of rich hot chocolate and a large glass bowl filled with trifle had been well ravaged, and now the four of them sat back, holding their stomachs and groaning. Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour was artfully decorated for Hallowe’en, only three days away. Glowing jack o’lanterns grinned in a sprightly row on the window ledges and tables, and bats and spiders hung, Charmed, in the air above them.

“Eating all this before trying on clothes wasn’t the smartest idea we’ve ever had, ladies,” Pansy moaned. A chorus of answering groans rose up around her.

“Well, at least you don’t have to worry about closing the button on your jeans -- yours haven’t GOT a button, only elastic! And anyway, you’re already fat!” Ginny snorted.

“I beg your pardon, Ginevra Potter! That’s your future niece or nephew you’re talking about so rudely! Never you mind, darling,” Pansy crooned, patting her stomach lovingly. It was only another eight weeks before she was due to give birth, and everyone was taking bets on whether the newest Weasley would be a boy or a girl, or perhaps one of each, given that twins ran in the family and she’d grown positively mammoth in the last month or so.

“It can hear you, you know,” Luna sighed, her dreamy gaze settling on Pansy’s expansive abdomen. “Fetuses are aware of everything.”

“I used to think about that quite a lot when I was pregnant with Rory,” Hermione mused. “I always wondered whether she could hear me and Draco when we… well… you know… then.” She blushed.

“Oh, then,” the others echoed, giggling.

“So tell us,” Ginny persisted, with a sly smile. “How is 'then' these days, eh?” She waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“Ginny!” Hermione protested, laughing and flushing again, her eyes bright.

“Yes, do tell!” Pansy chimed in. “This is strictly educational for me, you know. What to expect after you’re expecting, and all that.”

“Is he still… amorous?” Luna wanted to know.

“What about the sex, then? Is it any different now? You know, now that your body’s been through a birth. Does he feel different—inside, I mean?” Pansy got right to the point.

“Looser,” Ginny clarified, adding, “I never had that problem with Harry.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I know what Pansy meant, thanks! No. That’s not an issue,” she said softly, another furious blush pinking her cheeks. “He’s… you know… really lovely…” she trailed off, smiling almost shyly and shivering ever so slightly as a particularly delicious memory from a couple of nights before flashed into her mind.

“And if anything, he’s even more interested now than he was before. I think,” she whispered conspiratorially, so that they all drew their heads closer together to hear, “it’s my breasts. They’re so huge now. He can’t get enough of them! He looks at them sometimes as if he’s never seen a pair before!”

Everyone nodded gravely, and then burst into peals of laughter.
“It’s always tits with them, isn’t it! Tits and arses,” Ginny grinned.

“But the best bit is,” Hermione added, “even when I’m feeling really fat, Draco just seems to think I’m sexier somehow. It’s bizarre, really!” She shook her head almost in disbelief. “He seems to like me a bit fat! However,” she said firmly, “I don’t like me this way. Some of this -- she pulled at her midriff-- “has definitely got to go!”

“Hey, you lot, that gives me an idea!” Ginny chimed in. “Why don’t we join one of those Muggle exercise places, what do they call it? A gym? It would be a way to get ourselves out of the house once or twice a week for a girls’ night out!”

“Great idea, but I doubt I’ll be up for that for the next several months, I’m afraid,” Pansy sighed. “I expect Weasley Junior will be keeping me pretty busy.”

“And bloody exhausted!” Hermione muttered, remembering those very early days. “Of course, you do know,” she addressed Pansy directly now, “that you and Ronald won’t be able to shag for at least six weeks after the baby’s born. And honestly, you won’t want to anyway.”

“Yeah, I did read that somewhere,” Pansy nodded. “I haven’t broken the news to Ron yet though.”

Ginny snickered. “Shit, I’d love to be a fly on the wall when you do!”

“It’s very hard on them,” Hermione continued. “The husbands, I mean. Draco doesn’t know I know this, but he used to sneak certain magazines into the loo several times a week to… you know…” Her voice dropped to a near-whisper. “Bring himself off.”

“Neville does that sometimes, and we don’t even have a baby!” Luna confided, and giggled.

“Oh, Luna, how cruel, denying your bloke a proper shag when he wants it! Never knew you were such a tease!” Ginny scolded, her eyes twinkling. They all laughed, Luna included.

“Or maybe you never knew that Neville’s so hot-blooded!” Hermione winked. “Is he, Luna?”

“He’s all right,” she replied, a faint flush tinting her cheeks and rising up to the roots of her blonde hair. “He’s very good, actually!”

“Still waters and all that.” Pansy nodded. “Luna, you lucky girl! I’d never have guessed he had it in him, when we were at school.” She turned to Ginny. “And how’s our Harry these days, Madam Potter? We haven’t heard from you yet!”

“Oh,” Ginny answered airily, “he’s wonderful! Always has been.”

“Uh-uh, not good enough, Gin!” Pansy shook her head. “Details, we need details!”

The four girls bent their heads together, giggling. They had a lovely, long afternoon ahead of them and this was only just the beginning.

* 

Not far away in miles, but a million miles away in terms of environment, Draco was seated in front of Rory’s high chair, a small bowl of strained baby peas held hostage between them. Ron, Harry and Neville sat around the kitchen table, expressions ranging from sympathy to boredom on their faces. Somebody drummed his fingertips against the wood table. A drop of water fell from the tap into the sink with a small splash.

“Oi, Malfoy!” Neville piped up suddenly. “You sure you’re doing it right?”
“He’s doing it right,” sighed Harry. “She’s just new to it. You sort of have to, you know, make a game out of it.” He turned to Draco. “Know what I mean, mate?”

Draco nodded grimly and took up the spoon once again. Game or no, it was his responsibility to try to entice his daughter with at least a few bites of this meal or Hermione would likely have his head. At going on five months, Rory had only recently started on solids and was still getting most of her nourishment from nursing, but cereal and various strained fruits and vegetables were very slowly making their way into her diet one at a time. Not surprisingly, Hermione was trying to be very methodical and careful about deciding which foods, how often, and how much, and charting Rory’s progress. So far she’d done well with rice cereal and applesauce. Today was the third attempt with peas. He wanted to be able to tell Hermione he’d tried, at least.

SPLAT!!!

That was the third time in less than half an hour that a flying glob of liquefied peas mixed with a generous amount of saliva had landed somewhere on Draco. Rory was having a fine time. Whenever her father leaned in close enough to spoon a little into her mouth, she let fly with it right back at him. Her aim was impeccable.

Barely suppressed guffaws from behind him caused Draco to twist round in the chair and glare at his friends.

“Right, yeah, I know. Essence of peas. Lovely,” Draco muttered, and Accio’d a dry dishcloth from its place on a hook, to mop up his speckled face. The latest projectile had landed just under his right eye. Previous ones had already decorated his hair and neck, sending green rivulets sliding down under his collar. One truly spectacular one had lodged squarely in his left ear. She’d also discovered the fun of pushing her sticky little hands against his cheeks and fisting his hair in a slimy death grip.

Draco smiled through gritted teeth at his daughter, sitting opposite him in her high chair and babbling happily. She, too, was wearing her lunch, but didn’t seem the least bit bothered by the green streaks that stretched from ear to ear like war paint. The stuff was beginning to dry and crust in their hair and under their fingernails, something Draco found particularly distasteful.

“Come on, Baby, one more go just for Daddy, yeah?” he pleaded wearily, wiping fragments of her lunch out of his eyelashes. “Yummy peas, delicious, mmm. I’ll just have some first, shall I?” He smacked his lips loudly and made ready to swallow a spoonful, suppressing a shudder. Rory eyed him, suddenly quiet, hands arrested mid-smeared on her cheeks. He managed to get a bit of the foul-looking stuff down and then held out a tiny morsel of it to the baby.

“I hear the Hogwarts Express…” he thought for a moment about what Harry had said. Right. A little game. “Here comes the uh… the… Hogwarts Express…” He wove the spoon in a rather alarming arc through the air towards Rory’s mouth. “Straight into the tunnel!” Ah, good. That was more like it.

SPLAT!

Bullseye. The kid had a positive talent for projectile hurling. He swiped the mess from his shirtfront where it had landed, leaving a colourful blot. It rather resembled Australia.

“Here comes the Hogwarts Express…” he heard behind him, and twisted around again to see
Harry, Ron and Neville parroting his words, straight-faced, in a falsetto chorus. Ron added a high-pitched “toot toot!” which was followed immediately by collective howls of laughter. Even from Harry -- the traitor! Draco shot them all a dark look.

“Um…” Ron ventured, at last, once the laughter had died down. “Perhaps she just doesn’t fancy peas?”

Draco turned a baleful eye on him. “Really,” he drawled, his voice heavy with barely disguised sarcasm. “You reckon?”

In the last hour, segments of Draco’s hair had turned from palest blond to deepest, slimiest green, and his skin had now taken on a faintly gangrenous pallor in spots, looking a bit like the onset of an obscure tropical disease. He stood up, feeling the liquefied vegetable matter solidifying in his pores like a mudpack.

Just then, a cheerful voice trilled through the partially open kitchen window. A trill with an undercurrent of buzz saw.

“YOO-hoo!!”

Bloody, buggering hell, Beryl.

The next second, a round, multi-chinned face appeared in the kitchen window, seemingly floating there as if disembodied. Fat, dyed-brown curls bounced around her face as she moved. Her broad smile was made even more pronounced by the absurd amount of lipstick she wore, not only on her lips but also above and below them. She also managed, more often than not, to get specks of it on her front teeth, something that Draco found particularly revolting. Protuberant eyes were heavily painted in vivid eye shadow and severe black liner. Heavily rouged cheeks completed the rather clown-like overall effect. Today she wore a hat with a wide brim and large, gaudy flowers stuck jauntily around the crown. Draco found her pathetic at best, but this was definitely one of her scarier moments.

“And how is our little pudding today, then?”

Our little pudding??

“And who,” she added, in a voice suddenly gone all coy and coquettish, “are all these handsome young men?” Draco could have sworn she’d actually tittered.

Bollocks. All he needed right now was bloody Beryl, flirting with his friends! As if the peas weren’t already disgusting enough. A muscle in his jaw started pulsing.

“Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter,” he gritted out, and then nodded in Beryl’s general direction. “Beryl Mountbank, our… neighbour.”

The boys smiled and made properly polite noises of greeting.

“Charmed, I’m sure,” she said, batting her lashes as she poked her head further in and peered round the room. “Now isn’t this nice, all you lovely boys keeping our Draco company and helping with the baby.” Suddenly, she did a double take, banging her head on the top of the window frame.

“Did you say Harry Potter?” She craned her neck to see better and her mouth fell open. “The Harry Potter? Oh MY,” she murmured. Her eyes glazed over just a bit.

Suddenly, she seemed to come back to herself and it was then that she noticed the mess. “My
stars, isn’t your daddy feeding you properly? Let Auntie Beryl do it, she’ll make sure you eat all your lunch like a good girl! Gracious,” she murmured to herself over and over, as she backed away from the window and went around to the kitchen door, letting herself in and waddling to the table. She gestured at Draco to get up in a benevolent but obviously world-weary manner, her expression clearly announcing, “men are adorable but so hopeless at this sort of thing.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Draco muttered stiffly.

“Never you mind!” Beryl burred, shaking her curls and gesturing impatiently for him to vacate his chair. “I would be delighted to help! Isn’t that right, my little sugarpum,” she cooed at Rory.

Draco grudgingly obliged, but not without a thinly disguised smirk when he noticed that she’d unknowingly sat squarely in a small green pool which had dripped onto the seat of the chair.

His stomach churning, Draco caught Harry’s eye, jerking his head slightly in the direction of the living room. He cleared his throat. “Let’s… ah… go and check on Taran,” he said, and Harry nodded. The two of them slipped out quietly, leaving Ron and Neville to brave Beryl’s advances. They could still hear her chattering away about her garden and the most recent memory potion she’d brewed from Jobberknoll feathers. It had been a disaster, she informed them, though she couldn’t quite remember why. This set her off in gales of laughter at her own silliness.

“You poor sod,” Harry chuckled. “How the hell do you put up with that?”

“Thanks, Potter,” Draco muttered. “You really know how to make a bloke feel better, you know that? The answer to your question is, I don’t. Or just barely, anyway. I leave it to Hermione most of the time.”

“The question is,” he continued, his voice low, “how do I get rid of her?”

“Ha ha,” Draco muttered, casting a baleful eye in Harry’s direction. “Twat.”

“Sorry,” Harry grinned. “The answer is, you don’t. I do. Come on, Malfoy,” he said firmly, pulling on Draco’s sleeve and then wiping an errant bit of slime from it onto the seat of his jeans with a mild expression of distaste. “I’ve got a plan.”

He strode back into the kitchen, Draco following behind, curious and a bit apprehensive.

“Beryl -- it is Beryl, isn’t it…?” Harry paused and smiled winningly, locking eyes with Beryl. Her own eyes had grown quite round with the sudden attention. “I overheard you talking about your potion-making,” he went on. “Do you suppose you might show me what you’re growing?”

Gallantly, he held out his arm. Beryl struggled up from her chair as if she’d been hexed with a Jelly-Legs curse, dropping Rory’s spoon with a clatter onto the tray of the high chair and clutching her hand to her blouse. A pea-green smear settled just under her collar.

“…I… ah… oh, indeed… yes… yes, of course…” she faltered under Harry’s arresting gaze, dropping Rory’s spoon with a clatter onto the tray of the high chair and clutching her hand to her blouse. A pea-green smear settled just under her collar.

“I’ve always wanted to see what a really first-rate herbologist can do with certain plants. Potions are my specialty, you know,” he continued smoothly, with a surreptitious wink at his friends, who had to turn away to keep from laughing out loud at the sheer absurdity of that statement. Draco carefully studied a crack in the ceiling, fighting to keep the twitch from his mouth as Harry delivered his coup de grâce. “Do you suppose you might show me what you’re growing?”

Gallantly, he held out his arm. Beryl struggled up from her chair as if she’d been hexed with a Jelly-Legs curse, her eyes glazed over and her mouth open in a small “o.” Silently, she took his arm and he led her out the back door as if in a trance, turning his head to throw Draco a wink on the way out.
Draco grinned. *I owe you one, mate.* Funny. As a boy, he’d bitterly resented the attention and adulation Harry had received, albeit reluctantly. Now? He could be *The* Harry Potter, Saviour and Rock Star of the Wizarding World and welcome, if it meant getting Beryl Mountbank out of Draco’s hair.

“Bloody hell! Best use of wandless magic I’ve ever seen,” Ron laughed helplessly, shaking his head and wiping eyes that had grown moist. “Wicked!”

Neville sat, head in hands, his shoulders quaking and small, mirthful snuffles escaping him now and then.

“That was no wandless magic,” Draco snorted. “That was pure, unadulterated bullshit from start to finish, and she fucking ate it with a spoon! Brilliant. Very Slytherin, too, I might add,” he mused, grinning. “I always suspected he might’ve been Sorted wrong.”

He turned, then, to survey the scene in the kitchen. Somehow, Beryl had managed to get only one or two more bites into Rory, judging by the amount that still remained in the dish. Much more of it was on Rory’s face and in her hair, however. So much for Beryl’s way with babies.

Draco considered for a moment. If he attempted to wake her up so that he could bathe her properly, she’d never go back down for a nap, and all chances for a bit of relaxation with his mates would be gone. On the other hand, if he left her in the high chair for just a little while longer, they could have a bit of quality bonding time, which, he reasoned, was just as important for men as it was for women. And would it be so terrible if she were a little bit dirty for just a while longer? Strained peas never killed anyone.

Try as he might, though, he couldn’t completely ignore the small voice that kept intruding on his thoughts, reminding him of how Hermione would react if she saw this. Taking out his wand, he placated his conscience with a quick *Scourgify* on his daughter’s slumbering form and then on himself, and turned his attention to thoughts of more pleasurable pursuits. It would just be for a little while.

Harry had arrived back from Beryl’s twenty-five minutes after leaving, appearing only marginally the worse for wear, but definitely ready for a good, stiff drink. Draco reckoned that if anything warranted breaking out the good stuff, it was Harry’s brave and noble gesture on his behalf. Several bottles of select Ogden’s that he’d stashed away for special occasions found their way out of hiding, along with some chilled butterbeer and assorted snacks. They’d spent a bit of time watching football on the telly, still something of a novelty to Ron and Neville, and then they’d turned their attention to poker, a card game dear to Draco’s heart after three years at university.

Upon leaving Oxford four years earlier, he’d lost no time passing on the collective wisdom of Staircase 5 and Iffley Road to his Hogwarts friends. A rotating group of them played cards fairly often these days.

Now, nearly three hours after the end of the football match, the four of them still sat slumped in chairs around the dining room table. The game had become a war of attrition.

“Right, this one’s dealer’s choice,” Draco drawled lazily, attempting to finesse a shuffle of the deck but only succeeding in spraying the cards out in several directions at once. He recovered hastily, shuffled, and dealt them out. “Five Card Draw. The pot’s a Galleon. Ante up.”

Everybody dug into their pockets and fished out the cash, plunking it down in the centre of the table.

“High stakes today, Malfoy,” Ron muttered. “You’re going to clean me out.”
“Piss off, Weasley, you know you can afford it!” Draco chortled.

There was a moment of relative silence whilst everyone studied their cards.

“Malfoy, these cards are complete shit! What did you do, hex everyone’s hand but yours?”

“Now now, Longbottom, let’s not have any unfounded accusations. Malfoys never cheat.”

A chorus of snorts and jeers greeted that remark. Draco ignored them. “Your bets, gentlemen?”

“I’m in. I’ll call and raise you… a Galleon.” Harry dropped more money into the pile and smirked.

“Merlin, Harry, what the hell…?!?” Neville burst out.

“He must have something really good.” Ron was feeling disgruntled. “Shit, okay, I’m in.” He pushed some money towards the rest and rolled his eyes.


It was Draco’s turn. He glanced around the table and coolly assessed everyone’s expressions. Potter was looking rather smug. That was dangerous. He wasn’t a great liar, so the chances were that he really had something. On the other hand, Weasley was looking desperate. Draco glanced down at his own cards.

“Hmm…” he began, smiling enigmatically. Three heads swiveled in his direction. “I’ll call and raise… three Galleons.”

One second of dead silence and then --

“Fucking hell, Malfoy!” Ron muttered. He looked down at his own cards and almost violently pulled out three to discard. Harry followed suit and threw out one, somewhat more elegantly, and then it was left to Draco again. He plucked one out of his own hand and laid it down, then dealt out replacements to Ron and Harry and then to himself. Neville watched the play with intense interest, turning his head back and forth.

The second round of betting commenced, each of the three men glancing out of the corners of their eyes at the other two, trying to decide how to read their expressions.

Harry smiled serenely, called and raised Draco’s bet by yet another Galleon, and laid his cards face down.

“Right, I’m out,” Ron announced, shoving his cards away. This game was getting a bit too rich for his wallet. Pansy would murder him if he lost that much money while she was out spending more of it.

Now it was down to the two of them. Draco looked Harry steadily in the eye, a leisurely grin quirking the corners of his mouth.

“Call.”

Harry grinned back. Reaching out, he flipped his cards over and spread them out in a line.

There lay a five, six, seven, eight and nine of diamonds. Straight flush.

Harry leaned back in his chair and gazed coolly at Draco, his eyes glittering as if to say, “Hah! Beat THAT, Malfoy.”

Draco waited a few seconds, his slow smile getting wider by the minute. For the first time, Harry felt a twinge of nerves.
Then, in one swift and graceful move, Draco fanned his cards out on the table, face up, for all to see.

Ten, jack, queen, king, and ace of hearts. Royal flush.

A momentary, stunned silence was broken by good-natured yells and swearing, and the obligatory accusations of cheating (“Right, where’d you hide your wand, Malfoy?” “How’d you do it?” “Bloody hell, Malfoy, a royal flush for fuck’s sake!”), while Draco sat serenely above the fray, smiling complacently, and poured everyone another round of Ogden’s to celebrate.

* 

An hour later, the table was littered with empty glasses, bottles, cards, and the remains of a bowl of crisps, when Hermione, Ginny, Luna and Pansy suddenly stepped out of the fireplace, shaking themselves off a bit. Night had fallen. It had gone six.

The four men looked up lethargically. Draco’s chin had been cradled in his palm, his eyes half-closed, but now he jerked to semi-attention.

“Hi,” Hermione smiled, and leaned over to give him a kiss.

“Oh hi, love,” he slurred, and then suddenly remembered. Rory. Apparently, Harry had just had a similar epiphany, because he suddenly shot out of his chair and charged down the hall to the nursery where Taran had been napping, calling a hasty greeting to Ginny over his shoulder. She was close on his heels, however, looking suddenly suspicious.

“Where’s the baby?” Hermione asked, putting down her shopping bags. She looked wonderful: refreshed, eyes sparkling -- so bloody gorgeous in that jumper and those tight jeans, Draco couldn’t help but notice – full of spirit, very much her old self.

That same old self who would kill him if she discovered the state of the kitchen as he’d left it, not to mention the state of their child.

He backed away towards the kitchen, hoping to get there before she did and -- do what, exactly?

Oh Merlin, he thought desperately. I’m totally f***ed.

Neatly sidestepping him, Hermione slipped into the kitchen and came to a dead stop, Draco nearly colliding with her from behind. Rory was sitting in her high chair, rubbing her fingers in the leftover food, now completely cold and congealing in the dish, and licking them, then smearing the remainder into her hair. Spotting her mother, she broke into a huge, sloppy grin.

“I see you’ve fed her,” Hermione observed drily. At a loss for what else to do, Draco nodded enthusiastically. She opened the fridge. The bottle of breast milk stood there exactly where she’d left it hours before. She turned back to Draco. “What about this, then?”

Sheepishly, Draco focused on a spot on the floor. He shook his head.

“I forgot,” he said quietly.

“Hmm.”

A rather voluminous silence sat between them.

“Oh, hey!” Draco flashed what he hoped was a disarming smile, eager to move the spotlight away
from his own miserable indiscretions. “Beryl was here!”

Hermione looked hard at her husband, eyes narrowed. “Really. You loathe Beryl. Why do you look so pleased?”

Ignoring her question, he pressed on. “It was hilarious, you should have heard Harry! He charmed the hell out of her with a load of bollocks about how brilliant he is at potions, asking to see her garden and all…” His voice died in his throat and he forced himself to meet her gaze.

“Reckon I made a right cock-up of this…” he began.

Hermione quirked an eyebrow and opened her mouth to reply.

Just then, voices could be heard coming from the dining room. A temporary reprieve. Draco followed Hermione, who was carrying a quite filthy Rory, to investigate. They found Ginny holding Taran and looking daggers at Harry, who had the good grace to look just as chagrined as Draco felt.

Taran had clearly awakened from his own nap quite some time before and had quietly found many interesting ways to amuse himself in the nursery, chief among them an examination of the various items on Rory’s changing table. He’d managed to reach them by standing on a small stool and dragging a corner of the changing pad down. In the process, most of what had been on the changing table had come crashing down to the floor in an avalanche of jars, bottles, and containers. Baby powder, cleansing wipes, tissues, lotion, petroleum jelly, ointments for rashes, clean nappies, the lot. Whatever he could open, he did. Whatever he could stick his fingers into, he did that as well. Whatever he could smear on his face, taste, or plaster onto his body, he smeared, tasted or plastered. Consequently, he had the distinct look of somebody who’d been tarred and feathered. A fine dusting of baby powder clung to his face, topping a shiny, viscous layer of petroleum jelly and baby lotion. A tissue fluttered from his right cheek.

Ginny was fit to be tied.

For a moment, everyone stood there frozen in a curious tableau: on one side of the table, Hermione held Rory and glared at Draco, who looked as if now would be a wonderful time to Apparate virtually anywhere else on the planet. On the other side, Ginny was holding Taran and looking positively livid, while Harry shuffled his feet and stared pointedly at his shoes. At the head of the table, Pansy and Ron, appearing distinctly uncomfortable, rather like deer trapped in a set of headlamps, tried to gaze anywhere but at their friends. Neville and Luna had discreetly disappeared into the living room.

“Daddy…”

All eyes turned to Taran, whose own eyes had gone very round in a small face all but invisible behind blotches of lotion, ointments and baby powder. His dark hair stuck out in several spiky directions.

“Why’s Rory green?”

“If that isn’t the pot calling the kettle black….” Draco muttered, and then looked up and caught Harry’s eye. His friend seemed to be struggling to contain himself. His mouth had begun twitching oddly.

And then, the absurdity of it all seemed to strike everyone at once. A throat was cleared, there was a small titter, a snort, and then full-on laughter.

“Shit, Harry, what happened to Taran?” Draco choked out, laughing so hard that tears were starting.

“You don’t want to know, mate,” Harry roared, wiping his own eyes. “It’s all over the nursery!”
Draco blanched momentarily. *Bloody hell!* Then the tide of hilarity overtook him again.

One lingering glance at each other and their children, who looked at that moment rather like tribal sacrifices, and both Hermione and Ginny were in hysterics as well.

“I think we need to get these two into a bath,” Hermione gasped finally, holding her side with her free hand. “Come on, Gin, you can put Taran in the tub and I’ll bath Rory in the sink.” The two girls trailed off towards the bathroom, children in tow, still giggling.

* 

It was midnight. Rory had been nursed and changed again, and could be counted on to sleep for at least the next several hours. Hermione lay on her side in bed, her back to Draco, still awake. There was still a bit of unfinished business between them, and she knew he felt it too.

She felt his fingers gently moving her hair aside and caressing the nape of her neck.

“Hermione…”

Silence. She wasn’t ready to make it easy. Not just yet.

“Hermione… you awake, love?”

She turned slightly to indicate that she was.

“Oh, look, I admit it. I acted like an arse today.”

“Yes. You did, rather,” she said quietly.

“Sorry.” His voice sounded very small suddenly.

There it was. That small word—powerful but so often elusive-- out there in the air between them now and twisting precariously in the wind.

Hermione kept him hanging for only another second or two, and then rolled over, burying her face in his chest and wrapping her arms tightly around him. He drew her close and smiled with relief. Suddenly she started to giggle.

“Did you see Ginny’s face when she marched into the dining room with Taran all covered in powder and Vaseline?”

He laughed. “You should have seen yours, when you first saw Rory all-over peas!”

“Hey, you should talk, there are still little bits of it in your hair, you know. You look rather fetching in green, actually,” she added.

“Do I, now?” He smiled rakishly. “And here I was just thinking that maybe you could help me wash it again. You game?” He planted a light kiss on the tip of her nose.

“Oh gosh, Malfoy,” she sighed dramatically. “I’m completely knackered! *Such* a lot of shopping today, I just don’t feel like moving at all…”

“Come on, woman, up you get,” he told her briskly, rolling out of bed and reaching for her. “No more feeble excuses! I need you to scrub my back too!”
“All right, all right,” she sighed as he hauled her to her feet, pressing her tightly to his chest. “I suppose I can manage to —”

The rest of the sentence disappeared in a long, languid, really good kiss. She would have to remember to tell the girls what a sensational kisser he still was. Better than ever, in fact.

TBC
Thursday evening, early December

“They’re what?” Hermione snapped her head around and stared at her husband.

Draco was stretched out on the sofa, buried in the pages of Rugby World. Today’s Daily Prophet littered the sofa cushions at his feet in carelessly discarded sections. He’d finished checking the latest Quidditch scores and had now moved on to news of rugby, a passion acquired during his university days. Flipping through the pages of the magazine, he smiled to himself, recalling those halcyon student days at the flat in Iffley Road they’d shared with their close friends and flatmates, Danny and Gemma, and those lazy weekend afternoons he and Danny had spent with a couple of pints, following rugby on the telly. It had been Danny who had introduced him to the joys of the game, tutoring him on its finer points.

Curled up together in the overstuffed armchair, Hermione and the baby were at the tail end of a nursing session, Rory beginning to fall asleep as she suckled; her mouth began a slow slide off Hermione’s breast as her eyes fluttered shut. The quiet in the room had been lulling. Only the tick of the clock on the mantle made a regular, heartbeat-like sound.

And then Draco had suddenly remembered. Immersed in an article about the travails of a favourite player, the recollection had surfaced fleetingly and he’d casually remarked on it, not even really paying attention to what he’d said.

“They’re coming to visit this weekend,” he repeated now, half his attention still on the magazine article, and then he caught sight of the look on Hermione’s face. “Sunday. They haven’t seen Rory since her Naming. That’s more than two months ago. I told them okay.”

“But—but—” Hermione spluttered. “Draco, have you forgotten? This Sunday is my parents’ day
Draco put down the newspaper, a sudden, small frisson of panic rippling through him. He realised that Hermione was right. But now he had a real dilemma. His parents had already rearranged their schedule so that Sunday would be set aside for a family visit. Too many other plans would have to be broken and reset if he cancelled their visit now. Unfortunately, Hermione had a similar problem with her own parents, he remembered now with a sinking feeling. They were scheduled to leave on a Mediterranean cruise six days later and would be gone for two weeks.

They would just have to share the day and their grandchild, no matter what. Maybe Draco could arrange to be out of the country on Sunday. On another continent, preferably.

* 

Inevitably, Sunday arrived, no matter how both Hermione and Draco wished they could have fast-forwarded right over it with a Time-Turner. Heavy grey clouds and an icy drizzle foretold a typical English winter’s day. Hermione had wanted to cook, but Draco had put his foot down. There was a limit to how much she could do, and often, she was already stretched beyond it to the point of exhaustion. Cooking a big meal and entertaining the family at home were out of the question. Secretly, Hermione was relieved, and suggested to him that perhaps the next best thing would be to take all the grandparents out for Sunday lunch. Somewhere nice -- but also on neutral ground, though where that might be was anybody’s guess.

Richard and Claire Granger were the first to arrive. They parked their car in front of the neat, little, attached Tudor house. It was nearly the only car on the street. Most wizarding families simply didn’t bother with them.

Draco spotted them through the sitting room window as they walked up the slate path and approached the front door. He felt a momentary clenching in his stomach, imagining the lunch and how he – how they all -- would get through it. Over the years, despite the cordiality of their encounters both before and since the wedding, there had been relatively little casual contact between the two sets of in-laws. Moreover, aside from their children and granddaughter, they really had nothing in common. Certainly nothing that Draco could see.

The doorbell pealed and Hermione hastened past Draco to let her parents in.

“Mum! Dad!” she cried warmly, a big smile lighting her face. “Please, come in!”

Claire and Richard stepped over the threshold, wrapped their daughter in a huge hug and then spotted Draco. Claire was the first to collect him in a warm embrace of his own. Richard stuck his hand out with a grin, and Draco grasped it.

“How are you, Draco?” Claire smiled at him. “It’s wonderful to see you! And where’s my little granddaughter?”

“How she is,” Hermione sang, reappearing from the nursery with Rory in her arms. “All fresh from a nap and a nice bath!”
The baby was fragrantly clean and bright-eyed, her hair brushed into silken wisps that framed her face. At five and a half months, she looked like a waifish faery child; her eyes were a huge, luminous grey fringed with long, dark lashes like her father’s, her delicate facial features very like Hermione’s, and a small sprinkling of pale freckles had begun to dust her nose as they did her mother’s. Her fine, moon-pale hair was the image of Draco’s and marked her unmistakably as a Malfoy.

Immediately Hermione’s parents surrounded her and the baby, oohing and aahing and clucking at Rory, tickling and waggling their fingers at her.

In the midst of all this happy tumult, a knock sounded at the door.

Hermione handed Rory to Draco and went straight to the hallway, pulling the front door open, still laughing at something her dad had just said. Her eyes were alive and sparkling, cheeks prettily flushed.

There stood Lucius and Narcissa, looking regal, elegant and so very... blond. They wore dark traveling cloaks which made them seem even paler than usual in the winter light. The light rain had left traces of damp on the shoulders of their cloaks.

Narcissa wore rich, burgundy dress robes beneath her royal-blue cloak; they made a whispery, swishing sound as she moved. Her hands were wrapped in a soft, black muff that matched the collar of her cloak. Lucius’ gloved left hand rested on the brass head – a snake, naturally – of his intricately carved, oak walking stick. Their expressions were carefully neutral, but their eyes betrayed two people who’d found themselves out of their accustomed element and were fairly certain that they’d traveled down a peg or two. Lucius’ raised eyebrow as he glanced up and down the pleasant but unpretentious street said it all.

“Forgive me, I seem to have forgotten my manners! Come in, please!” Hermione said, after a moment’s tongue-tied hesitation.

Narcissa gave her a quick, warm smile. “Hermione, darling! How are you?” She offered her cheek for a kiss and then swept past Hermione into the sitting room.

Lucius stopped for a moment. The expression in his eyes, grey and so like his son’s, seemed indecipherable as they engaged hers. He hesitated and then proffered his hand.

“Good afternoon, Hermione. Narcissa and I have looked forward to seeing our grandchild,” he said finally. He seemed about to say more, but instead settled his face to await her reply.

These were circumstances against which many in the wizarding community would have bet a good deal of money. And in the not-too-distant past, they’d surely have collected. Nobody, pure-blood or otherwise, could have foreseen the marked change that the Malfoys, Lucius in particular, would undergo. What had started as a purely pragmatic decision had eventually grown into something much more.

In the beginning, it had been merely what needed to be done in order to function in the world as it now was, because things had certainly shifted radically for the pure-blood families. They had to be seen to be getting along, to be embracing the new order.

Then, there was the fact that their son, who had defected to the Light during the war, had made two radical life choices at the age of nineteen: he had elected to continue his education outside the wizarding world at one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the Muggle world, and while there, he had fallen hopelessly in love with the Muggleborn Hermione Granger. Pursuing that relationship to its logical conclusion had been his second life-altering decision.

Here, Narcissa had led the way, being above all else a mother who didn’t want to risk losing her son’s affections. At the same time, it hadn’t escaped Lucius, ever the pragmatist, that such a public alliance with a prominent Muggleborn could only reflect well on the Malfoys as leading lights for pure-blood reform, so he had allowed himself to be pulled along in her wake. But the opportunity
to begin getting to know his new daughter-in-law had, over time, led to a genuine breakdown of barriers, making possible a slow but steady reassessment of long-entrenched views on racial purity. Firsthand knowledge of Hermione had forced him to concede the folly of his former beliefs. And now there was a child of this union. Clearly, this child would be something special. It was already apparent, young as she was, that Rory had inherited extraordinary qualities, and not only from the pure-blood side of the family.

Her hand still resting lightly in his, Hermione smiled at her father-in-law. “Hello. Rory will be happy to see you too. She’s just inside. Please… come in.” She led him from the hallway to the living room, where Draco sat with Rory on the sofa, surrounded by two doting grandmas and a beaming grandpa who was in the midst of making silly faces at a giggling Rory.

Draco’s eyes widened at the startling sight of Hermione and his father walking in together. Recovering quickly, he handed Rory to Narcissa and stood.

“Father,” he said rather formally, and tentatively held out his hand in greeting, still not entirely sure of how to be around Lucius now.

An awkward silence hung between them for a moment or two.

Then Lucius offered his own hand, taking Draco’s in a tight grip. Feeling the warmth of that grip, Draco felt the beginnings of a smile lift the corners of his mouth. A momentary, answering warmth flared briefly in his father’s eyes.

“I insist,” Richard was saying, “that you all be our guests for lunch! There’s a good pub not too far from here that does a marvelous Sunday lunch! Now, now --” he shook his head vehemently. “I won’t take no for an answer! We can walk. As I said, it’s fairly close by.”

Hermione and Draco exchanged quick, apprehensive glances and Hermione shrugged. There was no talking her father out of something once he’d made up his mind about it. Even Narcissa, who’d been hoping for an elegant lunch in a place where she might run into a few of her cronies and show off her precious grandchild, could see that Diagon Alley was a lost cause.

She and Lucius exchanged a cautious glance of their own as they refastened their cloaks. He raised a wary eyebrow but inclined his head in a slight nod of acquiescence. Unavoidably, the experience of another lunch four and a half years earlier came to mind for both of them, the only other such encounter with a Muggle dining establishment they’d had. The place had been very chic, the food and wine wonderful, its location and history unusual to say the least—it was housed in a very ancient, former prison—and the occasion auspicious, a celebration of Hermione and Draco’s finishing at Oxford. And despite all of that, what had begun quite cordially had not exactly ended that way. One look at Draco revealed that he had not forgotten that day either, or why it had ended on such a sour note.

“We should be delighted, Richard. Thank you,” Narcissa began quickly, and then gave her husband a discreet nudge. “Oh, yes… indeed we should. Delighted,” Lucius echoed. “Shall we?”

At that, Draco slanted a quick, surprised look at his wife. Now Hermione’s expression was calm, her smile curiously serene. She was wont to react this way where his father was concerned, he’d noticed for some time now.

The rain had stopped and the heavily clouded sky merely glowered down at them now. As they paraded along the streets together, leaving the immediate, wizarding boundaries of the neighbourhood and moving into the wider, mixed area that surrounded it, the group undeniably drew curious glances, chiefly because of the tall, Nordic-looking man and woman with long, ice-blond hair and swirling cloaks. More than one passerby wondered if perhaps they weren’t mediaeval re-enactors going out to lunch after a performance. Three white-blond heads, one sandy-haired, slightly balding one, and two with long, luxuriantly wavy chestnut hair moved in a clutch as if they’d been Spelled. An elegant, somewhat old-fashioned pram -- it had been Draco’s,
put lovingly away by Narcissa many years before and presented with a flourish at Rory’s birth -- led the curious entourage as it moved along.

Before long, they arrived at The Red Lion, bustling with a lively lunchtime crowd. It was fair-sized, with a comfortable, relaxed feel to it. A handful of small tables were fanned out around the bar, a polished wood affair which gleamed with rows of bottles and glasses and brass taps for a variety of ales, served up frothy and dark in tall pint glasses. A larger second room invited diners to relax at tables and old-fashioned wooden settles, two of which were arranged around the hearth, where a cheerful fire crackled and popped, warding off the winter’s gloom. On the walls small, framed prints and shaded lamps hung, and crisp chintz curtains graced the windows. The low buzz of conversation was punctuated with occasional laughter.

They were shown to a large table in a corner with a spacious settle on one side. A highchair was quickly found for Rory. Lucius and Narcissa arranged themselves rather majestically at one end of the table, glancing around the pub with expressions of covert curiosity. It didn’t seem all that different from the Leaky Cauldron, or rather, if anything, it was a bit nicer. But appearances could be deceiving and they were both very much on their guard. Lucius gazed around the room, assessing the other patrons, particularly the more boisterous ones at the bar, with a slight frown. Narcissa eyed the silverware and linens, wondering just how clean all of it really was.

“Well!” Richard said heartily. He glanced at Claire for reinforcement and got none. “Well, well!” he repeated.

An awkward silence threatened to settle over the proceedings.

“Tell me, children,” Narcissa began finally, one elegant hand resting tapered fingers very lightly on the suspect tablecloth. “Have you two made plans for the holidays yet?”

“Oh… um… well, not, you know, anything really specific,” Hermione said. She had no idea where this was leading and looked quickly to Draco for support.

Casually, he slipped an arm around her shoulders and lounged back in the settle, pulling her along with him.

“Why, Mother?”

“Well, darling, your father and I -- ” she cast a smile in Lucius’ direction -- “were talking it over and we thought it would be lovely if perhaps the two of you and the baby could spend the holidays at the Manor. From Yule to New Year’s. You’d have your own suite of rooms, lots of privacy, loads of help with the baby, and of course, we’ll be having our annual New Year’s Eve party -- oh!” She stopped, turning to the Grangers. “You will be coming, won’t you?” They barely had a chance to nod their acceptance before she rushed on. “The holidays are going to be simply wonderful this year, and--”

“We hope you will come,” Lucius finished, looking pointedly at his son. Draco flushed slightly, avoiding his gaze, and began twirling a lock of Hermione’s hair around his finger. He wasn’t sure what to say. This détente was all still rather suspect as far as he was concerned. Much as a part of him wanted it, and he had to admit that this was so, he still wasn’t entirely certain he could trust it yet. Too often, it had felt like one step forward with his father, only to fall two steps back, or more. And truth be told, he wasn’t at all sure he really wanted to spend ten days at his ancestral home, huge, mouldering old antique that it had always been and still was, in his mind.

Hermione was the only one who’d noticed the rather meaningful look that had passed between her parents at the mention of this idea. She had the distinct feeling they’d had something very different in mind and had been on the point of extending their own invitation just as Narcissa had spoken.

Just then, a waitress materialised to take their orders. She was past middle-aged, but appeared to be in denial of that fact. Bleached hair was piled up on top of her head and her blouse was unbuttoned at the top just enough to reveal the beginnings of deep, rather wobbly cleavage. In her tight skirt, she rather reminded Draco of an overstuffed sausage about to burst its casing.
“What’ll it be then?” she chirped, casting a surreptitious glance at Lucius’ long, white-blond hair as it fanned out around the shoulders of his cloak. He was a striking man, unquestionably. A bit like – who was it? Yes! That elf man in the Lord of the Rings films! This delicious bloke could be a more mature, rugged version of that sexy elf. She wondered idly what his ears looked like under all that hair.

Licking her lips, she put pencil to paper and prepared to write.

“What’ll it be then?” she chirped, casting a surreptitious glance at Lucius’ long, white-blond hair as it fanned out around the shoulders of his cloak. He was a striking man, unquestionably. A bit like – who was it? Yes! That elf man in the Lord of the Rings films! This delicious bloke could be a more mature, rugged version of that sexy elf. She wondered idly what his ears looked like under all that hair.

Licking her lips, she put pencil to paper and prepared to write.

“May I take the liberty?” Richard said quickly. “We’ll have the Sunday roast all round.”

“Beef or lamb, sir?” the waitress replied, her eyes drifting from Richard back to Lucius.

“Oh—beef, I think. And the horseradish sauce on the side, please.”

“And to drink?” the waitress asked, looking directly at Lucius now and smiling coquettishly. “What’s your pleasure, sir?”

Suddenly Lucius became aware that he was being flirted with, an astonishing turn of events. Not only that, the advances were coming from a common, rather coarse Muggle with atrocious hair and hideously bad taste in clothes and makeup. A waitress, for Merlin’s sake. The very idea was appalling and he found himself rendered momentarily speechless.

Watching all this, Narcissa wisely stifled a powerful impulse to laugh. Still, this was priceless. She caught Draco’s eye, but he quickly averted his gaze, his mouth twitching dangerously.

“He’ll have -- Lucius, what do you fancy?” Richard turned to the other man and waited.

“Ah…” he began.

Draco leaned over, still smirking, and whispered, “No firewhiskey here, Father.” Without thinking, he gave Lucius a wink and then stopped, astonished at the very fact of having done so. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually teased his father.

In the meantime, Lucius seemed to have recovered his wits as well as his sense of the rightful order of things.

“Madam,” he said quite distinctly, drawing himself up and looking at her with thinly veiled disdain. “Kindly bring me a glass of your finest, oldest whisky. Neat, if you please.” While he might not fully believe all that business about blood purity any longer, he was still a Malfoy, and one could not simply abandon centuries of quite sensible truths regarding class -- though he was willing to bridge the gap, if he must, with a gracious dose of noblesse oblige, which in this case translated into the word “please.”

“And a pint of Fuller’s Pride for me, thanks,” Richard added.

“Make that two,” Draco grinned.

The waitress smiled toothily, not the slightest bit put off by Lucius’ somewhat frosty tone, and jotted down the order. Then she turned to the others expectantly.

“Ladies?”

Lunch was off to an interesting start.

*
The food arrived before too long, steaming plates fragrant with slabs of freshly roasted meat and vegetables, arranged around golden rounds of Yorkshire pudding in pools of rich, brown gravy. Everybody seemed suddenly ravenous and tucked in hungrily; for a while, not much was heard except for the occasional clink of cutlery against china.

As they ate, it seemed everybody was watching everybody else out of the corners of their eyes to gauge the various reactions: Hermione and Draco watched their parents to see how they were interacting; in addition, they watched Lucius and Narcissa to see how they were reacting to the experience of a meal in a typical, entirely down-to-earth Muggle establishment; Lucius and Narcissa eyed each other and also examined their surroundings (not bad, not bad at all, rather decent actually, silly waitress aside… passable food and quite acceptable, even rather good, drink… people surprisingly quite civil, generally…); Richard and Claire watched Hermione and Draco watching Lucius and Narcissa and themselves, and then observed the senior Malfoys checking out this most typical Muggle pub as well. It was all rather comical.

“Hermione, dear, “ Claire said eventually, laying down her fork and turning to her daughter. “I was thinking… won’t you need something new to wear for the Malfoys’ New Year’s Eve ‘do’? I thought perhaps we could do a bit of holiday shopping.”

Hermione paused, baby spoon midway to Rory’s mouth. The baby was swathed in an oversized bib and Hermione had brought a packet of baby wipes as backup ammunition. She did not want Rory’s usual practice of wearing her meal to put everybody else off their lunch.

“Thanks, Mum,” she smiled, spooning some strained peaches into Rory’s open mouth and then expertly scooping the dribbled remainder off her lower lip and recycling it back in. “I really could do with something new, I suppose. All my things are from before the baby or when I was pregnant, and nothing looks quite right anymore.”

“It’s settled, then!” Claire smiled happily. If she couldn’t have the kids at her house for the holidays, at least she could spend some quality time with her daughter beforehand. And surely she’d see them for… Yule. Whatever happened to plain old “Christmas”? She supposed it was just one more aspect of her daughter’s life as a witch that she must resign herself to accept.

* 

First thing the following Tuesday morning, Claire rang to invite Hermione for an afternoon of shopping the following day. The date was made. Ginny agreed to take Rory for a few hours. Everything was set.

Hours later, Hermione sank down in the squishy armchair in the living room and closed her eyes. It had been a very busy morning with Rory. They’d had an active play session on the big, toy-strewn blanket spread out on the living room floor. Following that, the baby had been offered a small meal of strained spinach, had had a much-needed bath, been dressed, nursed, burped, changed again, and sung to, and had just drifted off for her afternoon nap.

Hermione gratefully put her feet up on the ottoman and sighed. Sleep was blissfully overtaking her when suddenly the sound of flapping wings outside the bay window caused her to grudgingly open her eyes again. She roused herself, grumbling, and opened the casement, taking the envelope from the eagle owl that she knew had come from Malfoy Manor.
“Hello, Zander,” she murmured, absently reaching into a small, ceramic bowl on the mantle for a treat for him.

*Dearest Hermione,* she read.

*I plan to be in town tomorrow for lunch and a bit of holiday shopping. Would love it if you could join me. I would very much like to spend some time with you. Perhaps you might assist me in choosing special gifts for my son and my lovely granddaughter, and for yourself as well. If you are able to join me, I shall collect you at one o’clock sharp. Do please say you’ll come. I shall await your reply. Narcissa.*

What to do? Hermione had already made plans with her mother for noon the next day. Claire would drive over and collect Hermione and Rory, take them to Harry and Ginny’s where they’d drop the baby off, and then the two of them would proceed to the big, enclosed shopping centre in Watford, where lunch and several trendy new clothing shops awaited.

Oh, not fair! She was truly torn now. On the one hand, she’d been very excited about the prospect of a whole afternoon just with her mum. It had been positively ages since they’d had a day together, just the two of them. On the other hand, how could she say no when her mother-in-law was clearly going to a lot of effort to encourage their relationship? Hermione desperately wanted her relations with Draco’s parents to be pleasant and comfortable, at the very least. She knew both were making the best effort they could in that direction. For her part, she felt that whatever she could do, she really should do. That certainly included not turning down such an invitation.

This left her in a quandary. Fleeting, rather tempting thoughts of Time-Turners crossed her mind, but she dismissed them. No. She would find a non-magical way out of this mess, and she’d do it without bruised feelings on anyone’s part.

In the end, Hermione decided there was only one thing for it: she would have to bring Claire and Narcissa together once again so that she could be with both of them. But she’d ask Narcissa to change their meeting time from one o’clock to three, which would still give her time alone with her mother beforehand. She hastily scribbled a reply, informing Narcissa of her situation, and sent the owl back. Then she rang Claire, asking that she come at 11 o’clock instead of noon, giving them a chance to drop Rory off at the Potters’ and then enough time for lunch and a bit of dress shopping on their own. They could easily be back at Hermione’s in time to meet Narcissa by three.

* At eight-thirty on Wednesday morning she was sitting in the kitchen, hair pulled carelessly into a tangled bird’s nest of a ponytail, bleary-eyed because it had been a bad night for Rory and Hermione had been awake far more than she’d managed to sleep. Predictably, the baby was finally asleep now whilst Hermione was frazzled and hollow-eyed, sitting at the kitchen table in her sleep shirt and pink pyjama pants with the dancing sheep, nursing a tepid cup of coffee.

“What time’s your mum coming?” Draco asked, as he finished his own coffee and had the last bites of scrambled eggs and wholemeal toast.

He looked crisp and fresh and mmm… rather delectable in his black turtleneck jumper and grey wool trousers, Hermione had observed, a bit disgruntled as she considered her own disheveled state. His hair, just washed and smelling faintly of apricots, had grown rather long, nearly reaching his shoulders, and fell in a soft blond curtain over his eyes. A bit shaggy, yes, but rather rakish. In
fact, he looked entirely too good for a father of a not quite six-month-old baby who’d just begun teething with a vengeance. But then, he hadn’t spent half the night walking the floor with a screaming infant who was drooling constantly now and gnawing on her own fist in pain.

Hermione looked up muzzily from her coffee cup, where she’d been momentarily zoning out. But before she had a chance to answer, he glanced down at his watch.

“Oh, sorry, love, meeting at nine. Must dash. Have a wonderful time today!” He grabbed his sport jacket from the back of his chair, leaned over Hermione’s shoulder and nuzzled her neck, dropping light kisses there. His warm breath tickled her ear.

“If you can…” His voice dropped melodramatically. “The Invasion of the Mothers … dun dun dun!” He straightened and laughed.

Hermione giggled in spite of herself, reaching up to grab his lapel and pull him back down for a proper goodbye kiss. As he turned to go, she had an excellent view of his rather nice rear assets, which the trousers showed to great advantage. She let out a low whistle. He turned, flashed her a brilliant smile and a wink, and disappeared with a pop.

The rest of the short morning passed in a blur. In the next two and a half hours, while Rory slept -- fitfully, which didn’t bode well for her afternoon with Ginny— Hermione jumped into the shower, dressed, made the bed, did the washing up in the kitchen, and stuffed Rory’s nappie bag with everything the baby could possibly need for her afternoon at Ginny’s, her mind racing in a million directions, wanting desperately not to forget something essential.


Ginny was an experienced mother and would be fine with Rory, but still… she wasn’t Hermione. What if Rory had a tantrum and wouldn’t be calmed? What if she refused her bottle and worked herself up to the point of vomiting, as she had done many times before?

By the time Claire pulled up and bounced out of her car and up the walk, Hermione was ready to crawl back into bed. She plastered a smile on her face, though, as she opened the front door.

“Oh hi, Mum, would you be a darling and hold Rory for a sec while I get her car seat?”

She handed the baby to a very willing grandma and disappeared back into the house to retrieve the car seat from the front hall closet. Hefting that under one arm, she grabbed the nappie bag with the other hand and locked the door behind her.

Having the distinct feeling that getting herself and Rory out of the house more closely resembled a military manoeuvre than the simple act of transporting an infant to the home of a friend, Hermione secured Rory in her car seat and then dropped gratefully into the front passenger seat alongside her mother. Claire was almost nauseatingly chipper in her overcoat and a blue cashmere jumper set and smart black trousers. Not exactly haute couture, Hermione couldn’t help thinking, and
wondered what sort of outfit Narcissa would be wearing, though she had a pretty good idea.

They drove to Harlequin, the upscale shopping centre in Watford, where Hermione had grown up and where her parents still lived and had their joint dental practice. She hadn’t been in a place like this in ages, not really since the summers between Hogwarts when she’d go with her friends and then just a few times during her years at university and afterwards. Come to think of it, one of the last times had been for precisely this occasion six years earlier, when she’d been a second-year student at Oxford. She hadn’t realised until they arrived how much she’d actually missed spending an afternoon wandering the shops, stopping for lunch or a café mocha somewhere, trying on clothes she fancied, losing herself in the aisles of bookshops, just doing what ordinary folk did.

The two of them headed straight for a cafe on the second level, deciding on cups of tomato soup and custardy slices of quiche. Sitting down at a high, round table overlooking the lower level of the mall, they began to eat.

For Hermione, there was always a strange sense of “disconnect” when she found herself back in the Muggle world—a sort of self-induced schizophrenia that left her feeling as if she weren’t quite certain where she really belonged. As if she’d left major limbs somewhere else and was no longer whole. That same sensation had plagued her in reverse when she arrived at Hogwarts after learning of her special gifts.

A bit wistfully, she wondered whether she would ever feel completely at home in either world. Probably not, she decided. And now, neither would Draco, it seemed. He had experienced much the same thing in leaving the wizarding world for three years at Oxford and then in London for another three, the first years of their marriage before the baby. Going back into the wizarding world and making a place for himself there had been difficult. He often joked that the two of them were a weird new species, a strange hybrid. There was, she concluded, a good deal of truth to that.

Shaking herself out of her melancholy, Hermione smiled at her mother and tucked into her lunch with relish. She’d realised suddenly that she was completely famished.

Claire took a bite of quiche and laid her fork down, regarding her daughter thoughtfully.

“Hermione… how are you? I mean really. Are you happy, sweetheart?”

Hermione thought about her life and how it had changed in so many unexpected ways in the last seven years since she and Draco had found their way to each other, and within that time, the four years and nine months of their marriage. The closing days of the war had set the stage for their beginnings, pointing them both in a common direction neither could have foreseen. Sometimes she still found herself amazed -- and so very grateful -- that the Fates had seen fit to spin their web in such a surprising way. Was she happy?

“Oh yes, Mum.” Her smile was radiant. “Never better.”

The walkways were crowded with shoppers as Hermione and her mother made their way along. December sunlight poured in through the glass-paneled roof of the mall, the entire place a gleaming confection of light and open space.

Suddenly Hermione spotted a shop window display that beckoned to her with its siren song:
artfully arranged on several levels were samplings of some of the best of Waterstone’s collection of novels of pagan Britain and Ireland: Manda Scott’s *Boudica* series, Bernard Cornwell’s *Stonehenge*, Morgan Llywellyn’s *Druids* and others. She also spotted another title that instantly intrigued her: *The Element Encyclopaedia of Magical Creatures*, by John and Caitlin Matthews.

Instantly she found herself wondering how these books would compare to the texts she’d grown up with at Hogwarts, just how wide the gulf would be between the truth as she’d lived it and the stabs at the truth, half-truths, and blatant fictions disseminated in the Muggle world. This volume had been placed in the display window alongside several beautiful books about dragons, which also seemed to be *de rigueur* these days. Hermione smiled to herself. If only they knew how real such creatures actually were. The Muggle fascination with magic and what they believed were merely mythical creatures amused her, and yet she understood it well, remembering her own fascination with such things as a child growing up Muggle.

She began drifting towards the entrance to Waterstone’s until her mother grabbed her elbow and hauled her back, shaking her head and laughing.

“Uh-uh, my love, we’re here for one purpose today!” she reminded Hermione with a knowing grin. “We’ve got to find you a really special frock and we haven’t much time!”

Ruefully, Hermione turned away from the bookshop and all its enticing wares and found herself facing a boutique that actually looked rather promising. A tantalising array of holiday finery was displayed in the windows, dresses and gowns for any sort of special occasion.

Half an hour later, Hermione had two dresses folded neatly and wrapped in tissue paper in a shopping bag. She’d liked both well enough, though neither had really thrilled her. She had tried on so many dresses, and these were the best of the lot. Time was running out, though, and still, she hadn’t been able to decide. The best solution was the one Claire proposed: buy both and choose later. One dress would be a holiday present from her and Hermione’s dad. Hermione could pay for the other one if she still wanted it.

They were finally ready to leave. But on the way back towards the mall entrance, something in a shop window stopped her dead in her tracks. It was a dress. And not just any dress. It was The One.

“Hang on, Mum,” she said rather breathlessly, thrusting her bag into Claire’s hands, and ran into the shop. There wasn’t much time -- it was nearly half after two and they were to meet Narcissa in just over thirty minutes. But oh, she had to have this dress!

There it was. *Please let it be in my size!* There! The last one! She’d never moved so fast in all her life. Fitting room. Clothes were stripped off one more time, winding up in a crumpled heap on the floor. Finally, holding her breath, she turned slowly to really look at herself in the mirror from every possible angle. And it was… perfection. This dress might have been made for her. A smile spread irrepressibly across her face — until she looked at the price tag. Gods. Over four hundred pounds. Her heart sank. It was a good deal more than the other two dresses put together, but when she studied the label, she realised why. This was not just any dress off the rack—it was a Nicole Farhi.

Defeated, shoulders sagging a bit, she walked out of the fitting room, the dress slung over her arm. Claire was waiting for her by the register. She could spot the disappointment a mile off.

“What’s wrong, darling?” she asked. “Didn’t it fit?”

“Oh no, it fit just fine,” Hermione replied dully. “But the price is impossible, I’m afraid. Four hundred and sixty-five pounds.”

“Oh.” Claire had so hoped to make a present of this dress to her daughter. But the price was awfully steep. Suddenly she brightened. Narcissa had said that she wanted to buy Hermione a gift
today, something she would choose for herself. Perhaps... hmm...

“Look, sweetheart, I’ve an idea. It’s getting late. Let’s just take the two dresses you’ve already got and show them to Narcissa. It’s her party; she’ll have a good idea of which would be more appropriate.” She paused as if she’d just thought of something else. “We could even bring her back here straightaway and show her this one!”

Hermione sucked in her breath at the idea.

“All right... if you think so,” she said slowly. She wasn’t sure what Claire had in mind in proposing this, but her mother had a certain gleam in her eye that Hermione knew from experience meant a good idea lurking at the bottom of things.

They raced to the car. There was no time to lose.

Traffic was terrible on the way back, snarling in spots where roadwork was being done. Come on, come ON, Hermione willed the cars ahead of them, as her mother navigated the congestion seemingly unconcerned.

At precisely 2.56 pm, they stood at Hermione’s door. Relieved, she fiddled with her wand, muttering a quiet “Alohomora!” Not ten seconds later, just as Hermione was dropping her jacket and the shopping bag onto the sofa, Narcissa materialised with a pop in front of the fireplace, looking cool and collected in an elegant burgundy traveling cloak, the ends of a black silk scarf fluttering from her neck.

“Hermione. And Claire. How lovely,” she smiled, and glanced at the shopping bag. “Ah. I see you two were successful.”

“Uh...” Hermione cleared her throat. “Yes, I did find two rather nice things. Would you like to see them?” Pulling the two dresses out of the bag, she held them up one at a time, watching Narcissa’s face for a reaction.

Narcissa, brow furrowed; she looked both up and down critically, felt the material, and then held each one up against Hermione.

“They’re both very pretty, darling,” she said finally, “but to be truthful, they’re just not terribly... special.”

It was true. And Hermione knew it, of course, because she had seen the one that was.

Claire cleared her throat. “Actually, there was one other, Narcissa. But we didn’t buy that one.”

“Why ever not?” Narcissa was genuinely mystified.

“I just wasn’t sure,” Hermione hedged, unwilling to admit the real reason.

“We were hoping,” Claire continued, “that we might persuade you to come back to the shops with us so we could show it to you. We would value your opinion and after all, it is for your party, so you’ll know best. Will you come?”

“Are you proposing taking me to a... Muggle clothing establishment?” A new expression had now crossed Narcissa’s fine features, a mixture of surprise, faint distaste, apprehension, and ill-concealed curiosity.

Claire beckoned to Narcissa, inviting her closer as Hermione turned away, busying herself with folding the dresses back into their wrapping.

“Hermione would be so grateful,” she whispered. “I think she’s feeling just a bit overwhelmed at the moment. But I know that she wants very much for you and Lucius to feel proud, at the party, that she’s part of your family.”
Narcissa regarded Claire speculatively for a moment.

And then she smiled, nodding briskly. “There’s no question but that we feel that way. Yes, of course I’ll come. Shall we?”

Needless to say, Narcissa hadn’t considered the ramifications of her acquiescence, chiefly the method of transport needed to get everyone back to the shopping centre. One of only two prior experiences she’d ever had of Muggle cars had been the day of Rory’s Naming. She remembered now how frightened she’d been for a good portion of the drive to the New Forest from Malfoy Manor. That had been on fairly empty roads early on a Saturday morning. The other, her first, had been in busy, heavily trafficked Oxford, but mercifully, it had been brief. Today’s drive to Watford would be in the middle of a weekday afternoon and they’d be traveling by way of something called the Em One, she’d overheard Claire mention. A hornet’s nest of nerves erupted in her stomach. However, being a Malfoy meant maintaining grace under pressure, and so she would do. Lifting her chin, she wrapped her cloak around herself a bit more tightly and settled herself in the back seat of the car, grateful that neither Hermione nor Claire could see the tiny muscle that had begun twitching in her jaw.

They managed to get back to the shopping mall in fairly record time. Claire had tried to make the ride as uneventful as possible, aware that the whole experience was probably at the least somewhat disconcerting for her passenger in the back seat, but certain factors had simply been out of her control. Such as the time they’d nearly been rear-ended after the car ahead of them had suddenly stopped short at a traffic light. Or when a speeding car doing close to ninety on the M1 had come close to cutting them off while changing lanes. Narcissa had squeezed her eyes shut, her heart in her throat.

* 

What a very surprising place this “shopping centre” was. Narcissa stole what she trusted were discreet glances left and right. First off, it was simply enormous. Structurally, the whole thing looked rather like a giant greenhouse without the plants, save for a series of very large, wooden boxes of trailing greenery high on the walls above the shops. With all that glass everywhere, she wouldn’t give much for its chances in a windstorm. Pretty, but terribly impractical.

Second, Merlin help her, the people -- it seemed one had to put up with all sorts in such a place! A tad too egalitarian for her taste, she decided. Although it was certainly true that in public wizarding places, one could and did rub shoulders with different classes and sorts of magical folk, here, it was all too easy to distinguish between the better-bred people and the riff-raff. Apparently, there was a standard of public behaviour that was perfectly acceptable to Muggles. She found this difficult to understand.

Still, clientele aside, Narcissa had to admit to a certain fascination with the sheer variety and numbers of shops, restaurants and cafés, and the festive way the entire mall had been decorated for the upcoming holidays. She thoroughly approved of the swags and wreaths of yew everywhere. The strings of tiny coloured lights twinkling atop the holiday greenery were almost… magical. Almost.

“This is the one, my favourite,” Hermione was saying, and Narcissa snapped back to attention. She looked at what Hermione was holding up.

“Why don’t you try it on for Narcissa,” Claire suggested, smiling sweetly. Hermione nodded and disappeared into a dressing room. The two older women made themselves comfortable on a small
sofa in the fitting-room corridor and waited.

A few minutes later, the door swung open and Hermione emerged, smiling shyly. Both Claire and Narcissa were transfixed. The velvet dress fit her slim form as if she’d been the inspiration for it. It fell in a graceful sweep to the floor, the princess bodice molding itself to her breasts and waist, the softly curving neckline accentuating her slender throat. Its jewel tones of rich teal brought out the cream of her skin and the contrasting coppery chestnut of her hair. It was a dress reminiscent of another age and in it, Hermione seemed transformed.

One very long minute of silence passed. Hermione glanced at her mother and Claire gave a barely perceptible shrug; both looked at Narcissa.

“It’s just lovely!” Narcissa pronounced finally, to sighs of relief. “Absolutely perfect for you, Hermione! Now this one is special. It really suits you. Draco will be stunned!”

“In a good way, I hope!” Hermione laughed.

“Oh yes, have no fear of that!” Narcissa assured her. “It’s a Nicole Farhi! Her designs are exquisite.”

Hermione didn’t know whether to be happy that Narcissa had approved, or feel worse. No matter what Narcissa thought, the dress was still unaffordable. On edge, she disappeared into the dressing room to change, and Claire took advantage of the opportunity to speak candidly.

“Narcissa, let me be frank with you. This dress is terribly expensive. It costs close to five hundred pounds,” she began, not remembering that Narcissa would need that figure translated into wizarding denominations.

Narcissa smiled reassuringly, dismissing such petty concerns. She knew that whatever the wizarding equivalent would be, the price was high but not out of the realm of possibility. Not for her, at least.

“Oh of course I realise that Hermione and Draco couldn’t possibly afford something like this on his salary, and he’s just become so stubborn in the last few years, since Oxford, really, about not taking any money from his father and me. Nor would I want him to touch his inheritance for such an expenditure, though for Hermione, I am certain he would. He can be very impractical at times.”

She rolled her eyes in fond exasperation and then said with a pleased smile, “I should like to give this dress to Hermione as a present. I was planning to buy her something today anyway. It might as well be this.” She fully expected her offer would be seized upon with great excitement.

“Thank you, Narcissa. That’s extremely generous,” Claire replied, sotto voce, “but I thought that perhaps… well… you and I might share the cost so that this would be a holiday present from the four of us, you see.”

Narcissa regarded Claire thoughtfully. Suddenly it dawned on her that it was important to Claire to be part of this too, even though such an expense might be something of a hardship for the Grangers. Instinct told her not to question it though, just to accept.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I think that is rather a good idea… a marvelous idea, in fact. Happy Yule a bit in advance, Hermione,” she called. “Your mother and I look forward to seeing you in this beautiful dress at the party.”

“Happy Christmas, darling,” Claire echoed, and smiled to herself in quiet satisfaction.

Now Hermione understood that the dress was really to be hers. And what a marvelous, generous gift! She was feeling positively giddy as she reverently replaced it on its hanger and began to dress. She enjoyed nice things as much as the next young woman, but she wasn’t clothing-obsessed and never had been. This was different. Never before had she owned anything quite so soft and lovely, so… her. Nor, dear Morgana, anything anywhere near this costly! She left the
fitting room with a tremulous smile.

“Thanks, Mum!” She gave her mother a quick, fierce hug, and then, somewhat shyly, went to embrace her mother-in-law.

“Narcissa…” she began.

“Cissa, please,” the older woman corrected, shaking her head and smiling.

Hermione reached out and their cheeks brushed. A faint whiff of lavender whispered to her as she pulled away. “Thank you so much,” she said quietly. Narcissa nodded.

Suddenly, Hermione stopped.

“Narcissa… Cissa, I mean…” she began awkwardly. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I couldn’t help noticing that you knew about the designer of my new dress and I – I just wondered…”

“How I knew?” Narcissa grinned wryly. “Yes, you would wonder, wouldn’t you, my dear. I’m not surprised. Not much gets past you, does it?” They walked towards the register. “First, I must ask that this remain our little secret.” Both Hermione and Claire nodded. “Very well. My cousin Eleonora works in the fashion industry as a journalist. You might perhaps know her as Elle Portman.”

Claire started. She most certainly did know of Elle Portman -- everybody read her column! Elle Portman was one of… them?

They’d reached the register by now and Hermione realised she’d been staring. Closing her mouth, she handed the dress to the clerk while her mother took care of the purchase. The precious dress was wrapped in tissue paper and slipped into a festive, gold-foil shopping bag.

Leaving the shop, they agreed that a pot of tea sounded like a very good idea. Both Hermione and her mother were dying to find out the rest of Narcissa’s story.

They took the nearest escalator up to the second level for a quick stop at a café, Narcissa clutching at the rail, her eyes round. She’d had no idea that Muggles had come up with such clever contraptions as this moving staircase! Almost, though of course not quite, as ingenious as the ones at Hogwarts. She waited to tell the rest of the story until they’d sat down in the café.

“I was very close with my cousin when we were growing up. She is a Black, you know. Always a bit… different, shall we say. Very independent-minded, very creative, very rebellious. She and my sister Andromeda often got up to all sorts of mischief together, and then dragged me into it.”

Narcissa paused, a fond smile lighting her eyes. “But she was different in another way as well, though we children didn’t really understand it at first. However, as time passed, it became clear. Talented as she was in so many ways, she couldn’t do magic properly. She was a Squib. You cannot imagine the embarrassment that caused the family. She became a secret that we couldn’t speak of.

“When we grew up, she decided to leave our world and live as a Muggle, where she’d be accepted fully. I was very sad to learn of her decision. But by then, I was married and I knew my husband would never accept my association with a Squib, family member or no. She moved to London, got a job, married a Muggle eventually, and had a family, several children who must be all grown up by now.”

Narcissa stopped and looked at them, her eyes twinkling. “You’re wondering what in the name of Merlin this could possibly have to do with Nicole Farhi.” She took a sip of her tea and continued.

“Over the years, Elle and I have kept in touch, though of course Lucius has no idea. Nor can he,” she warned, her expression suddenly stern. “He would not approve. Anyway, she covers all the debuts of the new collections, interviews designers -- she knows them all. Sometimes she owls me
her articles and occasionally, even tickets to fashion shows.” Slightly self-conscious, she laughed at their surprise. “She does still maintain some connections to our world, an owl being one. Once, she took me to a show of Nicole Farhi’s. She even introduced me. Lovely woman. And I do so adore her clothes! I only wish I could shop for them as easily as you can. But I’ve never wanted to risk exposing my connection to my dear cousin. I’m so pleased to see that you have such exquisite taste, darling!” she told Hermione, who was by this time completely stunned.

And then giddy with excitement at the brilliant idea she’d just had.

An hour later, the three women strolled towards the car park. All three of them held large, gold-foil shopping bags containing lovely new frocks for the New Year’s Eve party. All three had satisfied expressions on their faces, Narcissa in particular looking like a small child after a binge in a sweet shop. She was now the thrilled owner of her very own Nicole Farhi creation, something she’d wanted for years and hadn’t dared try for in the past. And it was all thanks to a marvellous Muggle invention, the credit card, and Claire’s willingness to use hers to temporarily cover the expense, all of it the brainstorm of this surprising slip of a girl to whom her son had lost his heart.

When they were back in Hermione’s sitting room once more, the women sat down for a moment. Just then, a very familiar sensation swept over Hermione, a tightening that rippled through her breasts. And then she became aware of something else -- they were leaking. Glancing at the mantel clock, she realised how long she’d gone between nursings. Her body was telling her that Rory should be getting fed right about now, and no doubt, Ginny was taking care of that with the bottle she’d left.

But Hermione’s full, aching breasts needed relief, and fast. Blushing, she excused herself.

Both Narcissa and Claire had noticed the wet spots suddenly appearing on Hermione’s shirt. Narcissa raised an eyebrow. Before long, Hermione returned from a quick session with her breast pump, a wash-up and a change of shirt.

“Darling,” Narcissa began, “I don’t mean to pry, but… you’re not still nursing, are you?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. Why?” Hermione tried to keep her tone even and neutral, not sure what was coming.

Her mother-in-law sighed. In her day, women -- well, women of her station anyway -- did not nurse their babies at all. Sweet Circe, that was what bottles of formula were for, now that wet nurses were no longer in vogue. She would simply have to explain to Hermione. Apparently, the child didn’t understand that she needn’t be burdened with nursing anymore. Rory was nearly six months old, after all.

“Look, darling,” she said, with an ingratiating smile. “I understand that you’re doing what you think is best for the baby. But it’s been almost six months now. Are you not concerned about the effect that this prolonged… activity… will have on your…” -- she paused again, searching for a delicate way to phrase it -- “…figure?”

Hermione was momentarily confused. If anything, active nursing had helped her shed the extra baby weight that much faster.

“My figure?”

Narcissa lowered her voice almost conspiratorially. “You don’t want to start sagging, do you?”

Hermione managed to repress the eye-roll that she could feel coming on, pasting a diplomatic smile on instead. As she opened her mouth to reply, however, Claire cut in.

“Actually, Narcissa,” she began, “Nursing does not cause breasts to sag. That’s really just an old wives’ tale that has been disproven.” She couldn’t help a slightly smug smile. This was something she could speak about with some authority. “And as a dentist, I can assure you that what
Hermione is doing is far better for Rory than if she were using a bottle. Often, you know, bottles are left in babies’ mouths far too long. And then the sugars in the milk just sit on the gums and cause decay when the milk teeth come in. I always advise my patients to nurse rather than bottle-feed, if possible, and for as long as they can manage it. I believe it’s healthier in so many ways.”

Narcissa was regarding Claire now with an expression of surprise mixed with keen interest.

“I had no idea,” she began slowly. “Is that really true? We were taught so very differently. I suspect there is much in the Muggle world that would surprise me.”

Narcissa Malfoy was nothing if not intelligent and curious. Her own willingness to look at the world through a new lens, her readiness to reconsider so much that had always been deeply engrained in her consciousness-- both of which were already in bud by the time Draco had gone away to Oxford-- had been encouraged further by the addition of this forward-thinking Muggleborn girl to his life, and by extension, to hers and her husband’s as well. Post-war life in the wizarding world—or at least in pure-blood society-- was not the comfortably myopic, insulated and utterly predictable experience it had always been before. Almost nothing of what she’d been taught for so much of her life was sacrosanct anymore. This, Narcissa felt, was a very good thing indeed. Now, each new experience or idea was absorbed and evaluated and filed away. Here was yet another new idea to examine.

“Oh, gosh, look at the time!” Hermione exclaimed suddenly, checking her watch. “I’ll have to collect the baby soon. If we’re going to finish the shopping, we should probably get going now.” The breastfeeding discussion had concluded for the time being, and she had promised to help Narcissa choose presents for Draco and Rory.

Without waiting for a reply, she raised a bright fire in the hearth with a quick Incendio! Taking her mother firmly by the arm before she could object, she tossed a handful of Floo powder in, sang out "Diagon Alley!” and, together with Narcissa, they stepped in.

*Diagon Alley looked like a mediaeval village that had been given a good shaking, so that all the structures had shifted on their foundations and begun to lean over at crazy angles, some of them seeming to teeter precariously over the street. Claire couldn’t help being reminded of the Shambles in York: Diagon Alley minus the magic and all these weird people, she decided.

Today seemed very much like an old-fashioned market day; the streets were thronged with holiday shoppers every bit as relentless as those in the Harlequin Shopping Centre earlier. It was certainly not the first time Claire had been here, but it had been quite a while, and now it was her turn to feel rather like a fish out of water as she was jostled along by the crowds. It seemed everybody in the wizarding community was there buying gifts or browsing, their robes, traveling cloaks and mufflers flapping and swirling in the biting December wind.

Hermione could see old Mr. Ollivander through his shop window. He was gesturing to a young customer, his arm moving with a flourish as he demonstrated the proper way to wave a wand. Not ten seconds later, the hapless boy himself tried the same thing with an actual wand, and every box on the shelves shot out, crashing to the floor around them. Hermione giggled, remembering the first time she’d walked into that shop with her parents fifteen years earlier, an untried child of nearly twelve who’d only just found out she was a witch. Her first wand. Now that was a memory. She smiled.
“Where shall we begin?” Narcissa asked. “Hermione, I’m relying on you to give me some ideas.”

Hermione didn’t need time to think.

“Come with me,” she smiled, and linked arms with both Narcissa and Claire as they started down the narrow, winding street.

Their first stop: Quality Quidditch Supplies. Draco was in desperate need of a new pair of gloves and a broomstick-servicing kit, which Claire was happy to buy for him, Hermione loaning her the proper currency. A brand-new Orion XF, the latest and fastest broomstick on the market, was the gift of choice from Narcissa after Hermione let slip that Draco’s trusty old Pegasus had been warped beyond repair after being left accidentally in the attic of their house during a heat wave the previous summer.

Next, Hermione steered them into Obscurus Books, a cramped and dusty shop with the pungent perfume of very old books. Shelf upon rather rickety shelf of old, used, and very rare books and scrolls from every region and every age of the wizarding world since its earliest days filled the space. There was a book Draco had been wanting badly -- Transcendent Flight: A History, by Hieronymus Dinwiddie -- but hadn’t been able to find anywhere. It was a thorough accounting of broom flight from its earliest inception, and included a chapter on the very particular art of Quidditch flight as it had evolved over the centuries. Hermione had Owled some time before to ask if the proprietor, one Herbert Etheridge, could possibly track a copy down. It was looking like a distinct impossibility until quite unexpectedly, a week earlier, an owl from him had informed her that indeed, one copy -- a signed first edition, no less! -- had been unearthed in an estate sale. It would be the perfect present.

Herbert Etheridge was nowhere to be seen as the three women entered his shop, squinting in the sudden dimness. Dust motes floated in the shafts of pale, late-afternoon sunlight that managed to find their way through the rather murky shop window. Narcissa looked about her with a small shudder of distaste, and made sure not to brush up against anything as she passed. Claire was far more concerned with avoiding an allergy attack, as the level of dust in this one small shop was far more than was good for her, she was quite certain. Her eyes were already watering and she could feel a distinct tickle in the back of her throat. Coughing delicately, she dabbed at her eyes with a tissue and then covered her nose and mouth with another one. Hermione, on the other hand, was positively in her element. She didn’t care a fig about dust. This place was all about books.

“May I be of service, ladies?’’

A tall, unnaturally thin man, balding, with wire-rimmed glasses perched on a long nose, had suddenly shot up from behind the counter, where he’d been locking a lower cabinet. His rather dour smile revealed a rather unhealthy number of stained teeth, Claire noted. Hermione was struck by its uncanny resemblance to that of Severus Snape.

As it turned out, not only did Mr. Etheridge have the book in question, he had a surprise for Hermione. Miraculously, he had managed to procure the companion volume, Quidditch Flight: A Practicum, as well. He now offered the two volumes together at the unheard-of price of twenty-five Galleons. It was an extravagance, unquestionably, and Hermione was suddenly gripped by a terrible tug of war between her practical side and her excitement over the gift. Could she really justify spending quite so much money? On the other hand, this was a once-in-a lifetime opportunity, and she knew it wouldn’t come again. Carpe diem, Draco always said, even if something seemed impractical and crazy. Right, then. She bought both books without another second’s hesitation, thrilled because she knew he would truly love them, and then they were all off to search for something special for the newest member of the Malfoy-Granger clan.

Altogether, it had been a very satisfactory day.
TBC
The Twelve Days, Part One: Solstice
They’d promised and there was no backing out now.

Hermione and Draco were in the midst of packing. Suitcases lay open on their bed, nests of clothing and toiletries piled in small hills everywhere. They’d accepted an invitation from Lucius and Narcissa to spend nearly a fortnight at Malfoy Manor. Hermione was having a quiet anxiety attack. She paced around the house clutching a detailed packing list, determined not to overlook even one vital item she’d be sure to need once they were there. If she’d had her way, they’d be spending the holidays in their own cosy little home. There was probably something perverse about not wanting to spend twelve days being pampered in the lap of luxury, she realised, but there it was. The unaccustomed luxury aside, there was also the thought of spending quite so much time in the company of Draco’s still somewhat formidable parents. She’d spent time at the Manor
before, of course, but not anywhere near this much. It would be the biggest step she’d taken thus far in her still-evolving relationship with them.

“Relax, love, we’re not exactly off to Siberia, you know!” Draco had grinned at one point, sitting back in the armchair in their bedroom and stretching his long legs out to rest on the end of the bed. “Whatever you forget, we can Conjure for ourselves. And the house-elves are fantastic that way, they’ll get whatever we…”

He trailed off at the small frown that had appeared briefly on his wife’s face and then laughed out loud.

“Give it up, Granger,” he told her, still chuckling, “and get used to them, finally. They’ll be positively coming out of the woodwork for the big Holiday Extravaganza. And anyway,” he added mischievously, “you know you love Missy. Old Tibby as well, even if he is a bit of a curmudgeon. Admit it.”

Hermione grinned and rolled her eyes. “Okay, okay. You win. It’s true, I do. I just wish--”

The pillow that hit Hermione squarely in the forehead three seconds later spoke for itself. All talk of house-elves was shelved.

Joking aside, this next fortnight was not something he was much looking forward to either, for his own reasons. That house held a lot of really bad memories along with the good ones. Even though in the last several years his parents had made a concerted effort to make it a welcoming and pleasant place, those memories still haunted him at odd moments, hiding in the corners like cobwebs and refusing to be banished completely.

Then there was Lucius. Draco’s ever-shifting feelings towards his father these days had him feeling confused, off-balance... vulnerable. Undeniably, Lucius had made changes in the last six years. ‘Had to, didn’t he,’ Draco thought grimly. He hadn’t been left much real choice. The ultimatum Draco had given both his parents years before, regarding Hermione, had set certain wheels in motion and admittedly, Lucius had risen to the occasion surprisingly well. For the most part.

And then there had been those occasions when he had shown his truer, deeper colours. The way he had automatically assumed the worst about Hermione instead of giving her the benefit of the doubt, after a terrible misunderstanding on Draco’s twentieth birthday had nearly split them apart. The family lunch celebrating the conclusion of their university studies, when Lucius had made it plain that as far as he was concerned, all of Draco’s hard work to earn a degree at Oxford counted for little to nothing compared to what was really important. The fact that even now, his father had never truly acknowledged the worth of his son’s studies, much less expressed any true pride in his considerable accomplishment. It was pretty obvious that for Lucius, the entire three-year endeavour had been no more than a pointless folly—something for a wayward son to get out of his system before returning to the life he’d been born to.

Nevertheless, the man really did seem to be reaching out in his own way, particularly since Rory’s birth—“seemed” being the operative word. Much to his own chagrin, there were times when Draco felt himself beginning to respond to one of these gestures. But then he’d remember, pulling back reflexively. Was it his imagination, or had there sometimes been a momentary flicker of disappointment in his father’s eyes? It was hard to tell. Whatever it was, it always passed so quickly, replaced by the familiar, shuttered inscrutibility.

Bugger it all, he would not feel guilty. He’d been hurt too many times before. The lessons had been learned too well. He shook such thoughts off and got to his feet, resuming his own packing.

Hermione had just returned from a quick check on the baby, who was napping in her cot in the nursery next door. She smiled tremulously at Draco and he opened his arms to her. Gratefully she slipped into his embrace, resting her cheek on his chest, breathing in his clean scent. He was so warm and he smelled so nice and his arms felt so lovely around her. Why couldn’t they just stay
home, never leaving the sanctuaries of their bedroom and the nursery? She had everything she needed right here.

Draco rested his chin on the top of Hermione’s head, her soft curls tickling his neck. He had been feeling much the same way. Things were perfect just as they were. Why go off and spend nearly a whole fortnight in that drafty old relic of a house?

Suddenly, Hermione’s eyes flew open and she looked at the clock on the bedside table.

“Draco, we’ve got to get going! We promised we’d be there for tea! And you know your mother!”

He did indeed. Rolling his eyes and nodding, he turned back to his own packing while she resumed her pacing, list in hand, muttering to herself.

“Makeup, hairbrush, toothbrush, jewellery…” she muttered to herself and then stopped mid-thought, looking suddenly stricken. “Oh gods! Whatever should I wear to the party?” She had a gorgeous new dress but no accessories truly worthy of it! “Oh wait,” she reminded herself, “I could wear my pearls, the ones Mum and Dad gave me. And the little earrings that Gram gave me to go with them. Yes, good.” Nodding, she went back to ticking off items from the list.

Draco had raised his head at the mention of jewellry. A small, knowing smile fleetingly lit his face and then vanished as he turned back to his task.

It was one day before the winter solstice -- the shortest day and longest night of the year, but also a time to celebrate a major turning point in the Wheel of the Year: the rebirth of the Light. Now the sun would begin to strengthen again, gradually lengthening the daylight hours. The weather had turned markedly colder. A light frost rimed the windows in the mornings and left a tracery of silver on leaves and branches. But even as winter seemed to be at its height, still there was the miraculous knowledge that under the cold ground and in the tightly furled buds on bare branches everywhere, new life was biding its time, just waiting for the signal from Jack-in-the-Green to start growing.

Rory was now six months old. This would be her first Yule, and the first time she would be officially introduced to her grandparents’ oldest and dearest friends—a sort of debut into wizarding high society. Hermione had helped Narcissa choose a tiny velvet frock in a deep wine colour, with a lacy white collar and small pearl buttons, white lace tights and the smallest, dearest white patent leather Mary Janes imaginable. Along with that was her actual gift, a delicate gold bracelet made entirely of tiny hearts. On each heart was one letter of her name: Aurora Beatrice. Fourteen hearts for fourteen letters. On the fifteenth heart, her birth date was engraved. Narcissa had had it made to order. It was now safely stored away at the Manor.

* 

Finally, Hermione and Draco stood back and took inventory. Draco was charged with reading off the list as Hermione went around the room making sure everything was there.

“Two suitcases. Two garment bags. One smaller suitcase, one nappie bag. One pushchair. One travel cot. One cooler.” He stopped for a minute. “Did you pack the cooler yet?” She nodded. It was crammed with jars of strained baby foods, bibs, utensils, teething rings, her breast pump and plastic bags to store the milk in. “Right then, let’s go.” With a quick Locomotor, he began transporting everything out to the car they’d hired. Rory was just too little to travel any other way, Hermione felt.
“Wait!” She’d thought of one last thing. Running about the house with a small watering can, she lovingly gave all her potted plants a good, long drink, even the row of colourful, exotic-looking cacti lining the kitchen windowsill. Then she turned her attention to helping with the last of the luggage, finally bringing a sleepy Rory, all bundled up, outside to her father. Turning for one last look, she pulled the door shut behind her and did an extra locking spell just to be safe. The junior Malfoys were ready to hit the road at last.

Meanwhile, Draco had a fussy Rory in his arms and was attempting to soothe her before settling her in the car seat. Her little face was screwed up in an expression of misery.

“Oh, Button,” he murmured, smoothing the soft, pale strands of hair away from her forehead and planting a kiss there. “What’s the matter? Are your gums hurting?”

“I’ve got her medicine here,” Hermione said, coming up behind him and reaching into a pocket of the nappie bag. She drew out a small brown vial and carefully unscrewed the top. “Hold her still,” she murmured, and began to paint a thin coating of numbing potion onto Rory’s swollen gums. With the other hand, she took a clean cloth and deftly wiped dry the baby’s chin, shiny with drooled saliva.

The potion had an almost instantaneous calming effect as it numbed the painfully swollen gums where her first tooth was trying to push through. It could be quite some time yet before it finally did, and then eventually the same cycle would repeat as other teeth began to bud. There would be pain and probably many hours of crying and sleepless nights. But what was a little lost sleep, after all, compared to the discomfort Rory must be experiencing? Hermione would remind herself of that often over the next several months.

The late-model estate car sat in the driveway, packed to the gills. All four doors were open and Draco had just buckled Rory into the car seat. He rooted about in the vinyl cooler until his fingers closed on something very cold, hard, and smooth.

“Got it!” he said triumphantly, and popped the chilled teething ring partway into his daughter’s mouth. She instantly grabbed it with both tiny hands and began Mouthing it energetically. Draco grinned, looking positively cocky.

“Feeling rather proud of ourselves, are we?” Hermione teased, as she dropped the nappie bag down on the seat.

“As a matter of fact,” he sighed, looking smugly nonchalant, “yes. We are.”

She poked him in the ribs as she passed behind him and he whipped around, grabbing her and pulling her flush up against his chest, holding her there firmly.

“Hmm. It would seem that a small reminder is in order. Right, then, repeat after me,” he whispered silkily into her ear, tightening his grip around her waist. “My husband, Draco Aquila Malfoy…” He gave her a squeeze and she snorted, rolling her eyes. “…is an astonishingly clever, talented and attractive wizard, a paragon among men…go on! Say it!” He laughed and squeezed a little tighter, causing Hermione to let out a giggle.

“You are still not saying anything, wife,” Draco observed calmly. “I suppose I shall have to resort to a bit of persuasion…” Whereupon he slid one hand down to her side, just below her ribs, and began to press the tips of his supple fingers in a rolling pattern.

“OH!” Hermione gasped. “No, M-Malfoy, no t-tickling, please!”

“Say it!” he intoned, over her helpless giggles.

“D-Draco M-Malf, you prat!” she panted. She was practically bent over double, tears streaming down her face, but his grip was relentless and so was his tickling hand. “You… are… SO … dead! Seriously, I c-c-an’t b-breathe!” Only then did he let her go, turning her so that he could hold her close while she caught her breath. Gradually her breathing slowed and steadied and her
shoulders stopped shaking. Suddenly, she rounded on him, giving him a shot in the arm.

“That,” she announced, her expression a perfect mimic of the trademark Malfoy smirk, “is all you’re going to get out of me, Mr. Incredibly Conceited Malfoy!”

“Ow!” he whined, barely hiding his grin. “That hurt! It’s always the wand arm, with you.”

Ignoring that last remark, she moved closer. “Oh dear, have I bruised that perfect, lily-white skin? Let Mummy see,” she crooned. “Where does it hurt?” she asked, pretending to have forgotten where she’d landed the blow. “Is it… here?” Touching his bare neck with her index finger, she slid it lightly down and around to the nape, under his hair. “Or perhaps… here? Or… I know… here!” She drew his face to hers, their mouths nearly touching, and lightly traced a finger across his bottom lip.

His eyes slid shut and he waited, breathless. He could smell the fruity scent of her hair and the clean, soapy fragrance of her warm skin, mixed with the smell of peppermint coming from her warm puffs of exhaled breath on his face, clouding up in the cold air. He strained to get closer but still, she held herself away from him just a fraction.

Suddenly the air around him felt… empty? He opened his eyes. She was already moving towards the driver’s seat.

“Come on!” she said, all chipper. “We’d best get started. It’s a long drive to Wiltshire!”

What the bloody hell was that? It would seem he’d been hoisted on his own petard, out-Malfoyed. He chuckled softly as he turned to get into the car, already planning a pleasant revenge.

Hermione had just started the engine when they heard a door slam and rapid footsteps clattering on their slate path.

“They both turned their heads, frozen in the act of getting away.

“Yoo-hoo!! Wait!” an all-too-familiar voice trilled.

Draco heaved a sigh and slumped down in his seat. What he wouldn’t give for an Invisibility Cloak.

“I just couldn’t let you two go off without giving you some of my special whortleberry tarts—oh, and some of my best figgy pudding! I thought perhaps you might like to take some with you for the drive!” Beryl called, huffing as she ran, her dressing gown flapping over her nightdress, the matching slippers with their narrow heels and puffballs on the toes revealing bunions and hammer toes.

Reaching the car, she thrust a bowl and a plate through the open window at Hermione. They were clumsily wrapped in bright holiday paper and ribbons that had clearly been recycled more than once and looked rather the worse for wear. Apparently she had applied her lipstick in a hurry, so as not to miss them before they’d left, and now it decorated her face and front teeth even more haphazardly than usual, Draco noted with a faint shudder.

Hermione opened her mouth to say thanks, but Beryl was already making her way around to the other side of the car.

“And how’s our little lamby today, then?” she said in the treacly voice she reserved especially for the baby. “Oh, my stars, just look at her, the dear little thing!” And then she leaned in through the open window right over Draco. Unfortunately, this provided an unparalleled close-up view of her ample bosom as the dressing gown fell open again and her nightdress gapped. He slid down further in his seat, squeezing his eyes shut.

Rory sat in her car seat, busily gumming her teether. Saliva slid down her chin, sliming the fluid-filled teething ring, which she clutched to her mouth as if she wanted to devour it. Beryl, for all the silly faces and kissy noises she was making, was nowhere near as compelling as that teether.

“Thank you, Beryl. That was awfully kind of—” Hermione began.
“Must go, late already, bye bye!” Draco cut in, pressing the electric button so that the glass suddenly slid up, nearly trapping Beryl’s nose along the way.

Hermione threw him a dirty look. Trying to save face, she gave a cheery wave and mouthed “Happy Yule” to Beryl, still standing in the driveway, as she backed the car out. Then she turned her attention to Draco and glared.

He was clearly unrepentant.

“Well, that was just unbelievably rude!” Hermione’s exasperation was evident. “How could you treat a kindly old lady that way! Honestly!”

Draco stuck out his chin defiantly. ‘Fuck’s sake, Granger!’ he began.

“Language! The baby!” Hermione warned, shaking her head.

“Please! ‘How’s our little lamby?’ ‘Figgy pudding’!” he minced, in perfect imitation. “How do you stand her spouting such a load of unmitigated crap all the time! And she’s nosy! She’s always interfering in our business! Stupid cow, she’s a bloody joke!” He sank back down in his seat, arms crossed in front of his chest, his jaw set.

“I understand your impatience with her, but Draco, really! I mean, come on!” Hermione retorted. “She’s totally harmless!”

He stared at her, incredulous. Yeah, right. Like a Venus Fly Trap is harmless.

“You just have to rise above your feelings and be a bit more -- I don’t know …” Hermione paused, searching for the right word. “… tolerant!”

Draco knew better than to argue with her when she was right. And she was, he had to admit. He didn’t have a leg to stand on, just a lot of ill will boiling over. Still. Harmless old lady, my arse. She’s got enough combustible shit bubbling away on her back porch to blow up half of London!

He shook his head, turning to the window to gaze out as the car moved along. Everything he’d said about Beryl was the truth. It was. But okay, he knew he ought to be able to get past all that, be a bit kinder, more understanding. More tolerant, as Hermione had said. Draco decided that one of his New Year’s resolutions would be to be nicer to Beryl. Even if it killed him.

The rest of the trip was uneventful, and before Draco knew it, they were driving past the high, ornately carved, wrought-iron gates which opened out onto the grounds of his ancestral home. The long entrance drive stretched out in a winding ribbon that cut through thirty-foot-tall, wall-like hedges on either side.

* 

If Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice had been set in the wizarding world, it would likely have included just such a spectacle as the one they found awaiting them, far exceeding anything they’d experienced on previous holiday visits. The entire staff of house-elves stood in a line outside the front entrance of the stately old manor house, respectfully waiting for their guests’ arrival and looking as if they were on the verge of saluting.

In the past, Draco and Hermione had arrived with little or no fanfare, preferring to quietly and unobtrusively Apparate to the Manor. If anything, their often unannounced arrivals usually
generated surprise and then miffed clucking on the part of the head house-elf, Tibby, who found it quite disagreeable to be caught off-guard where guests were concerned. Hermione suspected that this rather grand display today had to do with the baby. They were a proper family now, and as such, that changed everything, including the manner in which they were greeted as they drove up.

Nevertheless, the whole thing was utterly surreal. Hermione drove slowly around the semi-circular drive, stopping the car when signalled by Tibby himself, and got out, fetching Rory from the car seat. From behind her, Draco leant over and whispered in her ear, “Just nod your head and smile. Noblesse oblige and all that.”

He’d seen this little drama played out many times over his years growing up in this house. He knew what to expect next as well. Right on cue, the front door of the Manor swung open and Lucius and Narcissa emerged. As ever, his father stood ramrod straight, the picture of gentility and decorum, a faint smile barely altering his patrician features. Narcissa, the picture of pureblood elegance, had a smile that was completely open and spontaneous as she descended the steps, her arms outstretched.

“Draco, darling! And Hermione! How wonderful!” She clasped both their hands in hers. “Oh, and look at you, my sweet little poppet!” she exclaimed, turning to Rory, who was busily devouring three saliva-slicked little fingers.

Lucius had reached them by this time as well. Once again, he offered that faint, rather remote smile and extended his hand first to Hermione. She contained a sudden impulse to curtsy, and accepted it, smiling shyly.

Draco knew that mask-like expression all too well. A long-ingrained reaction to its perceived coldness very nearly made him refuse his father’s hand.

“Draco!” Hermione whispered. “Come ON!” She gave him a nudge.

The memories were just all too… real in this place, along with the pain they visited on him. He hadn’t spent very much time here since his marriage, and usually it had been in the company of large numbers of other people, as at Rory’s Naming party and the annual New Year’s Eve bash. So much easier then, so many people and the usual hubbub of a festive gathering to distract him. This was the first time in years that he’d been home -- a decidedly qualified reference -- for any significant length of time when it was just the immediate family in the vastness of the venerable old house. Suddenly he felt distinctly ill at ease. Angry, too, that his father apparently still had so much power over his emotions; even now, that one look could send him into a tailspin.

*Enough.*

Hermione’s little nudge had propelled him forward and now he stuck his hand out, accepting the handshake.

“Father,” he said.

“Draco,” Lucius replied in an equally measured tone, his grey gaze catching and holding his son’s. His voice dropped. “I believe…” he began and then paused. “I am glad you’ve come, Draco. You’ve… made your mother very happy,” he said finally and then turned away

A small muscle pulsed in Draco’s jaw. “Thank you, Father,” he replied stiffly.

They headed up the steps, leaving their luggage to the house-elves who would take care of it later. In the meanwhile, as they passed, the female house-elves in the line dropped curtsies and the males offered respectful little bows as they passed. Hermione smiled graciously at all of them, bristling inside at the archaic class system that kept them little better than slaves. However, this was not the time to get up on her soapbox. At least, not yet, anyway. Maybe she could find an opportunity during this visit to exert her own influence for some long-needed change. She’d start with Narcissa.
“Morgana!” Hermione breathed. It was the most opulent room she’d ever seen, in a house that more closely resembled a castle. The sense of comfort was all the more unexpected because it was in contrast to an exterior that, while very grand, was a tiny bit forbidding as well. Slowly she turned and surveyed the room where she, Draco and the baby had just been brought. It was spacious, not surprisingly, the walls covered in a pale cream and claret striped wallpaper. There was a huge four-poster bed covered in a richly patterned bedspread in deep tones of burgundy and cream with hints of hunter green, and large, plump pillows to match. Drapes in panels of the same hues were tied off at each of the four posts. Gossamer ivory material hung from the central point in the ceiling down in cloud-like folds that were tucked into edging that went around the walls. A pair of wing chairs and an overstuffed sofa by the large hearth were covered in damask which matched the wallpaper. A plush chaise with matching ottoman near the dressing table invited a cosy nap or time with a good book. In addition, there was a comfortable sitting room for their private use, furnished in matching fabrics and colours. An adjoining room had been set up as a nursery, and in it there was an ornately carved, hand-painted antique cot, no doubt Draco’s when he was a baby. Narcissa had Transfigured one of the dressers into a changing table. Altogether it was a most graciously appointed, beautiful suite of rooms. And while she didn’t think she could ever live this way permanently, Hermione decided she could certainly get used to a little luxury for a fortnight. She sighed, bringing Rory up close for a nuzzle, and sat down on the chaise.

Draco glanced up at his wife as he unfolded the portable cot and smiled to himself. Her sense of wonder was positively endearing. Seeing his childhood home through Hermione’s eyes had always been a singular experience to say the least, beginning with the time he had first brought her here. It had been at this very time of year, in fact. They’d only been together a few months. That first time, there had been horrifying memories for her to exorcise. She had long since done that, but even now, seven years later, he found himself feeling instinctively protective.

The baby was ready for nursing and a nap, so Draco left Hermione to make herself comfortable and stretched out on the sumptuous bed for a short nap himself. Tiring work, riding in a Muggle car for two hours. He’d just close his eyes for a while. A little lie-down would be just the thing.

21 December, the Winter Solstice

Early morning. Huddled under the quilts, Draco opened one eye. The air was chill. The fire in the hearth had been banked overnight by the house-elves, who were ever-present but very nearly invisible in their chore-related scurryings around the Manor. But today, normal chores aside, there was much to be done and done early. It was Yule. They hadn’t been to stoke up the fire for the
day yet. He shivered and burrowed back under the covers. Small, agitated peeps were coming from the direction of the cot.

“Draco.” It was a very small whisper. He pretended to be asleep. He had a fair idea of what was coming.

“Draco.” More insistent this time. His back was to her, but his eyes cracked open a sliver.

“Draco,” Hermione said aloud. He turned over finally, his face an inch from the cloud of curls spread out on the pillows. Her fragrant warmth enveloped him and he snuggled closer, sliding his arm across her middle and drawing her up against him.

“What is it?” he muttered, his voice muffled against her hair.

“Rory. She’s fussing. I think she needs to be changed. Could you? Please…”? she wheedled, rolling over to face him.

“It’s your turn. I did it first yesterday morning.”

“I know, but as a favour just this once, could you?”

He considered. Then he moved closer, giving her a small kiss and burying his cold nose in the soft, warm skin of her neck. She gave a small, giggly shriek and made to turn back over, but he grabbed her so she was unable to move away.

“Oh, I’ll do it, but for a price,” he whispered, smiling slyly. This could turn out to be fun.

She turned her head and regarded him coolly, hiding a tiny smile of her own. “What price?”

“Patience, my love,” he murmured, nuzzling her neck where she was deliciously sensitive. “All in good time.” Then, leaving her to ponder an enigma he hadn’t even worked out himself yet, he gritted his teeth and thrust himself out of the nest of warm quilts and into the chilly bedroom, grabbed his dressing gown, and went to take care of his little one before bringing her to her mother for the first nursing of the day.

*  

The plan for the day included a flurry of holiday activity, culminating in an evening Yule ritual, followed by a festive meal and presents all around. The Grangers had been invited for dinner and the evening’s festivities, and Hermione looked forward to seeing her parents and sharing the occasion with them, even as she knew it would be a bit strange for them to be marking the holiday season in a manner rather different to their usual Christmas celebration.

The pleasantly clean, pungent odour of pine filled the house. Swags of evergreens and bunches of mistletoe hung from arches separating the rooms, and lay along every banister and the mantel of every fireplace. Scented candles of all sizes stood in bowls on tables and in rows across the mantelpieces and in front of every hearth. A huge Yule log of oak had been laid in the enormous hearth in the library. Below stairs, the kitchen staff scurried about the large trestle table laden with bowls and platters of food. Gleaming utensils had been enchanted to chop, slice and peel everything on their own, in preparation for the evening’s feast. Pots hissed and bubbled merrily on the hob of the mammoth cooker, emitting heavenly smells which wafted upstairs as far as the second floor.
As she helped herself to eggs, sausage, toast, and a cup of rich, frothy cocoa from the buffet laid on the sideboard in the dining room, Hermione sneaked a discreet glance at her in-laws, already seated and halfway through their breakfast. Draco had settled Rory in the high chair between his and Hermione’s places at the long table and was fastening her bib.

Narcissa had eyes only for the baby. She was utterly enthralled and began reminiscing fondly about Draco’s own infancy, to his utter embarrassment. Lucius was far more reserved, but he seemed equally taken with Rory. He gazed at her intently, a faint smile playing about the corners of his mouth. Every once in a while, his eyes traveled to Draco, and Hermione could see in them an expression that was as cryptic as it was intense.

“… and when Draco was just seven months old, he was already holding a spoon and attempting to feed himself! Would you like to see some photos?” Without waiting for Hermione’s reply, Narcissa jumped up and disappeared from the room for a moment, returning with a large, embossed photo album in her arms.

“Ah. Here.” She smiled and laid the open album on the table. A series of photos of a tiny, towheaded baby boy who looked uncannily like Rory practically leapt off the pages at Hermione, who gawked at the images and couldn’t stop grinning.

Several other photos showed him lying on his tummy on a bed, completely naked and surrounded by toys and stuffed animals. A very young Lucius was crouching beside him and laughing into the camera lens, baby Draco clutching one long finger in his tiny fist, which his father wiggled playfully, another finger tickling Draco’s toes. The love and pride on Lucius’ face as he played with his baby son were impossible to miss. Hermione felt a stabbing in her heart and she darted an anxious glance at Draco, fearful of how this photo might be affecting him. She was surprised and rather relieved to see that he seemed not at all upset, only chagrined, apparently, at naked-baby pictures of himself being openly displayed at the breakfast table.

Narcissa’s sharp eyes missed nothing, however. While Draco appeared unaffected, she knew her son very well, recognising the very nearly imperceptible mask of careless indifference his face had just assumed. She’d seen it all too often over the years while he was growing up. It was what he’d learnt to hide behind when a cutting word or harsh punishment — or worse, a callous display of indifference — from his father had left yet another wound.

That he would feel the need to hide now meant that the photos had opened those old wounds, revealing to him what he’d been deprived of during most of his childhood, through no fault of his own. That was the deepest, most painful cut, because such a loss was completely incomprehensible. How can a child ever understand the withdrawal of love from a parent he adores? The answer, throughout his childhood, had been quite simple for Draco: it must have been his own fault somehow. This Narcissa knew very early on, and she had tried her best to make up for the glaring omission with twice as much love of her own, though she also knew it could never truly be enough.

What she was not prepared for, however, was what she saw in her husband’s eyes. He sat there transfixed by the images and the feelings they’d resurrected, feelings that, years ago, he’d needed to put far away from himself in order to successfully embrace an ideology. Seeing those photos now, with his tiny granddaughter — the very image of that other baby, his child, twenty-six years earlier — sitting right there and reminding him of how much he’d willingly given up, was suddenly too much. Lucius stood abruptly, his face ashen.

“Excuse me, please,” he said stiffly, and strode away.

“Oh, dear Merlin,” Narcissa said quietly, her eyes anxiously following his retreating figure. “How foolish of me! I didn’t think… Well, I’d better go after him. I’m so sorry!” She looked imploringly at Hermione. Take care of Draco. Shutting the album, she hurried out of the room.
It was only then, when they were alone at the table, that Hermione could see what Draco had been hiding from her so successfully. The pain in his eyes was suddenly quite naked as he buried his face in his hands. Her own eyes filled instantly, and she ran to him, throwing her arms around him in a fierce hug.

“I didn’t know,” he said brokenly. “I never knew… She must have hidden that album all these years… Did you see him? Did you see his face in those pictures? It could’ve been me with Rory. Gods, Hermione! Did you see his face?” he repeated, his voice catching.

Hermione nodded, her cheek resting against his back, feeling the trembling that just wouldn’t ease.

“Yes, my love. I saw. Draco, listen to me,” she said, coming around to sit beside him and taking his hands in hers. “One thing is obvious.”

“What?” Draco asked dully.

“He loves you. I really think he must have loved you all along, even when things between you were at their worst. He just buried it.”

“When he chose Voldemort over his family, you mean. Yes. I know.” Draco’s voice was thick with rancour.

“Don’t you think that choice is torturing him now? You saw him. He couldn’t bear looking at those photos.”

“No great surprise. Guilt will do that.” His words were choked with bitterness.

“No.” Hermione shook her head. “You’re seeing it wrong. It was a lot more than just guilt. Surely you know that. The photos don’t lie. What did you see in them?”

Draco shook his head dazedly, almost uncomprehending. “I saw myself and the way I feel about our baby. I saw… love. Hermione…” He paused, his words halting. “He really did love me once, didn’t he...”

“Not ‘did.’ Does,” she corrected. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

Draco fell silent, his fingers idly stroking the velvet cover of the album. Then he opened it again, forcing himself to stare at page after page of photos of himself as a tiny baby and toddler, both his parents so young, smiling as they held and kissed him, waving to the camera. He looked until he couldn’t look anymore, silent tears blurring his vision. It was as if he were trying to convince himself of the truth of the images by virtue of sheer numbers. Every photo told the same painful but undeniable story. And yet… and yet, there was something more than just pain. He knew now, finally and without any doubt, that there had been love where he’d been so sure there had been none. Convincing himself, as a child, that his father must surely have been indifferent to him because he’d been a disappointment had been easier, perversely, than believing that Lucius could have abandoned him so callously simply for the sake of a cause.

The fiction was painful enough. The truth as he saw it now was terrible and wonderful and completely shattering.

“Hermione, look, I… I have to go. Need to get out of here for a while,” he said finally. “Can’t breathe.”

Her heart aching, she pulled him into a gentle kiss, and then cradled his face between her breasts, stroking and kissing his hair, holding him tightly as if she might draw the pain into her own body. Finally she released him, knowing there was nothing else she could do for now. She had to let him go.
“Will you be okay?” she asked in a small voice.

“I just need to get some air. I’ll be all right. Don’t worry, Granger,” he replied, rising from the chair, a ghost of his old cocky smile quirking his mouth for a moment. But his eyes were dark with anguish. She stood by the high chair, her hand on Rory’s soft hair, so like her father’s, and watched him leave. A feeling of utter helplessness and misery washed over her and she sank back down into her chair, buried her face in her arms, and wept.

*  

All the while Draco was gone, Hermione watched the sky out of the windows of the house, in whatever room she happened to find herself. It was overcast, a real snow sky as her dad always said. Mechanically, she did the things she’d had planned — wrapped presents, played with the baby, fed and nursed her — all the mundane little activities that ordinarily she would have taken pleasure in doing. The fires burned brightly in every hearth, lighting the rooms with their warm, flickering glow. But her heart was just not in any of it. It was with him, wherever he was.

It had been hours. At nearly four, Hermione was sitting on the richly embroidered rug in the yellow drawing room, awash in wrapping papers and ribbons, presents scattered around her. Narcissa was sitting in an armchair, bouncing Rory on her lap and singing her a song. She’d found it amusing and quaint that Hermione preferred to wrap her gifts by hand rather than use her wand. Lucius was conspicuously absent. He’d buried himself in his study for hours, with orders not to be disturbed. Twice, Tibby, who attended to Lucius personally, disappeared into the study with a tray, once with a bottle, and then re-emerged.

At the sound of the locks turning, Hermione dropped everything and sprang up, running to the door. He was there, silhouetted in the doorway, cold air rushing in around him. She flew into his
“Don’t ever do that to me again, Draco Malfoy! Do you understand?” she whispered fiercely, pressing herself against the damp wool of his cloak, tears squeezing out of the corners of her eyes, holding him so tightly that she thought she was probably stopping his breathing, but she didn’t care. His arms slid around her and he hugged her back, his palms pressed into her spine, his cheek resting on the top of her head. He was silent, but when she looked up at his face, partly shadowed with the dull afternoon light behind him, she could see that his eyes were suspiciously bright.

“I love you! I love you so much!” She was crying openly now, leaving sodden blotches on his cloak and wiping her eyes raggedly with the back of her hand.

“Ssh, ssh, it’s all right, don’t cry,” Draco said softly, “I’m okay, really I am. Come on.” Taking her hand, he led her upstairs to their room, drawing her down beside him on the edge of the bed. Absently, she covered his hands with her own, massaging his chilled skin. The only sound apart from their breathing was the fire crackling and popping quietly in the grate.

“I… I had to walk. And then run. And once I started, I couldn’t stop. I had to keep going and going. I felt as if I were going to burst. At one point, I was sure I was lost in the wood. The grounds are so vast, and there are stretches of mud everywhere, and fallen branches, and after a while, all the trees began to look the same. Imagine. I was in a place I’d been in hundreds of times before, and I actually felt almost afraid. Realised I’d run out without my wand. Stupid. I was almost as jumpy as that night in the Forbidden Forest when we were eleven, the night Potter and I found the dead unicorn and…” He shook his head ruefully. “Stupid,” he said again.

“I’m not even quite sure how I found my way out. Just… suddenly there was an opening and I saw the chimneys from a distance. I could smell the smoke. At that moment, all I knew was that I wanted —needed — to see you and Rory.” He turned his head and looked directly into her eyes, his own very dark. “I need you, Hermione,” he said, very quietly.

A breathless moment passed in which they searched each other’s faces. Reaching out, he caressed her cheek, trailing his fingertips lightly down to her throat, and then bent his head to take her mouth in a delicate kiss. She threaded her arms round his neck, pulling him even more deeply into the kiss, needing him, needing to draw him into her, feel him, breathe him in. Take his pain, take it all.

His right hand slid into her hair and lost itself in the curls as they deepened the kiss. They were falling into each other, devouring each other, but their touches and caresses remained languid, tender, sweet, even as they became deeply intimate. This time was about healing.

The room fell further into shadows, an occasional spark cracking as the fire died down in the hearth to a pulsing orange glow amidst the ashes. The only other sounds were whispers and sighs rustling in the dark.

* *

When they emerged from the dim bedroom some time later, the house was ablaze with light. Candles had been lit everywhere, and they warmed the rooms with their soft, scented glow. A bit shyly, Draco and Hermione walked down the stairs to find the rest of the family already gathered in the spacious front hall. Richard and Claire had just arrived, and they stood chatting with Narcissa and Lucius, who held Rory snugly in his arms. It was the first time either Hermione or Draco could remember Lucius holding his granddaughter for more than a minute or two at a time.

As they came down, he looked up in their direction. And then he did something else that was completely unexpected. He gave Rory a small kiss on the top of her head and then beckoned to the two of them. A small gesture, fairly unremarkable in itself, yet it spoke worlds.
Arms threaded around each other, they greeted Hermione’s parents. Still holding Rory, Lucius stood to Draco’s immediate right, their shoulders brushing, and Hermione was struck, suddenly, by the sight of three generations of Malfoys, their pale blond heads close together, and the quiet enormity of what had happened that day.

“Will everyone please come through to the library?” Narcissa’s voice rang out above the buzz of conversation.

The library was a large room, panelled all around in a warm honey oak. Built-in bookcases lined the walls on either side of the marble fireplace, in which the enormous Yule log sat, waiting. There were several large windows and a set of French doors, each with a graceful fan light at the top. Several groupings of pale, cream-colored sofas and wing chairs with throw pillows in a variety of colours made for comfortable places to read or relax. A highly polished grand piano in rosewood stood majestically at the far end, atop an intricately patterned Turkey rug. Even the oak floor had a mirror-like sheen. On every surface, groupings of candles in various sizes were already lit and suffused the air with the scent of almond and vanilla.

On a side table there was a large bowl in which stood six unlit candles in a circle. The six adults fanned out in a semi-circle before the hearth.

A daunting figure in his dark dress robes, Lucius took up a very old book from the table, one that had been in the Malfoy family for centuries; turning to face the others, he began to read.

“This night is the longest of the year, following the shortest day. ‘In every death is the seed of birth, and in the darkness of the longest night we await the dawn of the waxing year.’* We celebrate the Solstice as the rebirth of the Light of the sun, which is like the birth of a child, a symbol of hope.

“Yule, or Midwinter, is also known as the festival of Alban Arthuan, Light of Arthur. ‘Arthur the Sun King begins his return from Annwn, the child newborn as a weak flickering light that nevertheless holds all the promise of Midsummer in his grasp.’*" Yule begins stronger now as the days pass. And even though the days will grow colder before they grow warmer again, they are growing longer as well, and we know that the green of new life is waiting, sleeping, suspended in time, until the moment is right. This is the miracle of the earth. Year after year, she is awakened out of her winter sleep into renewal. We thank the Lady and the Lord for their blessings in this season. We honour the Lady, our mother earth, by bringing the green of holly and ivy, mistletoe and yew into our home to remind us of this miracle. We honour the Lord as the Holly King dies and is reborn as the Oak King. And we burn the oaken Yule log to symbolise letting go of the past and looking ahead.” Lifting his eyes briefly from the parchment, he met his wife’s steady gaze. The corners of her mouth lifted in a smile, and she nodded encouragingly.

“We begin by lighting the Yule log.” Lucius continued. “I ask for one person to assist me in this.” He looked directly at his son. “Draco?”

A brief flicker of surprise crossed Draco’s face as he handed the baby to Hermione and strode to the large, marble hearth to stand alongside his father, taking up the parchment.

“We ask you now to close your eyes when we light the log, and think of one thing in your life that you would like to relinquish. It can be anything. Imagine that it will be released into the smoke and be gone forever. It’s in the past. Let it go.”

The two of them drew their wands, pointing them at the log. Instantly, the log was bathed in a wash of flames. For just a moment, then, his eyes closed, Draco felt his father’s hand resting lightly on his shoulder, and then it was gone.

*Let it go. Let it go...
A moment or two of silence passed. Gradually everyone began to open his or her eyes. The log was blazing away merrily, sending billows of spark-suffused smoke up the chimney.

Narcissa had gone to fetch the bowl of candles and now she returned to take her part.

“Symbolically, we’ve let go of something that has been unhealthy in our lives. These candles represent the wishes we hold for the coming year. As you light your candle, you may share your wish or hope or intention for the future, if you choose.”

Richard was first. Slipping an arm around his wife, he smiled broadly. “Health and prosperity for us all in the coming year. And may this little monkey…” He grinned in Rory’s direction. “…continue to flourish!”

“Hear hear!” everyone murmured.

Claire took up the taper next. “Yes indeed. Good health and good fortune, and the blessings of family. I think that is something we are all thankful for and cherish.” She smiled fondly at her daughter and son-in-law and the beautiful baby they had made.

Four remained. Narcissa stopped in front of Hermione, who took the taper from her mother and set her candle alight, the wick fizzling a bit as the flame caught. She looked directly at Draco.

“Healing,” she said simply, handing him the taper.

There was power in that thought, infused with the inherent energies of the rite being marked. Just maybe… maybe finally…

Draco lit his candle and took a deep breath.

“Finding ways to show those I love how much they mean to me,” he said quietly, raising his eyes to Hermione’s and seeing the love shining there just for him. He reached for her hand and gave it a small squeeze.

Narcissa’s eyes swept the small group, coming to rest on her husband and son. “New beginnings,” she murmured, lighting her own candle, “and hearts’ desires.” She turned to Lucius. “Your turn.”

The sixth candle guttered slightly. Lucius turned to face Draco, who regarded his father warily. There was a pause.

“Trust.”

Trust? Draco held his father’s gaze a few seconds longer and then looked away. What did that mean? He would wait.

* 

Dishes of every sort sat waiting, steaming and fragrant, on the long, lace-covered table as they found their way into the dining room. There was a huge, golden-brown turkey with chestnut dressing, braised parsnips, roasted potatoes, creamed onions and peas, miniature Yorkshire puddings all puffy and golden, bottles of fine wine and crystal pitchers of hard cider. In the centre, a row of tall white candles stood in beds of holly studded with bright crimson berries and surrounded by trails of ivy. Dessert -- a gorgeous pear and Amaretto trifle piled high with whipped cream and studded with shaved chocolate in a deep, cut-crystal bowl, alongside mince pies and a rather impressive, brandy-laced, flaming pudding — was arrayed majestically on the sideboard atop a lacy white runner. A large silver coffee urn sat next to a smaller china teapot nested in a
hand-embroidered cosy. The house-elves had truly outdone themselves. It was a feast and everyone was more than ready to enjoy it.

Gifts. Ah, here, finally, was what everyone had secretly been waiting for. The gifts had been collected in the large front hallway and sat in colourful piles on the bottom few steps of the Grand Staircase. Lucius ushered everyone into the blue drawing room, asking that they make themselves comfortable, and then, with a casual flick of his wand, Summoned the gifts, which came flying in through the open double doors, landing, neatly stacked, to the side of the hearth, where a cheery fire crackled.

“Who’s first?” Narcissa asked, when everyone had made themselves comfortable on the plush sofas. “May I?” When nobody objected, she grinned and selected a very long, narrow box finely wrapped in shiny, royal-blue paper and tied with a large silver bow. Looking highly pleased with herself, she held it out to Draco, whose eyes widened as he accepted it.

“From me and your father,” she said, and gave him a light kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks, Mother,” he mumbled absently, tearing at the paper with mounting excitement. He had a feeling this might just be… Yes!

“Merlin! Thank you, Mother!” he repeated, grinning delightedly. “Father,” he added a bit shyly, as he held up his glorious new Orion XF. “It’s perfect! But how did you--” He looked up in time to catch the sly grins Narcissa and Hermione were exchanging. Oh. I see! “It’s wonderful, I love it!” Draco gave his mother a hug and, after a second’s hesitation, held out his hand to his father. Lucius took it and nodded, the corners of his mouth lifting in a fleeting smile.

Hermione’s present was next. It had been elegantly wrapped in hunter-green paper and lacy gold ribbons, despite the fact that she already knew what it was. She made a great show of unwrapping it, and anyway, drawing it out of its tissue paper and seeing it once again after two weeks, she really did feel excited all over again about her beautiful new party frock. Running to her parents, she grabbed them in a bear hug, and then turned to Narcissa and Lucius for a somewhat more sedate embrace. She decided that the Malfoys were definitely beginning to grow on her, Narcissa especially. She hoped the feeling was mutual.

Rory had long since been put to bed, having been bathed, fed and changed by Missy, the house-elf who’d been with the family for many years and had in fact taken care of Master Draco when he was a baby. A small box, artfully wrapped in silver and green patterned paper and topped with a festive green bow, waited to be opened. It was the tiny gold bracelet. Narcissa pressed the box into Draco’s hands now.

“Put this away for Rory. When she’s old enough,” she said, holding her son’s hands in her own. “Tell her how much we love her.”

“Tell her yourself, Mother,” Draco laughed, shaking his head and smiling. “She’ll want to hear it from you.”

The Grangers gave their presents to Draco next. He was genuinely thrilled with the Quidditch gloves and broom-servicing kit, and made sure to make a fuss over them, because he knew Hermione would be especially pleased. Their gift to Rory, a delicate golden locket with her name engraved on it, chosen to match the bracelet, was put aside for safekeeping along with the bracelet.
Hermione and Draco presented both sets of grandparents with large, very handsome photo albums, replete with page after page of lively pictures chronicling Rory’s birth up to the present time. The irony in this was suddenly and painfully obvious to Hermione as she was handing them out, but it couldn’t be helped. It was an idea she’d had months before, after very careful consideration, and she’d been meticulously assembling the photos for weeks. She just hoped that any awkwardness could be got past quickly.

Unaware of what had happened earlier that day, Richard and Claire were enchanted by their album, all the more as they were unused to photos that moved in such a life-like manner.

“Hermione, this is wonderful! What a brilliant idea! It must have taken you forever to put this together!” Claire exclaimed, delightedly turning the pages. Another festive meal, this one seven years earlier, suddenly came to mind. It was the first time Hermione had brought Draco home for dinner, and Claire remembered suddenly how very taken he had been with a particular photo of Hermione as a tiny child. She glanced at Richard, who smiled knowingly.

“Told you, didn’t I,” he grinned, giving his wife a wink. “I had a definite feeling about this one.”

“So you did,” Claire sighed happily. Across the room, Draco smiled to himself. That was good to hear. It had been a wonderful evening, he remembered, and more than that, a revelation in many ways. Hermione’s parents had made him feel so welcome and comfortable in a home that could not have been more fundamentally different to his own.

They had looked at family albums after dinner that night as well. He still had the photo of Hermione that Claire had given him, a copy of the one he’d been so struck with. Her expression in that captured moment, determined and clear-eyed, so essentially Hermione, was one he had come to associate with his own daughter now. As much as Rory looked like Draco, with her silken, white-blond hair and expressive grey eyes, her facial features strongly resembled Hermione’s. But more than that, that same feistiness of spirit was already evident.

“What a delightful idea, darling! Thank you!” Narcissa exclaimed.

“Hermione, you have provided your mother-in-law with the means to trump all her friends, at least momentarily,” Lucius observed drily. “You had best show off that album quickly, my dear,” he told Narcissa. “No doubt Elspeth Parkinson will be ready with her own the moment Pansy pops.”

“Which should be any day now, I believe,” Narcissa laughed. “You’re right, Lucius, though of course, we will have the chance to show Rory herself off at the party in a couple of weeks. Talking of trumps, I should like to see Elspeth trump that.”

Judging from their reaction, one would never suspect that this gift might elicit any response other than the sheer pleasure the Malfoys now showed upon leafing through its pages. Hermione could only guess what they might really be feeling, considering the morning’s incident.

Finally, all that remained were two boxes, one mid-sized and square, the other small and rectangular. Hermione picked up the larger of the two and turned to Draco with a secret smile.

“Happy Yule, Malfoy,” she whispered and gave him a quick kiss.

She held her breath as he carefully undid the paper, one fold at a time, and watched his face. His eyes grew wide as he lifted out the first volume and opened it to the frontispiece, where Hieronymus Dinwiddie’s ornate signature was scrawled in fading ink. They grew wider still, when his gaze flicked to the publication date and he understood that it was not only signed, but a first edition. He was positively stunned, however, when he found its companion volume, also signed, underneath.

“Hermione!” he breathed. “Wherever did you…”

“Ssh,” she smiled, putting her finger to his lips. “Don’t ask.”
Grinning, he gave her fingertip a kiss. “Merlin, thank you! This is… I’m speechless!” He sighed happily. “Granger, you never cease to amaze me!” She laughed as he gathered her in a tight hug and twirled her around.

Now only the small rectangular box was left. Setting Hermione down, Draco retrieved it, pressing into her palm.

“For you,” he said softly. “With all my love.” He bent to kiss her.

Hermione felt her pulse begin to race as she unwrapped the gold foil paper and carefully set it aside. Slowly she lifted the lid, and peeled back the protective layer of cotton. What she saw took her breath away. There lay a delicate silver choker studded all round with tiny, round pieces of jade inlaid in silver. Alongside it were matching earrings, two-inch-long silver threads ending in a single, small jade each. A bracelet completed the set: several twisted strands of silver, one rather sizeable jade at the clasp. The set must have cost a small fortune. She bit back the impulse to say so, however, and simply launched herself at her husband, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him for all she was worth.

“Hey!” he chuckled, wrapping his arms around her. “Steady on! I’d like to live long enough to see you wear them, yeah?”

“Draco,” she sighed, a tiny catch in her voice. “Oh, my gosh… they’re just… they’re beyond perfect! Thank you, thank you!” She buried her face in his chest, breathing in the intoxicating scent that was his alone.

Sitting on the sofa and watching, Narcissa smiled to herself in quiet satisfaction. This was all working out beautifully. A well-timed word or two was a very valuable thing, in her opinion. And it didn’t hurt that her son had such exquisite taste. He came by it honestly, after all.

The presents had been put away and now the scene resembled a traditional drawing-room drama. It seemed the upper crust of the wizarding world still subscribed to rather quaint, old-fashioned customs, Hermione realised with a wry grin. Lucius invited Richard and Draco to the library for port or brandy and cigars -- Draco glancing back at Hermione, as he left, to roll his eyes and grin - - while the ladies stayed in the drawing room for a genteel glass of sherry.

* 

Hours later, the house had finally fallen silent. The fires in every hearth were dying down, though the Yule log would surely burn all night and well into the next day. Wavering firelight sent a faint, flickering illumination into the rooms. The dining table had been cleared and was once again pristine. All vestiges of wrapping paper, Spellotape and ribbons had been Vanished from the drawing room.

Hermione and Draco had been relaxing in the shadowy library for some time, watching the Yule log burn slowly, she sitting at one end of the sofa and he stretched out, his head in her lap. Idly, she ran her fingers through his soft hair, gently massaging his scalp, a heavenly sensation. The quiet and warmth were comfortably lulling. Finally he forced himself out of the intoxicating haze all of this produced and hauled himself to his feet, holding out a hand to her. “Bed,” he whispered. Together they walked towards the staircase. Suddenly, Hermione pulled back on his hand, stopping him. She smiled and looked up, directing his gaze to what hung in the archway directly over their heads.

“Of course, how could I forget?” He grinned and crooked his finger, beckoning.
She happily complied and was immediately swept into a tight embrace.

“Do you know just how much I love you, Hermione Granger?” he murmured, pulling back to gaze at her.

She nodded. “I think so. If it’s anything close to how much I love you. And that’s Hermione Granger Malfoy, if you please.” Her teasing smile faded as she saw his somber expression.

“What you did today…” he began.

Hermione was confused momentarily. What had she done? It was what she hadn’t been able to do that had consumed her. She’d felt so terribly helpless when he’d been hurting the most.

“What do you mean?” she asked in a small voice.

“Hermione.” He stopped and regarded her soberly. “You must know, surely. No, no, it’s nothing like that!” he hastened to add, seeing her stricken expression. “Really, you were amazing, that’s what I meant. You showed me your love and support in so many ways today. You were hurting for me, I could see it in your eyes. I knew that you wanted to help. Don’t you think I would have let you, if there had been anything else you could have done at that moment? There wasn’t. You did all you could. You have to believe that. I… I just needed to be on my own for a bit, try to sort things out by myself. Can you understand?” He paused, waiting. She nodded again, beginning to tear up again.

“Don’t, love,” he murmured, kissing her hair. “Look. I’m going to be all right. Really. I think today was… good. And anyway, I reckon it was bound to happen— if not now, then soon. Being here again this way…” He trailed off and sighed, looking around at the walls that were so familiar. “I expect he really does mean to make things right, you know. Just have to work a bit harder on… well… believing it.”

He paused, a devilish grin suddenly quirking his mouth as he glanced upwards once again. “It seems to me there’s a bit of unfinished business that requires our immediate attention, my lady.”

Wiping her eyes, she gave him a tremulous smile. “Oh, is that so? What have you got in mind?”

In reply, he pulled her close, one arm slipping around her waist. Tipping her chin up, he drew her mouth to his in a dazzling kiss that seemed to go on and on. Suddenly, Hermione giggled against his mouth.

He looked at her, curious. “What?”

“I was just wondering how many other sprigs of mistletoe there are around the house.” She gave him a mischievous smile.

He laughed. “It’s a really huge house. Bound to be dozens, if not hundreds.” And if not, I’ll bloody well hang them myself!

“Well, then, I think it’s our responsibility to find them all. Don’t you?” Hermione looked up at him through her lashes, smiling demurely.

“We’re not done with this one yet. Come here, woman!”

TBC
**Jack-in-the-Green**

Have you seen Jack-in-the-Green?
With his long tail hanging down.
He sits quietly under every tree in the folds of his velvet gown.
He drinks from the empty acorn cup the dew that dawn sweetly bestows.
And taps his cane upon the ground, signals the snowdrops it's time to grow.
It's no fun being Jack-in-the-Green, no place to dance, no time for song.

He wears the colours of the summer soldier, carries the green flag all the winter long.
Jack, do you never sleep, does the green still run deep in your heart?
Or will these changing times, motorways, powerlines, keep us apart?

Well, I don't think so. I saw some grass growing through the pavements today.
The rowan, the oak and the holly tree are the charges left for you to groom.
Each blade of grass whispers Jack-in-the-Green.
Oh Jack, please help me through my winter's night.
And we are the berries on the holly tree.
Oh, the mistle thrush is coming. Jack, put out the light.

**Ring Out, Solstice Bells**

Now is the solstice of the year.
Winter is the glad song that you hear.
Seven maids move in seven time.
Have the lads up ready in a line.
Ring out these bells.
Ring out, ring solstice bells.
Ring solstice bells.
Join together 'neath the mistletoe,
By the holy oak whereon it grows.
Seven druids dance in seven time.
Sing the song the bells call, loudly chiming.
Ring out these bells.
Ring out, ring solstice bells.
Ring solstice bells.
Praise be to the distant sister sun,
joyful as the silver planets run.
Seven maids move in seven time.
Sing the song the bells call, loudly chiming.
Ring out those bells. Ring out, ring solstice bells.
Ring solstice bells.
Ring on, ring out. Ring on, ring out.
The Twelve Days, Part Two: The Game
The snow had begun well before first light, turning the night sky an eerie, opaque white. Over the hours before dawn, the storm had intensified. By early morning, eight inches of snow lay on the ground and there was no sign of it stopping. An unearthly quiet shrouded Wiltshire, and it seemed as if it covered the whole world.

Hermione woke early. She lay in bed, comfortably drowsy and warm, and gazed out the window through the opening in the drapes, where a shaft of pure white light came streaming in. Draco had burrowed under the quilt beside her, only the very top of his blond head visible.

This was always her favourite time of day, before the world had begun to stir, and most especially on a snowy morning when everything seemed transformed, made new. She remembered how as a
child, her imagination had created a magical winter world for her to explore: her own private Narnia. How remarkable that such a scenario should have become a reality. Even now, sometimes, she had to pinch herself to be reassured that it was all real.

Finally, she could wait no longer. Slipping out of bed as noiselessly as she could, she moved silently to the window seat, wrapping herself in a spare coverlet and gazing out at the thickly falling snow with mounting excitement.

In the large four-poster, Draco was dreaming. It was a strangely fragmented, confusing dream in which he was a small boy again, lost in a dank, black place. Every time he turned down another corridor, certain that this was the way out, there would be another frustrating dead end. Panic rose in his throat like bile, threatening to choke him. He opened his mouth in a soundless scream and awoke tangled in the bedclothes, his heart racing. For one disorienting moment, he wasn’t sure where he was. And then he caught sight of Hermione sitting in the window seat, her figure in silhouette, the early morning light behind her hair like a sort of halo. She sat with her knees drawn up to her chin and her arms wrapped around them, looking pensively out the window. Hearing him thrashing suddenly, she turned, worry clouding her eyes.

“Draco?” She crossed over to him and gathered him close. “You’re shaking, love, what’s wrong?”

“I’m okay.” He shivered.

“No, no, you’re not. Here, come under, it’s nice and warm.” Lifting one end of the coverlet, she drew it over him so that they were both wrapped up snugly inside it. “What was it? Did you—”

“Mmm. It was the one where I’m in the dark maze with no way out.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. What can I do?” She kissed his cheek and then traced a soft path down to his jaw with her finger, pulling the coverlet more tightly around the two of them.

He shook his head. “Nothing, I’m afraid. I’ve had that dream for years. It’s just bad while it’s happening, that’s all.”

“You’ve had it twice since we’ve been here,” Hermione observed pointedly.

“I know,” Draco sighed. Cupping her chin, he kissed her soundly, shaking off the last tendrils of the dream still clinging to him.

“Look, tell you what -- let’s forget about that old dream and go out and play in the snow in a little while, when it’s stopped coming down so hard. Rory’s never seen snow before!” Hermione’s eyes danced with excitement.

“Okay,” he agreed, flashing a smile. He hoped it was convincing.

*

The house-elves had never seen anything like it, not even when Master Draco was a tiny boy. He was running, scooping up handfuls of snow, throwing it at Mistress Hermione, dumping it down her neck, having it dumped down his own neck and rubbed in his face, actually rolling in it, and then the two of them were lying on their backs with their arms and legs flapping in the snow, laughing… this was very strange behaviour indeed. Had the two of them gone mad? They’d catch
their deaths out there! And bringing little Miss Rory outside on such a cold day and letting her sit in the snow! It was a very good thing the Master and Mistress were gone for the day and not expected back before evening. Surely they would not like this one bit.

Rory’s introduction to snow had indeed been quite an event. Sitting squarely down in the stuff, she’d made her parents laugh when she’d tried to cram a mittened fistful of it into her mouth. Like everything else she tried to eat, it had wound up all over her face and hair. Draco had carried her to a stand of pine trees and let her touch the snow-covered needles. Hermione couldn’t help laughing when Rory had smacked the branch hard, making a curtain of snow fly up into Draco’s face. He’d made clownish, surprised faces at the baby, his eyebrows raised comically and his mouth open in a perfect O. She’d laughed uproariously at her silly daddy. Finally, Hermione had brought her back inside, apple-cheeked and bright-eyed, and handed her off to Missy, who’d got her out of her wet snowsuit and into a warm bath, shaking her head all the while.

Later, Draco and Hermione stood in the entryway to the warm kitchen, stamping their feet. Snow clung to their hair and clothing and frosted their eyelashes; their cheeks and noses were rosy with the cold. Some of the snow from their boots had already melted into small puddles around their feet.

“Really got you there, Granger!” Laughter.

“No way, that one didn’t count, Malfoy! It was AFTER I rubbed your smug face in the snow, so I got you first! Points to me, hah!”

“Points to YOU? I beg your pardon! May I remind you that my five, very well-aimed snowballs count for two hundred points EACH? You only got me with four, and one of those shouldn’t even count, technically, because it only hit my hair, not my head -- okay, okay, it counts!” he laughed, seeing her readying a retort. “Even so, that gives me a total of a thousand plus another thousand for all the snow I dumped down your back! And it most definitely does count! No fouls, everything was in play! The way I see it, that puts me two hundred points ahead! Huh!” he snorted, shaking clots of snow from his arms, legs, and hair.

Hermione pulled the white-flecked knitted cap off her damp curls. Small bits of the stuff still clung to her hair here and there. “Phew! My fingers and toes are positively frozen!” she muttered. Discarding her boots, she peeled off her sodden gloves, rubbing reddened hands together. “Sorry, but I think we’ll have to agree to a draw, Malfoy,” she remarked matter-of-factly. “I’ve totted it all up and we’re dead even, you know. Even if I give you that last one, I clearly counted five snowballs of mine, not four. Don’t forget the one I stuffed down your jacket front!”

Oh, he wasn’t likely to forget that one. It had left an arctic trail from his neck clear down to his navel and below.

He threw his hands up in mock resignation. “I give up! It’s a tie! Hey…” He paused while untying his boot. “Fancy some hot chocolate? I bet we can scrounge some up.”

Just then, hot chocolate sounded like the best idea of the morning to Hermione. She nodded enthusiastically.

*  

It had gone two. They’d just finished a cosy lunch of soup and sandwiches by the fireside in their private sitting room. Rory had been trying out strained carrots that week, and wore them
triumphantly from ear to ear before Missy bundled her off for a washing-up, bringing her back to Hermione for nursing before her nap in the small nursery adjoining their bedroom. They’d enjoyed their meal quietly while she slept.

It was odd, suddenly being free to relax and do things she wanted to do whenever she wanted to do them. Hermione wasn’t used to it anymore. For the last six months, her schedule had revolved almost exclusively around Rory’s needs. It had, quite simply, become a way of life as unremarkable and natural as breathing. Suddenly to have built-in babyminders who were ready and eager, even, to take over a feeding or a bath time -- even taking it in turn to walk with Rory on some nights when she was fussing -- and were delighted to spend time playing with her baby, was nothing short of miraculous, as much as it did make her fret just a bit that maybe she was being a bad mother for actually enjoying time away from Rory. Oh well, she reasoned, one of the benefits of this holiday visit was precisely this sort of much-needed R & R, and so far, it certainly had given her that. She hadn’t felt this relaxed in ages. Sighing contentedly, she kicked back in the overstuffed armchair, her eyes sliding shut.

Draco smiled to himself. The timing of Hermione’s nap could not have been better if he’d engineered it himself. Now it was finally time to put into action something he’d been planning ever since they’d arrived a week before.

Silently, he stood and made his way out of their suite. There were just a few last-minute things he needed to do.

* * *

Perversely, it was the deep quiet that woke Hermione out of her nap some time later. Stretching, she looked around. She was alone. There was no sign of Draco and no sound coming from the nursery. Either Rory was still sleeping soundly or she’d awakened and was being taken care of by her father or Missy in another part of the house. Hermione decided to investigate.

She found the cot empty and there were signs of a recent nappie change. *Rory must be with Draco then. I wonder where they are?* She was just turning back from the nursery into the bedroom when she noticed a rolled-up parchment tied with a red ribbon, lying in a basket on the desk. *Odd. That wasn’t there before.*

Quickly, Hermione unrolled the parchment, her eyes widening as she read.

*The game’s afoot, sweet wife of mine.
The first you’ll seek does glow and shine.
Look for it now on the Grand Stair,
And leave behind one thing you wear.*

“What on earth…?” she said softly and then she understood. This was to be a game, a scavenger hunt in fact, from the sound of it— but no ordinary one. This one was going to be very naughty.

Hermione blushed and a small giggle bubbled out of her. It was an awfully good thing Narcissa and Lucius were away from home for the day! And then suddenly her eyes narrowed. Was that really a coincidence? For all she knew, he might have planned the whole thing. If so, what must
he have told them to get them to leave? Oh! She clapped her hands to her burning cheeks and then the beginnings of a grin nudged her mouth. On the other hand… this could be fun…

All this while, Draco stood not two feet away, undetectable under his father’s Invisibility Cloak. He had to bite his lip to stop himself laughing out loud as he watched a range of emotions pass over his wife’s face: confusion, surprise, embarrassment and then a growing glint in her eye. Hermione had always loved a good challenge. He felt fairly confident that he was about to give her one she wouldn’t soon forget.

Draco watched as she turned to leave, holding his breath for a couple of heartbeats. And then she stopped, reaching down to unlace her right trainer and slipping it off. He grinned. *Figures she’d start with a shoe.*

He followed at a discreet distance as she made her way to the Grand Staircase, basket and parchment in hand.

“Something that glows and shines,” she murmured, letting her gaze travel the length of the curving the stairway until it came to rest on a small, recessed alcove halfway up. In it was a single lit candle.

Eagerly Hermione climbed the stairs and blew out the flame. When it had cooled sufficiently, she plucked it out of its holder and dropped it into the basket. Behind the candle sconce was a small roll of parchment tied with green ribbon. She let it fall open and frowned, realising she’d need some light in order to read it in this shadowy recess of the long stairway. How stupid to have blown out the candle first! Luckily, there was another way, and she silently thanked the gods she’d thought to bring her wand.

“*Lumos,*” she muttered, pointing the slender vine-wood rod at the tiny scrawl.

*Your lovely mouth must puff and blow,*
*To take away yon candle’s glow.*
*‘Tis pity to put out its light.*
*In recompense, leave one thing bright.*

“One thing bright.” Hmm. Hermione looked down at herself. Nothing particularly bright in what she was wearing today -- except… wait—she *was* wearing neon-green and pink striped knee socks under her jeans. They’d been a joke gift from Draco after all her complaints about having cold feet. Just the thing! She plopped herself down on the steps and pulled the right leg of her jeans up to the knee, then peeled the sock down.

Right. Now fold it… Draco waited expectantly.

Hermione’s hand was halfway to stuffing the sock into the alcove, but then she stopped, took it back out, and folding it neatly, laid it where the parchment had been.

*That’s my girl.* Draco couldn’t help feeling a tad smug. He waited to see what she would do next.

Meanwhile, Hermione had spotted a second parchment roll protruding from a small opening in the alcove wall. Surprised, she drew it out and unrolled it.

“‘*Tis the sort of place you ne’er forsook,’ ” she read aloud. ‘*Find what you seek in a favourite book.*’ Hmm. *Right. Nox,*” she murmured, almost as an afterthought, and pocketed her wand. Picking up the basket, two more parchment scrolls added in, she headed down the stairs in the direction of the library with one bare foot and a determined glint in her eye. A moment later, Draco followed. This was all going very nicely indeed.
The fire in the library hearth burned cheerily. Hermione loved this room. Their own suite aside, it was her favourite room in the house. Unlike the formality of much of the rest of the Manor, it was warm and comfortable, exuding an air of tranquillity and grace. In addition, the collections of books were dazzling. They could keep Hermione happily reading for several lifetimes.

She stood in the centre of the room and thought. *A favourite book...* There were a number of possibilities of course, though it was uncertain which ones would likely be here in this library. *Merlin, this could take days. No, wait-- what would Draco think is my favourite?* That narrowed things down. She had a fairly good idea. She started with the bookcase to the immediate left of the hearth, pulled a ladder on wheels over, and climbed up to scan the titles on the shelves closest to her. *A Guide To Mediaeval Sorcery. Advanced Rune Translation. An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century Charms.* Clearly whoever had organized the library had the instincts of a librarian. The books had been arranged alphabetically.

**Dragon Species of Great Britain.** *Mmm, interesting. Encyclopaedia of Toadstools.* She ran her finger gently along the spines of the books, momentarily distracted. *Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century.* She’d save that one for another time. *Hairy Snout, Human Heart.* Definitely NOT. *Ah/ Hogwarts: A History.* Grasping the heavy tome, she pulled it off the shelf and started down the ladder. This just had to be it.

As her bare foot hit the floor, she stubbed her toe on the ladder’s wheel and swore loudly. Draco’s mouth twitched even as he felt a pang that he’d indirectly caused her a moment’s pain. Quietly he moved to a corner behind a tall, potted plant and watched as she sat down to examine her foot. Suddenly, he had an urge to press tiny, soothing kisses all over that soft pink flesh and suck on those cute little toes one by one. He felt a tightening in his groin and, shaking his head, he bit back a laugh. *Down, boy!*

While he was lost in his pleasant little reverie, she’d opened the book and begun flipping through its pages. Heart racing a little, she drew her wand to help things along. “*Locomotor pages,*” she murmured. Instantly the pages began turning at quite a good clip. Suddenly she drew a sharp breath. *There.* It was a pressed flower, a yellow rose. And beneath it, a piece of parchment. This one was already opened.

*Grinning, Hermione dropped the dried rose and the parchment into the basket and then slipped her other shoe off, leaving it by the fireplace behind a poker. This next one was simple. The dining room. Draco trotted behind, keeping a fair distance and taking care not to brush up against anything.*

Sunshine streamed through the tall windows and French doors of the dining room. It had stopped snowing some time before, and the sky had cleared to a brilliant blue. The world was covered in a cloak of dazzling, silent white.

The long dining table was bare, the dark mahogany polished to a mirror-like lustre. In the centre stood a plain box and a vase filled with a luxuriant bouquet of long-stemmed, yellow roses just beginning to open. They filled the air with a heady perfume. Leaning against the base of the vase was a small, ecru-coloured card on which were written two words: *Choose One.* Beside it, another parchment scroll lay tied with a blue ribbon. Feeling just slightly like Alice after she’d found the giant toadstool, Hermione drew an especially lovely flower from the vase. Instantly, the message on the card vanished and was replaced by another: *Wear Me.* “At least it didn’t say ‘Eat Me,’” she muttered, snapping off most of the stem and threading the flower through her hair at the
temple, a hastily cast Gripping Charm securing it.

Then she untied the ribbon and unrolled the parchment.

This rose is for your lovely locks.
Prithee, leave two items in the box.
The next room’s yellow as the sun.
The feather’s voice is never done.

Two this time! She laughed in spite of herself.

Beneath the Invisibility Cloak, Draco’s smile grew faintly predatory.

Hermione tugged the other knee sock off, dropping it absently onto the floor. A bit more hesitantly now, she began lowering the zip of her jeans and finally, with a last, cautious glance around, she stepped out of them and stood there, wearing only her jumper, bra and knickers.

The very tiny pink knickers with the hearts. Bloody hell. It was getting awfully warm under that cloak.

Suddenly there were voices coming from down the hall. House-elves! They must be coming to tidy up. Forgetting the instructions in her panic, Hermione jammed her clothes under the large sideboard and pressed herself against the wall next to it.

Merlin’s balls! Draco nearly choked with stifled laughter, clamping a hand over his mouth and hardly daring to breathe. For a moment, he was certain she’d heard him, because she turned her head in his direction and appeared to be listening intently. Then he released a slow, silent breath of relief. She had not heard. He was practically positive.

From her hiding place, Hermione still strained her ears for that odd noise, hoping it would recur. The sound had been halfway between a wheeze and a gurgle, and it had happened only once. She peered around the room, looking for something that might explain it. Because it had sounded human. And that was impossible, of course, because she was the only living being in the room at the time. Wasn’t she?

And then she saw it. The glimpse was brief, just a flash, and what she saw would have been rather difficult to believe on first glance. Except for one small, undeniable thing: the ring. A most unusual ring, one of a kind really, made specially to order. By her. For him. A wedding ring, in fact (she had its twin) -- and the finger to go with it. No doubt attached to a hand. Hermione narrowed her eyes. Yes. There it was again, only this time she spotted all five fingers of a left hand, just for an instant, and then they vanished.

So. A lurker in her midst, eh? It wasn’t enough that he was sending her on a wild, half-naked goose chase. Malfoy, you perve! There was only one way he could be doing this. She fought to keep a rather feral smile from her face. Two could play at this game.

Clutching her wand and the basket, she crept out from her hiding place, satisfied that the coast was clear, studiously avoiding even the tiniest glance in Draco’s general direction. If she could just get to the yellow drawing room before he did…

Draco watched her move furtively towards the door and then disappear down the hall. He’d wait a minute at least, and then follow.

Hermione was on the verge of an attack of the giggles as she crept into the yellow drawing room. If anyone were to happen upon her like this… it simply didn’t bear thinking about, that was all! Focus, Hermione. First things first: it was time to turn the tables. Once she found her next clue,
she could start her own counter-attack. “The feather’s voice is never…” _Oh! Feather’s voice._ Morgana, but she could be thick as a post at times! It was so obvious. She walked straight to the writing desk and there, partially obscured by the quill and the inkpot, was a small scroll.

He was there. She could feel it. And he was getting careless. She’d actually spotted a bit of bare foot a moment before. Now that she knew, she could almost feel his eyes boring into her, ogling her. I hope he drools all over himself, she thought basely, and bent over, ostensibly to stretch, wiggling her scantily clad bum in his direction. She could have sworn she heard a soft groan, and she grinned.

Making sure her body blocked his view, she stood at the desk and pointed her wand at a piece of blank parchment. _Right. Now. What shall I say?…_ She bit her lip and thought for a moment. The first idea came and she smiled gleefully, giving the wand a tiny twirl. Letters began forming themselves on its creamy surface. When the verse was finished, she rolled up the scroll, slipping the lavender ribbon off the scroll Draco had left there, and tying it around the new one. Plucking the original scroll up, she tucked its replacement in snugly next to the ink pot and quill, and turned to where she hoped Draco was standing, parchment in hand.

“Oh, I wonder what _this_ one says!” Hermione raised her eyebrows a tad theatrically and began to read out loud:

> My riddles you have puzzled out.  
> You’ll get this one without a doubt.  
> The mirror’d dressing room’s the place  
> To find a girl with style and grace.  
> But ‘ere you go, be sure to leave  
> The garment that you wear with sleeves.

She dropped the parchment and the quill into the basket and rolled her eyes, trying all the while not to laugh. _Prat! He knew I’d be down to nearly nothing by now! ‘The garment that you wear with sleeves’ indeed!_ She barely suppressed a snort.

Casting furtive looks right and left, she slowly peeled her jumper over her head. Draco watched in an agony of anticipation as the garment moved ever so slowly upwards, revealing a pale, smooth abdomen and finally, a pair of perky breasts barely covered in candy floss-pink lace. He licked his lips and swallowed, one hand creeping down inside his hastily unzipped jeans to cup himself. It brought him only scant relief.

Hastily she stuffed the jumper behind a nest of pillows on one of the sofas and then moved tentatively towards the door. Pushing the limits, Draco positioned himself very near the doorway, neatly sidestepping her as she passed only inches from him and sprinted down the hall. He watched her rapidly retreating figure, taking in the graceful movements of her long legs, hungrily imagining how her breasts must be bouncing in that skimpy bra.

He was about to trail after her when he noticed something odd. Hang on. She’d _taken_ the parchment, he was certain of that. Yet there it was, rolled up and neatly tied, and sitting exactly where he’d put it, apparently untouched.

Tossing the Cloak over the back of a chair, he crossed quickly to the desk, tearing the ribbon off the scroll and opening it. One quick scan and his eyes widened. This wasn’t his scroll, the one he’d left for her and that she’d just read aloud. This was a wholly different one. Which meant -- she was on to him. Somehow she knew he’d been following and watching! Draco laughed softly. This game had suddenly grown a lot more interesting. He read the scroll:
Quill and parchment, that is our way,
An Owl to send without delay.
They wend their way in sun and storm.
Leave one thing here that keeps you warm.

Well, well. The gauntlet had indeed been thrown down. Hermione would soon see that she wasn’t the only one who could rise to a challenge. He glanced down at himself. He’d neglected to properly zip his jeans after that quick couple of strokes, and his cock was waving hello to him out of the top of his pants. He grinned ruefully. Yes, he supposed he could rise to a challenge all right.

In one quick motion, he stripped off his pullover shirt, left it next to Hermione’s jumper under the sofa pillows, grabbed the Invisibility Cloak, the parchment and his wand, and Vanished with a pop.

Several minutes earlier, Hermione had been congratulating herself on coming up with such sly tactics. She had led Draco to believe she’d gone right to Narcissa’s mirrored dressing room, but instead, she’d Apparated straight up to the top floor of the Manor to wait for him, knowing precisely where he would go next. After all, she’d sent him there herself. She hoped he’d show up soon. First off, she was half frozen! Second, at any moment a house-elf could come waltzing out of one of the many rooms along this corridor and catch her in the nearly-altogether. Though it seemed odd that this hadn’t actually happened even once yet. Maybe this was something Draco had fixed ahead of time, she reflected. She wouldn’t put it past him to have arranged for those house-elves to make noise outside the dining room on purpose just to scare her silly. Hmm.

If that were the case, then her choice of location for this next clue was even more fitting and just. She couldn’t help a satisfied, little smirk. Oh, I am so BAD. She only hoped it hadn’t started snowing again.

If only she could remember the precise location of the room to which she had sent him. Draco had told her once. Cautiously, Hermione tried the third door in this top-floor corridor. Locked. A fourth was locked as well. What did they keep hidden up here anyway? Relics of his Dark Magic collection that Lucius simply couldn’t part with? An illegal menagerie? A dead body or two?

Her imagination was in serious overdrive and she admonished it to shut up as, shivering uncontrollably now, she tried the fifth door. Merlin be praised! It swung open with a creak that would have raised the dead, had there been any lying about the attic. In the dim light that filtered through several wavy-looking panes of glass along one wall, she spotted several standing perches and a roost high in the vaulted ceiling. A single owl regarded her curiously from a high perch. It wasn’t one she recognised. She wondered briefly where both Zander and Paladin had got to. The windows around the other side were all open and all she could see were clouds in open sky.

Slipping into a darkened corner behind some old perches in need of repair, she waited, quickly altering the parchment in her hand to contain a different message. Nodding her head in satisfaction, she Banished it to nest in a chink in the wall. She hoped Draco would spot it.

Then the reality of her circumstances hit her. She really was in one of the uppermost reaches of the manor. In her bra and knickers. Standing barefoot in four centuries’ worth of impacted, dried owl droppings.

Ew.

A wild, little giggle escaped her at the thought, and then she felt some of the more recent muck squelch between her toes.

EW.

Of course, to be fair, this bit was her doing. And before too long, she would have company.
Ten seconds later, Draco materialised in the middle of the room, shirtless. He was barefoot as well, and cursing himself for being so clever as to think he’d move more silently under the Invisibility Cloak without shoes or socks. This was where his cleverness had got him. Standing ankles-deep in ancient owl shit.

“Brr, bloody freezing in here!” he remarked loudly, surveying the room with casual scrutiny, and then he tossed the cloak over his shoulder and began a vigourous massage of his upper arms. Right, let’s just find that clue and get out of here! It would either be a roll of parchment or a quill, if that last clue was to be understood.

Ah. There it was, a little bit of white in a chink in the wall. Right over there, just under the…

Too late. Draco knew he couldn’t stop the fall even as he flailed wildly, the cloak flying out of his hands. His foot had hit a particularly slick new patch of owl excrement. Now he found himself bum-deep in it.

*Bloody. Buggering. HELL.*

It really had been terribly funny, the way he’d slid. But standing quietly in the shadowy recesses, Hermione felt very guilty suddenly, awful in fact. Let him just get the clue, she thought. *Come on, love. It’s right in front of you. Just reach for it.*

Draco abruptly heaved himself to his feet, brushing his hands off as best he could. Flakes of desiccated owl muck fell to the floor. He remembered his wand, then, and thanked the gods as he drew it out of his pocket. A quick *Scourgify* took care of the major damage, aside from the odd trace of filth stuck between his toes. That would require a good soak in the tub, he reckoned. He looked about for the Invisibility Cloak and cleaned that off as well. Now: the clue. This time he wasn’t taking any chances.

“*Accio* parchment!” he said clearly. It shot out of its chink in the wall into his hand. Picking absently at a bit of dirt still under his fingernails, Draco opened it and read:

```
An owl awaits your missive clear.
I pray you write your message here.
A note of love is always nice.
Take off your jeans or pay the price.
```

He snickered. Pay the price, eh? Having no quill or ink with which to write, he used his wand instead. Within moments, his message was winging its way to their bedroom window to await Hermione’s return.

Now for the last bit of the clue. There was no equivocating about its meaning. And no way to get around the fact that he was about to seriously embarrass himself once his jeans were off. But he was a Malfoy, and Malfoys did not walk away from a challenge, mortifying or not. They embraced it.

Slowly pulling the zip down, he stepped out of his jeans, slinging them with studied carelessness over his shoulder.

From her vantage point in the shadows, Hermione’s breath caught in her throat. She was certain he’d heard, because he turned his head in her direction and stayed quite still for a long moment, smiling slightly when he finally looked away again.

Standing there nearly naked, Draco was a sight to behold. He really was a fine-looking man. Beautiful, Hermione thought. The sight of him moved her unutterably. The cold air had caused his nipples to harden; they jutted out in small, rounded nubs from his leanly muscled chest. His
shoulders, arms and legs were nicely sculpted from years of athletics, his thighs and buttocks taut and well-defined, his abdomen hard and flat. Every part of him was well-formed, right down to his feet. In contrast to the rest of his very fine, pale body hair, a narrow line of darker gold thickened and curled as it trailed down from his navel and out of sight below that. Her eyes followed it like an arrow… straight to his quite impressive erection, which jutted out stiffly inside his boxer briefs.

Suddenly Draco inclined his head slightly in her general direction once again, and smiled serenely. Hooking his thumbs in the waistband of his boxers, he began to inch them slowly down over his hips, until first the head and then very gradually the rest of his cock came into view. The boxers dropped to the floor.

Hermione felt almost faint. She licked her lips and stared, rooted to the spot, her face flushed. Slowly her eyes travelled up his body to meet his. He was looking directly at her, smiling wolfishly.

And then he winked.

At once, intense surprise, confusion and embarrassment swept over Hermione. And then, Oh my gosh, the mirrored room! I’ve got to go! Still blushing furiously, she gathered up her belongings and Apparated on the spot, hoping desperately that she would get there at least one minute before he did, so she could recover her wits. His laughter was still ringing in her ears as she disappeared.

The mirrored dressing room was one of Narcissa Malfoy’s follies to which her husband had acquiesced some years before. She’d seen something similar in a magazine and wanted to duplicate it on the spot. It was a small room, but every surface was covered in large and small mirrors. The only area not mirrored was the floor, and that was, of course, because of a natural sense of propriety. Not really vain, Narcissa was certainly aware of her appearance and desirous of looking as beautiful as she could for as long as possible. She enjoyed primping as much as the next woman, to be sure.

The room was quite opulently fitted out. All the fixtures were gold. A plush white rug covered the marble floor. A gilded Louis XVI dressing table and chair with a matching gilt mirror sat at one end, and a white chaise lounge was placed nearby. An antique-gold brush and comb set lay on an ornately carved, mirrored tray, along with numerous perfume bottles and atomizers, containers of face powder, nail varnish and other make-up. Another mirrored tray held a collection of fragile glass figurines in muted colours. On the walls, golden sconces held dripless candles, which illuminated the room with an Otherworldly beauty as their glowing images were repeated over and over again, one mirror reflecting the image in the next into infinity.

The first thing Hermione noticed was the framed photo of herself on the dressing table. In it, she was wearing her wedding frock, looking radiant and waving while holding a delicate nosegay of miniature roses. Yellow ones, her favourites, just like the single, bright rose that lay on the table next to the photo. A girl with style and grace. A soft smile curved her lips.

“Oh, Draco,” she murmured, bringing the flower to her nose and inhaling deeply. She knew-- she felt, suddenly-- that he was there now, too, watching. And she was glad. Standing by the door, hidden once again under the Cloak, he smiled.

Beside the photo was the expected roll of parchment, this one tied with a white ribbon. Carefully, she opened it and read the message.

You’ve played the game. It’s nearly done.
Just one more stop; you’ll find it fun.
A rose in hand will take you there.
The one you need is in your hair.
Pray wait, and grant me one more boon.
Her eyes travelled down to the final line and she laughed out loud.

*Take off your bra. I’ll see you soon.*

“Well, that’s getting straight to the point!” She giggled again. “Right, then.”

Plucking the photo up, along with the parchment and the rose, she laid everything carefully in the basket. Then, reaching around, she unclasped her bra, letting it slide down her arms to the floor. Hoping she was facing him, she turned, fully illuminated by the candlelight.

Draco stood transfixed. Hermione was ravishing. He desperately wanted to reach out and caress her round, milk-pale breasts, take those lovely, taut nipples into his mouth and suckle them. He longed to run his hands down her smooth skin, touch her everywhere, kiss that sweet mouth senseless. He felt his balls clenching with desire, and he gritted his teeth. He was painfully hard now and without a way to really take care of it.

However, there wasn’t much time to dwell on this predicament, because a second later, she reached up to touch the rose in her hair and instantly Vanished. Taking a deep breath to centre himself, Draco Disapparated a moment after, winding up in their en-suite seconds after she had.

*What?* In their en-suite now, Hermione drew the rose out of her hair and stared at it. It was a Portkey within the Manor! And – sweet Morgana! – what had he done?

Steamy, aromatic air warmed her chilled body and promised to soothe her spirit. Clusters of scented candles in different sizes stood on the tub’s ledge. The tub had been magicked to twice its normal size and was filled with delightful, coconut-scented bubbles that caught the candlelight like a thousand prisms.

Hermione didn’t need telling twice. She slipped out of her knickers, tossing them onto the toilet lid, and gratefully sank into the warm, fragrant water.

Under the sheltering folds of the Cloak, Draco smiled and then, with the flourish of an orchestra conductor, he drew out his wand, inscribing a small arc in the air and then a long slash, lower down, and then another.

Hermione had been drifting peacefully on the edge of sleep. Suddenly, she felt as if somebody had just run a hand along her body. And then it happened again—a long, slow, gliding sensation from her shoulder downwards, just grazing the side of her breast and continuing its descent past her hip right to her toes, and then slowly upwards along her leg to her belly and on up to her chest. Always slow, always light and tickly, it moved laterally now, and she felt her breath catch as it circled her left breast ever so lightly, inscribing spirals which came ever closer to the one place that – oh! – yes! – right *there*. The tongue-like flick she’d just received on her left nipple was bliss. It sent a sizzling charge straight down between her legs to her core, where it ignited. She squirmed slightly, pressing her thighs together pleasurably.

As the engineer of his wife’s pleasures, Draco was quite enjoying the spectacle, though he was beginning to wonder if he had a death wish as well. His own arousal was swiftly becoming unmanageable. He didn’t think he could last too much longer, but he had to try. This was for her. Ignoring his burgeoning problem, he gave his wand a quick twirl and then a downward slash.

There was an answering caress that spread from one breast to the other and then shot straight down to her groin, where it slithered in and out of her curls and found its way to the heart of her. There it finally nestled, radiating rippling waves that felt like the deepest kisses and a hundred curling, seeking tongues.
Hermione lay with her head thrown back on the rim of the tub, arms and legs splayed open beneath the bubbles. Her eyes were squeezed shut and her mouth was slightly open, her tongue darting out every so often to lick her lips. The rosy tips of her breasts peeked out from the bubbles. Draco was certain he’d never seen anything so incredibly erotic in his entire life. She was moaning now, too, a low, throaty keening the like of which he had never heard from her before. He couldn’t help a satisfied grin. *Gods, I’m good.* The intensity of his own mounting desire fuelled his powers, and he raised his other hand for the grand finale. It was time for just a little bit of wandless magic now as well.

It was an all-out assault, pure and simple. The slithery, feather-light caresses retraced their path back up her torso until they reached her neck, where they became sucking, nipping sensations all over her smooth skin, returning frequently to the especially sensitive spots just below her ears and at the base of her throat, their intensity increasing so that they felt more like real bites along with smaller, playful nips.

Draco rotated his wand arm and pierced the air with a sudden thrust, while with the other hand, he directed a downward spiral of pulsating energy. Hermione was now in the throes of a relentless series of rolling climaxces, each one more electric and intense than the last, all the while having her neck kissed, her clit tongued, her thighs stroked, and her breasts ferociously suckled. And more. The sensation was truly like hands and mouths everywhere.

She was near to blacking out now. Finally, eyes wide, she let out a single piercing, utterly primal scream. He dropped his arms, breathing heavily himself, his erection huge, rock-hard and ready to explode. Clutching at himself in agony, sweat beading on his forehead, Draco watched his wife’s features relax finally as she closed her eyes again. He barely managed one more flick of his wand, the final parchment appearing on the rim of the tub to await her attention, before escaping into their bedroom and collapsing on the bed.

Dazed, her eyes opening slowly, Hermione tried to make sense of what had just happened to her. Then a slow smile crossed her face. Her husband was an even more gifted and creative wizard than she had realised, apparently. She would have to remember this. Gripping the tub’s edge, she hoisted herself out, feeling rather boneless, and grabbed a towel. Only then did she notice the parchment she’d inadvertently brushed onto the floor. Plucking it up with wet fingers, she read:

*A soothing bath has pleasured you here.*

*But one who loves you is very near.*

*You’ve reached the end of my game of guile…*

*Come out in nothing but your smile.*

The truth was, Hermione couldn’t have stopped smiling if she had tried. Quietly she stood in the doorway for a moment. The room was dim in the late afternoon light. After the relative brightness of the en-suite, her eyes needed a moment to adjust. Then she saw him in the shadows. He was lying on the bed propped up against the pillows, his legs stretched out. She stood silhouetted in the doorway, and let the towel slip to the floor.

“How long” -- she dropped a kiss onto his neck below his ear -- “had you been” -- a kiss to his jaw -- “planning such a” -- his chin -- “naughty” -- a lick to his bottom lip -- “game?” His mouth, when she finally tasted it, was so very sweet.

“I… ah…” he began, finding it difficult to concentrate. She shifted her seat just enough to tease
and then smiled lazily.

“I suppose you thought it all quite entertaining?” she continued, her voice dangerously low. “I like to be entertained too, you know. Very much. Can you think of any way I might find some… amusement?” Her questing fingers travelled over his chest, warm, smooth-skinned and firm, and played with its smattering of baby-fine blond hair. They continued on to his nipples, already erect. She began lightly stroking them and he shifted under her weight, moaning softly.

“Of course,” she continued, lowering her face so that her mouth hovered just above his right nipple, “there is the fact that after all those exertions, I’m simply famished now as well.” Darting her tongue out to taste the tip of one nipple and then the other, she blew on them, a tickling warm breath that brought them to attention. He made to embrace her but she was quicker than he and grasped his wrists, trapping them beneath her hands.

“Ah ah.” She shook her head, smiling, and resumed her leisurely feasting on his flesh. One, two, three licks. He thought his nipples would incinerate then and there.

“Hermione,” he began. She had stretched herself out along his body with the grace of a cat, using her talented mouth to explore him. She was grazing on his neck now, taking it in turn to suck, bite and lick the tender flesh.

Hearing her name, she raised her head. “Yes?” she asked sweetly. “What is it? I’m rather busy at the moment.”

“Look, love, I’m…” How to put this delicately. Oh sod it all, he couldn’t. “I’ve got a rather wicked case of … erm… blue balls. Can’t we just… you know… cut to the chase, as it were?”

She rolled off him and really looked. His penis was enormously engorged and mottled, its head purplish, swollen and weeping copiously, standing almost perfectly vertical as he lay there.

*Ouch!* “Oh dear,” she murmured. “Could it be that you have…” She leant over him until her face was just above his crotch. “…brought this little situation upon yourself?”

Burying her nose in the skin of his lower belly, she breathed in the fresh scent of soap mixed with the musky aroma that was his alone.

Draco groaned. If he didn’t get the sort of real relief he craved fairly quickly, he was fully prepared to believe his cock might be stuck this way indefinitely. Draco Malfoy, scion of an ancient and noble wizarding family, captain of his house Quidditch team two years’ running, top marks in all his NEWTS, a bachelor’s degree earned with highest honours from a renowned university, and world-record holder for the longest-lasting, most excruciating hard-on in history.

Hermione grinned with a wicked assurance that began to unnerve him. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing the painful intensity of his need to subside.

*Oh, please don’t torture me too long.*

Leaning over him once again, she drew her tongue sinuously around his balls and then up the shaft to the tip, circling it rather than touching it directly.

“For the love of Merlin, Granger,” he growled, “get on with it!”

This was payback time, but she didn’t want to kill him. “As you wish,” she replied merrily, and scooted up to straddle him, rubbing her opening against the sensitive head of his cock once, twice -- *mm, lovely!* -- before impaling herself on it.

“Uhng!” he grunted, grabbing her hips to pull her down, pushing himself in deeper. *There. YES.* Hermione began to move her hips in an undulating roll, finding a rhythm that he quickly picked up.
“You… feel… so… fucking… GOOD!” he ground out between thrusts. At last. She felt brilliant around him, warm and slick and so bloody tight, it was like a gift.

Hermione was far too preoccupied to speak at all. She was focused on the heat from this miraculous bit of male anatomy that was filling her so completely again and again, and the delicious sensations it created as he slammed into her.

Suddenly, he sat forward, crushing her to his chest, his mouth frantically seeking her mouth, her neck, her collarbone, her breasts. He was so close, so close. He wanted to devour her completely.

“Hermione, please… oh yes… yes… ahhh… oh… Oh…OH…OHHHH!!!!!” The explosive pleasure and utter relief of his climax dragged a roar from deep in Draco’s chest.

Panting, he fell back against the pillows, pulling her with him, their bodies still joined. Eventually, Hermione raised her head and looked down at Draco. His face was flushed with a light sheen of perspiration, his eyes closed. When they opened slowly to look back at her, they were luminous. He smiled.

“Hello,” he whispered.

“Feeling better?” she asked with a mischievous grin.

“Much. Though I think…” He raised his head to peer down at himself as she moved off him at last. “… I think I might possibly need a bit more attention later. Still sickening a bit for something, you know.” He sank back into the pillows and regarded her through hooded lids, a half-smile playing about his lips.

Hermione stretched herself out fully on top of him, his now-flaccid penis in its surrounding thicket of dark gold curls tickling between her thighs pleasantly. Her breasts rested lightly on his chest, and he caressed one absenty, lightly stroking circles with the tip of one finger.

“Hmm. Yes, I believe I may have some time. For a therapeutic massage, perhaps.” She giggled and bent to kiss him on the mouth. “Draco, where on earth did you come up with the idea for that scavenger hunt anyway?”

“When you grow up an only child in a place like this, you learn to be inventive.”

“Inventive.” She raised an eyebrow.

“Mmm. I came up with all sorts of games, growing up. None of them was quite this much fun though!” He chuckled, reaching out to wind one of her curls around his index finger.

“I’ll bet!” She shook her head, amused. “Ingenious. Oh!” A sudden look of horror crossed Hermione’s face. “We can’t forget to Summon all our things. The last thing I want is your mother finding my bra in her dressing room!”

“Too right!” he agreed. Then he stopped, suddenly remembering to be irate. “You know, that clue in the owlery, that was… that was…”

“I know, I’m really sorry about that!” Hermione fought to keep a straight face. “I wasn’t thinking about the possibility of fresh… uh…droppings. But you have to admit, it really was pretty funny when you--”

“Ha ha. That was absolutely disgusting. By the way…” He regarded her curiously. “When did you realise?”

“That you were following me, you mean? Using an Invisibility Cloak? Watching me strip? In the dining room. I saw this.” She tapped his wedding ring lightly. “And your foot too. Tsk, Malfoy, very careless!” She shook her head. “Hey, using your father’s Invisibility Cloak -- isn’t that cheating or something?” Playfully, she nudged him in the ribs.
Draco shook his head, grinning smugly. “Nope. My game, my rules. Anything goes. Including Invisibility Cloaks. Very handy, they are. Though I expect with your past history, you know all about that. And anyway, my sweet but not-so-innocent wife, I’d say you did your fair share of looking as well. Enjoy the show, did you?” He smirked.

“Wanker!” Hermione laughed, colouring. She made to smack his arm but he was quicker, catching her wrist and then grabbing the other one pre-emptively, pulling her up higher on his chest.

“Now, now, we mustn’t give in to our baser instincts,” he said very softly. “Then again, darling… I think I rather like your baser instincts.” He ducked his head, playfully giving her right nipple a quick swipe with his tongue. “Mmm,” he murmured. “You taste good.”

Releasing her wrists, he threaded his arms around her once again.

“I do believe I’m ready for a bit more of that therapeutic massage now,” he murmured, his breath tickling her neck. He nipped lightly at her ear lobe. “What do you say?”

“I’m game,” she grinned.

TBC
The Twelve Days, Part Three: Indiscretions
Late December

Iron-grey skies continued to promise snow as the days passed. The winter quiet outside seemed to have permeated the interior of the Manor, slowing the pace of life within.

Most mornings, Hermione and Draco were up quite early, but only because of Rory. Once she’d been changed and fed, they often brought her back to bed with them and spent some time lazing there, playing with their daughter, laughing and talking quietly.

Occasionally they’d have breakfast in their own sitting room, and the house-elves were more than happy to oblige. They were quite taken with Master Draco’s pretty young wife, secretly agreeing amongst themselves that he’d more than met his match in her, and that in fact, she was precisely what Young Master needed.

It was because of their affection for and approval of Hermione—and their fondness for little Rory—that they did not decide to mutiny when they discovered Hermione in the kitchen one afternoon, all the sharp knives arrayed in a gleaming mass on the big, wooden trestle table.

“What in the world can Mistress Hermione be doing?” Missy cried plaintively.

“Oh!” Hermione stopped, embarrassed. This was their domain and she realised, suddenly, that she was intruding. “I beg your pardon. I ought to have asked first. I would like to baby-proof the house.”

‘Baby-proof?’ Missy looked confused and sought the other house-elves’ eyes. “What is Mistress Hermione meaning by this? Missy does not understand.”

“It just means I want to make sure that anything that could be dangerous to the baby is safely put out of her reach. Sharp knives and heavy, breakable dishes and so forth.” Hermione smiled. “You see?”

“But–” another of them interrupted. “Dodie is begging your pardon, Mistress, but little Miss Rory is not even crawling yet. She is not reaching knives and other dangerous things.”

“Oh, I know,” Hermione answered confidently, as if she’d fully expected such an objection. “But the next time we stay for a long visit, she probably will be crawling and then walking, and I want to be prepared.” She looked brightly at them, expecting complete understanding and acceptance. This made such complete sense, after all. What she got instead were expressions of utter befuddlement.

What could she say to really bring them around? She considered for a moment and then she knew. They were besotted with Rory and would miss her little visits below stairs. “It is your kitchen, of course,” she said, backtracking carefully. “But if we do this, I will feel freer to bring Rory down here to visit even once she’s started crawling and walking. Won’t you help me? I would be so grateful.”

Finally, old Missy spoke up. “I is helping Mistress Hermione,” she volunteered staunchly. “What is Mistress Hermione wanting Missy to be doing first?”

Bless her tiny heart. Hermione could have kissed the diminutive elf, but she knew that Missy would be mortified. Instead, she turned to Missy and smiled. “If you would help me find
everything in the lower cupboards that is sharp and pointy or whatever would break if it fell -- you know, glass and china, that sort of thing -- I would be ever so grateful.”

“Mistress Hermione,” a younger house-elf chimed in, stepping forward shyly. “I is ready to be helping too.”

“I too.”

“And me.”

* * *

It was a busy couple of hours in the kitchen. Every cupboard and low drawer had to be inspected. The number of lower cupboards filled with fine crystal and china, as well as large serving pieces and ceramic baking dishes, seemed endless to Hermione, although the house-elves knew their various contents as thoroughly as army generals know particularly tricky and varied terrains on which they must plan their manoeuvres. Eight large lower cupboards held a rather fine service for thirty-six of Aynsley bone china, the set Narcissa favoured for posh dinner parties. Another four contained the gaily flowered Spode service she preferred for breakfast and tea, and further along, other cupboards held the blue and white Haviland and Parlon set used for more casual dining. Four cupboards housed sets of the most exquisite Baccarat and Murano crystal—wine glasses, brandy snifters, port sippers, decanters, tumblers, champagne flutes, small pitchers, platters and much more. Hermione felt very guilty requesting that so much heavy and extremely valuable china and crystal be moved, so she enlisted the house-elves’ help in setting a Securing Charm on all the latches; the charm would be set off when inquisitive baby or toddler fingers were pulling on the doors and was enabled to detect the difference between Rory’s touch and that of a house-elf.

All the knives found new homes inside large, rectangular wooden boxes Transfigured from heavy, canvas sacks previously used to store flour and sugar and about to be discarded.

“Depicio angustus!” Hermione said, pointing her wand at each box in turn. The latches clicked one by one, and then they were moved to their designated space in an empty cupboard, which was then Secured with the same charm.

Afterwards, a squadron of house-elves fanned out over the Manor with strict instructions to be on the lookout for anything that was both very low to the ground and breakable, making sure that sharp objects had been Locomotored to higher ground, and that dangerous potions were well-stoppered and safely locked away in high cabinets. Narcissa’s many Erte sculptures in the light-filled conservatory were discreetly secured to their pedestals with a clever adaptation of the Gripping Charm. Every door was armed with a sensor that would kick in when it detected a small baby pushing against it, triggering an automatic Locking Spell.
For breakfast and tea

For everyday lunches and dinners

For fancy dinner parties and special occasions
Later that afternoon, Draco and Hermione went for a walk round the gardens, Rory bundled into her pushchair under a warm blanket. She was zipped into a bright red snowsuit, her tiny hands warm in little white mittens and a white, crocheted hat tied under her chin. Her cheeks were like rosy apples, in sharp contrast to the fringe of white-blond hair that framed her small face.

The gardens were starkly beautiful, their marble statuary cold and white in the grey light. A ghostly mist shrouded the bare, dark trees.

“… and I just couldn’t believe what a death trap this house is for a baby! Merlin! There was not a single room that didn’t have something really dangerous in it! The house-elves were simply marvelous though. I could never have done it all by myself. If it weren’t for them, I’d probably have taken a wrong turn and wound up lost in the dungeons forever!” Hermione giggled and looped her arm through Draco’s as he propelled the pushchair forward.

“What did you do to get them to agree? Promise you’d never, ever threaten them with hats?” Draco teased, poking her with his elbow.

“Hmph!” she huffed in mock indignation. “No, silly, certainly not! They simply saw the wisdom of my concerns and decided to help.”

“You probably reasoned them to death, knowing you!” Draco snorted. “Reckon they decided it would be easier all ‘round just to give in.”

“You make me sound awful!” Hermione protested, smacking his arm playfully.

“Nope, not awful. More like… “ He paused to consider and then grinned evilly. “A force of nature.”

“What, like a volcano?”

“Hmm. Very apt, yeah.”

They laughed together and continued along the graveled paths past winter-shriveled bushes and
empty flowerbeds, guarded by ancient stone eyes that watched them sightlessly from cold marble faces. Ever since he was a small child, Draco had always found this particular garden rather creepy, especially in winter. But being here with his two girls seemed to render it harmless, mere stone and bark and leaf.

From the time of their arrival the week before, the days had fallen into a fairly predictable pattern. Breakfast was a casual affair. A lavish spread would be laid on the sideboard in the dining room promptly at eight. Usually Lucius and Narcissa breakfasted first. Draco and Hermione generally drifted in a bit later with the baby, often overlapping the elder Malfoys’ meal. After breakfast, Narcissa would disappear into the yellow drawing room, where she would sit at the Queen Anne desk and catch up on her correspondence, a house-elf dispatched to the Owlery afterwards to send off her letters. Often she would set aside the afternoon to spend with Draco, Hermione and Rory, or to mind the baby while Hermione and Draco spent some time alone.

For Draco and Hermione, mornings were playtime with Rory; this was sacrosanct. A cheerfully messy array of toys, chubby board books, activity blankets and teethers was gradually taking over every room of the Manor’s family wing — colourful reminders, as if any were necessary, that there was a very active baby in residence. These staid and elegant old rooms hadn’t seen so much vibrant life in years. Its magic was infectious and hopeful, touching everyone in the house right down to the house-elves.

Twice, Draco and Hermione took Narcissa and the baby into Muggle London to spend time at a museum and strolling in one of the lovely parks. Hermione delighted in introducing Narcissa, an art lover, to the British Museum and the Tate Modern, something she had already done for Draco
some years before. On one memorable day, the four of them took a ride on the London Eye, a gigantic Ferris wheel-like structure set on the bank of the Thames, in which passengers were enclosed in transparent, bullet-shaped cabins from which they had a spectacular view of London for miles around. Following that rather amazing experience was another: a shopping trip to Harrod’s. Narcissa hadn’t imagined that a Muggle department store could be even more grandly opulent than what she’d seen that day at the shopping centre in Watford, but Harrod’s had proven her wrong. The entire store was a larger-than-life entertainment, but most dazzling of all were the food stalls, which tantalised with every conceivable food fantasy, elegantly presented. She was astonished and delighted.

One day, they traversed the shire to visit Stonehenge. The ancient stones, the bluestones and the sarsens, bespoke their 5000-year-old magic on the wind as it whipped across Salisbury Plain. It rooted the three of them and drew them in, starting a tingling in the blood that reminded them that their magic was part of a much more ancient tradition of earth magic in the land. On the way back, they stopped in Bath to explore the old Roman baths with their hot springs and marvellous ancient mosaics, afterwards indulging in a gloriously decadent high tea in one of the Georgian pump rooms.
For his part, Lucius spent most of every day consumed with the business of Malfoy Enterprises, either ensconced in his study for hours at a time with paperwork or entertaining a business client, or actually leaving the house to take care of concerns at company headquarters. Often he didn’t return until very late afternoon or early evening, in time for dinner. It seemed fairly obvious that he had found a way to consistently absent himself, preferring to limit his family interactions to dinner and early evenings with everyone else in the library or the drawing room. He took full advantage of those occasions to spend time with Rory, all too aware that his time with her was paltry compared with Narcissa’s. He didn’t push for more, though, sensing a certain tension from Draco that was very nearly palpable at times.

In truth, Draco was caught between regret, annoyance and relief at his father’s regular absences from their family outings, though he supposed that if he were pressed to choose, he’d have to admit that he was more relieved than anything else. He still didn’t feel entirely comfortable around Lucius, much as he tried. Regardless of his father’s implicitly expressed intentions at the Yule ritual the week before, Draco was still finding it difficult to trust.

It was obvious, to both women at least, that Lucius was holding back, deferring to his son’s apparent reluctance to get closer, so their contact invariably remained politely distant. Draco seemed oblivious to this, apparently never noticing the flicker of disappointment in his father’s eyes when his occasional, somewhat awkward attempts to deepen a conversation were ignored.

* * *

30 December

8:00 am

“What on earth am I going to do with them for two days?” Hermione paused momentarily in her attempt to spoon some rice cereal into Rory’s unwilling mouth. A small rivulet of it trickled down the baby’s chin. Absently, Hermione scooped it back in and wiped her daughter’s sticky face.

It was a bright morning, the sun glinting off great expanses of clean, new snow that had fallen overnight. The dining room was bathed in light.

Draco was busy helping himself to a second portion of eggs and rashers from the sideboard in the dining room. He paused and considered.

“Beats me. What time are they arriving?” He sat down and forked some egg into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

“Your mother asked them for early afternoon, I think. And of course they’ll be stopping, because the party’s tomorrow night.”

“Right.” The big New Year’s Eve bash. He set his fork down and rested his chin in his hand. “Mother must have something in mind. Can’t imagine my father having much to do with it
though. If anything. He’s always preferred that she organise their social calendar.”

Rory had finished and Hermione was busy giving her face a thorough once-over with a damp flannel. “Well, they’ll want to spend some time just relaxing and being with Rory, of course.” She gave a rueful laugh. “That’s the main reason they’re coming, let’s face it. It’s not me anymore! I’m only their child!” She set the flannel down and lifted Rory out of the high chair, sitting the baby down on her lap. “Well, anyway, the first couple of hours are the easy bit. It’s after that I’m thinking about. And tomorrow too. See, the thing is, I want them to feel comfortable here. They’ve never been here for more than a few hours at a time, except for the weekend of Rory’s Naming, and then your parents had a whole houseful of overnight guests, not just my mum and dad. So that was different.”

Draco moved his seat closer to Hermione and offered her a bite of his eggs. She always forgot to eat when she was taking care of the baby. “Are you worried that they’ll feel unwelcome, somehow?” He felt an ugly concern of old insinuate itself into his thoughts.

Hermione shifted the baby so that she was on the other knee now. “No,” she said slowly. “It isn’t that. Your parents have been very gracious. It’s just… well, I’ve noticed that my mum has sometimes seemed just a little bit… I don’t know… intimidated by all this -- this grandeur.” She gestured around the room with a sweep of her arm. “My dad not so much. I don’t think it fazes him, really, your family’s wealth and status, I mean. He’s not generally fussed about much. Probably why he gets along so well with Mum. They’re complete opposites!” She laughed then, rolling her eyes. This wasn’t exactly news. He had spent a fair bit of time with her parents over the years, even living under their roof when he and Hermione were first married. “Well, you already know that! Anyway,” she shrugged, “I could be wrong. Maybe I’m imagining the whole thing!”

“Maybe. Don’t worry, though. You just see to your mum and I’ll look after your dad, I promise!” he laughed.

Hermione turned to Draco and smiled. “Thanks, love,” she murmured, leaning in close and delicately licking a stray speck of marmalade from the corner of his mouth, leaving a light kiss in its place. She licked her own lips, then, savouring the sweetness. A teasing lust darkened her eyes and she smiled provocatively as she stood, hefting Rory onto her hip. Draco felt a pleasant, answering heat in his groin. He was on his feet in an instant, catching her as she turned to go.

“You’re an evil woman, Granger!” His laugh was low and husky. “You’re not getting away quite so easily, you know!” Tipping up her chin with his index finger, he brought her mouth back to his for a slow, sweet kiss.

Together they left the dining room, his arm protectively around Hermione’s waist.

Rory was still napping when Richard and Claire Granger arrived at just after two that afternoon. The roads had been a bit treacherous, and the drive from London had taken closer to three hours rather than the customary two.

Hermione was halfway down the stairs when they stepped over the threshold, shaking snow from their shoes onto a small mat that Poppy the house-elf had just conjured there and would Vanish afterwards, leaving the area clean and dry.

“Mum! Dad!” she called, smiling. It had been just over a week since they’d been together for Yule
and she was very glad to see them again. She knew that both she and Draco were fortunate to have a really close relationship with both of them, especially in light of the troubled ties that he had with his own father.

“Ah, Richard! And Claire!” Narcissa walked into the front hallway from the drawing room. “It’s lovely to see you again. Did you have a good journey?” She offered her cheek to each of them and nodded to Poppy to take their wraps. “Please, do come in. May I offer you some tea?”

“Tea would be wonderful,” Claire smiled, shrugging out of her coat. “I could do with a bit of warming up! The heater in the car needs seeing to, I’m afraid. My feet are simply frozen!”

She turned in the direction of the stairs. “Hermione, darling!” The two shared a quick hug and then Hermione turned to her dad, burying her nose in his tweed jacket for a moment. He smelt of aromatic pipe tobacco and peppermint, just the way he always did.

Just then, Lucius strode in from the direction of the library and offered a hand to Richard. “Granger,” he said, in his richly timbred voice. “Claire, a pleasure. Please.” He offered her his arm and gestured towards the blue drawing room. The five of them trooped in and made themselves comfortable on the sofas. A bright fire crackled in the hearth.

Tea had just been served and everybody was gratefully sipping the hot brew when Draco appeared in the doorway, a sleepy Rory in his arms.

“Here she is,” he grinned.

All four grandparents turned from their tea. Their delight was evident.

Lucius and Richard rose from their chairs simultaneously, Richard getting to his feet first. Ever since the incident with the photo album, it seemed to Draco as if his father were attempting to make up for the lost time of his own son’s childhood by leaping at every possible chance to spend a little time with his granddaughter. Granted, Lucius was deliberately avoiding their family excursions, but Draco was fairly sure his father was sharing in the babysitting on those afternoons when he and Hermione took time for themselves.

Somehow, that possibility made him uneasy as well. It was strangely unsettling, seeing his father go out of his way to be playful and affectionate to the baby. Unsettling – and perversely disturbing. A part of him still felt raw with hurt each time he saw the sort of loving gesture he’d been denied as a child. He couldn’t help feeling a bit resentful and then immediately ashamed of having such a base feeling. Could he really begrudge his child her grandfather’s affections just because he’d grown up without them? He watched as Lucius slowly sat back down. A momentary resurgence of spite made him glad that it was Richard who approached him now.

“May I?” Richard asked, scooping Rory up and bouncing her a bit. “She’s going to make quite the impression tomorrow night, I’ll wager. Won’t you, Monkey?” Sitting back down in the generous armchair, he dandled her on his knee. She giggled delightedly and grabbed a handful of her grandfather’s thinning, sandy hair in her small fist. Everyone laughed.

Hermione had slid over on the sofa, patting the empty space next to her. Draco sank down into it, his thigh pressing into hers as he wrapped her fingers inside his own and squeezed them. The tension in his body was quite apparent. She gave his hand a quick squeeze back and drew it into her lap.

“Well, isn’t this nice!” Narcissa smiled, offering a plate of iced tea cakes around. “A bit later, I will need to steal Hermione and Claire away for a while, if you gentlemen don’t mind. We shall want to sort out our clothing for the party and make sure everything is ready. Claire, Hermione, if there is anything you require in the way of last-minute cleaning or pressing or even alterations, that can be easily seen to. There are also some party details I should like to discuss with you both.”

“Very well,” Lucius replied agreeably. He reached for his cup and saucer. “I’m quite certain we shall find sufficient activities to amuse us whilst you ladies fuss over your costumes for tomorrow
evening.”

After a pleasant hour spent unwinding with their tea and playing with the baby, the ladies excused themselves and went upstairs, Rory in tow. It went very quiet suddenly as the men found themselves left to their own devices.

Richard was busying himself studying the view from the south window whilst Draco lounged on the sofa, idly flipping through a book. Lucius stood suddenly.

“Ahem…” He cleared his throat rather abruptly. “What say we repair to my study for a drop of something a bit stronger? Draco, you will join us, won’t you?”

Richard perked up at the mention of spirits. A little liquid refreshment of a more festive sort certainly wouldn’t go amiss.

Draco swung his long legs to the floor and stood, stretching. So Lucius was going to play gracious lord of the manor, was he? Well, at least his behaviour had been decently cordial so far. And if, by chance, what he had in mind to offer were that prized stash of hundred-year-old Armagnac, it would be worth any irritating pretensions Draco might have to put up with. He just hoped he’d get sufficiently sloshed that he wouldn’t notice them.

Lucius’ study was spacious and leather-lined. Late-afternoon sunshine filtered in through heavy wooden shutters partially drawn. A ponderous, ornately carved desk dominated the room. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases lined the oak-paneled wall behind it. A sofa in burgundy leather faced the hearth, where a low fire sputtered and crackled in the grate. Matching wing chairs stood at right angles to the sofa, and faced each other on opposite sides of the hearth. A quiet warmth pervaded the room.

While Richard and Draco made themselves comfortable, Lucius opened a cabinet recessed into the paneled wall and drew out a beautifully embossed bottle. Setting it down reverently, he brought out three tulip-shaped, crystal brandy snifters from an adjacent cabinet and set them down next to the bottle.

Richard sucked in his breath. He fancied himself something of a connoisseur of fine wines and spirits and their accoutrements. These were no ordinary snifters, as well he knew. These were Murano snifters, worth a bloody fortune, nearly £100 apiece. He’d heard about them of course, but had never actually seen one. These were exceptionally lovely: mouthblown and handmade as all Murano crystal was, each stem a delicate snake sinuously winding its way up to the bowl.

“Now, then, Granger, here is something you shall really enjoy,” Lucius said with no small measure of pride. “This Armagnac has been in the family for one hundred years. I had Tibby bring it up from the cellars earlier today. Of course, the pouring is something I see to myself.” He opened the bottle ever so carefully, pouring a measure of the amber liquid into each, and then handed a snifter each to Draco and Richard.

“Cheers.” Lucius raised his glass, and Richard and Draco lifted their own in response. Lucius cocked an eyebrow as he waited for a reaction. Swirling the liquid for a moment, Richard brought the glass to his nose, sniffing delicately. His eyes drifted shut for a moment, while an expression of sheer bliss crossed his face. Lucius smiled a bit smugly.

“Ah, Lucius,” Richard sighed, shaking his head. “This is simply beyond description. Absolutely exquisite.” He swirled the brandy again, breathing in the aroma once more, and took an appreciative sip. “Pure ambrosia.”

Sprawled on the leather sofa, Draco idly swirled the amber liquor in his own glass as he rested it on his chest. Listening to his father and Hermione’s dad as they sat opposite each other in the wing chairs by the fireside and chatted about the relative merits of Armagnac versus Cognac, where the best grapes were cultivated and whether these brandies were superior to the various fruit varieties, bordered on the surreal in his view. That it was still surprising that they would have something like this in common was an understatement. On top of that, Lucius was actually being
more than civil to a Muggle -- you’d have to call it genuinely amiable -- and for longer than the requisite ten-minute stretch. In the past, although he had certainly been polite, even cordial, to Hermione’s parents -- scrupulously so, in fact -- he had never invested himself personally in the contact being made. It had always remained pleasantly superficial but nothing more. Today was different. This was a real exchange without detectable condescension. Draco wondered how much more common ground there might possibly be between Richard and his father. Curiously, Lucius himself seemed unsurprised. Richard seemed merely pleased. Draco narrowed his eyes.

Half an hour later, there were bottles of Cognac, Calvados, Framboise and Slivovitz lined up on the desk, alongside the Armagnac with which they had begun. Each had been opened in turn and sampled.

Draco lounged against the back of the sofa, glass still in hand. It was his third drink, though half of it was still in the snifter. He hadn’t quite kept up with his father and father-in-law. Hadn’t even attempted it. Somebody had to keep his head in this little party. It certainly wasn’t going to be Lucius, apparently, judging by the slightly skewed path he was taking from the liquor cabinet to the chair. Nor was it Richard. He was slumped down in the other wing chair, looking ever so slightly dazed.

“Lucius, I want to thank you for being such a gracious host,” he was saying, looking fuzzily in Draco’s general direction, nowhere near where Lucius actually had managed to seat himself. “Brandy is nectar for the gods, it’s true. This Pays d’Auge – remarkable.” He closed his eyes as he took another sip of the special Calvados imported from Normandy, swirling it around his tongue. “And I haven’t had a really fine Slivovitz like that in a very long while. May I ask how you came to acquire it? Private source in Bulgaria?” he added, joking.

Lucius hesitated before answering. At the silence, Draco looked up curiously.

“Ah… yes, well… that was a gift, actually,” Lucius began finally. “From a… former colleague,” he finished, refraining from a more specific reply. In fact, the Bulgarian plum brandy had been a gift twelve years earlier from former fellow Death Eater Igor Karkaroff in an effort to ingratiate himself with Lucius, at the time of the ill-fated Triwizard Tournament during Draco’s fourth year at Hogwarts. It was one part of a long period in Lucius’ life of which he was now distinctly ashamed. Too many bad memories and too much bad blood already stood between him and his son. He had no wish to add fuel to the fire, and he hoped this fragment of conversation had slipped past Draco unnoticed.

It hadn’t.

There was only one Bulgarian “colleague” Draco could think of, and the unpleasant image of a pallid and rather sinister face came unbidden into his thoughts, along with memories -- of an entire portion of his own life as well as his father’s career as a Death Eater -- he’d just as soon forget. He stared down into the depths of his glass.

“But I daresay,” Richard went on, unaware of the sudden tension and determined to make his point, “that there is something to be said for good, old-fashioned British ale as well, would you not agree?”

Lucius nodded distractedly.

“Good old-fashioned British ale, I say! Nobody makes it better.” Richard lunged forward suddenly, sloshing a bit of the Calvados that remained in his glass onto his trousers. “Reckon there are literally hundreds of ales made right here in this country. Foundation of our economy. Millions in exports every year. I’ve got stock in several myself, you know,” he confided with a knowing grin. “Made myself a quid or two, I can tell you.”

Draco couldn’t help a small grin, his black mood dissipating. If only Hermione could hear this. He couldn’t wait to give her a blow-by-blow. He raised his glass to his lips to keep from laughing out loud.
“‘Course,” Richard continued, “what we export isn’t really the good, quality stuff. Shame too. You know,” and here his voice took on a confidential tone, “I like to think of myself as fairly knowledgeable in this area. Always make it my business, wherever I go, to sample the best of the locals.” He smiled, lost in a momentary reverie. “Nothing like a nice glass of Gales Prize, or Sarah Hughes Dark Ruby Mild…. At any rate, the exports are vastly overrated, in my view. The only place to get the real thing is in the local pubs right here in Britain. Eh?” He grinned a bit muzzily and drained the last of his brandy in a single gulp.

“Agreed, agreed.” Lucius nodded his head vigorously. “Of course, even a chap with a discerning palate such as yourself is unlikely to have tasted the truly rare and exceptional ales. Those are…” - - he paused meaningfully -- “… not available, except to those who know where they might be found, shall we say.”

Richard’s curiosity was piqued. “Oh, and where would that be?” He had finally managed to rotate himself back around so that he faced Lucius.

“Would you like to see for yourself?” Lucius asked, a very faint smile playing about his mouth. There was a rather beady, alcohol-induced gleam in his eyes.

Draco sat up suddenly, nearly spilling the remainder of his brandy. Lucius wasn’t actually considering taking Richard there, was he? This day was just full of surprises. Hurriedly, he tossed back what was left in his glass, putting it down rather abruptly on the nearby table.

Meanwhile, Lucius had stood, brushing down his black shirt and trousers. He tossed back his silver mane.

“Come along, you two,” he commanded briskly. “We’ll leave word that we’re going out for a little while. Tibby!”
Castle Combe, Wiltshire

The White Hart, Castle Combe
Moments later, all of them were bundled warmly against the cold. And then, Richard Granger had his first-ever, rather terrifying experience of Side-Along Apparition. One moment, they were in the warmth and quiet of Lucius’ study and the next, they were standing in a narrow, secluded alley between old stone houses, in the middle of the medieval village of Castle Combe. He looked around, blinking rapidly, before Lucius waved him and Draco towards the main road and began walking, his heavy cloak flaring out behind him.

The venerable White Hart Inn was just a few yards away. It was housed in an 800-year-old structure, originally half-timbered and now whitewashed, the roofline broken into several gabled peaks. The sign hanging in front showed a white stag with a magnificent crown of antlers, reclining gracefully. The White Hart had served continuously as a pub for the past 600 years. However, what ordinary patrons didn’t realise was that it had a dual identity, not only as a pub for non-Magical folk downstairs but, in secret rooms upstairs, as one of a string of wizarding establishments that dotted the country as well.

Lucius led Richard and Draco round the back of the building to a rather unremarkable doorway. He drew his wand, muttered a quiet “Alohomora,” and pushed against the heavy, iron-hinged wooden door. The darkened stairwell was lit by a single, guttering candle suspended above a recessed ledge halfway up the stairs. Richard felt a small pang of regret, in passing, that they hadn’t entered by way of the more conventional downstairs pub. He felt sure that two of the great ales of the area, Wadsworth 6X and Farmer’s Glory, would be available on tap there. He had a sneaking suspicion they would not be available where he was going.

Once again, Draco felt a sense of the surreal pressing on him. This whole experience was turning just a bit too weird. Never before, at least not to his knowledge, had a Muggle been brought to the private upstairs rooms that had served Wiltshire’s wizarding community for centuries. That his father had chosen to do this was something that defied all logic and what was more, all Draco’s prior knowledge and understanding of him. Either that, or Lucius was a lot deeper into his cups than he had let on, and simply not thinking straight. Down a darkened hallway they went, Draco bringing up the rear. His head had been the clearest up to this point, but now he had a sudden and powerful urge to drink himself into a delightful stupor.

The dim hallway opened out onto a somewhat brighter room with a low, beamed ceiling and wide, wooden floorboards. A huge hearth stood at one end, its fire burning high and bright. Wooden settles faced each other at the fireside. A long bar stretched along the opposite wall, which was whitewashed and held several shelves in a recessed alcove. They gleamed with rows of polished glasses and bottles, and brass taps. Several long oak tables and chairs formed a sort of H in the centre of the room, and they were crowded with people drinking and laughing, deep in conversation. Flickering candles were everywhere, in wall sconces and in tin holders on shelves, on the tables, and suspended strategically overhead.

Lucius strode in with an air of natural authority, doffing his cloak and gloves. Draco and Richard followed in his wake. They sat down at the bar and within a few seconds, the publican was attentively awaiting their order.

“Lord Malfoy, it is a pleasure to see you,” he said, dipping his head deferentially. “It has been quite some time since you were last here with us at the White Hart.”

“Indeed, yes, Charles.” There was a regal grace about Lucius Malfoy that fit him like a second skin. “You know my son, I think?” He nodded in Draco’s direction. Draco smiled politely. “And may I introduce my daughter-in-law’s father? This is Richard Granger.”

“How do you do?” Richard smiled. So far, floating candles aside, it seemed not very different to any of the countless pubs he’d been in over the years. Well, that and the fact that most everyone here was wearing robes…

It occurred to Draco that in introducing Richard, his father was now making it quite public that he’d brought a Muggle into the establishment. It was already common knowledge that Lucius Malfoy’s son had married a Muggleborn. He wondered how long it would be before this latest
intelligence made its way around the room, and he glanced about warily.

Lucius seemed completely unfazed by the possibility of any sort of reaction. Castle Combe was Malfoy territory, had been since the 1500s when the Malfoys had arrived from France and laid their ancestral claim, building the Manor atop Castle Hill. Several hundred years earlier, another Malfoy castle had once stood on the same spot, and then, over two centuries, fallen into disrepair and eventual ruin. Nearly the same level of deference once shown to his ancestors was still his to command, and he exercised that power without restraint. In these parts, Lucius Malfoy was practically a law unto himself.

The publican’s eyes flickered in sudden understanding and then veiled themselves once again. He smiled. “How may I serve you, Lord Malfoy?”

“How may I serve you, Lord Malfoy?”

“Ich, yes,” Lucius replied. “A good bitter to start, I think. Three pints of Serpe d’Or.”

An hour later, at a table in a private, darkened corner, the three men sat amidst an array of empty pint glasses and a plate with the remains of meat pasties that Charles had sent over, compliments of the house. A candle in a pewter holder sputtered low, its wax pooling in a hot river in the ringed base. Richard listened, glassy-eyed, to Lucius, who was holding forth on a history of the family’s presence in the shire. Draco’s head was pillowed on his arms, which were folded on the table. He’d heard it all before. Periodically one eye would open and then close again in blissful semi-consciousness.

“…Reginald de Dunstanville. Earl of Cornwall. Bastard child of an adulterous affair between Henry I and Lady Sybilla Malfoi de Corbet. Of course, the king never acknowledged him. Built his castle on the hill in 1140, after the Saxons cleared out.” Lucius had begun to slur his words slightly but he was still in rare form. “Ah! Perfect!” The latest round of drinks had arrived, a rich, dark porter. “Richard, you mus’ try this. Devil’s Tipple. Sublime, and quite unlike anything you’ve ever had!” Lucius grinned a bit lopsidedly and held the glass up. “A votre sante!” When deeply in his cups, Lucius tended to lapse into French.

Draco lifted his head and peered blearily at his father. Lucius was the older by nearly twenty-six years and yet it looked as though he were about to drink his son under the table. Effortlessly. Unbelievable. Draco slid his hand out to grip the glass, figuring he’d take a sip or two for the sake of his pride at the very least.

Richard sat back in his chair. The room had begun to shift off its foundations just a bit. But he couldn’t be rude to his host. Lucius had gone to a lot of trouble and expense to show him a good time. It would be terribly bad form not to at least taste this latest ale. With some effort, he held his glass up to salute Lucius and took a swallow.

“…passed into other hands and then fell into disrepair by the fourteenth century. No longer needed as a fortified stronghold, you see. Abandoned. The local folk used the stones to build the houses you see in the village today. Nothing but weeds and broken stones by the time Lucien-George Malfoi came from France in 15--” Lucius paused for a moment, recollecting, and then smiled. “1528, yes. When he built the Manor, he had it warded and Glamoured so that it could not be seen by non-Magical folk, except those of his choosing. The ancient Glamour is still in place today. To the outside world, there is only a ruin at the top of Castle Hill.” Lucius took a healthy swig of his ale.

“How does he do it? Richard groaned silently through the fog that was rapidly descending around his head. Hell, it’s not possible. He’s just managed to finish that entire pint while giving us a fifteen-minute history lecture!

Draco was having similar thoughts as he struggled to keep his head up. Oh fuck. Battle lost. His head banged down hard on the table and momentarily, he saw stars.

Sometime later, when he managed to lift his head off the table again, he noticed, fuzzily, that they were amongst a scant handful of patrons still at the tables. Outside, the sky had grown dark. Shit.
They were fucked. Royally. And bugger-all to do about it now except face the music.

Lucius left a generous pile of Galleons on the table without troubling to count it out, and attempted to stand. It was then that a fair quantity of brandy followed by three full pints of unusually potent ale caught up with him at last, and with a vengeance. A sudden loss of equilibrium not unlike that which one feels in a lift during a rapid descent overcame him and he swayed alarmingly, sitting back down hard.

“Oh dear,” he murmured. “Oh dear, oh dear. Think I’m a bit tiddly.”

Draco and Richard looked at Lucius and then at each other. A moment of utter silence followed this absurd pronouncement, and then they both dissolved into laughter. Loud, rather undignified laughter. Lucius was momentarily affronted, but his skewed dignity made the others laugh even harder. Before long, he joined them.

“Phew,” he spluttered finally, and they all sighed, wiping their eyes. “We should be taking our leave now. Cissa…” he began, and then his head snapped to attention as he realised where that thought had been leading. “Merlin’s balls, Draco… your mother… she’ll have my hide!”

Well, this was something altogether new. Lucius Malfoy, actually in fear of his wife’s wrath. Draco found he was enjoying the fact of his father’s discomfited state enormously. It was just so… refreshing and novel. And human. The fortress had toppled. There was actually a mortal man inside.

“Come on, Dad. Let’s get you up on your feet,” Draco grinned. Easier said than done, however, as he was fairly stonkered himself. He couldn’t even think about what Hermione would say when he got home. There was a much more pressing problem to deal with first: getting down all those bloody stairs.

It was a painfully slow descent. Surely there hadn’t been so many steps before! It seemed as if their number had doubled on the way down. And got more precipitous too. And why was it so bloody dark? Draco hauled Lucius’ arm over his shoulders, his own arm wrapped around his father’s back, bracing him as they walked with halting baby steps. Richard followed, only minimally less plastered than Lucius but able, at least, to keep himself upright. He just wished the staircase would stop its infernal spinning!

Clearly, Apparition was impossible now, Draco realised. Splinching themselves was practically a dead cert, likely resulting in body parts being strewn all over Wiltshire. They would have to get home the old-fashioned way, on their own steam. It was going to be a long walk.

Castle Combe was actually quite lovely in the snow. Chunks of ice rimed the Bybrook as it wended its way through the village. The old Roman bridge spanning it was frosted with white. The facades of the ancient stone houses were dark, but their windows, like bright eyes, shone with warm light. It was a shame the three men lurching along the narrow roads were in no position to appreciate its beauty.
They left the village behind and began the uphill climb to the Manor. It was only half a mile, but
most of this would be on a road that was narrow and not well ploughed. Draco wondered, 
suddenly, how Richard had even managed it in his car only hours before. It was so bloody steep.
He tightened his grip on Lucius, whose trajectory tended to be three steps veering off in one
direction and then another couple that over-corrected and took the two of them off the opposite 
way. With great effort, Draco hauled his father back onto the relatively straight road each time.
Richard followed behind. Draco fervently hoped he was still back there, at least. Hermione would 
kill him if he lost her dad.

Suddenly, Lucius lurched to a halt, causing Draco to lose his balance and topple backwards to sit 
in the snow directly in Richard’s path. Predictably, Richard tripped over his son-in-law in the dark 
and fell, swearing colourfully, his elbow finding its way into Draco’s left eye.

“OW…”

“Draco, is that you? I’m so sorry! Are you all right?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, I’m fine.” I’m just peachy. Except my eye is probably hanging from its socket 
by now. Fucking hell! That Hurts.

He dragged himself to his feet and reached a hand out to Richard, pulling him up as well. Great.
Not only were they totally pissed and cold – now they were wet, to boot.

“Why’d you stop?” Draco asked his father peevishly.

“There’s a shortcut ‘cross this field. Come on!” Lucius would not be dissuaded. It was his land.
He knew best. Awkwardly, he swung his leg over the low fence and, stumbling a bit, began 
wading through the snow in a jerky, stiff-legged walk eerily reminiscent of Frankenstein’s monster 
in the old 1930s film. All Draco and Richard could do was follow haplessly behind.

This was crazy. It was pitch dark. They would get lost. What the fuck did his insane, never-
wrong, control-freak father mean by dragging them off the road, half-cocked, in the middle of 
fucking nowhere like this? He really didn’t have a clue where he was leading them, did he! What 
an utterly pointless, arse-brained cock-up this had become! They’d probably wander round this 
gods-forsaken field for a couple more hours till they were completely knackered, freeze their 
bloody balls off, fall asleep, and bloody, fucking Die. Their frozen, inebriated bodies would be 
 savaged by… by wolves. Or something.

They trudged along for a while in the silent cold of the field. It was a moonless night, the sky 
heavy with snow clouds blotting out the stars. Suddenly, there was an odd sound quite close by, 
seemingly right in front of Draco. A sort of… bleating. Draco stopped and listened intently, 
straining to see. There it was again. He took a tentative step forward and promptly fell over a 
warm, woolly mass that turned its head and baa-ed directly in Draco’s face.

“Bugger!”

They’d blundered straight into a flock of sheep, loosely scattered in clusters over a wide swath of 
the snowy field and standing like sentinels.

Amazingly, Lucius had managed to navigate the flock unscathed and was already on the other 
side of them, at the far end of the field. He gestured with his arm and yelled something, but neither 
Richard nor Draco could hear. The sheep had become restive with two strangers in their midst and 
were vocalising their discontent. They milled about, jostling a bit. Draco was caught amongst 
several, and found himself being bumped jarringly, kicked, and trod on by small, hard hooves. 
Somewhere in the mass of moving animals, Richard was similarly caught up. He set his jaw 
grimly and moved on, shoving sheep out of his way with dogged determination.

Finally, somewhat the dirtier and more bruised for wear, the two broke free of the flock. In his 
relief, Draco began to run and Richard followed suit, slipping a bit on the snow and occasional 
patch of fresh feces. It was like a silent signal to the sheep. A green light. Suddenly, the alarming 
sound of hundreds of hooves pounding the flattened snow reached their ears, and it was heading
in their direction.

No time even for a glance over one’s shoulder. They ran.

The sheep followed.

Panting, sliding, falling, moving with the grace of hippos on ice skates, Draco and Richard finally approached Lucius, who was waiting by the gate. His composure had been utterly shattered at the sight of them, and he laughed as he hung onto the top rail for support, tears starting down his cheeks. That is, until the stampede grew a bit too close for comfort.

“Come on, come on!” he shouted, and then found, to his dismay, that he couldn’t seem to unlatch the gate.

“FATHER! OPEN THE BLOODY GATE!”

Lucius fumbled with the latch but his fingers felt like sausages. He raised his hands in a gesture of futility. Swearing, Draco threw himself at the gate, wrenching at the latch savagely. It wouldn’t budge. Stuck-- frozen probably.

The sheep were close now. What they would do when they had nowhere left to run was anybody’s guess, but Draco did not want to stick around to find out. Scrambling up the stile, he flung himself violently over the fence, hitting the ground with a thud.

He turned to see that both Lucius and Richard were rather clumsily following his example. Now that he was safely on the other side, he could appreciate the obvious comic aspect of it. They really did look quite ridiculous -- two middle-aged men, all their dignity gone, their smart street clothes now slimed with snow and sheep droppings, frantically scrabbling up the stile and launching themselves over the fence, arms and legs flailing in an effort to cushion the fall, to the tune of language Draco hadn’t ever heard from his father. He hadn’t known that such words were even in Lucius’ vocabulary.

Slowly, painfully -- those bruises were going to be a bitch -- he stood up. He was thoroughly chilled, his trousers soaked through at the bum and knees. Streaks of filth patterned his clothes. Snow had worked its way inside his shoes.

Lucius struggled to his feet next. Fumbling in his cloak, he finally drew out his wand and made a wild thrust into the air in Richard’s general direction. Having managed to make it to his hands and knees by this time but with no clue what Lucius was preparing to do, Richard panicked and threw himself back onto the ground, covering his head with his arms.

Lucius stared at Richard, incredulous. “Get up, man!” he slurred. “Only going to – to – oh yes. Tidy you up.” He pointed the wand directly at Richard. A pair of wary eyes peered back at him over the top of one arm.

“Scourfigy!”

Nothing.

Lucius glared at his wand, astounded and feeling a bit betrayed into the bargain, and tried again with the same result.

Draco was leaning against a nearby tree, quietly snickering. He tried very hard not to laugh out loud. Bad form to laugh at somebody -- one’s father, in particular, as that could get somewhat sticky later -- when he’s rather the worse for drink. Fuck it all, though, this was bloody hilarious. “Scourfigy” indeed! Call yourself a wizard.

Finally he pushed off from the tree trunk and ambled over to his father, who was still staring, confused, at his uncooperative wand.
“Here,” Draco offered magnanimously, “lemme do it.” He took the wand from Lucius, pointing it at his father’s snow-encrusted trousers, and opened his mouth to do the incantation.

“How did it go? Bollocks. Now this was truly sad. Couldn’t even manage to remember a simple cleaning spell. “Here!” he said, thrusting the wand back into Lucius’ hand. “Wand’s gone funny.”

Lucius nodded gravely as he tried once, twice, three times, to slide the wand back into his cloak’s inner pocket.

“S’not supposed to do that!” he complained. “Mus’ lodge a complaint with old Ollivander! I ’spect my wands to work properly, damn it all!”

With the exception of occasional grunts, the three of them silently resumed their stumbling, loose-limbed shamble up the narrow road that led to the tall Manor gates, the chimney pots of the house dark and distant shapes above the tree line. All Draco could think about was spending the foreseeable future soaking in a hot bath. Preferably with Hermione, but at this point, he’d be quite content on his own.
It had gone nine. *Nine.* They’d been away four and a half hours. Narcissa, Claire and Hermione had had a walk around the grounds with the baby, and the clothing and accessories for the big party had been laid out. Rory had been played with, fed, bathed, nursed, read to, fuss ed over by both grandmas, and put to bed. Dinner was long since over. It had been served at seven.

The women sat waiting in the library. Dodie had brought up a tray of coffee and biscuits, and now they sipped and ate rather mechanically as they waited. Narcissa’s face was an impassive mask, but her blue eyes betrayed her irritation. First of all, how could Lucius disappear like this the very first night of the Grangers’ arrival, taking his son and one of their guests along with him? She’d had such a pleasant family evening planned, and he knew it. Not only that, it seemed to Narcissa that such behaviour was unspeakably rude to Claire, both as her host and also because he was causing her worry with regard to Richard. Finally, it was the night before the party and there were so many details yet to be seen to. It was all highly irresponsible and utterly unlike him.

Claire fidgeted, fussing with her skirt, patting her hair down, checking her watch, and five minutes later, doing it all again. The men had been imbibing before they left the house, and she suspected alcohol was a factor in their mysterious disappearance. She didn’t look forward to the state her husband might be in upon their return.

Hermione alternated between annoyance and worry. This was an uncomfortable reminder of how she’d felt that terrible day the week before, when Draco had left the house in such an awful state, not returning until hours later. She’d been badly worried then. Today was different, of course -- he wasn’t alone this time and he wasn’t roaming about, distraught. Still, he really ought to have let her know where he’d gone. But what if he couldn’t? What if something dreadful had happened? One of them could be injured or ill.

She twisted her fingers together and found her palms were a bit clammy. Wiping them off on the seat of her jeans, she went to the window and peered out. The darkness was impenetrable, very nearly palpable. Suddenly she thought she saw something. It was bright, a beacon, like concentrated moonlight. And there—again! And then she knew. Thank Merlin for that wonderful, impossibly blond Malfoy hair! Two heads of it were on their way to the front door! She had to assume one sandy-haired, balding head was there as well. With a joyful cry, she ran, Narcissa and Claire at her heels.

They flung open the heavy door and found three bedraggled, obviously drunk men weaving their way closer. The youngest was in the middle, his arms round the waists of the two older ones, attempting to support them both.

With cries of consternation, their wives latched onto them, dragging them inside.

“Tibby!”
At Narcissa’s sharp call, the old house-elf appeared. He attempted to support Lucius on one side, while from the other, Narcissa slung her husband’s arm across her back, clucking her disapproval. Together they half-dragged him towards the staircase. She would deal with him upstairs in the privacy of their suite. Just before they disappeared around the curve of the stairway, she looked back at Claire and Hermione, her lips betraying a hint of mirth, and winked.

“Mum, can you manage Dad all right?” Hermione stifled a laugh of her own and watched as her mother slid her father’s jacket off and worked on removing his wet shoes.

“Oh yes,” Claire sighed, and paused. “This certainly isn’t the first time I’ve had to take care of your father when he’s been… shall we say… a bit pickled.” Sliding his wet things off, she allowed a house-elf to take them away for cleaning and drying, and marched Richard up the stairs to the guest room they would be using during their visit. “Goodnight dear,” she called down to Hermione from the top of the stairs. “Take good care of Draco,” and then a bit more faintly, “Come along, Richard! One foot in front of the other, that’s it.”

Hermione smiled. Draco sat on the hall settle, legs splayed open, head drooping on his chest. Merlin, but he was in for a glorious hangover in the morning! Gently she unfastened his cloak and drew off his gloves and wet shoes. He slumped bonelessly forward and she caught him against her chest, her arms wrapped around him under his armpits to prop him up. She didn’t have the heart to lecture him. He was just too far gone, and it was clear that, drunk as he was, he had tried his best to take care of both her father and his own. Pressing a kiss to the top of his head, she hoisted him up to a standing position and threaded her arm around his waist to hold him up. She desired no assistance from house-elves, preferring to take care of her wayward husband by herself.

“Draco. You’ve got to walk now. I know you’re really tired” -- and completely sozzled -- “but we need to get you into a bath and then to bed. Come on, love, you have to help me just a little bit.”

The mention of a bath woke him up just enough that he began to make the effort to walk.

* 

He became suddenly talkative as soon as they reached their bedroom, but only in odd snatches and fragments. She began peeling his clothes off as he rambled.

“… the man’s got a cast-iron stomach, I swear, Hermione! He kep’ tossing ‘em back like they were water. Me, I’ve got my fucking head on the table, completely shitfaced, and he’s still drinking and telling the entire history of the Malfoys at the same time… ʼn’ then he decides to go over the FENCE for Merlin’s sake… nothing there, pitch black, suddenly two hundred flippin’ SHEEP are after me! You try running in the snow with four hundred rabid sheep up your arse…!!”

Once he was naked, she propped him up against the pillows, covering him with a spare quilt, and went into the en-suite to run a bath, returning to sit beside him and massage his feet, still so terribly cold to the touch.

“Mmm… feels so nice… love you, baby… c’mere…” He grinned crookedly and reached out to pull her up beside him.

The look he gave her was a bit unfocused. I’m over here, she thought, and bit back a giggle. *You poor lamb.*

He went to brush a stray curl off her forehead, nearly poking her in the nose. Holding his hands down for the sake of her own safety, she leaned in and brushed her lips against his, drawing back and wrinkling her nose at the heavy fumes that came from his mouth in a boozy sigh. It was then that she got a really good look at his left eye, which had begun to turn shades of purple and green
against his pallid skin.

“Gods, Draco! What happened to your eye?!”

“Oh… ha ha… your dad. Damned hard elbow he’s got.”

“What??”

“Accident. Tripped.”

Of course. This explained everything. Hermione shook her head. She’d wait until much later to ask the hard questions. Meanwhile, best to just get him into the tub. She would survey his various bruises and heal them all tomorrow. Just now, what he needed most was sleep.

The warm water was ever so soothing. He could feel every single chilled muscle gradually unclenching. Hermione sat on the rim of the tub behind his head, and worked her magic in a relaxing scalp massage as she shampooed his hair. He couldn’t imagine anything lovelier at that moment than the feel of her fingers moving in rhythmic circles, working their way from the top of his head to the nape of his neck, sliding through his hair, pressing gently on his temples and then starting all over again. It was utterly blissful. The rush of warm water as she rinsed his hair clean was heavenly. Eyes closed, he hummed in tuneless contentment. By the time she finished, he was more than ready for sleep.

As she tucked him up and leaned in to give him a goodnight kiss, his eyes were already sliding shut, but he struggled to stay awake for just a moment longer.

“Thanks, love,” he whispered. “For… you know…”

She smiled as she settled herself in the chaise to watch over him.

TBC
The Twelve Days, Part Four: Consequences and Truths

The Twelve Days, part 4: Consequences and Truths

Malfoy Manor
It had been a long night. Fortunately, Hermione had had the foresight to leave a basin by Draco’s side of the bed. At just past midnight, it came in very useful. She awoke to raw, retching sounds and hurried to hold Draco’s head as he lost the contents of his stomach. It wasn’t pleasant. At one in the morning, there was more. The dry heaves set in at two. She suspected the same scene was playing itself out in two other rooms of the house as well.

Now, on this final day of the old year, sunshine streamed in through every window in the Manor. Hermione had been up for hours already, taking care of Rory. She and the baby were in the dining room now, along with her mother and Narcissa, lingering over coffee. The men in the family were conspicuously absent.

“Absolutely unbelievable! I haven’t seen him in such a state since… well, to be frank, not since our Hogwarts days. Lucius never loses control, for any reason. Well, rarely, anyway. I cannot imagine what would have possessed him to do such a thing.” Narcissa shook her head in amazement and took a sip of coffee from the fine bone-china cup.

“Then perhaps regular visits to the “local” are less a part of your society than the rest of Britain,” Claire sighed. “It’s really sad that alcohol is such an ingrained part of our culture in this country. I like a glass of something myself every now and then, of course, but I think the way some people drink carries things a bit too far.” She chuckled her tongue and looked at Hermione. “Your father fancies himself a connoisseur. Does that mean he has to work his way through every single new ale in the pub?” She rolled her eyes. “Men!”

Hermione wasn’t surprised, really, but now that she stopped to think about it, she wasn’t pleased either. Her father’s occasional visits to the local pub had been so much a part of life as she grew up that for years, she hadn’t really thought twice about it. All her childhood friends’ dads had been the same. But her mother was right – perhaps all that drinking was just a bit too accepted.

“Draco isn’t a big drinker, not really, not since we were at uni, anyway,” she replied, considering. “Once in a while when he gets together with his friends, yes… but not on a regular basis. Oh, but he was so ill last night! Sicked up twice. Poor baby! Maybe the memory of that will keep him from overindulging if nothing else does!” She giggled in spite of herself.

Narcissa smiled wryly. “Lucius kept insisting he was perfectly all right. The man couldn’t even walk straight. I’ve no idea how they got home last night! Did you see the condition of their clothes? I could swear they’d walked through a sheep pasture. I thought I saw bits of wool on his trousers. Not to mention…” She wrinkled her nose delicately.

The three of them laughed. Sheep pasture. The very idea was ludicrous.

“Oh…” Claire paused, her face suddenly somber. “Oh dear! They’re going to feel wretched today! And tonight’s the party! Isn’t there something you two can… ah… conjure up, to take a hangover away?” She never imagined herself asking such a question. But there it was. And in this instance, their skills could certainly prove to be useful…

Narcissa considered this, and then a wicked grin crossed her face. “As it happens, Claire, I do have a good supply of a very efficacious hangover potion already bottled and put away. Always like to have some ready before our big gatherings. But I don’t believe I shall offer that to Lucius. I
think, in fact, that all three of them would benefit from something a bit more... persuasive. Something that will really make the point. And I know just the thing. I shall have to brew some, though. Hermione darling, Draco tells me you’re quite talented at potions. How would you feel about working with me to prepare some now? I expect we’re going to have three rather muzzy-headed men in our midst before very long. What I have in mind will cure whatever ails them and then some.”

“Hmm…” Hermione smiled mischievously. “Yes, absolutely. Mum, could you take Rory for a bit while we do this? I’m sure she’d love to spend some time with her grandma anyway.”

Claire nodded. “I’d be delighted, sweetheart,” she replied, with a faint smirk. “Especially for such a worthy cause.” Laughing, she scooped the baby up and walked out of the dining room.

Narcissa led Hermione to the plant-filled conservatory. A few days before, assisted by the house-elves, Hermione had done some creative rearranging of various art objects and other items there, for the sake of Rory’s future safety.

At one end of the room, there was a large, wooden table at which Narcissa liked to work with cut flowers, arranging and trimming and such. It also served as one of several impromptu workspaces she used when a potion needed brewing and her larger workroom in the dungeons was inconvenient. Hermione had made sure to move the gardening shears and various knives into secure drawers. Now she felt a bit uneasy. She’d gone ahead without so much as a “by your leave” and knew she’d been presumptuous in doing so. Narcissa might very well be annoyed. However, as they stood together at the table while Narcissa gathered the ingredients, along with her marble mortar and pestle, nothing was said. Either she was being remarkably sanguine about it or she truly hadn’t yet noticed anything amiss. Hermione would have bet money on the former. Not much got past her mother-in-law, she had come to realise.

“Hermione darling,” Narcissa said presently, “would you please grind up the scarab beetle bits? Thank you. Oh, and hand me the small knife with the mother-of-pearl handle, won’t you? I’m sure you know where it is.” A ghost of a smile quirked her mouth.

Hermione let out her pent-up breath. Chagrined, she darted a quick glance at Narcissa, who was studiously avoiding her gaze.

“Oh,” Hermione said, and had the grace to blush.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t notice, my dear?”

Hermione felt rather small. “I’m sorry, Narcissa. Cissa, I mean,” she added hastily at her mother-in-law’s smile and raised eyebrow. “I should have asked. It... it was wrong of me.”

“Yes. You really should have asked.” At the look of intense embarrassment on Hermione’s face, Narcissa patted her arm. “But no harm was done. And I know your motives were good ones, although quite honestly, I cannot pretend to understand just why you felt the need to... what do you call it?”


“Yes, baby-proof the house. Why? In my day, we never troubled about such things. And the children were always perfectly all right.”

Hermione laid down the pestle and turned to face Narcissa. “I suppose it must seem a bit strange to you, at the very least. I know it does to my mother as well,” she admitted. “It’s just that in the average home, there are so many dangers to a curious baby. And... well... in a house like this, the hazards are multiplied. I don’t know...” She shrugged and smiled. “It’s just how things are done nowadays. All the experts recommend it, and really, it makes a lot of sense to me.”

“I see.” Narcissa smiled back. “Well, if it means you’ll visit more often, then do, by all means, and with my blessing. Just be sure to let me know before you feel the urge to move anything that
belongs to Draco’s father. I doubt he’d be quite so understanding about it. He is meticulous with his possessions.”

Nodding, Hermione promised she would. She was relieved to have this particular conversation over with.

Together they chopped and ground and mixed and then poured the entire contents of the wooden bowl into a small cauldron, where it slowly heated to a nice, rolling simmer.

Three hours later, the hangover potion was done.

*

Draco awakened shortly before two and found himself alone, afternoon sunshine pouring in through the partially opened drapes. He sat up, squinting. The light was painful and on top of that, he felt decidedly bilious. His mouth was dry and rancid from vomit. Almost instantly, an ice pick of pain drove through the centre of his forehead and he groaned, falling back on the pillows and squeezing his eyes shut again. The resulting wave of dizziness had him rolling into a foetal position, dreading the slightest sudden movement.

“Hermione!” he called out. There was no reply. “Herm-i-oo-neee,” he moaned softly. Where had she gone? How could she have left him in his hour of need?

Ten minutes later, he realised he’d have to brave getting out of bed on his own. Slowly, he sat up, and instantly had to clutch his pounding head once again as another bout of dizziness threatened to overtake him. Touching his feet to the floor, he stood, gripping the edge of the night table so he wouldn’t topple over again. The floor was cold under his feet. His dressing gown lay across the back of the chaise, and he made his way there with the deliberate pace of a tortoise, grabbing handholds of furniture as he went. Every step caused tremors to explode inside his aching head with the volume of Chinese gongs.

*I’ll never drink like this again, I’ll never drink like this again, I swear on Merlin’s heart, brain, and testicles that I WILL NEVER DRINK LIKE THIS AGAIN.*

He reached the chaise and awkwardly slipped into his dressing gown one arm at a time, while holding onto the upholstered back of the chair with the other hand. It was the only way he could be sure he wouldn’t keel over.

Mission number one accomplished: dressing gown on. Now—find Hermione. Suddenly he became aware of something else: his body felt sore everywhere, but his legs particularly. He looked down quickly—Shit, no, big mistake!—and through the swirling, dizzying fog that had just returned, he noticed several bruises the size of small oranges dotting his lower legs. Actually, the size of small clusters of sheeps’ hooves, to be precise. The events of the night before came back into his consciousness in a rush.

Raising a hand to cover his eyes, he yelled in sudden pain and turned to look in the mirror. There, he was horrified to see his own face, deathly pale and with a monumental shiner surrounding his left eye, which was partially swollen shut.

_Bloody hell!_ It appeared that he’d been trampled by a hippogriff.


Gradually he inched down the Grand Staircase, which suddenly seemed three times as long as it
had done before. How the hell had he managed to get UP these same stairs last night?

*Ohhhhhhh.* His head hurt something fierce. He licked his dry lips and swallowed. *Ugh, absolutely must get a drink of water.*

Three-quarters of the way down the stairs, he spotted Hermione and his mother coming back from the direction of the conservatory, a large bottle of something brown and repulsive-looking in Narcissa’s hand.

“Draco!” Hermione’s smile turned to a concerned frown as he stopped and clutched his head, sinking down on the step. “Draco,” she whispered. “Sorry, love! I forgot! Are you all right?” She dropped down beside him, slipping her arm around his shoulders.

“No, I am NOT all right,” Draco replied peevishly. “I am terrible.” He laid his head on her shoulder, wincing as the dizzy feeling swept over him again. When would he learn that he absolutely should not move his head more than an inch in any direction?

“Poor baby,” Hermione murmured. “You must feel dreadful!”

Standing at the bottom of the staircase, Narcissa smiled and gestured with her head towards the dining room, and then left.

“Come on, love,” Hermione murmured. “Let’s get you to the dining room. We’ve made a hangover potion, your mum and I. I think it’ll help.” When he didn’t move, she sat with him a moment longer, stroking his cheek now rough with golden stubble, and smoothing his dishevelled hair into a semblance of order. Dropping a quick kiss on his cheek, she peered more closely at his face.

“Merlin!” Hermione drew in a sudden breath as she caught sight of his eye, so much more swollen and discoloured than it had been the night before. “We shall have to do something about that eye! Come on, Malfoy, up you get!” Looping her arm under his, she hauled him up to his feet. Together they swayed a bit and he grabbed the banister once again to steady himself.

When they arrived in the dining room, they were not alone. Lucius was already seated at the long table, his head in his hands. Richard was there, too, Claire by his side. Earlier, she’d made sure Rory had had her lunch and a bottle of breast milk Hermione had put aside and then put her down for a nap. Then she’d checked on her husband, who was just waking from the sleep of the dead to a pounding headache. All three men looked like death warmed over.

The bottle of freshly brewed hangover potion stood on the sideboard surrounded by three elegant champagne flutes. It was a rather uninviting sludge-brown colour, the natural result of mixing together ground scarab beetle with armadillo bile, cut-up ginger root, and a pinch of dried valerian root, and no doubt it tasted fairly vile too, but such was the price for the previous evening’s indiscretion, in Narcissa’s opinion. Besides, it would never do to have the host of the party, his son, and an honoured guest and family member muddled and dozy at the party, which would surely be one of the social events of the season. Malfoy parties invariably were.

She did the honours, trying not to smirk as she poured out three champagne flutes’ worth of the viscous brown liquid and handed them round.

“Now then, try to drink this in one go,” she advised. “Oh, and hold your noses. The odour is a bit… off-putting.” She caught Hermione and Claire’s eyes and her mouth twitched just a bit.

Obediently, all three raised their glasses. Narcissa considered that merely having the potion as a consequence meant they’d got off relatively unscathed. Nevertheless, this was certainly a case of just desserts after their rather adolescent behaviour of the night before. And didn’t they look pathetic now, like three chastened schoolboys. The women bit back grins.

Draco held the liquid in his mouth for a few truly terrible seconds, during which he feared he might actually just hurl the entire thing. He finally swallowed it in a violent, shuddering gulp,
afterwards coughing forcefully, tears leaking reflexively out of the corners of his eyes. It was beyond vile. It was evil. What were they trying to do, poison him? Oh well, of course they weren’t, that was ridiculous. Punish him at the very least, though; that much was obvious. Nothing this foul could possibly be good for you.

Lucius shook his head, screwing up his patrician features in a most undignified manner. “Yecchhh! I’d forgotten how awful this stuff is!”

Richard had yet to down his portion. He regarded it dubiously. “ Couldn’t I just take some Alka Seltzer, Claire?” he asked in a small voice. She shook her head firmly.

“Come on, Daddy, down the hatch!” Hermione said cheerfully. “Be brave. It’s not THAT bad.”

“Wanna bet?” Draco muttered darkly, shuddering once again.

Richard had managed to swallow nearly all his dose of the potion, but had gagged on the last bit, rushing out of the dining room and up the stairs. He had not re-emerged. One could only suppose that he was not in any condition for public appearances. Claire had rolled her eyes and followed after him. Some things never changed, apparently. Her husband was still a big baby about medicines.

Lucius had turned to Draco with a decidedly conspiratorial air, and whispered, “I’ve got something to take the edge off this wretched stuff. Too bad Granger left so soon, I’d have offered him some as well, but no matter now. Come.”

They had stood, pushing their chairs back from the table. Narcissa and Hermione had looked at them questioningly, Narcissa cocking an eyebrow as if she half knew what was coming.

“Please excuse us, ladies. Come, Draco. There’s a… a book in my study I think you’ll find most interesting.”

“Er… yes.” Draco had replied, caught slightly off-guard. He’d trailed after his father, leaving the women behind.

Now they sat together in the study, Lucius at his desk and Draco in the leather chair opposite. The wooden window shutters were closed nearly all the way to defend against the insistent sunlight. Lucius was fiddling with a drawer, finally giving up with an exasperated “Alohomora!”

The drawer shot open and Lucius smiled with satisfaction. Ah yes. Still there. Excellent!

“What are you–?” Draco began, but was silenced when his father raised an imperious hand in the air.

“Impatience is a sign of intellectual weakness, my boy,” he said, a rather smug expression on his face. “All in good time.”

He drew a slim, gold flask out of the drawer, setting it down on the desk, where it glinted in a narrow shaft of sunlight.

“Hair of the dog, don’t you know,” Lucius remarked complacently, waggling an eyebrow. In that moment, he suddenly looked much younger, and the rather rakish resemblance to his son was unmistakable, almost disconcerting.

“What’s in it?” Draco asked warily.
“It is a decoction of my own devising. I am rather proud of it.” At Draco’s questioning glance, he smirked. “Oh yes, in seventh year, we had a vat of this stuff hidden inside one of the suits of armour in the Slytherin dungeons. I store some here for emergencies now, though I haven’t had occasion to use it too often over the years. Nevertheless, it keeps remarkably well.” Lucius unscrewed the top and took a whiff. He smiled. “Yes. Still good. Firewhiskey, a dash of coffee, Tabasco sauce, a bit of chopped horseradish, two raw owl eggs–the personal remedy of Pliny the Elder, a wizard himself, you know, though that was not common knowledge even in his own time–and white pepper, in a base of orange juice. The horseradish acts as a preservative, you see.”

Draco goggled at his father. “Does it work? And if it does, then why did we have to drink that disgusting swill Mother and Hermione made?” He swallowed convulsively, suppressing a shudder at the recollection.

“It does indeed, and the reason we drank that nasty stuff was to appease them. Have to let them think they’ve regained the upper hand. After all, we are the ones who arrived home last night soused to the gills. Your mother had family plans for the evening that, I confess, I ruined rather spectacularly. Must be properly contrite and willing to take our medicine, you see. Makes them feel they’ve had a bit of their own back. Just a touch of marital diplomacy. Small price to pay, really.”

Draco stared at his father with a newfound appreciation. There was a certain silky smoothness to the manner by which Lucius had finessed the situation that led Draco to think he’d very likely been doing this for the better part of twenty-eight years of marriage. It was like a game of chess. Advances, followed by strategic, short-term retreats that would be turned into victories, long-range initiatives, back and forth, give and take. He knew that his mother was feeling satisfied at this moment, and yet, from the look on her face as they left the dining room, he suspected that on some level, she’d known she was being placated–and was content to play the game as well. This was fascinating. Draco felt as if he’d been given a glimpse into the inner workings of a well-oiled machine.

He turned his attention back to the matter at hand: the hair of the dog that had bitten him.

Accepting a large glass of bright orange liquid with just a moment’s hesitation, Draco clinked it against Lucius’ own glass, and tossed back a large gulp. Instantly, the molten mouthful left a searing trail down his gullet and into his esophagus. For the second time in an hour, tears sprang into his eyes and he coughed violently.

“Wh-what the…?” he spluttered, starting up.

Lucius regarded him with calm amusement as he nursed his own cocktail. “Sip. Slowly. I was about to tell you that.” To his credit, he didn’t laugh once.

Draco sank back down into the buttery leather of the chair. He eyed the drink and tentatively took a very small sip. This time the lava flow was just a bearable trickle and he found he was feeling measurably better already. He wasn’t sure which drink he should ascribe it to, but this second one had certainly obliterated any trace of the first, which he supposed was the more immediate objective anyway. He raised his glass in his father’s direction and smiled wanly. “Cheers!”

Lucius inclined his head, raising his glass in return. A growing warmth pooled in his stomach as Draco sat there. The Firewhiskey had started a slow burn that was spreading to all of his limbs, making him more relaxed than he’d been all day. The combination of pepper, Tabasco and horseradish had blown his sinuses wide open, an added bonus. He wondered whether, in fact, his brain might not be leaking out of his ears as well. Not that he cared much, honestly. He sprawled in the chair, taking tiny sips of his father’s miraculous elixir, grinning beatifically as he allowed his gaze to drift around the room. It came to rest on the glass-fronted liquor cabinet, through which he could see the bottles of brandy they’d sampled the day before. Suddenly, he remembered something he’d been meaning to ask.
“Hey,” he said, taking another swallow of his drink. “Father. *Dad.* Do you realise that you actually brought a *Muggle* to the White Hart?! You, of all people!”

Lucius laid his glass down on the desk and sat forward. “You’re surprised.”

Draco snorted. “*Surprised?* You could say that, yeah! I mean– a *Muggle*, for fuck’s sake! Oh. Sorry.” To his surprise, Lucius grinned and then nodded.

“Yes, of course you would be. I…”

“And not only that!” Draco interrupted, bringing his glass down onto the desk rather too hard and slopping some liquid onto the blotter. “What about that big discussion about brandy and different sorts of grapes and all that rubbish? You two sat there chatting as if you were best mates or something! I mean, it’s Hermione’s dad and all, and I’m really glad you two got on so well, but *Merlin*–you… you…” Draco was suddenly at a loss for words. “I don’t understand.”

Lucius regarded him soberly. “I wouldn’t expect you to.” He touched his fingertips together and then folded his hands. “It’s really quite simple. Your mother asked me to make a special effort to make Richard feel comfortable while the Grangers are here. She felt it was time I did more in that regard than I had done in the past. She left me no real alternative, you might say. You don’t cross your mother when she’s really serious about something.”

He grinned. “I thought about it and decided the best person to ask for help would be your wife.”

Draco’s eyes widened. He certainly hadn’t expected this. He began to speak, but before he could say a word, Lucius continued.

“I Owled her a few days before you both arrived and asked if she could tell me something about her father that would help me put him at his ease. She was kind enough to share a few pieces of information, such as Richard’s great passion for ales and various other spirits. I remembered that he’d once mentioned something to that effect. It seemed a logical avenue for conversation. One thing led to another. He was talking about one-of-a-kind ales the Muggles have, and suddenly I found myself wanting to show him a thing or two. I suppose it was rather a juvenile impulse.” He chuckled. “Opened a few eyes at the White Hart, though, didn’t I!”

“Oh, just a few!” Draco rolled his eyes. “Reckon you gave some of those old codgers heart failure!”

Lucius laughed then, a full-on belly laugh. It wasn’t a sound Draco had heard much in his life. He couldn’t even remember the last time, the night before aside.

“I am sure I did!” He wiped his eyes. “Do you know,” he mused, “I quite enjoyed conversing with Granger. He really is rather a refined, erudite man. For a Muggle.”

*For a Muggle.* Slowly a few thoughts began to crystallise in Draco’s mind.

Suddenly it occurred to him that his father was guilty of the most egregious hypocrisy. For so many years, he’d refused to give even a Muggleborn *wizard* so much as the time of day, and now, not only was he fraternising with a Muggle, he had brought said Muggle inside a wizarding establishment, which had to be in violation of at least fifty different rules. All of which he had always staunchly upheld before now. It was beyond belief.

*Who are you and what have you done with my father?*

And then he had a far more disturbing thought.

“Hang on. All those years… all those years, you pounded it into my head that Muggles and Muggleborns were utterly beneath contempt, and that it was my *duty* to emulate your sterling example and condescend, even be downright cruel, every possible chance I had! I was more rotten to Hermione than to anyone else! For YEARS. Even when I no longer believed a word of the rubbish I was talking, I still tormented her. And now you’re having cosy little chats with her
Lucius covered his eyes with his hand for a moment, opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again.

“That’s right!” Draco sneered. “You’ve nothing to say because there is nothing you can say! You poisoned me with your bloody lies. Starting when I was a child, Father! A little boy! You taught me to be the perfect little pure-blood bully, didn’t you! I learned all about lying and cheating and sheer bloodymindedness from you. Do you know what it’s like to have friends only because they fear you or they see a chance to benefit from it? Huh!” He scoffed. “I suppose maybe you do, at that. But did you really think that filling my head with your pure-blood shit—his pure-blood shit—would be a fitting substitute for what you so cavalierly took away? Need I remind you what that was?”

Draco moved closer. He leaned his elbows on the desk, so that his face was mere inches from his father’s. Lucius gazed back at him steadily, unblinking, almost trance-like.

“How could you?” Draco’s voice had dropped to a ragged whisper. “Really. I want to understand, Father. How did you manage it? I saw the photos. I know—I know—that you l—cared for me once.” He paused to take a steadying breath. “What did you do with all those feelings? How were you able to just take everything away? And give it all to HIM? What did I do to make you turn away from me? It must have been me. I know that. Because no parent, no father who loves his child, could walk away like that! I could never abandon Rory that way. How could you choose Voldemort over your family? Over your son? Tell me,” he said, his voice icy, “how did I fail you, Father? I was a child, for fuck’s sake! Hardly more than a baby!” Draco grabbed his father’s shirtfront suddenly with both hands. “Look at me!” he hissed.

A terrible silence fell over the study. The two men seemed frozen in a dreadful tableau, Draco’s face still only inches from his father’s and caught in a rictus of misery, his bruised and swollen eye standing out in sharp relief against his ashen complexion. Lucius remained quite still, apparently unmoved. A second or two passed and then he did something unexpected. Reaching out, he laid a tentative hand on the back of Draco’s head, gently stroking his son’s hair for a moment. Draco tensed, remaining quite still.

And then the moment passed. Wearily, Lucius sat back. Draco sank into his chair again, shaken, and closed his eyes.

“You never failed me. Never.” Lucius spoke quietly. “Quite the opposite. It was… I thought… I thought what the Dark Lord said was true. I believed. He made it all sound so reasonable, so entirely… sensible. He was—how can I explain this? He was mesmerising. His very voice was like a spell. I wanted to follow him. It was glorious, being part of all that. We believed we had so much to lose, we pure-bloods. So much to protect. Had to uphold the old traditions, keep them intact, never allow the purity of our ancient bloodlines to be sullied or compromised in any way. I thought—I truly believed—that I was doing the best thing for my family by choosing this path and making that alliance. Protecting you and your mother. The gods only know from what. I see that now. I was certain I was giving you something solid and time-honoured to believe in and someday pass along. He—he had all of us convinced. Well, nearly all.” Lucius glanced away briefly, and then his gaze fixed itself on Draco once more.

“I was persuaded that to make you strong, to make you ready to take up your part, I had to make you tough. Love would make you weak. Giving you the knowledge of your heritage, its sanctity and the dangers of corruption from outside, would make you powerful. Much more valuable a legacy than a mere show of love.” He spat out the word as he parroted the Dark Lord’s twisted philosophy. “Love was for the weak, you see, the traitors who were already tainted by their tolerance for Halfbloods and Mudbloods.”

Draco stiffened reflexively at the word, once a commonplace part of his own vocabulary but anathema to him now. Lucius appeared almost oblivious to his son, talking as if to himself as he expressed thoughts he’d never before given voice to. He seemed unable to stop the flow. Standing
now, he began to pace.

“Comical, really,” Lucius continued, with a bitter laugh. It was a harsh, grating sound. “All this coming from a Halfblood–and a bastard, to boot. We had no idea. And I’m not certain it would have mattered at the time anyway. I simply believed. It was surprisingly easy. I had no doubts. And you–you were my son. It was unthinkable that you would not accept and then follow. I could teach you, mould you, keep you safe with the strength and truth of my convictions. Love seemed a small price to pay for all that we would gain in its place.”

Lucius paused finally and looked at his son.

Draco stared back at him, glassy-eyed. He was deathly pale and still. “A small price,” he echoed hollowly.

Lucius winced at the sound of his son’s voice. “Yes. Can you imagine,” he said heavily. “I look at you now, and I see the way you are with Rory, and I realise what an enormous price I paid and asked you and your mother to pay as well. Not long after the end of the war, I saw, finally, that Voldemort had been deluded to the point of insanity and that I–we all–had been sucked into his madness. Getting to know Hermione helped me to understand the lies for what they were. We’d all been used. Willingly. You cannot imagine how such a realisation made me feel, even that late. True, I had been asked to sacrifice so much, and for what? But I could not deny that I had been more than ready to be seduced. The Dark Lord was very persuasive, but it was still my choice to follow him. Others chose a different path. Others…” he repeated softly.

Draco stared at his father numbly. What was he to do with this confession? It was so late in coming and the enormity of it so difficult to grasp. He felt utterly drained and suddenly, stone cold sober. He stood.

“Wait.” Lucius stopped him with a word. “There is one thing more.”

“What?” Draco asked dully.

Lucius took a breath and looked his son in the eye. “I will carry these regrets with me all the days of my life. What I did to your mother all those years ago was a terrible breach of her trust and of our marriage vows. I have tried to make it up to her, and I believe she has forgiven me. But what I did to you–my child–was unforgivable. And yet…. and yet…. I do ask your forgiveness.” He held Draco’s gaze unflinchingly.

There was a pause. Draco stood quite still. He was finding it hard to breathe. Then Lucius said the one word his son had never heard pass his lips in twenty-six years.

“Please.”

_Please_. Such a small word. What power it had to command and yet how dismally it might fail to do so.

Draco knew the word well. It was the failed sum of every prayer he had ever voiced when he was alone and wishing for his absent father’s return, when he had craved just a word or a smile of approval, a hand on his shoulder–when he lay in bed night after night and wondered what terrible wrong he had done to drive his father away. But the word had merely disappeared into the ether, time after time.

“Draco.” Lucius’ voice had fallen to a near-whisper now.

In that unexpected moment, Draco’s prayer had found its way back to him, but this time he could decide its fate. He understood with absolute clarity that more than one life would be forever changed by his choice. He could forgive, truly forgive, or he could be the one to turn away.

In the end, the choice was really much easier than he could have imagined.
He held out his hand.

TBC
New Year’s Eve

The house erupted in a sudden burst of activity in the last hours before the guests were due to arrive. The house-elves fell into their usual pre-party frenzy, conjuring huge vases of luxuriant hothouse flowers as well as tables and chairs in the Grand Ballroom, Summoning the fine linens, solid gold cutlery, bone china and delicate crystal on which Narcissa prided herself, and finally, magicking incandescent clusters of fairy lights—real fairies—throughout the ballroom now set for dinner and dancing, and in the Great Hall as well, where preliminary drinks and hors d’oeuvres would be served buffet-style. Hundreds of candles lent a mellow glow to both enormous rooms. Over one hundred people were expected to attend. It seemed to Claire, watching all this activity from an unobtrusive distance, that although she’d been to New Year’s Eve parties at the Manor before, this year her hosts had surpassed themselves. The Manor had truly been transformed into a fairytale castle fit for a ball.
Hermione and Draco sequestered themselves with Rory in their suite for most of the duration. When Draco had emerged from Lucius’ study earlier, he had been withdrawn, returning to their sitting room either unable or simply unwilling to say much. His extreme reticence was alarming. Several times Hermione opened her mouth to say something—anything—but then thought better of it. She sensed that talking was not what Draco needed just then. There would be time for that later. Whatever had happened, he needed to process it in his own way and in his own time. As she set about applying a quick-acting paste for healing bruises to his eye, she worked silently, watching. But feeling so helpless, while this man she had come to love more than life was suffering badly, was nearly killing her.

By half five, Hermione was busy with the baby, an excellent distraction from her own nagging thoughts. Rory had just been fed and still wore the remnants of her dinner—strained carrots and peas. She desperately needed a bath. She was also looking distinctly cranky at the moment.

“Come along, Sweet Pea, Mummy’s going to make you all clean,” Hermione said with a bit of forced cheer, her voice hitting that higher register reserved for mothers when they’re addressing their very young children. Gently, she lifted the baby out of her high chair, bringing her up to her shoulder. Rory’s gums had begun to bother her more intensely again in the last couple of days, making both mealtime and sleep more difficult. She was often fretful and prone to tears, only
temporarily soothed by the pain potion or her chilled teething rings.

“Mmm, you smell lovely,” she murmured, nuzzling Rory’s neck and marvelling at the softness of baby skin and its naturally appealing scent.

The baby laughed at the tickly sensation and grabbed a lock of her mother’s hair, pulling hard. Hermione let out a yelp of pain.

“No, no, Baby!” she cried hastily, extricating her curls from her daughter’s iron grip.

Shortly afterwards, as the bath got underway and she worked up a lather, gently sponging Rory’s small body from top to bottom, she found her thoughts returning to Draco. What could have happened, in the relatively brief time he and Lucius were together in the study, to cause such a reaction? She knew he had been tense and a bit conflicted in his feelings towards his father, no matter how well he understood Lucius’ good intentions intellectually. Whatever had transpired had shaken him deeply, this much was clear. Her heart ached, knowing his pain. She hoped he’d open up to her before too much longer.

Right. All clean. Hermione bundled Rory into a soft, fleecy towel with a pocket at one corner that functioned as a hood. She slipped this part over Rory’s wet head and gave her a kiss on the nose. The baby looked up at her with large, dove-grey eyes fringed with dark lashes—her father’s eyes—and smiled. Right then, Hermione knew she needed to talk to Draco. She couldn’t wait.

As soon as Rory was happily playing in her cot, Hermione was a woman with a mission. In the end, her quarry was absurdly easy to track down. Draco still sat in the wing chair in front of the fireplace in their bedroom. He stared into the flames, unseeing, his hands resting on the arms of the chair and his long legs stretched straight out in front of him.

Hermione drew a footstool up and gently took his bare feet into her lap, resting her fingers lightly on the arch of his left foot and beginning a soothing massage just the way he liked it: gentle acupressure working down to the heel and then back up through the centre of the foot to the toe area, circling back to the arch. His eyes slid shut.

She worked in silence for a while. And then abruptly, he murmured, “Remember how furious you used to get? At me, I mean. When we were at school.” His tone was almost lazy, his eyes still closed.

“Of course I do. Why?”

“I was a nasty little prat. Wasn’t I.” It was a statement, not a question.

“You were, rather. Why are you bringing all that up now?” She continued the massage, moving now to his other foot.

He ignored her question.

“I didn’t leave you alone for six years. And by seventh year, well... you weren’t there. And anyway, even if you had been, by then I was too scared of drawing attention to myself, for obvious reasons. Still. Most of the time we were at school, I was an arrogant, obnoxious little git, cruel even. Wasn’t I.”

He opened his eyes suddenly and looked straight at her. He almost seemed to be pleading with her to agree.

What sort of game was he playing? Hermione was confused and suddenly, very uneasy.

“You… yes. Yes. You were,” she said quietly.

“In fact, I was a right bastard, wasn’t I. Taunted you. In front of others. Talked shit about you
In fact, I was a right bastard, wasn’t I. Taunted you. In front of others. Talked shit about you behind your back and to your face. Made a game of it.”

He was staring at her now, his eyes burning. Her hands froze mid-stroke and without being aware of it, she stood up, backing away a step. She couldn’t speak. She just stared back, her brown eyes huge and uncomprehending. He was deliberately goading her, but why?

“Hurt you on purpose. Made you cry, didn’t I. Didn’t I.”

His voice had become a visceral growl.

“Didn’t I. Mudblood.”

The shock of hearing that foul word coming from his mouth again after so many years was like being slammed into the pavement, a boot bearing down on her back and forcing every last particle of air from her lungs until they simply shut down and collapsed. She felt she couldn’t breathe at all, not even a gasp. She simply froze, all the blood draining from her face. Swaying suddenly, she put a hand out to steady herself and grabbed only air.

Draco was on his feet in an instant, catching her and crushing her to his chest, one hand splayed across her back and the other burying itself in her hair, fingers clutching at her curls.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, baby, please forgive me!” he said, stricken, his voice choked with anguish. He clutched at her desperately, almost afraid to let her go. “Oh gods, please, listen to me, you have to understand! The things he said… I felt so angry, so betrayed! But I’m no better than he is! I was just as vile, wasn’t I! To you, more than anyone! Hermione, you hated me, and with good reason! For years I made your life hell whenever I had the chance!” His voice broke, and fell to a shuddering whisper. “We both know it’s true. How could you ever have forgiven me? I didn’t deserve it.”

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. Curiously, they were painfully dry, though tears clogged her throat, making it difficult for her to speak. She buried her face in his chest as she tried to steady herself. Finally she pushed away from him and looked into his eyes.

“Because you changed. You were different. You were. You are.” She reached up and took his face in her hands, then, gazing directly into his eyes. “And I knew what it took for you to ask the first time, six years ago.”

There was a pause. Suddenly the earlier, hateful words echoed again. She managed to fight down a brief flaring of the old anger and spoke quietly. “Where did all that come from, Draco? What in Merlin’s name did your father say to you?”

“He asked me to forgive him,” Draco said simply.

“Oh!” Hermione drew in a sharp breath, her anger deflating further. “And?”

“I—I let him know that I was willing.” Draco released her and sank back into the chair, his head in his hands.

“Hermione, I had to forgive him in the end. To be honest, a part of me wanted to, finally. But there’s another reason. So much of the past got dredged up when we talked, things I’ve tried for years to forget. But the past couple of hours, I haven’t been able to think of anything else. The way he was, the way I was—what I became, for him. He talked about choices. How he had freely chosen to follow Voldemort and distance himself from me. He admitted it, Hermione. He wasn’t forced. It was a choice. Do you know how hard that was to hear? Worse, even, than seeing those photos. But…” His voice became hollow with defeat and disgust. “I realise now that I had choices back then as well.”

Hermione had sat back down too, and now she opened her mouth to reply, but Draco raised his hand to stop her. “Wait. Please. Let me finish. How—how can I hold him to a different standard
than the one I hold myself to? I thought he was being a hypocrite yesterday, with your dad and all. But now I see that I’m no better. No better at all. I... well... I had choices years ago, too.”

Hermione began to protest and again, he cut her off. “No. There is always a choice. I remember you used to say that, years ago. That’s the truth. And the truth I cannot run from anymore is that, just like him, I made the wrong choices back then. It doesn’t matter that I was raised to make them. See, it goes much deeper than just being arrogant and cruel. It’s how I went about it. Blindly. Without thought, one way or the other. But being blind is a choice too. I didn’t have to go along. Hermione, I forgave my father partly because I am cut from the same cloth. I am no better. And it sickens me to realise it.”

Hermione gazed at her husband with slowly dawning understanding. All that poisonous spewing earlier had been a confessional of a sort, albeit twisted, born of a self-loathing that had come from staring some naked truths in the face. He’d wanted to force her to look at their ugliness too, make her see something in himself that he had finally been forced to acknowledge. In a strange way, he must have felt he owed her that. Gently she reached for his hand. Her voice was very low, very calm.

“When you called me a M- that terrible name... I know what you were really trying to do, Draco. But you made those choices when you were only a boy. Did you really feel you needed to test me this way now?”

Draco looked away, raking his fingers through his hair agitatedly. “Yes. I did. I’m so sorry. I had to know if... if, knowing all that, you’d still—”

“Stick around,” Hermione finished softly. “Don’t you know by now, Draco Malfoy, that I don’t scare that easily?”

She climbed into his lap, curling into his warmth. Sighing deeply, he rested his chin on the top of her head, wrapping his arms around her with a relief that was nearly palpable, as much as if a shard of ice had been eased from his heart.

Hermione laid her cheek against his shoulder, burrowing her face into the smooth skin of his neck and resting a hand on his chest. She could feel the strong, steady beat of his heart through the nubby wool of his jumper. Raising her head then, she continued.

“Look. I’ve always known that once you were old enough to understand what you were doing, you still chose to follow your father, though at the time, I could never really understand why. Until sixth year, and then I really believe you had no choice at all anymore. At the end of it, your spirit was crushed and you were miserable. Even I could see that.” Gently, she rested her hand on his cheek. “It’s been enough for me that you finally came to see the truth and switched sides. I knew you would sort out the rest eventually. Draco, listen to me, please!” she said with sudden fierceness. “I don’t regret one second of our life together. Everyone makes mistakes in life, sometimes really serious ones. But our being together is not a mistake. I forgave you a long time ago for all of it, everything. You’ve got to let go of this bitterness and forgive yourself.”

Forgive himself. He wasn’t certain that would ever be possible, not completely. He knew that like his father, he would always have regrets. But he could try. Right now, though, he needed to be sure she understood.

“I’m so sorry I doubted you, love. Well, it wasn’t really you I doubted; it was myself. I needed you to see, to understand, something I’ve only just begun to understand myself. And I needed to know for sure whether you could still be with me after that. I’ve always blamed my father for all my mistakes. But I can’t do that anymore, can I. Huh!” Draco laughed ruefully. “Ironic, isn’t it. He taught me that today by his own example, without even knowing it. I suppose I ought to thank him, really, for showing me something I should have realised on my own a long time ago. Sure, I changed. I finally got it sussed that Voldemort was nothing but a racist and a madman. But even then, I still told myself that all the shit I did—everything—was Father’s fault. It’s always been easier just to lay all my fuck-ups at his door. ‘Death-Eater dad screws up kid.’ Not anymore. I
know now that at a certain point, the responsibility for what I did became mine.”

He twined a soft curl around his finger and watched it unravel, and then took a deep breath. “Hermione, please forgive me for what I said before. I never intended… Especially not… that. I went too far. I don’t know what came over me. I just… I let myself wallow in all that shit.”

Hermione didn’t trust herself to speak. Her throat felt constricted, tears threatening to spill over. She simply clung to him and nodded, swallowing hard.

“Thanks, Granger,” Draco whispered. “For not giving up on me.” Slowly he bent his head and kissed her. The kiss was tender but fervent, filled with all of his love for her—at once profound and immeasurable—and his equally boundless amazement, joy and relief that she felt the same.

*

8:00 pm

The guests would begin to arrive in an hour. Tonight all the most influential families in pure-blood wizarding society, plus a good many who were not quite at the top of the social register—Arthur and Molly Weasley, for instance—would be wined and dined and see in the new year together at Malfoy Manor.

But this New Year’s Eve would see a significant change. With his wife’s approval, Lucius had vowed that this year, finally, they would draw up a guest list as inclusive as he and Narcissa could make it. It was something that, for reasons of his own, he’d felt compelled to do, and he was true to his word. Consequently, there were more than a few raised eyebrows and exclamations of surprise when the Malfoys’ owls delivered certain invitations. No doubt sheer curiosity was a driving factor behind at least a fair number of the acceptances. That, and the Malfoys’ reputation for throwing the best and most lavish parties in all of wizarding Britain.

Missy had been enlisted to dress Rory for her society debut, leaving Hermione and Draco free to dress quietly at their leisure.

Draco had his dress trousers on and had just slipped into his shirt. He was about to do up the buttons when Hermione came out of the en-suite. She wore only a lacy, seafoam-green bra and matching knickers, her thigh-high stockings held up by delicate garters, teal-blue heels on her feet. She was carefully stepping into a half-slip as she walked. He stopped and gazed at her with open appreciation, a small grin tugging at his mouth.

Caught up in her own thoughts and unaware of his frankly unabashed appraisal, Hermione went to her jewellery case on the dresser, drawing out a rectangular silver box, Draco’s Yule present to her. Carefully she opened it. On a bed of white cotton lay the delicate silver choker studded all around with tiny pieces of jade inlaid in silver, alongside it the matching earrings, two-inch-long silver threads ending in a single, small jade each. A bracelet completed the set: several twisted strands of silver, a rather sizeable jade at the clasp.

Tonight would be the first time she’d be wearing them. Smiling, she lifted the choker out, then the earrings and the bracelet, and laid them carefully on the highly polished surface of the dresser. They really were perfect for her. She turned to Draco and held out the choker.
“Darling—help me with this?”

Finally. He’d been waiting for what had felt like ages to see this necklace grace his wife’s slender throat. Positioning himself behind her, he drew the choker around Hermione’s neck, the tips of his fingers leaving a lingering trail, feather-light and warm, on her skin.

She shivered slightly, and he smiled.

Wordlessly, she handed him one earring. He slipped the thin, silver French wire through the pierced opening in her ear lobe and then leaned in and left a light kiss there. His lips were even warmer and softer than his fingertips had been.

“Oh…” she breathed. “The other one too, please.”

Draco laughed softly.

“Of course,” he said, and gave her other ear the same treatment, plus a light flick of his tongue on the skin directly beneath her ear. His warm breath tickled the tiny hairs on the back of her neck.

Hermione stood quite still. The man could turn the simplest act into a seduction.

The room was very quiet, save for the fire hissing and popping in the hearth. Draco raised his hand, whispering, “Nox Luminarium.” Instantly, the candles in the room grew shorter, their light dimming dramatically.

Hermione leaned back against Draco’s bare chest. His hands slipped from her shoulders down to the swell of her breasts, his fingers moving in gentle spirals around each, until finally they found the rounded pink buds at the centres, already erect for him under the lace of her bra. He stroked them lazily.

“Can’t we dispense with this silly thing?” he whispered, pressing a kiss onto her right shoulder while sliding her bra straps down.

Hermione drew in a jagged breath. Yes! Take it off! “Oh gods, Draco,” she gasped instead, “we can’t! Not now!”

“Of course we can, Granger,” he murmured into her hair, inhaling its pleasing apricot scent. He’d drawn the bra straps all the way down so that they hung limply above her elbows. Now he peeled the cups away, his fingers recapturing her bared nipples and teasing them as he ground his arousal into her bum.

“OH!” Her eyes flew open as a current of pleasure coursed through her body from three very sensitive starting points. If at that moment he had bent her over the bed, ripped her knickers off and taken her, she would have died happy.

Instead, her rational mind struggled to reassert control. She knew it must be well past 8:30 pm by now, and guests would be arriving in perhaps only fifteen or twenty minutes. She wasn’t anywhere near ready and she’d wanted to check on Rory as well. Reluctantly, she pulled away from his questing mouth and fingers, turning to face him and readjusting her bra straps.

“You’re a cruel woman, Granger,” he sighed, shaking his head. “The very least you could have done was put me out of my misery! How am I supposed to go downstairs and greet guests like this?!” He grabbed her hand and pulled her closer, pressing her palm to the prominent bulge clearly visible beneath the fabric of his trousers.

She couldn’t help giggling. “Oh dear! Sorry!” She glanced up at him slyly. “Well, you’re not alone, you know.” Her left palm was still pressed to his erection; with her right hand, she took his left and slid it inside her knickers, which were wet with her own arousal. “You see?” She opened her legs slightly and moved his hand against her most private flesh. He slipped a finger deep inside her, curling it to stroke her inner walls and then sliding it out to anoint her swollen clt. A spasm of
pleasure shot through her and instinctively, her hand convulsed around his cock. They both moaned. This was definitely getting out of control.

This time, Draco was the first to tear himself away.

“What are you trying to do, woman,” he groaned, “torture me? Enough!” He busied himself buttoning his shirt and then stuffing it into his trousers. Buckling his belt, he turned his head briefly to glance back at her. She had disappeared into the en-suite. Good. That would give his breathing and certain other… things a chance to calm down a bit. He sank into the sofa and watched the fire for a bit as he knotted his tie and slipped into his socks and shoes. His jacket and dress robes, freshly pressed, waited on hangers on the back of the door. Ready.

Ten minutes later, the door to the en-suite opened a crack. He turned his head ever so slightly, pretending he hadn’t heard, and then studied the flames in the hearth instead. The door opened wider and he could hear rustling behind him. There was a faint scent of a complex perfume and then her hands were on his shoulders.

He turned in his seat.

Hermione stood before him, smiling shyly. It was the same smile he remembered seeing back when they were fourteen, when she’d made her entrance at the Yule Ball looking so astonishingly beautiful. That night, he’d noticed her in a way he had never done before. She’d smiled as she moved a bit hesitantly down the steps, flushing with pleasure at the looks of appreciation she knew she was getting, feeling truly like a princess for the first time. It was all there in her eyes and her smile. He hadn’t been able to tear his own eyes away. That very early germ of a feeling had remained dormant until years later, but Merlin, he had noticed.

That same smile lit her face now. But this time, it was all for him.

And she was breathtaking.

She’d swept her hair up, leaving tendrils softly curling in the back and on the sides. The silver and jade choker gleamed at the base of her throat and the earrings were points of light against her skin. But it was the dress that completely took his breath away. She’d been careful not to let him see it before now, wanting to surprise him. Now he was very glad she had. She was quite simply resplendent. The teal-blue velvet dress fit her as if she’d been the inspiration for it. The bodice clung to her slender form, the soft folds of the scooped neckline accentuating her long, graceful neck and shoulders, and the full skirt fell gracefully to her ankles. He was delighted to see that the jewellery he’d chosen was the perfect complement. He stood, turning to face her.

“Hermione…” he breathed. “You look… amazing! Come here.”

He opened his arms.

Happily she complied, moving into his embrace. He held her lightly by the shoulders for a moment, studying her delicate features, the soft way her hair flowed into the upsweep, the play of light bringing out hints of auburn and gold in the chestnut colour, the way her full lips curved into a smile of purest contentment and love.

“Do you know—can you possibly know, I wonder—how I feel?” he asked quietly.

“I think I do,” she replied, dropping her gaze for a moment, her cheeks pink.

He found it utterly endearing that even now, she should still blush around him as if they were teenagers at their first ball. Well, as if it had been he she’d been going to meet that Yule evening, twelve years before. He wished now that it had been. What a different course his life might have taken. The same end result, hopefully, but with a lot less stupidity and heartache along the way.

Slowly, tenderly, he brought her face up to his and bent to kiss her. They pressed against each other, arms entwined around each other’s waists, each breathing the other in, sinking ever more
deeply into the kiss, drowning in it, forgetting to breathe. It was all softness and sweetness, intoxicating and consuming.

A sudden knock on the door startled both of them and reluctantly, they broke the kiss. Breathless, they held onto each other a moment longer.

“Come!” Draco called finally, releasing Hermione, who stood back, bright-eyed and flushed, smoothing down her dress. It was Missy. She’d brought Rory, who was all dressed up and looking like an angel. Her fine, moon-bright hair was neatly brushed and softly framed her face. She wore her new burgundy velvet dress, with its lacy white collar and small pearl buttons, along with white tights and a pair of tiny, white, patent leather Mary Janes. On her wrist was the thin, gold bracelet made entirely of tiny hearts that had been a present from Narcissa and Lucius. On each heart was one letter of her name, and on the last, her birthdate had been engraved.

They both smiled with pride. Their little girl looked so beautiful! Draco held her while Hermione went to fetch the delicate golden locket Richard and Claire had given Rory to match the bracelet. Inside there was a tiny photo of the three of them taken just two days after Rory’s birth. Now Hermione carefully lifted the baby’s hair and closed the clasp at the back.

Draco gave Rory a quick kiss and then shared one with Hermione, suddenly filled with a sense of completion he’d never imagined he’d be lucky enough to know.

“She’s almost as beautiful as her mum,” he whispered in Hermione’s ear as they left their suite and began walking with the baby down the hall towards the Grand Staircase.

“Do you realise,” he mused, “that exactly one year ago tonight, we didn’t even know this little peanut?” He chuckled. “It’s amazing. And look at you! One would never even know you’d had a baby!”

Hermione flushed with pleasure. “Well, I was the most fit witch in our antenatal class!”

“You were the ONLY witch in our antenatal class,” Draco pointed out, as they started down the stairs.

“True,” she admitted sheepishly. “I forgot.” She wiggled her finger at Rory as they walked, and the baby grabbed it.

“Although…” he began nonchalantly, hefting Rory closer as he walked.

“Although what?”

“Well, actually… there is one way you’ve changed since having Rory.”

She raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Your tits. They’re infinitely more… luscious.” He winked.

Hermione rolled her eyes and giggled. “Men! You’ve all got breast fixations!”

“Yep!” Draco nodded enthusiastically. He rather reminded Hermione of an eager puppy.

“Absolutely. Every bloke does.” He turned his head and gave her a sidelong look of careful appraisal.

“What—what are you doing?”

“Assessing.”

“Assessing wh—OH.”

“You know,” he said thoughtfully, “I wouldn’t exactly complain if yours were a bit bigger, even… Just a quick *Engorgio*, what do you say?” He twirled an imaginary wand about in the
direction of her chest, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Hermione laughed and shook her head. “Sorry, no. I’m quite content just as I am. Anyway, you do that and I’ll burst out of this frock!”

“No doubt, you perv! Don’t think I don’t remember that prank you and Zabini pulled fifth year.”

Draco gazed at her, all innocence accompanied by an angelic smile. “Whatever do you mean, darling?”

“That shrinking hex you threw at Lavender. The one that made her blouse suddenly go down three sizes so that all the buttons popped off in the middle of Potions. One of them hit Snape in the head. Ring a bell?”

“Oh. That. Right. Nice rack on that girl. Ow! Hey!” he protested. One of his shoes now bore the imprint of Hermione’s heel.

“And then there was all that rubbish you two told Snape about your wands misfiring whilst you were trying to shrink some black beetles for grinding.” She was just getting warmed up.

He snickered. “Ah yes. Didn’t really believe a word of it, did he. But he took fifty points from Gryffindor when you objected. Sweet.”

“Hmm! That was so unfair. I remember—”

“Sshh,” he soothed. “You’re absolutely right, love. Quite unfair.”

They’d reached the bottom step. He pressed his finger to his lips, in part to stop a positively wicked smirk that threatened to take over his face and also, to signal to Hermione that they were no longer alone.

Not noticing, Hermione opened her mouth to launch a retort when, very smoothly, Draco manoeuvred her and the baby towards the four grandparents, who were standing near the foot of the staircase, chatting.

“Good evening.” Draco smiled serenely, giving his wife a discreet push forward. “Happy New Year.”
Hermione’s dress, designed by Nicole Farhi
Before very long, the party was in full swing. Champagne flowed, as well as the usual complement of fine wines and other drinks. In that first hour, Hermione and Draco found themselves pressed on all sides by well-wishers wanting to get a look at the youngest Malfoy and offer their congratulations. She was a smashing success, though she was completely oblivious to the fluttery reactions she was eliciting from the ladies (“Oh, my word!” “Precious!” “She’s just darling!”). Eventually, Narcissa and Lucius materialised, whisking Rory away for a bit of proud, grandparental bragging and giving their son and his wife a chance to relax a bit with their own friends.

Not surprisingly, it seemed that everyone who was anyone in the wizarding world was in this house tonight. A number of business associates had come, along with their spouses. Favoured clients of Malfoy Enterprises as well as stockholders, members of boards on which Lucius served, Narcissa’s garden club and their husbands, and administrators of charities they chaired were all in attendance. In addition, all of the Malfoys’ longtime friends – the Parkinsons, the Notts, the Bulstrodes, the Farnsworths, the Parmentiers, the Cathcarts, the Goyles, and Marcella Zabini with her latest husband in tow – were there, and now crowded around their hosts, oohing and aahing over the golden grandchild they were proudly showing off.

“Narcissa,” Elspeth Parkinson purred, “She is just simply adorable! You must be ever so proud, my dear!”

“Oh yes, I certainly am, Elspeth! But what about you, darling? I hear that Pansy gave birth to triplets two weeks ago!” Narcissa shifted Rory to her other hip and smoothed the silky, fair hair away from her face.

“She was a week early and positively huge, you know,” Elspeth confided in a low voice. “Poor thing could hardly walk at the end. Oh! I have photos! Would you like to see?” The proud new grandma pulled a packet of photos out of her handbag, featuring Pansy and Ron waving and smiling despite Pansy’s obvious exhaustion, with three ginger-haired, red-faced babies cradled between them on the hospital bed. “Sweet Circe, can you imagine – all boys!” She sighed with satisfaction. “Lovely, all three, even with all that red hair. Liam, Alexander, and Jacob. They’re
calling him Jack for short. They’re being looked after by a nurse tonight, so that Pansy and Ronald could be here.”

Narcissa nodded, smiling. She remembered all too well what those early days had been like for Hermione and Draco. Could it really be six months already?

*

Some members of the Hogwarts contingent clustered near the bar where all sorts of lovely drinks were being liberally dispensed.

“Pansy! It’s only been two weeks; I’m amazed you’re here! How are you feeling?” Hermione gave her friend a quick hug.

“Bloody exhausted.” Pansy grinned ruefully, easing into the nearest chair. “And sore. Good job these chairs are so well padded!”

“Well, then, what in Merlin’s name are you doing here, you silly bint? You should be home, taking it easy!” Ginny cried. Then she stopped and thought for a moment. “On second thought, no. You’re probably getting more rest here than you would do at home, nurse or no.”

“Too right!” Pansy agreed. “Sometimes I wish I could grow a third tit and another pair of arms! Nobody warned me what triplets would really be like!” She sighed deeply rolling her eyes.

“Neville wants to have children as soon as possible,” Luna murmured.

“Uh, Luna… you two should probably think about getting married first, you know!” Ginny laughed. “Anyway, don’t rush it. I adore Taran, don’t get me wrong, but there’s a part of me that wishes we’d waited just a bit longer.”

“How is Taran these days?” Hermione asked.

“Two and a half, and into absolutely everything! There isn’t a single thing in our house that he isn’t insatiably curious about. And he can’t control his magic yet, so all sorts of little accidents happen. Plus he’s got quite a temper. Rather funny at times, really.” Ginny giggled. “Last week, he was in a snit for having to tidy up his room. Before I knew it, one of his toy lorries had blown up! And two weeks ago, he got into a bottle of Pepper Up and unbeknownst to us, poured some into Harry’s orange juice at breakfast. Poor Harry! He was in a hurry and didn’t realise until it was too late. Steam came out of his ears for an hour!” She laughed again. “He had to cancel a very important meeting that morning!”

A few feet away, a harried Ron Weasley was recounting Pansy’s labour ordeal in graphic detail.

“…twenty-three hours! Man, I couldn’t believe it. I mean, triplets, for fuck’s sake!”

*
The festivities had now migrated from the Great Hall to the Grand Ballroom for dinner. Missy had been summoned to take Rory back to the nursery and put her to bed.

A menu at each place setting detailed the vast number of choices. Once everyone had been seated, Lucius strode to the centre of the room, and cleared his throat.

“Ladies and gentlemen… friends… a word, if you please. You will notice that as soon as you pick your menus up, they will translate themselves into English. Once you have made your dinner selections, you need only speak them aloud in either French or English, whichever you prefer, and your entrée will appear on the table. Narcissa and I hope you will enjoy your meal!” He smiled expansively. “Bon appétit!”

In due course, as the salad plates were being Vanished, a mind-boggling array of succulent dishes began to appear in their places on every table.

There were twelve old school friends, nearly evenly divided between former Gryffindors and former Slytherins, and seated all together at one large table with Draco and Hermione. It had turned out to be a brilliant bit of planning, evolving into an absolute riot of reminiscences, good-
natured teasing and insults, and plenty of laughter, very much as their first reunion had done seven years earlier, when Draco and Hermione had first apprised their friends of the fact of their relationship.

At their own table on the other side of the ballroom, the senior Malfoys entertained the Grangers, Molly and Arthur Weasley, and Archibald Sillitoe, current Potions professor at Hogwarts; he was there with a date, a colleague from the Hogwarts faculty. More significantly, however, there were three people who, in the past, Narcissa had never dared hope she might one day invite into her home: her widowed sister Andromeda, her cousin Eleonora and Elle’s husband, Alex Portman. It was a novel gathering: two pureblood couples, one Muggle couple, one couple made up of a pureblood and a half-blood, a widowed pureblood, and one couple that was decidedly mixed, the husband a Muggle and the wife a witch, albeit a Squib. Lucius had pointedly specified this particular table arrangement. He hoped it would send the desired message to all his guests.

Narcissa’s wholehearted approval of both the guest list and the seating arrangements had come with a certain degree of amazement. She stole several sidelong glances at her husband, feeling the continuing urge to pinch herself. Yet there he sat, apparently quite at his ease, sipping his glass of Tokay and smiling as he joined in the conversation.

“Atch,” he began smoothly, laying down his fork after a bite of lobster. “I understand there is talk of initiating an ongoing exchange program with both Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. Is that so?”

Sillitoe looked up from his plate of crusted beef, from which he had just speared a bite of steaming meat enveloped in flaky pastry. He looked faintly disgruntled at having to put off the pleasure of savouring it even a moment longer. “Indeed, Lucius. Minerva has been consulting with the other Heads, and I believe they all have agreed a plan whereby selected students will move between the three schools in a rotation, the second quarter of term in one host school and the third quarter in the other. The first and last quarters will be spent at their home schools.”

“What a marvellous idea,” Claire enthused. “Oh, I just know Hermione would have loved such an opportunity!” In her innocence, she beamed brightly around the table. Virtually everyone else knew that the last place Hermione would likely have felt at home was Durmstrang, but they were too diplomatic to tell Claire this.

“Undoubtedly,” Sillitoe agreed drily. “From everything I’ve heard about your daughter, I’m quite certain she’d have availed herself of every possible chance to learn.”

“How’s the current crop of students, Archie? And Professor Easlington—perhaps you’d like to add your own assessment as well?” Arthur Weasley turned his attention to Sillitoe’s companion for the evening; the new Divination professor, Cassandra Easlington, was a tall, sharp-featured woman in her mid-forties, with dark hair swept up into a French knot and a keen intelligence in her expression. She had an uncanny way of looking through a person, really making it possible to believe she could see into the soul. Over time, Archibald Sillitoe, himself a rather staid individual, had found himself increasingly intrigued by her edgy, forthright confidence.

“Please… call me Cass. And to answer your question, Arthur, I would say… mostly fair,” she replied as Sillitoe opened his mouth. He closed it again, content to let her begin. “Although there are actually a number of remarkably intuitive students amongst them, I’m delighted to say. I believe some of them might have a future in my field of study.”
“Agreed,” Sillitoe added. “However, I would have to add that fortunately or otherwise, this current bunch is nowhere near as talented— and that includes an absolute genius for causing trouble— as their year was reputed to have been.” He jerked his head in the direction of the younger crowd across the floor, where Harry was regaling the others with what must have been a hilarious story. A number of his former classmates were breathless with laughter. The potions master could just imagine the sort of highly illegal exploit Harry must have been gleefully recounting, judging by his expansive gestures and animated expressions. He’d certainly heard enough stories in the last few years. They had become legend.

“Madam Portman, you are Narcissa’s and Andromeda’s cousin, I believe?” Molly Weasley inquired politely, shifting the conversation to safer ground. Her son Ronald had certainly qualified in the troublemaker category, chiefly by virtue of being one of Harry Potter’s best friends and always involved in one scheme or another as a result.

“Yes, yes I am. And please call me Elle.” The middle-aged, blonde woman smiled warmly. “Our fathers were brothers. We all grew up together.” At this, there were affectionate nods from the two sisters. “It’s delightful to be all together again, isn’t it, Cissa, Andi?” She reached out and gave both cousins’ hands a quick squeeze. Unmentioned was the fact that this evening’s visit was the first time that Eleonora Portman and her cousin Andromeda Tonks had been under this roof, separately or together.

Andromeda raised her glass. “I’d like to propose a toast to my sister and her husband. Thank you for this delightful evening in your lovely home!” Which I finally have the pleasure of seeing. “Lucius and Narcissa!”

“Lucius and Narcissa!” everybody echoed, raising glasses around the table.

“Oh, and I am afraid I have been a bit remiss!” Narcissa looked faintly scandalised as she remembered something. “We have something else to toast—the birth of Arthur and Molly’s new grandchildren! To… Liam, Jack and…” She paused, and looked to the Weasleys. Alexander, Molly mouthed, and winked. “Alexander!” Narcissa finished, raising her glass.

“Indeed, yes!” “Hear, hear!” “Congratulations!” Glasses were lifted once again.

“When, Claire said a moment later, smiling. “It is such a treat to meet you, finally. I read your column in the Times Sunday Supplement every weekend!” She was careful to stop there, not wanting to compromise Narcissa’s confidences of a couple of months earlier regarding the nature of her relationship with her cousin over the years.

Lucius stopped chewing long enough to regard his wife’s cousin with renewed curiosity. This bit of information was… intriguing. So she had some degree of celebrity in the Muggle world, did she? Odd – and rather telling, he realised— that Narcissa had never mentioned this before. Then again, he reasoned, why should she have done? Until relatively recently, she could have safely assumed that he’d refuse to have a turncoat and her Muggle husband in the house. Why go into details under those circumstances? He couldn’t blame her, really.

As Lucius ruminated, Narcissa’s thoughts were travelling in a somewhat different direction. She wondered if she dared go so far as to reveal Elle’s status as not merely the expatriate wife of a Muggle, but also as a Squib, traditionally regarded in pureblood circles as something shameful. Elle was one of several Black family skeletons. Narcissa just wasn’t certain of how far to open the proverbial closet door. She decided on second thought to leave it shut for the time being.

11:15 pm
A fabulous selection of sweets had appeared on a long, lace-covered table and guests were gradually making their way over to sample some of the chocolate soufflé or the ice cream and apricot sorbet bombe, or to try a luscious, ganache-filled pastry or Madeleine cake with their coffee or tea. At every table, after-dinner port and cognac appeared; wine glasses perpetually refilled themselves alongside slender, elegant champagne flutes, their effervescent contents pale and golden in the candlelight.

Draco sat, sandwiched between Theo Nott and Greg Goyle. Blaise Zabini stood behind him, leaning forward on the back of the chair. Sitting opposite were Ron and Harry, with George Weasley behind them, leaning in. It was an old, old argument concerning that one contentious match once again, the one from sixth year, in which Bell had successfully manoeuvred the quaffle the entire length of the pitch only to have Warrington whack it away into what the Gryffindors hotly argued was out-of-bounds territory. The Slytherins stood their ground, retorting that in no way was it a foul and that the decision in their favour had been entirely fair, and so it went, back and forth, every other conceivable bit of the match dissected and laid open for debate.

“That’s total bollocks, Malfoy!” Ron said heatedly, to a remark Draco had casually tossed off. “You’re joking, yeah? Everybody knows damned well that Montague aimed that bludger straight at my head!”

“Get over yourself, Weasley.” Draco smiled lazily, flicking a tiny piece of lint off the tablecloth with his fingernail. “What a load of unmitigated shit. Surely even you cannot honestly believe that Montague would pull such a clearly illegal move directly after what you lot believed was a foul?” With just the hint of a self-satisfied smile, he settled back into his chair.

“Huh!” Ron muttered. “How would you know? You weren’t even there!”

There was an uncomfortable pause. “I know,” Draco replied evenly, and then added, nearly inaudibly, “I wish I had been.” Momentary regret tinged with shame washed over him. He hadn’t been there, or at any of the matches that year, because he’d been too busy working on that bloody cabinet, on the way to nearly making the biggest mistake of his life. He looked away.

Blaise knew he had to do something. His friend was getting that withdrawn, pained look he had when he was forced to remember things he had nothing but regret about now, years later. He leaned in to add his two pence worth, successfully diverting attention away from Draco.

The discussion continued on another tack, but now Draco found himself tuning it out as just so much buzz around his head. Finally he’d had enough. Turning his head, he glanced at Hermione at the far end of the table. Their eyes met and he tilted his head ever so slightly in the direction of the tall double doors, and winked. She nodded, flashing a quick grin.

She was the first to stand and excuse herself, citing the need to check on the baby. Swiftly crossing the polished wood floor, she slipped out of the room. Draco waited a respectable though seemingly interminable five minutes, and then extricated himself from the debate, pleading a sudden and urgent need to visit the loo. He, too, exited quickly, satisfied that they’d been discreet.

As soon as he was out of sight, every one of their friends stopped talking, looked at each other, and burst out laughing.

“Well, and why ever not?” Pansy said defiantly, her chin jutting out. “I would, if I didn’t feel so bloody sore!”

“You _would_, eh?” Ron came up behind his wife, a roguish grin on his face.

“Well… maybe not just yet,” she admitted sheepishly. “But I would in theory!”

“Right, is _that_ what they call it these days? No muss, no fuss…” Blaise laughed.

“No _fun_…!” George added in a stage whisper, smirking.
“Don’t remind me!” Ron groaned. “I’ve got another month of ‘theorising’ in front of me!”

Bombe Glacee Marquise

*

*
“They knew, didn’t they!” Hermione was slightly giddy with the giggles suddenly, as she and Draco nearly ran down the nearest corridor. Suddenly he grabbed her arm, practically yanking her into another arched hallway. Candles guttered in the semi-darkness. It was one of the groined passages, just slightly creepy but fascinating at the same time. At the bottom of each joint of the stone arches, a carved face stared blindly down at them. Draco backed her against the cool stone wall, pressing his lower body against hers. She could feel a pleasantly hard, pulsating pressure from him there.

“Oh yes,” he said, smiling mischievously as his gaze traveled down her neck to her splendid
décolletage. “Yes, my love, I would say they most assuredly knew.” His smile turned wicked. “I’m not fussed… are you?”

His hands began a slow journey from her shoulders down her arms, gliding lightly over the velvet of the sleeves, fingertips slipping inside their hems to trace delicate circles into the soft skin of her inner elbows. A small, shuddering sigh escaped her and she raised her hands to find his, but he pushed them back down.

“No.” He shook his head, smiling. “Not yet. This is for you.”

Dipping his head, he brought his mouth to her throat, a soft sigh escaping him, her pulse fluttering under his lips as he pressed light kisses there. Each kiss became progressively hungrier, sucking in a bit more of her skin, leaving small marks which bloomed like strawberries in a field of snow.

“How?” Hermione murmured, and turned her head to allow him greater access, an invitation he seized upon with relish, sucking and nipping at the spot just beneath her ear that always made her weak in the knees. “I love it when you do that…”

He smiled against her skin but said nothing. She was warm, so warm, and tasted so incredibly sweet. He felt he could stand there with her indefinitely, just breathing her in and tasting her smooth skin. That perfume she was wearing intoxicated him with its hints of peaches, almonds and honey, and something else equally enticing.

Ghosting light kisses along her jaw, his mouth found hers and took it in a ravishing kiss that began just with lips melting into each other and grew into something much more.

Eons seemed to pass in this haze-inducing manner, until Draco pulled away to catch his breath. In the dim light of the corridor, he could see Hermione attempting to do the same.

“Let’s take this someplace else,” he whispered. “I have an idea. Come on.”

Taking her hand, he drew her into a sprint down the shadowy passageway towards a door painted a deep maroon.

“Wait!” Hermione hissed. “I’m going to break my neck in these shoes!” She stopped just long enough to pull them off and then, clutching them, she grabbed his hand and they ran on.

When Draco opened the connecting door at the far end of the corridor, Hermione gasped in delight. Before her was a long, rectangular space in which a very modern swimming pool had been installed. She’d been here before, of course, and so found herself momentarily confused about how they’d arrived here from the particular corridor they’d just left, but decided not to dwell too much on the mysteries of a five-hundred-year-old house, let alone a home to wizards.

Every common area of the Manor had been decorated for the party and this was no exception. The pool was flanked by a stone wall on one side; all along the other side, tall, arched windows looked out onto the Lady Garden, the same one in which Hermione and Draco had strolled with the baby days before. Through the windows, one could see tiny lights in the dark of the garden, sparkling pinpoints on every snow-covered surface. A series of graceful arches much the same as in the Groined Passage had been built into the ceiling. There, just beneath every arch, candles floated in undulating lines. Fairies fluttered gently in bright clusters just above the water, casting shimmering lights on its rippling, blue surface. Beneath, tiny water sprites darted and swam, leaving splashes of iridescent colour behind them.

It had never looked quite like this. Hermione gazed at it with a small, dreamy smile. Enchanting.

Draco had lost no time casting a Silencing Charm and setting wards to prevent anyone barging in on them. This was their time, no matter how brief.

“How a quick swim, love?” he whispered behind her, his breath ruffling the tendrils of hair on the back of her neck.
“What a very good idea,” she murmured, smiling. “Undo me, please…”

“Delighted…” he grinned, “… to be your undoing.” Slowly, he began unfastening the velvet-covered buttons, allowing his fingertips to trail caresses down the planes of her back as they moved lower. The dress slipped to the stone floor and she stepped out of it and turned to face him, pushing her half-slip down till it puddled on the floor where she stood.

Smiling impishly, she fingered the straps of her bra. “I don’t think I’ll be needing this now.”

Reaching around her, Draco unhooked the bra and it fell to the floor to join the dress and slip. He smiled as her pert breasts were bared. He’d always loved them, so creamy and lush, her peaked nipples a dusky rose colour. His breath quickened as he anticipated lavishing kisses on them. Shrugging off his jacket, he laid it on a nearby chair.

“Your turn,” Hermione told him, and began with his tie. Cufflinks, belt, socks and shoes followed in quick succession. She turned her attention, then, to the buttons of his shirt. Before long, he stood there only in his trousers. The tiled floor was cold to the touch, and he shivered slightly.

“Now,” she said briskly. “Trousers, please.” She stood there expectantly, clad only in her tiny lace knickers, stockings and garters, hands on her hips.

“Yes, ma’am,” Draco chuckled. “At your service.” Ever so slowly, he opened the button and pulled down the zip, letting his trousers drop to his ankles. Stepping out of them, he gracefully kicked them aside and moved closer to her. Only his boxers remained.

“Care to do the honours?”

“Mmm.” Hermione smiled, slipping her thumbs inside the waistband. For just a moment, the powerful temptation just to plunge her hand all the way in and grasp his jutting cock nearly overtook her, but she held back and merely dragged the boxers down in a desultory manner. When she’d got them down around his ankles, she looked back up at him.

The view was breathtaking.

Her breath caught in her throat and she shivered in delicious anticipation of stroking that smooth skin, running her hands all over his fine, leanly muscled body, and pressing kisses everywhere she could reach.

“Ready to go in?” She turned towards the pool, but he caught her arm.

“Wait,” he commanded. “Stay there a moment longer.” With a silent, stealthy grace, he slipped into the water and then turned back to her. She stood at the tiled edge, waiting.

“Right,” he smiled. “Sit down.”

She complied, letting her stockinged feet dangle in the comfortably tepid water.

“Ooh, this is lovely, so warm!” she exclaimed, surprised momentarily. She splashed a bit, making Draco smile at her childlike enjoyment of something so simple.

“Did you expect it to be cold, then?” He grinned. “The water is Charmed to be a certain temperature all year round. It’s always like this.”

“Lovely,” she murmured again. “I shall have to go swimming more often.” She looked at him expectantly. “So, Mr. Malfoy – what now?”

He moved closer to her and took one foot and then the other in his hands, briefly kneading them while she sighed blissfully. Then he reached up to her left thigh, unsnapped the garter, and in a gradual, sinuous movement, began rolling the silk stocking down her leg, tossing it aside finally. He set his hands on her right calf then, moving them very slowly up her leg, his fingertips teasing
the inside of her thigh and then brushing lightly over her silk-covered mound before undoing the
garter and rolling the stocking down. Despite her near-nakedness, Hermione found herself quite
hot suddenly, yearning for the refreshing water of the pool to soothe the slow burn that threatened
to immolate her from within.

Draco noticed the flush that had turned his wife’s skin rosy and he smiled wolfishly

“Warm, are we?” His voice was liquid and mesmerising, wafting around her like smoke. “That
can be remedied. Eventually.” He moved even closer. “Lift your hips, darling.”

As if in a trance, Hermione obeyed, and he grasped her knickers and slid them down over her
bum to her knees. There they stayed for a moment, as he surveyed the treasure they’d concealed.

“Lovely!” he breathed, and looked his fill before finally pulling the silken scrap of material down
the rest of the way in a single, quick movement, tossing it into the pile of clothing lying
haphazardly on the tiled floor.

Despite the seven years they’d been together as a couple and the nearly five they’d been married,
Hermione still felt, in some ways, as if each intimacy were the first. Draco had that effect on her. It
was something about the way he smiled, the way he looked at her with that penetrating gaze that
made her feel as if he could see all the way through her, the consuming passion in his eyes when
he looked at her body as if, for him, no woman could possibly be more desirable, the love
illuminating the passion in each kiss and caress. As time passed, each coupling seemed at once
brand-new and yet, because of their familiarity, more powerfully intimate than the last. She
thanked Merlin, Morgana, Circe, and anyone else she could think of for the good fortune and
extraordinary circumstances that had brought the two of them together against all logical odds.

Now, he rested his long fingers on her knees and began a sensuous stroking that progressed
upwards to the tops of her inner thighs. Over and over he repeated the tender, teasing strokes.
Parting her legs further then, he stepped between them and ran his hands up her legs, over her
belly, and finally to her breasts. Cupping them, he began a tantalizing curl of his fingertips over
her nipples, already painfully erect and waiting for his touch.

“Hermione,” he whispered, and she thrilled to hear her name the way he said it. “Hermione… I
want you so much!”

Bending his head, he began lavishing soft kisses on her inner thighs, each one bringing him closer
to the place she ached for his mouth to find.

“Lean back, love,” he said softly, and she complied, putting her weight on her arms extended
behind her. He slipped his hands under her bum, raising her slightly, and dipped his head down
between her legs, the scent of her arousal as heady to him as a rare perfume. He breathed her in
deeply, and gently, carefully, opened her to his gaze.

“Like the petals of a rose,” he murmured reverently. Delicately, he pressed a random sprinkling of
small kisses to her labia. Then, touching the tip of his tongue to her clit, he drew it slowly around
the sensitive nub of tissues, flicking it lightly over the top, and then down the length of her slit.
She sighed deeply and he glanced up. Her head was thrown back and her eyes were closed, her
back arched and the peaks of her breasts glinting in the candlelight. An answering fire in his groin
returned him to the pleasures of tasting her, and now he thrust his tongue deep inside her. She was
so exquisitely hot and wet for him. He wanted to devour her, draw her deep inside himself, mark
her, get right under her skin and leave himself there, turn her inside out with pleasure.

His tongue was doing wicked, delicious things that were becoming almost unbearable. Deep
thrusts were followed by shorter strokes and then caresses lavished on her clit. She clutched at his
head in an effort to draw him in even more deeply. Feeling her muscles beginning to contract in
sudden, coiling tension, he looked up, smiling, and ran his tongue over his lips, licking them clean.
Slowly, seductively, he drew the back of one hand across his mouth.

Then, in one quick, fluid movement, he grasped her hips, pulling her even closer, and buried his
head deep between her legs once again, resuming his caresses even more ardently with tongue, lips and teeth. Her mouth opened in a silent scream of pleasure.

“Come for me, Hermione!” His voice was low and compelling. Suddenly, an explosive climax banished all rational thought, sending her into sweet, shuddering oblivion. She lay there on the cool tiles, breathing hard, feeling sated and yet still so needy. For him.

“Draco…” Her voice was tremulous.

Strong arms encircled her, sitting her up and then drawing her gently down into the warm water. She turned and leaned her head back against his shoulder for a moment, enjoying the sensation of dangling as he held her, weightless, in water as restful and soothing as a bath. He lowered his head to nuzzle her neck and shoulder, and then gently turned her to face him again, drawing her close. She could feel his erect cock bobbing in the wavelets and teasing gently, delightfully, at her entrance. She smiled into his eyes, dark with smoldering passion, and drew his mouth into a breathtaking kiss that was all tenderness and sweetness. It was a kiss to savour, to linger over.

Slipping her hands around his firm, rounded bum, she drew him even closer, both of them falling more deeply into the kiss. Then, in a sudden, fluid movement, he lifted her high above him, much as a ballet dancer lifts his partner, and then let her slide slowly down his body until her breasts were level with his mouth, one hand circling her waist to steady her and hold her close while the other began to play idly with her left breast. He captured her tightly furled right nipple between his teeth, biting down lightly and then drawing it deeply into his mouth and ravishing with his tongue. When he had satisfied himself with that one, he moved to the other breast, raining tiny butterfly kisses all over it, curling and flicking his tongue around her nipple in repeated caresses. The sensations were electric and they radiated straight down to her core. Instinctively, she slid her hands into his hair, clutching his head to her chest.

“Draco,” she panted, almost incapable of coherent speech. “Oh… I want…”

“Ssh, darling.” His whisper moved over her skin like a sweet caress. “I know.”
Finally, she could wait no longer. Sliding down a bit, she reached with one hand to guide him to her opening as she brought her legs up and around his waist. That was all Draco needed. The heat from her lower body circled him like a vice and suddenly there was only the intense longing for completion. Grasping her buttocks tightly, he crushed her body to his, entering her in one powerful, deep thrust. The sensation of their joining was overwhelming. They sighed in unison, both growing quite still for a moment. She could feel him throbbing deep inside of her.

She felt like heaven around him, hot and tight and all-consuming.

“Must… move!” he gasped.

The urgency was upon her too, and she began to rock her pelvis against his in a rhythm he fell into smoothly and then accelerated, until they were undulating together with a fevered grace.

Before long, tremors of intense, almost unbearable pleasure rolled through one and then the other, and it was nearly impossible to tell where one flesh stopped and the other started. In such moments, it is possible to fall away from the world, to lose oneself completely in another, to know bliss in its purest form. This they did, each calling out the other’s name.

Afterwards, they drifted lazily in the warm water, the fairy lights flickering above them and casting spots of soft, pastel color into the blue depths. It was pure peace to float in each other’s arms, eyes closed, letting the water wash away all thought, soothing and cleansing as it gently cradled them.

Suddenly, a joyous roar from a distant part of the Manor woke them from their comfortable lassitude.

“Oh gods, Draco!” Hermione gasped, her hands flying to her mouth. “It must be midnight! Quick, check your watch!”

In two strokes, Draco was at the side of the pool. He scrambled up the steps and over to the pile of clothing, frantically rummaging through his belongings until his fingers closed over the cool metal of his watchband.

“You’re right. It’s 12:02. Well, Happy New Year, sweetheart! I believe we’re fucked.”

“We left the ballroom at nearly 11:30, I think… so we’ve been gone for at least half an hour! Draco, we totally lost track of time!” Her voice dropped to a pained whisper. “What will everybody think? This is so embarrassing!”

She stopped for a moment, and then the full import of their behaviour hit her. “Oh, Merlin – your parents! I’m sure we’ve embarrassed them, disappearing this way. They’ll be upset!”

“As I said. We’re fucked.” He laughed, but it sounded shaky even to him.

Just then, they heard voices. The sounds seemed to be coming nearer, and as they grew louder and more distinct, Hermione and Draco could hear their names being called.

“Oh shit!” Draco wasn’t laughing now. He froze for a second or two, unsure what to do next. Fervently, he hoped he’d set the wards properly. He had been in a bit of a hurry at the time.

The door was rattling on its hinges. Did they have time to get out, grab their clothes and hide? No. They did not. He leapt back into the water and splashed ungracefully over to Hermione, who was cowering against the far wall, only her head above the water. One arm covered her breasts rather pitifully, while the other hand was between her legs. Instinctively, he positioned himself in front of her, his own hands hovering pathetically above his bits.

Ten seconds later, the door burst open and what seemed like a horde of people, yelling and laughing and waving bottles of very expensive champagne, paraded in.
Well, that answers one question. Made a right bollocks of the wards, didn’t I.

He could feel Hermione’s panic in the way her fingernails were digging into his back and hips. He could picture the welts forming even as he felt the sharp points of her nails working their way into his skin.

“Oh! Here they are!” Blaise Zabini yelled. He waved his arm triumphantly, indicating he’d finally tracked down their quarry, oblivious to the fact that as he did so, the open bottle of Krug 1985 he was clutching slopped a foamy arc of champagne into the air and down the frock of his date, who was wobbling along behind him. She was none other than Lavender Brown, victim of the infamous fifth-year shrinking spell. She’d grown into an attractive young woman and, having accepted Blaise’s invitation, clearly wasn’t harbouring any long-term grudges. Her happy grin was momentarily replaced by a shocked grimace.

“Zabini, you prat! Watch what you’re doing!” she shrieked. Then, sticking a finger down her sodden cleavage, she licked its tip and grinned. “Mmm, Blaise, can I have some more of that, please?”

He turned back and grinned at her, leering predatorily at her chest. “Down your lovely front, my sweet, or in a glass like everybody else?”

“Oh, you!” she said in mock exasperation, slapping his hands away as he reached for her. “That’s for later!”

Harry tottered over to the pool’s edge and peered in, his glasses slightly askew on his nose. Ginny was right behind him, smirking.

“Hermione?” he asked hesitantly. “You in there?”

“It came out in a muffled squeak.

“Where??” He got down on his knees and began pawing the water as if he could part the Red Sea and discover her hiding there between the waves.

“Back. Here. Harry,” she muttered, her face half-pressed against Draco’s back. Gathering her courage, she peeked out from behind him, her wet hair half out of its French knot, curly tendrils hanging haphazardly here and there.

“OH, there you are! Look, you lot! Here she is!” Harry yelled happily, pointing. “Him too!”

Greg Goyle and his wife Millicent turned and began moving in the direction of the pool, as did Ron and Pansy, Theo and Angeline Nott, and Neville and Luna. George and his girlfriend had made themselves comfortable at one of the wrought-iron tables and were happily toasting the new year yet again as they made their way through their own private bottle. A goofy grin on his face, George raised the bottle in a cheerful salute to Draco and took a long swig. Luna poked Neville and pointed at the pair in the pool, dragging his attention away from the garden view he was squinting at through the glare of reflected candlelight on the window.

Well, well. The gang’s all here. All here and gawking, no shame at all. “Happy New Year, everyone!” Draco called, his forced heartiness generously laced with a sarcasm that nobody, in their tipsy state, was remotely aware of, except for Hermione. “Join us, why don’t you?”

“What??” Hermione hissed, horrified. “What are you doing, Malfoy??”

“Relax, Granger,” he whispered. “I didn’t actually mean it! I’m trying to make them go away!”

Unfortunately, reverse psychology proved unreliable on this occasion. There was a deadly silent pause, everybody looking speculatively at each other.

And then, “Why not, yeah? I’m in!” Greg Goyle stood, stripping off his jacket and beginning to
unknot his tie.

After that, it was a free-for-all, clothing flying in every direction, people in various stages of undress jumping, cannonball-style, into the pool with shouts of “HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

Hermione and Draco stood, frozen, watching their friends paddling happily by.

“Oh! Malfoy! Sorry… Malfoys!” Ron emerged suddenly from underwater, spluttering, right next to them. Hermione was uncomfortably aware of how close he must have been. She wondered, suddenly appalled, whether he swam with his eyes open underwater.

To his credit, Draco kept his cool admirably while doing an evasive little dance in order to shield Hermione from view. Fortunately he didn’t have to do it for long. Of the sixteen friends who’d discovered their little tryst, only Ginny had the presence of mind to toss Draco their underthings.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as she pulled her bra and knickers on. *I owe you, Gin.*

Somebody had Transfigured a chair cushion into a beach ball, and a raucous, pick-up game of Rounders *sans* bats ensued, whilst at the other end of the pool, Lavender and Pansy were atop their men’s shoulders, playfully trying to see who would be the first to knock the other off into the water. Poor, valiant Ron was at a clear disadvantage, as Pansy was still burdened by extra pregnancy weight. His face, emerging from between her thighs, was beet-red, his eyes comically bugged out with the strain.

* *

Later, quick Drying Spells speeding up the dressing process, everyone made their way back to the front hall in time to see the rest of the guests taking their leave, either by Floo in the huge hearth, one of several that connected the Manor to the Network, or via Apparition. The group, still somewhat bedraggled, drew curious, and in some cases disapproving, glances from many of the guests who were still saying their goodnights.

Draco and Hermione walked, arms around each other, towards the hearth to find their parents. However, only the Grangers were there. Hermione hurried ahead to try and make amends for their absence, discovering to her relief that their sense of humour far outweighed any slight consternation. She hoped that Narcissa and Lucius would see it the same way.

As she stood there, speaking to her mother and father, Draco turned his head right and left, vainly searching for his own parents. He spotted Lucius shepherding his mother through the crowd towards him, both of them looking more glad than upset upon catching sight of their son.

There were a number of people between them still. Suddenly, Draco was aware of the voice of one, a woman. With other guests hemming her in on all sides, she was apparently unaware that Draco, Lucius and Narcissa were approaching from opposite directions, and all three were within earshot. She seemed equally oblivious to the actual volume of her voice, a slightly slurred, rather ill-concealed stage whisper.

“… all of them stripped *naked* and cavorting in the pool doing the gods only know what! Imagine! What a crass display! I don’t know how Narcissa and Lucius will live it down. It was bad enough when that headstrong son of theirs married so beneath him. This was probably all *her* idea.”

Draco stiffened and froze in his tracks.

“Indeed,” a man replied, his voice a failed whisper as well. “I blame that girl and her Muggle
ways for many of their ridiculous decisions these last several years. Blood is everything, regardless of the absurd views put about by the Ministry. Lucius and Narcissa carry political correctness too far! One might think they actually believe all this nonsense!” he scoffed, and pressed on. “I for one have had quite enough of ‘inclusion.’ If Malfoy continues to insist upon it, I shall have no option but to take our money elsewhere.”

Lucius and Narcissa had advanced far enough into the room to hear the hateful exchange as clearly as Draco had done. They stood very still. Lucius’ expression appeared impassive, but there was a dangerous glint in his eyes as he listened.

“Inclusion! Hmm! Frankly,” the woman sniffed, “I don’t understand how they can bear the sight of some of these people!” Her voice dropped even further to a vitriolic hiss. “Between you and me, I don’t believe any of this change-of-heart rubbish. He’s got an ulterior motive. He hasn’t changed one whit, not really. You mark my words.”

Draco was thunderstruck. And then he saw his father let go of his mother’s arm and move more swiftly than he had ever seen him move before, straight to the couple in question. With an icy smile that seemed more like a baring of teeth, Lucius took both by the arms and escorted them rapidly to the door. Draco watched as Lucius spoke to them in what looked like clipped monosyllables, his face stiff with barely contained anger.

The door opened. Rather unceremoniously, the pair was shown out. The door shut again, a sudden blast of cold night air causing many nearby to shiver. Making a visible effort to compose himself, Lucius walked back through the crowd, heading directly for his son.

Draco was nearly at a loss for words. Nearly, but not quite.

“Father, who was that?” he managed to say, finally.

“Oh, them?” Lucius affected a casual demeanor. “Virgilius Maxwell and his wife, Porfiria. Major stockholders in Malfoy Enterprises. Silent partner in fact. Or was.” His laugh was grim.

“What do you mean?”

“He will be closing out his portfolio come Monday morning and withdrawing all his capital.”

Draco sucked in his breath. He knew very well what must have happened.

“Father…” he began, stopping when Lucius shook his head and held up a hand.

“Do not trouble yourself. He gave me an ultimatum. I do not accept ultimatums, nor do I take kindly to them, and I reminded him of that. His money – and the strings he attaches to it – are neither needed nor desired any longer.”

Before Lucius turned to rejoin Narcissa to bid their remaining guests goodnight, Draco caught his eye and they regarded each other for a long moment. It was the moment to which everything in the last twelve days had been leading, one that defined the past near-fortnight with astounding clarity, but ironically, one in which the fewest words had been said. But the flash of warmth in his father’s eyes and the hint of a smile on his face were unmistakable. Draco nodded, a small grin tugging at his own mouth. Then Lucius turned to go.

Draco walked back to Hermione, curiously lighter at heart than he had been in a very long time. The grin grew until his whole face was lit up with it. Watching him approach, Hermione couldn’t help smiling in response, even though she was mystified about the reason.

*
A bottle of champagne sat chilling in a silver ice bucket. Two glasses, half full, waited beside it on
the low table in their sitting room.

“S’late.”

“What’s the time, love?” Draco shifted on the sofa and stretched, slinging a bare arm over
Hermione as she snuggled against him, spoon-style. They lay there, warm and comfortable, Hermione in an oversized t-shirt and a pair of his boxers, and Draco in his favourite flannel pyjama bottoms.

She glanced at the mantel clock. “Nearly three.”

“Oh.”

Silence.

A burning ember popped in the grate, the fire now reduced to the occasional low flame licking the
coals.

“Can’t believe we’re finally going home tomorrow. Seems like ages,” she sighed.

“It has been. I can’t wait.”

“Quite an… eventful visit, wasn’t it?” Idly, Hermione traced little circles and figure eights onto the
back of his hand, now resting on the crest of her hip.

“Bit of an understatement, that,” he chuckled.

“Hey, what were you grinning about before? I’ve been meaning to ask.” She twisted her head
around to get a look at his face, which was curiously relaxed in the firelight.

“Oh!” Draco paused, a faint smile returning at the recollection.

“Let’s just say that a couple of guests needed putting in their places and my father took care of it. Quite thoroughly too, I might add.”

Hermione turned so that she lay facing Draco. She reached up and smoothed a wayward lock of
his pale hair.

“Why? What had they done?”

“For starters, they were scandalised about everybody jumping into the pool. Said my parents
would never live down such a ‘crass display.’ Yeah. Their words. Spouted some really vile stuff
about Muggles and Muggleborns. That inviting them was ridiculous, just like everything else my
parents have done the last several years, and – wait for it – that surely my father, of all people,
couldn’t really be this tolerant of such inferior types, that he must have an ulterior motive and that
he’s just biding his time until pure-blood society can rise again. Essentially that my father is a liar.
Which apparently is entirely acceptable under the circumstances, in their view.” He carefully
avoided mentioning the rest of what that prick Virgilius Maxwell had said.

“Oh, Draco!” Hermione was plainly horrified. “What did your father do?”

“Well, I wasn’t close enough to hear what he actually said to them, but they were given a few
choice words and then shown the door so fast, I reckon their heads are still spinning!” Draco
laughed. “You should have seen their faces! Father gave them The Look, you know? The one that
can melt stone. He told me later that the bastard actually threatened to withdraw his considerable
financial support from Malfoy Enterprises unless my father reverts back to all that pure-blood
superiority shit. I’m not sure what offended him more: their insufferable attitudes or the fact that
they believed he secretly felt the same way!"

She gasped. “And?”

“And…” he grinned, “… then he told them in no uncertain terms what they could do with their money!”

Hermione stared. “Merlin!” she breathed. “You must be very proud of him.”

“I am, rather,” Draco admitted, surprising himself. “He was… he was bloody brilliant, actually.”

“Does he know you feel that way?” she asked gently.

“I… I hope so. He does, I think. Yeah.”

“Good.” Hermione smiled, raising his hand to her lips and pressing a kiss to his palm. “Shall we have a toast, then?” Together they sat up.

“By all means,” Draco replied, topping up their glasses and then raising his. “To… let’s see… breakfast in bed!”

“To snowball fights!”

“Scavenger hunts!”

“And lovely bubble baths afterwards…”

“To… naughty Owl messages.”

“Oh, and yellow roses! That was so sweet, Draco!”

“To very old brandy.”

“Baa-a-a-a-a!” (giggles)

“I’ll ignore that. To my gorgeous wife.”

“To my very sexy husband.”

“Happy New Year, Hermione!”

“Happy New – mmm…”

TBC

And now, a little tour of the family wing of Malfoy Manor:
The Yellow Drawing Room

The Blue Drawing Room

The Dining Room
Other Groined Passage
The ornate hearth in Lucius’ study

The Library, recently redone
Draco and Hermione’s modernised bedroom

Draco and Hermione’s modernised en-suite
Indoor Swimming Pool
“You’re going where?”

Marmalade dripped off the knife, poised in mid-air, as Draco turned an incredulous eye on his wife.

Hermione laid down the spoonful of rice cereal she’d been about to give eight-month-old Rory. “It’s a ‘Mummy and Me’-type play and fitness class for babies Rory’s age. Should be fun, don’t you think?” she said brightly, returning to the task at hand and tipping the remains of the cereal into Rory’s waiting mouth. The baby accepted it eagerly and then grasped her closed sippy cup for a drink of apple juice. She’d begun drinking from a cup by herself a few weeks before and was still delighted with her newfound skill. Latching onto the cup’s spout, she began drinking with great enthusiasm.

“Bit silly, if you ask me,” he snorted. “Rory can’t even crawl properly yet, much less walk! What sort of ‘fitness’ class could it possibly be?”

“Oh, well, you know. Mums sit with their babies on the floor and move their little arms and legs to music, play games. They’ve got mats on the floor and steps to climb and little plastic slides and tunnely things to crawl through, that sort of thing.”

“Tunnely things. Right.” Draco wasn’t convinced. Then he thought of something else. “And what’s all this about ‘Mummy and me’? What about dads, then?”

Hermione laughed, reaching over to tousle his hair playfully, leaving several small blobs of rice cereal clinging to the blond strands fringing his forehead. “Oops, sorry!” she giggled, reaching to pluck the offending particles out of his hair. “I’m sure they’re welcome too, love. Would you like to come along?”

“Nope,” he replied, swatting her hand away and frowning briefly as he tried to brush the food out of his hair. “It’ll probably be a gaggle of women all nattering on about the best nappies and problems with child minders and how Junior can recite the entire alphabet backwards at just ten months. No,” he repeated with a wry grin, “not for me. Thanks loads, sweetheart, but I think I’ll pass.”

Hermione shrugged and gave the baby’s face and neck a quick wipe. “Suit yourself. But we’re going to have lots of fun, aren’t we, Muffin?” She hefted a squirming Rory out of the high chair.
“Come on, then. Time for a bath. Silly baby, you’re wearing more than you ate!”

They disappeared down the hall in the direction of the loo, leaving Draco to ponder what he’d do with his Saturday. Hmm. Well, there was that book he’d been dipping into lately, Spectacular Spells Gone Horribly Haywire. That was always good for a laugh or two, particularly as most of it was utter rubbish.

He supposed he could work in the back garden for a bit. Hermione had asked him to clear away the piles of dead leaves littering the barren flowerbeds. But a simple *Evanesco* or two and that job would be done in no time.

He wondered what various friends were doing later in the day. With enough Floo powder, he could always pop round the usual fireplaces and see if he couldn’t talk some of said mates into a cozy little game of poker or maybe a bit of pick-up Quidditch. They hadn’t done either in a dog’s age.

Hang on. Harry and Ginny were away this weekend with Taran, braving both Muggles and their notion of fun on a grand scale. They’d gone to Paris to spend a couple of days at EuroDisney. Right about now, they’d be wandering round the Magic Kingdom, the delicious irony of which wasn’t lost on Draco.

And Ron, poor sod. He was up to his eyeballs in triplets, had been for the past ten weeks. Draco had never been one for the notion of karma, but in Weasley’s case, he’d become a believer. Just the thought of Ron surrounded by screaming, red-faced, miniature versions of himself in triplicate was enough to start Draco sniggering. No, Ron would be wanting only one thing these days (well, maybe two), and neither was a game of poker or taking to his broom in the scintillating company of a bunch of his mates-- rather, a solid six or seven hours of uninterrupted sleep and then a nice, long “getting reacquainted” shag with Pansy.

As for Blaise… who knew what he’d got up to this weekend, now that he and Lavender were officially an item? Probably holed up together in his well-warded flat with enough supplies to last a week. No point in trying to track him down.

His glance fell on a letter lying on the sideboard, a handful of photos partially visible inside the open envelope. It had arrived from the States several days earlier. Danny and Gemma. Married now, their former flatmates had moved to New York after finishing their post-graduate degrees a couple of years earlier. Professional prospects had beckoned– for her, a position as a graduate teaching assistant at a prestigious university, and for him, an enticing job offer from a private philanthropic foundation– and so they had gone. In the seven and a half years since they’d first met at Oxford, Danny had become more than just a close friend; he’d been like a brother, and in these last two years, a brother who was very sorely missed. Draco found himself wondering what his friend was doing at that very moment and then laughed quietly to himself. It would be three a.m. in New York now. Knowing Danny and his night-owl proclivities, particularly on a Friday night, there were several likely possibilities, and only one of them actually involved sleep.

Shaking his head with a wry grin, he brought his attention back to the matter at hand, deciding that he really didn’t much fancy the options as they stood.

“Uh… Hermione?” he called down the hall from the sitting room, where he was sprawled on the sofa. “Granger! You there?”

“Yes?” came the muffled reply.

“Is that offer to come along still open?”

Hermione’s head popped out from the nursery doorway. She was wreathed in smiles.

“You really want to come?”

“Reckon so. Lead the way, love.”
An hour later, they were strolling along Queensway in the heart of Bayswater, West London, enjoying the late-winter sunshine and bracing air while searching the shop fronts for the right address. Finding it didn’t take long. Whiteley’s Centre was an imposing and rather grand collection of shops and restaurants enclosed in a charming, old building, a series of columns and bay windows lining the upper storeys.

![Whiteley’s Centre, Bayswater, London](image)

As newlyweds– in fact, for the first three years of their marriage– he and Hermione had lived in Muggle London. Far more familiar now, it no longer held quite the aura of alien exoticism that it had when he and Hermione had first begun to really explore it together as students and then after leaving Oxford. And he very much enjoyed many aspects of it: the theatre, cinemas and museums, fine restaurants and cafes, funny little out-of-the-way bookshops and antiques shops with their eclectic treasures, the green parks and gardens. But even now, despite the fact that he’d lived essentially as a Muggle for six years, with an ever-growing ease of movement and comfortable familiarity with the ways of their world, every once in a while, such ways could still seem a bit strange. There remained a peripheral awareness of something Other about them, no matter that he could slip in and out of their world and blend in with ease.

Shopping centres in particular still mystified him even as they rather fascinated him. The sheer size of such places and the single-minded pursuit of spending that seemed to possess Muggle shoppers as they made their way round, trolling from shop to shop, were bizarrely intriguing even as the whole experience also seemed rather crass at times.

Wheeling Rory in her pushchair through the entrance, he glanced around somewhat dubiously. Whiteley’s on a Saturday morning was precisely the wrong place to be if one were naturally wary of crowds with one thing on their collective minds. It didn’t help that many of the shops were advertising huge sales, drawing hordes of them in like sharks at a feeding frenzy.

Hermione sucked in a quiet breath and grabbed Draco’s arm, breaking into his ruminations. The marble staircase in the centre of the atrium to which she pointed was quite grand, he had to concede.

They made their way to the glass-encased lift, manoeuvring their way amongst other parents with pushchairs, some holding small children by the hand, all of them rather like sardines being packed into a very cramped tin. Several teenagers lounged against the back wall, looking out at the shops as the lift moved up and smirking at each other with a distinct smugness that reminded Draco sharply of himself ten years before.
The lift stopped on the first-floor level and Hermione whispered, “Here we are.”

Draco nodded mirthlessly and gritted his teeth as he propelled Rory’s pushchair forward, resisting the temptation to use it as a battering ram and simply mow down everyone in his way. Finally emerging, he felt rather as if the lift had just belched them out and then shut its mouth before gliding serenely up to the next level.

“Oh! There it is!” Hermione pointed, grinning. “Come on!”

Just a few storefronts down from where they stood was an inviting display window filled with hand puppets, plush animals in rainbow colours, dolls, large plastic balls, and a clutch of marionettes, all of them clowns with bright orange-red hair made of yarn, wearing a variety of garish outfits decorated mostly with large polka dots and plaids. They were suspended from the ceiling of the display case and waved their arms and legs in time to cheery music welling up from invisible speakers. The large, bright sign above the window read GYMBOREE.

Inside, the large, cheerful space was decorated with brightly coloured rubber floor mats in solids and stripes, small slides, cloth tunnels like huge, open-ended caterpillars, climbing ramps and soft, squishy wedges and climbing steps, rings like giant doughnuts for sitting in, huge rubber balls and tiny plastic ones with holes. Sprightly music and small soap bubbles wafted over the room as parents parked their pushchairs and prams in one corner and made their way to the centre.

The class was scheduled to begin at 11:30 and it was nearly that now.

“What happens now?” Draco asked, lifting Rory out and hugging her to his chest protectively. She fisted his hair gleefully, dragging it into her mouth, and he winced a bit. Hermione laughed, extricating a clump of sodden blond hair from her daughter’s grip, and then fastened prepared name tags to each of their shirts.

“Well, I think we just start playing,” she replied. “Here, let’s try this! Come on, baby.” She indicated a small blue plastic slide. Draco sat Rory at the top of it, holding her firmly around her well-padded waist.

“One, two, three, wheeeee!!! Hooray, Rory!” Hermione laughed and applauded as Draco drew Rory down the slide. The baby burst into giggles and clapped her tiny hands.

‘AH-BAH!” she crowed gleefully.

Draco chuckled. “I do believe she likes that. Again, Rory B?”

They did it again and again, taking it in turn, and each time Rory seemed to enjoy it more. Draco caught Hermione’s eye and they grinned at each other over the baby’s head. Maybe there was something to this baby fitness idea after all.

Gradually, they made their way to every piece of equipment in the spacious room, delighting in Rory’s evident pleasure as she discovered the fun of pulling up and sliding down and bouncing...
and rolling. She’d already surprised and thrilled her parents on a recent morning when they had
come into the nursery to find her actually standing in her cot, clutching the rail and looking
immensely pleased with herself. Soon she’d be crawling, and then there would be even more she
could try. This play space was full of colour and music and interesting things to explore. If
anything, it seemed the parents were having just as much fun as their babies. The sounds of
laughter, encouraging cheers and applause, and excited, high-pitched baby squeals punctuated the
music with a happy sort of chaos.

Eventually, Draco and Hermione sat down on the rubber-matted floor, Rory nestling between her
daddy’s legs and her mummy sitting opposite. She was intent on picking up one of the small,
plastic balls with holes in them. Her brow furrowed in concentration, she lunged and made a grab
for it, knocking it out of her own reach when she missed. Hermione and Draco laughed, and
Hermione rolled it back for her to try once again. This they did over and over until finally, she
managed to snag one of the balls and happily brought it up to her mouth, her small fingers
clutching at it for dear life.

“First time?”

Hermione looked up to see an attractive young woman about her own age, baby son in tow, in the
process of sitting down right next to Draco. He opened his mouth to answer, but Hermione nipped
in ahead of him. “Yes, that’s right,” she chirped brightly.

Draco quirked an eyebrow at his wife but said nothing. He smiled politely at the woman and
nodded.

Apparently encouraged by this, the woman pressed on, ignoring Hermione completely. “What a
simply beautiful baby you’ve got!” she cooed at Draco. “She looks just like her daddy! The very
same lovely blonde hair and gorgeous eyes! How old is she?”

“Eight months. Isn’t that right, love?” He turned with a cheeky grin to Hermione and saw, to his
surprise, that her mouth was drawn into a tight line. He faltered, momentarily confused, before
turning back to the stranger. “And yours?”

The woman settled her son on her knee. “Andrew’s going on ten months. I can scarcely believe it.
Nearly a year already! The time’s simply flown. I’m Penny Cattrall, by the way.” Giving him a
dazzling smile, she stuck out an impeccably manicured hand.

A bit nonplussed for the moment, Draco quickly recovered himself, though he couldn’t hide a
small grin. Well, well. The woman was actually flirting with him! And he had to admit, he rather
liked the fact. Not that he was the slightest bit interested in her, or in anyone other than Hermione
for that matter, but his ego hadn’t had a stroking like this in ages. Marvellous to know that after
being officially half of a couple for a little more than seven years and married for nearly five, he
still had it. By the cartload, apparently. He revelled in the knowledge that his effect on women
was as potent as ever. This Penny woman was Exhibit A.

For her part, Hermione was amazed. How could a woman (Is she married? Must check to see if
there’s a ring…) throw herself at an obviously married man whose wife was sitting right there?

“Draco Malfoy,” He smiled politely, shaking Penny’s hand. “My wife, Hermione,” he added,
gesturing, and then he caught the look on her face. She was quietly seething. Silly girl, she needn’t
be jealous. She should know better, surely. He caught Hermione’s eye and winked playfully.

Unfortunately, the wink took a slight detour in translation. Hermione’s eyes widened.

Bloody hell! He’s actually enjoying this! ”Lovely to meet you, Penny,” she muttered, eyeing
Draco balefully.

If the Killing Curse could have been cast with a mere look, then Draco was as good as dead and
he knew it. After a long, uncomfortable moment, Hermione turned her gaze away from him,
smiling sweetly at Penny instead. Shit! Draco knew that particular smile and what was likely
brewing behind it. But damn it all, he hadn’t done anything wrong. It wasn’t his fault that women found him attractive. Why should he let unfounded jealousy dictate his behaviour? He was only being sociable and polite, after all.

Hermione’s thoughts were far less generous. Malfoy was acting like such a… such a man! Apparently he was getting a real buzz from all this attention, if his “aren’t-I-charming-and-sexy” smile were any indication. She could practically see his precious ego inflating! He was charming, not to mention sexy as fuck, but did he have to flaunt it quite so much? Okay, yeah, maybe he couldn’t help the fact that women were drawn to him like moths to a flame. Or perhaps more aptly, bees to a honey pot. All those intoxicating pheromones oozing out of every pore. Still, did he have to be so bloody cute in a room where the ratio of women to men was easily five to one? She could have sworn that his brilliantly white, perfect teeth had actually sparkled when he’d smiled!

The black-haired woman gave a quick nod, her gaze flickering briefly in Hermione's direction. This was followed by the barest possible verbal acknowledgement of Hermione’s presence—a quick “Pleasure”—and then Penny Cattrall was ready to engage her prey in further pointless but flirtatious chit chat. Her body language made it clear that Hermione might as well have been invisible. Innocent that she was, she had no idea whom she was choosing to ignore in order to be on the pull with Draco Malfoy.

“You know, Draco,” she said, her voice dropping to a tone bordering on sultry, “I simply cannot get over how much your daughter resembles you! I mean, she’s absolutely you all over. People must tell you that constantly! What did you say her name was?”

Before Draco could even open his mouth, Hermione was on her feet. Scooping Rory up out of his lap, she replied curtly, “He didn’t.” Fuming, she marched away with the baby, head held high.

A disturbing thought began niggling at a corner of her brain as she calmed down, but she stubbornly pushed it away. Just at present, she didn’t want to think about what the root of her jealousy might be. She would stew in it a bit longer, thank you. Her husband was acting like an arse.

Draco caught up with her just as the class leader, a robust-looking woman in a Gymboree t-shirt, began calling out something about “parachute time,” whatever that meant. She and her co-leader had opened up a huge, round, striped parachute made of nylon. Now everyone was to deposit their babies in the centre and then grab hold of an edge so as to make the parachute move this way or that as the grownups walked around in a circle, singing songs.

“Fuck’s sake, Hermione!” Draco whispered. “What the hell is the matter with you?”

“London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down…” everyone sang, walking around to the right. The clutch of babies toppled over, giggling, as the parachute moved them along. A few looked a bit dubious about the entire enterprise and one actually howled and had to be picked up. The rest seemed to enjoy it all enormously. Rory was having a grand time, by the look of her.

“Nothing!” she hissed.

The class leader sang out, “Walk left!” and everyone changed direction.

“My fair lady!”

Frustrated, he dropped his voice, his mouth close to her ear. “Bollocks! Come on, Granger, it was just a bit of stupid flirting and it wasn’t even me doing it, it was Pen–” he shook his head in frustration. “–that woman! Is that my fault?”

“Take the key and lock her up, lock her up, lock her up…”

Hermione’s reply was delivered in an angry whisper. “No! Of course not! But you did nothing to discourage her either, you great, conceited prat! You liked it!”
They both stared straight ahead, tightlipped.

“*Take the key and lock her up, my fair lady!*”

The class leaders broke out in hearty cheers and applause, which the parents took up as they began collecting their offspring from the parachute’s centre.

“Yay,” Hermione muttered darkly.

They glared at each other again and then both went to pick Rory up. Draco got to her first, sitting with the rest of the group on the floor in a circle, babies in their laps. It was time for more fun. Gritting her teeth, Hermione took her place alongside Draco and Rory. ‘Sod off!’ she thought basely, as the class leader beamed at everyone around the circle.

“Right, then, Mums and Dads,” the class leader chirped. “Stretch your legs out straight and sit your babies down just above your knees, that’s good. As we sing, we’re going to slowly raise our knees to a bent position and bring the babies up to the top, and then gradually slide them back down again. If you don’t know the nursery rhyme, just listen and you’ll pick it right up. Ready? *Oh… the grand old Duke of York…*”

When the song reached the lines *and when he was up, he was up, and when he was down, he was down*, Draco bumped Rory up to the top of his knees until she sat impossibly high, giggling hysterically, and then suddenly slid her to the bottom in a rush so that she plopped down, surprised and delighted, at the base of his stomach. He made silly faces at her and waggled his eyebrows as he sang, and she laughed harder.

It really was awfully sweet, the way they were together, Draco and the baby. Hermione couldn’t help laughing as well. Suddenly, she felt very foolish for having been so jealous. Really, what had happened, after all? Nothing more than the rather silly attempts of a woman to flirt with her husband. It wasn’t as if it had never happened before. Women had always gravitated towards Draco, though more so prior to their marriage, of course. There was that time at uni, she remembered, when her unreasoning jealousy had nearly ended their relationship. Even now, the recollection was painful. The truth was, he had never given her the slightest reason to lose faith in him, never taken any of these women up on their implicit invitations, never seemed even remotely interested in any of them. So what if such attentions stroked his male ego a bit? He was only human, after all—just a normal, red-blooded man. Being so jealous had been ridiculous. She needed to apologise and soon. Why, though, had it bothered her so much more today than in the past?

The class session was winding down with the traditional Gymbo the Clown goodbye song. One of the class leaders held up a huge clown doll with bright orange yarn hair under a sprightly, pointed hat. She went around the circle and sang goodbye to each baby by name, touching each one lightly on the nose with the doll’s soft face.

As the Gymbo doll approached, Rory’s eyes grew wide. Watching, Hermione wasn’t certain whether her daughter would laugh or cry when her turn to be kissed goodbye came.

“…Goodbye, Rory! *Mmwah!*” the leader sang out, gently touching the clown’s nose to Rory’s. Immediately, the baby reached her little arms out and pulled the doll to her in a huge bear hug.

“Aw-w-w-w…!” came the collective sigh from all the parents.

Hermione and Draco couldn’t stop their own smiles.
Later, they sat at a Starbuck’s on the top level of the shopping centre, having a light lunch. Hermione spooned strained chicken and vegetables into Rory’s eager mouth as they savoured melted cheese and roasted vegetables on focaccia bread and sipped steaming cups of cappuccino.

A healthy sip left a film of creamy foam above her lip. Draco watched as her tongue flicked out and delicately erased a bit of it. He allowed himself a moment to enjoy the sight before reaching out with a paper napkin to deftly finish the job.

“Sexy,” he pronounced, totally deadpan. “I’ve always been especially attracted to women with moustaches.”

She rolled her eyes, her mouth twitching. “Thanks. I think. Look,” she said quietly and put down her cup, suddenly unable to meet his eyes. “I acted badly earlier. I don’t know why it affected me like that. It never has done before, not to that degree anyway. Well… except once. I’m sorry, Draco.”

“You had nothing to be jealous about, you know,” he said quietly, covering her hand with his own.

“I know!” she wailed, feeling a wave of remorse and embarrassment. “I was an idiot! Please don’t rub it in!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. And… well… I suppose I really should apologise too. I can’t deny it, I did rather enjoy the attention.”

“You certainly did! Ugh, Draco, how could you! She was an absolute cow!”

“Agreed. She was. Whatever was I thinking? Shameless slag.” He grinned again, and winked. “Bet she propositions at least one dad every class session!”

“Just make sure it isn’t you again, Malfoy! Or I’ll be roasting your bollocks for dinner.”

He smiled serenely and leaned in to give her a light kiss on the nose. “No worries, darling. I only have eyes for you.”

11:20 pm. Hermione was in her pyjamas, curled up on the sofa in front of the fire. She could hear Draco singing lustily in the shower, and she grinned. The calm of the sitting room was delicious after a long, active Saturday keeping up with Rory, who was finally, blissfully, sound asleep after a touch of crankiness that was the likely result of being overtired.

Her current book lay untouched in her lap whilst she gazed pensively at the flames. The scented
candle she’d lit on the mantel sent a spicy pumpkin aroma into the air, and together with the 
crack of the fire, could easily have lulled her to the edge of sleep. But she was deep in thought, 
trying to work something out for herself.

Why had a harmless flirtation—neither instigated nor actively encouraged by Draco—got her so 
brassed off earlier? Granted, that Penny woman had been beyond irritating. Hermione had found 
herself entertaining all manner of base fantasies of ways to part Penny from various limbs and 
internal organs. But as much as the attention had puffed Draco up like a bantam cock, there had 
ever been any real threat to Hermione, and beneath her irritation, she had always known that. So 
—why had her knickers got into such a gods-awful twist? What was it about Penny Catrall that 
was so threatening? She sat, lost in these ruminations, for a good while.

* 

Draco found her there, fast asleep, an hour later. The book had slipped out of her hand and now 
lay, open and face down, on the floor. The fire had gone down to a bank of burning embers, its 
soft sputtering the only reminder that it hadn’t gone out altogether.

He reached for the crocheted afghan that lay folded across the back of the sofa and was gently 
drawing it over her when she awoke.

“Mmm…” she murmured drowsily. “What time is it?”

“Late,” he told her. “Time for good little witches to be tucked up in bed with their husbands.”

He slipped an arm behind her back and began to scoop her up, when she put out a hand to stop 
him.

“Wait, love,” she said. “Sit down, okay? There’s something I’d like to say.”

Draco looked at her quizzically and then nodded. “Fancy something to drink? Cup of tea, maybe, 
or some wine? We’ve still got a bit of that Pinot Noir left from dinner.”

“Yes, please, wine would be lovely.”

Draco disappeared into the kitchen, emerging with a pair of glasses and a bottle of wine. He made 
short work of what was left in the bottle, handing Hermione her glass and then settling down with 
his own at the other end of the sofa, her feet nestled in his lap. She wigged her toes comfortably, 
setting off a small but unmistakable reaction inside his pyjama bottoms. He squirmed a little and 
then cleared his throat.

“Right… so… what did you want to talk to me about?”

Hermione took a sip of her wine, studying the way the faint firelight infused its ruby colour with a 
golden glow. “Well… I’ve been thinking about this morning. You know, what happened at 
Gymboree…”

“Yes, okay. Go on.”

“I’ve been trying to understand why the whole thing bothered me so much. And I think I’ve 
finally got it all sorted.” Hermione flushed, unable to meet his gaze. “I’m a bit embarrassed to 
admit this, Draco, but… I suddenly felt… well… as if maybe I were just sort of ‘good old 
Hermione’ to you now, after seven years together. You know, like a comfy old boot. Nothing 
thrilling anymore, not like at the beginning. I mean, gosh… you’ve seen me covered in baby 
vomit and poo, and so sleep-deprived that I look like a zombie. I’m still not quite all the way down 
to my pre-baby weight. I was wearing the jeans with that little baby-spinach stain on the bum. I 
expected we’d be playing on the floor and nobody would be at all dressed up. But that… that 
woman… she looked so chic, even if she did have a ten-month-old! Like she’d just stepped out of 
a salon! And like she’s got a personal trainer. Wearing those teeny, tiny jeans, and probably one of 
those push-up bras from Victoria’s Secret…”
She’d lost Draco at “personal trainer,” but he’d certainly got the gist. Hermione was still talking, but the essence of what she was saying was already all too clear to him. She’d been scared, suddenly, that he no longer found her as attractive or intriguing as he had done in the past. Completely irrational, of course, and certainly he’d shown her on a very regular basis just how appealing he found her—but this wasn’t a thing of logic and reason. She’d assumed that somebody new and pretty could interest him by virtue of those qualities alone. “Good old Hermione” indeed! The irony was positively hilarious, in fact, when he thought about it. He chuckled and she glared at him and then looked away, her mouth set in a thin line.

“Hermione.” He touched a finger to her chin, turning her gaze back in his direction. “Listen. I’m sorry, I wasn’t laughing at you, darling, honestly. I was laughing at myself. Yes, really!” he exclaimed, nodding vigorously. “It’s just that what you said—it’s rather a lot like what I was feeling this morning. You were angry because I was enjoying being flirted with, and the truth is, I was. But not just for the reason you might suppose. Okay, yeah, my ego got a big boost, I can’t deny that. It felt great to know that I’m still attractive to the opposite sex even after being out of circulation for years.”

“Still attractive?” Hermione snorted. “She was falling all over you, in case you hadn’t noticed!”

“Well, yeah, ‘course I noticed! But that’s not the point. It wasn’t just ego. It’s that… you’re not the only one who worries about maybe being a comfy old boot. Every so often, I’ve wondered if … if maybe I don’t do it for you anymore quite the way I used to. I know it sounds silly. You’ve never given me any reason to believe that. But don’t forget, you’ve seen me nearly as sleep-deprived as you, and with baby food all over me and pee down my shirt, and just this morning, Rory’s cereal in my hair. That one was your fault, but still. You get the point. You’ve seen me totally shit-faced and acting like an arse on more than one occasion, and you’ve held my head when I’ve sicked up afterwards. Hell,” he grinned, “you see me when I first wake up in the morning! Not a pretty sight. So in a perverse way, I think I wanted you to notice that some strange woman found me attractive, because… well… it would remind you that I still could be, to somebody.” He paused, smiling at her slyly. “Your jealousy was rather a turn-on, I must admit. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it!”

Hermione stared at her husband as if he’d suddenly sprouted an additional head. And then she, too, began to grin. Putting down her wine glass, she kicked off the afghan and scrambled into Draco’s lap, straddling him and cupping his face in her hands. Her palms were warm against his cool skin.

“Malfoy, you plonker,” she murmured. “Come here…”

She drew his face very close and kissed him, moving her lips very softly over his. The sensation was like velvet, like cream, like a whisper or a sigh. They stayed that way for a long time, losing themselves in the kiss as it deepened, became electric.

Eventually, they pulled apart to catch a breath, still entwined, and really looked at each other, as the humour of the situation suddenly became apparent. Laughing, they hugged and kissed again, and then grew quiet once more in the warmth of their embrace.

“It’s always been you,” Hermione whispered into his hair. “It always will be.”

“Good,” he replied. “Because you know, nobody will ever love you the way I do, Granger.”

“Nobody could,” she said solemnly and nuzzled his neck, planting a soft kiss there.

Hooking her legs securely around his waist, Draco slipped his hands under her bum and stood slowly. Hermione threaded her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder, her body wrapped around his like a koala bear’s. Closing her eyes, she smiled happily.

“Come on, Old Boot,” Draco said, laughing softly and turning off the lights. “Let’s go to bed.”
TBC
Saturday morning, 8 March 2007

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” Hermione muttered as she pushed a couple of dress shirts aside in the pine wardrobe that stood in the master bedroom. “I really should *not* be doing this!” She stopped, huffed a stray curl out of her eyes, and giggled. She hadn’t done anything like this since she was a kid looking for hidden birthday presents in her parents’ front hall closet. She was about to slide more clothing to one side when the telltale creak of the bedroom door stopped her and she froze, holding her breath.

“Tsk, Granger. Curiosity killed the cat, you know.” His warm breath tickled her ear and she could hear the amusement in his voice. “Now, whatever can you be looking for? And don’t say ‘nothing’!”

Caught!

Hermione turned to face her husband’s lazy grin.

“You’re not going to find it there, you know,” Draco remarked matter-of-factly. “In fact, you’re not going to find it at all, so you might as well stop looking.”

“I don’t know *what* you’re talking about!” she huffed, despite the betraying blush that heated her cheeks. Bad enough that she’d given in to the childish urge to hunt for her anniversary present, but he’d caught her red-handed! She sidled past him and walked very sedately to the doorway, at which point she fairly ran, Draco’s laughter ringing in her ears.
Friday evening, 14 March

Draco sat cross-legged on the floor of the sitting room, brochures fanned out chaotically around him. He only had a week to finalise their plans and there was so much yet to do.

Five years. He couldn’t quite credit it. Just over a quarter of his entire life spent with this brilliant, sometimes infuriating, often stubborn, ever-inquisitive, clever, beautiful witch he’d known since they were children, and almost a fifth of it married to her. The very best years of his life, and certainly most surprising for being totally unexpected And she had presented him with the second love of his life, a child who’d filled a space in his heart he hadn’t even known was there.

Hmm. Someplace… secluded. Right. That for starters, most definitely. Now—location, location… the mountains maybe, or the beach, somewhere tropical. Or perhaps a city? If you played your cards right, you could be as secluded in a bustling city as in a remote resort. So… Paris? Rome? Mmm… nope. Been there, done that. Right. Back to the mountains versus a tropical island somewhere. A made-to-order paradise with total privacy. It had to be perfect.

Hang on. Suddenly he knew the ideal spot, and what excellent timing that the owner of said property just happened to owe him a huge favour! Draco reflected with a self-satisfied smirk that now would be a splendid time to call that favour in.

One hasty Floo conversation later, the plans had been set in motion. Next: double check with Richard and Claire and make sure they’d be available to stay with Rory for the weekend in question. He knew he’d really left it rather late. Hermione was in the shower and the baby had finally dropped off, hopefully for the night, so he’d have at least ten minutes to call in at the Grangers’. Although they’d both had mobile phones ever since their days at university, they’d eventually arranged for Richard and Claire’s fireplace to be hooked up to the Floo Network as well, for even faster and more direct contact. It had already come in very useful on more than one occasion. For their part, the Grangers found the whole thing weird and unsettling, preferring to ignore the small, clay jar of powder Hermione had placed discreetly behind a vase on their mantel.

Now Draco grabbed a handful of Floo powder from the jar on his own mantel. Tossing it into the hearth, he called out, “The Grangers!” Seconds later, he was peering in at Claire and Richard as they sat on their sofa, laughing at something on the telly.

Draco cleared his throat. They failed to notice, the laugh track drowning him out.

“Hello!” he offered next, perhaps a bit too heartily, but he felt the need to somehow announce the presence of his head in their fireplace before one of them had a coronary.

Nevertheless, Claire’s head swiveled around and she blanched, her hand flying up to her chest.

“Oh! Draco, dear!” Flushing, she laughed a bit and settled back against the sofa cushions. Then she paled again. “Is everything all right, then? Hermione? The baby?”

“Oh, sorry! Yes! Didn’t mean to scare you!” Draco laughed. “Okay if I come through for a sec?”

“Oh, of course, darling.” Claire sighed. She was certain she’d never be entirely used to certain… trappings of her daughter’s life as a witch.
Draco stepped through and discreetly brushed himself off, flicking ashes backwards into the hearth. Claire patted the sofa cushion next to her and dutifully, he sat down. Both of his in-laws leaned forward slightly, identical expressions of anticipation on their faces.

“Um… yes... well, that is… as you know, it’s our wedding anniversary on the twenty-second. I want to take Hermione away next weekend, make it really special. So I was wondering… I was hoping, that is…”

“Where would you like us to baby sit? Here? Or at your house?” Richard grinned, tamping down the tobacco in his pipe. Lighting it, he drew deeply till the crushed leaves in its bowl glowed orange, and then blew out an aromatic ring of smoke as he moved to settle himself in his armchair.

Draco relaxed visibly and smiled back. “Thanks! And—our house, please, if that’s okay. Do you mind?”

“Not at all, sweetheart. It’ll be fun, won’t it, Richard?” Claire patted Draco’s arm. “I can’t wait to see the baby! She’s getting to be such a big girl now! Before we know it, she’ll be a year old! But—” Suddenly an expression of concern crossed her face. “Won’t your parents be a bit put out that you’ve asked us instead?”

Draco hadn’t really thought of that. He considered for a moment and then shook his head. “No. And even if they are, well, they had their turn—more than their turn, really—when we stayed with them at the holidays. They’ll understand.” I hope.

* 

A little while later, Hermione came out of the bedroom in one of Draco’s old college t-shirts and a pair of flannel pyjama bottoms, her wet hair wrapped in a towel, to find Draco and Rory on the sofa together, her sleep apparently short-lived. Hermione stopped, still out of sight, and listened, smiling. He was stretched out, his head and shoulders propped up by several pillows, and the baby was sitting squarely on his belly as he bounced her up and down to the rhythm of a curiously reworded version of an old nursery song.

“All around the cobbler’s bench, the Ferret chased the Weasel… the Ferret thought ‘twas all in fun… POP goes the Weasel!”

At the “pop,” he bounced Rory high up and plopped her down on his belly again with a loud smack, the baby giving a squeal of delight.

“Oooph!” he grunted, laughing. “You’re getting heavy, kiddo! Mummy’s going to have to put you on a diet!”

Hermione snorted to herself but stayed where she was, toweling off her hair as she listened.

“What shall we do next, Rory B? I know. What about ‘Twinkle Twinkle,’ then? But Daddy’s way is much better. Listen…” and he began to sing softly:

“Twinkle, twinkle, little bee, buzzing in the apple tree.\nUp above the world you fly, tiny insect in the sky.\nTwinkle, twinkle little bee, buzzing in the apple tree.\nWhen the blazing sun is high, shining in the morning sky,
Then you move your wings in flight, flapping, flapping out of sight.
To the meadows you will go, finding flowers as they grow.
Tiny as a little pea…twinkle, twinkle, little bee.”

He lifted her to him, nosing under her little shirt and burying his face in the bare skin of her tummy, blowing a wet raspberry into her belly button. Peals of laughter prompted him to do it again and again. “Bzzz… here comes the little bee, Rory, bzzz!”

Laughing, Hermione joined them finally, shaking her head. Droplets of water from her curls showered down onto Draco’s upturned face as she bent to kiss him.

“That was so sweet!”

“I beg your pardon, my good woman. Malfoys do not do ‘sweet’!”

“Seriously, Draco!” Hermione poked him in the ribs. “I loved it! Did you just make it up on the spot?”

“Not exactly,” he admitted, chuckling. “It was actually something my mother made up for me when I was little, not much older than Rory. I just added the line at the end. The best bit,” he grinned, winking.

“Of course.” Hermione nodded solemnly. “Looks like our little munchkin enjoys her daddy’s singing. Yet another Malfoy talent I was hitherto unaware of.”

“Oh, I’ve loads of talents you may not be aware of,” he replied airily. “I intend to surprise you often.”

“Do you?” Hermione quirked an eyebrow. Now this was the perfect opening. Maybe she could finally get some tidbit of information out of her supremely duplicitous Slytherin husband about his plans for their anniversary. It was only a week away and she hadn’t a clue what might be lurking up his sleeve. But he couldn’t keep her completely in the dark, could he? Was that fair? Of course it wasn’t, and she was absolutely determined to worm the truth out of him somehow.

“So, love… you were saying … you plan to surprise me,” she said smoothly, turning her back and missing the grin he’d just managed to cover with a fake yawn. “Would one of those… surprises… be on the horizon a few days from now, perchance?”

_Hah, trying to get it out of me, are you? Fat chance, Granger. But keep trying. You’re adorable and quite entertaining when you attempt to be devious._ “Whatever can you mean?” Draco asked, feigning innocence. “What’s happening in a few days? I’m stumped!”

“Oh… _YOU!”_ she growled in mock anger, grabbing a sofa pillow and trying to get in a good swat at his bum.

He held Rory up in front of him, smirking. “Calm yourself, woman! You wouldn’t hit a man holding an innocent baby, would you?”

“Trust you”—_swat_—“to use your own child”—_swat_—“as a human shield!” Hermione lunged at him again, only narrowly missing. His reflexes were just too sharp.

“Oh, but she’s such a cute little shield, aren’t you, Button?” He laughed, nuzzling Rory’s neck and planting a big, sloppy, ticklish kiss there, just the way she liked them.

“How can I stay angry with you when you’re so cute yourself!” Hermione sighed, giggling, as she collapsed onto the sofa.

Depositing Rory in her playpen, Draco flopped down on the sofa too, pulling Hermione into his
lap and drawing her close for a quick kiss.

“Mmm… I rather liked that…” she whispered against the softness of his mouth. He tasted of their after-dinner crème de cacao. “Can I have another, please?”

“You may, for a price to be exacted… later,” he answered, drawing out that last word while gazing at her with a sudden intensity that sparked an answering flare of heat inside her.

“You take advantage of my naturally generous nature, sir,” she murmured, her tongue darting out to taste the slightly salty flavour of the skin below his ear. “Yet you still refuse to divulge your intentions!”

“Me? Never!” he breathed, turning his head to capture her tongue with his. “My immediate intentions are entirely dishonourable and I make no bones about it. You know exactly what I intend.” He slipped his hand into the damp curls at the nape of her neck and drew her closer, deeper, into the kiss.

“Do I?” She turned her head, deliberately breaking the contact, and stretched languidly. “Perhaps we might come to an arrangement, a sort of quid pro quo, as it were.”

Draco nearly laughed out loud. You’re good, darling, very good. But I’m better. Sighing then, he jumped up abruptly, dumping Hermione onto the floor. “You know, Granger, my Latin is just a bit rusty. No idea what you meant by that. Well!” he said briskly, “time to get Rory into a clean nappie and down for the night. Don’t trouble yourself, love. I’ll do it.” He flashed a dazzling smile at her, winked, and, sweeping the baby up from her playpen, disappeared down the hall, whistling. Hermione was left sitting on her bum and wondering what had just happened.

—

Three days later, his marvellous plan to borrow Blaise’s timeshare in the Italian Alps fell through rather spectacularly. It seemed that Blaise had forgotten about having already promised the loan of it that same weekend to both a colleague from work and his mother and her latest husband. Marcella Zabini had sold her own pied à terre in Tuscany and then apparently regretted the decision. In any event, Draco was now low man on the holiday totem pole. He only had four days to come up with Plan B.

A quick canvas of people at Malfoy Enterprises yielded nothing. Even his parents were no help. All their properties abroad were just the sort of palatial affairs he’d grown up in, and that really wasn’t what he’d had in mind. Yes, he wanted to spoil Hermione rotten and treat her to every luxury and then some, but he wanted to do it somewhere a bit more intime.

Feeling discouraged, he was just returning to work from his lunchtime jaunt to a nearby Stargazers for his daily café mocha when he overheard a woman speaking to her friend as they sipped their coffee at an outdoor table.

“—marvellous! I’ve never been anywhere quite so romantic in all my life!”

“Oh, Natasha, I’m so jealous! It sounds divine!”

Feeling a bit strange at first for stopping expressly to eavesdrop, Draco quickly banished all scruples and affected a casual pose at a nearby table with his own coffee and an open newspaper he’d been inspired to surreptitiously pluck out of a nearby rubbish bin a moment before.

He listened carefully, his ears cocked and a deceptively impassive expression on his face, as the woman described a charming, 16th-century French chateau near the south coast of Brittany, outside the mediaeval village of Rochfort-en-Terre. The woman rapturously described it as
exquisitely appointed and large enough to offer a range of wonderful amenities, yet small enough to offer a very personal touch. It sounded perfect. Draco dispatched an owl to the chatelier that very day and was pleased to receive word, via a very aristocratic snowy owl later that same afternoon, that his booking had been confirmed. Sometimes, Draco reflected, the Malfoy name came in quite useful indeed, and he wasn’t above trading on it if it meant cutting through miles of red tape and making this anniversary weekend something to remember.

*

Friday evening, 21 March

Promptly at seven pm, Claire and Richard Granger pulled into the driveway and headed up the stone walk to the front door. Richard’s arms were laden with gaily wrapped presents, mostly for Rory, but with a couple of anniversary surprises for her parents as well.

“Mum! Dad! Come in!” Hermione was all smiles as she welcomed her parents inside, giving them both big hugs. “Draco! My parents are here!” she called over her shoulder and then turned her attention back to her mother and father. “Let me take your coats! Merlin, whatever have you got there, Daddy?”

“Oh, just a few little things for our favourite daughter and her family!” Richard said, smiling, as he laid all the packages down on the cocktail table.

Draco appeared with the baby and they sat down with her parents to open the presents. There wasn’t much time before she and Draco were due to leave and there was a lot to do yet.

“Oh Mum, you shouldn’t have done, really! You’ll spoil her!” Hermione laughed, as the third toy, this one an elaborate set of stacking blocks, was taken out of the box. Rory herself was having a grand time sitting in her playpen and ripping the wrapping paper into small pieces.

Finally Claire handed Hermione and Draco one large box each.

“Open them when you’re there,” she said, smiling cryptically and reminding Hermione rather uncannily of the Cheshire Cat.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Well, all right… thank you!” she said and kissed both her parents. Draco gave Claire a hug and shook Richard’s hand, and then excused himself to finish his packing, at which point Hermione retrieved a list from the cocktail table and sat down again, suddenly all brisk business. Snatches of what she said wafted into the bedroom, and Draco smiled to himself as he dropped his toiletry kit into the overnight bag. That was Granger, thorough and well-organised to a fault.

“… and the breast milk’s in the freezer, Mum, in little plastic bags. All you have to do is just thaw one in a dish of warm tap water till the chill’s off it, and then she can drink it out of a cup. Her sippy cups are in the cupboard next to the window. The one with the white top is for milk and the blue one is for juice. All her foods are in the same cupboard, and her special dishes and spoons and bibs as well. Oh, and she’ll want the milk before she has breakfast in the morning, and at bedtime, and in between, she can have it an hour before she has her lunch and dinner. Books! I nearly forgot! Her favourites are on the shelf above the changing table. She loves Goodnight Moon and The Runaway Bunny. Don’t forget to…”
Hermione made her way down the very lengthy, detailed list of instructions and emergency procedures, her parents nodding dutifully every time she paused to look up and make sure they were paying close attention. Claire and Richard now knew which toys were Rory’s favourites for playtime and which for naptime and bedtime, which songs she liked when playing and which at bedtime, which cuddly toys she preferred in the cot, what to do if she got fussy, where the medicinal potions were and how to administer them, and most critical of all—which soft, worn, old sleep shirt of Hermione’s the baby had appropriated as a comfort object and now could not do without.

Finally, the time came. Hermione could not put it off a moment longer. The instructions had been given. Rory had been changed one last time and was clean and dry and cosy in her soft, flannel baby grow. Her grandparents had been shown where everything was in every room. A list of emergency contacts was by the phone. She and Richard had been shown how to work the brand-new telly. Richard had been put in charge of Draco’s owl for the weekend, a task he rather nervously accepted, though Paladin had seemed to take a liking to him, only nipping at him hard enough to draw blood once.

“Come on, love, we’re late! You’ve only tried all week long to find out where we’re going. Don’t you want to know finally?” Draco teased, pulling his wife to his side and slipping an arm round her waist. Their weekend bags were slung over their shoulders. It was time to go.

“Yes, of course, only…” Hermione faltered. It was the first time she’d left Rory for more than a few hours, and somehow, it just felt wrong. What could she have been thinking, to agree to this? Rory would miss the two of them dreadfully, she would cry, her grandparents wouldn’t be able to calm her… it would all be a mess… and what if…

Claire held Rory out to her daughter and son-in-law. “Kiss your daughter goodbye and then go! The pair of you!”

In a rush, they both gave the baby kisses, Hermione’s eyes filling suddenly with tears, and then Draco tightened his grip around her waist and Apparated them away.

* 

The next moment, they found themselves standing outside a charming chateau.
“Oh!” Hermione breathed. “It’s magnificent! Where are we?”

“Brittany, my love,” Draco grinned. “Et voilà, I give you le Chateau de Talhouët! Pretty cool, yeah?”

“Very cool! Draco, it’s amazing! Wherever did you find this place?”

“That’s my little secret. Come on, then. We’re expected.”

Shouldering their bags once again, they made their way through the front entrance and found themselves in a large, very grand foyer that led into a graciously appointed sitting room. The walls were a deep salmon colour and matching drapes hung from the floor-to-ceiling windows. An ornately carved fireplace stood at the far end of the sitting room and original wood beams traversed the ceiling. In the foyer, a long mahogany table, tourism booklets and brochures neatly stacked in small piles down its length, stood on a patterned rug atop the highly polished wood floor.
Hermione sank down in one of the straight-backed chairs whilst Draco went to the front desk to check them in.
The chatelier appeared almost immediately. He wore a charcoal-grey suit and a crisp, pearl-grey dress shirt with a burgundy silk tie.

“Ah, good evening, Monsieur—Malfoy, isn’t it? Yes. We are delighted to have you with us. Permit me to introduce myself. I am Etienne Delacroix, at your service. If you would kindly sign our register, monsieur...”

He smiled rather formally and extended a newly sharpened quill to Draco, at the same time pushing a book with rather brittle-looking parchment pages across the desk. The register looked as old as the house, Draco thought.

Moments later, they found themselves following Monsieur Delacroix up a massive stone stairway to the second floor, where, with something of a theatrical gesture, he showed them to their room for the next two nights, La Chambre Pomone. It was a warm and spacious bed chamber with paneled walls in ivory and matching floral-patterned fabrics for the bedspread, the drapes, the coverings on the nightstands and the elaborate, shirred canopy above the head of the bed in crimson, ivory and green. An imposing gilt mirror graced the wall above the bureau. An antique desk and chair stood by the tall windows, which looked out on the gardens and the woods beyond. Lit candles gave the room a warm glow.

Monsieur Delacroix stood by the doorway, smiling patiently, until Draco realised why, and fished in his pockets for a Galleon, which he pressed into his host’s palm.

Delacroix inclined his head in thanks and said, “I hope you will find everything to your satisfaction. Breakfast is between eight and eleven tomorrow morning in the dining room. Bonne nuit, Monsieur and Madame Malfoy.” With that, he bowed again and disappeared with a pop.

There was a momentary silence and then Draco and Hermione looked at each other. Breaking into huge, delighted grins simultaneously, they moved into each other’s arms.
“I thought he’d never leave,” Draco murmured into her hair. “Mmm… you smell utterly delicious…”

Gods, the man could still leave her as weak in the knees as the very first time the spark had flared between them in earnest, seven and a half years before. If she were going to be honest, she’d have to admit the attraction dated back long before that, though it had been left to smoulder beneath the surface. That seductive voice, smooth as velvet, the alluring natural scent that was so distinctively his own, those mercurial eyes that could change from the darkening grey of clouds just before a storm to the silver of a pond in moonlight…

Gradually, she became aware that her husband had begun nibbling on her left ear, his tongue dipping inside and then tickling its lobe until she shivered with pleasure. Next, it traced a lazy downward path along the column of her throat until it reached her suprasternal notch, delicately tasting the skin there. Hermione sighed, lifting her chin slightly and tilting her head to the right, to give him greater access. At that, Draco smiled against her skin and began to explore her collarbone, leaving small nips and soft, soothing kisses along its length.

They’d just dropped to their knees on the thick rug when there was a discreet knock at the door.

“Bugger!” Draco muttered. “Un moment, s’il vous plait…”

He stood up, leaving Hermione slightly dazed on the rug, and strode to the door, yanking it open.

A tiny house-elf stood there, heavily laden tray in her hands. She managed an awkward curtsy, the tray’s contents migrating alarmingly to one side in the process.

“Pardon, Monsieur!” she squeaked, and hurriedly laid the tray on the table by the window, then just as quickly exited, saying as she did so, “With Monsieur Delacroix’s compliments. He thought perhaps you might be hungry. Bon appétit!”

A tantalising array of cheeses and fruits, a warm, fragrant brioche, a cut-glass bowl of chocolate mousse topped with a cloud of whipped cream, two long-handled spoons, a pair of slender glasses, and a bottle of champagne awaited their inspection. Draco glanced at Hermione, who nodded.

“I’m starved, actually,” she admitted. “We did skip dinner. And gosh, it looks really wonderful, doesn’t it?”

Draco grinned. He was nothing if not patient about reaching a goal. And there was certainly nothing wrong with a little nourishment along the way. Carefully, he uncorked the champagne and filled the two flutes with the effervescent golden liquid, handing one to Hermione.

“Happy fifth anniversary, darling,” he said quietly. “I love you.”

“Oh!” She smiled through the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. “And I love you, Draco Malfoy. More than I can possibly say. Happy anniversary!”

Their kiss was leisurely and tender, as fulsome as the taste of champagne on their lips and tongues. Everything they had been feeling at that moment—all the vagaries of life that had brought them together despite the distaste, animosity even, they’d felt for each other as children, and their overwhelming joy at the gift of that love—was poured into it.

They made themselves cosy on the rug in front of the hearth, where several logs were already burning with a comforting crackle. Soft firelight flickered amidst pockets of deep shadow. Draco tore off a small wedge of the sweet, moist bread, spread a bit of Brie onto it, and lifted it to Hermione’s mouth, briefly caressing her lower lip with the pad of his thumb as she accepted it, before withdrawing his fingers.

Hermione smiled, a slightly veiled expression in her eyes, and broke off a large, juicy strawberry from its stem.
“I think I fancy something sweet now,” she said, her gaze turning predatory. She dipped the strawberry into the mousse, bit into it and then drew his mouth to hers, tenderly cupping his face in her palm as she shared the succulent fruit in another slow, sensual kiss. The chocolate-drenched strawberry slid from her tongue to his and back again as it slowly dissolved.

“You know,” he mused a moment later, popping a grape into his mouth, “technically, it isn’t our anniversary until midnight. No presents for another three hours. Whatever shall we do with ourselves until then?”

Hermione smiled provocatively and took a sip of champagne. “Oh, I can think of a few things.”

Intriguing. Draco quirked an eyebrow and raised his own glass.

Midnight found them naked, their limbs entangled, in a comfortably befuddled champagne stupor on the rug. Evidence of chocolate mousse as body art was to be seen in the brown streaks trailing down from Draco’s chest into two distinct streams, one continuing around his waist and down his right buttock and the other clumping in the soft, dark-blond hair trailing down his lower abdomen, a blob of the pudding pooling in the well of his navel. A residue of whipped cream clung to both Hermione’s nipples, and continued downward in a congealing line. There was a telltale bit hanging from her right earlobe like a frothy earring. Fragments of a cherry sat comfortably on her belly surrounded by a halo of chocolate.

Ooohh... and then, seconds later, ugh... sticky. Hazily, Hermione opened her eyes and stiffly raised her head. Oh... RIGHT. A glance down the length of her body told the story. She was flat on her back with Draco wrapped around her, his right leg thrown over hers, his thigh pressed heavily against her private parts. His face was mashed into her chest, his cheek flush against her breast and his mouth just above the nipple. He appeared to be sound asleep.

Had they...? She couldn’t remember for certain, but she didn’t think so. Her leg had fallen asleep and prickled painfully now.

“Draco,” she whispered into his hair. “Draco... wake up...” She wriggled slightly, causing his head to slip lower till his mouth rested directly against her nipple.

He muttered something unintelligible in his sleep, his response muffled by the proximity of her flesh, and then, eyes still closed, his tongue darted out, circling her nipple and then sucking it into his mouth like a comfort object. There was an almost instantaneous tightening sensation at her core, and she squeezed her thighs together to relieve the ache.

Gradually, though, she began to suspect he was only pretending to be asleep. There was too much deliberation in the pleasuring; he knew exactly what she liked and he was providing it most generously, curling his tongue around the hardened peak and then giving it teasing flicks, nipping gently and then soothing the bites with long, gentle licks. She shuddered pleasurably.

“You awake, love?” she whispered and then her breath caught. Yes! Just there... mmm... He raised his head just a bit and opened his eyes. They were shining wickedly.

“Have been for the past ten minutes.” Grinning, he rested his chin between her breasts. “Why’d you stop me? I was quite enjoying that!”

“Me too, but I was also thinking how nice a shower would be. We’re all...” She looked down at
the two of them and made a face. “Somehow I don’t think this is quite what Monsieur Delacroix had in mind when he sent up that tray.”

Draco laughed, a husky sound that sent a thrill through Hermione. “On the contrary, darling. I think it was precisely what he had in mind.”

* * *

A quick Scourgify for the rug and a much-needed shower later, they sat on the bed wrapped in thick, luxuriantly soft terrycloth dressing gowns. A small pile of wrapped presents sat between them, magically returned to their actual size after being shrunk to fit into their overnight bags.

“Let’s start with the ones from Mum and Dad,” Hermione said happily, pushing Draco’s towards him. “I wonder what they could be?”

Draco made a show of shaking his box. “No idea. Let’s find out!”

Like little kids, they ripped the fancy paper and ribbons off with abandon, pulling the lids off the boxes. The gifts had come from Harrod’s, which surprised Hermione initially and then made perfect sense, upon reflection. She knew it was important to her mother that she and Richard offer gifts as fine as those that would invariably come from the Malfoys.

Eagerly, she pulled open the tissue paper and gasped. There, neatly folded, lay an exquisitely lovely little nightie, ivory lace and virtually sheer. She held it up and Draco grinned approvingly, a light in his eyes at the enticing mental image the gown created. There was a matching peignoir as well. Preparing to lay it gently back in the box, she noticed one other item tucked inside the folds of tissue paper. Smiling to herself, she closed the box. She’d surprise him with that later.

“How now,” she urged, eyes sparkling. “Go on!”

“Right...” he muttered, parting the tissue paper. “Oh, I see!” He laughed. “Your mum’s quite the little devil, isn’t she!”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked.

In answer, Draco held up a pair of silk charmeuse pyjamas and a matching dressing gown in a rich claret colour, beautifully tailored and exquisitely soft to the touch.

Hermione’s eyes went wide.

“Well, you must admit, she’s got good taste,” she said, smiling and shaking her head.

“I’ll definitely give her that!” Draco laughed. “This was very generous of your parents. I wonder what mine have got in store for us?”

“Knowing your mother, there will be something tasteful but terribly extravagant waiting for us when we get home. Ooh,” she said gleefully, “let’s put these on right away before we do the presents from us!” Happily, Hermione snatched up her box and vanished into the en-suite.

While she was gone, Draco shrugged off the terrycloth robe, stretching luxuriantly, and stepped into the silky pyjama trousers and matching dressing gown. He busied himself lighting candles and building up the fire, which had died down nearly to embers. Soon the room was transformed, the candles and hearth fire bathing it in a mellow light.
Fishing around in his overnight bag, he drew out a small box slipped it into the pocket of his dressing gown, patting it in satisfaction before pulling one of the straight-backed chairs up to the fire. Sitting, he stretched his long legs out and studied the play of light from the flames. The crackle of the burning embers was soothing in the quiet of the late hour.

Suddenly, a delicate whiff of almond and honey filled his nostrils. He turned in the chair to see Hermione standing, half in shadows, a vision in the lacy nightie. Its ivory colour was a perfect complement to her tawny skin tones and rich chestnut hair; it fell from thin spaghetti straps and a low-cut V neckline to cling to every line and curve of her body. There was a slit that went up to the top of her left thigh, and the borders of the two halves were trimmed in delicate lace, falling in an irregular hemline from shortest in front to slightly below the knee in back.

And Merlin above, in the firelight, the sheer lace revealed much more than it hid. He could see that beneath it, she wore nothing but a tiny, lacy thong. Draco silently blessed Muggles and their far more daring notions of women’s lingerie.

He swallowed hard and stood.

“Hermione, you look…” he began rather breathlessly. He held out his hand to her.

She advanced towards him, smiling shyly. The way he looked at her, he could still make her feel as giddy as a bride, and oh gods, didn’t he look marvellous in claret! The colour was striking against his fair skin and moon-pale hair. She noted appreciatively that the dressing gown had fallen open as he stood, revealing the firm, smooth planes of his chest and abdomen. The pyjama pants, riding low on his slim hips, begged her to run her hands along their silken length before slipping them off altogether. He really was a breathtakingly handsome man.

“And you,” she breathed.

“Come, sit with me by the fire. There’s one more present each, you know,” he told her. He drew her down sideways onto his lap, slipping his arms around her waist to anchor her. She threaded her left arm around his neck, her hand resting on his shoulder.

“Let’s open them together, okay?” she asked. “Here.” She placed a small box wrapped in lilac-coloured paper in his palm. Startled, he drew out the silver-foil box he’d hidden in his pocket and pressed it into her open hand.

For a moment, there was just the sound of paper being torn and crumpled and then a gasp.

Hermione looked up into Draco’s eyes, stunned. Of all the possible gifts, she had not been expecting this one.

It was a ring, platinum with a floral design. The inscription inside read “Yours Onli,” coupled with a date: “DM & HG 22-3-2002.” Such poesy rings, the tradition of which dated back to the 16th century, were always given as a lover’s token or pledge. But for them, now, after five years of marriage, the promise meant so much more.

Anxiously, he searched her eyes. “Do you… do you like it? We saw it ages ago in that shop with all the antique and made-to-order jewellery, remember? You thought it was beautiful.”

“I did, yes. You remembered!” she said softly.

He nodded excitedly. “It’s been Spelled to fit itself to your finger the first time you wear it. Please try it on!”

“Help me,” she murmured and held out her right hand. He lifted it, pressing a tender kiss to her palm, and then slipped the ring onto her fourth finger, where it gleamed in the firelight alongside the promise ring he’d Transfigured for her from a coin in Rome, six years before.

“Thank you! It’s just perfect!” Hermione whispered and hid her face against his shoulder. She was
dangerously near to tears and took a breath to steady herself, finally giving him a tremulous smile. “Now yours.”

Pulling on the forest-green, satin ribbon, he lifted the cover and then it was his turn to stare. The reason for Hermione’s surprise was now clear.

An identical ring sat encased in black velvet. The only difference was in the way their wedding date was inscribed, with the month written out.

He continued to stare, dumbstruck, and Hermione laughed. “I see that we were thinking along the very same lines! I bought yours at the end of November. When did you buy mine?”

Draco thought for a moment. “It was… let’s see… right after New Year’s.” He rolled his eyes suddenly, remembering something. “Bloody hell, Granger, no wonder the clerk in the jewelry shop kept smirking and waggling his eyebrows at me! At first I thought he’d gone totally mad, looking at me that way, and then… chatting me up like that… I was sure he was… you know… on the pull! Shit…” he choked, dissolving into laughter, and she joined him, tears rolling down their cheeks at the very thought of such a scenario.

When they’d finally recovered their breath, he held out his right hand expectantly and she slid the ring onto his finger, where it was, of course, a perfect fit. It rested snugly next to his own promise ring, the one she’d Transfigured for him that same night in Italy. They held out their hands together, admiring the rings as they glinted in the warm, yellow light from the hearth.

“Do you know what an amazing man you are?” Hermione murmured, kissing him softly on the mouth.

“Now you mention it,” he replied nonchalantly, “I have been told that once or twice.”

“Oh, you!” Hermione gave him a playful smack on the arm.

Laughing, he pulled her close and kissed her back, breathing in the intoxicating scent of her glorious hair, the hair he’d so enjoyed making fun of as a stupid schoolboy and now, that he so dearly loved to look at and touch. Then he looked at her, his expression quite serious.

“If I am, a lot of it is to do with you,” he replied, his voice trembling slightly. “You’ve stuck with me through everything, always believing in me and expecting the best from me. You can’t know what that’s meant. So I’ve tried. Really hard. I think… I think I would do anything for you.”

This admission had not been made lightly. Overwhelmed, Hermione threw her arms around him once more, burying her face in his neck. Smiling, he scooped her up in his arms and took her to bed, where they made the dark hours of the new day their own.
Manips by Moonjameskitten
Saturday, 22 March
The Vernal Equinox, a time of perfect balance between light and dark

Early-afternoon sunshine slanted across the bed. Draco cracked one eye open against the light, and groaned quietly, closing it again. Too bloody early for so much brightness! There was a dull throb behind his eyes and his mouth was dry and foul-tasting. He licked his lips and swallowed a couple of times futilely. Water! Reaching out to the glass on the bedside table, he took a long, refreshing swallow and sighed, lying back on the pillows.

The empty champagne bottle stood on the floor near the fireplace, alongside the remains of their late-night snack. Half a brioche was now on its way to being hard as a stone. Small slabs of cheese had shriveled, the green tops of strawberries littered the tray where they’d been discarded, and a half-eaten chunk of melon lay abandoned on a napkin, where two pear slices had turned a pale brown. The chocolate mousse had been ravaged, however, and the bowl now stood as empty as if it had been licked clean. Quite possibly, it had been. Draco couldn’t recall, though he did remember fondly how sublimely delicious it had been… what little had actually made it to his
mouth. Chocolate was a particular weakness of his, and Hermione had lost no time in using that knowledge to great effect the night before. He smiled despite his mild hangover, remembering just how creative his wife had proven to be with a bowl of chocolate mousse. She was an artist. Even he hadn’t imagined how many ways one could sample it, using the human body-- his-- as a highly sensitive, eminently edible canvas.

He stretched lazily and rolled over to regard his wife. Hermione lay on her side, facing him. One strap of the nightie had slipped off her shoulder and now hung limply over her upper arm. The creamy mound of her right breast threatened to spill out of the top, and he could clearly see its rosy peak through the diaphanous material. He recalled asking that she keep it on while they made love. In the end, it really had been at least as much a gift for him as it had been for Hermione, if not more. Thank you, Claire!

One little touch wouldn’t wake her, would it? And bugger it all, it was inhuman to expect a man to pretend indifference to such a provocative sight. He reached out and lightly grazed a finger over the little pink bud under its filmy covering. Then he did it again, watching the sensitive tip stiffen beneath his touch. Hermione slept on, though she appeared to be growing restive, judging by her soft sigh.

Draco couldn’t resist. Leaning in, he lightly flicked just the very tip of his tongue across her nipple. It wasn’t enough. Carefully rolling her onto her back, he peeled the bodice down to her waist, baring her breasts to his gaze, hungrily suckling first one and then the other, his fingers tracing light, random patterns on her skin.

Hermione awoke to the sight of her husband’s blond head pressed into her bare chest and the most amazing sensations zinging from her breasts straight down between her legs. Smiling, she slid her arms around him and stroked his hair lightly, holding his head in place. Lovely way to wake up. Very nice indeed. So often, mornings were a busy time, what with Draco getting ready for work on the weekdays and her involved with Rory, and then at the weekends, one or both of them doing baby duty. Time to laze around in bed and simply enjoy each other was a luxury and a rare treat.

She cleared her throat delicately.

Draco lifted his head and flashed a grin at her.

“Hello, Sleepyhead.”

“Hello,” Hermione sighed pleasurably. “I was just having the most wonderful dream…”

“Tell me.” A slight smile played about his lips, his fingertips toying lazily with her nipples once again.

Coupled with the marvelous things his hands were doing, the molten intensity of his gaze was setting every nerve ending on fire. She was having trouble gathering her wits.

“I… uh… it was about… about… mmm… keep doing that… we were on a beautiful beach with fine, white sand and… oh!… we were the only ones there…”

One hand had left her breasts and now traveled down to the hem of her nightie, slipping beneath it to meander in feathery circles and figure eights along her inner thighs, gradually moving ever higher.

“… and we… we were lying on the warm sand… naked… and gentle waves were rolling in and breaking over our bodies… the water was lovely… like a bath…”

The thong had been discarded hours before. He’d duly admired it and then dispatched it swiftly, flinging it in a perfect arc so that it had landed on the chair back by the Louis XIV desk, where it still dangled. Now his fingers found the softly curling hair between her legs, the middle one stroking the tender flesh outside and then sliding deep within and out again to circle her clit,
anointing it slowly and deliberately with her slippery juices. This he did again and again, all the while showering her with kisses wherever his mouth could reach and smiling delightedly as her breath quickened.

“You… you were stretched out on top of me,” Hermione gasped, struggling to stay coherent. “Ooh… mmm, YES… and you were… you were touching me, just… just the way you are now… and your skin… you were so warm, so warm… and ah… ah… AH… DRACO!”

He was inside her in a single, fluid movement. For just a few seconds, time stopped, the heat between them growing so intense that every second he prolonged moving became an even sweeter torture.

“Hermione!” Her name was a growl deep in Draco’s throat.

He was unable to hold out any longer and Hermione didn’t think she could bear it if he did. She twined her legs around his, trembling, and grasped his buttocks, digging her nails into the smooth flesh, urging him deeper, aching for him. His hands were curled into her hair, holding her head steady and raising her face so that he could draw even fuller, more bruising kisses from her mouth and neck. Then, without warning, his hands slipped from her hair down to the backs of her thighs, hoisting her legs over his shoulders; now his thrusts became far deeper and more powerful, until he was pounding into her with an almost alarming force and Hermione felt that fierce, aching need satiated.

Their climaxes exploded within seconds of each other and left them both quivering and slick with sweat, a sweet torpor settling over them as their racing hearts slowed. When Draco began to roll off her at last, she held onto him tightly.

“No, not yet… please… I need you,” she said, her eyes bright with sudden tears.

“Hey, what’s all this, then?” His eyes widened with concern and he reached to gently smooth the curls off her forehead, pressing his lips to the slightly damp skin there. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“Oh…” she breathed, laughing a bit shakily. “It’s nothing. I’m all right. It’s just… you know…”

And he did. He really did. It was what he felt for her, too-- that exhilarating, about-to-burst feeling of wholeness and completion that moved one to tears with the pure, utterly astonishing joy of it. He knew. Smiling tenderly, he settled back and carefully moved them onto their sides, still joined. He held her close and they dozed comfortably for a time.

Some time later, Draco’s stomach announced its empty state with a loud rumble. Raising himself up on one elbow, he raked a hand through his tousled hair and glanced at the bedside clock.

“Well,” he announced cheerfully. “We’ve missed breakfast. It’s past noon. And I’m famished!”

“I know!” Hermione replied brightly, sitting up and wrapping her arms around her bare knees. “Let’s go into the village and find a little crepe shop or something. There’s bound to be one. We can ask Monsieur Delacroix. He’ll know.”

“Excellent idea. Now, up you get, wife, we’ve places to be!” He gave her bum an affectionate pinch as she hopped off the bed, and then gave chase as she ran into the en-suite. “I’ve got dibs on the shower!”
The village of Rochfort-en-Terre was only a hop, skip and a jump away by Apparition. As old as Hogsmeade, it had been founded by the wizarding community of Brittany centuries earlier, and it was still a thriving magnet for magickal folk. For Muggles, its guise as a charming old village of trendy New-Age shops and artisans’ marketplace stalls, where artsy, oddly quaint, and downright eccentric sorts wouldn’t be out of place, was very effective. Though oftentimes witches and wizards who frequented its narrow, cobbled lanes were dressed in Muggle garb, the better to maintain the town’s cover, the occasional witch or wizard in flowing robes simply appeared to be a retro hippie type. Once a privately owned manor house, the fortified chateau that looked down upon the old stone houses of the village now housed the region’s academy of witchcraft and wizardry, rivaling Beauxbatons.

Hermione and Draco strolled along the town square, idly browsing shop windows they passed. They’d found upon inquiring that there were indeed some nice places to find a meal and some interesting shops as well, and now they searched for the perfect little bistro. Early spring flowers crowded the many window boxes and spilled out of pots and hanging baskets everywhere they looked.

A tiny, hole-in-the-wall bookshop, L’Aile du Corbeau, drew Hermione like a magnet, pulling Draco in after her. Normally, it would have held the same allure for him, but just at the moment, he was ravenously hungry and food was all he could think about. He managed to pry her out of the pleasantly cluttered little shop with only three new books, no small feat.

They were becoming footsore and frustrated when the perfect place suddenly presented itself. Situated between a shop offering scented candles, tarot decks, crystals, wands, rune stones and the like, and an apothecary well stocked with the most obscure ingredients for a variety of potions, La Petite Pêche boasted the largest and most exotic selection of hot and cold drinks in France, as well as a mouthwatering array of sweet and savoury crepes.

Gratefully they sank down at an outdoor table well situated to provide a view of the busy square. Shoppers thronged the outdoor stalls and kept up a steady stream in and out of the shops. In the middle of the square, a mime was doing a magic show, to the delight of a small crowd of children and their parents, making a variety of small animals appear and disappear. Muggle adults and their kids assumed he was just really good at sleight of hand, but the wizarding folk who watched knew better. This was one of their own who was particularly adept at wandless magic.

“May I be of service, monsieur?” The waiter, a short, swarthy man with a curling moustache, stood with his pad and pen, an expectant expression on his face.

“Thank you, yes,” Draco replied and looked over at his wife. “Hermione?”

She examined the menu one last time and then nodded. “I think I’d like the almond crepes with raspberry sauce, please,” she said. “This one.” She indicated her choice on the page. “Oh, and orange juice and a café crème.”

“And you, monsieur?”

“Oh, yes,” Draco smiled. Finally. He could eat. This was almost better than sex. Well, no, it wasn’t, but damn-- he was so hungry! “The chocolate cream crepes, please, with orange juice and a café breve.”

The waiter scribbled the order and hurried away.

“Chocolate cream crepes?” Hermione grinned. “Merlin, won’t that be a bit much for your first meal of the day, Malfoy? I don’t think I packed the stomach potion.”

“Not in the least! It’s to make up for the mousse I didn’t get to have last night! Or rather, I had it, thanks to my very talented little artist in residence” —he reached over and gave her nose a playful tweak— “but not in the usual way, and my chocolate habit is in serious need of a fix!”
“Okay…” she sighed, in that “it’s-your-funeral” voice she used whenever she was certain she was right. Almost invariably, she was.

He would not get annoyed, however. It was too nice a day, it was their wedding anniversary besides, and he absolutely would not allow the hint of smugness in her tone to irritate him, not even a little bit.

“So,” he said, all smiles and quite chipper. “What do you fancy doing after brunch? Quick stroll round the shops?”

“Lovely, yes!” Hermione said, delighted. “And later, when we do go back, let’s Apparate only as far as the gates and walk from there, okay? We haven’t had a chance to see the grounds at all, and I bet they’re beautiful.”

Draco smiled. Her enthusiasm was infectious and it pleased him to know she was so enjoying this weekend he’d planned. But that was yHermione that he loved—she was incredibly easy to please, taking pleasure in the simplest things. Something she’d taught him as well, over the years.

Lunch was served shortly afterwards, and Draco wolfed his down. Hermione managed a somewhat more leisurely pace, even though by the time the food actually arrived, she was fairly starved herself. Over cups of espresso, they made plans for that evening (a cosy dinner by the fire in their room and then a moonlit stroll through the gardens), and for the following day as well. The chateau was not far from Carnac, site of Brittany’s best known set of Neolithic standing stones, an ancient place of great power and mystery and especially significant to the modern guardians of that power, the world’s wizards and witches and in particular, those of France and Britain. Carnac would be their destination for Sunday afternoon; they’d have the chef at the chateau pack a picnic lunch for them to take along.
Views of Rochfort-en-Terre, Brittany
Two very pleasant hours later, Hermione and Draco were both ready to return to the chateau for a lie-down before dinner. Ducking down a narrow alley, they Apparated, reappearing by the high, wrought-iron gate opening onto the twenty-acre, park-like grounds of the Chateau de Talhouët. A long road wound through heavily wooded copses of beech, oak and chestnut, and then past open gardens on either side. Great profusions of shrubbery grew tall and almost wild in spots, over-spilling their borders. Down one narrow, overgrown side path, a quite sizeable stand of bushes covered in clusters of white buds seemed ready to completely engulf its smaller neighbours. The sight was so striking that Hermione stopped to take a picture.

“Sweet Circe!” she muttered, moving even closer. “Malfoy, look at that… that thing! It’s positively monstrous!”

And indeed it was. Standing at a height of close to twenty feet, it towered over the surrounding vegetation. Its canopy was umbrella-like, divided into branches ending in clusters of what would be white flowers in a couple of months’ time.

“Any idea what it is?” Draco had followed. Now he peered up at the top of it, trying to gauge its height. “You always did pay closer attention in Herbology.”
Hermione took a step closer.

“Not a clue,” she said, her curiosity piqued. “I need to have a better look.” With that, she reached up and snagged a slender branch overhead, pulling it down so she could examine the leaves more closely.

“Strange,” she began, and then, “Oh!”

“What is it, love?” Draco moved nearer, curious.

“Stupid!” she said distractedly. “See what I’ve done! I just broke the branch. I didn’t mean to. I suppose I was pulling a bit harder than I realised and it snapped off. Look!” She held out her hand. In it lay the branch she’d pulled on, bent and cracked open, a thin, clear residue of sap clinging to her palm. “Ugh!”

Draco grasped her open palm in question to get a better look and in the process, got some of the viscous fluid on his own hand. Swearing in annoyance, he absently wiped his hand on his jeans and reached into his pocket for his wand.

“Scourgify!” he commanded, pointing the wand at both his and Hermione’s hands.

Faint remnants of sticky plant sap remained.

“That’s odd,” Draco murmured, frowning.

“Try it again,” Hermione urged. “I’m sure it’ll work better this time.”

“Scourgify!” This time he said it louder and more emphatically, with something of a flourish.

Nothing.

“Right, well, I reckon we’ll just have to go back to the room and have a proper wash, then,” he said, resigned. “We did get most of it off. I don’t understand why the spell didn’t work more completely, but there’s nothing more we can do at the moment. Come on, love.”

They turned and headed back to the main road that led to the chateau, never noticing the sign posted just on the other side of the huge shrub and partially obscured because the foliage had become so overgrown. It read:

**ATTENTION!**

**DÉFENSE D’ENTRER!**

Ce Secteur Contient du Géant Hogweed.

Il est Interdit de Toucher des Plantes Le Géant Hogweed est Nocif pour la Santé.

**WARNING!**

**DO NOT ENTER!**

This Area Contains Giant Hogweed

Avoid Touching This Plant Giant Hogweed is a Health Hazard
There was a photo as well, if one were brave (or foolish) enough to push the branches aside to look.

* 

The day was lovely, unseasonably warm for a day in June, and the late-afternoon sun shone brightly as they hiked back through the gardens towards the chateau, stopping to explore the 17th-century stone chapel on the way. It was fascinating, and they spent more time there than they’d realised, walking around it and examining the stonework and the architecture, trying unsuccessfully to peer inside. Before they knew it, it had gone five.

The Chapel

The remainder of the walk back took them along a stone wall, past statuary and a fountain in the middle of a neatly manicured garden close to the house. Weary and footsore, they gratefully sought the sanctuary of their room.

They hadn’t been back long when the first sign of trouble appeared.

What little was left of the sap on their hands had apparently disappeared, so rather than having that proper wash, both Hermione and Draco gave in, instead, to the desire for a short nap, falling on the bed and succumbing almost immediately. Hermione was the first to awaken and decided to take a nice, long shower. She felt a bit grimy from their hike and wanted to be refreshed for their special evening.
She was just beginning to work up a nice lather with the scented soap when she felt an intense itching sensation, beginning on her right hand and gradually spreading to just above her wrist. Without thinking, she stuck her hand under the hot water of the shower to rinse off so she could have a look—-insect bites?-- only to yelp in pain. Her entire hand was turning beet-red and had begun to swell. She could only stare, horrorstruck, as the water from the shower sluiced down on her.

Then she found her voice again.

And screamed.

Draco had been dozing when her bloodcurdling shriek wrenched him violently out of a rather pleasant dream. Disoriented momentarily, he stumbled as he leapt off the bed, tripping over his trainers. Picking himself up, he staggered into the en-suite, his heart pounding.

“What… what?” he cried. “Hermione! What’s wrong? You scared the shit out of me!”

She thrust her arm out between the shower curtains, trembling. By now, the swelling had worsened so that her fingers looked distinctly sausage-like, the skin an angry red and stretched tightly over the flesh.

Draco was speechless. Hermione, on the other hand, suddenly had something to say, and it wasn’t good. Her voice was very low and trembled slightly.

“Your left hand, Draco. Look at it.”

He looked. And there it was, plain as day. His left hand had ballooned up and now dwarfed his right, and just like Hermione’s, the skin was terribly inflamed. As he stared in disbelief, he gradually became aware of the itching.

“FUCKING HELL!”

What in the name of Merlin was going on? This had to be the result of something they’d both come into contact with. The sap from that monster plant was the only thing he could come up with. He calculated quickly. At this point, it had been at least three hours since Hermione had accidentally snapped the thin branch; he suspected that even at the one-hour mark, when they’d first got back to the room, it might already have been too late to stop what was happening now, assuming the sap was indeed the culprit. And if indeed it was, then clearly it was highly allergenic at the very least, if not downright toxic. He had the sinking feeling that what was happening had been preventable, that if they had somehow found a means of rinsing that bloody sap off sooner, this would likely not be happening now. And now he understood why the cleaning spell had been insufficient. The essential ingredient had been missing.

This realisation broke over Draco like the dousing of cold water he now wished they’d had earlier. Suddenly, in a blind panic, he began tearing his clothes off, frantically leaping into the shower alongside Hermione. But now the very touch of soapy lather to his fiery skin was excruciating. He drew back from the spray of water as if stung, his eyes wide with shock.

Hermione was huddled against the back wall of the shower stall, weeping quietly. Her hand dangled at her side, swollen and useless. She could barely bend her fingers. Draco stared, ever
more alarmed as it dawned on him that this was what was in store for him before long as well. This was beyond belief! How the fuck could such a thing have happened? What sort of an establishment was this, that guests could be exposed so cavalierly to such a risk? Twisting the taps shut violently, he grabbed a large bath towel with his good hand.

“Come on, love, let me help you,” he muttered, reaching for her. “Let’s get you dry, yeah?”

Gently, he patted at her skin all over, being careful not to brush against her right arm and hand, all the while very aware that his own left hand—and shit! now his forearm as well!—were itching relentlessly and becoming ever more distended and flushed.

Hermione was being oddly quiet. It wasn’t like her at all. This worried Draco almost as much as what was happening to their bodies. She only got this quiet when she was seriously disturbed or frightened about something. He got them both into soft, loose, old t-shirts and pyjama bottoms he Transfigured from clothing they’d packed, settling Hermione on the bed and then calling for Martine, the house-elf.

She appeared at the door almost instantly.

“What may I do for you, young sir?” she piped.

“Please ask Monsieur Delacroix to come here. I need to speak with him right away! Vite!” Draco hissed, and shut the door again, going back to the chair to wait.

Before very long, a soft knock sounded. Draco opened the door and stepped out into the corridor.

“Monsieur Malfoy, is everything all right? Is something not to your satisfaction? Please, allow me–” Delacroix began and then stopped dead. Draco had thrust out his arm, his puffy, tomato-red hand a shocking contrast to the rest of his pale skin.

“Les yeux de Malécrit!” Delacroix exclaimed, utterly horrified. “Monsieur Malfoy, what has happened?” And then his eyes widened with sudden understanding. “Where did you–”

“We were walking on a small path off the road that goes through the grounds, not far from the chapel. There was this huge–” Draco began, opening his arms wide.

“Oh la la la, quel calamité!” Delacroix muttered over and over, shaking his head in dismay. “May I come in? Is your wife affected too?”

Draco nodded and stood aside to allow him entry.

“I am so very sorry, sir! Did you not see the sign?”

Draco and Hermione stared.

“What sign?” they asked sharply, in unison.

“Why, the one that warns walkers not to go near le Géant Hogweed… the Giant Hogweed!”

“What the hell is Giant Hogweed?” Draco was rapidly losing patience. “I would suggest that you start explaining, Monsieur Delacroix! Fast!”

Delacroix sat down wearily in the desk chair, and Hermione motioned Draco to come and sit next to her on the bed.

“Please,” she said softly. “Tell us.”

Monsieur Delacroix sighed heavily. “Very well. Giant Hogweed is a… how do you say… a phototoxic plant. It is the sap of the plant that is so dangerous. If it gets on the skin and then the skin is exposed to sunlight, it causes severe swelling and itching and then horrible blisters, often followed by black or purplish scars. We have been trying to rid the grounds of it for years! It has
proven very difficult.” He paused and scrutinised them sharply. “You did not get it into your eyes, did you?”

“No,” they said together.

“Ah, bon!” Delacroix sat back, relieved. “The only way to avoid the rash and the blistering altogether is to wash the affected area as soon after contact as possible.”

Draco rolled his eyes. *Bit late for that, isn’t it.*

“But in the event that is not possible, the most important things are rest and proper treatment of the rash. I will send up warm compresses for you to apply. They will be soaked in a topical anaesthetic solution that should give you some relief. You must have bed rest for the next twenty-four hours. Try not to scratch. Keep the drapes drawn. Once you have returned home, you will have to stay out of the sun for a week or so and then protect your skin by using much sunblock.”

“You mean…” Hermione said faintly. “You mean, we have to stay here, in this room, all day tomorrow? And what’s all this about black or purplish scars??”

“Oui, Madame, you must stay in this room at least until Monday morning! And yes, such terrible scarring is often a consequence of the blisters that will very likely develop by sometime tomorrow. However, I have a wonderfully efficacious potion that will prevent the scarring, if applied to the area around the blisters. But you must be extremely careful not to burst them, because if you do, you will release the fluid they contain. That will spread the toxins even further.”

He stood and moved towards the door, turning in the doorway to remonstrate with them once more.

“I will send the potion and the compresses *immédiatement!* You will need all your meals in your room. And I will instruct the cook to prepare a very special dinner for tonight, as it is your anniversary. Of course, there will be no charge for your stay with us. Again, please accept my humblest apologies. Whatever I can do to make you more comfortable, you have only to ask.”

With that, he bowed and closed the door behind him.

There was a long moment of silence as Draco and Hermione looked at each other.

“Oh,” she said heavily.

“Twenty-four hours,” he groaned. “Tonight and all day tomorrow stuck in this room! I mean, it’s a very nice room and all that, but this is NOT what I had in mind for our anniversary weekend! We had plans for tomorrow!” He slammed his good fist down on the bed in frustration. “Bloody hell!

Hermione sidled closer to him, crablike, finally reaching his side and slipping her left arm around his shoulder.

“I know, love, I know,” she said in a soft voice. “If anyone feels badly about this, it’s me. Really, it’s all my fault. But there’s nothing we can do, is there, except make the best of it. Hey, I can think of worse things than being stuck with you for twenty-four hours in a luxurious room in a French chateau… breakfast, lunch and dinner in bed, nothing to do but laze around. Think about it.” Her eyes sparkled with sudden mischief. “We’ve even got an extra night out of it.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Yeah, with nothing to do but try not to scratch, and watch as our fingers continue to curl up and go all fat and claw-like and nasty, and our skin erupts in giant, hideous pustules! Lovely!” He twisted round and raised his inflamed left hand, attempting a playful swipe at Hermione and then wincing in pain. “Ow, shit! Serves me right, I suppose. This really isn’t very funny, is it.”

“No, not very,” Hermione said, chastened. “I can’t believe this has happened, and on our special
weekend too.”

Ten minutes later, they were stretched out side by side on the bed, drapes drawn, when there was a soft knock on the door.

Hermione opened it to find Martine with a tray holding several vials and a bowl of warm compresses. A rolled piece of parchment accompanied them. Hermione took the tray, thanking the little house-elf, who darted several furtive, wide-eyed glances at Hermione’s swollen, discoloured hand and then quickly backed away.

“Stuff’s here,” she announced, setting the tray down in the middle of the bed. “The potion is for when the blisters appear, so right now all we can do is apply the compresses. Here, love, let me.”

She squeezed the excess water out of a washcloth into the bowl and then gently wrapped it around Draco’s misshapen left hand, draping part of it around his wrist, where the swelling had all but obliterated the bones from view. It took a bit of doing, as only her left hand was truly functional at this point, the fingers of her right refusing to bend. Her turn was next, Draco cloaking her madly itchy right hand in the soothing compress. Afterwards, they settled back against the pillows and tried to rest. A bit of oblivion would help to pass the time.

* 

“Monsieur et Madame, your dinner is served.”

The disembodied voice was Étienne Delacroix’s, jostling them out of a light sleep to signal the fact that the antique desk by the window was now set beautifully for dinner. A very romantic dinner for two, in fact. On a pale peach, damask tablecloth, tall candles in slender, silver candlesticks illuminated settings of fine, patterned bone china and silver cutlery resting on matching napkins. A bottle of Brut stood chilling in a wine bucket alongside a pair of crystal champagne flutes. A cut-glass vase was filled with a profusion of wildflowers, filling the room with their delicate perfume.

Dinner was a small feast. The chef had outdone himself, probably because Monsieur Delacroix had felt such an urgent need to make amends. For starters, there was a goat cheese salad with walnuts and then an airy cheese soufflé that literally melted in the mouth, followed by thinly sliced fillet of chicken with a Roquefort sauce and sautéed potatoes, and for dessert, Pears Belle-Hélène and a pot of richly aromatic coffee that kept refilling itself.

Hermione sat up and rubbed her eyes. The aroma was heavenly! Inspecting her hand, she saw that the compress had dried out, and even in the dim light, it was obvious that the swelling had worsened. The afflicted skin looked like a relief map, and the itching had become a constant irritant. Her arm above the wrist had begun to swell now too, and she understood that she must have inadvertently touched that area as well, while the sap was still on her fingertips. How could something so entirely ridiculous have happened to them? It was incredible. She gritted her teeth, trying to refrain from scratching whilst applying a fresh compress.

Draco was still caught up in the confines of a restless dream, his expression agitated. His left arm lay draped over his stomach. The compress had fallen off and Hermione could see how much worse the affected area looked now. He needed a fresh compress immediately.

“Draco,” she whispered, and touched his shoulder gently. “Wake up.”
He opened his eyes a crack, squinted up at her and then at his arm, and shut his eyes again with a groan. It was true, he hadn’t just dreamt it!

“Malfoy, look! Dinner!” Hermione smiled. “Monsieur Delacroix has sent us a lovely meal. Let’s get that arm wrapped properly again and then we can eat. How are you feeling?”

“ITCHY!” he sulked, pulling a face. “Like ants are crawling round under my skin!” He stuck his arm out for a closer inspection. Tiny bumps were beginning to show under the skin and he knew that by the next morning, they’d likely be transformed into full-blown blisters. “I just wanted to make this weekend special for you! Instead of which, it’s all gone to shit.”

Hermione had been inspecting his arm and wrapping it in a fresh compress. She looked up.

“Now you listen to me, Draco Malfoy,” she told him sternly. “This is not your fault! It was my curiosity that got us into this mess. You planned a marvellous weekend, and it couldn’t have been more perfect! And it still is, even if we do have to stay in tonight and all day tomorrow, itching like mad. We have each other and that’s all I need. Now shut it, and let’s enjoy this lovely meal!” Her fierce expression silently dared him to argue back.

Meekly, he pushed a chair over to the desk and sat down, sticking a fork into his salad and spearing a chunk of goat cheese. “Feeling a bit sorry for myself, wasn’t I.” He sighed and shook his head.

“A bit, yes. But we’ll be okay. Come on, let’s have a toast.”

Nodding, he filled the two flutes and handed one to Hermione, grinning ruefully. “Well, Granger… to us, and to an anniversary that no doubt we’ll find positively hilarious in about fifty years. I love you, even if your hand does look rather like the claw of a Chinese Fireball!”

“Hah,” she teased. “You were actually paying attention to Hagrid that day!”

“I always paid attention,” he sniffed. “I just had an image to maintain.”

“Right,” she laughed. “Bratty little pureblood tosser faffing about or whinging all the time!”

“Hardly! I beg your pardon, Granger. I simply could not be seen to be wasting perfectly good brain cells and time on stuff that was mostly just obscure rubbish! However, there were some useful bits now and then.”

“Well, I’m flattered that you’d compare me to a dragon. I’m definitely as hungry as one at the moment! Oh, and Malfoy…” she paused, grinning. “I love you too. To us!”

“To us!”

Fortunately, the food was so tender that using a knife was unnecessary, so they were able to manage one-handed, though eating that way proved awkward at times for Hermione, as she was right-handed and was forced to use her left.

Dinner was a welcome distraction from their misery and they tried to make it last as long as possible. The remainder of the evening passed uneventfully, the other high point being the therapeutic bath they shared. Monsieur Delacroix had sent Martine up once again with special oatmeal powders to be mixed into the water, to ease the tortuous itching. They stayed immersed in the soothing water until their fingers and toes turned pruney, because the relief it provided was so wonderful.

*
As expected, the blisters had already begun to sprout by the time their brunch appeared on the desk at eleven o’clock, allowing for a nice lie-in. The lesions were evil-looking things—large and fluid-filled, they itched like the very devil. Draco wondered miserably whether victims of the Great Dragonpox Plague of 1640 had looked something like this.

Now the potion had to be administered. The instructions indicated every four hours on the dot. It was a vile-smelling mixture, a variation of the traditional boil cure potion consisting of dried nettles, crushed snake fangs, stewed horned slugs and porcupine quills, with the addition of soothing murtlap essence and one part shrinking solution, to reduce and eventually eliminate the blisters and ward against permanent scarring. Draco and Hermione took turns painting it on each other with great care. It was cooling and felt marvellous, though it turned their skin a bright purple. That was good for a laugh, at least.

A stack of Muggle board games and a deck of cards sat on the desk, courtesy of Monsieur Delacroix, who kept them especially for non-wizarding guests who enjoyed such diversions in the evenings or on rainy days. Currently Draco and Hermione were embroiled in a game of Cluedo.

“Hah! I knew it! This is ridiculously simple, Granger. I accuse…” Draco paused, waggling his eyebrows dramatically. “… Mrs. Peacock of murdering Dr. Black in the conservatory, with the candlestick.” (Triumphant smirk)

“Ah, I think not. Check the cards.”

“Oh… right. It was Colonel Mustard in the billiard room with the rope, then. I knew that. Just testing you.”

“Malfoy!”

“I’m BORED.” (Pouting)

“Read a book!”

“Didn’t bring one.”
“What about those new ones we bought yesterday? And there’s a library downstairs. We could ask Martine to bring us something.”

“Don’t feel like it.”

“Well, what do you feel like doing?”

“Oh… something…”

“Not THAT, Draco! We can’t!”

“Why ever not? Don’t need two hands for that!”

“You’re incorrigible!”

“I know.” (Grins) “Anyway, what about it, then?”

“Malfoy!”

*

“Right. I’ll teach you a card game I used to play with my friends at home in the summers. It’s called Bullshit.”

“I swear, only Muggles would come up with a name like that for a game of cards!”

“What, you going all prissy on me, Malfoy?”

“Prissy? Moi? I’ll show you ‘prissy’!”

“Mmm… oooh… careful, my blisters!”

“No blisters here… or here… and most definitely not here…”

(Giggles) “Malfoy!!!”

*

“I know, Granger. Let’s play True Confessions.”

“Aren’t we a bit old for that?”

“Never. It’ll be fun. And whoever is caught lying has to pay a forfeit. We’ll keep a record.”

“Okay… you go first.”
“Right then. Here’s a truth. Greg Goyle fancied you third year.”

“He did not!”

“He did. Honestly. Would I lie about a thing like that?”


“Merlin’s honour. Didn’t you ever notice how clumsy he always was around you?”

“Now you mention it… I do remember how often my things got knocked off the table in Potions. I thought he was just being annoying because you told him to. Huh!”

“He used to say your name in his sleep sometimes too.”

“No!”

(Falsetto) “Oh, Hermione… Hermione, my love!”

“You’re lying.”

“Yeah. Well, that last bit, anyway.” (Grins)

“Forfeit! Write that down! I’d do it but I’m utter rubbish with my left hand. Okay, my turn. Oh…”

(giggle) “Remember that time in fifth year when you couldn’t stop laughing for hours?”

“Yes…?” (Guardedly)

“Well… um… that was me. At breakfast I… uh… pretended to bump into your books accidentally and then I slipped an infusion of dried Alihotsy leaves into your pumpkin juice whilst you were picking them up.”

“Hermione!” (trying to hide a smirk) “You didn’t! I’m wounded!”

“I did. I’m sorry! I’ve wanted to confess that for years!”

“That was bloody awful, I’ll have you know! I was actually hyperventilating after a while! Wheezing and coughing, tears running down my face! Very nearly pissed myself! Snape sent me to the hospital wing! It was mortifying!”

“Oh, Draco, I’m so sorry, really!”

“Why? It was brilliant. Very Slytherin of you. Wish I’d thought of it first. Then I’d have had YOU laughing hysterically all day.”

(Smacks his good arm) “Oh, you! Your turn!”

“Okay… let’s see… Right. Here’s something true. My very first wet dream was about you. The summer after first year.”

Silence. Then, very quietly… “Really?”

“Yep. Even then you were in my head, with that impossible hair of yours and the way you’d stick out your chin defiantly, and those big brown eyes always flashing. Mostly in anger if you were looking at me, but still. You’d already got under my skin even when we were twelve.”

“So… what was it like? Your… um… dream? Do you remember any of it?” (Shyly, blushing)

(Laughing) “Curious, are we? Well… you were all alone in your dorm room and it was really hot. You began to take off your clothes. Very slowly. One piece at a time, starting with your knickers. Just imagining you in your skirt and blouse without knickers got me incredibly hot! And then…"
then you took off your blouse. You were wearing one of those little stretchy bras and your tits were small and pert and I imagined touching them and how nice they’d feel…”

“Oh…” (faintly) “… what else?”

“And then you took your bra off too, and I could see them. They were so pretty. Just the way I’d pictured them. I imagined kissing them, licking and sucking those sweet little pink nipples. Mmm. Then, you took off your shoes, very slowly, bending over to untie the laces. Your skirt rode up and I could see your bare bum and it was just mouthwatering, so soft and round. I wanted to bury my face there and lick you all over, you looked so delicious.”

“Gods… really?” (Whispering)

“Really. And then… then you stepped out of your skirt. I remember that part of my dream especially well. You had your back to me and the skirt just slid down to the floor, sort of in slow motion. And then you turned. Full frontal. You were completely starkers except for those knee socks. You have no idea what that did to me at the tender age of twelve. Woke up lying in a puddle of cum with a monster stiffy. Really freaked me out too. Not just because it was the first time it had ever happened to me like that, but because … you know… it was you. It really shook me. I think that’s when it all started.”

“When… what started, Draco?” (Softly)

“Me falling in love with you. Not that I knew it, not for years. But if I’m going to be honest, it’s always been you, really.”

“Oh… Malfoy…”

Monday

The next morning dawned bright and clear, not that either Draco or Hermione saw the light of the lovely new day. They packed their things and Apparated straight home covered in clothing from wrist to ankle, bottles of healing potion and medicated compresses tucked carefully into a pouch in Draco’s bag.

The rash and the blisters persisted for days, but the compresses continued to offer relief from the pain and itching, and the special potion assured that there would be no lasting scars or other damage. Claire and Richard were horrified when they learnt what had happened, offering to stay on for several days to help out, as neither Hermione nor Draco was in any condition to care for the baby or do much else, for that matter. But Draco could have sworn he caught just the tiniest hint of quickly suppressed grins on their faces, and of course, he really couldn’t blame them. This would be one to tell his and Hermione’s grandchildren some day, years hence.

If only he could stop this infernal itching now…
TBC
Monday morning, 28 April 2007

The entire lower cupboard had been emptied onto the kitchen floor, and now pots and pans were scattered haphazardly about. Hermione had filled one large, stainless steel mixing bowl with small, plastic blocks in a variety of colours and shapes, and now Rory was enthusiastically grabbing each one and then flinging it to the far reaches of the room.

“Aaahh!” she crowed gleefully, briefly mouthing a triangular green block before lobbing it in the direction of the doorway.

“Hey!” Draco stood there, his suit jacket and business robes draped over his arm. The toy went flying, and nimbly he sidestepped a small missile, which bounced against the wall instead and skittered to a halt, finally, at his feet. “What are you trying to do, Baby? Put Daddy’s eye out?” Laughing, he bent to retrieve the block, dropping it back into the metal bowl. “Right, now you can have another go!”

Hermione, sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the baby, regarded her husband with a mischievous smile as he seated himself at the breakfast table.

“What d’you reckon? Future Chaser in the making?”

“Could be, could be…” Draco mused. “She’s definitely got the moves. ‘Course, it’s quite conceivable she might turn out to be a really brilliant—” He tossed one of the blocks high in the air and then deftly snatched it back again in a neat catch. “—Seeker.” He grinned. “If she takes after her old man.”

“Talking of which,” Hermione began somewhat cryptically, as he leaned over and held out a hand. “Thanks, love,” she said, accepting it and getting to her feet. “Anyway, as I was saying—talking of which—”

Draco had sat back down and was helping himself to some breakfast. “You’ve lost me, “ he replied, taking a bite of toast thickly spread with butter and marmalade. “Talking of what, exactly?”

“Quidditch, silly! You’ve a pickup match booked for this Saturday afternoon, right? With Harry and Ron and everybody?”

“Mmm.” He nodded, chewing, and then took a gulp of coffee. “Yeah. Why?”
Hermione watched as Rory overturned the bowl and began happily banging on it with a wooden spoon, and then turned her attention back to Draco.

“Oh… it’s just that I’ve something special planned for Saturday night. Well, not just me, exactly—Pansy and Ginny and Luna as well.”

“Oh, really?” he drawled, the jam knife poised in mid-air, marmalade dripping unattended onto his plate. He grinned, his eyes narrowing slightly. This could be interesting. “What in Merlin’s name are you women plotting? And what’s it to do with our Quidditch match?”

“Last question first,” Hermione answered. “We thought that as everyone would already be together, we could simply segue into the evening plans straight from the match. Well, after you lot clean yourselves up, that is. You can all come back here afterwards to do that.”

“Naturally.” Draco nodded sagely. “Don’t suppose it would do for us to be all sweaty and grungy for whatever it is you ladies have got cooked up.”

“Definitely not! And as for your first question,” she giggled, catching his hand and leaving a kiss in his palm, “it’s something you’ll love. I promise.”


Wednesday lunchtime, 30 April

“It’s all set. I checked with Narcissa and she was actually quite excited by the idea.” Hermione grinned conspiratorially and helped herself to another glass of butterbeer, licking her finger where a drop had spilled.

She, Ginny, Luna and Pansy sat at the Malfoy kitchen table discussing their plans over sandwiches, a green salad, and iced butterbeer. Pansy’s triplets, now nearly five months old, had been fed and were already down for their afternoon naps in the impressive triple pram. Only Liam had been a bit fussy and he’d calmed down very quickly after some extra time at the breast. Rory was playing quietly in her cot preparatory to her own nap, little peeps issuing from the nursery periodically. Taran Potter was sitting on the kitchen floor, absorbed in play. He’d eaten his lunch when Rory had had hers, and now he was busy with a colourful pile of Junior Legos which had been magically altered so that periodically, the patterns on the bottom would shift and he would have to find a new way to fit the pieces together.

Ginny snorted. “She’d probably like to join us with Lucius, but that would be just a bit too weird I think, don’t you?”

Hermione laughed. “Um… yes! Especially for Draco! But look, as long as we’ve got her blessing, and Lucius’ too of course, then we’re good to go. She’s already sent me the Portkey. Now—let’s run down the list of things we’ll need, okay?”

They put their heads together and set to work, their conversation punctuated by frequent giggles.

“Listen,” Pansy was saying, calming down from the latest bout of laughter. “We’ll need to get all this stuff there early, yeah? It’s got to be all set up and ready well in advance.”

“Right, well, we can do that whilst they’re playing Quidditch,” Ginny agreed. “Luna, Neville will play this time, won’t he? We need him out of the way as well.”

Luna nodded, brushing a strand of hair from her eyes. “Oh yes, he could play the Chaser position again. He’ll be up for it. He’s actually not half bad at scoring.”

The innuendo, although unintentional, was hilarious, made all the more so by Luna’s initial
The innuendo, although unintentional, was hilarious, made all the more so by Luna's initial confusion at the helpless laughter all around her. Ginny nearly choked on her butterbeer, sputtering, “I’ll just bet!”

“One thing though,” Pansy interjected when the others had caught their breath. “What about Lavender? We should probably tell her beforehand, don’t you think?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hermione mused. “That girl’s game for pretty much anything. She certainly was when we were at school. And from what I’ve heard, that hasn’t changed. I get it second-hand from Draco, who gets it straight from Blaise. She may be surprised at first, but she’ll go along and happily, I bet. We’ll just need to collect her on the way. Now— what about the kids? Ginny, will your mum help us with that?”

“Yes. I did ask her, and she and Dad are more than happy to help. I mean, four out of five of them are their own grandchildren, after all. What’s one more? Especially yours, Hermione. You and Draco are honourary family. And they’re old hands at taking care of a big brood!” Ginny grinned crookedly. “Listen, talking about kids… can you lot keep a secret?”

All eyes and ears were suddenly on the redhead as she toyed with her salad, flushing slightly.

“What?” Hermione hissed.

“Well…” Ginny began, smiling. “Actually… I’m–”

“Pregnant!!” Pansy shrieked. “I knew it, I knew it! I was saying to Ron just the other day that it’s about time you and Harry got started on another one! I mean, after all, Taran’s turning three at the end of the month and it’s time he had a baby brother or sister! Oh, this is simply fantastic! Do Molly and Arthur know yet?” She stopped suddenly and looked at Ginny. “You are, aren’t you? Pregnant, I mean.”

Ginny laughed. “Yes! Merlin, calm down, Pansy! You’ll give yourself a stroke! And no, Mum and Dad don’t know yet. Harry doesn’t even know yet. I was planning to tell him this weekend.”

Hermione threw her arms around her friend and gave her a hug. “Ginny! Congratulations! This is fantastic news! How far along are you now? And how come you haven’t told Harry yet?”

“About six weeks, I think, give or take. I didn’t say anything to Harry before this because I was spotting a bit and I was afraid to trust it. I didn’t want to get his hopes up. We’ve been trying for a while now, and he wants another baby so badly. But I saw a medi-witch on Monday and everything’s fine. So I thought this weekend would be the perfect time. After… you know…”

“Oh,” Luna breathed. “How romantic!”

Hermione grinned. “More butterbeer, anybody?”

Saturday, late afternoon, 3 May

The late-afternoon sun slanted across the floor of the enclosed back porch as the door swung open and five sweaty, dishevelled men trooped in, pulling off wrist guards and gloves and dropping their gear on the floor.

Draco sat down wearily on the settee and leaned back, pushing a damp lock of blond hair out of his eyes and leaving a trail of grime from his glove on his forehead. He let out an explosive sigh, half weariness and half frustration.

“Fuck’s sake, you lot! We could have done better than that, surely!”

*
Harry raised his head from his hands, and grimaced. “Bloody Mainwaring! We all know he should have been called out for blagging! The ref was completely oblivious! It wasn’t Neville’s fault!”

“Sorry, lads,” Neville muttered, reminded once again of one particularly excruciating moment in a series of mishaps that had doomed the match for their side.

“S’okay, Nev. Nothing you could have done,” Ron said generously. “On the other hand, Zabini…”

“Sod off, Weasley! That call was bollocks and you know it!” Blaise muttered, wrenching off his boots. “There is no way I’d have been stupid enough to try and knock Cantwell from his broom! It was just a friendly little bump is all! Not my fault he can’t sit a broom properly!”

“Oh, whatever, forget it! There’s always next time.” Draco sighed again. “Not worth arguing over.” He stretched, flexing his fingers. “Best hit the showers now, mates, or the girls will have our arses in a sling! Come on!”

He gestured for them to follow him and they did, all their muscles protesting as they hauled themselves into an upright position and trailed after him. Neville and Ron were directed to the guest bathroom and Harry and Blaise to the master bath, each of them collapsing gratefully into the nearest chair whilst waiting his turn.

Finally, all five were all freshly showered and dressed. Ron’s hair was plastered down in a bright cap around his head, a few unruly wisps persistently sticking up, to his great annoyance. Reassembled once again in the sitting room, everyone looked at Draco expectantly.

“Well, what now?” Harry was the first to ask.

Just then, Draco noticed something wrapped up in neon-green tissue paper on the cocktail table.

“Um… I expect this was meant for us,” he replied, unwrapping it and tossing the discarded paper to the side. It was a thick volume, its title etched in gold lettering on the cover: Writings of the Ancestors: A Compendium.

“Oi, Malfoy!” Ron interjected, pointing. “There’s a note, look!”

A small card had fallen out of the folds of tissue paper when Draco had dropped it. Now he retrieved it.

“‘Read the first poem aloud all together, and then come to us! P.S. Bring your wands!’ ” he read and looked up, shaking his head. Then he realised. “Oh! It’s a--”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Right, everybody. Hands on!”

Fingertips from five hands rested on the book’s cover, and five voices spoke the words from “The Song of Amergin”:

“I am a stag of seven tines
I am a flood across the plain
I am a wind on the deep waters
I am a shining tear of the sun
I am a hawk on a cliff
I am fair among flowers
I am a god who sets the head afire with smoke
I am the salmon of wisdom
I am a height of poetry
I am the fierceness of boars
I am a wave of the sea
Who (but I) is both the tree and the lightning that strikes it?
Who is the dark secret of the dolmen not yet hewn?
   I am the queen of every hive
   I am the fire on every hill
   I am the shield over every head
   I am the spear of battle
   I am the ninth wave of eternal return
   I am the grave of every vain hope
Who knows the path of the sun, the periods of the moon?
   Who gathers the divisions, entralls the sea,
   sets in order the mountains, the rivers, the peoples?

At “peoples,” there was the sudden, anticipated pulling sensation in the pits of their stomachs
wrenching them away from the sitting room and depositing them into soft grass in the centre of a
woodland glade.

“Where the hell are we?” Blaise muttered as he stood, brushing himself off.

Ron rolled his eyes and sighed. “In the middle of a bloody forest, what d’you think, Zabini?”
Then he drew out his wand. “Lumos!”

Blaise muttered something mildly nasty under his breath, not really bothered in the least, and
turned away, peering through the trees as the last golden rays of sunset filtered down through the
forest canopy.
there was a vision.

Five forest nymphs stood together, in long, trailing white robes that seemed to float about their bodies. Their skin glowed with an unearthly pearlescence that made them seem even paler, like Otherworldly creatures drenched in moonlight.

The men blinked, rubbing their eyes in disbelief.

Suddenly, one of the nymphs walked forward, holding out her hand and smiling. It was Hermione.

Draco swallowed hard.

“You found us,” she said softly, leaning forward to leave a light kiss on his mouth.

One by one, the other nymphs moved forward and went to embrace their mates, who were momentarily as nonplussed as Draco. Each slipped her arm through that of her man and led him forward on a path that was lit by only a twilight glimmer, until they came to yet another clearing surrounded by towering pines and firs, ancient oaks and beeches. In the centre was a small pool surrounded by myriad white tea lights in glass holders. There was a scent of jasmine in the air, and the candles’ reflections flickered on the water’s dark surface like small, bursting stars.

When everyone had gathered, Hermione stepped forward.

“We are here tonight to celebrate the ancient fire festival of Beltane in the Old Way, very much as our ancestors might have done, carrying on in the spirit of their celebration. We hope it will be a night you’ll never forget!”

Her smile was provocative as she winked at the other women, whose eyes glinted as they smiled back. At that, the men glanced at each other with a healthy dose of curiosity laced with a small frisson of trepidation. They’d all celebrated Beltane before in one way or another, but there was the distinct feeling that tonight’s marking of this turn of the Wheel would be very different to anything they’d experienced before.

Ginny came forward then. “First, we must cleanse ourselves to make ready for the ritual. We’ll do this here, in the sacred pool, one couple at a time. As it’s to be done skyclad, of course, it will be private, so whilst each couple bathes, the rest of us will wait at a discreet distance back there beyond those trees.” She pointed and the men turned their heads to look.

“Harry?” Ginny called, drawing their attention back. She smiled and held out her hand.

Looking slightly nervous, Harry detached himself from the group and walked forward. Draco smirked. He couldn’t help thinking that Harry rather resembled a man going to his execution. But Merlin, what a way to go! He turned back to Hermione and along with the others, they trooped back to the further clearing to wait their turn.

Each couple had their time at the sacred pool, until at last it was Draco and Hermione’s turn. Obediently he followed her, outwardly calm, but inside, on fire with anticipation.

They approached the pool and then Hermione stopped him, her hands resting lightly on his chest.

Rose petals and orange blossoms floated on the water and their scent wafted up from its surface, which bubbled gently like a natural hot spring. Draco realised this was no ordinary pool but a magically conjured one.

Hermione smiled as she gently lifted the edge of his black t-shirt up and over his head. His pale hair and the bare skin of his upper body gleamed in the moonlight that now shone through the tree branches.

Carefully undoing his jeans, she slid them down to his ankles, trailing her fingertips along his compactly muscled thighs as she did so. The fine, soft hair on his body rose up, partly because of
the slight chill in the air, but also in part from a sudden rush of adrenaline that left his heart racing and his mouth dry. Toeing off his trainers, he stepped out of his jeans.

Finally, she drew his boxers down ever so slowly. His already stiffening cock felt oddly exposed in the cool night air.

Now he reached to undress her, unfastening the top of her robe and slipping it off to discover her utter nakedness beneath.

His momentary surprise made her smile as she took his hand, leading him to the water.

It was pleasantly warm, and not very deep, reaching only to mid-thigh for him and a bit higher for her. Without a word, Hermione scooped some water into her palms and trickled it over Draco’s chest, smoothing his wet skin with her hands. She repeated this cleansing caress again and again as she worked her way around his body—his neck, shoulders, arms, back, abdomen, groin and buttocks, and then finally his legs right down to his feet, which she gently massaged under the water. She paid special reverence to his genitals, tenderly soothing his rigid cock with splashes of tepid water and feather-light touches that were an exquisite torture.

When she finished, Hermione straightened and gazed at him expectantly, a small smile quirking her mouth.

“Your turn.”

It was what Draco had been waiting for. Just as Hermione had done, now he paid reverence to every part of her body, slowly and with great delicacy, the soothing, scented water his medium. At one point, after he’d lovingly tipped the water over her breasts, he bent to kiss them, but she stopped him, shaking her head with a smile. So he’d continued to bathe the rest of her body, ending finally between her legs.

Gently, he brought handfuls of cool water to her mons, trickling it through the softly curling hair and letting his fingertips brush softly over her labia as he did so. She sighed softly and in the gathering darkness, Draco smiled to himself.

“Now let me dry you off, love,” Hermione said quietly, “and then you can dry me.” She handed him a towel, taking another for herself and gently patting his skin all over. When they’d finished, she uncapped a small purple vial she’d retrieved from the grass. Pouring a small amount of its liquid contents into her left palm, she dipped her fingertips in and rubbed them together.

“Musk oil,” she explained, and knelt to dab small amounts on the soles of his feet, working the warming liquid into his arches in a blissful, circular massage, and then into a spot behind each knee, then to the flat of his lower belly just above the golden thicket of pubic hair. Next, her fingertips circled each nipple, sensitizing each areola before stroking its peak, leaving them gleaming in the faint light. Finally, she anointed the base of his throat, his jaw at the chin, and his forehead. Each fleeting touch left behind a pulsing, spreading warmth.

“Now you,” Hermione smiled, handing him the vial and standing quite still before him.

In the moonlight, her beauty was truly unearthly. Draco felt as if he were in a dream from which he was loathe to awaken, as he repeated the process with her. When he reached her breasts, smoothing the warmed, scented oil over their rosy tips, she let out a small gasp, and he knew that he was affecting her as powerfully as she had him.

A loose-fitting white robe was waiting for him and he slipped it on and found his shoes. Hermione had put her own matching robe back on; now she placed a circlet woven of flowers and leaves on his bright hair and handed him its twin, which he carefully set atop her damp curls.

Last were the markings that would bind them to the Ancestors, to be applied in the Old Way, using blue woad. As she drew, she explained the significance of the symbols she chose.

“Suns for Belenus, the sun and fire god,” she murmured, as she drew them on his cheeks. “A
spiral winding towards the right,” she added, etching it on his forehead, “to represent the power of
the sun as well, and finally…” She paused then, to spread some woad over his chest before
pointing her wand at it. “... Ah yes, a magnificent dragon with spread wings, because that’s your
totem and your power. The woad is Charmed to configure a design that is most spiritually
appropriate to the wearer,” she explained.

“Now put a bit of this—” She scooped some of the blue paste into his palm. “— on my face as I did
yours, and some on my chest as well, and then use my wand.”

Draco nodded, picking up her wand and then smearing small amounts of woad on her face and
chest. Instantly, as he pointed her wand at each area, a design appeared, the particles of the plant
dye forming themselves into moons on both of her cheeks and a triple spiral, the Triskele, on her
forehead; across her chest, there was a butterfly, its gleaming wings spanning her breasts to catch
and reflect the moonlight.

“You’ve got moons,” he told her. “And a triple spiral.”

“Yes,” she nodded, not surprised apparently. “You’ll see, all of the women will. The moons are
for the water goddess Boann, who is associated with the moon as well, and the triple spiral
represents the triple aspect of the goddess: maiden, mother and crone.” She looked down at her
chest and smiled, well satisfied with what had appeared there.

“Well, you’ve done your homework,” Draco remarked, impressed. “Why am I not surprised?”

Hermione grinned. “Now we’re done.” Hand in hand, they walked back to join the others in the
clearing.

Everyone was similarly attired in loose, flowing robes and circlets of spring flowers in their hair,
and all had those same designs imprinted on their faces. Hints of the unique designs on their chests
could be seen peeking above the necklines of their robes.

“It’s time to make our way to the Sacred Grove. Use your wands to light the way,” Pansy
announced, holding her wand in her left hand. “*Lumos!*”
Like a constellation suddenly shimmering into being, nine other wand tips flared as well, casting a luminescent glow on the path in front of them as they walked through the darkening wood.

The men had dropped back to follow in a loose-knit cluster, the women moving ahead along the path, under overarching branches that created the illusion of a leafy tunnel. Each seemed quite keen to look the others over and see how they’d fared so far.

“What d’you think they’ve got planned for us?” Blaise whispered, nudging Draco as they walked along and promptly tripping over a tree root.

Draco hauled him back up with a snicker. “Not much for you, mate, if you can’t even put one foot in front of the other properly!”

“What’s on your chest, then, Malfoy?” Neville had caught them up and pointed to himself. “I’ve got the twin hounds of Arawn, Lord of the Underworld. Luna told me. Pretty cool.”

Draco spread open his robes and proudly showed his dragon off. It flapped its wings, his chest muscles rippling beneath them as he moved. “No great surprise,” he chuckled, smirking. “What about you, Potter?”

“I’d thought maybe a stag,” Harry mused, opening his robes to reveal a unicorn, noble and proud. “But unicorns are healers. I like that. Ron, what’ve you got?”

Ron seemed reluctant and instantly this aroused suspicion and an insatiable curiosity in the others.

“Okay, Weasley!” they taunted. “Give!”

“Oh, all right!” he groused, and opened his robes. There, ranging across his pale, freckled chest, was a dog. “Well,” he said defensively, “Pansy said it symbolises loyalty! That’s good, yeah?”

“Yeah!” They all laughed. One more to go.

“Right, Zabini, let’s have it!” Draco said, still snickering.

Blaise, ever dignified, opened his robes. A horse, pawing the ground and tossing its head, was splayed across his chest. “A transporter to the Otherworld and a giver of prophecy,” he announced imperiously, and closed his robes again with a flourish.

The women had nearly disappeared down a slight hill within the tree tunnel, the last glimpses of their white robes flashing like the tails of female deer lifting in invitation. The men quickened their pace, snatches of feminine laughter echoing back to them on the evening breeze.

Suddenly the path opened out onto a clearing. An eerily familiar clearing, Draco realised with a start. He’d been here before, many times in fact. He’d recognise that gnarled, old beech anywhere. His initials were still there, carved about three feet from the base. He’d been punished severely for leaving his mark on the ancient tree at the age of nine. These were, in fact, the grounds of Malfoy Manor! He wondered if he should share this information with his friends, and decided for the time being to keep it to himself, though he couldn’t help being astonished that Hermione would choose to conduct this ritual here of all places. Unless… He resolved to ask her about it later.
As familiar as the clearing was, however, its transformation into a place of ritual was striking.

In each of four corners, a tall white candle in a metal holder stood, unlit. In the centre was a table covered in a richly coloured square of tapestry that flowed down to the ground. On it were a bowl of water, a dagger sheathed in leather, a small tray containing strings of beads and bunches of flowers, a dish of mixed seeds and grains, a slender oaken staff, a stick of incense standing in a dish of sand, a pitcher of mead and small cups, a plate of cakes, a bowl filled with fresh berries, candles, a ceramic bowl for offerings, and a leather folder. On the ground, a short distance from the table to the right, there was a small cauldron, already sending up wisps of smoke that wafted, ghost-like, into the branches overhead.

The women stood together waiting, their eyes alight with anticipation. As soon as the men arrived, Ginny took up the leather folder and began distributing a sheet of parchment to each of them. It was the ritual they would observe, with assigned parts for everyone.

“Okay, who’s North?– oh, that’s Blaise and Lav– here you go.” She handed them their sheets and turned slightly to her right. “East… Harry and me. Right.” Another slight turn to the right. “South will be Draco and Hermione. And West of course is Ron and Pansy. Good. Neville and Luna will be acting as our Grove Father and Grove Mother. Everybody, please stand at your direction point. The candles just outside the circle will show you where. Now,” she continued, “the speaking parts have already been assigned, so it’s really very straightforward.”

Then Luna stepped forward, oak staff in hand.

“It is time to cast the sacred circle,” she said solemnly. “Please follow me as we walk around three times, deosil, and then take your places in the circle.” With that, she began to inscribe the circle, holding the staff out from her body at a ninety degree angle as she walked around to the right, her starting point the base of the old oak, until she had done the circle three times, the rest of the company following her. Replacing the staff on the table, she rejoined the circle.

Ginny lit a candle, saying as she did so, “Fire and Well and Sacred Tree, Earth Mother now we honour thee. May we be hallowed one and all that you may hear us when we call.”

With that, she passed the dish of seeds and then the Offering Bowl around the circle, saying, “We’ll leave these seeds as an offering to the Mother when we’re done.” When full, the bowl was set on the table.
Next, Pansy stepped forward. “Mother Goddess,” she said in a ringing voice, “Queen of the Night and of the Earth, and Father God, King of the Day and Lord of the Forest, we celebrate Your union as nature rejoices in a riotous blaze of colour and life. Accept our gifts in honour of your union.”

She passed the tray around and soon everyone had either beads or flowers in hand. “Please step forward one at a time and lay your token at the base of the old oak.”

When this was done, she continued. “From your mating shall spring forth new life; living creatures shall cover the lands, and the winds will blow pure and sweet.” Then she nodded to Hermione, who went on:

“As the ancestors once did, so we do today, and so our children will do in the future. We pay homage to the divine as manifest in Danu, Mother Goddess, and Boann, Lady of Fertility and goddess of the waters; to Cernunnos, Lord of the Forest, and Belenus, Lord of the Sun and healer; to the gods, the ancestors, and the earth spirits; to the rising light of the year. Now is the time of fertility, when the flowering plants put forth their blossoms and Mother Earth is fertile once again. Bees and butterflies travel from flower to flower. In the meadows the sire and the dam come together. This is the Feast of Beltane, the Fires of Bel. As the Sun now burns brightly, bringing warmth to Mother Earth, so warmth stirs in the loins, and the fires of joining burn again in the sexes. In the embrace of lovers, new life is created. Let us join together to make our offerings in joy and reverence. And now– we will call the Quarters.”

There was a lengthy pause. Harry muttered an embarrassed, “Oh, sorry!” and then he and Ginny began: "We call upon the Bean Sidhe of the East, washers at the Ford, bringers of sendings and warnings in beautiful and hideous forms, to witness these rites we undertake this night.”

Draco and Hermione continued without missing a beat. Their combined voices were clear and strong. "We call upon the Dioane Sidhe of the South, fierce warrior elves and masters of all blades, bringers of peace, to witness these rites we undertake this night.”

Pansy nudged Ron, who seemed to be in something of a trance. He shuddered slightly. "We call upon the Sylph Sidhe of the West, ancient shape shifters and glamour-wielders, bringers of thought and tranquility, to witness these rites we undertake this night.”

Blaise and Lavender were last. "We call upon the Leanan Sidhe of the North, relentless muses, bringers of inspiration and poetry, to witness these rites we undertake this night.”

Neville was apparently taking his role as Grove Father very seriously. His expression was solemn as he said, "I call upon the Aes Sidhe above, our primordial ancestors, creators of all seven realms, to witness these rites we undertake this night.”

Luna gave him a dreamy half-smile of approval and finished, "I call upon the Sidhe within the Mounds below us. Awaken and witness these rites we undertake this night.” Then she added, “Everyone, please take a bunch of flowers and an incense stick from the cauldron, carry them to your direction corner, and light the candle there.”

That done, everyone spoke the consecration together: “These are the Fires of Bel, Lord of the Sun; this is the Field of Boann, Goddess of the Moon, River of Life.”

It was a beautiful ceremony and Draco was surprised to find himself truly moved by its spirit. It was now his turn. He cleared his throat. “Now we open the portals to the Otherworld,” he read, “by Fire and Tree and Sacred Well. We have come to this sacred grove, in this time that is no-time, in this place between the worlds, to honour The Lord and his Lady in all their forms. We make these offerings that the portals may be opened.”

Hermione placed a silver ring into the bowl of water, saying, “In the deeps flow the waters of wisdom. Sacred Well, flow within us.”
Lighting a stick of incense from the center candle, Ron placed it back in its stand, according to the directions on his parchment. “I kindle the Sacred Fire in wisdom, love and power. Sacred Fire, burn within us.”

Finally, Pansy sprinkled water from the bowl onto the oak branch. “World Tree with roots in the earth and arms in the skies,” she chanted, “Sacred Tree, grow within us.”

Everyone responded, “So be it!”

Now it was Harry’s turn. “We welcome the Three Kindreds to our rite: Ancestors, Earth Spirits, and Gods. Receive our offering by Well and Tree and Sacred Fire. Hear our call and come to this grove.”

Blaise continued, “Ancestors, Old Ones, remember us as we remember you. Hear our prayers and accept our offering of love. Hoof and horn, leaf and stone, Earth Spirits, aid us as we aid you. Hear our prayers and accept our offering of love.”

Lavender spoke next. “Gods and Goddesses, Shining Ones,” she said, looking around her and managing to stifle a small, nervous giggle. “honour us as we honour you. Hear our prayers and accept our offering of love.”

Neville held the filled bowl up for all to see.

"Hallow these waters,” he intoned. “Cleanse our hearts as we join together!”

Handing the bowl to Luna, Neville brandished the blade rather dramatically above it.

"As the Blade is to the God…"he began.

"…So the Chalice is to the Goddess," she finished.

Slowly, deliberately, he dipped the blade into the bowl three times and then, together, they pronounced, "And so the two are made one."

The visual symbolism was striking, and for a moment, nobody spoke at all, caught up in its power.

Then, the silence was broken by a plaintive voice.

"Right, so… what now?" Ron looked around the circle expectantly.

Everyone laughed, the dramatic tension of the moment broken.

“Well,” Hermione replied, “now we do something our ancestors did in tribal Britain two thousand years ago when they celebrated Beltane. We’re going to jump the ceremonial fires. Traditionally, you know, this was done to insure the blessings of fertility, but not just for people. Animals were driven between two bonfires for the same reason. Fertility– of the land, the people and the animals– was essential for the tribe’s survival. I read up on it.”

“No, really?” somebody joked.

“Jumping the fires… uh, Hermione… isn’t that a tad dangerous?” Neville sounded dubious.

“No, not at all. It’s done symbolically, using our cauldron as the fire. All you have to do is take Luna’s hand and then just sort of hop over it. But first– we’ve decided to add something we all thought would make it even more special and meaningful: a traditional handfasting for whoever chooses to do it. Gin?”

Ginny stepped forward holding long, brightly coloured ribbons in her hand, which she passed out to each couple as she explained.

“Right, this is how it’s done. When it’s your turn to jump the fires, join your right hand with your partner’s and then your two left hands, in a criss-cross. This forms the symbol for infinity. One of
us will bind your wrists together with the ribbon. Then you look each other in the eye and say together, ‘So long as love shall last.’ And that’s it, you’re ready to jump the Beltane fires.”

“Who’s first?” Blaise called out. He caught Lavender around the waist and gave her a little squeeze and she giggled, nodding. After more than a year together, they were ready, at long last.

“You two!” Draco replied, smirking. “Somebody tie them up!”

“Ooh, kinky!” Pansy teased. “I’ll do it!”

Dutifully they presented their joined hands and she bound their wrists with a long, green ribbon, patting the knots with satisfaction when she was done. Lavender and Blaise looked at each other, murmured the requisite words, and then set off at a trot, clearing the small, smoking cauldron with little more than a small hop.

The others followed in turn, with Draco and Hermione the last to go. As Harry secured their wrists with a red ribbon, Draco gazed at his wife, a sudden rush of love nearly overwhelming him, recalling another occasion when they had been similarly bound. This was a sort of reaffirmation of that day, those vows. He knew Hermione remembered too. Her eyes were shining.

“This one’s a dead cert,” he whispered in her ear and gave her a quick kiss, basking in the smile she gave him in return.

“So long as love shall last,” they said together, gazing at each other. Hermione mouthed forever, lacing her fingers more tightly through his.

“Ready?” he asked. She nodded, her eyes suspiciously bright.

They ran lightly towards the cauldron and gave a quick little leap, flushed and laughing as they came to a stop on the other side.

Standing there together, even as they were all laughing and joking, it was impossible to ignore the sense that the ritual had indeed touched each one of them with a power older than recorded history. Maybe it was the spring flowers woven through everyone’s hair or the ancient markings on their faces, or perhaps the free feeling of bare flesh beneath their loose ceremonial robes. Standing there under the milky light of the full moon, it was all very real and everyone was caught up in the potent magic the ritual had conjured. The clearing grew quiet suddenly.

“Well…” Pansy began with a grin, her cheeks pinking. “Um…”

“This is the bit that seals the ritual so it’s very important,” Hermione jumped in quickly. “Each couple has been designated a special, totally private place in which to spend the night. Gentlemen, be guided by your ladies in this. We’ll meet back here at first light.” She smiled, a glint of mischief in her eyes. “Do try to be back by then, everybody.”

“Say no more,” Ron laughed. “We get the picture!” He slid his arm around Pansy, pulling her close. “Lead the way, love!” The two of them disappeared down a path from the western quarter of the circle, their wands lit against the darkness.

“Well, Gin,” Harry said to his wife, “I’m sure you’ve got this well in hand, like you do everything.” He held out his hand, grinning. “I’m all yours.” She took it and they left along a path near the eastern quarter, their laughter carried back on the wind.

Neville and Luna and then Blaise and Lavender followed suit. Finally, only Draco and Hermione remained.

“Where do we go?” he asked softly. His grey eyes were wide and lambent in the moonlight.

“Come with me,” Hermione replied mysteriously, slipping an arm about his waist.

The forest that surrounded Malfoy Manor was extensive, and even Draco hadn’t explored it in its
The forest that surrounded Malfoy Manor was extensive, and even Draco hadn’t explored it in its entirety. Now, as they walked, he found himself in a part of it that was totally unfamiliar. It felt, in fact, uncannily like they’d stepped over an invisible border and slipped into Faerie. There was a dream-like quality to the light as it illuminated each coppiced hillside and silvered pond, overlaid with water lilies and fringed with reeds and grasses.

They walked on until they reached a small glade entirely protected by heavy foliage on all sides. Within the foliage was a thicket, impenetrable to the eye from the outside. Hermione turned to Draco with a secretive, little smile, taking him by the hand and ducking down to a narrow opening he’d never have noticed on his own. Obediently, he went in after her on his hands and knees. The crawl space was narrow at first, but suddenly opened out into an area just high enough to stand up in and wide enough to stretch out in quite comfortably, and totally secluded.

Hermione had created a private bower just for them. A thick, downy quilt had been laid over a bed of soft pine needles, and four large, comfy pillows were scattered on top of that. Real fairy lights twinkled in the high branches, their tiny wings gleaming, iridescent. There was a pleasing scent of fresh pine.

“Welcome,” she smiled and drew him down beside her.

“Hermione,” he breathed in amazement. “This… this place is incredible! How did you find it?”

“Oh, it took a bit of doing,” she grinned, “but we all found places that were special. Each one is different but they’re all enchanted. And we’ve all decorated, too. Remind me to thank your parents again for giving us permission to do this. I think maybe a present from all of us would be nice.” She leaned back on the pillows, regarding him speculatively. “I bet you didn’t know the woods here were so… fey.”

“No! I didn’t! How did you come to ask my mother and father for permission to celebrate Beltane here, of all places?”

© 2007 Robb Waterman
“Well, we needed a wooded area that would be totally free from prying eyes. It was really the most logical choice. And your parents were wonderful about it, they really were. Actually…” She gave a little laugh. “I think it may have given your mother some ideas!”

Draco shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. “Too much information! I did not need that image, thank you!”

“Sorry,” Hermione giggled. Then, smiling shyly, she ran a fingertip lightly along his cheek and down his neck, stopping at his collarbone, where she traced small, random circles. “So… you like it, then?”

A pleasurable shiver caused the fine hairs on the back of Draco’s neck to stand on end. “I like it very much indeed,” he replied softly.

Overhead, the fairy lights winked and sparkled. Hermione fished two pieces of parchment from under the pillows. “There’s still a little bit of the ritual we must perform, you know. Here.” She handed him a small piece of parchment. Then she clasped his hands in her own and drew them both to their feet, face to face, resting her hands at the top of his robe.

“Bel, God of Light,” she said solemnly, gazing into his eyes, “now bringing love and passion and fertile power… All are manifest in thee. God of Fire, naked be!”

Draco stood very still, hardly daring to breathe. He felt transfixed by her voice and the bird-like grace of her hands as her fingers moved to open the fastenings at the front of his robe.

Slowly she drew it down over his bare shoulders so that it slipped to the ground in a crumpled heap. Her hands, soft and cool, moved along the entire length of his body in a sinuous caress, returning to rest lightly on his chest. In the half-light of the bower, standing tall and proud, his fair hair like silken moonlight and his eyes dark with desire, he was the young fire god, the dragon on his chest unfurling mighty wings that rippled over his lean musculature. His heart felt like a hammer in her chest as she waited for what she knew would come next.

He glanced at the parchment briefly and then let it slip from his fingers to the bower floor.

“Boann, Goddess of the moon and of the waters, bringing vigour of life, strength of love and beauty… Magickal are thy ways. River Goddess, naked be!”

His gaze devoured her whole, and her breathing seemed to stop as he reached for her, but he didn’t remove her robe as she had expected he would. Instead, he drew his fingertips down its silken front, ghosting over her breasts and lingering on her darkened nipples, already hard and clearly visible through the thin material. Her need to feel his touch on her bare skin grew and he knew it, but still he didn’t remove her robe. Plunging his hands into her hair, he lifted it off her shoulders, his fingers slipping beneath and then down her back to the curve of her buttocks, where they rested, gently kneading the tender flesh.

Now, now he must remove her robes, surely. She waited, tense with anticipation as his hands traveled from her buttocks around to her lower belly and then down, slipping between her covered thighs and resting there, slowly curling and uncurling, the feathery touches through the gossamer material driving her mad.

At last, when he saw the fevered glint in her darkened eyes, he unfastened her robe with an agonizing deliberation and spread it open, baring her to his gaze, finally slipping it off altogether so that it pooled at her feet.

He held her at arm’s length for a moment and simply gazed at her slim form. Her tawny skin glistened, and her hair fell from the circlet of wildflowers in untamed waves past her shoulders. In the soft glow of the fairy lights, the age-old markings on her face and the butterfly enveloping her bare breasts with its fluttering wings made her seem somehow insubstantial, a creature of incandescent beauty he’d conjured or wished for, one of the immortal Sidhe. His desire for her
was immediate and consuming.

“You’re so lovely,” he whispered, awestruck. “Come here, sweetheart.”

Willingly she stepped into his arms and they stood quietly, their bodies pressed together shoulder to knee. The touch of warm, smooth skin on skin was bliss. Finally the need for more overtook them both, and their mouths sought the solace of a kiss.

And like everything else on this night that was a time out of ordinary time, a space between the worlds, this first kiss of many became so much more as it deepened. Potent ritual magick had been raised and now infused everything—every touch, every kiss, the very lights that spread a starry canopy above them—with its ancient power.

Slipping to their knees in the embrace, mouths hungering for ever-deeper tastes, hands touching, soothing, exploring, discovering, they breathed in each other’s sighs and smiles. Moon and sun joined precisely as they were meant to on this night, and the eternal magick of the spiral swept them up in its pattern, timeless and without end.

Later—how much later it was impossible to judge—Draco awoke and gazed down at Hermione, who was still asleep in his arms, her back to his chest.

“Hermione!” he whispered, suddenly and inexplicably near to tears.

She stirred and turned to gaze at him over her shoulder, smiling softly and then snuggling against him, drawing his arm securely around her. He felt himself quicken in response and pressed himself against her, wanting, asking.

Her response was immediate. She dropped a kiss in his palm and then pressed back against him, inviting. He rolled her onto her hands and knee, positioning himself behind her and drawing his fingertips down the length of her body. They were long, meandering strokes, from shoulders to rounded buttocks, feeling her ribs, the dip of her waist and the swell of her hips, and back again to cup her breasts, tenderly caressing her sensitive nipples. Again and again his hands made their journey of exploration as he rested his cheek against the smooth skin of her back and rocked rhythmically against her, teasing her with the tip of his erection, curling himself around her, holding her close.

The first touch of his slick, warm tongue penetrating her nearly sent her over the edge. She gripped the quilt as he gently spread her open, thrusting deeply, then curling his tongue over her labia, caressing her swollen clit with strokes that soothed and tantalised at the same time. The pressure building up inside finally shattered and she climaxed in a paroxysm of almost unbearable pleasure. Her legs were trembling and she didn’t know how much longer she could hold herself up.

It had to be now. She was ready, more than ready. She needed more. She needed him.

“Please, Draco!” she moaned, burying her face in the soft quilt.

His need had grown as great as hers. Grasping her hips, he drove into her and was immediately enveloped in slick, silken heat. His thrusts were powerful, even savage. He felt almost as if he were outside himself, and at the same time, as if something greater and older, something elemental and primordial, had fused with his own power, igniting an impossible vitality inside him that demanded release.

That release would not be denied. It came as surely as the sun would later rise in the dawn sky, his seed potent and voluminous as it exploded deep inside her. Their voices rose together in a visceral scream that startled birds into flight in the highest reaches of the treetops all around the thicket.

Exhausted and trembling, they collapsed to the bower floor side by side and lay there, breathing hard. Eventually, they slept.
Awakened by the first, insistent peeps of a bird overhead, Hermione lay quietly on her side, watching her husband sleep. He was sprawled on his stomach, his face turned towards her. Strands of pale hair partially obscured his eyes, his dark lashes resting on flushed cheeks. His breathing was gentle and even. She was struck once again by how different he was now— and had been for the last seven and a half years— to the boy who had teased her so cruelly when they were at school. But this Draco— the one she knew and loved so completely— he had been there all along too, waiting. Waiting, perhaps, for a reason to be, a reason to push the cruelty aside and grow up, to leave it behind as just one more vestige of childhood that had no real place in his life anymore. She was never more certain of it.

Dawn came, bathing the forest in its wan light. Birdsong had begun even before first light and now filled the wood with music from every quarter.

Everyone had agreed to meet again in the ritual circle at daybreak. Hermione and Draco arrived to find Ron peacefully asleep, his head in Pansy’s lap as she sat with her back to a tree. Harry and Ginny straggled in ten minutes later, looking disheveled and very tired, but curiously elated. They joined Draco and Hermione within the circle, stretching out on the soft pine needles there.

“Where are Lovegood and Longbottom?” Blaise’s voice came from behind them as he and Lavender, their robes rumpled and the flower circlet slightly askew on her head— he had lost his, apparently— trudged into the clearing.

“Here!” Luna had Neville by the hand and they joined the others on the ground. Everyone looked hollow-eyed, physically spent and thoroughly sated, and as they surveyed each other, one of them and then another began to titter, until the entire group was laughing helplessly.

“We’re a right mess, aren’t we!” Pansy giggled, shaking Ron, who awoke with a snort.

“Speak for yourself!” Ginny replied loftily. “I consider au naturel with a bit of body art and some flowers to be the true representation of the male and female essence!”

“Don’t forget the dirt and bugs and twigs! Very primal!” Harry laughed, giving his wife a playful pinch. They shared a private smile.

He knows, Hermione thought happily. “Well, I don’t know about the rest of you,” she said aloud, “but I’m famished! Let’s finish the ritual so we can eat! Come on, Malfoy.” She got to her feet, pulling Draco up with her.

Soon the circle had reassembled with everyone in their original places. Hermione looked around at all her friends and smiled with satisfaction. It had all been a huge success. Ritual sheets were redistributed. Then she nodded to Draco, who winked affectionately at her and began:

“The Lord and Lady have been honoured. This Rite of Beltane is done. By Fire, Well and Sacred Tree, we offer thanks and praise! Together, please, beginning with East.”

The group faced each of the four quarters of the circle in turn, voicing a wish for “light and life” and finishing, still in unison, “With welcome to the rising sun, may gates be closed, and rite be done!”

Then Luna took up the oak staff. “We will now unwind the circle by walking three times around
it, widdershins.” Holding the staff out and walking around to the left this time, she led the group on the symbolic journey back from the Otherworld.

“This is the hour of recall,” she declared, when they had stopped. “The circle is open but unbroken.”

The ritual was over. There was a profound silence for a moment, and then…

“I’m starved! Did somebody say something about food?” Ron piped up.

Everyone laughed as they settled down companionably on blankets under the trees. Plates of sweet cakes, along with succulent strawberries, grapes and blackberries, were passed around, to be washed down with cups of honeyed, spiced mead.

Shafts of sunlight broke through the forest canopy, bathing the grove in the bright, clear light of an early summer morning. The Wheel of the Year had made another turn, and the Lord and Lady smiled on their young supplicants. The land had been properly consecrated. It would be a year of abundance.

TBC
Tuesday morning, 28 May

Rain lashed the window panes and an errant tree branch scraped the glass persistently, as if begging for shelter from the storm.

Hermione sat in the window seat, daydreaming as she gazed out at her rain-swept front garden. She could see her neighbour, Beryl, hastily scuttling up her own front walk, attempting and failing to shield her brassy curls with a shopping bag. *Sweet old thing. Dotty as ever.* Hermione smiled a bit wistfully, setting her chin in her palm and drumming her cheek idly with her fingertips.

Rory was in her playpen close by, busy with a pile of old magazines. Each one was being methodically ripped to shreds, an expression of fierce determination on the baby’s face. There was already a sizeable pile of shreddings all around her when Hermione noticed suddenly that Rory’s hands had turned black from the ink on the pages. She jumped up, fetching a baby wipe from the nursery, and hurried to clean her daughter’s small hands before her fingers found their inevitable way to her mouth.

“Silly girl,” Hermione sighed. “See what you’ve done! Those fingers won’t taste very good now, I’m afraid!”

Rory squirmed and made noises of protest but her mother’s grip was far stronger and the job was finally done. The magazines were cleared away and Hermione brought out a stacking toy and then sat back down in the window seat. Ordinarily, she would be completely and very happily involved with Rory’s morning playtime. For some reason, she’d woken up today feeling a bit distracted and melancholy. Maybe it was the rain, she reasoned. That must be it.
Thursday evening, 30 May
9:30 pm

“‘When baby went to bed, the bear went too. And that made 2.’”

Hermione sat on the sofa, Rory in her lap; she was attempting to grab the little board book from her mother’s hands as she read. “No, no, baby, let Mummy read. Look, see the little baby? She looks just like you- or, well, not really, she hasn’t got any hair. You’ve got such pretty hair, just like Daddy’s. But she’s cute like you, see? She’s got her yellow bear and they’re all tucked up in the cot, just like you will be in a little while.”

“Bap! BAP!” Rory declared, bringing her hands together in a resounding, if uncoordinated, clap.

She was clapping her hands for the first time ever! This was definitely a memory for Rory’s baby book! If only Draco had been there to see it!

“Ooh, look, Rory!” Hermione continued, still elated as she pointed at the next page. “Who’s she got in the cot with her now? Look! ‘Puppy said, ‘Wait for me!’ And that made 3.’ Oh my goodness, Rory, now she’s got Bear and Puppy! See, she likes that!”

Just then, the lock on the front door clicked and Draco walked in, the weariness etched in his face turning to a big smile when he saw his two girls there on the sofa. Rory bounced in her mother’s lap and held out her small arms.

“Merlin, are you ever a sight for sore eyes,” he murmured, bending to nuzzle Hermione’s neck and giving her a resounding kiss. “Mmm, Granger, you taste good. What have you been eating? Is that chocolate?” Without waiting for an answer, he went on, “It was the day from hell. You don’t want to know!”

At Hermione’s questioning glance, he shook his head. “Tell you later. I can’t deal with it now! Suffice it to say, you’ve no idea how happy I am to be home!” He turned his attention to the baby. “And how’s my little Button tonight, eh?” he grinned, rubbing noses with the baby and making her giggle.

Rory continued to reach for her father and obligingly, he hefted her off Hermione’s lap, hoisting her high in the air and jiggling her, then bringing her back down close to his chest. She laughed as he blew noisy, sloppy raspberries into the soft, fragrant skin on the side of her neck and grabbed a fistful of his hair. There was a light in her eyes that seemed reserved for her daddy alone.

As Draco walked out of the sitting room, Rory in tow, Hermione gave this thought more attention. It was true. It had been that way for some time– since always, if Hermione were going to be honest with herself. It had only become more pronounced over time. Aurora Beatrice Malfoy was most definitely a daddy’s girl. While she was always very responsive to her mother, smiling and laughing freely, loving to play, still enjoying the closeness of nursing, that particular light in Rory’s eyes surfaced only when Draco was around. He was clearly the apple of his daughter’s eye.

Hermione had always known Draco and the baby would become close, had known it ever since the very beginning when Rory was really tiny. Something about the way he held her, as if she were a miracle he had never expected would come his way, as if he couldn’t quite believe he’d had a part in creating such a perfect little creature– he acted as if he were the first man who’d ever become a father, and promptly fell madly in love with his daughter.

And Hermione loved that, she really did. Seeing them together that way made her truly happy. Then there were those days when she’d spent ages trying to get Rory down for a nap, or when she had got soaked to the skin giving the baby a bath, or when she’d picked up the toys scattered all over the sitting room floor for the millionth time only to have them dumped back out again… all the hours she’d spent reading to Rory, singing to her, playing finger games with her. It wasn’t that
she begrudged Draco the love Rory obviously had for him. Not at all. It was just that she had tried so very hard to be the best mother she could be, and sometimes… sometimes, after one of those long, very intensive days, it was just a bit hard to watch Rory’s eyes light up in that special way the second her father walked into the room. She supposed she’d like to have a bit of that special light for herself as well.

Ah well. Enough brooding. This was stupid. Jealous of Draco? And over what? ‘Come on, Hermione,’ she scolded herself, ‘get a grip! You’re just being silly.’ Pulling herself off the sofa, she headed towards the nursery to do the bedtime nursing and help tuck Rory in for the night. ‘At least I have that,’ she told herself. ‘That’s one thing he can’t do!’ And then she rolled her eyes. *Silly cow, you’re doing it again!*

11:45 pm

Hermione lay in bed, watching the shadows of leaves from the trees outside their bedroom window dance and sway on the ceiling. Draco was in the en-suite; he’d just finished brushing his teeth and was now gargling lustily. She stifled a giggle. One thing she had to give him. He didn’t do anything by half, not even that!

A moment later, he slipped into bed beside her and drew her close, smoothing her hair and playing with one of her curls.

“Hey,” he said softly, “what’s up, love? You seem a million miles away tonight. Is something wrong?”

“Nothing, really,” she said lamely. “I’m just tired, that’s all. I had a long day with Rory.” This wasn’t entirely a lie. She really was tired to the bone. Completely drained. She’d been feeling this way for a while now, probably from stress. She was letting things get to her far too much.

“Come on, Granger, I know you better than that. What’s really got your knickers in a twist?”

She was silent for a minute, unsure of where to start or even what it was, exactly, that was bothering her.

“I…” she began hesitantly. “Oh, I feel so stupid for even thinking this, much less saying it!” She buried her face in the pillow. When he said nothing, she raised her head again and turned it to look at him. He was lying there watching her, his head propped up in his hand, his expression pensive.

“Oh, it’s just that… well… do you think I should go back to work?”

It wasn’t what she’d meant to say at all. She didn’t even know where *that* had come from, all of a sudden. But she just hadn’t quite been able to voice her real feelings.

Draco’s eyes opened a bit wider in surprise, and he sat up. “Do you want to? I didn’t know you’d been thinking about it!”

“I hadn’t, not really– but… I don’t know… just lately, I’ve been wondering if… well… if Rory needs me quite as much as she used to. I mean, I suppose a childminder could do the same things I do at this point. I could express milk for her daytime needs– and she doesn’t nurse as much anymore as she used to, so that would be easy enough, I suppose. I could even wean her off daytime nursings altogether– we’re practically there anyway, at this point. And… well… *shouldn’t* I be back at work by now?’ *Shouldn’t I want to be?* But– I *really* *don’t want to be!* ‘It’s been a year. I don’t even know if there’s a job to go back to anymore!’

Draco regarded her with a cool, appraising look before he spoke. “You love being home with Rory. You know you do. You always have done. What is all this sudden urgency to go back to work really about, Hermione?”
He knew her too well. She’d never been able to lie to him. An unreasoning anger– at the situation, at herself for her stupid, petty jealousy and insecurities, at his ability to see right through her and not let her get away with anything, not even to save her silly pride– rose up in her and she snapped, “Tell you what, I’ll go back to work and YOU can stay home with Rory! I expect that would work out marvelously well, don’t you think? She’d be thrilled! And you’ve been complaining about work so much lately anyway. This would be the perfect solution! For all of us, really! Maybe if I went back to work, I’d be someplace where I’d be…” Her voice quavered, the first tears threatening to fall. “Where I’d be a-a-appreciated!”

Now they were getting somewhere.

Draco frowned. Hermione felt unappreciated? Since when? And why? He could have sworn he’d done everything he could to show her just how very much he did appreciate everything she did each day. Maybe he hadn’t, though. Maybe it hadn’t been enough.

“Hermione… darling,” he crooned, trying to gather her close to him. She pulled away, sitting back against the headboard, drawing her knees to her chest and burying her face in her hands.

He tried again. “Look, I’m really sorry. I didn’t realise! What can I do to make it better?”

“Nothing!”

_Nothing?_ He hadn’t expected to hit a wall quite this soon, especially when he was trying so hard to be understanding and kind. Well, there was nothing for it but to try another tack.

“Oh, come on, love. Don’t be daft!”

Her head snapped up.

Er… not a shining moment. Back up. “Look, of _course_ I appreciate you! You do so much for me every single day! I don’t know what I’d do _without_ you! I thought you knew that! And Rory– well, there couldn’t possibly be a better mum than you!”

Apparently he’d just hit a nerve. At the mention of the baby, Hermione began to cry. Draco was completely at sea now. _Bugger._

“What the hell is the matter with you, Granger?” he sputtered, exasperated. “You’re being totally…” He cast about for the right word. “Totally… emotional!”

Hermione turned a tear-stained face to him and glared. “Emotional, am I? You mean, like a _woman_? Like a weak, irrational woman?”

“No, no!” Draco backtracked hastily. “Fuck’s sake, Hermione, I didn’t mean it that way and you know it! But you… you’re… not making sense!”

Suddenly there was a wailing from the nursery. Hermione and Draco looked at each other guiltily and then Hermione flopped down, her face in the pillow.

“Look, why don’t you nurse her for a bit? It’ll settle her right back down.” He reached out and patted her shoulder. Instead of leaning into his touch as she usually did, she wrenched herself away and muttered basely, as she dragged herself out of bed, “Why don’t _you_ nurse her for a change?! She’d probably rather have you than me anyway!”

_Why don’t I…? Rory would… Gods._ It all became clear suddenly. Irrational? Absolutely. Absurd? Utterly. Nevertheless, it seemed that his darling, clever, completely logical wife had succumbed to a bit of jealousy over his close relationship with Rory! He was momentarily stunned.

Right. Now he knew what he had to do. He hoped.

Cautiously, he entered the nursery, to find Hermione sitting in the rocking chair, the baby still
nursing but her eyes drifting shut even as her small mouth continued to make little sucking motions, her tiny hand gently patting Hermione’s breast.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Hi,” he said quietly and came closer, resting his hand on her soft curls. “Sorry.”

“No, I’m the one who should apologise,” she said wearily. “I don’t know what came over me, behaving like that.”

“I think I do,” Draco replied, crouching down alongside the rocker. He decided not to mince words. “Are you… are you afraid Rory has become more attached to me than to you?”

Hermione looked away, colouring slightly. She nodded.

“I understand. But don’t forget, your relationship with Rory is special and unique and so is mine. And that’s good. She’ll always turn to you for some things and me for others. Right now, it may seem like she’s closer to me, but even if it’s true— and I’m not saying it really is— that’s going to change as time passes. Anyway, come on. Who can really know what’s in the mind of an eleven-month-old baby!”

Tears had begun to well up again and she rubbed her eyes furiously. “I-I know you’re right! It’s just that… I’m with her all day long and we do so much together! It’s just so hard to see her face light up when you come home every night! She never gives me that look! I’m just… just…

always here, nothing special!”

Draco smiled. Suddenly he knew how to make it clear to her.

“Think about it, love. You don’t see that particular look precisely because you’re with her all day long. I bet you get lots of other wonderful looks and responses from her all the time. Because you’re lucky enough to be around when she’s laughing and happy and discovering new things. I’m envious of that, you know.”

She looked up in surprise and said in a small voice, “You are?”

“Yes! Honestly! You said in anger that maybe we should switch places. But I’ve sometimes wished I could be the one at home with her.” He moved closer and rested his hand on her arm. “You’re her rock, Hermione. Her whole world. Don’t you know that?”

“I-I suppose…” Hermione murmured uncertainly.

“Of course you are. Trust me, if you were the one out working all day, you’d be getting that excited look when you came in the door. She doesn’t get to see me all that much. I miss her— and you– terribly when I’m away. It’s nice to come home and know she’s missed me too.” He smiled slyly. “What about you? Don’t you miss me?” He moved even closer, and began tickling her neck with the tips of his fingers. “Not even a little?”

She laughed, trying to bat his hand away without waking the baby. “No, you great, silly prat! I most certainly do not!”

“Liar!”

“Am not!”

Draco raised a finger in the air as if to say “wait,” and then carefully lifted Rory and laid her against his shoulder, rubbing her back gently until a neat little belch came up. Then he set her down in the cot, covering her with a light blanket.

He turned back to Hermione then, with a triumphant smirk. “Are too! You love me, you miss me dreadfully, and you can’t do without me!”
Hermione laughed. “Your ego is about the size of Brazil!”

“I just call ‘em as I see ‘em,” he sighed, shrugging. “Let’s face it—you’re hopelessly addicted to my boyish charm, keen intelligence and extraordinary good looks. You can’t help it. It’s okay, I don’t mind.”

She groaned, smacking his arm playfully. “Come on, Malfoy. Let’s see if we can fit that ego of yours through the door. I’m absolutely knackered.”

*

Saturday afternoon, 1 June
3:00 pm

The day had dawned warm and sunny, and the Potters’ back garden was gradually filling with family and friends, as well as a clutch of three-year-olds from Taran’s nursery class. He had turned three the day before and this afternoon was his official party. It seemed to Draco as if every wizarding family with a small child within a fifty-mile radius had turned up at Harry and Ginny’s modest home. The back garden was festooned with colourful crepe paper streamers and balloons of various sizes, something Harry had always wished for as a child and never had for himself. Instead, he’d always been forced to watch from the shadows as year after year, his wretched cousin Dudley had had the wonderful decorations, cakes, presents and fun. But now his son would have it all.

“Oh, Taran, what a big boy!” Molly Weasley scooped the small boy up in her arms and hugged him tightly. “Grandma is so happy to see you! Ginny!” she enthused, turning to her daughter and kissing her cheek. “He’s the very image of Harry!”

She waved to Harry, who was busy handing out drinks of different sorts to guests and making sure their plates were full. He waved back cheerfully.

“Come on, my lovely boy,” Molly gushed, “let’s go say hello to Grandpa! And look, your uncle and aunt and baby cousins are here!” She spirited Taran away, disappearing with him into a small crowd of people who had congregated by the buffet table. Ron and Pansy had just arrived and were proudly showing off their five and a half-month-old triplets.

A paddling pool had been set up for the children, as well as various toys and games. It was rumoured that later, some sort of entertainment would be presented. Just what sort of entertainment nobody knew. All rather suspect, Draco thought. He wouldn’t put it past George to have concocted something a bit sophomoric in addition. ‘Best watch where I sit down and what’s in my drink,’ he decided.

Harry was barbecuing wizard-style, which meant that the chicken, steaks and bangers were quick-cooked as he waved his wand with a flourish over the grill, intoning a dramatic “Incendio!” to the delight of the children who invariably gathered to watch the spectacle. Each time the blue flames shot up around the food, they cheered and clapped their hands. Taran was suitably impressed with his dad, his own prestige amongst his peers rising with each batch of meat that Harry charred. Dense clouds of cerulean-blue smoke rose up from the grill and drifted out over the garden.

Arms crossed over her chest, Ginny surveyed the party in progress from the patio. She turned to Hermione, who’d been keeping her company, and her smile turned to a worried frown in a matter of seconds.

“What is it, Hermione? What’s the matter?”

Hermione was leaning back against the doorframe, looking distinctly pale. A light sheen of
perspiration dotted her forehead. At the sound of Ginny’s voice, she opened her eyes and smiled weakly.

“Nothing, I’m fine! Really! Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason,” Ginny said pointedly. “It’s just that you look like death warmed over at the moment.”

“It’s just… I felt a bit lightheaded for a minute, that’s all. I think it’s the smell of the smoke from the barbecue. It’s pretty strong. I’m fine, really!” She attempted a small laugh and ran her hand through her hair distractedly.

“You sure you’re all right? Shall I fetch Draco?”

“I’m fine! Absolutely! And no, don’t bother Draco. He’s got his hands full with Rory at the moment. And anyway, he’d only worry for no reason.”

Ginny scrutinised her friend closely for a moment and then shrugged. She disappeared into the house briefly, reappearing with a glass of tart, iced lemonade.

“Here, drink this. You’ll feel better,” she said.

Hermione gratefully sipped the lemonade while Ginny dragged a pair of deck chairs closer. They sat in companionable silence for a while, enjoying the mild breeze, Ginny sneaking only occasional glances at her friend. Hermione appeared not to notice, studying the melting ice cubes in her glass instead. Finally, she cleared her throat.

“So– have you told everyone yet? About the baby, I mean.”

Ginny grinned. “Well, actually, we’re planning to do that today. Somewhere between ‘happy birthday, Taran’ and ‘bye, everybody, thanks for coming’!”

Hermione laughed. “Your mum will have a heart attack! Don’t you think you should take her aside and tell her privately?”

Ginny shook her head and smiled wickedly. “Harry and I did consider that, but I’m dying to see her face when we do the announcement as originally planned!” She chuckled. “Anyway, you know Mum. If I’d told her in advance, it would be on the front page of The Prophet by now!”

Hermione giggled. “Too right!”

*

he afternoon’s entertainment, a snake charmer by the name of Monsieur Ouro Bouros, had arrived (sans snake. A high point of the show was to conjure a variety of exotic snakes via Serpensortia and then Vanish them just as dramatically), done his show, and left the children goggle-eyed and clamouring for more. Truth to tell, a good many adults had been mesmerised as well.

Now Harry and Ginny emerged from the kitchen, carrying a huge cake of rich, dense chocolate fudge. Sparklers fizzed in a ring around each of three tiers, four candles stood proudly at the top, and tiny fairies dressed as characters from Taran’s favourite story books hovered or danced lightly down and around each layer. The signal for silence rippled through the clusters of guests until you could hear a wand drop.

Taran looked up from the sandpit, where he was digging happily with some of his nursery school friends. Rory sat off slightly to one side, her own pail and shovel in hand, Draco and Hermione crouching on either side of her and helping her dig.
Everybody joined in the time-honoured birthday song and Taran, his eyes impossibly wide and his mouth open in a perfect O, got to his feet and walked, entranced, to the table where his parents had set the dazzling cake down.

“Make a wish and blow your candles out, Taran!” Harry whispered in his son’s ear. “Three for your birthday and one to grow on!” He straightened and grinned at the crowd. “Right, everybody, Taran’s about to make his wish!”

Taran squeezed his eyes shut and sucked in a huge breath. Then he expelled it explosively, extinguishing all four candles at once. Opening his eyes, he smiled brightly at everyone, his eyes shining.

“You did it! Hooray for Taran!” Ginny cried, beaming. “Remember now, don’t tell your wish! If you do, it won’t come true!” She gathered her small son up in a big hug, and Harry wrapped his arms around both of them. Cameras flashed on all sides.

Hermione felt her eyes puddle up suddenly, and she turned away. Before she knew it, Draco was at her side, holding Rory.

“What’s the matter, love?” he asked softly.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just that… well… seeing Harry so happy in his life, now… it’s wonderful. He never had this, growing up, and he so deserves it— a family of his own, people who really, really love him. I’m just very happy for him!” She wiped her eyes and gave him a rather watery smile.

Draco leaned over and kissed her lightly on the tip of her nose.

“I know you are. And I know how he feels. Look what we’ve got to be thankful for.”

Hermione looked at him, startled momentarily. Her husband wasn’t often quite this serious or immediately forthcoming about his feelings. Usually it took a lot for him to drop the smooth, wisecracking, arrogant façade he had cultivated so meticulously and for such a long time, and reveal the way he really felt.

“What we’ve both got to be thankful for,” she replied, and put her arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder. And she was, truly. In that moment she understood just how much he had become her rock.

“Oh!” she murmured. “I forgot to tell you. Rory clapped her hands for the first time, the other day!”

“Did she now!” He chuckled and turned to address the baby with mock sternness. “Did you clap your hands and not tell Daddy about it? Tsk tsk! Daddy must always be kept informed!” Whereupon he tickled her under the arms, and she fell into a fit of exuberant giggles.

Just then, Harry cleared his throat and all eyes were on him and Ginny.

“Before we cut the cake, there’s a piece of news we’d like to share with you all.” He glanced at Ginny and smiled fondly. She grinned and winked at him.

“Anyway… we’ve thought a lot about it, and it seems to us that Taran really needs a partner in crime, somebody to balance out the numbers so it isn’t always two against one round here. So… Taran,” he said, looking directly at his little son, “pretty soon, you’re going to have a brand-new brother or sister!”

“Tomorrow?” little Taran asked plaintively.

Everyone smiled. “No, sweetheart, not quite that soon,” Ginny told him gently.

There was another moment of relative calm; then, Molly Weasley let out a joyful shriek and rushed to Ginny and Harry, at once beaming and clucking reproachfully about not being told
beforehand, and before long, a small crowd had formed around the happy family.

* 

Sunday morning, 2 June
3:15 am

Moonlight streamed in through the sheer curtains that flew, wraith-like, around the window frame in the light breeze, fragrant with the newly flowering roses that climbed the trellis on the side of the house.

The house was very still. Strange to be awake when everyone else was sound asleep, when the house was full of shadows in fields of moonlight, when there were almost no sounds except the occasional creak of a floorboard that said the house was shifting on its foundations just a bit. A car passed occasionally, its headlamps sending momentary streams of light through the bedroom windows, illusory reminders of the outside world.

Hermione sat in the window seat, arms wrapped around her knees, feeling the cool caress of the breeze on her face. Draco slept peacefully, his quiet breathing punctuated occasionally by a soft snore. She’d checked on the baby too, more than once, and each time, Rory had been wrapped in dreams as well. Hermione had tucked the blanket around her once again, and tiptoed out, almost disappointed that the baby hadn’t woken up. She felt oddly restless and in need of company at this solitary hour.

This… sensation of displacement– feeling out of sorts for no discernable reason– was disconcerting and confusing. Insomnia was new to her as well. She would be dead tired in the morning, she knew. But she just couldn’t seem to settle.

Maybe a cup of tea. Yes, that might help.

She brewed herself a strong cup of herbal tea, her favourite flavour: vanilla almond. Downing it, she crawled back into bed, exhausted, and fell into a fitful sleep.

Three hours later, a grinding, relentless surge of nausea woke her and she only just made it to the loo before throwing up violently.

TBC

A/N: Thanks to Kazfeist and floorcoaster, my wonderful betas, for their careful read-through and
for being there as sounding boards when I need to talk chapter-related stuff over!


The snake charmer’s name is a bit of word play on the term for the ancient symbol for the serpent or dragon that swallows its own tail, forming a circle.

There is a wonderful classic fantasy novel by ER Eddison called *The Worm Ourobouros* that I highly recommend.

The *Ouroboros*, also spelled *Ouroboros, Oroborus, Uroboros* or *Uroborus*, is an ancient symbol depicting a serpent or dragon swallowing its own tail and forming a circle. It has been used to represent many things over the ages, but it most generally symbolizes ideas of cyclicality, primordial unity, or the vicious circle. The ouroboros has been important in religious and mythological symbolism, but has also been frequently used in alchemical illustrations.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ouroboros

Drawing by Theodoros Pelecanos, in alchemical tract titled Synosius (1478).
Saturday lunchtime, 8 June

“Hermione darling, won’t you have a bit more quiche? You’ve hardly touched a thing. Draco, can’t you persuade your wife to eat a bit more? She’s so thin!”

Narcissa Malfoy’s brows came together in a mild frown as she regarded her daughter-in-law with some consternation. Hermione had always had a fairly hearty appetite, so this lack of interest was puzzling at the very least.

Draco, Hermione and the baby were at Malfoy Manor on this lovely, early-summer afternoon, having a small celebration brunch with Lucius and Narcissa in honour of Draco’s twenty-seventh birthday, three days before. They sat at a table shaded by a massive umbrella on the flagstone terrace overlooking the beautiful Lady Garden of which Narcissa was so proud, especially now that her prize roses were all in bloom. Their fragrance, as richly intoxicating as the rarest perfume,
wafted up to the terrace in delicate waves.

Before Draco could answer, Hermione replied with a small smile, “Thank you, Narcissa. Everything was delicious. Really. I’m just… a bit full, that’s all. I had a lot of… a lot of salad,” she finished, and smiled again gamely. Ordinarily, she loved quiche, especially one with as delectable a custard and such savoury bacon, perfectly cooked and seasoned with chives and parsley, as this one. But today, she found she could hardly manage more than a few bites. Something about the smell of the food was turning her stomach upside down.

Narcissa glanced at her husband, who raised an eyebrow, and then both looked pointedly at Draco. He gave a slight shrug. “She hasn’t been feeling too well this past week,” he offered. “Touch of stomach flu.” He patted his abdomen and caught his parents’ eyes, one eyebrow raised.

“Oh.” Lucius nodded. Draco didn’t need to draw them any pictures. He knew what that gesture meant and it needed no further elaboration at the brunch table. “Well, my dear, I do hope you’re feeling much better soon.”

“Oh, yes, I’m feeling a lot better already,” Hermione smiled. “Just need to rest a bit. Thank you… both of you.” She laid her napkin down on the table and pushed her chair back a few inches.

Narcissa took a sip of iced cranberry juice and cleared her throat. “Well, darlings, it seems to me we have another special event coming up very soon, do we not?” She smiled brightly. “Somebody else in this family is about to celebrate a birthday, her very first.”

“In two weeks’ time,” Lucius added. “Have you made plans for a celebration?” He looked over at Draco. “Your mother and I were rather hoping we might have the pleasure of hosting her party here. Nothing too elaborate, just your friends and ours, their children and grandchildren, naturally, and some of Rory’s little friends too.” He leaned very close to Rory, who sat in her high chair between him and Hermione. It seemed that she was drawn to men in particular, and was already quite attached to both her grandfathers as well as Harry. This one was fun because he had such lovely, long hair she could pull. “So, Rory, my pet, are you ready for your first birthday?” Gently, he tweaked her tiny nose.

The baby looked up at him with huge, dove-grey eyes and smacked his face playfully, letting out a crow of delight.

Hermione and Draco looked at each other quickly. They hadn’t really made any firm plans. This was traditionally Hermione’s sort of thing and ordinarily, she gloried in the planning and organising, diving into list-making and shopping with relish. But the recent fatigue and persistent stomach upsets had intruded to the point of real worry, nearly blotting everything else out, though she hadn’t shared that with Draco, not wanting to scare him.

For his part, he’d assumed initially that he could leave the party-planning to her as always. Later, once he’d realised she was under the weather, he hadn’t broached the subject on his own except in a casual way, not wanting to pressure her. He wasn’t even sure she was up for a party at all at this point and so had finally decided to let the whole thing ride. He was beginning to really worry about her, but had avoided saying so, not wanting to upset her unduly. His own birthday had nearly gone unnoticed, so in a fog she seemed to be these days.

Now, like it or not, the subject had been opened and had to be dealt with. Before either of them could respond, however, Narcissa jumped in.

“We were thinking Sunday afternoon, the twenty-third. It would be absolutely divine! We could open up the French doors onto the terrace here, and set up a buffet. The gardens will be even more magnificent two weeks from now. A light, summery menu, you know— lots of salads of different sorts, perhaps some smoked salmon, a bit of prosciutto, Caviar d'Aubergine— oh, I do love that!— some brochettes definitely, a variety of breads…”
Hermione’s head had begun to spin. She leaned back in her chair, feeling suddenly overwhelmed, and reached for Draco. Her chilled fingers on his bare arm brought him very quickly to attention from the daydream he’d been floating in.

“Mother.” His tone stopped Narcissa mid-sentence. “Look, it’s a lovely idea, really, and we appreciate the offer, but… we’ll have to think it over, all right?” He gave Hermione’s hand a squeeze. “Depends on how Hermione’s feeling.”

“Oh, of course, darling, I understand completely!” Narcissa nodded, contrite, with another worried glance at her daughter-in-law. Her eyes narrowed slightly for just a moment as she turned a thoughtful gaze on her husband, and then she continued. “Just let me know. It can be put together in a trice.” Glancing around the table, she smiled rather too brightly as an elegant birthday cake appeared. “Dessert, anyone?”
Inside the Lady Garden
7:30 that evening

Puddles of sudsy water were all over the bathroom floor. It was bath time, and Rory was having a jolly time splashing with the flats of her hands. Clots of frothy lather dotted her small body. Draco’s t-shirt was totally drenched and his jeans were well on their way too. Sighing, he stood for a moment, stretching to ease the stiffness in his back, and stripped off his shirt, tossing it to the floor near the laundry hamper. A moment later, he shrugged, peeled off his jeans as well, and climbed into the tub, setting Rory between his legs. Little currents of bath water ballooned in his boxers.

“Oh, Rory B, time to wash your hair, yeah?”

Oh yes, this was much easier than bending over the tub to reach his slippery child, and winding up with a crick in his neck and back. And now she could splash him all she liked. He poured some no-tears shampoo into his hand and began working up a lather all over Rory’s small head. He loved her silky, white-blond hair. Her smile and that sprinkling of pale freckles over her nose were Hermione’s, as were her features and the shape of her face. But her hair, her pale complexion, and those large, soft, grey eyes were identical to his own, and had a devilish glint that he liked to think came from him as well.

“Oh, sweetheart, time to rinse. Lean your head back for Daddy now,” he instructed, laying his hand on her forehead and tipping her head back a bit, so the water wouldn’t go into her eyes as he rinsed. Pouring several small buckets of clean tap water over her hair, he did the squeak test, found all the shampoo gone, and then smiled, satisfied.

“Right, now we can play a bit.” He repositioned her so she sat facing him. “Let’s have a tea party, shall we?”

A large bucket of bath toys sat on the tub’s edge and now he reached in and drew out a plastic teapot and two small cups.
“Would you care for some tea, Miss Malfoy?” he asked, pouring some water from the teapot into a cup with a flourish, and handing it to her. She squealed and instantly dumped its contents out, throwing the cup into the water, where it landed with a small *kerplunk*.

“Manners!” Draco said in mock reproach, stifling a grin as he filled her cup once again and then his own, pretending to drink his “tea.” This time, her cup went flying over the water to land on the floor, bouncing a couple of times and landing at Hermione’s feet. She smiled and picked it up, tossing it back into the tub.

“You might do better to forget the tea party and just let her have the whole bucket,” she laughed.

“Good idea.” He gave her a wry grin and reached behind him for the big red bucket, setting it down in the water between him and the baby. In a flash she was grabbing whatever she could get her hands on, until the entire bucket’s contents were bobbing all around them in a small flotilla.

“How long have you been standing there anyway?”

“Oh,” she mused, seating herself on the closed toilet lid, “just a minute or so, really. Look, Draco– there’s something I need to tell you.”

He pushed strands of wet hair out of his eyes and looked at her curiously. “Shoot.”

“Right. Well. It’s just… I’m so sorry your birthday was a bit of a damp squib this year! It’s all my fault!” She studied her fingers interlaced in her lap, feeling suddenly and inexplicably close to tears. (*What was going on with her? These days, the slightest thing reduced her to jelly!*)

“Hermione.”

She looked up and saw that Draco had extended his hand to her.

“Come here, love. Please.”

Slowly she moved closer to the tub and crouched down next to him, taking his wet hand in hers.

“Listen, you silly girl. I don’t care about my birthday. I’m a big boy. I can handle not having all sorts of fuss made over me one year. And you did remember– it isn’t as if you forgot altogether. You made me a lovely cake and your present was wonderful– or will be, when I pick it out. Your IOU was very nice in the meantime.” He grinned cheekily and then saw that his little attempt at levity had brought on the threat of fresh tears. “Hey, come on now, none of that! I’m fine with it, really!”

“You mean it?” Hermione wiped roughly at her eyes with the heel of her hand and looked at him, her lower lip trembling.

“Slytherin’s honour. Now, listen, there is something we really do need to discuss. What did you think of my parents’ idea for Rory’s birthday party? I know it isn’t at all what either of us had in mind, but it would take the pressure off you altogether. My mother would handle everything, right down to the last party favour. And honestly, Rory won’t know the difference. Maybe we should consider it. What do you think?”

The question hung in the air as Hermione hoisted a wet and wiggly Rory up out of Draco’s arms and wrapped her in a warm flannel, rubbing her nose against the baby’s wet cheeks and planting a kiss there. “You smell so nice!” she murmured, and then turned back to Draco, who had stepped out of the tub and was now shimmying out of his dripping boxers.

He drop-kicked the wet garment to the spot where his t-shirt and jeans already lay in a sodden heap, and Hermione handed him a fresh flannel of his own, eyeing him appreciatively. Dropping a kiss on the damp skin of his chest, she said huskily, “You smell nice too!”

He tipped her chin up and kissed her, growling against her mouth, “Mmm… sneaky way to get out of answering my question!”
His hand had wandered casually down the front of her t-shirt and now it reached her breast, where it began to inscribe gentle circles that moved ever closer to her nipple.

It felt good. Really, really good. But–

“Hang on!” she whispered. “Let me take care of the baby first!”

Before long, Rory was all dried, in her pyjamas for the night and happily playing in her cot. With a last glance at the baby, Hermione went to the bedroom.

Draco—looking delectable, she noted, in only his pyjama bottoms—was more than happy to resume where he’d left off. He caught her mouth in a lingering kiss, his hands finding their way inside her shirt and deftly unhooking her bra, slipping beneath its slack cups until they’d reached the objects of their quest. Gently he palmed her breasts, using his thumbs to lazily caress her nipples, already stiffly erect.

“Fucking hell, Granger, your tits feel fantastic,” he murmured. “So… firm and…” Wordless with delight, he yanked up her shirt and bra and nuzzled them, taking a nipple into his mouth. The sensation of his warm, moist mouth and wandering tongue tickling her nipple nearly made Hermione jump out of her skin, and an intense shudder passed through her. Gods. This sensitivity was proving nearly incendiary!

“Stop!” she panted finally. “Please… I can’t…”

She looked up and saw her reflection in the mirror as he moved reluctantly away. Her nipples were still almost painfully erect.

“I’m sorry, darling! Did I hurt you?” Surprise and confusion gave way to concern as Draco stared at her image in the mirror and then back at her.

“No… well, maybe a little bit… but it felt amazing too…” She turned to him, moving wordlessly into his arms for a hug. He held her that way for a long time.

* 

Sunday, 9 June
8:30 am

This was the limit. It really was.

Trembling, Hermione braced herself over the toilet bowl, involuntary tears streaming down her face. She had just lost her breakfast yet again. It was the third time in just the last week. Her initial presumption of food poisoning after Taran’s birthday party had proven unfounded, as nobody else who’d been at the party had become the slightest bit ill afterwards.

Rest. That would help. She’d clearly been trying to do too much while feeling tired— and that was another thing, come to think of it! She was tired nearly all the time now, and that simply wasn’t like her at all. Maybe she needed to take a vitamin-rich potion to boost her immune system— that, and fluids, and get more sleep at night. Most likely, her body’s natural defenses had been compromised, and that had left her vulnerable to the wretched stomach flu she was suffering from now. Yes, of course.

She felt better, having worked it all out so logically. She had a plan. And if it went on very much longer, she’d simply have to go and see somebody about it. For now— no more brooding. Time to get on with deciding what to do about Rory’s birthday, a much more pleasant thought than why
she was spending so much time lately with her head in the toilet.

* 

Monday, 10 June
10:00 am

A fast and furious game of “let’s pull everything off the shelves,” was going on in the sitting room. The bookcase was a magnet, drawing Rory to examine every single item on the lower shelves, all breakables having been moved to higher ground long before. A shelf and a half’s worth of books now lay scattered where they’d been tossed, some on the hardwood floor and others on the rug. Hermione sat nearby, enjoying her daughter’s glee; Rory was happily engrossed in flinging her latest find across the floor when the mobile rang suddenly.

“Oh, hi, Mum… Okay… yes! Really!... Yes, it is-- on the twenty-first, that’s right… No, we don’t, not yet, but… What?... When, that Saturday?... At the house?... Well, yes, I understand, and I want to see them too, but… Look, I can’t give you an answer right now. I need to discuss this with Draco first… Yes, okay, I understand… I’ll get back to you in a day or so, all right?... Love you too, Mum… Bye…”

* 

That evening—

It was good to relax. Both of them felt it as they lounged on the sitting room sofa, watching Rory play on the large quilt that was perpetually spread on the floor and nearly always littered with toys. Hermione’s legs were draped across Draco’s lap, and he absently traced patterns along their length, down to her bare feet. She wiggled her toes blissfully as his talented fingers commenced a slow, soothing inventory of her left foot, beginning with the arch and working its way up to the ball of her foot with artfully applied pressure in just the right spots.

“Wherever did you learn how to do that?” she sighed.

“Just one of my many talents, all part of the Malfoy marriage package,” he replied airily.

“For which I am ever so grateful,” she murmured.

“As well you should be, my love. Not everybody can do a proper foot rub, you know. Not to mention…”

Hermione stretched, cat-like, and impishly offered him her other foot.

“Oh, thanks!” he laughed. “I see. Marry the girl and what happens? I’m totally taken for granted!”

“No, no,” Hermione protested as he began massaging her heel and then sighed with pleasure. “Oh… that feels amazing… and I do not take you for granted, not in the least! You are absolutely magnificent in every possible way.” This last was stated quite matter-of-factly before she leaned back, blissfully closing her eyes again.

“That’s more like it,” he grumbled, stifling a grin. “You mentioned before that your mum had called today. What about?”
“Oh yes!” Hermione sat up, suddenly alert. “Guess what? It seems my parents had the same brilliant idea about Rory’s birthday that yours did. Except that she and Dad want to have Rory’s party at their house the day before, on the twenty-second—”

Draco rolled his eyes and sighed explosively. “Go on…”

“—and all my aunts and uncles and cousins would be there. They’re all dying to see me, you, and the baby, according to Mum.”

Draco was silent for a moment. Then he said carefully, “I suppose you’d like to do this, wouldn’t you… I mean, you haven’t seen all those relatives of yours in a long time.”

“Not since before the wedding, some of them,” Hermione agreed. “That’s true.”

“Well…” He took a deep breath and plunged ahead. “If that’s what you’d like, it’s fine with me. Tell your mum and dad yes.”

Hermione looked at him, her eyes huge. “You are so generous! I know this isn’t what you want at all, is it? But you’d do it for me anyway! I can’t tell you how much that means to me! I love you so much, Malfoy!” And with that, she threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck, peppering him with kisses.

A slow smile etched itself on his face. He would do this for her. It wasn’t a big deal, really. It would be no worse than a huge “do” at the Manor— in some ways, decidedly better, considering that he rather liked Hermione’s large, warmly welcoming family. Maybe they could do one party each day, grueling as that prospect sounded. At least that way, everybody would be happy. Well… nearly.

“So— it’s settled then, yeah?” He leaned back up so he could get a look at her face, which was suddenly damp with tears. “Oh no, you’re not crying again, are you, Miss Waterworks?” He tickled her in the ribs and elicited an hysterical hiccup and a giggle.

“Yes, I am crying again, for your information, and no, it’s not at all settled. Because that’s not what I want to do either!”

Draco was not expecting this. And yet, it shouldn’t have surprised him, he realised, not really. First off, Hermione’s behaviour seemed completely unpredictable these days. That in itself should have twigged him to the possibility that she’d do or say precisely the opposite of what he’d been anticipating. Second, he knew that deep down, neither a big, posh party nor a huge family gathering was what she’d really had in mind to mark Rory’s first birthday. She’d wanted the same thing he had: something meaningful and a lot quieter and more low-key than either of the circuses their respective parents had planned.

He slid his thumb across her cheeks, wiping away her tears, and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I’m happy to hear that. I really wasn’t up for another of my mother’s extravaganzas, frankly, and… although I’m certainly still willing to do it if you change your mind,” he added hastily, “honestly, I’m not too keen on a horde of relatives swooping down on us all day, as nice as they are. Sounds exhausting!”

“It does,” Hermione agreed fervently, rolling her eyes. “I was actually thinking more along the lines of—”

The words died in her mouth as her attention became focused on the baby, who had been playing quietly with a set of stacking rings on the quilt. Suddenly, though, there she was, peeking up at her parents over the top of the cocktail table, her small hands gripping its edges so tightly that her knuckles were turning white. Her little pixie face was alight with sheer exhilaration, as if to say, ”Look at me! See what I can do!”

And then— mother of Merlin!— she took a step, and then another, all the while holding on for dear
life.

“Draco!” Hermione breathed, clutching at his arm. “Look! She’s… she’s…”

“Yeah…” Draco said softly, mesmerised. “She really is. Wow.”

They cheered together as Rory made her way painstakingly along nearly a foot of the cocktail table. Then, just as suddenly, she lost her balance and sat back down on the soft quilt with a bump.

Instinctively, Hermione began to get up, ready to soothe her baby daughter’s tears, only to find that there were none. She watched as, not at all fussed by this small setback, Rory crawled on her hands and knees to retrieve a toy that had caught her eye.

“Feisty,” Hermione murmured, smiling and nodding her approval.

“Like her mum.” Draco leaned back on the sofa and patted the cushion next to him, a hint of a smile curving his lips. “Come here, you.”

* 

Tuesday afternoon, 11 June

The plans were set. The arrangements were all made, simple as they were. There would be no extravagant celebration at Malfoy Manor, nor would there be a big family reunion in the guise of a birthday party at the Grangers’. Instead, there would be a simple birthday lunch in their own back garden on Saturday, the twenty-second. Hermione had agreed that Narcissa could help by providing some of the food at least (nothing fancy, she assured Hermione); Claire could bring Hermione’s gran’s special lace tablecloth, a few helium balloons and a bouquet of flowers from her own garden for the table. It would just be ten of them and five children: besides the two sets of grandparents, Harry and Ron would be there with their families.

Standing in the middle of the back garden, Hermione let her eyes wander around its perimeters, mentally gauging the best spot for the table. Under the tree would be lovely and shady, of course, but then there was always the possibility of the odd inchworm dropping down into somebody’s hair or plate from its invisible thread.

One day, she found herself musing, they really should think about putting in some sort of water feature, something soothing to the eye and ear on a warm summer’s evening. One day. For now, she was just happy that her black-eyed Susans and purple cones were coming up so nicely, and that the columbines in the corner were already in flower. They added such a pretty splash of lavender and yellow to that part of the garden. The white spiderwort was tall and healthy, and the frothy yellow coreopsis and bright rows of day lilies were growing lush as well, attracting bees and butterflies in increasing numbers.

Still lost in thought, Hermione nearly didn’t notice the piercing “yoo hoo!” coming from over the fence.

“Yoo hoo!! Over here, ducks!” Beryl stood waving a handkerchief madly, trying to get Hermione’s attention.

Hermione gave herself an internal shake and came back to reality in a rush. She walked over to the fence, giving her neighbour a smile.

“Hello, Beryl. What are you up to this afternoon?”
"Just coming back from my bridge game, lovey. Ever play bridge? *Delightful* Muggle game," she chattered. "Cousin of mine learnt it at a hotel when she was on holiday and taught it to me. Now we all play, all the girls in my Tuesday lunch group." Suddenly Beryl stopped speaking, sliding the enormous sunglasses down her nose to peer at Hermione speculatively.

'You all right, ducks? You seem a bit peaked. Have you been eating enough?'

Hermione moved back a step and looked away, only to find that Beryl’s rather insistent gaze had followed and was even closer than before.

"Let me have a good look at you, my girl," Beryl demanded sternly, and reached out, turning Hermione’s face and studying her closely. ‘Tsk… you haven’t been at all well, have you?’

For all her silliness, Beryl could be quite astute at times. Just now, her scrutiny of Hermione’s face resulted in a slight frown. She shook her head.

“Tsk… you haven’t been at all well, have you?”

Beryl gave her a rather inscrutable look, calling over her shoulder as she walked back to her kitchen door, “Now that is for the healer to tell you, lovey, not me. Just go! Tomorrow.”

* Wednesday mid-afternoon, 12 June

The appointment had been difficult to get at the last minute. Hermione had almost had to wait a week, but the urgency in her voice when she’d made the Floo call to St Mungo’s had persuaded the receptionist to relent. She’d fit Hermione into a newly vacated two o’clock slot with Healer Grey, whom she’d seen earlier for general check-ups. Fortunately, Ginny was available on short notice to take Rory.

Healer Grey was a quiet woman with kindly eyes who knew how to really listen, and she examined Hermione thoroughly, taking note of all her symptoms. Various tests were performed and blood and urine samples were taken and sent off for analysis as well.

Finally, she sat back, crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap.

“We shall have to wait only a very brief time for the test results to come back. However, I do have a very strong suspicion about what the situation is. Tell me,” she continued. “How old is your daughter now?”

Hermione smiled softly at the mention of Rory. “She’s turning one the day after tomorrow, actually.”

Healer Grey gave her a warm smile in return. “That’s lovely, congratulations. And… are you still nursing her?”

“Yes,” Hermione replied slowly, not quite understanding where this line of questioning was
headed. “Why?”

“All in good time, Mrs. Malfoy. How often do you nurse her now?”

“Usually just two or three times a day. She’s on cow’s milk at meals, so it’s mostly just first thing in the morning and at bedtime–oh, and she does like to nurse a little bit before her afternoon nap.”

“More for comfort, though, than for food.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

“Have your monthlies returned yet?”

“No. I haven’t had a period in nearly two years.”

“I see. And… are you and your husband sexually active on a regular basis?”

Hermione blushed and shifted in her seat. “Yes,” she said in a small voice. On a very regular basis, she was tempted to add.

“And have you been using contraception?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, for the past six months or so, ever since Rory started on solids. I’ve been very careful about that.”

Healer Grey smiled gently. “Is it possible that you might have been… a bit less careful recently? All it takes is one time.”

Hermione sat up straight in her chair and stared at the healer, her inference now clear. “You mean…”

“I suspect,” the Healer said briskly, “that you ovulated early last month.”

Hermione had gone very pale.

“And I’d be willing to bet a Galleon that you’re pregnant– from the looks of things, about six weeks along.”

The silence was very nearly palpable, as a stunned Hermione registered this information. Just then, there was a knock on the door and Healer Grey opened it to receive the test results. She quickly scanned the parchment and looked up, smiling.

“Congratulations!”

*

Pregnant. Pregnant.

Sweet Circe, Morgana, and Cerridwen!

Could this really be true? And… a confirmed six weeks since she conceived… that would mean– Hermione did some quick calculations– Beltane.

Gods!

Vivid memories of that night and the following morning flooded her mind and she found herself blushing again. The experience had been beyond special. It had been extraordinary, culminating in couplings suffused with a beauty and intensity that were indescribable.
She recalled the potency of the ritual’s magic, the way every part of the experience had been touched by enchantment. Nothing else had mattered in the consuming urgency of their passion. It had swept them both up and she had forgotten to be careful. Maybe… maybe this was her secret heart’s desire all along and Beltane had been the perfect—perhaps even the fated—time for it to happen.

She knew without question that this baby had been made in that lovely, leafy bower under its canopy of fairy lights.

**PREGNANT!**

Hermione wanted to run, dance, and jump up and down. She felt itchy and wiggly and unable to settle. So rather than simply Apparating home, she took a walk, revelling in the trees, all green and lush, the blue sky dotted with large, puffy clouds that looked like whipped cream, and the vibrant life of the London streets that buzzed and hummed all around her. It was all she could do to keep from skipping.

*Hmm… if I’m six weeks along, then my due date would be… let’s see— she calculated again—around the beginning of February. Rory will be…nineteen and a half months old! I can’t imagine her so big! She’s not even walking yet, not really!*

Draco. What would he say? How would he feel about another child at this time? Oh, but surely he would be pleased… wouldn’t he?

Except… would he be truly happy about this baby? She couldn’t bear the thought of Draco not being as thrilled about it as she was. Maybe she would wait to tell him, try to feel him out about the idea of it first.

You’re a bloody coward, she berated herself as she returned to St Mungo’s to Apparate home.

---

Saturday morning, 15 June

7:15 am

“Hermione! You okay in there, love?” Draco called through the en-suite door that had slammed unceremoniously in his face as Hermione had made a mad dash for the toilet.

The nausea had come on her as soon as she had sat up in bed, a head-spinning queasiness that hit her like a wave.

“Yes…” The small voice was muffled.

“Can I come in?”

“No!” This wasn’t something Hermione really wanted to share. She felt wrung out and exhausted, and the odour of vomit was everywhere. She hadn’t her wand to make that disappear, nor did she have the strength and focus to do it wandlessly, and the stench rose around her from the toilet in noxious waves.

Finally she scraped herself off the floor, brushed her teeth vigorously, rinsed her mouth, and splashed some soothing, cool water on her face. The reflection that looked back at her from the mirror was pale and thin. But this time, rather than being frightened, it had a grin that seemed irrepressible.

Hide it she did, however, when she returned to the bedroom a moment later.

“Hermione,” Draco began sternly, worry clouding his eyes. “Enough is enough. You have got to
see somebody about this. It’s gone on far too long already! Now promise me you will, or I’ll have to drag you there myself!”

Hermione perched on the bed, arms around her bent knees. “I promise,” she said meekly, biting her lip to keep from smiling. “Don’t worry, I’m okay now.” Stealthily, she slipped a salted biscuit from the drawer of her nightstand and popped it into her mouth while he wasn’t looking. They had been lifesavers when she’d had morning sickness with Rory and now that she knew what was happening, she hoped fervently that they’d help again.

* 

The next several days went by in an absolute haze. Now that she knew what the cause of all her troubling symptoms were, Hermione was not only not worried, she was virtually ecstatic. The challenge now was keeping her glee from bubbling up and escaping. She was dying to tell Draco the news, but she needed to test the waters first, and then– then, assuming he’d be amenable to the idea of another baby– oh, wouldn’t it be lovely to surprise him with it somehow! The very thought of that caused her to break out in a huge grin, as she fantasised about all sorts of scenarios for the big revelation. She did a lot of that as she went rather dreamily about her everyday routine.

* 

Thursday morning, 20 June

Time, finally, to stick her toe in the water. She’d put it off long enough.

Over her rather spartan breakfast—dry toast and tea—Hermione broached the subject.

Rory was in her high chair, happily drinking milk from her sippy cup and cramming fingers full of mushy cereal into her mouth. Her first pearly bud of a milk tooth was finally pushing through in the front, making her smiles adorably comical.

“Hey, Snaggletooth!” Draco laughed. “You’re a right mess! Mummy needs to wash your face!” He sat down and took a sip of orange juice.

“Oh, Mummy does, eh?” Hermione challenged. “Whatever happened to Daddy and the concept of the equal division of labour?”

“Well, Daddy is all dressed for work and it wouldn’t do for him to have porridge dribbled down his front when he does his presentation at the big meeting this morning!”

“Oh, that’s today? I’d forgotten,” Hermione said, startled. “I’m sorry, love.”

“Well, you’ve been a bit… preoccupied lately.” This was putting it rather kindly, Draco thought, as he dug into his own bowl of porridge, liberally laced with maple syrup and cream, just the way he liked it. “It’s okay.”

“Thanks. I have been a bit preoccupied, I suppose. Coffee?” she asked, pouring him a cup and passing him the milk pitcher. “Um… I was wondering… has Harry said anything to you about… about the new baby they’re expecting?”

Draco glanced up from his breakfast. “No. I haven’t spoken to him since Taran’s party. Why?”

“Oh… well… I just wondered how he might be feeling about the prospect of a second child.
Ginny was a bit concerned when I spoke to her the other day. What do you think?"

“Sorry, no clue,” Draco replied, taking a sip of coffee. “Mmm, good. New kind?”

“Yes… hazelnut,” Hermione answered absently. No clue? “But—” she persisted. “You’re a man. Put yourself in his place. How would you feel in the circumstances?” She was skating on rather thin ice with that question, but she was determined to get an answer.

“How would I feel? Hmm…” Draco considered for a moment. “Merlin, I don’t know! Scared, probably.”

The complete candour of his reply was alarming. Hermione’s heart sank.

Then he went on. “Scared, but… not in a bad way, if you know what I mean. More like… the first time you push yourself on your broom higher and faster than you’ve ever gone before. Scared but excited as well. I bet that’s how he’s feeling. Thrilled but a bit nervous, wondering if he’ll manage supporting two instead of just one and if he’ll be as good a dad with the second one, wondering how things might change once the second one arrives. That’s how I’d feel, I think.” He took a bite of toast. “Why? Was Ginny really worried?”

“Yes, well, you know…” Hermione trailed off, trying to hide the enormous relief washing over her.

Draoc snorted derisively and shook his head. “Silly bint! She’s not very observant, then, is she? I mean, did you see his face when he made the announcement? He was over the bloody moon.”

Hermione nodded and went back to her tea. Her mouth twitched in a grin. For the first time in two days, she could breathe freely. It would be all right.

*

Friday, 21 June
The Summer Solstice
Rory’s first birthday

The big day had finally come. It was quiet, for the most part, a quick “happy birthday” hug and kiss for Rory from her daddy before he left for work, and then a morning of the usual playtime.

Hermione had to wait to get busy with plans of her own; in the late afternoon while Rory was still napping, she spent time setting everything up. She had given a great deal of thought to the plan in the last couple of days. Not only must Rory’s first birthday be special, but she wanted her surprise for Draco to be unforgettable as well.

In a sunny corner, a jar of small, golden crystals sat alongside pots of day lilies, coreopsis, daisies, black-eyed susans and muskflowers culled from other parts of the garden for transplanting. A basket full of herbs ready for transplanting waited as well: st john’s wort, vervain, juniper, and rosemary. She Vanished the grass and a few errant weeds from a small circle of ground, and now it lay ready to receive the flowers. A bucket of small stones sat next to the flowers. She thanked the gods she was a witch as she considered how much manual labour she’d saved herself. She knew perfectly well she wouldn’t have been fit to do all that on her own anyway, the way she’d been feeling. This project would be the last part of the brief ceremony. It would play a very important role, if all went according to plan.

In the centre of the garden there was a small black cauldron, in which Hermione left small pieces
of aromatic wood and crumpled paper that would act as kindling. This would be where the ritual would take place.

That evening, they had an early supper, complete with homemade, iced cupcakes, one of them with a little candle for Rory. The big, fancy cake would come tomorrow at the official party. After singing a rousing “happy birthday,” they went out into the garden, Hermione carrying the baby and Draco bringing the portable playpen.

“Happy Midsummer,” Hermione said softly as the two of them surveyed the garden. “I thought it would be nice to celebrate Rory’s birthday by marking the Solstice as well, and then planting a special garden.”

Draco raised his eyebrows in surprise. “When did you have time to do all this? It obviously took some planning!”

“Well,” she replied, grinning, “it wasn’t much, really. The ritual was easy, just some quick research. I’ve copied out my favourite bits for us to read. I Summoned the flowers and the stones from around the garden, and Conjured the crystals and the herbs. No time to go shopping for them. Vanished the grass and weeds from that spot over there, where the flowers will go. Simple!”

Draco shook his head and laughed. Of course. Why had he even bothered asking?

After the baby had been secured in her playpen with her favourite toys and soft books, Draco and Hermione took their wands and the ritual parchment she’d brought out, and went to stand at the garden’s centre opposite the cauldron.

“I’ll cast the circle, shall I?” she said. He nodded. Slowly, she rotated around to the right a full 360 degrees, holding her wand straight out, and read, “Today is Midsummer, Alban Heruin as our ancestors called it, the longest day of the year. It’s also the day we mark and celebrate the first birthday of our beloved child, Aurora. Today we honour her as we do the earth herself. Around us are trees and flowers, above us the sky, and below us our mother, the warm earth. New life grows in her womb.” She flushed slightly, stifling a smile, and turned to Draco. “Now you.”

“The Wheel of the Year has turned again,” he read. “The Light has grown in strength for six months until today. We honour the sun at his most powerful, and we light this fire as the Ancients did long ago.”

Looking at the cauldron, he closed his eyes momentarily, his brow furrowed in concentration. After a minute, a small curl of smoke snaked up from the centre of the cauldron, and soon all of the scented wood was ablaze.

“Impressive!” Hermione murmured. “Very nice work!”

“Nothing to it,” he said smoothly, with a small wave of his hand.

“I bow to your prodigious talents!” she laughed. “Okay…” Quickly, she found her place again in the reading. “Midsummer is a time to celebrate the longest day of the year, for tomorrow the light will begin to die as the Wheel turns ever on. Even as the Sun now burns brightly, bringing warmth to Mother Earth, so that warmth begins to wane, and the fires of life begin to bank even as the days grown warmer. The new life created at Beltane now grows. From this day on, darkness will vie with light as the cold of year’s end inevitably approaches. The Holly King wrestles with the Oak King, Bran with Bel, and the Goddess grows from Maiden to Mother and the promise of the Crone.” She nudged him a bit, and whispered, “Now the Quarters.”

They began by facing east, easy to find because the morning sun flooded their bedroom windows each day. As each quarter was called, they turned, so that they inscribed their circle once again.

Together they read, “From the East comes the wind, cool and clear, bringing new seeds to the garden, bees and butterflies to the pollen and birds to the trees. South is the fiery sun, rising high in the sky and lighting our way to the night. From the West, the mist comes, bringing rain, the life-
giving water without which we could not live. North is the Earth, dark and fertile, the womb where life begins and where it will later die only to return anew.”

“The triple goddess watches over us,” Hermione continued, casting a quick eye on Rory, who was standing in her playpen and watching her parents with a quizzical expression. “We honour her. She is the Morrighan, Brigid and Cerridwen. She is the washer at the ford, the guardian of the hearth, and the one who stirs the cauldron of inspiration.”

“Bel, God of the Sun, smith and herald of new life, watches over us,” Draco read over Hermione’s shoulder. “We honour him, by all his names known and unknown. He blesses us with his wisdom, and gives life and abundance to us as the sun gives life and abundance to the earth.” He dropped his head to her shoulder and left a quick kiss there on her warm skin.

“Hey,” Hermione said softly. “Don’t distract me, Malfoy!” She grinned and continued. “We make this offering as the Goddess honours the God on this day, adds her power to his and offers tribute to him as her equal.”

With that, she picked up a small bunch of yellow flowers from the ones that would be transplanted later and tossed them into the cauldron, where they quickly caught fire, sending up a sweet smoke. Together, they finished, arms around each other, “Today at the Solstice, we celebrate life and love and the power of the Lady and her Lord, earth and sun.”

Turning to face each of the four quarters, they made a wish for light and life as they had done at Beltane, and Draco unwound the circle.

The sun was dipping fairly low in the sky as they finished. There were perhaps two hours of waning daylight left. It was close to half seven. Hermione slipped her arms around Draco and drew him close, burying her face in his shirt and inhaling the scent that was uniquely his, masculine and fresh. She’d always loved the way he smelled.

“Sniffing me again, are you?” he teased. “Do you suppose you’ll still be doing that when we’re old and wrinkly?”

“Doubtful.” She scrunched up her nose. “You’ll probably smell all musty and medicine-y by then. Have to get my fill now!” With that, she pushed her nose firmly into his chest, inhaling deeply and tickling him in the process.

“Hey, no fair!” he laughed, holding her away. “Sniffing, okay. Tickling— that’s cheating!” He ducked his head and retaliated with feather-light kisses all over her throat, her most sensitive spot.

“Enough! Enough!” Hermione gasped, laughing along with him.

When they’d caught their breath, she turned to him. “I thought, in honour of Rory’s first birthday and the Solstice, that we could plant a sun wheel garden. That’s what all this is for.” She made a sweeping gesture towards the flowers, herbs, stones and crystals waiting under the eaves of the garage. “See, everything’s golden, like the sun. And all of these herbs and flowers are bee and butterfly attractors, so we’ll be helping to give them more of a habitat. We make it round, like the sun and the Wheel, and in the centre, we put the crystals. I thought, one section of the wheel for me, one for you and one for Rory. On top of that, we can keep a dish filled with water, which will be nice for birds as well as bees and butterflies. The stones are for the border. I brought out trowels and hand rakes for both of us. Will you help me?”

So fitting that his girl had come up with an idea like this. There had been another Solstice, their first in the Iffley Road flat, and another garden they’d planted together there. He had arrived home to find her on her hands and knees in the rather barren back garden, surrounded by pots of flowers. Smiling mischievously, she’d handed him a pair of gardening gloves. The resulting garden had been a joy for both of them as it grew lush and vibrant over the next two years.

Seven years ago this day. Was it possible? His life had changed so much in that short span of time,
and yet, Oxford and their student days seemed forever ago now, as he gazed at his wife and child.

Draco smiled, catching her hand in his and lacing their fingers together. “‘Course I will.”

They worked steadily and without much conversation other than what was necessary, such was the intensity of their focus. Periodically, one or the other would take a break to spend a bit of time with Rory, taking her out of the playpen and letting her crawl about, sniffing at the grass and swatting at tiny glow-worms as they twinkled against the twilight sky.

Before long, the sun wheel garden was nearly finished. It had been divided into three segments, the back of each section filled in with the taller perennials, and the rest of each wedge-shaped section with the remaining flowers and herbs. Each wedge had an inner border of stones. In the centre was a smaller circle of yellow crystals in different sizes. Draco had just finished laying down the outer border. He stood up, his back and shoulders painfully stiff, and stretched.

“Just about done, yeah? Looks fantastic! You know,” he mused, “Except for that one time at the old flat, I’ve never done much gardening, not where I’ve actually got my hands dirty. Even here. I’ve always just used my wand— and sometimes not even that.” He gave her a playful wink.

“And?” Hermione teased. “Did you enjoy getting all grubby?” She grinned, recalling that summer seven years earlier. They’d just moved in together as students. During his very first trip to a Muggle supermarket, he’d been transfixed by the strange, shiny gardening tools. Not long afterwards, on a hot, summer day very like this one, she’d finagled him into helping her plant their first garden behind the flat. It seemed so long ago now, ages really. Hermione smiled, savouring the memory and holding it close to her heart.

“Remember…” she began, stopped by his nod and the wry, knowing grin that lit up his face.

“Well,” he said eventually, returning to her first question, “I still don’t much fancy the ‘blackened fingernails’ look, but… yeah. Reckon I did.”

Hermione laughed. “Well, that’s a start! Look, love, could you do me a favour, please? I’ve just
got this last little bit to finish here, but I'm terribly thirsty. I bet you are, too. There’s some lemonade in the fridge. Could you please get us some?”

“I could definitely do with something cold to drink. Be right back,” Draco said, wiping a trickle of sweat out of his eyes as he ran a hand through his hair.

“Lots and lots of ice!” Hermione called after him as he disappeared into the house with a backward wave.

Now was her chance. Hermione whipped out her wand and cast a very quick Placement Charm, rearranging all the flowers and herbs from three divided sections to four. She turned her back quickly to block the newly transformed garden just as Draco reappeared with two tall glasses of lemonade. He’d actually cut up some strawberries and fresh lemon slices as a garnish, making the drinks really festive-looking.

“Oh,” Hermione smiled, “that looks wonderful! Thank you, darling! You’re so sweet!”

“Yeah, well… don’t spread it around. Wouldn’t want to compromise my image, you know. Accio chaise lounges!”

Two cushioned lounge chairs rolled over to them from the patio and they sat down gratefully, drinks in hand. As luck would have it, the chairs faced the sun wheel garden. Hermione slanted a quick look at Draco but said nothing. So far he hadn’t noticed a thing.

Rory had fallen asleep in the playpen, her cheek pushed up against one of her little plush toys, a unicorn. Her mouth was open slightly and made tiny sucking movements, like a little goldfish. Draco had leaned back in the chaise lounge, and now his eyes were sliding shut. Glow-worms flashed tiny, brilliant points of light against the darkening leaves of the shrubbery.

That gave Hermione an idea. Time for drastic measures. Summoning all the glow-worms in the garden, Hermione arrayed them on the stones which bordered each section of the sun wheel, as well as the outer ring which contained them all. It was truly an enchanting sight.

“Draco,” she whispered. “Draco, wake up! Please!” She reached out and nudged his shoulder just a bit, and he woke with a small start.

“What’s the matter?” His voice was slightly slurred.

“Look!” Hermione pointed excitedly. “There!”

He looked. It took a minute to get past the sheer spectacle of the glow-worms as they lit up the newly planted sun wheel like a shimmering necklace. And then suddenly he turned to Hermione, a decidedly baffled expression on his face.

“I thought…” he began. “Weren’t there…? I could have sworn…” He turned to Hermione, a question in his eyes. “Now there are four.”

“Yes,” she said gently. “Four.”

“But why? You said one for each member of the family.”

“And so there is, love.”

Thirty seconds passed. A series of expressions from confusion to wheels turning to abrupt, overwhelming realisation ranged over Draco’s face.

“Hermione!” His voice was suddenly unsteady. “Are you–?”

“Afraid so.” She gave a nervous little giggle, almost afraid to meet his eyes.

“When??”
“You mean when did it happen or when did I find out or when will we meet the newest Malfoy?”

“All three!” Draco sank back on the chaise, his eyes wide.

“At Beltane, nine days ago, and next February, in that order. I’m about seven weeks along now.” She reached out and rested her hand on his arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes… I think! Gods, Granger, I’ve been so worried about you!” Dazed, he shook his head. “It all fits, though, doesn’t it! All the throwing up, how tired you’ve been, all your moods…”

“Hey, wait a minute!” Hermione objected. “Oh, all right, I have been a bit emotional lately, it’s true.” She paused. “Have I been awful?” she asked in a small voice.

“Impossible! I don’t know how I’ve put up with you the past few weeks,” he declared completely straight-faced, while sneaking a look at her through the corner of his eye. She began to puddle up, her bottom lip trembling.

“Oh no, Baby! I was just having you on! I didn’t mean it! I’m sorry!” She allowed him to hold her and give her a conciliatory kiss, and then pushed him away in mock reproach.

“Hmm! Never tease a pregnant woman. It’s cruel!”

“Never again! Merlin’s honour!”

They both knew that was a lie.

“A baby… I can’t believe it… we’re going to have a baby!” He leaned back in the chaise and sighed. Suddenly his eyes opened wide and he sat up. “So that’s why you asked me at breakfast yesterday how I thought Harry might be feeling! It was my reaction you really wanted, wasn’t it!”

Hermione nodded, chagrined. She’d hoped he might forget about that.

“Did you really think I might not be happy about this? Oh, sweetheart!” Incredulous, he reached for her, sudden concern on his face. “Is that why you didn’t tell me sooner?”

She nodded, tears starting again.

“I’m so sorry you were afraid! Fucking hell– a baby! It’s bloody brilliant! I couldn’t be happier!”

She gave a shaky little laugh as she wiped her eyes. “Well, this is certainly different to the way you reacted the first time, isn’t it!”

Draco laughed, remembering that day. “Reckon it is. You can thank our daughter for that.”

She quirked a sly grin. “Will this do as a belated birthday present?”

His eyes were lambent and his smile radiant in the gathering darkness. “It’ll do,” he said softly. “Come here, Granger.”

He made room, opening his arms happily as she lay down alongside him on the chaise. They held each other and watched as the sky blackened and stars began to wink there, tiny, slivered diamonds on a velvet tapestry. The longest day had ended, but a whole new lifetime of days was just beginning.
TBC
Wednesday, 23 December
8:40 am

“It’s a girl!”

The oversized mug slipped out of Hermione’s hands and crashed to the floor, hot tea splattering all over the rug and seeping between the floorboards.

Molly Weasley’s head had made a sudden appearance in the Malfoy bedroom fireplace. Her ecstatic expression was a dead giveaway even before one word had escaped her lips.

“It’s a– what?” Hermione sat down on the edge of the small sofa, one hand braced behind her back so she wouldn’t sink too far into the cushions, lest she couldn’t stand up again. “When?”

“An hour ago! Arthur and I are Flooing everyone with the news! She’s tiny– six and a half pounds, with a full head of auburn hair! And four days early!” Molly beamed with grandmotherly pride. “Oh, Hermione!” she added, almost as an afterthought. “How are you feeling, dear? It’ll be your turn before you know it!”
Hermione opened her mouth to reply but Molly was already rushing on. “Oh dear, must dash!” she said cheerfully. “Loads more calls to make!”

“Wait, Molly! What’s her name?”

The answer floated back to her even as Molly’s head was disappearing from the hearth. “Emma Abigail!”

A Yule baby! Or very nearly, anyway. One day late.

“Draco?” Hermione attempted without success to lever herself up off the sofa. “Malfoy, where are you?”

Draco poked his head in the door. “What’s the matter? You’re not…” He suddenly looked stricken.

“No, no!” Hermione laughed, shaking her head. “Not yet! Didn’t mean to scare you!” She patted her belly, now quite prominent and solidly round at thirty-four weeks. She was definitely carrying differently this time around. It was all in the front and she looked rather as if she’d swallowed a huge beach ball. “Two things, actually. First… “ She grinned sheepishly. “Can you help me up, please?”

Draco bit back a chuckle as he looped one arm around Hermione’s waist and grabbed her hand with his other hand to haul her to her feet. An unfortunate mental picture of recent rescuers’ attempts to shift a beached whale came, unbidden, to mind, and he shut his eyes, shaking his head to banish the image.

“Ooof!” she grunted. “Thanks, love!” and then, “You all right, Malfoy? What is it?”

Opening his eyes quickly, he saw Hermione’s worried face peering at his.

“Nothing,” he replied quickly, crossing his arms and lounging back against the doorframe. “So—what was the other thing, anyway?”

“Oh yes!” Hermione clapped her hands together. “Harry and Ginny had a girl this morning! About an hour ago! Molly popped in by Floo and told me a few minutes ago. Scared the hell out of me too! I’m afraid I dropped my tea. Do you think you could…”

Draco sighed deeply. “See what you’ve reduced me to…” he murmured, shaking his head in teasing reproach. Then he grinned broadly. “A girl, eh? That’s great! What are they calling her?”

“Emma Abigail, Molly said. Pretty, don’t you think?”

Draco nodded as he carefully pushed the cup fragments into a single pile with the toe of one foot.

“You know,” Hermione continued, watching as her husband methodically Vanished the mess from the floor. “We need to decide finally what our top boy and girl names are. Can you imagine if we still haven’t decided by the time the baby comes? It would be—”

Suddenly, a peculiar look crossed Hermione’s face and she stopped, mid-sentence. Her hands automatically found their way to her lower belly and she rested them there, fingers splayed, as she took a deep breath and then expelled it again.

“Phew!” she said, finally and her face relaxed, her hands moving in small, deliberate circles over her lower abdomen, soothing the muscles as they gradually relinquished their tense coiling.

“Big one?” Draco studied Hermione’s face anxiously. He was fairly sure that it was only a Braxton Hicks contraction, a forerunner to the real thing that helped prepare a woman’s body very gradually for labour. Over a period of weeks, these practice contractions would gradually thin and stretch Hermione’s cervix so that it would be ready for the real work of expanding enough to allow their baby passage through the birth canal into the outside world.
She nodded, expelling a pent-up breath, and smiled.

Pretty handy, being so experienced at this baby stuff. Draco’s own relieved smile was just a bit cocky now. They were two thirds of the way through the antenatal classes they were repeating as a refresher (despite his initial protests that they were an utter waste of time and money, as he was certain he remembered absolutely everything that old McDougal bat— yeah, all right, Granger, she wasn’t an old bat— had taught them the first time round) and he’d discovered he actually felt grateful to be going through the exercises and information sessions again. He’d already learnt quite a lot this second time.

Hermione nodded, continuing where she’d left off.

“Anyway— as I was saying before this little one so rudely interrupted— we really do need to make a decision about names soon. There’s not a lot of time left now.”

Even as she said it, Hermione found herself amazed that this was actually the case. Six weeks left. Hardly any time at all in the larger scheme of things. And yet, in another way, it was beginning to feel like the longest six weeks of her life. Every day seemed to inch along as her increased girth caused her to struggle with the simplest tasks: picking up something she’d dropped, tying her shoes— just putting her shoes on, for Merlin’s sake!— and even standing for any length of time. Walking any distance was really a chore now as well, as she quickly grew short of breath and had to sit down. Her ankles were swollen, and there was a persistent ache in her lower back. And finally— the ultimate indignity!— she’d actually peed herself twice recently, because she hadn’t made it to the loo quickly enough. It seemed she had to pee constantly these days. Ellen MacDougal had reassured the whole class, explaining that at this stage of development, their babies had grown so much that they were exerting fairly constant pressure on their mothers’ bladders.

“Don’t worry!” she’d said cheerfully. “Once you’ve given birth, you won’t even remember all this discomfort!”

Somehow, Hermione had thought darkly, she had a feeling she would.

Laying down his wand, Draco nodded.

“Right. Names. We’ll be ready, Granger, I promise. But— ” He stopped to listen intently. “I do believe I hear a little Someone waking up. Don’t trouble yourself, love,” he added kindly. “I’ll go.”

A small voice was indeed calling from the nursery and not surprisingly, Hermione thought wryly, it was peeping, “Da! Da!”

It had been her first word.

Saturday, 26 December

Draco, Hermione and Rory arrived at the Burrow to see Harry, Ginny, Emma Abigail and Taran late in the afternoon just after Rory’s nap, so she was alert and in a happy mood. Molly and Arthur
had insisted on Ginny and her family staying with them for the first few days (well, it had been Molly really. Arthur had been just as happy to let his daughter and her husband do whatever pleased them), saying that at the beginning it was particularly important for a new mother to get as much rest as possible, and this way, Ginny could be totally coddled. Even Harry would get a break, as there would be built-in childminders for Taran. He and Ginny would have enough to do, just dealing with the demands of a newborn. It was the least grandparents could do.

The front door opened on a scene that more closely resembled Kings Cross Station at rush hour than a family sitting room. The whole family had turned up at once, it seemed. All the Weasley offspring and their respective girlfriends/spouses and children milled about the sitting room and spilled over into adjacent rooms. In addition, friends of Harry’s and Ginny’s had decided today would be the perfect time to drop in and offer their congratulations. Neville and Luna were there, as well as Blaise and Lavender and Seamus Finnegan and his wife. Nobody had counted on the three-ring circus into which this first day of visiting would evolve. It became clear very quickly that far from being the most opportune time to show up, Hermione and Draco had arrived at a monumentally bad time. On the other hand, at this point, what were three more now that the house was already full to bursting?

“Oi!” Ron yelled cheerfully over the heads of his brothers and their respective girlfriends or families. Bill and Fleur were closest, with their six-year-old twins, Rachel and Peter. “Over here!”

Clutching Rory tightly, Draco elbowed his way through the crush, making room for Hermione to follow in his wake. They finally reached Ron, who was holding out a glass of butterbeer for Draco and some mulled pumpkin juice with a cinnamon stick for Hermione.

“Cheers!” he said, raising his own glass, and the three of them took a swig. “Bloody madhouse here! Ginny and the baby are resting for a bit, and Mum’s gone round the twist, I think. She’s guarding Ginny’s room with such a look in her eye, you don’t want to know!” He laughed and downed another swallow of his drink. “And Dad– he’s just a wreck at this point.”

Hermione had spotted Fleur behind her and turned to say hello. Noticing, Ron took the opportunity to ask Draco rather conspiratorially, “How are you holding up these days? Not much more time before all this insanity will be yours!” There seemed to be an almost gleeful glint in his eyes.

Draco tipped his head slightly in Hermione’s direction, rolling his own eyes. It was a very specific, beleaguered-husband expression which spoke volumes. Ron nodded sagely, and grinned.

“Poor sod. Well, it’ll be over soon enough. Driving you round the bend, is she?”

“Well,” Draco sighed, “it’s not too bad really. Bit prickly sometimes, you know– she gets impatient and frustrated easily. Fuck, I would too if I were dragging round that belly! Don’t let on I told you, but she’s put on two stone and we still have six weeks to go!”

Ron chortled into his butterbeer. “You think that’s a lot, mate? By the time the boys came, Pansy had put on close to four! It was scary.”

Draco chuckled. Now the proverbial shoe was on the other foot and Ron was telling him war stories! “Hey, where’s the new dad anyway?” he asked, looking around. “I haven’t seen him anywhere.”

“Oh, he’s with Ginny and the baby. Bad night last night, from what I hear. Nobody did much sleeping. He hasn’t come up for air since–” Ron glanced at the mantel clock. “Not since about an hour ago.”

“Shall we take pity on him and bring him a drink?” Draco suggested, nodding towards the impromptu bar on a table in the corner.

“Yeah, only something a lot stronger than butterbeer! He needs it, poor bastard!”
The two of them laughed and then Draco turned to find Hermione. He handed Rory over to her for a bit, excusing himself, and walked off with Ron. She watched the two of them retreating into the crowd and shook her head, amused. Who would ever have thought that these two could forge any sort of a working relationship, much less a friendship? But they had.

*

Some time later, Ginny and Harry emerged from the bedroom. It had been a long, exhausting labour and she was still recovering from that as well as three consecutive nights virtually without sleep. Harry had been wonderfully helpful, but when it came right down to it, he couldn’t actually do the nursing for her so the real burden was still more hers to bear.

By this time, the crowd had thinned somewhat and things were quieter. Everyone made themselves comfortable in the sitting room whilst Molly bustled about, making sure drinks and snack platters were refilled.

Harry sat with his arm around Ginny, who rested her head on his shoulder. Emma Abigail Potter lay swaddled like a little parcel in the bassinet—finally, blessedly, asleep.

Her big brother Taran had spent most of the day bouncing about from one uncle to another or playing with his cousins. By now, he was beginning to tire and become peevish. At three and a half, he wasn’t sure quite what to make of all the sudden fuss, much less what he thought about having a new little sister at all. This Emma creature was funny-looking and smelly, her face all red and scrunched up most of the time. She cried an awful lot too. Her hair stuck straight up and was not at all the right colour, the “right” colour being his own of course. And she was too small to play with, besides which everybody was always telling him to be careful, mind the baby, don’t touch. Well, everybody except his mummy and daddy of course. They were nice. They let him touch. They even let him hold her in his lap. Now all he wanted was to sit and play with his collection of toy dragons. He wished all these people would go home.

Hermione sat next to Ginny, propping Rory up on her knees. There was far less lap room these days, a fact that Rory herself was a bit confused about. She patted her mother’s huge tummy gently, and laid her cheek against its rounded crest. There had been an episode a while back, where the contact was a bit too hard (No, no, be nice, Rory! Your baby brother or sister is in there! Don’t want to hurt the baby, do we?) and she’d learnt.

“Bay,” she said. “Bay.”

“Yes, sweetheart,” Hermione smiled. “Baby.” She looked over Rory’s head to catch Draco’s eye, and he blew her a kiss.

“See, Rory,” Draco said gently, sitting down next to Hermione and lifting Rory so she could look into the bassinet. “Taran has a new baby now. That’s Emma. ‘Em-ma’.”

Rory reached out and touched her father’s cheek with the tips of her fingers in an exploratory way and then tried out the word. “Eh-m.”

“Yay, Rory, good job!” Hermione and Draco enthused and everyone around them smiled approvingly.

“Will Rory have a new baby soon?” Draco continued quietly. He looked directly at her as he spoke, his smiling grey eyes meeting hers.
“Da!” she answered instead, reaching out with both her tiny hands to clasp his face, whereupon he leaned in and gave her a kiss. At that, there was an audible sigh from every woman in the room, most noticeably Molly.

“Well, Malfoy,” Harry chuckled, “she’s got you wrapped right round her little finger, I’d say.” He took a sip from a glass of firewhiskey and soda and grinned.

“She certainly does,” Hermione agreed. “You should see them at home!” She caught her husband’s eye and winked.

“That bodes well for the new one, I think,” Ginny said sleepily. “’Scuse me, sorry!” She covered a huge yawn with her hand. “Sounds like a dedicated dad to me.”

“Yes, he is that.” Hermione covered Draco’s hand with her own and gave it a quick squeeze.

Pansy and Ron’s one-year-old triplets were on the floor playing with a variety of toys and now Rory squirmed to be put down so she could play too. Bending was impossible for Hermione now, so Draco scooped Rory up from her lap and set the baby down on the floor.

“Let’s watch and see what they do,” Ron said. “Like an experiment.”

“You mean, let’s watch and see which one kills the other?” Pansy laughed.

Almost immediately, as if on cue, Rory happily grabbed a toy from Alex, making him howl.

‘Oi, Malfoy,” Ron exclaimed, with exaggerated consternation. “You tell your daughter to stop bullying my son!”


“Well, she’s my daughter too, may I remind you, and it seems to me she’s not being a bully in the least!” Hermione huffed in mock indignation. “She’s simply being an assertive woman! Reaching out in life and taking what she wants with both hands!”

“Oho, is that what you call it!” George Weasley laughed. “Trust our Hermione to find a way to put a positive spin on her kid pinching another kid’s toy!”

“Well, yes, okay, it really wasn’t very nice, I suppose,” she admitted with a giggle. “Too late now, though. I’ll suppose I’ll just have to wait till she ‘asserts’ herself again!”

“Ha ha…” Ron muttered.

Just then a gentle snore interjected itself into the conversation. Ginny had fallen fast asleep on Harry’s shoulder. Tiny Emma slept on, oblivious to everyone around her. She’d be awake soon to nurse, though, and it was apparent to everyone that Ginny needed to grab this catnap whilst she could. Very quietly, everyone stood to leave.

“Your turn next, you two,” Pansy whispered with a wicked grin.

Just then Hermione felt a severe kick as the baby stretched.

“Right.” She rolled her eyes. “As if I could possibly forget!”

*
That night, 11:30 pm

The house was quiet. A fire burned low in the bedroom grate. Rory was sound asleep. A few minutes earlier, she’d drifted off while at the breast. Nursing was still a powerful soporific. It had become tricky in the last several months as Hermione’s belly expanded, but not impossible. Hermione had researched the problem, poring over books in the Pregnancy and Childbirth section of Obscurus Books one afternoon. She’d learnt to lie on her side with Rory facing her, so that she could nurse for a few minutes until the baby’s need for comfort before bed was satisfied. She no longer suckled as hard as she had when she was a tiny infant, so there was no real discomfort for Hermione. Instead, it was gentle and pleasant, as much for mother as for daughter, and it was a way that Hermione felt she could still give something special of herself to Rory even as she knew the time for her daughter to be the only child was growing short.

Truth to tell, Hermione felt a certain amount of guilt about that, even as she gloriied in the idea of a second child for her and Draco to love. Was she betraying Rory by doing this? Absurd as it sounded even to herself, she had to admit to feeling the pric of this concern. As she looked down at that small blonde head so close to her heart, eyes closed, tiny hands gently patting her breast, there was a sharp pang and she felt tears closing her throat. This was her baby, her own—and soon, things would never be the same! They’d never again be quite like this! And this—what they had right here and now—was so precious! A rush of emotions that were all in a tangle threatened to engulf her, and she felt tears slide down her face and on in small rivulets down her neck, soaking into the sheet and Rory’s fair, soft hair.

Draco walked in then and stopped, arrested by the sight of his wife, her belly and breasts bared and exquisitely voluptuous in their extreme fullness as she suckled their child. She reminded him of primitive earth-mother figurines he’d seen in the British Museum. There was something powerfully primal and timeless about the picture she presented. Like women since the very beginning, she had taken her place in a larger, very beautiful and moving continuum of creation and nurturing. Draco’s breath caught in his throat and he simply stood there for a moment, watching, struck almost painfully by her beauty.

Rory lay with her face pressed to her mother’s breast, her small mouth still making gentle sucking movements, though her grip had slackened as she fell asleep. Hermione herself had dozed off, her hair falling over her face, partially obscuring it. Draco leaned over and gently pushed the errant tendrils away, dropping a light kiss on her cheek. She stirred, opening her eyes, and smiled muzzily at him. He smiled back, putting his finger to his lips, and carefully drew the baby away, lifting her up and carrying her to the changing table in the nursery, where he did a quick check to see if she was still dry. As luck would have it, she was. He laid her ever so gently down in her cot, covered her lightly, and tiptoed out.

When he returned to the bedroom, Hermione was still lying on her side, still bared to the waist, rubbing her lower abdomen in a soothing, circular pattern.

“Hi,” she whispered, and beckoned to him.

He lay down behind her and slipped his arm around her, resting his hand on her belly alongside her own, then letting it wander over the perimeter, fingertips lightly grazing her soft skin. It was stretched taut, her abdomen rock-hard beneath. For a few minutes, all was quiet, the only sounds their gentle breathing and the low, occasional crackle of burning embers in the grate. Suddenly, a bump rose, knob-like and vigourous, under his palm, causing his eyes to open wide, and he laughed out loud. What was that, anyway? A hand? A foot? An elbow or knee? This whole thing was marvellous. Amazing.

Hermione turned to look at him over her shoulder, grinned, and covered his hand with her own.
“Wow,” she said softly. “Strong! Do you think we could guess the sex of the baby based on how hard it kicks me?”

“Nope,” he replied. “Rory landed some pretty good ones, remember?”

“True,” she nodded. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re here. I rather like having you around.” She snuggled back against him, unintentionally rubbing her bum against his groin in a most delightful manner. He felt himself responding instantly, wanting her, needing her.

Carefully, he extricated his hand from hers and began a slow, upward journey along the curve of her belly toward her breasts, so large and firm now. His fingertip reached her left nipple and found a creamy drop of colostrum, or “pre-milk” beading up at the tip. He spread it over the sensitive tissue there, and she sighed in pleasure, wriggling closer to rub against his growing erection and reaching around to draw his head down to hers. Their kisses were slow and sweet, as they savoured the sensations of lips and tongues joining.

“Mmm…” she murmured. “You taste lovely…”

Draco’s answer was to kiss her again even more deeply. As she made to turn completely and face him, he stopped her.

“Wait, baby. Let me love you this way.”

Carefully, he drew down her jeans, the task made a lot easier because as maternity trousers, they had an elasticised waistband. Hooking his fingers into the top of her knickers, those same, enormous things he never tired of teasing her about, he pulled them down as well.

She kicked the garments to the floor and raised her leg, bending it at the knee so that he could slip his hand in between her thighs.

The skin there was silken as he began a gentle exploration of her inner thighs, gradually working his way ever higher towards their apex.

Ah, there. The softly curling hair of her mons was already damp with her desire, and he stroked it for a moment before running a couple of fingers down over the glistening pink flesh of her labia and eliciting another sigh, this one a bit more ragged. He continued to stroke her, varying the length and intensity of his touch as he did so, sometimes dipping inside and then drawing her slick wetness out to coat the turgid little nub of hooded flesh at her centre. Her breathing quickened and she opened her legs a bit wider, splaying them out as far as she comfortably could to give him greater access. And then just as suddenly, he knew he’d brought her almost all the way, because she clamped her thighs around his hand and held it tightly in place, arching her back and shuddering.

“Hermione, wait!” he whispered urgently, rolling her onto her back into a half-sitting position against the pillows. Then he dipped his head down between her legs, plunging his tongue deep inside her, searching and insistent, and then curling it to caress her clit and up and down the length of her slit, licking up the cream of her arousal. She came within seconds, it seemed, clutching the sheet in both fists, throwing her head back and letting out a strangled cry of purest pleasure.

Dropping back onto the pillows, sated, she reached for him, her kiss no longer soft but full of the passion he’d just wrought in her.

“My turn,” she said, finally, her eyes alight with tenderness. “Please. I want to.”

He nodded wordlessly, straddling her on his knees, and she undid the zipper of his jeans, pulling them down to mid-thigh. Her index finger traced a light path up his erect penis, still covered, and then slid inside the opening of his boxers to caress the smooth skin stretched over it.

“Come closer, love,” she directed, and obediently, he moved forward, allowing her to slide his boxers down to his knees, where his jeans already lay pooled. She moved herself down just a bit on the pillows, so that her face was directly at the level of his groin, and then she leaned forward just enough to begin tasting him in earnest.

Up and down the length of his cock her tongue went, flicking the tip, finally, and licking off the
pre-cum that glistened there; then she closed her mouth over it and took it in as far as she could, her hand at the base as she sucked, stroking, cupping and fondling his balls, dragging a deep groan from him as the sensations grew almost unbearably delicious.

“Granger, stop!” he panted finally, pulling away. “Roll onto your side again!”

Murmuring assent, she complied, and he slipped his hand back between her legs once again to gently stroke her clit, reawakening her desire, making sure she was ready. It didn’t take long. Carefully, gently, he spread her open, guiding his hardened cock to her entrance and sliding inside. Her warm, velvety wetness surrounded him as her inner muscles contracted around his member, and he began to thrust, slowly at first and then with increasing intensity. As he did so, he kept a finger on her clit, teasing it in tandem with his strokes, creating a very intensely erotic dual sensation for her, so that she was on the verge of climaxing again very quickly.

As her breath caught, becoming increasingly shallow, he stepped up the pace, moving inside her smoothly and rhythmically, his thrusts going ever deeper, so that he filled her to the hilt. And then, abruptly, he saw stars. She was right there with him, both of them erupting in a volatile explosion that left them trembling as he wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly to his chest, spoon-style.

“I love you so much, Hermione,” he whispered over and over into her hair as he stroked it, drawing the softly curling tendrils away from her damp skin.

“You’re my whole life, Draco Malfoy,” she replied softly. “Don’t let me go, ever.”

“Never,” he promised, pressing his lips to the soft skin of her shoulder and breathing in her scent, at once redolent of jasmine and sweat and the perfume of sex. He drew the quilt up to cover them both and they fell asleep, his arm protectively draped over her belly. As he drifted off, he felt their child turn, rippling under his hand as it swam in its birthing waters.

*

Sunday morning, 17 January 2008
Thirty-seven weeks

The new nursery was nearly done. Hermione’s nesting instincts had kicked in powerfully, and she’d pushed to get it all completed by at least two weeks before her due date of 6th February. It was almost that now. Paint, cream and mint-green patterned wallpaper, pine furniture, and soft, lamb’s wool carpeting— all in place. A mural with an under-the sea theme, created using Spelled paints, graced one entire wall and came to life if one looked at it long enough, tropical fish meandering through the pale blue water and sending small bubbles to the surface as sea flora swayed gently. The sleeper sofa that had been in Rory’s room had been fitted with a new cover and soft new cushions and moved in as well, and a comfy rocking chair stood alongside it, next to the large, bright window in the corner. Hermione had painted two shelves and then Draco had hung them, and now they were home to a row of gaily coloured, rather exotic plush animals. Like Rory’s, they too had been a gift from Narcissa and Lucius, and they cheerfully nodded hello whenever anyone came near. Occasionally the elephant made a rude noise with his little purple trunk, but that could be overlooked as he was mostly quite friendly. It was a tranquil room, a place in which to dream, and the perfect place to welcome a brand-new life.
The honey-pine dresser and changing table had arrived and were in place, fresh nappies and lotions and wipes ready and waiting. Hermione had shopped for whatever they could conceivably need for the baby and then some, laying in a good supply of everything. A small lamp with a base that was at once a tiny, enchanted fish tank as well as a music box, stood on the dresser. A simple *Lumos* would light up both the lamp and the base as well, setting its tiny fish into gentle motion, and start the music, a twinkly, lullaby version of “Octopus Garden” by the Beatles. With a little help from Narcissa, that had been a rather unexpected but inspired gift from Richard and Claire.

Today, with Hermione and Rory out of the house for the afternoon visiting the Grangers, Draco had decided to assemble the new baby’s cot by himself, no magic, just as he had done with Rory’s. This one was proving a challenge, however, and he could feel his temper starting to seriously fray. Sodding hardware! A string of colourful expletives streamed, unfettered, from his mouth as he found that yet again, just when he thought he’d nearly finished, the side rail in the front refused to fit properly with the rest of it– and when he did finally get it to fit, the footboard fell down. And fuck’s sake, it really would help if the bloody directions weren’t only cartoon-like pictures– curse the stupid arse who’d thought *that* one up!-- but a step-by-step set of instructions in clear English!

Gritting his teeth, he reminded himself that he’d done this successfully before not two years ago, and bugger it all, he could do it *again*.

An hour later, it was done. Standing to stretch his cramped muscles, Draco wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it out of his eyes. He surveyed the room with a sense of quiet, albeit tired, satisfaction, feeling as if he’d earned his place in that noble pantheon of Men Who Are Handy at DIY, a term he’d only learnt in the last couple of years since just before Rory was born, when assembling cots first became an issue.

One of the most important lessons gleaned from the past eight years had turned out to be a very simple truth: Life wasn’t just about plying a wand effectively (or flashy wandless magic, for that matter), and it wasn’t just about being intellectually clever, though being gifted at wizardry and having a keen intellect were certainly extremely important and he was glad he had no shortage of ability in either area. But in his secret heart of hearts, he’d always wanted to be clever with his hands as well, and envied those who could really make things, craft them. It wasn’t something he’d ever admitted to anyone, not even Hermione, but he knew that being able to put together the baby’s furniture certainly would raise him up a notch or two in her estimation. He wanted to be everything to her if he could be, a true Renaissance man.

He sat down in the rocker to rest for a moment, and found himself ruminating as he kicked back. This room was a tangible symbol of such a big change in all their lives. A completely unknown entity was about to make him- or herself a part of their little family unit. Everything was about to change, and nobody knew how or to what extent, except that it would be radical and irreversible. You couldn’t just decide it had all been a mistake and give the baby back, saying, “Thanks awfully, but no thanks. We’ll just keep things as they were if it’s all the same to you.” This child– girl, boy, they had no clue– would insinuate her/himself into their lives in countless ways, changing the way they related to Rory, the way Rory related to them, certainly the way he and Hermione related to each other. He’d always thought vaguely that someday they’d probably have a second child, but not quite so soon. This had been a shock– lovely, mostly, but a shock nevertheless. And now, three weeks from D-Day, it was becoming all too real. The very way they viewed themselves as a family would be forever altered once this new baby arrived. The dynamic would be shaken up and the pieces would fall down and form something else entirely.

What would that new puzzle picture look like? Draco sighed and leaned back, closing his eyes. ‘Calm down,’ he told himself. ‘You’re being daft. It’s going to be okay. It is.’

Sighing again, he heaved himself up from the chair and with one last glance at the new nursery, he walked out, closing the door behind him.
Wednesday night, 27 January
2:30 am
Thirty-eight and a half weeks

“BuggerbuggerBUGGER!”

Draco sat bolt upright in bed, his heart pounding. He took a single, shuddering breath and turned to his wife.

“What the fuck! You scared the living shit out of me, Granger!”

“I’m really sorry, Draco, but oohhhhh!” Hermione had a slightly unhinged look in her eye, her hair was dishevelled, and the bedclothes were all twisted in disarray. Her pillows had had the figurative stuffing knocked out of them and lay there, the mark of her fists still clearly visible. “I just cannot get comfortable! I’m so bloody HOT! And I think he or she– whatever, it!– is in there doing aerobics and shoving its feet into my ribcage! Every time I lie down, I get pummelled! Not to mention it’s leaning on my bladder! Do you know,” she declared fiercely, verging on tears, “can you imagine what it’s like to have to pee all the time? Honestly, can you?”

Draco leaned back against the headboard, pushing his pillows behind him for support, and looked thoughtfully at his distraught, incredibly pregnant wife. The poor girl looked as if she were ready to pop any minute. She was a little thing to begin with, and this huge weight gain all in one place had become horribly difficult for her to manage. She doesn’t mean it. She’s just unbelievably uncomfortable.

“No, I– wait… hang on a minute,” he said slowly, grinning. “As a matter of fact, I can. Remember in sixth year? The Vesica Maximus somebody cast on everybody in Slytherin? I still haven’t worked out how they did it, whoever it was. Nobody could stop peeing the entire day! Reckon I spent about eight hours in the Prefects’ bathroom. Didn’t dare leave! Soon as I finished, I had to go again! You know, that just might have been worse than being pregnant!”

Hermione’s eyes widened in recollection and then she laughed, a real, honest belly laugh, and all the anxiety faded from her face. She laughed so hard that tears sprouted from her eyes, and she buried her face in Draco’s chest, clutching onto him as her shoulders heaved.

“Um… already had my shower, Granger,” Draco reminded her, grinning, and rested his chin on the top of her head.

She pulled away, trying to catch her breath, tears still pooling at the corners of her eyes. “Thanks, Malfoy,” she sighed, and gave a small hiccup.

“Always happy to help. And I’m glad to know that the very thought of my former predicament can be such a source of unbridled amusement for you. Very gratifying,” he teased, flashing her a wry smile.

“Oh, stop!” Hermione giggled, and smacked him with her pillow. “Anyway, really– thank you. For making me laugh and forget how miserable I’d been feeling.”

“Silly girl,” Draco murmured fondly, pulling her into a hug and pressing a kiss to her hair. “Look, tell you what. You can’t sleep, and now you’ve made sure I can’t either. I’ll make us some hot
chocolate and we can have a game of Cluedo. Been wanting to play that damned game again ever since Brittany. What do you say?"

Hermione nodded happily, wiping her eyes and scooting back against the pillows to wait as he hopped off the bed and disappeared into the kitchen.

Monday afternoon, 1 February
Thirty-nine weeks, 2 days

Rory toddled into the kitchen, her mother close on her heels. She had a plush, blue dragon firmly under her arm and there was a red crayon clutched in her right fist. Hermione carried a large piece of construction paper marked with jagged scribbles going in all directions.

“Look what Rory made,” she announced proudly to Draco, who was sitting at the table in front of his laptop. Three years at Oxford, the following three living in Muggle London, and a life shared with Hermione had meant exposure to many facets of the Muggle world. One result of this familiarity was that he’d been instrumental in introducing certain Muggle technologies to Malfoy Enterprises; this included computers, which made his job in public relations a million times easier. He was working at home now that Hermione’s due date was so close.

“Rory!” He gave her a huge, delighted grin as he surveyed her artwork. “Did you make this?”

“Mine!” she asserted proudly. “Mine!”

“Oh, but this is very, very good, sweetheart! Daddy is very proud of you!” He reached out for the picture. “May Daddy have it, please?”

“NO!” Rory yelled, grabbing a corner possessively. “Mine!”

“Okay, okay!” he laughed, holding his hands up in surrender. “Who’ve you got there, anyway? Is that Dragon?”

In reply, Rory hugged her dragon to her chest fiercely.

“She really loves that thing, doesn’t she.” Hermione shook her head. “I dread to think what would happen if it ever got lost!”

“I know!” He nodded ruefully. “Maybe we should lay in a supply of them just in case!”

“That’s actually not a bad idea. But she’s so smart, I bet she’d know the difference in a minute.” She paused. “Look… I was thinking… can you take a little time off this afternoon? There’s something I’d like the three of us to do together.”

An hour later, they were stepping out of the fireplace in the Great Hall at Malfoy Manor. Draco carried their coats and gloves and Hermione held the baby by the hand. Narcissa happened to be passing, and she stopped in amazement.

“Darlings!” she cried, walking quickly in from the entry hall. “Is everything all right? You didn’t tell us you were coming! Your father…”
“He knows I’m here. Spoke to him this morning, actually. You probably know I’ve taken off work until after the baby is born.”

“Yes, of course, but what are you doing here now? Not that I’m not simply thrilled to see all of you.” She moved swiftly to embrace each of them, saving a special hug for Rory, who reached for her grandma with a big smile.

“We’ve come to visit the sheep in the meadow,” Hermione said, winking. “Has the lambing started yet?”

“Oh yes,” Narcissa nodded. “There are already quite a few. Rory will love that!”

Hermione turned to take Rory somewhere private to change her nappie. Perplexed, Narcissa looked past her to Draco.

Draco shook his head, waiting until Hermione was out of the room. “She wants to show Rory the ewes nursing their lambs to help her understand about new babies being born and mothers taking care of them and…”

“And it’s Imbolc. Of course. “ Narcissa nodded in quiet satisfaction. “The time when ewes are ‘in milk.’ The first sign of spring coming. How appropriate, and what a lovely thing to do.” She smiled and gave her son’s hand a squeeze. When he lingered there, she looked at him quizzically. “Was there something else you wanted to talk to me about, darling?”

“Well, yes, actually, now you mention it. I was wondering… when Hermione goes into labour, may we call you to come and stay with Rory? Would you mind?”

Narcissa looked amazed that he would even ask such a question. “Of course not, don’t be ridiculous. Of course you may call me. Or… did you mean me and your father?” she asked pointedly, one eyebrow raised.

Draco was momentarily taken aback by her question; it wasn’t something he’d even thought about. Now that she raised the question, though… what had he meant?

A sort of resigned diplomacy won out. “Uh… you and Father, I reckon… you could have the guest room downstairs.” Suddenly the rather bizarre scenario of his parents actually staying under his roof struck Draco.

“You know, Draco,” Narcissa said, breaking into his thoughts, “perhaps the best thing would be if your father and I came before Hermione went into labour. That way, we’d be right there and you wouldn’t have to worry about last-minute arrangements.”

“There are no house-elves, you know,” he reminded her dubiously, beginning to regret the whole thing. What had begun as a relatively simple idea– his mother coming to baby sit– had turned into the usual Malfoy Production. Better and much less complicated to have simply asked the Grangers. But it was too late for that now.

“Oh, that’s not a problem,” his mother said airily. “We could bring Missy with us– if it’s all right with you, of course,” she added hastily.

“Hmm,” he said. “Maybe. I’ll ask Hermione how she feels about it.”

“All right, darling, just a suggestion,” Narcissa smiled and winked as she turned to leave the room. “Enjoy the lambs!”

Fifteen minutes later, they stood at the fence which divided off one of the big sheep meadows of Malfoy Manor. In fact, Draco noted, it was the very same expanse of land that he, Lucius and Richard had drunkenly navigated the night before New Year’s Eve, just over a year before. Like that night, there was some snow on the ground now, from a light snowfall they’d had a couple of days earlier. He swallowed a laugh, remembering, and turned to Hermione, hefting Rory a bit
higher in his arms. The baby was bundled in her bright red snowsuit, tiny mittens and a knitted hat keeping her fingers and head warm, with the tiniest snow boots– her very first ones– on her feet. Hermione had a thing for baby shoes, Draco had discovered. The very sight of them turned her into a gushing female, he’d observed with surprised horror the first time they’d bought shoes for Rory. ‘Merlin,’ he’d thought at the time, ‘They’re just shoes, for fuck’s sake.’

Her voice brought him back from this latest foray into his own thoughts.

“Look, Rory!” Hermione was saying excitedly, pointing. “There! See? See the baby? That’s a lamb, Rory! Lamb.”

Rory was staring avidly at the clusters of sheep milling about the meadow, many of the ewes clearly pregnant and some already nursing newborns. Along with their mothers, the new lambs had been brought back out from the barn into the meadow, after a day or two of shelter and being checked over by a veterinary healer to make sure they were healthy.

“La-a-m,” she attempted, and her parents cheered.

“What does the lamb say, Rory?” Draco offered. “She says ‘Baaa’!”

Rory regarded him for a moment as if considering the merits of his statement, and then she replied with evident glee, “Baaa!”

“Sec, Rory!” Hermione enthused. “The mama is feeding her baby milk, just like I give you!” She pointed. And indeed, not too far away, there was a ewe standing there with a spindly-legged little lamb who was trying very hard to grab hold of her mother’s teat. Time and again she butted her nose into her mother’s abdomen, trying to latch on and finally succeeding.

“Mama!” Rory pointed and then turned, burying her face in Hermione’s coat. “Mama!”

Dear baby. Hermione felt the tears coming. “Yes, that’s right.” She laughed a little bit, rubbing her cold nose against Rory’s, gave her a quick kiss and turned to Draco. “Poor things,” she murmured, glancing back at the heavily pregnant ones. “I know how they feel! Let’s go home now, love. It’s starting to get really cold.”

That night the snow began.
Thursday, 4 February
5 pm

It snowed nonstop for the next three days and nights. By Thursday morning, the entire world was a blind of white. There hadn’t been a snowstorm of this magnitude in Britain in years and everything came to an abrupt standstill. Three feet of snow were on the ground and more was on the way.

Missy had come back from Malfoy Manor with them as a sort of compromise solution to the question of when or even if Lucius and Narcissa should come and stay. This way, there would be somebody who could mind Rory at a moment’s notice, and then the senior Malfoys could come to visit and help when needed. It really was a much better idea all around, and Hermione was just grateful that Draco had thought of it. She wouldn’t have wanted to risk insulting her in-laws by telling them no.

Now, Rory was being fed her dinner. Missy, ever capable, had taken charge. She sat the baby down in her high chair with no nonsense and set her meal before her, entertaining her with silly faces and by wiggling her large, pointed ears. Draco laughed, remembering with great affection how she had taken care of him when he was small, making him laugh in that same silly way.

Once Missy had things well in hand, he’d sent Hermione out of the kitchen altogether, insisting that she take this opportunity to put her swollen feet up and rest a bit for a change, and so she had.

Sitting in the window seat in the bedroom, she watched large snowflakes swirl down fast and thick. All the tree branches were heavily layered and the shrubbery was virtually buried by this time; only a few hardy sparrows were out in it, clustered wherever they could find a modicum of shelter. She remembered a very mournful song about a sparrow she’d heard once. It was by an American folk group her parents liked, Simon and Garfunkel, and remembering the lyrics, she felt unutterably sad for them suddenly, tears pricking her lashes. She sighed and rested her chin in her palm on the sill.

Suddenly, too, she felt very… lonely. Lonely and isolated and utterly useless. She’d been shooed out of her own kitchen when she should have been there, feeding her daughter. Voices floated back to her, mocking her with their merriment. Rory let out a peal of laughter, probably at something Draco had done. Her baby, her husband… her life was in that kitchen, and she wasn’t.

A tear rolled down her cheek and she didn’t bother to wipe it away.

*
Bath time. Hermione sat on the closed toilet lid and watched as Draco bathed the baby. He had such a wonderful way with her. Hermione knew how lucky she really was. So many women had husbands who didn’t even bother to try with their kids, figuring it wasn’t their domain. Or else, even if they did attempt involvement, often they didn’t have a clue. For all his initial reluctance and resistance to the idea of parenthood in the abstract, Draco had proven to be a fantastic father. Rory had awakened a light in him that now shone in his eyes whenever he was around her or even spoke of her. And Hermione knew, too, that he was determined never to leave her emotionally, as his own father had done. The combination was pretty potent. She knew and he knew that he’d learned to love in an entirely new way.

“Okay, Rory B, up you get,” he said as he lifted Rory out of the tub. “Hermione love, hand me that flannel, would you please?”

She did and he deftly wrapped the baby up, covering her dripping hair with the hooded end, which he massaged to stop it dripping. “Off we go, now, time to get into your jimjams! Mummy, you come too,” he said, winking at Hermione.

Story time before bed was always one of Hermione’s favourite times of the day with Rory. Now the three of them lay on the big bed, the baby between them.

“… and the bee says buzz-z,” Draco read. “See the little bee, Rory? ‘The dog says woof.’” He looked down at her.

“Oof!” she mimicked, fondly patting the picture of the cocker spaniel.


“Moo-o-o!” Rory yelled, clapping her hands, and they all laughed.

“Look, Rory B, sheep! And there are the babies. We saw them today, remember? ‘What do the sheep say? Baa-a-a,’” Draco read.

“Baa-a-a,” Rory parroted back, to her parents’ delight.

She was growing sleepy now; her eyelids had begun to flutter and her head flopped over onto her mother’s shoulder. Hermione unbuttoned her shirt and opened her bra, lying down on her side and bringing Rory’s mouth to her left breast. The baby latched on without even opening her eyes; her questing mouth sought the comfort of her mother’s scent and skin and touch and she suckled contentedly for several minutes, until her breathing became deeper and her mouth grew slack on the nipple. Draco lay stretched out behind Rory, watching with a faint smile on his face, his eyes soft with love for them both.

When it was clear that Rory had finished, he carefully lifted her small, recumbent form, settling her in the cot in her own room. Meanwhile, feeling unaccountably restless, Hermione wandered around the house, checking that everything was in place in the new baby’s room, picking up magazines in the sitting room, putting away clean dishes and then making some tea in the kitchen, sitting finally to watch a bit of telly only to find she hadn’t the patience and then wandering some more.

It was 9:30 and the snow was still falling heavily, the gusting wind now creating high drifts.

*
Hermione had dozed off in the rocker in the new nursery, listening to “Octopus Garden.” Suddenly she awoke, not sure what had startled her out of her slumber. Levering herself out of the chair, she felt an unaccountable stickiness between her legs. A quick, furtive hand down her knickers came back bloody, and she pushed the garment to the floor, stepping out of it to find a glob of stringy, pink-tinged mucous— the “bloody show,” or mucous plug, that had blocked her uterus, acting as a seal against bacteria all these months, and now had come loose. She remembered the mention of it in her antenatal class as a very early signal of incipient labour. It looked like the show might just be on the road.

Hermione stood there dumbfounded for all of ten seconds. Then, with some effort, she retrieved her knickers, rinsed them and hung them to dry in the en-suite, and then calmly walked into the kitchen, where Draco was having a glass of milk.

“I think I might be in labour.”

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but was silenced by a sudden flood of clear fluid cascading down her legs onto the kitchen floor.

“Shit.” Hand shaking, he set down the glass. No doubt now.

“Uh… Hermione… are you having contr–” he began to say, when quite abruptly, a spasm of pain crossed her face.

“Must…” she muttered to herself like a mantra. She glanced at the wall clock in the kitchen. 11:24 pm. Just keep busy between contractions, that was best. She looked for a chore to occupy her and her eye fell on her box of recipe cards. It desperately needed reorganising. She reached for it and sat down at the kitchen table, preparing to look them over and discard those she no longer needed. She had only just spread the A’s out in a fan when the next contraction hit like a wave. 11:28. Four minutes.

Some of the B’s had been taken out of the box when a stronger, longer clenching of her uterus stopped her cold and she sucked her breath in, clutching her abdomen. Draco had just Vanished the mess on the floor; Hermione’s gasp made him turn sharply.

“How long?” he asked, concerned, sitting down next to her and resting his hand on her arm. She didn’t reply, instead gritting her teeth, small beads of clammy perspiration dotting her forehead. There was worry in his eyes as he patted her arm, but he forced himself to back off, keeping a watchful eye from close by.

11:32. Do the B’s. Focus. This could take a while. She reached for the file box, her hand trembling slightly. Bacon Pudding. Broccoli and Apple. Brown Windsor. Bonfire Warmer. Belvoir Crumpets. It was a mess. She couldn’t concentrate. The very thought of food nauseated her anyway. And cold– why was it so awfully cold in this room? And then another contraction hit, more powerful and protracted than the last. 11:34. Too fast. They were coming too fast. And that last one had been at least ninety seconds long.

“DRACO.” The urgency in her voice made him snap to attention. “I need towels. Lots of them. GO!” She leaned back against the counter, an uncontrollable trembling in her legs. The birth was going to be here. In the kitchen. And soon.

“What… what’s going on? Aren’t we going to hospital?” he asked stupidly.

“No time,” she grunted and then groaned. “The baby’s coming, Malfoy! Help me!”
He ran.

11:36. Another one, massive this time, and long, peaking twice. Gods, where was he with those bloody towels?!

Draco came running at top speed, skidding to a halt before her with a pile of clean towels in his arms. Missy had followed him, concerned about the commotion in the kitchen. One look and she understood. With a nod to both of them, she turned and went back to the nursery to stay with Rory. That was what she’d come for and how she could be the most help.

“Now what?”

“Towels— on the— floor! Have to— sit!”

“Right!” Draco quickly spread a several towels on the floor and then braced Hermione with an arm around her waist as he helped her to sit down, her back against the cupboard.

“More towels, here!” She pointed between her legs, now bent at the knee and spread far apart. He placed two folded ones there as a cushion, for when the baby— Merlin, this is really happening! He would see his child in a matter of minutes!— came out. Holy shit.

She must be uncomfortable, leaning back against that cupboard door. He had a sudden moment of clarity, Transfiguring a tea towel into a pillow for her to lean against. As he positioned it behind her, she looked up at him with a brief, blinding smile before another wave of pain overtook her.

After that, things passed into the realm of the surreal for Draco. He felt almost as if he were having an out-of-body experience, as he watched a dark mass begin to emerge from Hermione’s vagina, now stretched impossibly wide.

“The baby— it’s… it’s (what was that term? Oh yes!) crowning!” he whispered, feeling a frisson of panic rising in his throat. “What do I do?”

“Nothing!... Just… wait till… the head… is out,” Hermione gritted, panting. “Then… make sure… the cord isn’t… ahh-h… wrapped round… its neck!” She panted shallowly as more of the head became visible. The baby’s hair was plastered to its skull in damp tendrils. “Want to… push!”

Draco suddenly remembered something from their antenatal class. “Granger, no! Not yet! Wait till the head is all the way out! Just hold on a little bit longer. You can do it, love! Just pant, like you’ve been doing!”

The tremors in her legs had intensified; her thighs shook uncontrollably now. Then, without warning, the baby’s entire head appeared and Draco leaned forward, excited, fascinated and awed in equal measure to see his new child’s face.

“Check… the cord!” Hermione gasped.

He reached down and gently felt around the tiny neck. No, no cord there, thank Merlin.

“It’s okay, love. The cord is fine,” he told her, and she smiled grimly. There was still work to be done.

Suddenly he really saw her— her face flushed, sweaty, and etched with pain— and he knew he could do more. Tenderly, he blotted her forehead with a cool, damp flannel.

“How about— now?” he asked, and she nodded slightly, her brow furrowed in intense concentration.

Quickly he Conjured a glass of chilled water and a straw, and brought it to her mouth for a small sip. Gratefully she took it, but then fisted the towels on the floor in sudden agitation.

“NOW!” she hissed. At Draco’s nod, she took a deep breath, and began to bear down. Hard.
There was a wrenching, bloodcurdling final scream from Hermione. The baby slid out in a sudden gush of fluids, straight onto the folded towels Draco had laid between Hermione’s legs.

Somehow he had the presence of mind to glance at his watch.

12:03 am.

And then both of them looked down.

It was a boy.

A perfectly formed little boy— all ten fingers and toes (his father counted!) and a full head of hair!

Hermione leaned back against the pillow and closed her eyes. “Rub him gently, love, to dry him off,” she directed in an exhausted whisper. “Then bring him to me and lay him on my chest, inside my shirt.” Even as she spoke, however, Draco had wrapped the baby in a soft towel and was tenderly patting him all over, making sure to keep him well covered so he wouldn’t become chilled.

“Well, little boy,” he said softly, tears pricking his lashes. “I’m your daddy. Welcome to the world!”

Kneeling between her legs, Draco finished drying his son and then laid him naked between Hermione’s bare breasts, buttoning her shirt over him like a cocoon, the umbilicus still joining them. Automatically, she began a circular massage on his small back, murmuring endearments of her own.

“Blanket, please,” she said weakly, a few moments later. “And a bowl. For the placenta. I’ll need to show the Healer when she comes later.”

“Accio blanket!” he said without missing a beat, and the spare one they kept at the end of their bed flew, still folded, into his hand. He covered mother and baby with it, tucking them up securely. Then, looking around, his mind blank for a moment, he spotted a stainless steel bowl, the same one Rory loved to fill with her toys, and grabbed it, placing it on the floor beside Hermione.

“Missy!” Draco called. She reappeared instantly, the look of apprehension on her tiny face swiftly changing to joy when she saw that all was well and the baby had been safely delivered. “Send a message by Floo to St Mungo’s, asking that Healer Grey come to check on Mistress Hermione. Tell them she’s just given birth.”

Missy nodded enthusiastically and disappeared. The rest of the Floo announcements were Draco’s to make and they would have to wait a little bit longer.

In the relatively brief time they had alone before Healer Grey arrived and the world began to intrude, Draco crawled beneath the blanket, wrapping Hermione in his arms and peering down inside her shirt to gaze in wonderment at their brand-new son. Now that he was completely dry and warm, his skin had pinked up and one could see that his hair was a very dark blond, the tawny colour of honey. His eyes were slate grey, as all newborns’ were, but before very long, they would turn a bright, cornflower blue just like his grandmother Narcissa’s.

The familial resemblance to Rory was certainly there, and yet, this little boy had his own look too. Funny, how genes can align themselves. The same two parents had produced one child with her father’s colouring and her mother’s features and petite build, and another with hair a hybrid of both parents’ colours, eyes like his gran, and facial features and a build that would be all Draco, aristocratic, tall and slim. Both would be instantly recognisable as their parents’ children and as Malfoys, yet they were distinctly different.

Just now, though, he was only ten minutes old, and far too tiny and new for his parents to know any of that.
“Well, what shall we call our son?” Hermione asked, smiling sleepily. “Our son, who was in such a hurry to be born!” She laughed softly and patted his little back, feeling the warmth of his tiny body against her heart.

“We were down to two first names, remember? The middle name is already decided.” Draco leaned in and unbuttoned the top of Hermione’s shirt so he could kiss his son’s head.

“But… I love them both! Wait, I know. Let’s use all three! What do you think?” Hermione’s smile was triumphant.

‘I like that.” Draco grinned and snuggled back down under the blanket as Hermione brought their newborn to suck for the first time. “Hey…” He tipped her chin up, turning her face towards his. “How did you know exactly what to do before?” She opened her mouth to reply but he stopped her with a chuckle. “Don’t tell me. You read up on it.”

Hermione nodded with a grin.

Ten minutes later, Healer Grey stepped out of the fireplace, dusted herself off, and began her examination of the baby and then his mother. Hermione had delivered the placenta only moments before, holding the tiny infant to her breast as she rose onto her knees over the bowl. It slid out cleanly and intact and looked fine, according to the Healer.

As did young Master Malfoy. He weighed in at seven pounds, three ounces, and measured twenty inches. She footprinted him for the birth records that would be filed at the Ministry, and then cut the umbilical cord, clamping off the stump and casting a quick Sanguis Desino to stop the bleeding. Then she took out her quill and an official-looking document.

“Time of birth?”


“Name?” she asked briskly, her quill scratching away.

Hermione and Draco smiled at each other and then spoke in unison.

“Kieran Daniel Sirius Malfoy.”

Healer Grey nodded, smiling, and entered the name. Then she wrapped up the placenta to take it back to St Mungo’s for a more thorough examination, packed up her kit, and bade them goodnight.

As they would later explain to their family and friends, “Kieran”— a wonderful old Celtic name—meant “black.” It was a way to honour the Black side of the family, something Hermione was as eager to do as Draco. Narcissa had always been very good to her. They’d chosen “Daniel” because they both loved it, but also in memory of Hermione’s grandfather Dan, with whom she’d been very close growing up. Finally, “Sirius.” It happened to be the brightest star in the February night sky, as this child would surely be to his parents, but it was also a way for Draco to honour a cousin he’d come to respect and admire only posthumously, something he would always regret. For Hermione, it was a chance to remember and honour a brave friend and ally, Harry’s beloved godfather, whose tragic loss eleven years earlier was still a source of pain.
The house was quiet again. The birth announcements could wait. For now, it was enough for Draco and Hermione to lie in bed, warmly cradled in each other’s arms and drifting peacefully, little Kieran curled up snugly between them. Outside, the snowfall gradually stopped and the clouds parted, scudding swiftly before the wind across the blackened night sky. One star, the brightest in the firmament, glittered there like a jewel in the last hours before the dawn arrived to flood the darkness with hues of rose and gold.

Fin

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to my wonderful beta, Kazfeist!

If you would like to hear the lullaby that Draco played for Rory, you can find it here:

http://www.rhapsody.com/-search?query=someday%20baby%20%20katherine%20dines&searchtype=RhapKeyword

Click on the first of the three choices, from the album FUNSies 1.

Enjoy!

*SOMEDAY BABY

By Katherine Dines.
© 1987 Someday Baby, BMI
Banner by munchos, aka Leah. Thanks so much, Leah! It's perfect! :-)

“Football” in the UK (and in most of the rest of the world, too) means soccer, and that’s what Draco and friends were watching on TV.

General inspiration in the Winter Solstice chapter provided by the great Jethro Tull’s “Jack-in-the-Green” and “Ring Out, Solstice Bells,” off their fantastic Songs from the Wood album. A link for listening can be found here:

http://www.last.fm/music/Jethro+Tull/Songs+From+The+Wood

Huge thanks to two fabulous artists, Alexia and Moonjameskitten, both of whom answered my call for a pair of commissioned manips in the chapter entitled "Something to Remember." Both worked very hard and came up with absolutely beautiful pictures, exactly what I’d had in mind. I just couldn’t choose, so I’ve included both pairs for everyone to enjoy.

The ritual in the Beltane chapter is actually a composite of parts of three actual rituals with some modifications and additions of my own. My sources are the following:

Beltane Ritual and Lore by Fire Rose, found at:
A Beltane Ritual by Jillbe Badb, found at:
http://druidsegg.reformed-druids.org/

Tuatha de Brighid – Beltane Festival of Fertility, found at:
http://www.tuathadebrighid.org/Ritual/Good%20Folk%20Ritual%20Cycle/beltaine.htm
Copyright 1998, by Good Folk
Heartfelt thanks to all three!

Terms used:

Triskele, or triple spiral:
According to Wikipedia, “The triple spiral or triskele is a Celtic and pre-Celtic symbol found on a number of Irish Megalithic and Neolithic sites, most notably inside the Newgrange passage tomb, on the entrance stone, and on some of the curbstones surrounding the mound.”
Disclaimer: Only the original plot and characters are mine. I make no money from this story.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!