

Baby Days

by *eilonwy*

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Sequel to A Writer of Fictions. Baby Days has been nominated for the Dangerous Liaisons Awards, Round 6, in the Cotton Candy (best fluff) and Pitter Patter (best baby fic) categories.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Prologue

It was true. Ten seconds after staring at the vial of potion which had indisputably turned a shocking, bubble-gum pink, the knowledge had finally sunk in. *Reallyreallyreallyreally!* she thought, still slightly incredulous.

And then Hermione Granger Malfoy turned to her husband of three years, seven months, twenty days and sixteen hours and said, a tremulous smile quirking her mouth at the corners, "We're pregnant."

Draco Malfoy swallowed hard and blanched. Sure, they'd been trying...and he couldn't deny that all that effort had been the most fun he could remember in an age. Naturally he knew, somewhere in the fuzziest reaches of his consciousness, that this outcome was a distinct possibility. But it was a possibility he'd somehow very conveniently neglected to imagine could really come about. And yet it had.

"Um... you're sure, then... ?" He tried hard to keep the tiny quaver out of his voice.

"Oh yes," Hermione nodded. "This test never lies. But..." She looked at him suddenly, eyes narrowing. "Draco... you're not upset about this, are you? I mean...you had to know this could happen, we've been trying for the past four months, and..."

"No, NO, darling!" *Methinks I do protest way too much. She's going to see right through that.*

And there it was. The stance he knew so well, the one she invariably fell into when she was annoyed or worse. Arms crossed over her chest, mouth set, lower lip stuck out petulantly, brows drawn down into a line over warm brown eyes that had turned dark and stormy, she planted herself right in front of him and glared.

"I thought you *wanted* a baby! We agreed it was time, finally!" Her voice was ever so gradually creeping up an octave, and it wavered with the tears that threatened to overtake her.

"Hermione, stop! *Please!* It's okay, it's fine. Really, I promise! I'm... I'm thrilled, honestly! Please believe me. *Please.*" He hesitated just long enough to gauge whether the attempt to gather her into a reassuring hug would be just the right thing or more likely to earn him a slap in the face. Getting slugged by his darling wife in their Hogwarts days was quite sufficient, thank you he had no desire to repeat the experience ever again. He saw his opening in a barely perceptible softening of her eyes and took a chance, crossing over to her in one long stride and wrapping his arms around her. He could feel her shoulders trembling as he held her tightly to his chest and stroked her hair, tipping her chin up and placing a light kiss on her mouth. Her dark eyes still held a remnant of reproach, but it was fading. 'Phew, caught that one just in time,' he thought and then realised what had really happened, what was about to happen, what the outcome of the bombshell still hanging precariously in the air between them was invariably going to be.

Draco Malfoy was going to be a father.

The First Trimester

So far, it was still their secret. They'd decided to keep it that way until the first three months had safely passed so as not to jinx anything. Not that Draco was exactly champing at the bit to blab this particular bit of news to anyone. The longer he could keep himself firmly situated in blissful denial, the happier he was. Hermione wasn't showing yet. It was only six weeks. He could pretend that the entire conversation of a few days ago had just been one of his more vivid nightmares. (Or a hallucination, that was it. The product of a glass of rancid pumpkin juice.) Except for one thing he really ought to have counted on, but had somehow managed to forget.

His wife's penchant for research. In this case, research into every possible detail of pregnancy, from the earliest nano-second of conception right through to when the little brat would emerge, red-faced, pruned and howling, ready to take over their lives for the next twenty or thirty years.

On Monday of week six, Hermione took herself off to Diagon Alley and spent her entire lunch hour in the bookshop there, blissfully buried in the Magicka! Pregnancy and Childcare section. When she arrived home after work, she happily dumped an ominously tall stack of books on the dining room table.

"There!" she announced, satisfaction evident in her cheeky grin. "That should do it!"

"Do what?" Draco had been peacefully stretched out on the sofa, dozing over the *Daily Prophet*, and was just now regaining a semblance of alertness. His gaze traveled to the source of the noise that had abruptly startled him out of his nap, and then slid up to Hermione's sunny smile. He groaned inwardly. It was all over now. For the next seven and a half months, he would be regaled with a never-ending stream of facts and statistics and forced to look at a series of truly disgusting photos of embryos *in utero*. He shuddered, swung his long legs off the sofa, and stood. 'I'm sunk', he thought, sighing. Luckily, Hermione hadn't noticed the ripples of apprehension coming from her husband, caught up already as she was in one of the books. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled when she glanced up at Draco, her smile deepening. And he knew there was no way in Hades he would do anything to take that joyful smile away.

"What've you got there anyway?" he said lightly, a forced bravado making his voice just a tad too cheery.

"Oh, Draco!" Hermione breathed. "Look at these books, they're wonderful! They tell you *everything!* And ooh, the photos...they're *amazing!* Come see!"

Dutifully, Draco bent over the open book, his blond head gleaming in the lamplight. Before him was a colour photo of an embryo at just six weeks. He gulped. It was semi-transparent, shaped like a tadpole, had hands and feet which looked more like tiny ping pong paddles with little ridges for fingers and toes, and large, round, coal-black eyes in a noseless, mouthless face. It floated gently in its private amniotic pool.

And it was waving at him.

His first thought, a wordless expression of disbelief that anything looking like *that* could possibly turn out to be a human being, was followed by a sudden and overwhelming wave of... awe? excitement? pride, even?... that this tiny creature must look very like what was growing inside Hermione right at that moment. And it was *his*. His very own child. Suddenly and quite without warning, his eyes misted, an errant tear escaping his furious attempts to bat it discreetly away. But Hermione spotted it and instantly looped her arm around Draco's waist, hugging him tight.

"I know, love," she whispered and kissed him. "I know."

Damned if he did, though. This whole thing was just too strange. He suddenly felt as if he'd had some sort of bizarre out-of-body experience and was standing there, watching himself become completely and unaccountably unglued.

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The rest of the first trimester passed in relative calm, a few minor bouts of morning sickness aside. Hermione took to leaving a plate of salted biscuits by the bedside table to have at the ready if she woke up feeling her gorge threatening a return appearance. The days were shaped by their nine-to-five routines...work, errands, the usual...but the evenings were now consumed by Hermione's sessions with The Books. It was to be that way for the entire nine months. She tried to draw Draco in and from time to time, his curiosity getting the better of him, he would carelessly wander closer to the table strewn with open books. He'd look, he really would, but invariably, twin sensations of excitement and something approaching dread would sweep over him, making his flesh crawl. At this rate, he didn't know how in hell he was going to survive the next six months. He found himself suddenly grateful for the hours spent at work, only wishing he could flee to the sanctuary of his office in the public relations department of Malfoy Enterprises even on a Saturday sometimes, rather than face yet another discussion of the merits of breastfeeding over the bottle, or how to avoid needing an episiotomy during delivery.

New Year's Eve approached, marking the end of the first three months of Hermione's pregnancy. The time was rapidly approaching when they'd agreed to let the rest of the world in on their little secret. The means to do it would be simple, as there were to be huge parties at both the Burrow and Malfoy Manor. They'd already planned to make an appearance at both. Now there was an even more pressing reason to do so.

"Sweetheart, hand me a towel, would you please?" Hermione called from the shower. Draco had just come into the bedroom and pivoted on his heel towards the steamy en-suite. He reached for a fluffy, white towel but then stopped and smiled. There would be time enough for drying off later. He had a far better idea.

Hermione's back was to him as she rinsed the last of the conditioner out of her tangled chestnut curls. Shrugging out of his clothes, he opened the opaque glass shower door and silently slipped in behind her. She sensed him there instantly and relaxed against him, a small grin on her face.

"Well, it's about time," she murmured as his hands slid around her belly and he dropped a kiss on her slippery shoulder just at the base of her neck, that most responsive of spots. Dropping her head back onto his chest, she closed her eyes, letting out a contented sigh as his hands traveled upwards over her still-soapy skin until they covered her breasts, his fingertips gently caressing her rosy nipples until they were taut and tingling. She'd discovered, to her delight and his, that pregnancy had made them even more sensitive than they were ordinarily. He discovered, to *his* delight, that her breasts were growing rapidly and were already more than he could hold within his hands. Not that he minded, of course.

"Mmmm..." she breathed. While one of his hands continued toying with her right nipple, flicking it teasingly, the other had begun a reverse journey, his long, elegant fingers tracing lazy circles on her belly, dipping into her navel, now playfully losing themselves in the softly curling triangle of hair between her thighs. A throbbing had already begun deep inside her and she stilled, nearly breathless. One finger began idly stroking her outer folds. Hermione squirmed a bit, pressing her legs together and inadvertently mashing his fingers between them.

"Impatient, aren't we?" Draco laughed softly, bending to give the soft skin at the base of her neck a deep, pulling kiss which would surely leave a mark. He was glad of that...especially, somehow, because of tonight's momentous announcement. He wanted everyone to know that she was his and his alone in every possible way. He nuzzled her briefly, then dropped a series of molten butterfly kisses back up her neck and along her jawline, turning her chin with his fingertip until his mouth could reach hers. They kissed then, light, glancing kisses gradually deepening into languid, soulful ones. Time seemed suspended as they tasted each other.

Mouths still joined, he gently but firmly pushed her thighs apart and brought his hand back to her mound, deftly slipping one finger, then a second, just inside the opening. Gods, she was delectable...already so warm and slickly wet. A sharp intake of her breath told him that what he was doing was having the desired effect. He smiled to himself and pushed in a little deeper, curling the tips of his fingers so that they touched that spongy spot just under her pubic bone. His erection was becoming almost painful, and he ground its length against her, seeking relief.

"Oh-h-h!!!"

His smile turned positively feral now. After one final, exquisitely tortuous crook of his fingers, he withdrew, deliberately brushing her already-sensitive clit ever so lightly as his fingers slid out, and moved around to face her, lowering his head so that he was level with her breasts. The sensation of his tongue as it delicately curled around each nipple was almost too much to bear, and she moaned and abruptly clutched his head to her chest, burying kisses in his silky hair. Slipping down very slowly to his knees, then, he drew his mouth and fingers in tender lines down her body, finally sliding his palms around to the backs of her thighs.

For just a moment, he rested his cheek against her upper thigh, breathing in her fresh, soapy scent, water from the shower misting his face and dripping into his eyes and nose, slicking down his moon-bright hair. Hermione looked down at him, her legs trembling, and laid her hands gently on his shoulders. They looked at each other then, and worlds of words, unspoken but so deeply imprinted on both hearts, passed between them.

Shivering, Draco brought himself back to the present and turned his attention to the task at hand. He reached up and oh so softly traced a stroke along the sensitive flesh of her sex. He never tired of touching or kissing her. Their years together hadn't changed any part of his intense desire for her; if anything, it had deepened, and now, with her pregnancy firmly established, she had never looked more beautiful to him. Gently parting her folds, he brought his nose and mouth so close that she could feel his warm breath raising the baby-fine hairs in a delicious shiver.

Hermione tensed in anticipation. He didn't keep her waiting long. The warm, wet tip of his tongue flicked at her briefly, withdrew for one heart-stopping moment and then returned, circling and flicking over her aching nub again and again, interspersing these tantalising touches with gradually longer, broader licks along her slit and finally, *finally* penetrating her with a single deep, forceful stroke.

"Draco... Draco, *please!*" Hermione whispered raggedly, between shuddering breaths. Her legs were trembling so hard, she feared they would give out. The throbbing that had begun deep inside her center was on the verge of blowing her wide open in an agony of delight. She couldn't breathe. It felt like dying in the most exquisite way.

He stood then. "What's your pleasure, my love?" His voice was husky, close to a whisper.

"Oh..." Her voice shaking, she swallowed hard. "J-just... I just need you inside me. Now! *Please!*"

The raw desire in her voice triggered a new rush of heat to his loins. Crooking his arm behind her neck, he brought her face to his in one swift movement, taking her mouth in a breathless kiss. She grasped his cock and guided him to her opening, pulsing with need for him. Hoisting her up and bracing her so that she could wrap her legs securely around his waist, he drove into her, his hips grinding out a steady rhythm, withdrawing nearly all the way before slamming back in again as deeply as she could take him. The sense of fullness and perfect completion was almost overwhelming for both Draco and Hermione. It had always been that way, the attraction between them electric, undeniable, as inevitable as night and day, and yet brand-new each time. And when brought to its overwhelming conclusion, it was a veritable force of nature.

Their climaxes rolled in one on top of the other in a great, shuddering wave of pleasure, neither of them aware in that final moment that each had screamed the other's name. Afterwards, sated and utterly spent, they stood wrapped in each other's arms, trembling slightly.

"I can hear your heart beating." Hermione smiled into her husband's smooth, lightly muscled chest. She loved his skin, so silky and perfect, so firm. "It's racing, actually. Are you okay?" She cocked her head and gave him a mischievous grin.

"It's all your doing, woman," he laughed. "I swear, you'll be the death of me one of these days!"

"But not today," she said firmly, suddenly all business. "Come on, love, we've got to get a move on! They'll all be wondering what's kept us." She reached around and gave his lovely bum a wet smack.

"No, they won't," he snorted. "They'll *know*." And smacked hers right back.

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The Burrow was their first stop of the evening. The house was alight, cheerful, noisy laughter and talk spilling out past windows closed against the frigid December night. Hermione slipped her hand into her husband's, and both of them unconsciously took a deep breath before pushing the front door open.

They were greeted by smiling faces and welcoming arms all around, drawing them in and slipping their snow-flecked cloaks off to dry, pressing drinks into their hands, clapping Draco on the back, planting wet hello kisses on their faces.

Everyone was there: Harry and Ginny, arms entwined and radiant; Ron and Pansy...a surprise match, that one. Nobody had expected it, certainly nobody could have predicted it whilst they were still at school, but somehow it had happened, nevertheless...George, with a date on his arm, a girl who was brave enough to face a house full of Weasleys and their friends for the first time on New Year's Eve; Bill and Fleur of course, their two small children asleep upstairs; Charlie on his own for once, having just extricated himself from a disastrous relationship and happy to be single; Neville Longbottom and his girlfriend Luna, both of them already a bit loopy with drink and happy with the world and everybody in it. Before long, Arthur and Molly Weasley approached Draco and Hermione and drew them into fierce hugs of welcome. One thing that could never be said about the Weasley family was that they were undemonstrative. Or quiet. This last was to come in very useful a couple of hours later.

At ten o'clock, Hermione realized it was now or never. They had another stop to make, and nothing had been said. Best just to get it over with. She caught Draco's eye from across the room. He'd been deep in conversation with Harry. The two of them had gradually overcome the deep enmity of their school years and forged an unlikely friendship. It was one that probably always could and should have been, if not for the particularly destructive circumstances that had poisoned things right from day one, when they were only eleven. But that was the past. Time and marriage to Harry's best friend had gradually cast things in a very different light. That, and Draco's realization that everything he'd been brought up to believe was complete and utter shite.

He caught her glance and winked at her, moving away from Harry and into the center of the room, holding his hand up until enough people noticed and the noise level dropped dramatically. All eyes were on Draco. They were curious, expectant, and completely unsuspecting.

He cleared his throat and took a quick swallow of firewhiskey for Dutch courage. "I... uh... well, that is, *we*, Hermione and I..." He looked in a sudden frisson of panic to his wife; she was standing nearby, her face unusually pale, eyes wide, though a hint of a smile played about the corners of her mouth. He beckoned to her, and she came and slipped her arm around his waist. That was all he needed.

"Well, you see, the thing is, something very serious has happened, and we felt you all had a right to know."

Somebody gasped. Suddenly, one could have heard a pin drop. There were muffled whispers then: might one of them be seriously ill, had one or both lost their jobs, were they having financial difficulties or perhaps moving far away-- or worse yet, leaving the wizarding world altogether?

Draco smiled and held up a hand once again. "No, no. It's just... well... we're going to have a b--"

Pent-up breath from every quarter was released in one collective explosion, and suddenly, they were surrounded. Delighted questions came from all directions.

"When?"

"How long have you known?"

"Why didn't you tell us before?"

"June."

"Since October."

"Because we wanted to be sure before we told anyone else. Our parents don't even know yet."

Molly Weasley, eyes brimming, enveloped both Hermione and Draco in a powerful hug. Stepping back then and wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she gave them a stern look even as her eyes smiled. "Now look here, you two," she scolded. "You go and tell your *parents* this instant, do you hear me? Off you go, then! *Scoot!*"

There was no arguing with that tone of voice and they both knew it. Before they could protest, their travelling cloaks were being bundled into their arms, and they were pushed rather unceremoniously out the door.

"Well, THAT was easy!" Hermione muttered, and they both laughed suddenly at the absurdity of it all.

Apparating was the fastest (and cleanest) way to get from the Burrow to Wiltshire, where Malfoy Manor was located amidst rolling hills and dense copses of dark, winter-bare trees. Hermione realized this might be the last time she could safely travel this way until after the baby arrived. It had always struck her as appropriate, somehow, that both Stonehenge and Glastonbury Tor were not far away. The deep magic of Avalon stirred in those ancient hills, and this was evident, even to those not wizard-born and unable to put a name to what was so clearly in the air. Everyone felt it.

The atmosphere at Malfoy Manor couldn't have been more different to the informality (Draco thought of it more as benign chaos) of the Burrow if a party planner had deliberately set out to make it so. The entire mansion was the very picture of elegance and refinement. Every room was lit with an array of floating, scented candles, and the best china, silver and crystal graced the buffet tables. Sumptuous foods and bottles of the very finest wines were waiting to tempt the most discerning palates. House-elves somehow managed to serve and clear away dirty dishes invisibly. Music rose from one corner of the room, where a string quartet played. The party was an exercise in well-oiled perfection.

Hermione glanced around as a house-elf took their cloaks and disappeared once more. She wondered if her parents had arrived yet and if they had, how they'd been faring on their own in this crowd. It was a surprise, something of a shock even, to everyone...not least Hermione and Draco themselves...that Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, heads of one of the oldest and most patrician of the pure-blooded wizarding families and known before the war as almost virulently racist in their attitudes towards Muggles, could have turned around completely in the past few years and extended the hand of friendship to Richard and Claire Granger. Nobody would have believed it possible. Yet the defeat of Voldemort, coupled with their own son's eventual defection to the efforts to vanquish the Dark Lord, had set just such a scenario in motion. Stronger than their own views, as ingrained as they had been, was their love for their only child. Something in them had cracked open and begun to thaw, just as ice in a glacier very slowly melts under the onslaught of the summer sun. The final straw was Draco's deepening relationship with Hermione. They'd bowed to the inevitable then, and opened their arms, albeit guardedly at first, to the whole Granger family. Better that than lose their son.

Suddenly, Hermione spotted a familiar head of brown curls lightly threaded with silver.

"Mum!" she called happily and, grabbing Draco's hand, wove through the crowd to reach her parents. They were standing, drinks in hand, chatting with another couple.

"Sweetheart! Oh, and Draco dear! It's so good to see you both!" Claire Granger drew them into an affectionate embrace. She bore a striking resemblance to her daughter, both in terms of her borderline-unmanageable hair, which always threatened to erupt from whatever style was holding it, and her warm, cinnamon-brown eyes that, like her daughter's, seemed to hold a banked fire of passions. Along with Hermione, Draco gave her a fond hug back and warmly shook his father-in-law's hand. He had long since discarded the ridiculous ideas about Muggles with which he'd been raised and had developed a genuine fondness for his in-laws, non-magical quirks and all.

"Well, well!" Richard Granger's hearty baritone boomed. He was a tall man, taller, even, than Draco, and lanky, with thinning, sandy hair and blue eyes. "How are my two favourite kids?" As fond as Draco had become of him and his wife, so Hermione's father had gradually developed feelings of admiration and respect for his son-in-law. They'd even discovered they had things they could talk about: a love of history and literature and even sport. Richard had introduced Draco to the joys of cricket, rugby and football, and Draco in turn had managed, finally, to explain the finer points of Quidditch so that Richard could enjoy watching a game without being in constant fear for his life.

"We're fine, Dad," Hermione grinned. "And actually, we... "

"Darlings!!!" Narcissa had spotted them all. "Lucius, come, the children are here!" Smiling widely, she hooked her arm through her husband's, pulling him gently away from the conversation he'd been having, and the two of them approached.

Narcissa Malfoy was a strikingly beautiful woman still, at the age of fifty. She was a perfect complement to her husband, whose silver-blond, rugged good looks, at fifty-one, hadn't altered much over time. Looking at him, one could easily imagine Draco himself twenty-five years hence. It was almost uncanny.

"Draco, Hermione!" Narcissa smiled graciously. "I'm so glad you're here finally! And Claire, Richard...welcome to our home. Please make yourselves comfortable, have something to eat and drink...oh, good, I see you already do..."

In the meantime, Lucius had simply extended his hands to grasp those of his son and daughter-in-law in a gesture of welcome. "Draco," he said, rather formally. "And... Hermione, my dear."

The evening passed pleasantly enough as the hands of the ornate, tall-case clock in the spacious centre hall crept towards midnight and the coming of the new year. Somehow, there never seemed to be a moment that was right to share the big news. Every time there seemed to be an opening, it was filled with a new guest needing something or Narcissa having to see to more platters of food being brought out or introductions needing to be made or some such thing. Finally it was 11:55 pm, and everyone was gathered in the centre of the ballroom, party hats on heads and noisemakers in hands. Hermione looked somewhat desperately at Draco. 'We haven't told them yet,' her eyes said. For some reason, she had really wanted their parents to know before the clock struck midnight. Silly and superstitious, perhaps, but it just seemed right, somehow, to bring in the new year having already shared such life-altering news. 'I know,' his replied. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it," he whispered and gave her hand a quick, reassuring squeeze.

11:57 pm. Heart pounding, Draco moved swiftly towards his parents while Hermione, in perfect synch, found her own. As if on cue, they met in the middle of the room, noisy guests massing all around them and readying themselves for the countdown.

"Look, there's something we've got to tell you, and it's important," Draco began. All around them, the clamour seemed to intensify until it was a roaring in his ears. Hermione looked rather faint. She gave him a tiny smile and an encouraging nod.

11:59:50 pm.

"We're..." he started again.

"Ten, nine, eight..." the crowd shouted.

"... going to have..."

"... seven, six, five, four..." The roar rose up all around them, nearly drowning him out completely.

".... a **BABY** !!!!!" he managed to yell just as the crowd had reached "two."

Four faces froze. Four pairs of eyes stared in momentary shock. And in the next second, eight arms managed to grab Hermione and Draco and crush them in a joyful embrace, all of them laughing and crying at the same time. It was glorious. And they'd done it just in time.

"HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!!" the crowd shrieked deliriously, everyone hugging and kissing. In all the tumult, nobody noticed the six people standing in the centre of the room, oblivious to the rest of the world, wrapped as they were in their own privately euphoric cocoon.

The Second Trimester

Things had certainly progressed. The morning sickness had passed, thank the gods, and Hermione was glowing with good health. However, her increasingly rounded belly forced her to buy some maternity clothes finally, and she found she actually looked forward to shopping with her mother and Narcissa, though the two of them initially differed on where the most appropriate places to shop would be. In the end, Narcissa's influence prevailed, and Claire was treated to maternity shopping Diagon Alley-style. She compensated by buying her daughter little things from the maternity shops in her own neighbourhood, feeling the balance had been righted somewhat. As for Hermione, though maternity robes were certainly a necessity for her work at the Ministry, where she often had to formally present grant proposals she'd written for various fundraising projects, she really preferred the cute tops and stylishly comfy jeans her mother had found.

For his part, Draco was far past the point of being able to indulge in any sort of denial. Not only did his wife look markedly different now, she had stepped up the nightly research sessions to include discussions of the baby's room and what to furnish it with, paint versus wallpaper, the decision between cloth nappies and disposable ones (she was strongly in favor of the cloth ones, not only for reasons of protecting the environment but also because she couldn't bear the thought of plastic against her child's tender flesh), what sort of pushchair to buy, and on and on. It was an onslaught and he couldn't escape it. Not that he wanted to most times, but still... there was a limit, and every young father-to-be hit that wall at some point or other.

For Draco, it happened one evening when he found himself becoming increasingly irritated and had no clue as to why. Hermione had been talking about looking into some sort of classes she wanted them to take, but he wasn't paying attention. He'd had a very long, tiring day and was fading fast on the sofa. Her voice lapsed into an annoying drone not unlike that of hornets in their nest.

Hermione looked up sharply when there was no reply to her question.

"Draco!" she flung out before she could stop herself.

He started awake and stared, slightly disoriented. What *is* she on about, he wondered. And suddenly he found that not only did he not know, at that moment he also did not remotely care.

"Sorry. Going to bed. 'Night." And just like that, he hauled himself off the sofa and walked out of the room, leaving Hermione standing there with her mouth open, rather like a goldfish.

Later, much later in fact, Hermione crawled into bed beside him, feeling both a bit sorry for herself and also chagrined and guilty that she had overwhelmed him without meaning to. Slipping her arm around his waist, she snuggled closer and lay spoon-style against his back.

"I'm sorry, love," she heard him whisper, and her heart twisted inside her chest.

"No, no! Please, I'm the one who should apologise!" she insisted, her throat closing and making it hard even to get the words out. Tears were threatening to spill onto her cheeks, and she wiped them away, irritated. She'd been a regular waterworks even before her pregnancy, and in the last few months, her hormones had cranked up her emotional state to an impossibly fragile point. She cried now at the drop of a hat.

Draco was just about to turn and take her in his arms when he felt it. A sudden intake of her breath told him she'd felt it too. It was a small, wiggly sensation against his backside, a sort of ripple. And then it happened again.

"Bloody hell," he whispered, his mouth suddenly dry. He twisted around to face Hermione, who was lying there with a beatific expression on her face. This new development had brought the entire discussion to a rather dramatic halt.

"The baby... it moved... " she whispered. "Draco, it *moved!*"

Grabbing his hand, she yanked it down under her t-shirt to her belly and pressed it there, palm flat, splaying his fingers out beneath her own. They waited and before long, there it was again. And again. Little, undulating currents of baby movement, rolling under her skin and making her laugh, both from the weirdly wonderful sensation and the pure joy of it. They fell asleep that way, his hand and hers on her belly, their child swimming like a little fish beneath.

The Third Trimester

Hermione was now in the middle of her seventh month. It was April. The baby was due the twentieth of June. She was still at the Ministry, although not for much longer.

Those classes Hermione had been talking about...well, truth to tell, Draco wasn't too keen. What did they need to go to childbirth classes for, anyway? A bunch of people sitting around on the floor, doing strange exercises and making funny noises, and for what, exactly? He was certain he wouldn't ever want to see a baby, even his own, make its entrance into the world, all slimed over with blood and other unmentionable bodily fluids. Let the mediwitches clean it up and then he'd have a look. Yes, definitely more civilised that way. And besides, he didn't think he could handle seeing Hermione in pain. That would just be altogether too unnerving.

Hermione would not be dissuaded, however. True to form, she'd made a list of possible locations for the classes and had researched the credentials of each instructor, finally narrowing it down to a small, private class being held in the home of a Lamaze-trained obstetrical nurse who lived nearby. The fact that it was a Muggle class was precisely what drew her to it. She wanted the added advantage of that side of childbirth preparation; it was so much more progressive and advanced than its wizarding counterpart, which basically just expected witches to magic the pain away and pop their babies out. Positively mediaeval, Hermione felt. That wasn't the way she wanted to experience the most miraculous thing in a woman's life. She wanted to know and understand every facet of it and be an active participant right to the finish.

The night of the first class saw Hermione almost dragging an obviously reluctant Draco along behind her as they walked the few blocks to the instructor's flat. Even when they arrived at the door, he hung back a bit.

After the second ring of the buzzer, the door swung open and a pleasant-faced, middle-aged, rather earth-motherly woman in a swirling caftan stood there, smiling and gesturing for them to come in. Hermione gave Draco a small shove forward and smiled back.

"Hi," the woman said warmly. "I'm Ellen McDougal. Please come in, won't you? You must be Hermione and Draco, yes?"

They walked past her, down a narrow hallway and into a spacious living room with comfortable sofas and plush carpeting in muted tones of taupe and cream. It was very nearly spartan in terms of knickknacks and accessories of any sort, and this was clearly deliberate. The overall effect was of total serenity. Lit candles suffused the air with a pleasingly light vanilla scent. The sound of falling water turned Hermione's attention to an electric water feature in a bowl on the coffee table. Through an opening in a pyramid of smooth, grey stones of varying sizes, there flowed a steady stream of water, rippling and splashing as it hit the basin at the bottom, only to be recycled back up to the top to fall once again. The sound, joined by Celtic harp music tinkling from a Muggle CD player on a shelf, was eminently soothing. Altogether, it was a most tranquil place, a surprising oasis hidden behind a very ordinary front door in a street of very ordinary attached houses.

There were three couples already sitting on the sofas. They looked up expectantly as Draco and Hermione came in and sat down.

"Well, I think we're all here now." Ellen smiled as she consulted her list. "Let's see... ah yes, here we are. Mark and Susan Atterbury, Pam and Rob Newhouse, Lynn and

David Baker, and Hermione and Draco Malfoy. Very good. Well, shall we go round the room and tell a bit about ourselves, just to get acquainted?" She grinned again, a bit toothily. Here was the part most people generally hated. And this group was no different.

Shite. Just what he needed, having to hurriedly patch together something... anything...to say that was just bland and vague enough to cover the very real fact of his life as a wizard. Nobody had warned him about this bit! He wondered what Hermione had in mind.

She was having very similar thoughts, in fact. Scrambling mentally, she came up with a fairly decent story and hoped that her disgruntled husband had done the same. Slanting a glance at him, she found she couldn't tell from his impassive expression, and she swallowed hard. Merlin only knew what he was likely to come out with.

In the end, she needn't have worried. Of all the people in the world, Draco was surely both quick and glib enough to concoct a very convincing story. Suddenly, he was a freelance copywriter who specialized in environmental causes. Which was, quite naturally, the reason he so firmly supported the idea of nappies being recyclable cloth instead of plastic. He'd done a fair bit of brochure-writing along those very lines for private nappie services already. Hermione bit her lip to hide the smirk that threatened to turn into a laugh, reached around and gave him a sharp pinch on the bum. He slid a sidelong glance at her and winked smugly, his own mouth twitching with suppressed amusement. *There, took care of that one nicely, didn't I, Granger. Hmm!*

An hour later, all four couples were on the floor, the coffee table having been moved out of the way. Each husband sat with his legs splayed open, his wife comfortably situated between them, leaning back against his chest. They'd learnt about the importance of relaxation in controlling pain and were practicing the technique. Draco resisted the temptation to laugh (though he wouldn't be able to in later classes, when the breathing exercises sounded just plain silly to him. "Hee hee HOO" indeed! Hell, he'd never keep a straight face in the delivery room if Hermione had to say *that* while she was breathing!) and tried very hard just to focus for Hermione's sake.

"All right. Mums, close your eyes. Dads, please place your hands gently on your wives' lower abdomens, and trace light circles there. No, not that light, Rob, you don't want Pam laughing hysterically! Okay, let's begin. Ladies, focus on your feet and the muscles there. Clench your toes very hard. Now slowly let the tension go. Your toes are becoming totally relaxed; you are letting all the tension go, and now it's flowing away from your toes, your arches, your heels.... all the tension is easing.... now take a deep cleansing breath, that's right, in through the nose and out through the mouth...." Her voice, a soothing contralto, began taking on an almost singsong rhythm. It was definitely mesmerising. Hermione could actually feel herself melting into the plush carpeting.

"... clench your thigh muscles, yes, good... hold that for a count of five... and let it all go, let all that tension go... cleansing breath now... yes, very nice, excellent... now tighten your abdominals as hard as you can...hold it... good... and let it go, totally relax those muscles and let it all flow away... deep, cleansing breath..."

The faint scent of vanilla in her nostrils, the sounds of the gentle music and the waterfall, and the rhythmic voice of the instructor wrapping themselves around her had a positively drugging effect on Hermione. She felt as if she were under a spell, and she realized with a start that it was the surpassing power of the human mind that had accomplished that, without any help from wizarding charms. Hazily, she wondered whether Draco had come to the same realisation.

Ellen had got as high up as the jaw now, and Hermione dutifully tightened the muscles there, grinding her teeth together and holding the tension. The release she felt when letting it all go was wonderful.

Draco watched her face moving back and forth between a screwed-tight concentration and complete relaxation and felt he was somehow witnessing a sort of small miracle in the making. At the same time, the whole thing was suddenly becoming a bit too real and close for comfort, and he felt a clutching stab of panic in his chest. This was all really happening, wasn't it...they were coming down to the wire now, it was only a matter of weeks. 'Fuck!' he thought. 'Can I really do this?' He was suddenly very scared indeed. The realisation that there really was no turning back...that in only six weeks or thereabouts, his entire world would change forever...hit him squarely in the solar plexis. Those first six weeks seemed like ages ago now. He thought ruefully that maybe he was the one who should be lying there, doing the relaxation exercises.

Later, they walked home hand in hand, taking deep, sweet breaths of the balmy spring air. There was a small apple tree in someone's front garden, and it was newly in bud. The blossoms would begin to open any day now. Stars glittered in the sky along with a mere slip of a silver moon. For Hermione, the class had truly been a revelation. She felt empowered and so much less frightened than she had been before. There would be several more classes like this one, concentrating with increasing intensity on mastering breathing techniques to help in relaxation and control of pain during labour. Plus there would be a lot of practical information regarding timing of contractions, knowing how to judge when they were escalating from one phase to the next, and how to tell when birth was imminent. They'd have to practice the relaxation and breathing techniques at home too, of course. Hermione hoped fervently that involving Draco to this degree would help him overcome his natural aversion to even being in the room when she gave birth, much less being an active participant.

The Big Day

Those last weeks passed in a veritable blur of shopping for last-minute baby supplies, getting the nursery painted and wallpapered (they'd decided together on a delicately striped wallpaper of palest yellow and cream and an azure ceiling dotted with magical constellations of stars, moons and shooting comets that would glow in the dark and actually move across the night sky according to the seasons), and having the furniture delivered and set up. Draco alternated between throwing himself into the distracting occupation of assembling the cot and changing table (avoiding the use of his wand because he really *needed* to work with his hands and shut off his brain for a while) and fighting the desire to get on his Firebolt and flee to the farthest reaches of the planet until it was all over. He managed to stifle the urge.

For Hermione, it was a blessing that those final weeks were so frenzied because all that activity exhausted her to the point where she collapsed on the sofa every chance she got. It was the only real sleep she had now. The baby was so active that no matter which position she tried to sleep in at night, she got a severe kicking. Sometimes it felt as if the baby were all knees and elbows, and all four of them were being stretched in different directions simultaneously. They'd been amused one night to actually see a knobby protrusion sticking out from one side of her hugely distended abdomen. Completely bizarre, that was. Draco's eyebrows had shot up, and then he'd laughed and dropped a tender kiss on the spot where the elbow or knee or foot had just been.

By the end of May, however, all that activity had come to a startling halt. At first, Hermione had been frightened that something might be wrong with Peanut, as she'd come to call the baby. No, the mediwitch had reassured her at the last checkup, it was just that he or she had grown so much and was now so ready to be born that there wasn't any more room for acrobatics.

One very early morning during the third week of June, Hermione woke up suddenly and was mortified to discover that she'd wet the bed. Morgana, how embarrassing...she couldn't even control her bladder anymore! And what was worse, Draco was lying in a pool of it too. It was then that the larger realisation slowly hit her: it wasn't *that* sort of accident at all. Her water had broken while she'd slept and had drenched the bed!

"Draco!" she hissed. He didn't move. Poor baby was exhausted. She'd kept him up late the night before, talking about baby names. They were still dithering between two or three favourites, and it had been niggling at her. Well, now they would be forced into a choice, like as not. It was time.

She let her lips linger for just a moment on his bare shoulder and then gave it a vigorous shake. "Malfoy, wake UP!"

"What...?" he muttered, emerging out of his comfortable sleep shell like a deep sea diver slowly returning to the surface.

"My water's broken, the bed's soaked," she told him matter-of-factly, tugging at his arm and trying to make him appreciate the enormity of the situation. Apparently, it hit him not thirty seconds later, because he suddenly shot out of bed as if it were threatening to suck him in and drown him in her amniotic juices.

An hour later, the bed having been quickly Scourgified, Draco sat with a stopwatch and a pad and pencil (much easier than a quill, he'd discovered), and conscientiously wrote down every slight change Hermione reported. So far, the contractions were about forty-five minutes apart.

Ho hum.

Six hours after that, things hadn't changed appreciably. The whole thing was rapidly becoming one huge anti-climax in Draco's considered opinion. He put down the pad and pencil he'd been carrying from room to room and picked up a book. Hermione took a shower and checked her hospital bag three, four, five times, then sighed and

picked up her own book. It looked as if it might not even be today.

By six that evening, however, it was a whole different story. The contractions were coming about six minutes apart and there was no way around the fact: it was time to get to St. Mungo's as soon as possible! Hermione smiled weakly and grimaced as another contraction hit her like a wave. *Breathe*. Draco, on the other hand, was galvanised into action, grabbing her bag and standing them both in the fireplace with a fistful of Floo powder to get to the hospital. Apparating and Portkeying were both far too risky in the ninth month of pregnancy.

Hermione paced around the labor room, scowling. She did NOT want to lie down, thank you! She knew perfectly well from all her reading that it was far better to let gravity help the process along, not to mention the benefits of physical movement like walking. So she walked, stopping only when a particularly powerful contraction rolled through her uterus. Nobody was going to make her lie down until she was good and ready!

Draco hovered over her like a worried mother hen, stopwatch in hand. It had been hours since they'd arrived at the hospital, the contractions were coming every three minutes now, and damn the woman, she refused to do what they were telling her to do and just bloody well lie down! He had everything at the ready: ice chips in case she got thirsty, a dampened washcloth to soothe her face, a pair of warm socks in case her feet got cold, a small basin in case she needed to be sick. He'd tried to think of everything, plunging into her collection of books in the last week in a state of near-panic, wanting desperately to make certain he wouldn't be caught unprepared.

"Hermione love, don't you think you should..." he began tentatively.

She turned to him, face blazing. "Draco. Malfoy. Don't. You. Dare. Say. Another. Word." And promptly bent over double in pain.

Ten minutes later, she was being wheeled into Delivery, Draco running alongside the gurney. "Come on, sweetheart, breathe with me. Hee hee HOO! Hee hee HOO!"

Hermione looked up at him, his cheeks filling up and deflating like a miniature bellows, and fought down the bubble of hysterical laughter that threatened to burst out of her. He was trying so very hard to help! Just then another hard contraction seized her, and she joined him in his owl imitation.

*

"Look at me, baby. Open your eyes and look at me. I'll breathe with you." Draco sat next to the delivery table as close to Hermione as he could get, as the mediwitch and her assistants bustled about the room, getting her prepped. He looked her in the eye, his hand resting lightly on her abdomen, sensitive to the smallest change. He could feel it gradually hardening whenever a contraction was building, and he reminded her to take cleansing breaths. Tenderly, he wiped the perspiration from her forehead and kissed her there. "You're doing marvelously. Not much longer now." Somehow all his old fears of this moment had evaporated. The only thing he feared now was something going wrong. It just *couldn't*.

He looked up anxiously as the mediwitch parted Hermione's legs and settled her feet into the stirrups attached to the sides of the table. A quick but thorough exam followed. Nodding, she looked up and said briskly, "She's ready, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco stood up so quickly that he almost lost his balance, but recovered and then positioned himself behind her, so as to support her upper body.

"The baby is crowning, Mrs. Malfoy," the mediwitch said excitedly. "Now, dear, we need a really good push!"

"Come on, Granger!" Draco whispered in her ear. "We can do this! Push!"

Hermione resisted the impulse to turn around and snarl an acid "WE??" Instead, she gritted her teeth and bore down as hard as she could, a strangled groan coming out of the deepest part of her and sounding primitive, even feral.

There was a mirror placed so that Draco and Hermione had a clear view of what was happening between her legs. And suddenly, Draco recognised that it was not disgusting at all, but beautiful, *beautiful*, miraculous in fact. He could see the top of a very pale head and then a little more.

Again and again, she pushed mightily when asked, that same wild, guttural scream bubbling up from deep inside with each effort. A pair of tiny shoulders appeared. And then suddenly the mediwitch called out, "Stop pushing!" Hermione and Draco both went very still.

Suddenly, the rest of the baby slid out in a rush of bloody fluids. Hermione leaned back against Draco's chest and exhaled, dark curls clinging damply to her forehead. He kissed her there again and took a deep breath. Time seemed to stop until they heard what both had been waiting for: a lusty, hiccupping wail. Afterwards, neither of them seemed aware of the several things that happened next: the umbilical cord being cut, the baby being cleaned up and weighed, measured, and footprinted, and finally wrapped in a warm blanket cocoon.

It was 4:37 a.m. It had been a very long night.

The mediwitch suddenly reappeared, holding a small, delicate bundle wrapped in pink, tufts of white-blond hair sticking out from under a tiny knitted cap. The baby's face was oh so small and a bit flushed, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. The mediwitch gently placed her in Draco's arms and he gazed down at her...his *daughter*...Merlin!...and then, to his great astonishment, she opened a pair of large, lambent, slate-coloured eyes and regarded him solemnly. That was his final undoing. Hermione stared, her own throat closing and her eyes welling up at the sight of her husband weeping unabashedly.

Apparently a dad in tears was not at all extraordinary because the mediwitch seemed not the least bit fazed or even surprised. She went about her business tidying up the delivery area, pointedly ignoring the little family to give them a bit of quiet time together.

Later, back in Hermione's hospital room...

"So what shall we call her, Malfoy?" Her voice was weak with exhaustion, but the smile in it warmed him.

He thought back on the small group of names they'd narrowed the list down to. And suddenly he knew.

"Aurora Beatrice. Because she was born close to dawn and she's the bringer of joy." He grinned infectiously. "We could call her Rory. What d'you reckon?"

Hermione nodded and gave him a tremulous smile. Patting the bed, she slid over so he could lie down by her side, their baby daughter curled across their chests, their linked fingers resting lightly on her small back. Through it all, Rory Malfoy, six pounds and seven ounces, slept blissfully, her mouth making tiny, sucking movements rather like a goldfish. She smiled.

Fin

A/N: Heartfelt thanks go to my wonderful beta, Kazfeist, whose patient, sensitive and meticulous assessment of this story made all the difference to me in this very first effort. Hugs, Kaz!

Disclaimer: It's all the brilliant JK Rowling's except for this particular plot bunny, i.e. the pregnancy and the Lamaze class. They're mine; I lived them. I make no money from this story.