

Polaris

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Variety Challenge Winner: A distraught and newly widowed Draco finds himself subject to a marriage law that passed over fifteen years before.

One Shot

Chapter 1 of 1

Variety Challenge Winner: A distraught and newly widowed Draco finds himself subject to a marriage law that passed over fifteen years before.

Dear JKR: Thank you for letting me play with your toys. I promise to take good care of them. Sincerely, SL

When he closes his eyes and the wind carries his thoughts, Draco can almost hear the cheering. The air is no longer charged with excitement, but he can feel the rushing sound. At first a crowd roaring, and then, in the midst of it, Draco can make out one clear, adolescent voice.

It had been 24 years since England hosted the Quidditch World Cup, the last time being the infamous Death Eater fiasco. Viktor Krum was even returning, this time as coach to the Bulgarian team as they faced Portugal. The seats had boasted a commanding view of the arena, but that wasn't surprising given the Malfoys' connections. Draco remembered the thrill he felt at his first World Cup. He wanted to make sure Scorpius had the same experience.

The air had been warm, perhaps a little too warm for that many people stuffed into a magically enhanced stadium. The cooling charms couldn't keep up with all the sweating bodies as they pressed together in the stands. The Malfoy box had been better, of course, but they could still feel the heat of the masses. It had been such a beautiful night, the stars radiating above, and standing here Draco can nearly relive it. He almost feels the brush of his son's robes and the touch of his wife's hand.

Now the air bites, though. Not terribly so, but in the interceding months life has moved on in the rest of the world. It has for Draco, too, at times. But he returns. At first he came weekly, but now he forces himself to just come on the monthly anniversary.

Most times he sees her. She comes for just a few minutes. Draco doesn't even know if she notices him standing by the trees. The night wraps him in shadow, where the starlight bathes her in an almost ethereal glow. Hermione Weasley stays long enough to close her eyes, perhaps to remember the beauty of the evening or the beauty of her family. Some part of Draco longs to ask her if she hears the screams, too--the sounds of the stadium starting to give way, of their section collapsing, and the chaos that ensued, all of which possess Draco's mind. The panicked voices quiet when he's here. Only here do the sounds of Scorpius' shouts and cheers pervade, rather than his cries of terror.

Does she hear Ron's voice? Maybe Hermione still hears it in Hugo, or Rose even, when she pulls her children close. Draco wonders if the children have nightmares. He wonders if Scorpius would have had nightmares of seeing his mother perish. Instead the nightly terrors are Draco's alone as he walks sleeplessly through an empty house.

The frosted ground crunches underfoot as Draco turns to leave. The sight of her grief holds him, though, and Draco watches Hermione disappear with a pop.

Draco sits in his favorite leather arm chair staring into the dwindling fire. The glass of Ogden's Best that rests loosely in his hand slowly dwindles as well. The chill of winter creeps in on him, but he doesn't bother to cast a warming charm. For that matter, he doesn't know if he's even instructed the elves to turn on the heat in this room. Perhaps

they have anyway, he hasn't really noticed.

The letter on the table next to him is barely visible in the dark room. It came today, delivered by a self important Ministry owl that nipped at him when he didn't bother to offer a treat. The script is dignified, even if the message falls short.

Dear Mr. Malfoy,

The Ministry wishes to once more extend its sympathy at the passing of your wife. It is our duty to remind you, however, of the timing for your remarriage. As required by the Marriage and Wizarding Population Preservation Act of 2001, all wizards and witches over the age of 25 must remarry within six months of becoming a widow(er). If you choose not to comply, the Ministry will select a spouse for you from a pool of applicants and available candidates.

As further reminder, you and your new spouse will be required to produce two children with demonstrated magical abilities within the first five years of your marriage or be subject to Ministry inquiry. Once such children are produced, you will be eligible to apply for a divorce, keeping in mind that all divorcees are subject to the same remarriage requirements as widow(er)s.

Should you have any questions regarding the Marriage and Wizarding Population Preservation Act of 2001, I encourage you to contact me at the Ministry of Magic.

Sincerely,

Dolores Umbridge

Marriage and Wizarding Population Preservation Coordinator

Draco hadn't paid much attention to the Act when it had first passed. The required age for marriage was 25, and at age 23 he was already engaged to Astoria. While they had planned to have more children, Astoria had been unable to get pregnant again after Scorpius. The Ministry had accepted notice from St. Mungo's of her condition, and their lives had been unaffected by the silly legislation.

Now, however, he faces having to find a wife in a matter of months. The few available witches, and even some unavailable ones, are practically queuing up outside his door. To look at them seems traitorous, however, and he can't imagine marrying someone who is willing to commit to him knowing nothing except what appears in the *Daily Prophet*. The people who can be counted as friends, or friends of the family, or merely pure-blood acquaintances are all married.

So Draco sits, skin slowly growing cold to the touch, stomach warmly couched in Ogden's Best. In the moment before sleep steals into his mind, just as a house-elf covers him with an ever-warming blanket, an idea forms in the dark recesses of his subconscious.

Draco doesn't stay at the manor for Christmas Eve. He comes for the evening, eats the traditional light supper with superb scotch and excuses himself. Every Christmas of their marriage, Draco and Astoria stayed at Malfoy Manor for the night. Once Scorpius was old enough to understand Christmas and presents, they always woke to sounds of delight as he discovered what had appeared for him under the tree.

This year the bed would be cold, however. The slow, beautiful lovemaking that completed his Christmas Eve in years past would not come, and he would wake alone to the sound of a house-elf announcing breakfast. As dreadful as returning to his own desolate house sounds, it is still better than the memories lingering at the Manor.

After saying his goodbyes, Draco steps out onto the front step, drawing his cloak around him to keep the winter air at bay. The night is beautiful and clear, with the ice crystals in the air forming a luminescent halo around the moon. Absorbing the sight for a moment, Draco decides to make a detour.

Somehow the air is harsher as he reappears, seizing the lungs as he fights to draw in breath. She's beaten him here. Draco didn't think to see her. He would have expected her to be cloistered in the warm bosom of the Weasleys, singing carols and eating sweets. Yet she stands almost knee deep in snow. No footprints surround her. She stands exactly where she Apparated in, as much a part of the landscape as the ice-laden tree branches.

"You don't have to lurk in the shadows, Malfoy." Her voice is steady and resigned, flowing across the snow drifts.

"I don't mean to disturb you."

"You have just as much right to be here as I do. It's okay. I can always tell when you're here." At this Hermione turns to look at him, her eyes indiscernible in the shifting shadows.

Holding her gaze for a tense moment, he starts across the field to her as his boots squeak in the icy snow.

Hermione's eyes go back to the main clearing as Draco draws up next to her. Only the wind speaks. It sounds different under the cast of winter, gusting hoarsely through the trees. As he stands there, Draco notices her shaking. At first he thinks she's crying, and perhaps she is, but as he watches her out of the corner of his eye he realizes it's from the cold.

"How long have you been standing out here, Grang--Weasley?"

"Not long." She forces out through chattering teeth.

"Bullocks. You're shaking." Draco frowns for a moment before pulling off his cloak and casting a warming charm on it. She tries to refuse, but Draco has none of it. What type of person would he be allowing a widow to freeze on Christmas Eve? Merlin knows he already has plenty going against him in the afterlife.

Wrapping the cloak around Hermione's shoulders, and adding his scarf, Draco notices a distinct lack of body heat. When Hermione stops shivering, Draco puts a hand to her face.

"Merlin, Weasley. You're becoming hypothermic. I'm taking you home."

"No!" Hermione momentarily snaps out of it. "You are most certainly *not* taking me home, Malfoy."

"Calm down. I meant to your home, not mine." Draco smirks a little before adding, "Not even I'm low enough to pick up hypothermic people standing in fields."

Hermione smiles wanly. "Thank you, but I can manage."

"You can barely stand. Where do you need to go? I'll take you by Side-Along."

"We're at the Burrow. You don't even know how to get there."

A dark look passes across Draco's face. "It won't be a problem. I know where it is."

"Why would you know how to get there?" Hermione's face betrays the confusion of her cold-addled brain. Draco answers with a steady gaze deeply layered with remorse.

"Oh, oh, of course," Hermione stutters, pushing aside the thought that Draco paid the Burrow a visit during the war. "I can't be seen sauntering up to the door with you at

this hour, though."

"It's either that, or I take you back to my house and send you through by floo," Draco says plainly. "Quite frankly, Weasley, I think you'll have a much easier time saying you went out for an evening stroll if you arrive by the front door rather than the fireplace."

"But if they see you--," Hermione protests.

Draco sighs benignly. "That's what Disillusionment Charms are for. We need to get going. Take my arm."

Hermione sways, and Draco grabs her around the waist a moment before they disappear.

One week later Draco stands at her office door feeling slightly foolish. Her head bows over the parchment, shoulders hunched, and fleeting strands of gray lace through her braid. A few rogue curls still escape, creating a harried look. All told, Hermione looks very much the same, he thinks. The moonlight suits her better, though. The harsh light of the office shows the lines around her eyes more plainly. *She's probably aged a decade in the last few months. I feel like I was born old.*

Before he has time to announce his presence, Hermione looks up. The slightly irritated look on her face relaxes into an expression of mild confusion, and she rises from her chair.

"Mr. Malfoy, what a surprise," she says with a slight stammer in her voice. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Please, don't get up on my account," Draco assures her, gesturing to her chair. "I wanted to stop by and inquire as to how you're feeling."

Hermione disregards his gesture and smiles wearily. "I'm feeling better, thank you." She pauses, an unreadable look in her eyes. "Thank you for your assistance."

"It was my pleasure." Hesitating momentarily, Draco draws up his courage. "I was wondering if I might take you for tea."

"Tea? Well, um, certainly. I don't see why not."

Not entirely encouraged by the less than enthusiastic response, Draco suggests, "Perhaps 2 pm Saturday at The Ceylon Cottage?"

"That would be fine," Hermione replies, trying to hide the surprise in her voice.

"I'm glad to hear it. I don't mean to disturb your work, so I'll see you then." With a nod and a silent sigh of relief, Draco makes his exit.

The Ceylon Cottage sits right off the end of Diagon Alley. The furniture is comfortable, the tea excellent and the location away from prying eyes. Any sighting of the two of them together will likely garner coverage in the gossip columns, something neither of them likely want at this point.

Arriving a few minutes early, Draco selects a table in the alcove near the back. He's only just seated himself when Hermione comes through the door. In the moment before she notices him, Draco takes a moment to watch her. The navy blue robes flatter her figure, slightly fuller from having two children. Her curly hair is tamed into soft waves that flow just past her shoulders.

As Hermione turns his direction, he waves her over, standing to pull out her chair for her.

"Why thank you, Malfoy. Your manners have certainly improved since Hogwarts," Hermione says with a wry smile.

"It would be rather concerning had I not changed in that time. Don't you think?"

"That it would," she responds softly. The smell of tea floats on the air, and the murmur of other conversations surrounds them. They sit quietly, looking at each other, uncertain of the moment.

The tenuous pause is only interrupted by Hermione's stomach. She blushes as she remarks, "Please excuse me. I was so busy with errands I wasn't able to stop for lunch. Would you be averse to a full tea?"

Draco offers a gracious smile. "That would be fine. Let me call a waitress." With a poise that belays the nervous tension strumming through his body, Draco summons their server and orders a selection of sandwiches and cakes. He tries hard to pick a nice selection without being ostentatious. While his tastes run towards the finer things, he doesn't think she would appreciate the gesture.

The tea appears almost instantly and he pours two cups. Hermione inhales the sweet, yet pungent aroma wafting off her tea cup. "This smells wonderful."

"I'm glad you approve," Draco says with a reserved smile. "It's Lady Grey."

"Lady Grey?"

"Earl Grey with orange and lemon. I think it goes better with food. The flavor isn't as overbearing." Draco pauses for a moment as he savors a sip. "How have you been?"

Hermione contemplates the question before replying. "Work is going well. It's hard having the children away, especially now. The house seems so empty without them." Her eyes suddenly widen as she realizes what she said.

"Malfoy, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean... you certainly have... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so insensitive."

He nods ever so slightly. "Don't worry about it. Please, call me Draco."

"In that case you should probably call me Hermione." She takes a long sip of her tea and looks searchingly at him.

"How have you been, Draco?"

"It's been challenging the past months, but I hardly need to tell you that. The law practice is going well. I'm thankful to have good associates to assist with my cases." He pauses a moment as the food arrives and they help themselves to the tray.

Hermione barely keeps from groaning in delight as she tucks in. The mango chicken salad and minted cucumber sandwiches are divine, and still they hardly hold a candle to the miniature raspberry and lemon tarts. They eat in silence for a few moments, Draco enjoying her obvious appreciation for his selections.

"What types of cases have you been working on lately?" Hermione eventually asks, dabbing at her mouth with the daintily embroidered napkin.

"We just finished up Yaxley yesterday. It felt good to see that one come to a close."

A look of distaste crosses her features. "You defended Yaxley?"

"We were counsel for the plaintiff, with support from the Dobby Foundation for Elvish Welfare."

Hermione nearly chokes. "You were the counsel for DFEW?"

"House-elf families have no recourse under the law, and there are some people who only understand a blow to their Gringotts account. DFEW worked with the Prewetts to pursue destruction of property in civil court."

"You can hardly put a price on the life of a living creature. What Yaxley did to the Prewetts' elf was heinous, and over some silly land feud of all things," Hermione says heatedly.

"Price tag or no, Yaxley's Gringotts account is now 10,000 Galleons smaller and DFEW has a 10,000 Galleon donation to help their cause."

"You did this pro bono?" Hermione asks incredulously.

"Hardly. We're on retainer. Although, between you and me, DFEW gets an exceptional deal. I do, after all, still owe Potter a life debt or two." Draco sips his tea and takes a moment to enjoy the gobsmacked look on Hermione's face.

The two women are just sitting down in front of the fire with a bottle of Bordeaux when a tapping comes at the window. Ginny looks up first and her eyes grow a little wider. "Hermione, you've got an owl, a huge owl in fact."

Hermione gets up from the couch and goes to open the window. The elegant eagle owl swoops gracefully in the window and drops a small box in front of Hermione. He then sits on the table expectantly, attempting to stare her down. A look of irritation crosses Hermione's face as she goes over to grab an owl treat. Hermione could swear the owl actually looks down its beak at her, if a bird could do such a thing, before snatching the treat and making a quick, yet elegant, exit.

Ginny sets her wine down on the coffee table and crosses the room. "That was a beautiful owl. In fact, that looked like the Malfoys' owl." The redhead raises her eyebrows and looks at Hermione with expectant curiosity.

The package sits on the table, untouched, as Hermione stands there staring at it in indecision. "Well, I'll take your silence as a yes. Open it already," Ginny prods.

Hermione reaches for the package and tentatively opens it. The aroma that arises is unmistakable.

"Is that tea?" Ginny asks. "Why is Malfoy sending you tea?"

A fleeting smile graces Hermione's face. "I mentioned that I liked it."

"When did you see him?" asks Ginny. "And why were you discussing tea?"

Hermione tears her eyes away from the box and braces herself for a tirade. "We had tea together yesterday."

Ginny's jaw drops and she immediately drags Hermione back to the couch. Thrusting a wine glass into her friend's hand, Ginny pauses only a moment before beginning her assault. "You went on a date with *Malfoy*?"

"Well, not so much of a date as--"

"The man took you to an eating establishment and then sent you a gift, a thoughtful gift at that. It was a date."

Hermione pauses, assessing Ginny's reaction. "Maybe it was, I don't know. It was weird. I haven't been on a date in over 20 years, Gin. I don't know that I'd recognize one if it stood up and introduced itself."

Ginny snorts and reaches for her own glass. "Don't pull that one on me. You're a smart witch. What possessed you to go out with Malfoy?"

"Well, I kind of felt obligated."

"How could you possibly owe Malfoy something?"

Hermione sighs. "He took me home Christmas Eve."

"He did *what*?" Ginny nearly spits out her wine.

"Not like that. He Apparated me back to the Burrow."

"You were freezing when you finally stumbled back in that night. We had no idea you'd been out that long. But why did you need to Apparate back?" When Hermione doesn't respond, Ginny puts the pieces together. "You were out there again, weren't you?"

The guilty look on Hermione's face gives her away.

"You need to stop doing that, especially if you're not going to take care of yourself."

"He waited on the porch until I was inside." Hermione pauses, examining her next words. "I think he may not be all bad, Ginny."

"Scorpius and Al were almost inseparable last year," Ginny says, glancing at a picture on a nearby bookshelf. From inside the frame two first years in black robes and Ravenclaw scarves cheer excitedly from the Hogwarts Quidditch stands. "Scorpius was a wonderful boy the times I met him. I doubt that was entirely from his mother."

Hermione sighs heavily. "Molly would throw a fit."

"My mother would get over it. It's a little creepy anyway, the idea of you marrying George."

Hermione snorts. "That's the understatement of the year. I feel horrible about Angelina dying in childbirth, but that doesn't mean George and I are a good match. Feels a bit incestuous really."

Ginny eyes Hermione. "So are you going out again?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact Draco's taking me to dinner. He didn't say where, though."

"It went very well, then. Are you ready for this?"

"I think so. The first date went well enough, how badly could the second go?"

Ginny looks at her friend appraisingly. "Hermione, you do know he's probably going to propose to you?"

"What?" Hermione splutters.

"Pure-blood custom is that you propose on the second date. The first date is basically a job interview. If he likes you, and you're amenable to the match, you go on a

second date. It gives the bloke time to plan something nice."

"But Ron and I--"

--were completely different and you know it. The Weasleys hardly practice old pure-blood customs."

"Pure-bloods date all the time at Hogwarts!" Hermione protests.

"It's different when you're young. That dating is mostly for fun. Once you're old enough to marry, your parents arrange dates for you with the expectation that you will accept one of their matches."

"You're kidding. That's an arranged marriage! This isn't anything like that."

"Isn't it? Sounds like the Ministry has done plenty of arranging on your behalf." Ginny gives Hermione a knowing look from behind her wine glass.

Hermione groans. "Do you really think he'll do it on the next date?"

"I'm sure he knows you may not be entirely fluent in pure-blood customs. Come to think of it, I'd say he waits until the third date."

Hermione takes a long drink and doesn't taste a bit of the Bordeaux.

"It's beautiful," Hermione gasps.

The view from the top of the castle is indeed stunning. She isn't exactly sure where they are, but based on the scenery she guesses somewhere in Scotland.

Draco smiles as she appreciates the view. "I'm glad you approve. A client told me about this establishment a few years ago, and it's been a favorite ever since."

He escorts her down the stairs from the Apparition point on top of one of the turrets. It really is an impressive entry. Draco is glad he picked her up at her house and did Side-Along, however. This is not a place where one wants to miss the mark.

"I have to admit that I'm little confused by the fact that this is an Italian restaurant. It seems as if this should be Scottish. We are in Scotland, are we not?"

"Indeed we are, but would you prefer haggus to linguine?"

"Perhaps you have a point there," Hermione replies with a quirk of her lip.

At the bottom of the stairs, a small lobby awaits and a waiter ushers them straight to a window table. A bottle of chianti and a plate of calamari immediately appear on the table. "I hope you like calamari? Theirs is excellent."

"Calamari sounds lovely," Hermione says, helping herself to loops of the breaded seafood and a spoonful of marinara sauce as Draco pours the wine.

"How was your week?" Draco asks, allowing her enough time to finish her first mouthful.

"It was good, thank you. Ginny and I got together on Tuesday evening. It was nice to see her."

"How are the Potters?"

"Good, good. Ginny sends their greetings."

"So you mentioned our dinner to her?"

Hermione smiles, wondering what he makes of that. "Your owl arrived while she was visiting, so the topic inevitably came up."

Draco pauses. "The Potters are good people. They were always kind to Scorpius, even when some other parents insisted on holding my past against him."

Hermione watches him with cautious interest as she takes another bite.

"What did Ginny say about dinner tonight?" He attempts a light and conversational tone.

"Quite frankly, she thought you were a better match than George," Hermione says with a smirk. Her attempt to lighten the mood causes Draco to snort.

"Someone you suggested you marry George?"

"Molly thought keeping us all in the family would be a delightful idea."

Draco raises an eyebrow at her.

"Don't get me started on how ill-conceived that is," Hermione assures him.

"So you've shot down one potential suitor, then?"

"I don't know that I'd call him that. George's enthusiasm was pretty much on par with my own."

The rest of her thought is cut off by the arrival of their food.

"Did you order for me?" she demands.

"It's prix fix. I hope you don't mind. Their selections are usually excellent."

Hermione nods briefly before examining her plate. Small portions of penne arrabiata, fettuccini alfredo and mushroom risotto are artfully arranged before her. The smells collaborate to bring her mouth to full watering status. Before taking her first bite, she asks, "How was your week?"

Taking a moment to survey his own plate, Draco replies, "Things went well. We have a new associate that I have high hopes for. This week we introduced him to some of our clients and one in particular took to him."

"Do you do that with all your new associates--take them out to meet clients, I mean?"

"I try," Draco says, quickly swallowing a mouth full of fettuccini. "Building relationships early is key. I hire associates because I feel they have a strong future with our firm and I want to get them off on the right foot."

"It sounds like you have a strong vision for your firm."

"Our firm, and I do. Keeping the firm in business means keeping us all in jobs, aside from the obvious benefit of assisting our clients." Draco takes a sip of his wine and looks out over the hills. "That's quite enough about my business, though. I'm sure you didn't come here to be bored senseless. Unless you wanted a copy of our financials from the last quarter?"

Hermione frowns ever so slightly. "Why, do you carry them with you?"

"Not generally, but I could have copy sent to you if you'd like."

They stare at each appraisingly.

"I didn't come here for a business valuation, Draco."

"I'm glad to hear that."

They eat in silence as the pasta slowly disappears from their plates.

"I received my letter a while back." At first Hermione can't believe she said it. That must be the wine talking.

"Letter?"

"From the Ministry."

"Oh, I see," Draco says thoughtfully.

"As much as I hate to admit it, I didn't really pay attention to the Marriage Law when it first passed," Hermione admits.

"It wasn't relevant to you."

"Exactly. That's a horrible reason, I know, but there were so many other things going on. I just wanted for it to be someone else's fight for once," Hermione confesses.

"Not every fight has to be yours."

"Apparently it should have been."

"Will you make it your fight now?" Draco questions.

Hermione looks into his eyes, which eerily reflect her feeling of being completely lost. "I don't think I have the strength to make it my fight."

Draco responds with an affirming silence.

As Draco Apparates them back from dinner, they land on Hermione's doorstep with a pop and are immediately hit with a light rain that drips off the trees surrounding her house. Hermione moves back under the eave, pulling Draco with her. Out of the rain they stand there, awkwardly looking at each other like two people stranded on a foreign planet. She shivers unconsciously, and he instinctively reaches out his hand to touch her arm. Pulling her closer to his warmth, Draco lets his hand wander up her arm until it reaches the warmth of her neck. He watches intently as his hand slowly caresses her face of its own accord. As his gaze drifts with his thumb across her cheek, he catches her eyes. Hermione studies him, eyes intent with only a hint of trepidation betrayed in their depths.

Draco shuts his eyes, bringing his other hand up and slowly exploring her face and neck. Hermione leans in, bringing her own hand up to caress his. Opening his eyes at her touch, he sees her watching him. His body gently moves forward until his lips find hers with a feather light touch. The sigh that escapes her lips urges him on as he teases her lips with his tongue. Her mouth immediately opens in invitation. The intensity builds, breathlessly, and he suddenly feels her reaching for something. The door swings open as she pulls him inside, barely breaking the kiss. At their entrance a fire roars to life in the grate. She removes his cloak, stepping back long enough to hang their wet outerwear on a coat rack near the fire.

Hermione holds out her hand to him, and they settle on the sofa. Her skin is warm and the feel of it is intoxicating. Another living body, another's breath bears down on him, propels him. He peels back her clothes slowly, but doesn't look at the beautiful creature it reveals. Intent solely on not breaking contact, they drink in the feel of one another. Hands on lips, legs clashing, breasts pressing against bare chest. When he sinks into her at last, the feeling of relief overwhelms him. As he finishes and gently rolls off, settling her next to him, he sees the tears that he felt spilling onto his own cheeks earlier. Holding her firmly, Draco does not insult her with placations or endearments. He simply brushes her tears away as they fall and from time to time leans down to kiss her forehead.

Once Hermione cries herself to sleep, Draco carries her upstairs. He sincerely hopes it isn't a complicated floor plan. The idea of wandering aimlessly through her house at night isn't one he relishes. Thankfully the only door open reveals a room with a queen size bed that looks to be hers. Settling Hermione under the covers, Draco hesitates. He doesn't want to overstay his welcome, but she probably wouldn't want to wake alone. The bed dips slightly as he crawls in beside her. He won't be able to sleep, but he will stay until she wakes, long enough for him say his goodbye.

A few hours later, emerging from deep sleep, Hermione opens her eyes long enough to find herself in her bed with Draco settled quietly beside her. "I didn't want to leave just yet. Do you need anything?" As she shakes her head, Draco quietly leaves, making his way to the front door before Apparating directly to his bedroom. Shedding his shirt on the floor, Draco stumbles into the bathroom and turns on the tap. The cold water feels good on his face, but in a matter of moments he slumps to the floor, leaning against the wall. Sobs wrack his body as he holds his head in his hands.

It had been beautiful, this amazing witch giving herself over to his touch. Her caress, her very breath stood to fill him with hope. It isn't what he wants, though. He doesn't want her, Hermione. This brilliant woman who deserves better, deserves to be appreciated, and his only thought is he doesn't want her. He wants Astoria. Draco's guilt claws at him as he knows how unfair it is to Hermione, that he doesn't feel what he should. Draco continues to shake as he runs a hand through his white blond hair.

Deep down he knows, and perhaps it pains him the most, that Hermione cried the same tears. His heart, mind, and soul pool in his chest. The viscous mixture flows slowly through his arms, quietly dripping from his finger tips, saturating the tile with the feeling of despair that grips him. He is hollow as the life leaves. Draco no longer believes in his ability to believe in hope. He carries it to sleep, waking with it as a disenfranchised lover.

"He's crying again."

Cissy sits with her legs tucked underneath her in an entirely unladylike fashion. She tears her gaze away from the fire long enough to address her portrait. "That's none of our business, Narcissa. We've been over this before."

"None of our business? Don't be ludicrous. Of course it's our business, he's our son," the portrait balks.

"He's a grown man whom I respect enough to grant his privacy."

The painted image of Narcissa purses her lips in disapproval. "He's never going to find a wife at this rate."

"He will find a wife," Cissy says, attempting to stifle a sigh. "He will find a wife or the Ministry will find one for him."

"I don't understand, Cissy. I don't remember this Marriage Law nonsense before."

Cissy returns to staring into the fire. "It didn't matter before. Draco had Astoria."

"But why does it even exist?"

"There was a plague, after the war. It took most of the children under ten. A Muggle disease of all things, and we seemed to have no immunity. At first the Healers at St. Mungo's refused to seek any outside help to treat it. Once they finally agreed to consult with Muggle doctors, it was too late. We'd lost so many. Nearly half a generation, gone," Cissy finishes quietly.

The portrait shakes her sternly. "So they started a breeding program? That hardly seems civilized."

"It wasn't civilized. It was anything but that. The Ministry tried everything to get people to have children--tax incentives, cash bonuses-but to no avail."

"Then they passed this Marriage Law nonsense?"

"They did. And now Draco's time is running out," Cissy says with a deep seated feeling of resignation.

"We should help him. It's our duty."

"There isn't much to be done, Narcissa." Cissy looks up at her painted self with haunted eyes.

"But sitting in his bathroom crying again..."

Cissy drifts off momentarily. "If he wants our help, he'll ask. Until then, stop stalking the poor boy. Where is your portrait anyway?"

"He put me in the hall."

"Of course he did, what with your constant spying."

"Spying?" Narcissa says indignantly. "I would never deign to do such a thing."

"Then how do you know he's crying in the bathroom?" Cissy asks skeptically.

"I can hear him through the walls."

"I see."

The two glare at each other, and the painted image turns to make her exit.

"And Narcissa--"

"Yes?"

"Do stop watching Lucius and me."

"Whatever are you talking about?" the portrait demands in a scandalized tone.

"I know you're snooping in our bedroom."

"Well I--," Narcissa stutters. "Oh, fine. I can't help it if Lucius' portrait has a stick up his arse."

"Because he won't fornicate with you about the manor?"

"He's my husband!"

"Then find someone else. Just stop watching us. It's indecent."

Narcissa flips her hair indignantly, huffing as she stalks out of the painting.

His owl hadn't arrived for a couple days. Hermione wasn't sure what she was expecting, but some part of her thought something would arrive right away. He'd stayed to say goodbye, some part of her kept saying. Deep down she was just too confused to even know what to expect.

The note had been pleasant enough, expressing his enjoyment of the evening (Hermione had openly snorted at this) and stating that he'd like to see her again. As Ginny had pointed out, though, what exactly was he supposed to say without sounding crude or ridiculous? At least he'd foregone the flowers. Hermione didn't think she would have been able to handle morning after flowers.

Hermione sat on Draco's letter for a couple days, not knowing what to do with it. Her clock is ticking, and the Ministry's letter glared up at her from her desk, and yet she hesitated.

Still, with some measure of incredulity, she now sits in a small Muggle pub on the outskirts of London. He takes her to a Muggle pub, of all things, as if he's trying to show off his comfort in her other world. If he's trying to show her an unexpected side of himself, it's damn well working.

Hermione snaps herself out of her reverie as the waitress comes by. "Two pints of Boddington's, a shepherd's pie and an order of fish and chips, please." At the server's raised eyebrows, Hermione adds, "My friend is in the bathroom." The woman smirks a little, as if to say, "Of course he is, sweetie," and saunters off to place the order.

Draco slides into his chair as the waitress disappears.

"What's that look for?"

"Nothing. She thinks I just ordered two meals for myself."

"Well did you?"

"Certainly not. I placed each of our orders."

"Perhaps she thinks you look hungry. You are looking a little piqued."

Hermione considers making some snappish remark about his appraisal of her appearance, but stops herself short. The smell of heavy, greasy food oozing from behind the bar prods her appetite and makes her realize how long it had been since she'd eaten a full meal. "It was a long week, I guess."

"Did you have a bad time at work?" Draco asks, watching her expression.

"Not really. It was actually rather light. Most of the supervisors in Magical Creature Relations are at a conference in Morocco."

"You weren't invited?"

"No, and I'm glad for it. It's nice to have the office to myself for awhile," Hermione assures him.

"But it's still been a long week for you."

Hermione pauses. "I started cleaning out some closets. It's overdue, really."

Draco looks at her for a moment, and then follows suit as she turns her gaze out the window. "I did most of my cleaning right before Christmas or, rather, my mother did."

"Does your mother do all your cleaning?" Hermione asks evenly, still staring out at the street.

"No, we received a house-elf as a wedding gift so Blinky does most of it. I was having trouble packing things myself. The process kept stalling."

"I actually got to a point this week where I started throwing away entire boxes," Hermione quietly admits.

"I'm sure you had a lot of things to sort through."

"No, I mean I started throwing away entire boxes of his unopened things. Something just snapped." Hermione looks at Draco as her voice takes on an edge. "I thought to myself, if he hadn't looked at it in years what the hell would I want it for now? I was so tired of looking at it, all of it, and I just started obliterating entire boxes."

Draco turns to meet her distraught eyes.

Hermione suddenly feels as if the air is running out. "I shouldn't have done it. I don't even know what was in those, what things Rose or Hugo might have wanted."

"It won't matter, Hermione, because they will never know what they missed. You'll never remember, or by the time you do, it won't be important to you either," Draco says calmly, allowing her to keep going.

"It's not me, not who I am. I'm not someone who throws things, or burns things, or commits rash acts of violence against helpless inanimate objects," Hermione says beseechingly, suddenly not caring that he hears this, not caring that anyone in the pub hears it.

"We're not the people that we were six months ago," Draco whispers loudly enough to carry to her ears.

"I know," Hermione responds in a hushed tone.

"Do you want to be?"

"Some days."

"I know," Draco replies quietly.

The chatter of the pub grows around them, filling in the gray spaces, as they sit slowly processing the world spinning wildly around them.

Draco reaches across the table and puts his hand on hers.

"I only had Mother save a few of Scorpius' things."

Hermione closes her eyes, and Draco squeezes her hand. Steadying her breathing, Hermione looks up at him. "Did you keep Scorpius' things for your next baby?"

Draco gently shakes his head. "No."

After dinner he leads her on a walk through a nearby park. When he guides her there, she shivers at his hand in the small of her back, unsure of how much is attraction and how much uncertainty.

The gardens are beautiful with low hedges weaving amongst a myriad of roses. Hermione has never been a big fan of roses, but she has to admit they're lovely. The night air seems to hold their fragrance, offering it up to those who venture out in the waning light.

"Why are we here, Draco?"

"What do you mean, 'why are we here'?"

"Us. Why are you and I here, now?" Hermione quietly demands.

"You're joking." When her face remains impassive, he stops short.

"Would I be here if I was joking?"

Draco stares at her in disbelief. "I would have thought it to be pretty obvious."

"I want to you say it, Draco," she insists.

"What, that I want more than a quick shag on your couch?"

For the second time in her life, Hermione hits Draco with every ounce of strength she in her.

"I'm sorry, that was out of line." Draco looks at her contemplatively as he massages his jaw. "You're not going to get grand proclamations of love out of me; you're not going to get love poems and a handsome prince to serenade you."

"Don't insult me, Draco. I'm not so naïve as to think that is what this is about."

"You want to know what it is about," he states, as if still trying to grasp the words.

"Yes. Before I agree to anything, I want to know why I'm here."

"I respect you," Draco says plainly, as if speaking something completely self-evident.

"Respect?"

"Yes. You're hard-working, loyal and intelligent. You love your family and take your responsibilities seriously."

"You want to marry me because you think I'm the citizen of the year?" Hermione scoffs.

"Don't belittle me. This is important," Draco snaps, but the tone lacks any venom.

"You don't need to tell me that. You believe that respect is enough to build a marriage on?" Hermione insists.

"I know it is, because I've done it before."

"You didn't love Astoria," Hermione says, her voice steady and unrelenting.

"Watch your tongue." Draco's eyes flash with a fire that Hermione remembers from her childhood. "I loved Astoria more--I loved her in a way that I cannot put words to. We started with respect, which grew into friendship, and then we were fortunate enough for it to become more."

"And you think you can do it again?" Hermione pushes.

"Pure-bloods have been doing it for generations. My parents did, their parents did. It's not romantic at first, maybe it's never romantic, but you need dedication on both parts."

"You think I'm dedicated?" Hermione asks with a hint of skepticism.

"I know you're dedicated. You followed your best friend on an eight month camping trip through Great Britain in *winter* because you promised to stand by him."

"We were trying to win a war, Draco."

"I know. Many people owe their lives in part to your dedication."

Hermione gazes at him searchingly. "And you think I'm dedicated to you?"

"I think you have enough integrity that if you don't think you can be, you won't say yes." Hermione pauses and looks into his slate eyes. He reaches out and gently takes her hands. "I wasn't planning on getting down on one knee."

Hermione closes her eyes and leans in until her forehead comes to rest on his.

Ten years later...

Some nights he still walks alone through the house. The halls are narrower here, the walls not covered as lavishly, but they had thought it best to keep Hermione's house. Rose and Hugo needed to feel at home, feel secure, and Draco understood that. They certainly hadn't complained, either, when the new addition was built. It was Draco's idea to add a game room along with more bedrooms, and the new space made the house a popular spot amongst the children's friends.

Blinky, at first incensed at being moved and then subjugated to a bossy Muggle-born, eventually warmed to the new space. Having her own cupboard in the new addition probably helped, as did Hermione stopping the campaign to pay her. While Hermione had at first fought the idea of having house-elves, she had reluctantly admitted how nice it was to have someone to warm bottles in the middle of the night.

His wanderings are now punctuated with soft snores and snuffles. Walking quietly so as not to wake his family, Draco makes his way to the study. The room embodies peace, with its windows looking out over the slumbering yard. The stars shine down, pouring through the windows to land gently upon the slightly worn leather arm chairs. This is Hermione's room, really. The books lining the walls all sit in the order in which she placed them. The burgundy rugs overlay the hardwood floors in just the way she likes them.

The still nights draw him here. Along one of the walls, a shelf sits devoid of books. Small pieces of sentimental value sit here: a vase received as birthday gift from Draco's grandmother, a dried bridesmaid's bouquet from Harry & Ginny's wedding. Among the items sits a small picture frame that took Draco by surprise the first time he came upon it. A double frame, one side holds a picture of Rose and Hugo sitting on their father's lap in front of a Christmas tree. The three wave at the camera while Hugo playfully shows off a mouth full of Christmas candy. The picture on the other side is equally joyful, if not as raucous, as Scorpius and his mother stand before trees alight with autumn colors. A grin of pure delight graces Scorpius' face as he holds his first racing broom.

The fireplace mantel is always his final stop, though. More often than not it's his only stop these days. To one side sits a silver frame, waves wrapping their etched fingers around the photo in an embrace. Four smiling faces crowd around a towering sandcastle that lists precariously to one side. A red headed teenager in outrageously colored swim trunks holds a squirming blond toddler determinedly grabbing for stick that decorates the top of a turret. Opposite them a teenage girl showing the first hints of sunburn points for a little boy to wave at the camera. Showing off sparkling blue eyes, the boy grins unabashedly.

The picture in the mahogany frame on the end is Draco's favorite. The two in the picture look at each other with genuine smiles as they lean against a deck railing with the sea shimmering behind them. After a moment they break their gaze and look off to the side at the night sky. The woman tucks her unruly brown hair, liberated by the wind, behind her ear and points up at something. Pointing with her, the man admires the object for a moment before taking her hand and drawing it down to him. He raises it to his mouth, allowing his lips to linger on her fingers, watching her eyes drink in the sight of him.



Artwork courtesy of the wonderful beawasley2. Thank you so much, dear!

A/N: Profuse thanks go my betas, nanacu and soonkatin, who cheered me on and graciously provided a quick turnaround when my muse wasn't cooperating!

Two sources conspired to give me the title for this story. The beautiful poem "Survivor" by Archibald MacLeish and the lovely song "Polaris" by Jimmy Eat World each spoke to me about Draco.

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