

The Escort

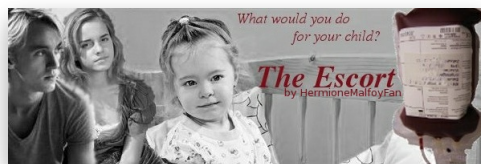
by HermioneMalfoyFan

If your child fell ill, how far would you go to save its life? Would you do anything to secure the help of the one person who could make a difference?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 4

If your child fell ill, how far would you go to save its life? Would you do anything to secure the help of the one person who could make a difference?



This is the first story I've ever tried to post on this site. I was unsure for a long time if I should do it because the stories that get posted here are so good. But then this story received a nomination for the Dramione Awards, and I thought I'd just try.

I hope you enjoy reading the story as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'd be happy if you go and vote in the seconding phase of the Dramione Awards. Obviously I'd love if you wanted to second my story, but there are many other good stories, too, so don't hesitate if you like another better!



Thanks to my beta, laurielove!

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The young wizard sat relaxed on the plush chair, his legs lazily spread, a bored expression on his face. He was, in short, the epitome of an overconfident, rich daddy's son. The middle aged witch, who was facing him with a professional smile on her face, readied her dicta-quill and then started the interview with him.

"So, Mr. Malfoy, I am sure you are aware that we are an Escort Agency, we don't provide hookers. You are paying for the company of our girls, not for sexual services. If you wish to become more intimate with them, you must make that kind of arrangement on a personal level."

The woman smiled sweetly and Draco just waved his hand in acknowledgement.

"I know, I know."

"So... I will start finding out your preferences, so we can narrow down the choice before I get the comp cards out. Do you have any preference concerning the blood status?"

Draco shrugged and shook his head.

"Age?"

"About my age... Maximum five years older, and not more than about three years younger."

"Figure?"

"Petite."

"Hair colour?"

"No red-heads or blondes."

"Long or short hair?"

"Long."

"Eye colour?"

"Don't care."

"Any particular requests you have for the girl?"

"It should obviously be somebody who doesn't run at the sight of a convicted ex-Death Eater. And I like intelligent conversation so no dumb bimbo, please."

The witch smiled and waved her wand affectedly. Without further ado, a thick photo book appeared in front of Draco.

"The witches in it fit your description. If you're interested to know more about one of them, you tap your wand on their photograph and the comp card of the girl will appear. In there you will find more pictures as well as more detailed information such as height, weight and so on."

"Take your time to decide. When you've made your choice, please ring the bell, and we will arrange an appointment with the lady you're interested in."

The blond nodded and started to leaf wearily through the book. It had not been his idea to come here. In fact it had been his mother who had urged him to go more like threatened, really. She had said that she couldn't see him moping and hiding any longer and that if she had to pay a girl to get him to go out, she would do so.

Now he was stuck here with a madam who wouldn't even admit she was one, scrolling through a list of high-end call girls. He had to admit that most of them were really pretty, some even beautiful. Many had had their looks magically enhanced you could always see that, no matter how good the Plastic Healer they hired but not all of them.

He stopped dead at the picture of a smiling brunette. She was not prettier than any of the others, but oddly familiar. She had very dark, straight hair, green eyes and porcelain white skin. Without hesitating Draco tapped the picture with his wand. He curiously opened the comp card and read over the summarising stats quickly before he moved on to what he hoped to be more revealing photos.

He was sorely disappointed though, since the photographs were revealing, yes, but not at all in the way he had hoped. The wizard rang the bell to call the witch from the agency in again.

"I want her," he said as soon as the woman entered the room.

"Oh, our Philippa, excellent choice! I am sure you will be satisfied with her. She is a rare gem, believe me. And if you are seeking somebody intelligent, you will hardly find somebody better suited!" the witch exclaimed. "I have her appointment book right here. When would you like to meet her?"

"How about Saturday?"

"I am sorry. She already has an appointment with another gentlewizard that evening. But how does Friday night sound to you?"

Draco shrugged. It was not as if his schedule was bursting with activities, so why not? "Yes, that will do nicely."

After they had settled the terms and conditions, as well as a time, Draco Apparated home. He knew that his mother would probably be waiting for him to tell him in all detail what kind of girl he would be meeting. As if it mattered; it was a date he had paid for paid a lot for so what was the point? They were probably all lying, cheating sluts, so what was there to talk about? He'd go out, just as his mother wished and, hopefully, never hear anything about it again.

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Philippa scrunched up her nose and looked angrily at her employer. "You know I don't like to take more than one appointment per week during term time. How am I supposed to get all my work for University done when I am taken on two evenings over the week-end?"

"And of all people... The son of a Death Eater? Did you forget that I am Muggle-born? No way, really. The thought of him touching me creeps me out..."

"Philippa, child, be reasonable! To secure Draco Malfoy as a regular client for our agency would be a real asset! Imagine if you could add him to YOUR regulars!"

"Right," the other witch mumbled under her breath and hid an annoyed huff. "I really don't think that's a good idea. I doubt that he'd want to meet somebody of my birth. And honestly, I would rather not touch him either..."

"He knows you're Muggle-born. I am sure he will prove to be a very generous gentlewizard!"

"Where will we be going?" Philippa finally surrendered and turned towards the other witch.

"Good girl, that's the right attitude. You will have dinner at the *Magique*, I have already put out several dresses for you to choose from..."

"Did he insinuate if he wanted to be... you know?"

"No, he didn't. But he was quite taken with your pictures, if you know what I mean."

Philippa blushed a bit, and the other witch wondered not for the first time how somebody as innocent could be working in such a job AND be good at it if you believed her clients. Well, she wouldn't complain since Philippa was sought-after. Not like some of the girls, but certainly more than the average performer. A pity she would only take a limited number of clients per week.

If only she could get her to quit those absurd studies. A girl with her abilities did not need to study; she should focus on her career in the business, do the job for a few years and then land one of her clients as husband or at least become his mistress. That's what a self respecting escort did after all. But it seemed that she was fighting a losing battle.

The brunette witch sorted methodically through the dresses the other woman had lain out for her. She finally decided on a black cocktail dress, with a skirt ending just above the knees, the top showing a nice amount of cleavage without being offensive. The shoes were easily chosen, as was the purse to go with her outfit.

At the front desk she signed for the borrowed items and requested the key to the safe. She chose a sensible pearl necklace and matching earrings, signed for those, too, and then left the agency in a hurry.

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"Molly?" Hermione stepped into the kitchen of the Burrow like she did every day. "Anybody home?"

"Oh Hermione, dear! We're here..." the Weasley matriarch entered the room with a baby on her hip. "This little one needed a clean nappy. Didn't you, Sophe?"

The little girl bounced and reached for Hermione: "Nappy, Mummy..."

"Hello Sunshine..." the witch took the baby and kissed her cheeks. "How was your day? Did you have fun with Grandma Molly?"

"Oh we had fun, didn't we, Sophe? You learned a new word today, remember? What was the word?"

The girl just stared at her with big, chocolate brown eyes so much like her mother's and chewed on her fingers.

"Do you remember, sweetheart? The word was Dr..." Molly paused and the little girl's eyes lit up.

"Dagon! Dagon, Mummy!"

"Dragon? That's a good word!" She turned to Molly. "I am sorry I was late. I got held up with the accounting... Something did not add up. I hope you had no other plans?"

"Don't worry, Hermione! Sophia is never a bother, you know that very well. Why don't the two of you stay for dinner?"

"Oh, Molly, I'd love to, really, but I need to go home. I have revision to do, and I know very well that if I stay for dinner I won't be home before ten. But I'll be over for brunch on Sunday, I promise. And I actually have a favour to ask you. Could you babysit Sophe on Friday night? One of the waiters is sick, and they need a replacement..."

"You shouldn't be working so hard, Hermione! I thought that by doing the accounting for the pub you were supposed to work fewer night shifts! Obviously I can take her, but you know, you really should take more time for yourself and your baby to relax and spend quality time."

The younger witch smiled a constrained smile. "And how do you suppose I pay my rent? Not to talk about food and nappies for little Miss Sunshine here?"

"Couldn't you raise some more credit? You have done that before..."

"Yes, and I am at the absolute limit of what they would give me. And before you say anything else: yes, even with Harry bailing for me."

Molly huffed in indignation, but Hermione knew too well that she wasn't huffing at her but at the perceived injustice that a single mother should have to work her ass off in order to continue her studies and provide for her child. She walked Hermione and Sophe over to the fireplace and blew both of them a kiss before they stepped into the green flames.

When she arrived home a few minutes later, Hermione put her book-bag down, put her cloak on the hanger and then gave her full attention to her beautiful daughter. The gods knew her little angel deserved it. She knew very well that they spent too little time together, but what could she do? She did what she could, working night shifts instead of day shifts when possible, had even lowered her expectations of her studies, because honestly, what was an Outstanding worth if it meant not seeing her baby nearly as much as she wanted?

Sophia was such a lovely child. It was a pity that her father wanted nothing to do with her. But what did she care, actually. Sophe had everything she could want for: a loving mother, doting grandparents and a bunch of honorary uncles who were more than willing to replace a lousy father.

When Sophia got impatient with the book Hermione was reading for her, the older witch let the girl go and run around on her still wobbly feet. Ruffling through the blonde curls on her daughter's head, Hermione got up from the sofa to prepare dinner. It would be... Broccoli and potatoes with a bit of grated cheese. Perfect.

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Philippa entered the *Magique* fifteen minutes before the stipulated time. It was a habit of hers to arrive early. It gave the customer the feeling of being important enough to be waited for, and herself the chance to become accustomed with the location. Not that this was necessary; she had been at the restaurant a few times with other clients, but she still preferred it this way.

She waited at the bar for Draco to appear. The maître d' would inform him that she had already arrived. It usually was good to make a first acquaintance at the bar, having a drink. It seemed to relax the men, especially when they were first-timers like Malfoy. She tapped her toes to the rhythm of the tune that sounded out of the speakers. The witch knew very well that she was attracting the stares of every single man in the bar. But that was the aim of wearing shoes like hers, wasn't it?

The stilettos were black, peep-toe and had a five inch heel. If it weren't for magic she would never have considered wearing shoes like that, but thanks to a stabilising and cushioning charm, they were reasonably comfortable to wear. And even more important, her legs looked like they'd never end a great turn-on to every man she knew.

The witch swirled the dry Martini in her glass, when somebody slid onto the stool next to her. She looked up, smiling brightly because she expected it to be Draco. When she realised that it was not Draco at all, she tuned her smile down and turned back off, concentrating on her drink once more. But the wizard next to her was not ready to give up.

"May I buy you a drink?" he asked, smiling in what he thought a seductive way.

"No, thank you. I am waiting for somebody. He should be here any minute."

"But as long as he isn't, you could certainly keep me company and have a drink with me, right?" he moved his stool closer to her.

Philippa sighed. Things like this happened at regular intervals, unfortunately. "No, thank you very much, but I am not interested. I'd much prefer to wait for my friend on my own." She drew her own stool away from the intrusive man and tried her best to ignore him.

Draco had followed the whole exchange from the doorway and approached them only in time to prevent the other wizard from putting his hand on the young woman's thigh.

"Excuse me, but I think my friend made it very clear that she did not want to be bothered. Please remove yourself from near her or I will have to do it for you," he stated

calmly and put himself between the man and Philippa. He then turned and took a first close look at his company for the evening.

"Philippa. You look stunning." He kissed her hand lightly. "Do you want to have another drink, or proceed to a table right away?"

"I think we should go to table. I don't like the present company too much..." She smiled her most dazzling smile at him.

"As the lady wishes."

Draco offered her his arm and led her into the restaurant, following their personal waiter to their table.

They were seated at the best table in the restaurant. What else could be expected of an outing with the Malfoy heir? Even if the family had long fallen from grace, they still held an important place in society even if it was more for money than other reasons. The waiter placed the menus in front of them and waited a few feet away for their order.

Philippa watched Draco through the lashes of her eyes. He seemed engrossed in the menu, not inclined to start the conversation. They ordered their meal and drinks and then looked at each other in open curiosity.

"Thank you." She decided that she would use the earlier incident to break the ice.

"Whatever for?" Draco looked confused.

"For earlier. The guy at the bar? He was getting a bit too close; a rather unpleasant experience."

"I am amazed that a woman in your profession would feel that way." He shrugged nonchalantly.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't tell me you like all of your suitors?"

"That is something completely different," she answered with conviction.

"Is it?"

"Obviously. My job is my job. I get paid. My clients get what they pay for. That man was harassing me, as he would every other woman. You pay to be close to me, so it doesn't matter if I like you or not. He didn't pay and I didn't like him. Nothing gives him the right to assume his advances are welcome."

Draco chuckled a bit at this logic. "Well, if you want to see it that way..."

They had a perfectly pleasant time at dinner, and at the end Draco was almost happy that his mother had forced this date on him. Philippa had turned out to be an intelligent young woman who had a great insight on many subjects. He was particularly intrigued by her profound knowledge of Potions. Although he had never studied Potions at University, he had always been one of the best informed people when it came to that subject.

"Tell me, how come you're so knowledgeable in Potions?"

"It's what I am studying..." She smiled at him and Draco had the impression that this was the first absolutely honest smile that evening.

"You're a student? Really?"

"Yes. At LMU. Like I said, I am in their Potions programme, but take some classes in Herbology and Arithmancy, too." She played with her dessert and once again watched him from under her lashes. She wasn't sure if it was a good idea to tell him that she was a student, much less what subject or university. It was the first time she had told any of her clients so much about herself. But he just seemed like he wouldn't use his knowledge against her.

"London Merlin University? Impressive. You must be really good if you got into their Potions programme. Is that why you work... umm..."

The witch felt his discomfort and released him from it by simply answering, "Yes. That's why. The tuition fee needs to be paid. And since the wizarding world doesn't know anything about scholarships..."

"Scholarships?"

"Exactly my point." Philippa smiled wryly. "In the Muggle world you can get monetary help to pay for tuition and living costs, either from different organisations, the government or even the university you're attending. No such thing for LMU."

"You're Muggle-born?" Draco inquired curiously.

"Yes... Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all. They asked me if I had any preferences concerning the blood status. But I don't, not anymore at least. I will not lie, it was very important to me at one point in my life. But now... It's a new world, right?"

"If you say so..." the witch smiled. Then she cocked her head, raised an eyebrow and asked, "And what are we doing after this lovely dinner? Would you like me to accompany you home?"

"Actually... I had a great time, Philippa, believe me. And I hope we can repeat this experience. But I did not hire you to sleep with me. My mother talked me into this. She thinks I don't go out often enough and keep I quote *moping around, wasting my youth*"

For a second Draco thought he saw a flash of annoyance in her eyes, but it was so quickly gone that he probably imagined it. After all he had already paid her agency 500 Galleons for this evening, so even if her share of it was only half of that, it was certainly worth three hours of work.

They left the restaurant and slowly made their way to the closest apparition point. Philippa had her arm linked with Draco's and they conversed animatedly.

An enraged shriek stopped them dead in their tracks.

"How dare you! How dare you flaunting my fiancé?!"

"Pansy. What are you doing here?" Draco kept Philippa close as she tried to extract her arm from his.

"The question is what are you doing, Draco Malfoy! What are you doing here with this woman?"

"Not that it concerns you, but I am out and having a nice evening with a lovely young lady. May I intro..."

Pansy interrupted him angrily. "Going out? With somebody who's not your fiancé? How dare you!"

"We're not engaged anymore, you know that very well. You fucked my best friend, and thus made it very clear how important I was to you. There's no shagging somebody else and marrying me. It's very easy to understand, so please, leave us alone."

"But, Draky... I was only confused... I have been waiting for you to contact me ever since! You told me to leave you in peace and I did, to give you space... I thought we'd be okay, you and I!"

Draco just shook his head. Without further consideration of the other witch, he guided his date further down the street and smiled apologetically at her.

"I am sorry about that. She's my ex, and she hasn't accepted yet that we're done."

"She slept with your best mate?"

Draco nodded sullenly.

"What a bitch!" the brunette said honestly. Compassion shone through her eyes, and he could see that she meant what she said. "Is that why you have been 'moping around, wasting your youth'?"

"Yes... I was really smitten with her, you know. Maybe not truly in love, but she had certain qualities I appreciated very much."

"No kidding..." Philippa mumbled sarcastically, but then switched on a seductive smile and said, "Well, you know, I have certain qualities that you'd probably appreciate just as much..."

But Draco just chuckled and shook his head. "No, I am sorry. You'll have to be content with what you earned tonight. I don't pay for sex. It is bad enough that I let my mother convince me to pay for company. Although it was worth it. Shall I accompany you home?"

"No," the young woman smiled. "I don't give away where I live. I am sorry. Thank you for being so considerate, though. I had a nice evening too. Good night." She kissed him lightly on the cheek and then Apparated away.

In her flat the witch fell into her old, comfortable armchair and wrestled the shoes from her feet. *Content with what I earned tonight..* The audacity of that boy! I only hope the guy tomorrow is interested in something more than a stupid dinner. This was certainly not worth my time," she babbled angrily to herself.

She went to her small, cramped bathroom to remove her make-up and brush her teeth. Then she removed the simple glamour charm and smiled at her own reflection before she turned off the light and went to bed.

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Hermione hummed happily while she prepared breakfast at The Burrow. Her daughter sat in her high chair, munching with abandon some bread with cheese while they waited for the rest of the inhabitants to wake up. It was tradition that the witch would come early enough to be there when her daughter woke up when she stayed overnight at Molly and Arthur's place. That way the two of them could sleep in, and Hermione could reciprocate for Molly's many favours at least in some small way by taking care of the breakfast.

"Good morning, Hermione, darling. It's been too long since I have seen you!" Arthur enveloped her in a fatherly hug.

"Arthur... I hope Sophe was not too much of a bother?"

"Oh stop that nonsense! When will you accept that she's never a bother? You know Molly. She thinks that it's far too quiet here anyway. At least when one of our grandchildren is here, she's occupied." He sat down next to Sophia and stopped her from flinging a piece of bread right to the floor. "So, how was work?"

"Serving drinks is always the same, Arthur..."

"I know, I know, but did the crash gister break down again?"

"Crash gister... Nice pun Arthur, but it's actually a cash register. And as fitting as the name crash register would be, no, it didn't for once." She grinned. "But the cook almost set the deep fat fryer on fire."

"That would have been a deep fat fire..." the red headed man joked.

"Yeah, only it wasn't funny when it happened." Hermione flipped over the sausages and turned the heat off before serving her honorary father his breakfast. "Molly's still sleeping?"

"I'm just here..." came a cheerful voice from the entrance of the kitchen.

"Good morning. Just on time, breakfast is ready. I am sure it runs in the family to be always on time for meals."

The three adults enjoyed a quiet breakfast, only interrupted by Sophia's happy babbling about dagon's and naits. They were not too sure if naits meant knives or knights, but Hermione pointed out that knights would go better with dragons.

With all the Weasley children now having left home, Molly often complained that it was far too lonely, and Hermione knew that she loved it when she came over for breakfast. The only time when The Burrow resembled what it had been during her school days was on Sundays for brunch. Although it was rare that everybody would be able to attend, they all tried their best to make it there on a more or less regular basis.

For Hermione it had become one of the few opportunities to see her friends. Between her studies, work and the little monster that was currently decorating the kitchen floor with pumpkin juice, there was not much time left to be a carefree twentysomething like the others.

Harry, Ron, Ginny and George, too, were catching up on what they had missed as teenagers and having fun whenever possible. Hermione didn't begrudge them their freedom since all of them were taking their obligations seriously nonetheless, but she just didn't have the chance to live this experience with them. From time to time Ron and Harry would force her to have a golden evening, as they called it jokingly, during which Ginny would babysit-but that was about as far as it went.

She was content with her life. Of course it was not always easy to be a single mum, but honestly, she had everything she needed. Support from her family and friends, the possibility to study at one of the best universities in the wizarding world and a stunning daughter. What else could she ask for? She didn't need a man to be happy. They were all the same anyway.

Sunday afternoon found Hermione asleep in the shadow of the large apple tree in the garden of The Burrow. Sophe snuggled against her, sucking greedily at her thumb. Some well-meaning soul (probably Molly) had placed a light blanket over the two of them. Harry chuckled at the picture that presented itself to him.

Motherhood became Hermione. Neither of her friends had expected that during her pregnancy. She had almost freaked out when she first learned that she was with child. Not because she didn't want her baby (oh no, Harry remembered well enough how she once told him in dry words: *"If I am ready to shag, then I'd better be ready to raise a*

child, too."), but because she had been scared. Scared that she'd have to quit her studies, scared about how she'd pay for the baby's needs, scared what her friends would think of her.

If Harry had thought that she was in deep with the first shock, it had been nothing compared to the panic attacks she had had a few months into her pregnancy. They all had been worried about her, and it had been Molly who had finally put her foot down and told her in no uncertain terms that her worrying wasn't good for her unborn child at all.

But it was only a few months after Sophia's birth that Hermione seemed to really stop worrying. Or at least as much as a young mother could stop worrying anyhow.

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Philippa grumbled as she got ready for yet another date with Draco Malfoy. She was not sure how that stupid witch had got her to accept another appointment with that man. He had been charming, certainly, but work wasn't about going out with a charming man. It was about gaining enough money for university. She replayed the conversation with her employer in her head again and again...

"No, there is no way I will meet him again. It doesn't pay off for me. I cannot survive on an appointment with him, which means that I'd have to take two appointments that week. No."

"But Philippa, Mr. Malfoy was very happy with you! I am sure this time would be different."

"No, I am not interested. It's not worth it."

This stupid, stupid... Arrgh. This was the last time she would get her to do something like this. If this night didn't pay off, she was over and done with Draco Malfoy. With a last look into the mirror, she Apparated to the bar where they were supposed to meet.

Surprisingly Draco was already there. She checked her watch. He was early, earlier than she was. The witch smiled and approached him with swaying hips. When he saw her his face lit up, and a genuine smile graced his features.

"What a pleasure to see you again, Philippa. It has been a long..."

"Draco... Not that long. Three weeks only."

"Yes, you are quite busy aren't you?"

The young woman just smiled and took the chair offered to her opposite to him. She ordered her dry Martini and then concentrated on the wizard.

"So, what play are we seeing tonight? I was only told that we'll go to the theatre."

"It's the opening night of Macbeth. Everybody will be there, I really needed somebody to go with me, I am glad you were free today."

Philippa smiled to hide her annoyance. *Free?* she thought. *I guess it depends on the definition of free. If free means no other appointment, then it is certainly correct..* But she only said, "Shakespeare! That's great, I love Shakespeare. Don't worry, nobody will recognise me, there are spells to ensure your privacy."

The blond scratched his head thoughtfully. "I hadn't even thought about that yet. But I guess I am thankful for that."

The witch did not comment on his last statement. She had heard it so often she had lost count. No matter how nice they were, no matter how often they assured her that they had enjoyed their time immensely, nobody would get caught with an escort. The disgrace! It didn't bother her anymore; that was just the way it was. But sometimes she just wished they could be honest and say that they were ashamed and not hide behind cheap excuses.

They departed from the bar not much later. Draco wanted to arrive early at the theatre, a guarantee to see and to be seen. He had been staying at home entirely too much since the disaster with Pansy. He needed to be seen more. And now (thanks to his mother, he admitted grudgingly) he had the right woman at his side. Even if it was all show.

Philippa enjoyed the theatre very much. It had been too long since she had last had the opportunity to watch a play, not least have good company. And Draco was good company. She thoroughly enjoyed discussing the performance of the actors and the contents of the play at dinner. Nevertheless, Philippa had the distinct impression that the evening would not turn out to be equally beneficial when it came to the financial side. And she was right. After dinner, Draco accompanied her to the Apparition point, kissed her on the cheek and said, "I hope to see you again, soon. There are some events coming up, and I'd like you to go with me."

The witch sighed and shook her head. "I hope you'll forgive me for being blunt, Draco. The evenings with you are fun but they don't earn me enough money. I am sorry, but I will not be at your disposal anymore. There are other girls registered with the agency that don't engage in uhmmore intimate activities. They will cost you far less money, and I promise they are just as charming and fitting for a public outing as I am."

Draco stared at her in disbelief. "I paid 700 Galleons for this evening; 500 for the last and you're telling me that isn't enough money?"

"Listen, I know that 60 Galleons for four hours work is good compared to somebody who works in a book store or in a restaurant. But it just isn't enough for me. I have university fees to pay, food, rent... I try to keep my schedule to one client a week, and an appointment with you cannot replace any of my other clients."

"I understand that you don't want to pay for sex. Merlin, I can even respect you for it. But that is exactly what I have to offer. If you're not interested in the product, then I cannot sell and if I don't sell, I don't make a profit. Even if the agency is called Escort Agency, let's be honest for one moment—we're hookers. And if you're not looking for one, then I am the wrong person to make an appointment with."

"As I said, there are other girls. You have to ask directly for them. They are cheaper and thus they obviously try to give you appointments with me or one of the other girls who do... well, you know. But one of them might be the best solution for you."

"Wait a second, what are you rambling on about 60 Galleons? You mean 60 Galleons per hour, right?"

Philippa threw her head back and laughed, a deep, heart-felt laugh, that seemed so familiar, even if Draco was hearing it for the first time. "No, I am certainly not talking about 60 Galleons per hour. What do you think the agency share is? Hmm?"

The wizard shrugged. He felt stupid somehow, even if he really couldn't tell why. "I don't know. Maybe... Ten percent? Or twenty max?"

"Well, that is my share."

"Twenty percent?"

"Not twenty. Ten. And obviously I have to pay to borrow the dress, the shoes, the jewellery. Out of this evening I gain 60 Galleons. Last time it was 40. On average, I earn about 250 per night."

"I am not in this job because I want to be in the company of rich people. I do this because I need to earn a lot of money in little time. With you... that's just not the case. I trust you get my point?"

Draco nodded and watched her Apparate away after a quick peck on his cheek. Hell, he had not thought that escorts would be so blunt and honest with their clients. Weren't they supposed to accommodate them and say what their customers wanted to hear? But then again, she had told him that he was a bad client for her. *She sells sex*, he thought. *Nothing more, nothing less. She's a hooker.* He had almost forgotten that. Of course he was very aware that he paid to see her, but he had to admit that he found her rather charming and preferred not to think about her in that way.

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Draco was fuming. It had been almost two months since he had last seen Philippa. He had done what she had told him to do and taken appointments with the girls who did not wish to be intimate with their clients. And no matter what the witch had said, those women simply couldn't match her.

While Philippa had been funny, intelligent and blunt, those other witches he had taken out were boring, shallow and false. He had tried several times to get another appointment with the brunette, but to no avail. He supposed he should be happy that they had agreed to give her the letter he wrote to her.

Dear Philippa,

I tried to date other women from the agency, and it just didn't work out. They are dull compared to you; we had such a great time together. Or at least I had and I only hope it was the same for you.

I know why you don't want to take another appointment with me. And believe me, I understand your motives. But what if I promised that it would be worth your time? Would you please reconsider and meet me once more? I miss you, and I'd really like to see you again.

Yours sincerely,

Draco Malfoy

Philippa sighed when she read the letter. She had to admit that she had missed him, too. He was a bit arrogant, but he was interesting to talk to. If they were friends, she was sure that they would squabble with one another regularly. They just had such different opinions on some points. Not that she'd ever consider one of her clients a friend, but still...

Dear Draco,

I hope you'll live up to your promises. I agree to meet you in lieu of the appointment next Thursday with Christy you asked for.

But only because I missed you, too.

Yours,

Philippa Ephesus

They met up at the bar of the *Magique*, and Draco took her by Side-Along Apparition to the birthday party they were supposed to attend that evening. He had warned her that it would be a boring, elitist pureblood event, but the witch had only laughed and told him that more than half of her clients took her to such events, usually to show off with a much younger woman at the arm.

After the party Draco led her to one of the thestral-drawn carriages that waited to take the guests home. Since most of them were so inebriated that they couldn't Apparate anymore, there were many people waiting in line.

"So... if I wanted to... Let's say I wanted a blow job and to sleep with you?" he asked very quietly so the other people couldn't hear him. "How much would I owe you?"

"Would you want to come both times? Or would the blow job be foreplay?"

"Umm... Foreplay?" He was obviously uncomfortable with her bluntness once again.

"250 Galleons."

Draco nodded, filled out and signed one of his Gringott's vouchers and handed it over to Philippa. If that was the price for her company, he was ready to pay it. He didn't need to count his Galleons; he could afford to spend such an exorbitant sum on a date. It was not as if he intended to make use of the services he had just paid for.

She smiled and pocketed the voucher. They waited in silence until it was their turn with the carriages. The witch stated clearly in the direction of the thestrals, "Take us on a ride over London," and pulled the blond in.

The wizard twitched his eyebrow but said nothing. He was curious to know what the witch wanted to do. He'd have thought that she'd want to go home as fast as possible. But he was obviously mistaken. The carriage soared in the air, only the flapping of the thestrals' wings could be heard.

Philippa pushed him to sit down on the plush seat and knelt in front of him. Her slim hands undid the fly of his pants with practised movements. Draco felt his cock twitch, but stilled her hands with his own.

"What... don't, you shouldn't..." he choked out. This witch was too insistent for her own good. How was he supposed to resist when a beautiful young woman tried to go down on him?

"You prefer a bed?"

"No... just... I didn't want you to..."

But the witch didn't seem to hear and continued what she had begun. She smiled up at him. "I didn't think so..." and lowered her mouth onto his already half-erect member.

And she did know what to do with her tongue! Draco's determination not to pay for sex resolved into nothingness. How could he say stop, when her soft lips closed like a velvet prison around his glans, her tongue twirled lightly just beneath? She gently licked and sucked until his cock was hard enough to pleasure him at a more demanding pace. Then she glided slowly further down his shaft, massaging him with her tongue.

Draco groaned; this was simply too good to be true! It had been such a long time since a woman had done this for him. He bucked his hips up, shoving his hard manhood deeper into her warm and welcoming mouth. Philippa did not hesitate, but sucked greedily at it while cradling his balls in her hand, playing tenderly with them.

It was a delicious view how her perfectly shaped lips glided up and down his girth. From time to time her little pink tongue would peek out, caressing him, too. She had her eyes half closed and concentrated only on the feeling of his sex in her mouth, hearing his laboured breathing and moaning.

He fucked her mouth eagerly with one hand in her hair, the other one gripping the seat tightly. This was just perfect! The brunette had her lips closed tightly around his cock, so that there was just the right amount of pressure. From time to time her teeth grazed his length tenderly, only to soothe the tiny pain away with her tongue immediately.

The wizard tried to speed up a little more; he was so close! But apparently she knew that, too, because she released his dick with a soft pop and looked up at him slyly.

"Ah, ah, ah..." she chided him. "We cannot have you coming yet, can we? I still have other plans for you, Mister..." she told him as she slowly caressed him.

Then she let go of him, earning her a disappointed groan. But Philippa just smiled, her hands sliding down her skirt, gathering the hem... She then took one of his hands and put it under her skirt, directing it to the elastic of her lacy knickers. Draco slid his other hand under her skirt, too, caressing the soft skin of her ass cheeks. His fingertips slowly entered the crotch of her knickers, inquiringly caressing along the slit of her sex.

He glided her knickers down her legs and continued the exploration of her little pussy. The pubic hair was neatly trimmed, her opening completely hair-free. The wizard wet his finger with a bit of saliva and pinched her clit tenderly before probing her opening with it. Philippa was straddling his lap by now and had resumed caressing his pulsing cock.

Gods, even her hands felt heavenly on him... And she was wet. Not dripping, but wet enough. He moaned, not ready to wait any longer to have her. He gripped her hips and pulled her against him, guiding her carefully atop of his weeping length. She lowered herself a bit, teasing the tip of his member with her moist heat before impaling herself with one smooth move.

Draco threw his head back in bliss. Regardless of what he might have thought, she was tight, oh so tight. He thrust his pelvis up, meeting her in her movements. With fumbling fingers he freed her breasts of the confines of her dress. They were glorious, just as he had thought. Not very large, but they fit his hands perfectly with dusky, fawn nipples.

He latched on one of them with ardour, caressing her other breast, while she rode him passionately. She moaned at the contact of his warm mouth with her skin, throwing her head back. Her slim throat bared to him was too much of a temptation, so he temporarily abandoned her nipple to plant a multitude of small kisses and bites along the vulnerable flesh.

The wizard slid a bit further to the edge of the seat, pulling her even closer against him. She had been in control of the act until then, but now he was ready to claim it. And as if she felt his need to be the one in charge, she let him. He gripped her buttocks tightly, pulling her as close as possible, grinding his hips into her.

She melted against his body, and he held her tightly before turning her around and laying her down on the velvet bench. Her high-heel clad feet dug into his bare ass, urging him on and on. Philippa arched against him, her beautiful body searching for friction with his muscled chest.

Draco continued to pound heavily into her velvet heat, sweat dripping from his eyebrow. The witch mewled in contentment as he hit her sweet spot repeatedly. She dug her fingernails into his back and drew him close, biting the base of his neck. The combination of pain and pleasure drove the wizard over the edge. He felt the tightening of his balls and slid his hand between their bodies to stimulate Philippa's sensitive clit.

As he shot his hot seed into her womb, he felt her walls clamping around him. With a shout that sounded half surprised, half relieved, she followed him into orgasm. Draco fell onto his forearms, resting his front against hers. She had her eyes closed, her breasts jiggling softly with every breath she took.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 4

If your child fell ill, how far would you go to save its life? Would you do anything to secure the help of the one person who could make a difference?

They met regularly after that evening, or as regularly as Philippa would accept an appointment with him. She had made it very clear that she would not run on just one client; she preferred to stay independent. And since she would only take a limited number of appointments per week, that made it pretty much impossible to meet Draco too often. But they met at least once per month, twice when Draco could persuade her.

He had become quite infatuated with her. She was everything he could possibly want in a woman. And the sex was great, breathtaking, spectacular. Seldom had he had a partner with such skill and abandon. Of course, one could argue that this was her job. But Draco did not think that she faked her orgasms. They were too true; none of the false moaning and screaming Pansy had displayed.

By now he knew the signs of her approaching climax very well. Her breath became ragged, and her inner walls would start to flutter delicately. And depending on their position she clawed his back. Once she came she sighed in contentment, eyes closed and lips open, always looking surprised and happy.

Of course, he had not been able to resist asking her if she did fake orgasms with clients. Honest as she was, she had simply answered yes, and nothing more. She had laughed heartily at his uncertain reaction and reassured him that she didn't need to fake it with him. *"Don't worry, your manly pride doesn't need to suffer. It is quite a pleasant surprise that you're able to take care of my needs in spite of our more professional relationship. That doesn't happen often."* She had smiled while she said it, and he had believed her.

In the months they had been meeting each other, they had had sex almost everywhere: on carriage seats, against the wall in deserted alleyways, in his private booth at the theatre. The only place they hadn't ventured yet was the Manor, and had thus not done it in the most old-fashioned way: in a bed.

Draco stood in front of his mirror and gazed deep in thought at his reflection. He remembered the conversation they had had during one of their encounters, a few months into their acquaintance. *"Quit the business..."* he had told her. But she had simply laughed.

"And then what, Draco? I cannot afford my studies without this. I don't want to end up as a technical assistant in a potions lab, and that's as far as I'd go with my current education. At some point I'd probably become head of laboratory, but that's all. I want to be the one in charge of the research, not a mere assistant."

"I'd pay for your studies. Nothing would change, apart from the fact that you'd not work anymore." He had insisted, but Philippa had refused to give in.

"Right, and be your private whore, dependent on you as my only client. No, that's just not possible, Draco. I am sorry."

"You wouldn't be my private whore."

"Yeah, your mistress then. A kept woman. There is no difference. It would still be exchanging sex for money, just that you'd have much more control over my life than you have now. It's not an option accept it."

And he had accepted it, because he knew too well that she wouldn't budge from that viewpoint. He had not dared to point out that she could be much more than his mistress. She could be his girlfriend, for heaven's sake. He wasn't ashamed of her!

There had been a time when he looked down at women. Truth be told, he had looked down at pretty much everybody. How could he not, being the one and only Malfoy heir, his family in the highest possible standing in wizarding society? He had had everything: money, good looks, intelligence. It had been the time when his father was still in the good books of the Ministry of Magic, and his mother had not been on probation.

But his world, his faith in the truth of his upbringing's teaching, had been shattered during the war. He had witnessed too much, lived too many horrors to uphold the beliefs that had been instilled in him since his childhood. It had been a slow process: a lot of happenings leading to his questioning of the Dark Lord's goals. By no means had there been a sudden epiphany making him realise that it was all wrong and suddenly becoming one of the *'good guys'*.

When his father had gone on trial, and subsequently been convicted to twenty years in Azkaban, it had been a humbling experience for Draco. His own probation and community service had done the rest. He had seen widowed women struggling to rebuild their lives, orphans trying to get over the loss of their parents, fathers begging for help to bring up their family.

He had come to realise that war was always hardest on the weak ones. But how could he call them weak, when they managed to survive nonetheless? When they brought up their children to be decent witches and wizards anyway? His view of the world had changed greatly, and he tried to live up to these perceived changes every day.

Now Draco wished to believe that people were essentially good, that their intentions were always the best. Sometimes it wasn't easy though. After what he liked to call *'the Pansy incident'*, he had struggled not to lose his faith in people. It hadn't been easy, but he was happy that he had continued on his new path after he found out about her and Blaise. People just tended to be much nicer and more amiable if you were decent to them.

He sighed and looked at his watch. He had five minutes until he had to leave if he wanted to be on time for their date. The wizard took a last glance around his room, satisfied with what he saw. Tonight he would bring her here. Their first *'appointment'* had been almost eight months ago and there was little he longed more for than to make love to her in a bed. Yes, make love. Not fucking, shagging, screwing or humping her and not sleeping with her either. He wanted to make love. Forget, just once, that he paid for the privilege of touching her body. Forget, just this time, that there were other men who touched her too.

He Apparated to the point where they were to meet. As always, she was already there, waiting for him. Despite not arriving twenty minutes early anymore when she had a meeting with Draco, she made sure to be there first. The brunette witch smiled at him and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Hello, Draco... Long time no see."

"So, now you admit that I don't get to see you nearly as often as we should!"

"Oh, Draco, don't start on that... Term has only just started; we have seen each other a lot during the holidays! But tell me... Where are we going? You didn't say I hope my dress is appropriate?"

He looked her over carefully from head to toe, and nodded.

"Perfect." He offered her his arm. "I'll take you side along. It's a surprise... Let's go."

Philippa stumbled slightly when they arrived at their destination. Draco monitored her closely to be able to judge her reaction. When she finally got a glimpse of their destination her breath hitched and her eyes widened.

"Malfoy Manor..." she breathed out.

"You've been here before?" He was surprised.

"It's in Witch Weekly and the *Prophet* at least twice a year... Pretty difficult not to know what it looks like."

"I guess." The wizard smiled and approached the gates that had opened by themselves on their arrival. When Philippa didn't follow him straight away, he stopped and turned. She looked a bit ashen. "You're not coming? Are you all right?"

"Isn't... your mother... ? Is it okay if we...?"

"She's on holiday. And even if she were here... she's the one who set me up with this whole thing." He once again offered her his arm and was glad when she took it. It would have been such a shame if she had refused to come here with him. He had looked forward to this evening too much.

"I bet she didn't think this would become such a permanent and expensive arrangement, though," Philippa remarked as she followed him up the drive leading to the manor house.

Draco smirked. "Probably not."

The house-elves had prepared a superb five course dinner, and, as always, they talked about everything and nothing. Philippa, who had become much more relaxed about disclosing little tidbits of her studies, did a wonderful impersonation of her Bioinorganic-Potions professor, who seemed to have many traits in common with Professor Flitwick, whilst having the brains and passion for potions of Professor Snape.

After dessert, Draco led her from the balcony into his room. He gave her time to explore his rooms leisurely, pleased by her interest in his large bookcase. Standing behind her, he stroked her hips slowly and remarked, "We have a library, too. If you're interested, I can give you a tour next time we come here."

His hands found the zip of her dress and opened it slowly. Pressing his lips against her bare neck, he slid the soft material from her shoulders and let it fall to her feet. Philippa stepped gracefully out of it and then turned around, taking a few steps back to give him the opportunity to admire her body fully for the very first time.

She had shed her shoes earlier in the evening, claiming that there was something wrong with the cushioning charm. Now she stood there only in her hold-ups, knickers and bra. Draco thought that she looked very young and unlike the temptress she usually was. He now remembered the information from her file; she was older than he was, although not much. For some reason, he had forgotten that. He approached her slowly, caressing the dip of her waist with his index finger when he was finally close enough to touch her.

"You're beautiful," he whispered and continued tracing her body tenderly with his fingers.

Philippa smiled softly and started opening the buttons of his shirt. She had long ago admitted to herself that she was rather attracted to him. Draco was one of her youngest clients, and by far the best looking. She liked his firm body, the way he moved when they had sex. And he made her come, something that was certainly not a usual occurrence in her job. While she was a normal young woman, who enjoyed sex as much as anyone when it was up to her to choose the partner, sex with her clients was generally not a very pleasant encounter for her. There had been very bad experiences too, although those were fortunately very few and far between.

The witch slid his pants down his legs, so that they were now in a similar state of undress: he still in his boxers, she with her stockings and knickers. Draco had undone her bra earlier to have unhampered access to her breasts. He loved her breasts, although for the love of Merlin he couldn't explain why. His preferences had always been for girls with a rather large bosom, but Philippa had a small B cup. They were perfect anyway in his eyes, firm and round like apples.

He led her backward until she bumped into his soft bed with the back of her legs and laid her down on the mattress. When she was settled in the middle of it, the blonde

hooked his finger under the seam of her knickers and pulled them carefully down her shapely legs. He then parted her knees tenderly, all the while keeping eye contact with her.

The fingers of one hand carefully stroked her folds, his other hand stayed on her leg, caressing her still stocking clad calf and advancing slowly up her leg. Draco rested his cheek against her inner thigh, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her arousal. He had never tasted her before, and he couldn't wait to do it tonight.

To be honest, he had never been a great fan of oral sex at least as the giving partner and had only done it out of a sense of justice and reciprocity. None of his partners had found reason to complain, quite the opposite; they had been very satisfied, but it had never increased his own pleasure. This was different though, the very thought of tasting her drove him crazy with lust.

Doing it hadn't seemed right until now. They had always found themselves in situations that were either uncomfortable, in which they could have been easily discovered, or both. And he somehow wanted to remember this moment. He wanted Philippa to remember it too. Oral sex was such an intimate act to him, and although she had done it to him quite often by now, for him, this was... just different.

He carefully parted her outer lips with his hands and gave her pussy a first slow lick. Draco could hear her breathing become uneven and the sheets shuffle as she grabbed them by her hands. Her tangy taste lingered on his tongue and he knew right away that he was addicted, utterly lost. He closed his mouth over her wet opening and started lapping it in earnest before he advanced further until he reached her swollen clit.

"Oh, god..." Philippa groaned and watched him moving between her thighs from under her lashes. The blonde head moved slowly, teasing and arousing her with his tongue and lips. He sucked her sensitive clit carefully, all the while cajoling her slit, probing her entrance with his fingers, caressing her in all the right places. Blood flooded like lava through her veins; her whole body burned in a passion she had not experienced in years. She could not resist and buried one hand in his hair, stroking her sensitive breasts with the other.

Draco felt her hand in his hair, drawing him closer to her, directing him where she wanted him to be. She had abandoned every pretence of restraint, giving herself fully to the feelings he was provoking with his mouth. A gush of her wetness reached his mouth, and he greedily lapped it all up, not wanting to miss the smallest drop of it. She arched even further into him, and he felt his already hard cock twitch. Philippa was letting out a deep moan, panting and whispering, "Yes, Draco, yes..."

The wizard looked up without pausing from his initial task. He carefully slid two fingers inside her and continued to feast on her clit. He curled his finger slightly, gauging her reaction; it was all he had hoped for. Her hips arched from the bed into his lips and hand, and, with a strangled cry, she came forcefully into his mouth.

The witch hadn't even come down from her high when she felt Draco kissing his way up from between her legs to her belly, to her breasts and her neck. He kissed her tenderly on the mouth, and for once she didn't turn her head, but let him do as he liked. It felt natural, so she opened her mouth and shyly granted his tongue entrance. She could taste herself on his lips, slightly salty but not unpleasant.

Soon her attention was attracted by his hard member, pressing slowly into her wet, hot quim. Philippa wrapped her legs around Draco and pulled him flush against her. She sighed into his mouth when he was buried deeply in her. Although the blonde wizard had not yet found his release, he felt no need to hurry, but set a slow and tender pace.

He propped his elbows up next to her shoulders and cupped her face lovingly in his hands, showering her face with small kisses. Philippa had her arms around his neck and met him at the lazy rhythm he was dictating.

Their lovemaking was tender and sweet, and Draco could not have wished for more; this woman in his arms, sighing and moaning under him, breathing his name when she came. He followed her into her climax, and although he had experienced more earth-shattering sex in his life, he could not remember a time when he had been more satisfied and happy.

They lay silently after they had finished, Draco's head in her lap, drawing little paintings on her stomach with his fingers.

Philippa was half asleep when he casually stated, "You have stretch marks."

The witch under him tensed and he could see her blanch. "I usually glamour them... Sorry you had to see that... Wait, I'll get my wand." She moved to get her purse, but Draco restrained her.

"Hey, hey... I don't mind! Stay here... It's just unexpected. You're such a tiny person..."

Philippa didn't answer, but just fiddled nervously with her fingers, concentrating hard on some imaginary scratch. Draco frowned. She was acting strangely, although she didn't seem offended by his statement. He ran his hand over her smooth legs when it suddenly hit him. He sat up.

"You have a child?" he asked incredulously.

The witch looked pitiful. Unable to meet his eyes, she nodded. The wizard forced her chin up to look her in the eyes. They were full of anxiety, worry and something else. Could it be shame?

"Are you ashamed to have a child?"

"No," she whispered and looked away.

"That's not the impression you give me. You are ashamed of something... Did you..." He gulped. "Did you give it away?"

"No!" Her reaction was fierce and full of pride. "I could never, ever give my child away! How dare you suggest something like that!?"

"What is it then? Why are you ashamed? I can see in your eyes that you are."

She shrugged. "I am not."

"And what are you doing here? In my bed instead of with your child and husband?"

Although she could tell he was struggling with the question, he asked it calmly nonetheless.

Philippa moved her chin from his grip and stared at him defiantly, daring him to say something degrading. "He's not in the picture. Neither as my partner, nor as her father."

She waited for a moment, but when he only continued staring at her in shock, she urged him on. "Don't hesitate. Say it. Say what you think of single mothers whoring themselves. Don't hold back!"

"That's what you think I'd do? Mock you when I still have your taste on my lips? Ridicule you when I have been indulging in your services for the last few months? I might not be perfect, but I am not that bigoted."

Draco looked angry, and a little hurt. She reached out for him shyly. "I am sorry." She wasn't sure how he'd react, so she was careful to touch him, but he only drew her close. He settled against the headboard with the witch in his arms.

"So it's a girl?" Philippa nodded. "How old is she?"

"A little over two."

"And the father? Why isn't he in the picture?"

"He called me *une petite putain qui ne veut rien que son argent* and told me to get rid of it" *

"He was one of your clients?" Draco was shocked. She had told him in no uncertain terms after they had slept with each other for the first time that although she had a semi-permanent contraception charm on her, that he should cast his own, too. "*Never trust an escort,*" she had said "*We wouldn't want you to find yourself in an unpleasant situation, would we?*" And now this?

"No! That was before I even thought about this kind of job... He was a French exchange student at University. Had no qualms about sleeping with a Mudblood as long as his parents in France didn't find out about it. But fathering a half-blood? Out of the question."

"I gather he doesn't pay child support then?"

"Are you kidding me? He told me to get an abortion for heaven's sake! Do you really think he'd be willing to pay child support?"

"Is that why you work for the agency?"

"Yes... I had a Gringotts' loan for the university fees in my first year. If they had continued to pay... with the help of my friends and family, it would have been fine. I didn't need him. I could have moved in with my surrogate parents, they were only too ready to take me in. I'd have continued with my job as a waitress once or twice a week and I wouldn't exactly have been rich, but I would have had enough to live on.

"But when the goblins learned that I was pregnant... Well, they had already granted the loan for the second year, so they couldn't withdraw it anymore. But they informed me that they could not support a single mother after that. The credit risk was too high.

"My parents... they died just after the war. There were some difficulties concerning my inheritance. I never saw a penny of it." She took a shuddering breath at the memory.

"A friend of mine already stood surety with his newly acquired house for my first loan. If it wasn't for him, they wouldn't have granted it to begin with. I had the choice of either dropping out or finding a way to finance the three years ahead of me. It was purely coincidence that I stumbled over an ad in the *Daily Prophet*... And so it began."

Draco had held her close while she spoke, and caressed her arms lightly.

"Do your friends and family know about your job?"

"Heavens, no! I never told them that Gringotts refused to extend the loan. If I had told them... my friend would have sold his house to pay the fees for me. The other one would have cut his business investments...

"They already pay the fees for someone else. She's in Healing School, which is very expensive as you probably know. There is no room in their budget for my fees as well. They would have given up their dreams for mine. It wouldn't be fair to ask for something like that.

"You know, this is not only about my dream. I really don't want to be a technical assistant, but not only because I would be bored out of my mind within a few years. I want to be able to give the very best to my child. I want to be able to pay the Hogwarts fees and if she wants, for her studies, too. She deserves it."

The wizard nuzzled her neck and nodded, deep in thought. He could understand her reasoning and if he was honest, he admired her for her courage and determination.

"What's her name?"

Philippa tensed once again and hesitated with her answer. "I'd rather not tell you," she finally said.

"Is she the reason why you wouldn't quit the job and be with me? Were you afraid that my offer might only stand as long as I didn't know you had a child?"

"That's part of it. But not the only reason. You don't even know me... how could you want to be with me? And I really don't appreciate the idea of being a kept woman. Now I have a job of which many think poorly, to say the least, but I am my own master. If I agree to the arrangement you're proposing, then I'll be dependent on you."

"I know you! You're Philippa Ephesus, 23..." The witch tried to interrupt him but he didn't listen and continued instead, "...Muggle-born witch and Potions student at LMU. You like to laugh, tell dirty jokes and read. You enjoy the opera and theatre but you love ballet more. You have a little daughter, age 2 and I am sure you are a great mum. What more do I need to know?"

"I am not Philippa Ephesus."

"What?" He stared at her until his face lit up in understanding. "Oh... But it doesn't matter if your name is Philippa or Julia or whatever else! You're still all the other things, or was all that a lie, too?"

"No... I was being pretty much myself with you."

They continued talking for quite some time. Draco tried to get her real name out of her and to convince her to agree to quit the business in favour of being his mistress (He called it girlfriend, but Philippa knew too well what it really meant). After some time the blond gave up; he had realised that she wouldn't back down from her decision.

Although it angered him to some extent, he could understand her reasoning. He'd be reluctant in her situation too. He stared at the point she had Apparated from for a long time after he had paid her and kissed her good bye.

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They continued their regular dates, and with each meeting Draco became more obsessed with the idea of having this wonderful woman for himself. Philippa had opened up to him considerably since she had told him about her daughter for the first time. Not enough to confide her real name or that of her daughter to him, but she was open enough to tell him little anecdotes about her private life strictly without names, of course.

As the weeks went by, he couldn't fail to realise that she was worried about something or other. When he asked her directly, she admitted that her daughter had been sickly for some time, but that the Healers had found nothing and had told her that it would certainly go away given time. The brunette witch was worried all the same and admitted that she had a very bad feeling about it.

It thus came as no surprise to him when she cancelled on him one day, claiming an emergency with her child. What did surprise him though, and hurt him too, was the fact that she didn't reappear. Over several weeks he tried to contact her through the agency, but the madam claimed that she didn't know how to reach her and that she wasn't accepting appointments until further notice.

He tried everything: bribery, blackmail, even flattery (and honestly, who wanted to flatter a madam in her late forties?!); but to no avail. She wouldn't admit to having any real way of contacting Philippa and even refused to give out her real name. She claimed that Philippa Ephesus was the name she checked in with and that she had no idea why she suddenly wasn't working anymore. Furthermore, she denied any knowledge of a child.

His inquiries at London Merlin University hadn't brought the desired results either. They had flat out refused to let him see the list of their Potions students. This was probably only normal, after all they charged 10,000 Galleons per year; the students could certainly expect confidentiality. It did nothing to appease his mood, however.

Only a few days after he had tried to find her at LMU, he received a nondescript letter with a post-office owl. It delivered the letter and left immediately.

Dear Draco,

I heard that you have been looking for me, at university as well as at the agency.

I am quitting the business, just as you asked me to. I will not continue my studies after this year and thus don't need the money anymore. Instead I will get a job in some potions lab or apothecary, I don't know for sure yet.

My daughter's health has deteriorated, and the Healers are currently trying to figure out what's wrong with her.

I am very sorry that I didn't tell you all of this in person, but I am needed at home. I wish you only the best and all the luck in the world. Go out and find a nice girl. A guy like you doesn't need to pay for an escort.

Please don't try to find me. It wouldn't do us any good, we're from different worlds. I enjoyed your company greatly, and I'll always cherish the time we spent together even if it was under these circumstances. You gave me something precious, and I will always be thankful for that.

Hugs and kisses,

Philippa

Draco swore after he had finished reading. This stupid, stupid girl! Why did she insist so much on the idea that they couldn't work together? For heaven's sake, they had worked when they were going out or hadn't they? He reread the letter and concluded that she, too had liked spending time with him. So why did she push him away?

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"How much?" Hermione whispered incredulously.

"500 Galleons each."

"You mean just to get scans from each of these databases I'll have to pay 1,500 Galleons?"

"Well yes. Of course, we'll have to do the typing for your daughter, too. And you must know, this is a rather difficult process. For Muggles, only certain criteria must be met usually they are called HLA characteristics. But since your daughter is a witch, the magical characteristics of the donor have to be matched too..."

"How much?" she whispered once again.

"Since your daughter is still a toddler, and it's rather difficult to determine the characteristics of a child's magical signature..."

"How much!?" This time the witch almost screamed.

"1,000 Galleons."

Hermione almost hyperventilated and put her head between her knees in order to calm down. She closed her eyes and willed herself not to cry. This was not true. This simply couldn't be true. She took a last deep breath and then righted herself. She looked at the healer pleadingly.

"Isn't it right that a family member is the best chance of finding a match? Couldn't I be a match?"

"Of course. We will do a typing on you, and obviously on the father, too. Adults are much cheaper to type, by the way, because the magical signature is already known. It's only 50 Galleons per typing." The healer smiled in a condescending manner that made Hermione's blood boil.

"If my calculations are correct, and neither I nor the father are a suitable match... we'll already be at 2,500 Galleons for the typing of my daughter and the screening for a donor alone. Pray tell, how much will the actual treatment cost?"

"Well, there is the medication, the staff, the hospital time, the surgery, the follow-up examinations..."

"For Merlin's sake, just tell me the fucking price! I am not asking for a detailed listing; I am sure I will get that once you write your bill!"

"It will be 80,000 Galleons if you find a donor in Europe. If you have to go overseas, you can calculate about 30% more."

Now Hermione did hyperventilate. Panic surged through her like a herd of raging hippogriffs. She trembled so much that she thought she'd fall off the chair, not to talk about the fact that no oxygen seemed to be reaching her brain. 80,000 Galleons... 80,000 Galleons... 80,000 Galleons... Where the hell would she find 80,000 Galleons?

Finally, she had herself under enough control to croak out, "Is there any program to financially support people who cannot pay? Or at least a chance of getting a special loan?" Her eyes pleaded with the healer, but he only shook his head.

"No. Of course you can always try for a Gringotts' loan. That's what most people would do."

"Fucking goblins won't give me a damn Sickle," the witch whispered.

"Well, it's not certain that we'll find a donor for her anyway. For Muggles, the chances are about 30%, but for a witch or a wizard, it's about half. It depends on the case, obviously..."

"AND THIS IS SUPPOSED TO HELP ME HOW?" Hermione screamed. "YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT MY DAUGHTER!" The sobs and the tears were like a summer storm, sudden and violent. She felt as if she couldn't breathe anymore, not think, not feel.

When she regained consciousness, the worried face of Ginny Weasley was hovering over her. She held Sophia in her arms. The little girl was struggling to get down to her mother. Hermione held her arms out for her and cuddled her daughter against her. She cried silently into the squirming toddler's hair. It smelled like soap and biscuits, a mix that was typically Sophie.

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Philippa stared at herself in the mirror. She looked like shit; dark circles under her eyes, pale, and several pounds lighter than only a few short months ago. This would be the hardest thing she had ever done. But she had to. She took her wand and glamourised her hair and eyes, to match the image Draco knew. She didn't bother hiding the signs of her distress though.

Draco read the letter he had received from Philippa for the umpteenth time. That woman had nerve; disappearing off the face of the earth, leaving nothing but a short letter, just to contact him two months later, asking for a favour.

Draco,

I am sorry I disappeared like that but my daughter needed me.

I know that you might be very angry with me, or maybe you have already completely forgotten about me, but, please, I need your help.

Meet me at Fortescue's, tomorrow, 3 o'clock. Please come, I beg you. I desperately need your help.

Yours sincerely,

Philippa

He wasn't quite sure what made him go to the Ice Cream Parlour. It was probably because she seemed desperate, he told himself. He had moved on. Turned a corner. Got over her. He was only here because... Right. He scowled. He was only here because he could not forget about her.

He could see her from afar when she arrived, early as ever. She didn't look good; he could see that from a distance of a few hundred feet.

It was the first time he had seen her in jeans and everyday robes, but that was not it. She seemed deathly pale and had obviously lost weight. She sat down in the chair opposite him and ordered a water when the waiter arrived.

"Draco," she acknowledged him. "I am glad you came."

"Right. What do you want, Philippa?" His voice sounded cold and distant, not at all like the Draco she had gotten to know over the months she had met him regularly.

"I need your help." She bit her lip forcefully.

"I gathered that much from your letter. What kind of help?" He forced himself not to say anything as she bit even harder on her lip. *By now she must be drawing blood* he thought to himself.

"My daughter has been diagnosed with leukaemia." She had tears in her eyes. "I have about 5,000 Galleons left, and I could borrow another 10,000 from friends... I am not a match, but..."

"How much?" Draco interrupted her.

"What?"

"I asked how much you need."

"Just... just like that?"

"Just like that. How much do you need?"

Philippa darted over the table, practically flying, and hugged him tight. "Thank you, Draco, thank you!" She cried onto his shoulder, this time from happiness, until he silently repeated his question.

"How much do you need?"

"It depends... if we don't find a donor, I won't need it at all. If we find a match in Europe I'd need about 70,000. If it's overseas it might very well go up to 100,000..."

"I'll pay you back, Draco, I promise. I just need to be able to access the money as soon as we find a match. Those fucking hospitals are nothing else than business... There's no possibility of applying for respite, a loan or... I don't know. Being a witch sometimes really sucks. It's incredible that there is no health insurance at all!"

"I am not worried about my money. How is she?" The wizard kept her safely in his lap, hugging her closer. She was so tiny and fragile.

"Oh, considering the circumstances she isn't doing too badly. She has good days and bad days. But you know, for a child her age..." She sobbed in distress.

"Yes..." Draco rubbed her back in a soothing way. Merlin, she felt so good in his arms. They sat like that for some time without speaking. The wizard continued rubbing her arm and back until she had calmed down considerably. Then he spoke again.

"What about the father?"

"What about him? He will not help me out."

"I did not mean financial help. But did he get tested? Could he be a match?"

"I don't know. He could be. I tried everything to get him tested. I wrote to him, I even went to see him... But he refused. He told me to get lost and not to jeopardise his marriage."

"Bastard."

The witch smiled wryly. "Yes. He certainly is. No point fretting about it though. There is no way I could force him to get tested."

The wizard nodded in acknowledgement and then said, "Philippa? I'd like to ask something from you, though."

"Anything. What do you want?"

"Tell me your real name. And let me meet your daughter."

"What?" The witch panicked "You... does your offer depend on... what if you don't like me..."

"How could I not like you? I like Philippa; why shouldn't I like the real you? But in the unlikely case I don't, I will give you the money anyway. Okay?"

Philippa stared at him uncertainly and finally nodded. Without waiting another second, she entangled herself from his grip and rummaged through her bag. She threw a few Sickles on the table and motioned him impatiently to follow her.

"Come on." She decided not to waste their time, took his hand and then Apparated them away on the spot an administrative offence because they weren't at one of the official Apparition points but since there were no patrol Aurors around it didn't matter. Within a few seconds they reappeared in the long hallway of an apartment-block.

The witch turned to the closest door and opened it. Before she let him enter she turned, took a deep breath and told him, "I am sorry, Draco." She pushed the door open and let him in. Draco's eyes grew wide when he saw the inside of the flat. It was... in the absence of a better word slightly shabby; cosy, certainly, but well-worn, and the furniture was obviously second hand.

On the mantelpiece he could make out a picture of three teenagers in Hogwarts robes. He wasn't close enough to discern their faces though.

"You went to Hogwarts?"

Philippa nodded nervously and fiddled with her wand. Her secret would be out. As soon as he took a closer look at the pictures, he would know who she was. Draco reached for the photograph of the three people. His eyes grew impossibly wide.

He turned just in time to see the witch flick her wand to change her appearance. Green eyes turned to brown, straight hair curled and brightened slightly. Hi, Draco," she whispered.

"You... wow."

"Yeah..." She smiled uncertainly. "Wow good... or wow bad?"

~~*~*~

French translation:

* "He called me a little whore who wanted nothing but his money and told me to get rid of it."

A/N: Thanks to laurielove, the best beta ever! She has been very patient with me and my many mistakes once again.

How about you hit the review button and let me know what you think? Believe me, your feedback would be very appreciated!

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 4

If your child fell ill, how far would you go to save its life? Would you do anything to secure the help of the one person who could make a difference?

A/N: Here is the third chapter for you! I hope you'll enjoy reading it.

The seconding phase for the Dramione Awards is over, and those who made it into the second round should be announced soon. You really should go and vote in the final round, there are so many good stories running!

**

Chapter 3

They sat down and talked for a long time. Since he already knew how she had started her rather exotic job, Hermione told him everything about Sophia. She told him how torn she had been when she learned that she was pregnant, hesitating between the joy of having created a new life out of love because it had been love for her and the fear of being too young and not fit to be a mother.

She told him how desperate she had been when Sophia's father, Christophe, had told her to get lost. She revealed to him how it had been Molly Weasley who had pulled her out of her misery and helped her to find a flat where she could live with the baby, since the small sublet room she lived in at that time wouldn't do.

Draco choked when the witch colourfully described Harry and Ron's reaction when they learned of Christophe's betrayal. It had been very hard indeed to keep the two from beating the man up. Even though they had been in Auror Academy, and it could have meant their expulsion at that point, they wouldn't have hesitated for a second.

All of them had helped her find and pay for the furniture she owned now. It wasn't new, certainly, but it was good quality and clean. Molly had lent her the antique, handcrafted cradle from the Prewitt family, and George had set about producing a baby-safe line of WWW products, so that Sophia never ran short of the newest toys. Some were even educational. Hermione was still certain that was due to her good influence on the mischievous redhead and the whole line had proved to be a great success.

Much to Hermione's relief, Draco seemed to want to stay true to his word. He asked a lot of questions about her daughter and admired her pictures appropriately. Since Hermione had left her daughter in Molly's care when meeting him, they agreed to set up their first encounter on neutral ground, at a park with a huge playground. Sophia tolerated the potion she was on astoundingly well and was thus fit enough to go out and play.

After they had arranged a time for the upcoming day, Draco left with a peck on her cheek. Just before he disappeared, he smiled at her and spoke.

"Wow good."

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"Tell me again why you are meeting the amazing bouncing ferret?" Harry pouted.

"Because he offered his help and his only condition was to meet my baby. Really Harry, the man helps me out by supplying an incredible amount of money how can I deny him that?"

"I told you I would..."

"I know! I know you would sell your house. I know you would take a loan out for me. But you know what? It wouldn't be enough! You'd have to pay back the money I already owe the goblins, because you bailed for it with your house.

"And I know that George would sell the patents of his jokes, too. And it probably would be enough to pay for the treatment. But how could I ask him to do that when there is another solution? How could I let you sell the house? Draco has enough money to pay for ten treatments without even noticing a drop in his funds.

"You are the best friends I could ever ask for, and that is why I couldn't do such thing to either of you. If it were a choice of taking up your offer or letting my baby die, obviously I would do it! But don't you see? There is a perfect solution that won't harm anyone.

"Please, Harry. Don't make this harder on me than it already is."

Hermione watched her friend pleadingly. When he sighed and then shrugged, she smiled, glad that he had finally come to his senses.

"I am still not sure why he'd help you. It's not like you were the best of friends. Are you sure he has no hidden agenda?"

"Harry James Potter! There is *no hidden agenda*! So, if you'd kindly let me be on my way, I'd really prefer not to be late."

The witch flung the nappy bag over her shoulder and put Sophia securely on her hip. She blew her friend a kiss before Apparating away, leaving the disgruntled young man alone in her flat.

Harry dragged his fingers through his hair.

He still didn't like this whole idea. What possessed Malfoy to pay for Sophia's treatment? True, he hadn't caused any trouble at all since the war, but he still didn't trust him. You don't put years of enmity aside just like that. And how had he got wind of Hermione's situation anyway?

He sighed once again and decided to leave. Hermione's mind was set; there was no point staying now that she had already left.

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Hermione was the first to arrive at the playground where they had arranged to meet Draco. It was a nice day, and a lot of other children were already playing in the sandbox. The brunette put her daughter down. Sophia had always been a very social child, not shy towards others her age, but since she had fallen ill, she was somewhat subdued and kept more to herself. Hermione reached into her bag and pulled some sand moulds out for her daughter.

Just then a shadow fell over them and the little girl snuggled closer to her mother.

"Hermione. And you must be Sophia?"

The toddler put her thumb into her mouth and stared at him without blinking. Hermione blushed.

"She usually isn't that shy. It's only been since we started seeing all the healers recently. She doesn't like them." She turned towards her daughter. "Are you a baby, Sophia? No. Then take your thumb out, please. This is Draco Malfoy. He's Mummy's friend. Won't you say hello to Mr. Malfoy?"

The blond wizard had crouched down on the fringe of the sandbox. "Hello, Sophia. I am very pleased to meet you. Would you let me play with you?"

The little girl watched the young man with a rather weary expression, but then struggled to break free from her mother's arms. Apparently she had made up her mind about the stranger, because she passed him one of her favourite sand moulds and enthusiastically started putting sand into another.

Hermione was amazed at how comfortable Draco was with Sophia. He seemed very much at ease and had her little girl giggling in no time. Since it was a magical playground they had met at, and the moulds were enchanted, too, the animals they had made with them were now moving around the sandbox. With the wizard's help, the little girl built a magnificent sandcastle before they retired onto a picnic blanket to have tea.

"She's exhausted," Draco observed when the little girl crawled onto Hermione's lap and fell asleep sucking her thumb.

"Yes, she is. She still needs her nap in the afternoon. When she doesn't nap, she's excruciating." Hermione put a small pillow under the girl's head and smiled. "In an hour she'll be as fresh as a daisy. You are great with her. You'll be a great dad one day. You want to have children, I presume?"

"I don't know. Obviously, I will have to have children at some point or another. In my position I have no choice, really. And I adore children, but then again... I don't want to muck it up. It's not as if my father was the best role model I could have wished for."

"You're not your father, Draco."

The wizard sighed and watched the sleeping child with an expression akin to tenderness. "I know. But I have the same genes, and he brought me up, too. What if I turn out like him? Aloof and violent? Hurting the people I am supposed to love?"

"What's the guarantee that I will not one day raise my hand or wand against my wife and child? Every child deserves good parents, not some fucked up son of a Death Eater."

"Don't say that! You're more than that! You're better than you think!"

"Oh, Hermione, don't pretend! You know it's true. You wouldn't have let me near your daughter at all if you didn't need my help!"

She hesitated on hearing his accusation, because unfortunately he was right. "That's not fair, Draco! I would have let none of my clients near my family. It has nothing to do with who you are!"

"Yes, right, I forgot about that. I was just a client." Draco suddenly sounded bitter and unhappy. "Do you think that all the things I told you were a lie? I asked you to be my girlfriend! I wanted to be with you and your daughter. But to you I was obviously nothing more than some client."

"No, Draco, please! You know that you are more than just a client to me. You're the only one I would consider worthy of getting to know my child. I wouldn't have asked any of the other men to help me. You're the only one I trust enough to reveal who I am."

She knelt next to him, cupping his face tenderly in her hands. He was so handsome, it almost pained her to look at him. It was incomprehensible to her how this man could be the same person as the bully she had known at school. She had grown attached to him somewhere along the line. Although she wasn't quite sure when it had happened, Hermione knew for certain that she cared for the man who was now sitting on the blanket next to her daughter.

"You got to kiss me..." she whispered, her lips almost touching his. "Kisses are the one thing I ever give for free. And only when I want to." The witch leaned even further into him until her mouth touched his shyly.

For Draco that was all it took. He grabbed her by her shoulders and pulled her into his lap. The park and the playground faded away while they kissed. They savoured the flavour of each other, and the blond was reminded of their first real kiss. Hermione tasted just as sweet as she had then. She felt different in his arms, though. She was too thin; even through her shirt he could feel every rib.

With Draco's strong arms around her, Hermione felt as if she was in heaven. She was safe, and for once all her worries seemed to fade away. He would help her with the money and to find a suitable donor for her baby. And his kiss was a promise of more; he would not abandon them like Christophe had. His lips teased and appeased her equally.

Draco's mouth softly coaxed hers into submission. She followed his lead, letting him plunder her lips with fiery passion and loving caresses. His tongue touched every point he could reach, while his hands slipped under her clothes and fondled her back tenderly.

They broke out of their bliss when a red ball hit Draco on the back of his head. "Ouch!" he exclaimed and smiled down at the witch in his arms. She looked thoroughly kissed and stared at him through heavily lidded eyes.

Draco could see how tired she was. Not the kind of tired you were after pulling an all-nighter, but the kind of bone-deep, dead tired that came from deep sorrow and worry.

He kissed her forehead and lay down next to Sophia with her.

"Sleep. It seems Sophe is not the only one who could use a nap."

The wizard guarded their sleep until the little girl woke up. To him they were the allegory of everything innocent and pure. Most people would probably see things differently. After all, she was a single mother, one who had sold her body, Draco had to remind himself. But for him she was so much more.

When Hermione finally woke from her deep and exhausted sleep, her first reaction was panic. Where was her baby? Where was Draco? She didn't know how long she had slept, but the sun had started to disappear behind the trees, and there were only a few people left in the park. She couldn't remember when she had last slept so undisturbed and unworried. But now where were they?

When her vision cleared, she could make the two of them out in the playground. They were sitting on one of the swings together, Sophe secure in Draco's lap. He had his head inclined, apparently listening with rapt attention to the little witch's stories. Smiling with relief, Hermione started to pack their things. They would have to go home soon. With the sun declining, it would not be long before it became too cold for the summer clothes they were wearing.

She approached the swings slowly after she had finished packing, smiling softly at the vision of the two blond people. Draco rocked the swing carefully back and forth, chuckling from time to time at what Sophia was telling him. She was babbling quite a lot these days. She had a way with words, even at her tender age, and Hermione was sure that one day she'd be the bane of anyone in need of some peace and quiet.

"Ready to go, you two? Have you had a good time?"

"Mummy! Draco and me swinged!"

"Draco and I, baby. And you swang."

"No! We swinged!"

"It's... All right, all right! You swinged. Never mind the grammar."

At this, Draco chuckled once again and got up with Sophia still in his arms. "We had fun, didn't we, Sophe? And now I think it's time to go home."

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Draco had gone home soon after they returned from the park. They had agreed a meeting to make the necessary arrangements at Gringotts for Hermione to be able to access one of Draco's accounts. Even though she had told him that that wasn't necessary, he felt that this would be the easiest way to proceed.

The wizard had been able to schedule an appointment with one of the leading healers specialising in oncology the following week. He was very sought after and usually didn't do home visits, especially not in Europe, since he was from America. For once, Hermione was grateful for what money could do. She would have hated to submit Sophia to the trouble of international travel in her condition.

After his visit, the healer had initiated a scan through all the available medical wizarding databases to find a suitable donor, but it would take some time until the results were available. He had also changed the potion the little girl was on to a newer improved one. He had nevertheless made it very clear that there was no way around a transplant. The cancer was too aggressive and running rampant in Sophia's body, and although the potion managed to keep it at least a little in check, it was hard to tell how long this would work.

Hermione had found a part-time position in a potions lab that paid a decent wage. Four years of studies were not for naught after all. Without the pressure of University fees, she was able to live quite comfortably with her little girl, especially since Molly still refused to let Sophia go to a childcare facility.

Even after her meeting with Draco in the park, Harry was far from happy with his involvement in Hermione and Sophia's lives, but could hardly do anything about it. While the two female members of the Weasley clan had been quick to accept the wizard if he was generous enough to help Hermione out with such an amount of money, he couldn't be too bad, surely? the males proved to be much more difficult. *'One should never trust a Malfoy! A kneazle can't change its spots!'*

However, Hermione was happy; at least, happier than she had been during the weeks between the diagnosis of Sophia's disease and her subsequent meeting with Draco. He was a frequent visitor and regularly took them out to playgrounds, zoos and other places a child enjoyed.

They had not slept with each other since she had revealed to him her true identity. They had kissed and made out quite a bit, but each time Hermione tried to go further, Draco had stopped her. This was not because he didn't feel attracted to her anymore; the witch had felt the hard evidence of that through his pants. To be honest, she had no idea why he wouldn't; it wasn't as if it was something they hadn't done before!

But as the weeks advanced, Hermione grew more and more depressed. The three biggest databases had been scanned to find a witch or wizard who could be a donor for Sophia, without success. There were some smaller ones left, but it wasn't very probable that somebody would be found in these. However, neither Draco nor Hermione were ready to give up. For the time being, the little girl's health was quite stable, but nobody was sure how long this would last. Every friend and relative, colleague and friend of friends had been tested paid for by Draco. None of them was a match.

It pained Draco to watch her suffer. Of course, he, too, was very concerned for Sophia's health. The little witch had very much grown on him. It was impossible not to love the child. She was just lovely in every imaginable way: intelligent like her mum, mischievous like her adopted uncles and beautiful to boot. She had a head full of dark blond curls, brown eyes and a cute little nose. Her cheeks weren't always rosy, due to her illness, but the spark in her eyes made up for it.

The way Sophia looked, she could very well have been his daughter. In fact, people never doubted the paternity of the little girl when they went out together. The first time a witch had told them that she looked *'just like her daddy'*, Draco had beamed with pride. This, combined with the fact that Hermione had not objected to him being referred to as Sophia's father, left him wanting to shout for joy.

It was undeniable that his love for her mother made it very easy for him to fall for the toddler. Since that fateful day when Hermione had unveiled her identity to him, he had discovered anew the woman he thought he had known before. If he had fancied himself in love with Philippa, it was nothing compared to what he felt for Hermione. She was everything Philippa was, and so much more.

He had probably harboured some small, secret crush for the Muggle-born witch for some years. He had abhorred her at school, that much was true: the poster child Mudblood, besting him in every imaginable way and even daring to punch him! Him, Draco Malfoy! He had never understood what some people, Viktor Krum for example, seemed to see in her. Granted, she was pretty, but in such an ordinary way. There were so many other witches that cleaned up at least as well *and* had the right blood!

But the day the snatchers had brought her and her friends to the manor... How could he not be rendered speechless by her courage? Admire her determination not to give away anything even under torture? Draco thought that that had probably been the first time he saw her for what she was: a loyal, powerful, loving, strong and beautiful witch. Seeing her blood trickle down her skin, blood as red as his, had made him realise that she was as worthy as he was, if not more so.

If a Muggle-born girl could be such a good witch, if her blood had the same colour as his what was the difference between them? How could he think himself better than her? He, who had stood there like a coward watching his insane aunt torture the one girl who had always been the incarnation of everything good?

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His mother had noticed the change in Draco, too. A Muggle-born, single mother was certainly not the ideal girlfriend for her son, but it was better than having him pining

over some random escort. She had been worried for a while that he might actually want to pursue the witch seriously. At least that was what he had insinuated at the time. Surely he wouldn't want to stay with Ms. Granger for good, would he? He seemed to have some sort of romantic hero complex, but with that she supposed she could live. After all, it could be worse.

However, as the time dragged on, Narcissa grew more and more curious about the girl. Draco seemed so infatuated with the young witch and her daughter that she couldn't ignore it anymore. He was at home less and less, either working or visiting Ms. Granger and the little girl he affectionately called Sophe. She was nevertheless astounded when he announced that he would bring the two over for lunch the following week-end.

"Sophe loves horses, and I thought she'd like to see the stables," Draco explained to his mother.

"I see. So that's why we own Shetland ponies now, is it? I was already wondering as they are hardly the size for us to ride."

The wizard blushed. He had bought the skewbald mare and her fully grown foal only the week before, after a heated discussion with Hermione over the question of whether a little girl of not even three years needed riding lessons. Sophe had always approached the ponies in the petting zoo without showing any sign of fear, but Hermione had told him it was ridiculous to have a toddler taking lessons and that she couldn't afford it anyway.

Since he knew that Hermione would never let him buy anything as expensive as a pony for her daughter, he had simply told her that he still owned his old pony which had later had a foal. It had taken him some time to lay his hands on two ponies that fitted the age and his description, but he had succeeded. A Malfoy never got caught lying! At least not when he could make the lie a truth with his money. Well, half-truth.

"Yes, well, if she asks, I got her for my fifth birthday and her name is Sprinkle. And her son is called Snitch."

His mother merely lifted an eyebrow. He was certainly going to some lengths to impress the witch. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea if she got to know her, after all.

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Hermione fidgeted nervously in her seat. It hadn't occurred to her for a second that she would meet Draco's mother when she visited the Manor. The question hadn't even crossed her mind; she had simply assumed that Mrs Malfoy wouldn't be interested in meeting her. Clearly, she had been wrong.

Draco and Sophe had left to visit the stables, leaving Hermione alone having tea with the elegant woman. She felt inadequate and insecure, having dressed in jeans and a simple t-shirt. But the other woman turned out to be more pleasant company than anticipated.

At first she had been afraid that Narcissa Malfoy would take offence at the fact that her son had offered her such substantial financial support. But the older woman had only shrugged a gesture that Hermione would never have associated with the willowy pure-blood and told her that Lucius had lost far more money betting on race-hippogriffs.

And she didn't even seem to find it reprehensible that Hermione had asked somebody who had previously been her enemy *A woman has to do what she can for her child. Don't forget that I am a mother too,* she had told the brunette witch.

"So, Sophia's father is French? That's what Draco told me."

"Yes, that's right. He was an exchange student at LMU. Handsome, intelligent..." Hermione smiled sadly. "I fell for him the first moment I saw him. He seemed so different to the average English pure-blood. I really believed him when he told me that he loved me and didn't care if I was Muggle-born."

"And now he's even refused to get tested to see if he could be a donor. But Draco probably told you that."

Narcissa huffed impatiently. "The French are no different to the English, if not worse, believe me. After the war, things started to change here. But on the continent... Well, they didn't have the experience we had. The higher up in station, the worse."

"What is his name, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I don't, since it's not exactly a secret. I couldn't put him on the birth certificate because he refused to recognise his paternity. But I won't prevent my daughter from knowing his name. It's Christophe de Clermont-Tonnerre."

"Oh, that's rich. Cécile would die of shame if she knew that her precious son had fathered a half-blood." Narcissa grinned maliciously. Hermione felt uneasy; she had not meant to give out any blackmail material.

"I didn't want to..."

"Oh, don't worry. Cécile and I are hardly what you would call friends. We know each other a little socially, but that's about as far as it goes. I won't go spreading this around, rest assured." The witch patted her hand and took another sip of tea. "But isn't one of the Weasley boys married to a Delacour?"

"Yes, Bill is. He married Fleur Delacour. Why?"

"Sometimes it's good to have memorised the entire family trees of the European pure-blood families. Fleur Delacour is a second cousin of your chère Christophe. You said that he refuses to get tested to see if he's a match for your daughter?"

Hermione nodded, confused.

"I think, my dear, an international Floo call is in order..."

When Draco and Sophe returned from their outdoor activities half an hour later, they found a dazzled Hermione and a devilishly grinning Narcissa. For a second, Draco worried what his mother could have done to her, until he noted that she didn't look dazzled-upset but dazzled-hopeful; a look he hadn't seen on her face ever since they had got the results from the bone marrow register.

Once she saw him, Hermione jumped up, right into his arms, hugging him and her daughter tightly. She hid her face in his shoulder, and he could feel his shirt dampen. Carefully, he pushed her chin up and made her look into his eyes.

"What's wrong, Hermione?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. It's just your mother... She has come up with the best plan ever! She has found a way to get Christophe to get himself typed. Everything is wonderful! Just wonderful!"

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Fleur Weasley and her husband enjoyed their trip to France very much. Although they had come with a clear mission, they were determined to have a good time regardless. Molly had gracefully offered to take care of their child while they were away, but they had declined. After all, Fleur's parents got to see their grandchild far less than they'd like to.

To announce Fleur's second pregnancy officially to the family, her mother Amélie had organised a big, lavish garden party. Amélie's garden parties were known to be quite the event; nobody ever declined an invitation. Chatting happily with some of her cousins and far removed aunts, Fleur put her delicate hand of the forearm of Laure de

Clermont-Tonnerre.

"You can imagine her situation?" she continued leaning into the other woman confidentially. "Left all alone and pregnant! Of course she didn't know the man was spoken for; I can assure you she is a very reputable young woman. Only she didn't associate with the same stratum of society that he did. Really, how was she supposed to know he never told her!"

"Anyway, she decided that she'd keep the child nonetheless. She didn't ask him for anything at all, not marriage, not money, nor any other support, not that he'd offered it!"

"Zat's abhorrent of him!" Laure gasped audibly at Fleur's story.

"Mais ma chère, ce n'est pas tout! In fact her child fell ill. Leukaemia. She didn't even ask for money when she tried to find a donor, but wanted the biological father typed, to see if he was a match." Under her lashes, Fleur glanced at a visibly pale Christophe de Clermont-Tonnerre who was standing behind his wife. He had already guessed who she was talking about.

"Certainement il ne pouvait pas refuser..."

"Si. He refused to take the test. So at the moment she's really crushed and doesn't quite know what to do. But I think once she gets over the first shock, she'll probably decide to go and tell his wife.

"As I told you, she's a lovely girl. But if he destroys her life, she'll not hesitate in destroying his. It's for her child's sake after all!"

"Quel salaud! 'e certainly deserves 'is wife knowing about zee indiscretion. I'd never forgive Christophe if 'e did somezing like zat. I am so glad zat Christophe would never do anyzing to 'urt me, n'est-ce pas chéri?" She smiled up at her husband, who reassured her with a nod and a smile.

Bill Weasley used the moment of silence to dive in and offered to take a walk through the extensive gardens with Christophe. The cold smile and the deathly glare in the redhead's eyes told the other man everything he needed to know, and he followed without protesting.

Draco stood patiently, waiting in the shadow of a tree, a stack of parchments in his hand. To somebody who didn't know him, he looked collected and untroubled. Those who did know him, however, would have tried not to come too close to him. His eyes were steely grey; the absence of any warmth was frightening.

When Bill made his way over with the other man; he smiled his coldest smile. A flicker of incredulity shot through Christophe's eyes when he saw him.

"You? What are you doing here, Malfoy?"

"I've got some business with you, de Clermont-Tonnerre. You left my girlfriend pregnant."

"What? I didn't... I wouldn't... I thought this was about the Mudblood!"

With a growl, both Bill and Draco were at the young man's throat.

"Don't you dare call my girlfriend that! Don't you even dare think it!" Draco seethed through his teeth.

"I didn't know she was your girlfriend. She can't... She she was a virgin!"

"Which makes your behaviour all the more despicable. You impregnated a girl who trusted you enough to make you a gift she could only give away once! And then you leave her all alone to care for her child. You disgust me.

"But that's not why I am here. We have an... offer... to make. Well, maybe not exactly an offer, but you will see. You agree to get typed, and to act as donor for your daughter in case you're a match. In return Hermione offers not to say anything about your child to your wife or your family.

"Furthermore, you will sign these documents and renounce every paternal right you might claim on Sophia. This will also make you free of every obligation be it material or emotional. If you sign these documents, you can be sure that Hermione will never sue you for support of any kind or put your name on the birth certificate.

"And all of this for a bit of typing and possibly a completely pain free and harmless donation of bone marrow isn't that great?" Draco smirked, but it wasn't a smirk that eased Christophe's mind. In fact, it had the exact opposite effect.

Christophe squirmed uncomfortably. "What's in it for you?"

"A girlfriend who doesn't beat herself up over the fact that she couldn't get her father's child tested. That's enough for me."

The other wizard didn't hesitate long before he signed the agreement. Since Hermione had already approved them, they glowed golden and were transferred directly to the Malfoy family notary. Draco watched the other man coldly before turning to Bill.

"Congratulations to you and your wife, good luck with the new baby and thanks for your help."

"Anything for Hermione. She's like my little sister. I didn't even know we were related to that little leech who put her into that situation. I am glad we could help. Your mother is a genius," the other man responded without acknowledging Christophe's presence.

Draco only nodded and Disapparated with a *pop*! The appointment for Christophe's typing had already been arranged in a French magical hospital. The only thing he had to do was show up. And he would show up since he had just signed a magical contract.

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Draco appeared in the middle of the cosy kitchen of The Burrow. Hermione ceased her pacing and turned on the spot. She stared at him wide-eyed and asked in a breathless voice, "How did it go? Did he agree? Is he a match?"

"He is."

With a strangled cry, Hermione jumped into his arms and hugged him close. "Oh my God! Thank you!" she breathed. She kissed him soundly, laughing and crying simultaneously. Draco grinned and kissed her back.

"It's not me who made him a match. I am happy that he is though. And I am happy that you're happy."

They stood in a fierce embrace, oblivious to the fact that Molly had come in at one point and quickly tiptoed out again when she saw them standing there. Now the older witch was standing in the garden, Sophia on her hip. She was quite excited for Hermione; it would do her good to have a new man in her life.

Certainly, she had never lost hope that the young witch might opt for one of her boys after all Charlie and George were still single and she would never have thought that the new man would turn out to be Draco Malfoy of all people. Yes, she'd have to get used to the idea, but to be honest, the man had already won when he stepped up to advance the money for Sophe's treatment.

"Hmm, little Sophe, how would you like Draco Malfoy as your stepfather?" she asked the little girl playfully.

"Daco? Daco nice. And Spinkle. And Snitch."

"Stepfather? Draco Malfoy? W w what?" Seemingly out of nowhere Harry and Arthur appeared next to them and the younger wizard wondered if he had heard her right.

"Ah, nothing, Harry dear. I was just..."

"Meddling. As always." Arthur smiled affectionately and kissed his wife and granddaughter on the cheek. "They finally came out then?"

"You knew?" Molly and Harry asked at the same time, enraged at the idea that he might have held such significant information back from them, but he merely chuckled.

"Come on, the two of you! If a man pays a fortune for a child's health, then he's either the father or in love with the mother. And we all know who Sophie's father is.

"Besides, haven't you seen the way they look at each other? Do I have to point out how much time the two of them are spending together? Really, you would think it was obvious." Still chuckling, Arthur then entered the house to change into more comfortable clothes for the rest of the evening.

Molly and Harry stood dumbfounded and gaping like flobberworms. When Hermione and Draco exited the house just a few minutes later, the Boy Who Was Ignorant stared at them incredulously. They had obviously been warned by Arthur but still looked a bit startled. Hermione blushed furiously under the scrutiny of her long-time friend.

"So it's true? You two are..."

"Well, yes," Hermione answered nervously. Draco only smirked and drew her close, daring Harry to say something.

"And for how long has this been going on?"

"A few weeks..."

"A few months..." they answered simultaneously.

Harry only raised his brow and waited for Hermione to explain.

"Okay. Draco is right. We have been seeing each other for quite some time. It was just a casual thing, nothing serious. A bit of dating, having fun. I didn't tell him about Sophie at first. I actually stopped seeing him when I found out that she was ill."

"And she took me back when she needed my money," Draco said with mock hurt, but it was obvious that he wasn't serious.

"Yeah. Well, you know the rest." The witch shrugged, seemingly nonchalant, but biting her lip nonetheless. "Are you upset?" she ventured when Harry didn't respond for a moment.

"Upset?" He tussled his hair the way he always did. "Not upset. I just wish you had told me before."

"I didn't know when or how to tell you," the witch responded meekly.

"You could have told me when you went to meet him with Sophia."

"Oh, you mean your *hidden agenda* moment?" Hermione grinned. "Do you think you'd have been very open to that kind of information then?"

The wizard blushed. "Probably not," he admitted, slightly embarrassed.

"Anyway, that's not important now. We've got great news! Christophe is a match! We have an appointment at St. Mungo's tomorrow!" the witch beamed.

"Is that true? Oh sweet Nimue!" Molly sobbed and Harry drew his friend into a bone crushing hug. "I am so relieved! Everything will be good now!"

"Yes!" Hermione laughed and cried at the same time.

Sophia didn't take all the excitement too well though. She started squirming restlessly and tried to get out of Molly's arms, reaching out for Draco who seemed to be the calmest person in the garden. The wizard took the unhappy toddler and turned around to Hermione.

"Maybe we should go. We have an appointment at eight tomorrow morning."

The Muggle-born nodded and hugged everybody goodbye before they Disappeared together into her flat. They put Sophia to sleep not long after they arrived. The little witch tired quickly nowadays, and although she had had a long nap in the afternoon, it didn't take long before she was sleeping soundly.

To celebrate the good news of the impending surgery, Hermione cooked a nice dinner for the two of them, completed by a bottle of red wine Draco had contributed. They took their time with dinner and neither were entirely sober by the time they finished. Much to Draco's delight, Hermione had found an open bottle of firewhiskey in one of her cupboards, probably forgotten by one of the boys.

So when Hermione asked him to stay overnight, he agreed.

They stood awkwardly in her bedroom at first. Hermione pulled back the duvet and retrieved the large t-shirt she usually slept in. She blushed. "I didn't expect you to stay over... I would have changed the sheets if I had known," she fidgeted.

"Don't be stupid." Draco toed his shoes off and unbuttoned his shirt.

"Do you need something to sleep in? I could lend you one of my sleep shirts."

"Hmm..." the blond seemed to think hard. "I believe I have a better idea. Why don't we..." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her closer. "...sleep naked?"

Hermione giggled as he pushed her top up her body and over her head. "White lace. Why am I not surprised?" Draco grinned when he finally had free access to her bra-clad breasts. "Is it a set?" He wiggled his eyebrows wickedly and knelt down before her.

"Oh, you will have to find out on your own, I think." She giggled some more and helped him with the button of her jeans.

"And it *is* a set!" Draco grinned and kissed her between her belly button and the hem of her lacy knickers. He slowly slipped her trousers down her legs, showering every inch of skin he uncovered with small kisses. When she finally stepped out of her trousers, he stood up again.

"Your turn," Hermione breathed. "You are wearing far too many clothes!" She first pushed his already open shirt down his shoulders and then caressed his torso, finally following the line of blond hair disappearing into the waistband. With expert hands she unbuckled his belt and undid the fly. She then reached tenderly into his pants, stroking his half-hard member through the silk of his boxers.

"Witch! Stop teasing me!"

More giggles. By Aphrodite's sweet tits, had she ever giggled before when they were engaged in such activities? It was so girlish, so damn sexy! He pulled her up by her

shoulders and kissed her hard. He walked backwards, one arm around her waist, the other hand buried in her glorious curls. When he felt her double bed behind him, he let himself fall onto it, pulling Hermione with him.

They kissed, nibbled, bit and licked some more, and before long both of them were heavily aroused and panting. Draco struggled to get out of his pants. They had entangled themselves between his legs, and to get rid of them didn't prove to be an easy task. It earned him more giggles from Hermione.

Impatiently, he flipped her over onto her back and finally succeeded in shedding the superfluous garments, including his boxer shorts.

"Who is overdressed now? Hmm?" He crawled up her body, pressing his hard cock against her and claiming her mouth with another searing kiss. With one hand he helped her into a half sitting position, propped up on her elbows, and grasped behind her to open the bra clasp with a smooth move. Hermione's breasts sprung free from their confines, and he simply had to admire them.

He stared at her for some time before he latched onto her small nipples with vigour. He sucked and laved one until it was hard and reddish from the assault. The young woman arched into his touch and wrapped her legs around his hips. She moaned with disappointment when he withdrew his mouth from her breast. He gave the other nipple the exact same treatment while he fondled her round bum through the lace of her knickers.

Hermione was searching for friction, grinding her crotch against his hard prick, trying to get him to nudge her clit just a tiny little bit... She was on fire, burning with desire. She wanted his hands, his lips, his tongue on her pussy, on her clit. She wanted to feel his thick cock inside her, pounding into her hard.

"Draco, I want you now! Please, make love to me now!" she whispered desperately.

Smirking, Draco pulled her lacy undergarments down her legs and threw them carelessly over the foot of her bed. He buried his face between her legs, inhaling her scent deeply. With a lazy lick along her slit, he made Hermione buckle helplessly, moaning and panting.

"So you want me?" he whispered against her pussy lips, the vibration of his voice going straight to her sensitive bundle of nerves.

"Yes, Draco... I want you so much!"

With a smile, he kissed his way up her body until his hips were once again settled between her thighs. He teased her with his cock, nudging his glans gently against her over sensitive clit. He kissed her slowly, sensuously.

Then suddenly he became serious.

"Hermione? Tell me that this is... that this is a proper relationship. It will be, right? You, Sophia, me. Just the three of us."

"Yes! Oh Gods, yes! I only want you in my bed. But now please, please make love to me!"

She looped her legs firmly around his bum and tried to get him closer. With a satisfied smile, Draco obliged her urging and thrust deeply into her. They set a quick pace, lost in their lust and each other. Hermione's fingernails left deep scratches on his back; he left a chain of love bites on her neck.

He filled her completely, fitted her as if he were carved out of her flesh, as if he were a part of her. With each stroke he completed her, body and soul, her hips coming up, meeting him in their frantic rhythm. Draco felt her hot wet walls around him, sucking him in deeper and deeper. He buried his nose in her hair she smelt like honey and Sophe's cookies, better than the most expensive perfume could ever smell.

"Hermione," he groaned, feeling the telling tightening in his balls. He ground his pelvis purposefully against her crotch, stimulating her clit effectively. Hermione sucked in a deep breath and moaned loudly as her climax washed over her like a wave. Draco followed her, her clenching cunt being the last push he needed to go over the edge.

They made love several times that night, sharing their relief and hope by worshipping each other's bodies. Just before Draco could drift into a deep and exhausted sleep, he felt Hermione crawling out of bed, throwing his boxers at him and putting on a tank top and soft shorts herself. When he looked at her questioningly, she only shrugged.

"Sophia comes to cuddle when she wakes up in the morning."

"Are you okay with her finding me in your bed?"

"I am. She's already used to your presence in our lives, and I think she should get used to you in my bed, don't you?" She seemed insecure about the last thing, but Draco smiled and drew her into his embrace.

"Right," he agreed.

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"The potion works basically like Muggle chemotherapy, only much faster and without the side effects. Thanks to very advanced disinfection charms, you will be able to stay with your daughter before and during the transfusion. It is scheduled for this afternoon.

"The procedure is very safe. The success rate is close to a hundred percent. There are very few relapses, far fewer than in the Muggle world. Sophia will have to stay at the hospital for a couple of days after the surgery, but by the end of the week, she should be able to go home with you.

"Do you have any questions?"

Hermione threw a short glance at Draco, who had been listening intently, and then shook her head. "No, I don't think we have."

"Good. A nurse will help you prepare your daughter and administer the potion." The healer smiled encouragingly.

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Hermione watched hypnotised as the reddish-brown bone marrow trickled into the slim plastic tube and through the needle into her daughter's vein. After all the months of worrying, this seemed almost too easy. The stem cells would find their way into Sophia's bones all alone, no big surgery or the like needed. She should start getting better soon.

Hermione looked up when a hand passed her a steaming cup of tea. She smiled.

"Thank you, Draco."

The wizard smiled back and took his place in the chair next to her. In about half an hour the transfusion would be over and the healers would wake up Sophia. For the moment she slept a potion-induced sleep.

"Hermione?" Draco put his own and Hermione's cup on the table next to Sophe's bed. "I've meant to ask you..." he took her hand hesitantly and caressed her with his thumb.

"Yes?"

"Would you... I mean... would you allow me to put my name on Sophia's birth certificate?"

The witch simply stared at him without saying a word, so Draco rushed on with what he had obviously repeated in his head a thousand times.

"I know that we don't know if it will work out between you and me yet. I hope it will, but in case it doesn't... I'd hate to lose Sophe. I love her as if she were my own. Please, would you allow me to become her father?"

"I I don't... Are you sure?"

Draco looked frustrated. "Of course I am sure! Do you think I'd ask something like that if I wasn't sure? I have thought about it for weeks. If you would let me, I'd like to adopt your daughter."

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A/N(2):

My beta, laurielove, brought up a question about stem cells. I decided to clear that issue up for everybody, because I think that it might be interesting for all of you.

There are two categories of stem cells: adult stem cells and embryonic stem cells. The former are won from bone marrow or from the umbilical cord blood. While embryonic stem cells can still develop into different cell types and might one day be used for multiple medical purposes, the use of adult stem cells is more limited. But it's usually the adult stem cells that you use to cure leukaemia.

I am neither a nurse/doctor, nor a medicine student, but the procedure about bone marrow transplant I described should (hopefully) be more or less accurate. I have the information from Wikipedia and have cross-checked with different medical sites.

By the way, it is pretty easy to get typed and included into a donor database. It's not even necessary to draw blood anymore so there is no excuse left not to do it... :-)

jamies_lady told me in her review that in England it's the Antony Nolan foundation that deals with the typing.

In Germany, it's the dkms (amongst others). If there are people who know about where to go in their country, let me know and I'll update this note.

**

The epilogue will be up soon. But I warn you in advance, it's much shorter than the chapters!

And now... I really appreciate your feedback... Please hit the review button!

Epilogue

Chapter 4 of 4

If your child fell ill, how far would you go to save its life? Would you do anything to secure the help of the one person who could make a difference?

And here comes the final chapter. Thanks as always to laurielove, who has been a great beta and friend once again!

I hope you enjoy!

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Epilogue

Sophia brought her pony to a rather abrupt stop. There was a man standing in front of their door, talking with a very much disgruntled house-elf. She kicked the pony in the flanks, urging it on to approach the man.

"Miss Sophia!" the house-elf squeaked excitedly.

The man turned slowly and watched the child approach. His eyes took in the relaxed stance and her firm yet gentle grip on the reins. The pony looked well-groomed and seemed to be absolutely obedient to its rider. She didn't have a crop, and her seat was well-balanced and independent.

"I see you get your riding skills from your father," the man observed.

"He's the one who taught me in the beginning. But I have a personal instructor now. Are you a friend of my parents?" Sophia smiled and pushed her riding helmet back a bit so she could watch him better.

The man seemed taken aback at first but then smiled back at her. "You could say that I am a friend of your mother's."

"Oh. Do they know you're here?"

"No. I thought I'd surprise them. Do you know when they'll be back? I can come back another time."

"They are in Diagon Alley. Mum has an appointment with the Healers and she and Dad are taking my brother to Fortescue's afterwards. I couldn't go... There's a show this weekend, and I have a riding lesson in a few minutes. They might bring me some ice cream back though." Her face lit up at the prospect. "But I think they'll be home soon. We're going to see my cousins this afternoon."

"So your father is Draco Malfoy?"

The girl nodded. "I am not allowed to let strangers into the house. Do you want to come with me? We're doing jumping today... Or I can go and look for Nana Cissa. Then you can wait in the house. I am sure Nana would keep you company."

"I'd love to watch your lesson, if that's OK with you."

Sophia hesitated and then shrugged. She was almost sure that she'd be in trouble for that later on. Her dad was very strict about the whole *talking to strangers*' thing. She shouldn't have asked him to come along. But he was a friend of her mum, and her riding instructor would be there... She nudged the pony forward and motioned the wizard to follow her.

"I'll be late if we don't go down to the stables now. And that would mean trouble..."

It was a joy to watch the girl on horseback. It was quite obvious that she was a natural; the jumps seemed to be nothing at all for her and her pony. But her riding instructor found a lot to criticise anyway: her hands were too high, her legs too far back, the reins too long or too short, the crop she had picked up before the lesson was not in the right angle... the list was endless. Sophia seemed to enjoy herself nevertheless, her cheeks red from the exercise.

When the wizard heard quick footsteps approaching the riding ring, he turned around. Hermione and Draco were almost running towards the stables. Both looked murderous and the man feared that he had raised his hopes in vain. When they were within hearing distance, he could pick up the brunette murmuring rapid and furious words to the wizard at her side.

"What the hell are you doing here, Clermont-Tonnerre? I thought we'd be lucky enough never to see you again," Draco ground out as soon as he came to a halt next to him.

"I am here to see my daughter."

"Like hell you are! You don't have a daughter!" Draco seethed.

"Draco... Let me talk to him. Please? Sophia's lesson is almost finished. Help her with cleaning the horse and take her to the house. I'll be there after I've spoken to Christophe, okay?"

The blond sighed impatiently but nodded. "Okay. Don't be late. You know we're invited to Bill and Fleur's for dinner."

Hermione hugged him tightly and gave him a peck on the cheek. "I'll be quick." She nodded to Christophe. "Let's take a walk."

Hermione led him wordlessly back in the direction of the house but then turned left into a magnificent garden. They walked amidst a variety of roses and other cultivated flowers.

"What are you doing here, Christophe?"

"As I said... I have come to see my daughter."

"She's *not* your daughter. You signed away your paternal rights the moment you signed the contract."

"I am still her father! She's still my flesh and blood! I'll admit that I haven't been a model parent, but you cannot possibly deny me the right to see her!" he demanded.

"That must be the understatement of the year! *Not a model parent!*" the witch mocked. "I recall having to blackmail you into helping my baby to survive! And you DARE call yourself her father?"

"No, listen to me, Christophe, and listen well. Draco is her father in every sense that counts. He was the one who helped me financially, he's the one who helped me find a donor, he's the one who raised Sophia with me.

"Draco was there when she first rode a pony. He's the one who picked her up when she got thrown off. He taught her to control her magic. Where were you all that time? She's a great girl, Christophe, and you know nothing about her. You have no right to show up just like this and turn our life upside down."

"Does she even know that I am her father?"

"She doesn't know that her *biological* father is called Christophe de Clermont-Tonnerre. Although she does know that Draco adopted her, yes. But that's hardly the point, because it doesn't matter. Not for her and not for us. We're family; you're not. So why are you here?"

"I... My wife... I wanted to get to know her. It turns out my wife and I cannot have children. So we thought maybe..."

"Oh that's rich! You turn up, almost twelve years after you left me pregnant, without money and no completed education, because your wife cannot have a child? What do you want me to do? Give you mine?"

Christophe didn't say anything and Hermione stared at him incredulously. "You cannot be serious! You came here to ask me if I would give you my daughter? ARE YOU COMPLETELY MAD?" she shouted.

"No, no... Not that, at all... But... I wondered if maybe you'd consider sending her to Beauxbatons? That way, I could go to see her regularly..."

"No. Absolutely not." Hermione was seething with anger. "First of all, I don't want you to have *any* contact with her. In fact, I forbid it! You know it is in my power to do that. Draco is the one whose name is on the birth certificate, and you specifically signed away your rights. So don't even think about calling upon the Wizengamot; you'll lose anyway.

"Secondly... have you seen her on horseback? She's so talented! She wants to be a professional rider, and we have arranged an opportunity for her to continue training while attending Hogwarts. Her instructor will continue to work with her, and we've rented two horseboxes in Hogsmeade.

"And thirdly... how come you only show up now, after you have been married for over ten years?"

"My wife..."

Hermione put up her hand. "Wait! I don't even want to know. That was a rhetorical question."

"I should have married you when you fell pregnant. You have a second child, with him, don't you?"

The young woman sighed audibly. "We have a second child. A son. And we will have a *second* daughter. The Healer confirmed today; I am pregnant.

"Listen, Christophe. We are happy, as a family, as a couple... we don't need anybody to stir up our life.

"Our daughter will leave for her first year at Hogwarts after the summer, and that will be enough of a change for us. We'll all miss her, especially Draco. Believe me when I say that she's a daddy's girl. She worships and adores him, and he her. Spoils her rotten, really.

"Sophia doesn't need you. She doesn't ask for her biological father, and as long as she doesn't, we won't talk about him... you. It's you who decided that you didn't want to

be part of our lives, and we have learned to live with it. And it's okay; we have everything we could wish for.

"If one day she starts asking questions, we won't lie to her. And if she wants to get to know you, then it's up to her; we won't discourage her. But please understand that we will not encourage her either as long as it doesn't come from herself."

"She's beautiful," the man whispered.

"Yes, she is." Hermione couldn't help smiling. "She has always been, even when she was ill."

She took out her wand and summoned a small box. They had stopped at a stone bench and she sat down, patting the seat next to her. When she opened the box, Christophe saw a multitude of moving wizarding photos: some of Sophia, some of a little boy who bore a noticeable resemblance to Sophia, some of Hermione and even Draco and other people he didn't know.

The brunette rifled through the pictures and finally chose a few. "You can have those if you want. The best are in my albums of course, but I can make you a copy of one or two if you would like."

"Thank you." Christophe looked at the photos intently and finally picked an additional one from Hermione's box. It looked recent and showed a close up of a laughing Sophia with a squealing and squirming toddler. "Is that your son? How old is he?"

"He's three. They adore each other. But of course Sophie gets annoyed sometimes. It's not easy being a big sister..." She smiled at the picture and stroked it tenderly.

Christophe dropped the picture back into the box.

"I am sorry for all the pain I caused you, Hermione. I know I can never make up for it, but if you could find it in your heart to forgive me... I should have married you, but I never could have. You understand that, don't you?"

"I didn't ask for marriage, Christophe. But a bit of support would have been nice, even after you broke my heart. I don't want to forgive you for what you did. I am not cruel, so I won't keep Sophia from contacting you if one day she desires to do so. But that's all you can hope for from me."

She stood up, brushed some imaginary dirt from her robes and turned to Christophe. "I will leave now. We have an invitation to dinner. Sophia has been excited for days about seeing her cousins. You have half an hour to leave our property. That should be plenty of time. You can Apparate from behind the main gates."

Hermione made her way slowly to the house. Seeing Christophe had brought back a whole abundance of memories. The time when she had had to fight so hard for Sophia's life seemed so far away now. She still remembered the indescribable fear of losing her. Without Draco, she wouldn't have been able to pull through this hard time.

She didn't regret the decisions she had made in her life. When she looked at her children, she knew that she could never imagine not having them. If she had to, she'd prostitute herself again. *'After all,'* she mused, *'it's the job that brought me Draco...'* Hermione smiled at the irony. Who'd have thought that she'd end up married to her childhood nemesis and later client?

Harry and the Weasleys had accepted their relationship astonishingly easily. But how could they not have after all Draco had done for her? She had preferred not telling them how they really met, though. What she had done to ensure her education and her child's well-being was a well-guarded secret between herself and Draco. It would do no good to upset everybody about something that was firmly in the past. Her history didn't diminish her husband's love for her and that was all that mattered to Hermione.

There had been so many reasons why she had fallen in love with Draco. But the one thing she could never love him enough for was his love for Sophia. He had easily slipped into his role as her father, and there was no other man she could think of being more worthy of that role than him.

Although she and Draco had barely spent a night apart after they found Christophe to be a match for Sophia, they had waited for almost a year before Hermione officially gave notice and moved out of her flat. After that, they had waited another two years before they got married; enough time for Hermione to take up her studies again and finish her education.

She had to smile, thinking back, how Draco had tricked her into going back to university after Sophia had been cured. A few weeks before the new university year started, she had received a letter from the dean. Apparently money enough to install a couple of scholarships had been donated to the Potions faculty. They had offered her one of these scholarships. Only later had she found out that it was Draco who had given them the money.

He had known her well enough to realise that she would be hesitant to accept his money, even when they were in a relationship. To be fair to him, he had kept his donations up even after she'd graduated. Other rich people had followed his lead, so that there was now a growing number of full and partial scholarships available to those who otherwise couldn't afford university but had excellent academic prospects. In Hermione's eyes, the number was still too small, but she supposed that they had to move one step at the time.

From afar, she could see Draco pacing behind the glass doors of the parlour. He was nervous, as she knew too well. They had talked about the possibility of *the French git* showing up a few times, but had nevertheless hoped that he'd just stay away. When Draco saw her approaching he stilled, his stance tense and insecure.

Hermione opened the doors quickly and threw herself in his arms. "He's gone," she mumbled against his chest.

"For good, I hope," Draco growled.

"I think so. He asked me if we'd consider sending Sophia to Beauxbatons. Of course I told him that the idea was ridiculous. I forbade him from coming near her again."

His arms tightened around her and he kissed her on the top of her head. "Have I already told you *love you* today?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, you have. But it's always good to hear it. I love you too, Draco." She looked up and caught his lips in a tender kiss. She'd never grow tired of his kisses, never grow tired of him and his love. She sighed in contentment.

"We should probably get the kids ready to leave. Bill and Fleur are expecting us..."

~~*~*~*

"Mum? Who was the man?" Sophia yawned while her mother tucked her blanket under her body.

Hermione paused. "Somebody I used to love very much. We were at university together for a year."

"Oh." The girl yawned again. "He looked at me funny."

"I imagine he did. He wasn't unpleasant, though, was he? Did he scare you?"

"No. Just funny."

The older witch smiled. "Good. Tell me, sweetheart, do you ever think about your father?"

"Whatsit 'bout dad? Of course I think 'bout him..." the girl mumbled sleepily.

"No... I mean your biological father?" Hermione bit her lip, unsure if her daughter would draw the right conclusions from her question. But it didn't seem to be the case.

"Not very oft'n. I have Dad..."

"But you know that if you have any questions, you are allowed to ask, don't you?"

"Yeah. Night, mum."

"Night, sweetheart." She kissed her daughter's cheek and then motioned impatiently at her husband. "For heaven's sake come in and say good night... I've seen you, Draco."

The blond wizard grinned and strolled over to the bed. He bent over and caressed a strand of hair out of Sophia's face before he too kissed her good night.

"Sleep tight, darling," he whispered, but it only earned him a dreamy sigh from the sleeping girl. He took his wife's hand and led her out of the room. When the door was closed he turned and looked at her with a gleam in his eyes.

"Finally home, children in bed... How about we celebrate the good news in our own bed?"

"What good news?" Hermione smiled cockily. "That you're the only important man in our daughter's life, or the fact that you will soon have yet another one to spoil rotten?"

"How about both?" He scooped her up and carried her bridal style into their bedroom.

**

A/N2: It was a pleasure to share this story with you. Thanks to everybody who stuck with it to the end, and especially those who reviewed!