

Deception

by Pyttan

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

1

Chapter 1 of 20

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1

The sound of an owl pecking at the kitchen window startled Hermione awake.

She groaned and burrowed deeper into the bed, wishing it would leave the parcel or the letter on the window ledge instead of demanding her presence.

She'd been idiotic, she admitted to herself, for working far too many hours at the Ministry during the past week. No, that would be working for far too many hours in the past months, actually, and then she'd compounded her stupidity by going to the Leaky Cauldron with Ron, Ginny and Harry the evening before, drinking too much.

That was Shackbolt's fault, obviously. It was he that had signed the documents in which, yet again, her request to have Draco declared dead had been denied.

"Go away," she mumbled and pulled the pillow over her head.

The clicking from the kitchen continued, louder now, and judging from the incessant quality of the noise, the bird had whatever it was carrying tied to its legs, poor creature. She sat up, wrapping the duvet around herself, and then carefully put her feet on the floor. She needed hangover potion, a big vial. And a glass of grapefruit juice would be good too.

She slowly made her way to the kitchen, her head pounding. On entering, Hermione was forced to squint, since the sunlight pouring through the kitchen window and promising a warm spring day was also making a painful cut straight through her brain. It didn't improve her headache. Neither did the sight of the eagle owl sitting on the window ledge, marring the view. She stiffened, contemplating ignoring the nasty creature—or hexing it—but it had now added scratching at the glass to the pecking, and the sound was turning her brain into one solid mass of pain. The horrid spawn of the Malfoy owlery wasn't intending to leave before it had carried out its mission, that much was clear.

Hermione grabbed an owl treat and opened the window, placing herself so the owl couldn't get into her apartment. The owl tipped its head forward, giving her a sinister glare before lunging forward, trying to peck her face. She gave it a hard shove in retaliation, forcing it back out on the ledge again.

"Try that again, and I'll hex you. Give me the letter. You know you'll displease your master if you don't."

The owl screeched and, despite its hostile posturing, stretched its leg out. The minute she had the letter in her hand, she threw the owl treat as far as she could out the window. The owl let go of the window ledge, spread its wings and swooped—without a sound—down on to the lawn to take it. Hermione hurried to slam the window shut just in case it returned.

She turned the envelope over and looked at the seal. It was emerald green with the words *Toujours Pur* and the Malfoy family crest stamped into it. She dropped the envelope on the table and turned away from it. Ignoring the Hades out of it, in fact.

She found a vial of hangover potion in her medicine chest and drank it down in one gulp. Looking at how the day had started, she would need it even more than she had anticipated.

She kept ignoring the letter as she made coffee and a sandwich. What did Lucius bloody Malfoy want this time? Another threat brought on by the fact that she'd tried to have Draco declared dead?

Twenty minutes later she was sitting at the table, holding a cup of coffee with the uneaten sandwich on the table, duvet around her shoulders, still staring at the piece of parchment on the table.

She wanted to burn it, but what she really needed to do was read it. If not for anything else, she needed to know what was in it so she would be able to raise her defences accordingly. And if she did it now, she wouldn't have to fret over the contents any longer.

Her hands were shaking. Pathetic, really, from someone who had fought Bellatrix Lestrange and lived to tell the tale. And the letter wasn't even a Howler.

She broke the seal in one decisive movement, unfolded the parchment, and looked at the handwriting. Lucius's heavy-handed scrawl covered it.

My Dear Daughter-In-Law,

Malfoy Manor has been very empty since you chose to move out. Narcissa and I have missed you, our only connection to our lost son. Your absence has—as I have pointed out on numerous occasions before—raised questions among our peers that have been difficult to answer, especially since you never saw fit to tell us why you moved out from the Malfoy Manor.

"Because of you and your family, Evil One. I would have got out earlier if I'd been able," Hermione told the letter before she continued reading.

I'm happy to tell you that circumstances have changed. After the sadness and pain we all suffered at Draco's disappearance, this new development brings us hope. Hope regarding the Malfoy line and also the hope, nay, the conviction, that it will bring you back to your family and your home.

Our attorney, Mr Markus Licinius, is looking into the new events as I'm writing this letter.

We will gather for dinner at eight o'clock this evening to discuss the details. The discussion will concern you too, my dear. I'm feeling convinced that you will, knowing that, finally accept an invitation from us.

I'm looking forward to your company, and I'm happy to say that I'm certain we will be seeing much more of you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Lucius Malfoy

Good news for a bad man then. His short stint in Azkaban had always struck her as much too little, much too early in the proceedings. Not even Draco's death had been enough to keep Lucius down. He'd never lost hope. He had never, not for a minute, believed Draco was dead. First she had thought he was in denial, but no. He had hope, and he had never given up hope that his lost son would return.

She looked at the wording of the letter again. Changed circumstances. New developments.

She would have to let herself be summoned this time.

2

Chapter 2 of 20

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2

Harry and Ginny were sitting on Hermione's sofa. Both of them were wearing almost identical frowns as they watched her put different odds and ends in her beaded

evening bag.

Odd how people in love seemed to look more and more like each other the longer they were together.

"Are you sure about this, Hermione?" asked Harry.

"Sure of what?"

"Take your pick. Sure of going, sure of going alone—"

"Please, we're worried. Couldn't you bring someone along? Your own lawyer at least," said Ginny. "What if he plans to do something ... like, you know ... like he did before?" Ginny's voice trailed off, and she fell quiet. She should, too, since she was treading on an area that was bound to set off sharp things that could cut deep if they hit a target.

Hermione bit her lower lip hard enough to taste blood. She looked away, not meeting Ginny's eyes while she cleared her throat, trying to dislodge the potion that felt as it was still stuck there, even now, six years later.

"He hasn't got any more sons to sacrifice, has he?" She made sure she sounded brisk, and the rhetorical question made Harry cock an eyebrow and give her the smallest of nods. "So, feeding me Amortentia again would be rather futile. He would need to impregnate me himself to get the deed done. Only I'm a Mudblood, and he barely manages to touch me without cringing away in distaste, and besides, Narcissa would yank his boy-bits off if she caught even a whiff of a plan like that. No, I'm happy to say that the Malfoy line will be extinct in fifty years or so."

Or so she hoped. She drew a deep breath, trying to calm down. She felt chilled. She would need the cloak matching her robe after all. She took it from the back of the chair where she'd hung it earlier, put it on and rubbed her arms to get some warmth back.

"I'm sorry," said Ginny. "I shouldn't have mentioned it. I'm just worried."

She could tell them, of course; she could tell them that she had never been intended to carry a Malfoy heir. She was only the means he needed to clean up the soiled Malfoy name. As long as she was married to Draco, she wouldn't get to have any children of her own. She could also tell them that Amortentia was only one potion among many, and that feeding someone potions on the sly was far easier than one might imagine. Ironic that she had discovered what was going on only when she'd had an adverse reaction to the combined effects of her own contraceptive potion and the one Lucius had fed her. Even more ironic was Lucius' fury when he'd understood what she'd been up to. She'd thought a lot about that very strange reaction of his. It must have been the principle of it. He was supposed to be the one in charge, and she supposed that in his mind, she should want to carry a child of Draco's more than anything. As if she'd actually want to bring a child in to the Malfoy family.

But she didn't tell them. Some things were just too private and horrible to talk about.

She looked her friends again. Harry was reading the letter again for some reason. He should know it by heart by now.

"Anything new in there?" she asked, giving him the wryest smile she could produce.

He looked up at her and returned a smile that equaled hers. "Nope. But I don't like this. The wording ... He sounds just a bit too pleased with himself, doesn't he?" Harry shook his head, and his right hand went to his forehead, massaging the scar. She wondered about that gesture sometimes. Did it still twinge? Did it warn him about dangers ahead?

"The adjectives you are looking for are 'condescending' and 'smug', Harry. Nothing new there," she said. This time she managed to sound brisk and decisive. She could impersonate the old Hermione well, she knew.

The look Harry gave her was the brooding one she had grown so accustomed to seeing during their days of roaming the Forest of Dean. This was the first time she'd seen it in a long while though. It had been years, in fact.

"You will inherit everything when they die. Lucius won't allow that. The only reason you're still alive is that he can't afford a suspicious death so close to home, at least not at this point." Harry looked so solemn and worried that Hermione couldn't help wondering if he'd heard rumours at work, or if he was being his ordinary dramatic self. She hoped for the latter.

She would have to sit him down and talk about it later.

"Maybe. But on the other hand, I plan to sit at Lucius Malfoy's deathbed while he draws his last breath. To entertain him, I will tell him all about how I'll divide his estate into tiny little pieces and give the lot away to the Muggle-borns of Britain," Hermione said. She hadn't managed to hide the vehemence. She could see it in the way Ginny moved closer to Harry, turning her head away, and the way Harry smiled. A wry, sad, but still a hard-as-diamond little smile. He understood. And that didn't surprise her. He did know a thing or two about anger, after all.

"The Aurors' office is still looking into his affairs. Maybe I can find a way to get rid of him for you."

Ginny gave Harry a nod of approval and a smile before turning back to Hermione.

"Dad's helping. All we need to prove is that Malfoy is doing something illegal, and he'll be put away for good this time."

It was nice that her friends still had such an optimistic view of the world. Naive, in a rather surprising way, all things considered, but still nice. She threw a quick glance at her watch.

"Sorry, I need to be on my way. I'll get back to you as soon as I get home."

Ginny rose and gave her a hug, while Harry gave her an awkward pat on her arm.

"Got your Galleon?" he asked.

"Of course," she answered.

"Good, I'll keep an eye on mine. If you need me, I'll be there."

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3

With its grey exterior and diamond-paned windows, Malfoy Manor looked like the lovely old house it wasn't. It just camouflaged well. If you didn't know about the oubliette below the dungeons, and the dungeons below the torture chambers, no one would suspect that they were there. You also needed not to know the inhabitants, to be perfectly honest.

The house was like one of those apples that looked so delicious on the outside. Only when you bit into it, you'd find that it was rotting from the inside out.

She had reached the door, and Merlin, it was cold this evening. Hermione rubbed her arms to get some warmth back and then took a few deep breaths before knocking. A sneering house-elf opened the door and let her in.

Poor Dobby, how he must have hated it here. Being the only decent one of the lot, his life must have been pure hell, since the house-elves at Malfoy Manor were more like Kreacher than Dobby, only without Kreacher's redeeming characteristics. He would have been a natural target for everyone, much as she'd been when she lived here.

"Miss will be waiting here in the hall, Miss, while Roach is asking Master if the Mudblood should be let in the house," the elf said and stuck its pointed nose in the air in a very apt—and comic, if one was in the right mood—imitation of Malfoy Manor's mistress. She contemplated letting the elf's rudeness slide but decided against it. She wouldn't stay in the hall, like an unwanted visitor begging to be let in when she'd been invited, even surreptitiously ordered, to come. Besides, she hated the hall where the lead-light windows—depicting green serpents slithering through a bed of red Poinsettias—closed out the light and distorted the view of the world outside. And Roach knew who she was. She was so very tempted to threaten him with clothes, but it struck her as too Malfoyesque to bear.

She drew another deep breath, this time to keep herself from harming the obnoxious house-elf. "Oh. Well, since I was summoned here by Mr Malfoy himself, I assumed I was welcome. I'll just leave, then, and send an owl with an excuse for the misunderstanding," Hermione said, taking care to sound as polite as she could.

The house-elf gave her a wide-eyed look and spluttered something incoherent.

"The dining room?" she asked.

The elf shook its head hard enough for his floppy ears to dance around his head.

"Where, then?" she asked.

"The drawing room, Mrs Malfoy," said the elf, the answer a frightened whine. "Young Mistress," it added with a sycophantic bow, making Hermione want to snarl at it. And of course they would be in the drawing room. A conscious choice on Lucius' part, without a doubt. She took two deep breaths as she ascended the broad stone stairs. She couldn't start chattering her teeth. It just wouldn't do.

The drawing room was lit with candles, and the moment she entered, Lucius, Narcissa and a man she didn't recognise rose from their seats. The small group walked towards her, smiling, the man she didn't know making up the rear.

"Hermione, I'm so pleased to see you." Lucius's lazy drawl made her skin prickle, and when he reached for her, she stepped away to avoid his arm. Lucius smirked, looking pleased.

"Dear," said Narcissa, and before Hermione had time to move away again, Narcissa took a firm hold of her arms and kissed the air beside her cheeks. Narcissa straightened, looked Hermione over and sighed.

"If you would choose to wear your hair up, you would have so many more options than you have now." Narcissa made a disgusted little moue as she looked Hermione over. Then she leaned close to Hermione's ear and whispered, "I know Madam Malkin is expensive. I just want you to know that you can always turn to me if you're short of money. It would be our little secret."

"Thank you. I'll be sure to do that." She just hated Narcissa sometimes. Every once in a while it was a toss-up between her and her husband as to who was really the worst of them.

Narcissa gave Hermione a thin-lipped smile. "Indeed, you should," she said and turned her head to Lucius, giving him an accusing glare, the very clear message of the look being that it was his fault a Mudblood witch without any sense of style was standing in Narcissa's opulent drawing room. Truth to tell, it was his fault. Which was amusing in its own way.

The second man in the room stepped forwards as Lucius signalled for him.

"May I introduce Mr Markus Licinius. I don't think you've met. He's here to help us with the legalities." Lucius sounded as if he was talking to someone daft, and Hermione's jaws were beginning to ache with the effort of not screaming. She took a deep breath and smiled at the man. He wasn't proven guilty of anything, after all—not yet, at any rate. But on the other hand, Mr Licinius was, at least as far as looks went, exactly what she'd expected. Even his robe was formal in the same way an exclusive Muggle suit was. He couldn't look more suave, slick and predatory than he already did. And it seemed effortless on his part, and not in any way affected, which made her uneasy. He smiled at her and took the hand she offered, bowing over it. He didn't let go of her hand as he straightened, and when she tried to pull it out of his grip, he squeezed it harder, hurting her fingers so badly she gasped.

"Mrs Malfoy. How nice to meet you. I'm very honoured to meet one of the ... former ... war-heroines. Or maybe you prefer war-heroine?" He gave her hand a small pat before letting it go. "The legalities are nothing to worry about, I assure you. Time-consuming, but not very difficult. There are just a few clarifications that need to be addressed. You can just enjoy the moment." He gave her a solemn nod and a smile. The smile showed too many teeth.

"I'm afraid I don't know what this is about," said Hermione, and looked at Lucius. "I assume it concerns who will get the Malfoy estate when Lucius and Narcissa die, but as I'm not interested in it to begin with, I don't know why I'm here."

Mr Licinius gave Lucius and Narcissa a quick glance, a smirk hovering on his lips. The silent exchange between the three of them struck her as odd; she had the urge to turn and run from the situation.

She looked closer at Lucius instead. She found glee; she could read that in those opaque grey eyes of his. She saw happiness too. And pure, unhidden cruelty, aimed at her.

She looked at Narcissa. There was serenity and peace. Narcissa was at peace.

They were at peace, they were happy, and they were both smiling.

This didn't bode well for her at all.

"Mrs Malfoy, your husband is not dead," said Markus Licinius, his air solemn. And then he licked his lower lip, giving Hermione a fleeting impression of a lizard tasting air.

Not dead?

Lucius just kept smiling without saying anything, watching her reaction.

"Unexpected, I realise," said someone behind her, and all the hairs on her body rose as she turned around. The room was tilting, and she had trouble keeping her balance, since her knees were shaking so badly too.

She looked at the man who was now sauntering into the room in a way that was much too familiar.

Draco was moving toward her.

The room shifted again, and she heard someone speak from a long distance away.

It couldn't be. He had fallen from the yacht, and he had never surfaced again. The storm had made it impossible to save him.

Zabini had told them.

It wasn't Draco. It couldn't be.

"You're dead," she said. The room tilted again, and her knees buckled as she tried to compensate for the movement.

The man who looked like Draco smirked and said something she couldn't hear because of the loud humming noise in the room. What was that sound anyway? Then all the candles in the room went out at the same time.

4

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She screamed when she couldn't move her feet. The Draco-Inferius was coming closer, and its clothes and hair were dripping water. The layer of flesh that could be glimpsed through the cracked, pallid skin was tinged green.

"I'll fuck you from behind," it said to her, "so I don't have to look at your Mudblood face." They were in a bed now, with her underneath him. She could smell him; the same smell she had encountered in Bathilda Bagshot's house. "I'll fuck you till you bleed, just like the old days. I enjoyed that." It shrieked with laughter and bent its head to kiss her.

Hermione screamed and fought to get free. She managed to get away from its hold and rolled off the bed.

She landed on her hands and knees. Pain shot through her kneecaps, and she screamed again, but she managed to scramble away from the bed anyway. But no one came after her. Curled in a corner of the room, she looked at the bed. Empty. No one was in it; not Draco, nor the Draco-Inferius.

First came a wave of cold blooming in her chest. The painful breathing and the tears followed, as she realised it was a dream and why she'd dreamt: She was still at Malfoy Manor and not at home. She pulled her knees to her chest and rested her forehead on her knees.

The knock on the door was perfunctory, and it opened just a second after the knock.

Draco stepped into the room and closed the door behind him and walked toward her where she sat. She couldn't read him as she stared up at him, but something was ... what? Her mind fumbled and tried to find the right word.

Askew.

That was it. Something about the man in front of her was askew.

A face a bit too pretty, a body a tad too fit and hair as white as moonlight. A perfect fantasy-Draco as the mind of an adolescent pure-blood witch would have conjured him.

She curled her hands to fists and got to her feet. You always left a fight hurting afterwards. So would he, even if he'd win in the end.

"I heard you scream," he said, and as if she didn't already know, he added, "I'm in the next room." He took a few careful steps toward her, and when he started to lift his arms, as if he was going to embrace her, she lifted her own arms as guards, her hands fisted. What she needed was her wand, but she didn't even know where it was.

She would go for his eyes if he touched her.

His arms fell, and he stepped back, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, you heard wrong, so you can leave now," Hermione said.

Draco gave her a wry half-smile. Instead of leaving, he walked over to the bed, gazing at the tangled bed sheets and the duvet that had been dragged to the floor with her.

Without looking at her, he started to stretch and smooth down the sheets, tucking them under the mattress. He continued his work by fluffing the pillows, placing them in a neat row at the headboard, and finally, he shook out the duvet and spread it over the bed.

He made her bed? And without summoning a house-elf and without using magic.

Draco turned to her and tilted his head, his movements careful as he moved toward the door. "I can arrange for some Dreamless Sleep to be brought up for you, if you wish," he said.

"No, thank you. You may leave."

She saw him clench his teeth, but then his features relaxed. He gave her a short formal bow and left the room.

She looked at his back as he left. Wasn't he just an inch or so too tall?

5

Chapter 5 of 20

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5

She had gone through every drawer as well as the huge walk-in closet connected to her room: Her wand was gone, her Galleon was gone, and her robes were gone. They had taken everything, even her shoes, leaving her in only her panties and bra.

She sat down on the bed and pulled the duvet around herself, not knowing what to do next. Screaming would be satisfying in the short term. In the long term it would only be stupid. Any show of weakness or frustration was damaging, at least if it was found out. And she needed to think about this situation without giving in to emotions. Especially not panic or depression; that would be disastrous.

What she didn't want to think of was the previous night. She didn't want to think of Draco coming uninvited to her room, catching her frightened and crying in her underwear. It must have reminded him, in such a satisfying way, of the bad old days when she had been forced to share his bed.

She wanted to go home now, this instant, but in the end going home was a secondary goal. Leaving the Malfoy Manor as a divorced woman was the primary goal: The desired result of making the right decisions.

What she needed was to be free of the Malfoys. Not only free of Draco, but the lot of them. Then she could go home and have some peace. But to be able to do that, she needed to know as much as she could about what was going on here.

So, if she thought about it, all that she knew at this point was that Draco had returned home. Or rather that someone looking like Draco had returned, someone Lucius and Narcissa thought was their son. Her best chance would be if he was an imposter. Someone who wanted the Malfoy estate and had no interest in her and, preferably, had no wish to please Lucius. A bit contradictory in terms, but hope was a strange thing.

If it was Draco ... She pressed her hand against her breastbone to get rid of the suffocating pressure that was starting to bloom there.

The knock on the door startled her, and her heart got caught in her throat in the process.

And again, the door opened before she even got the chance to answer.

A pile of golden brown wool, seemingly attached to two skinny grey legs with knobby knees, entered the room. Hermione blinked and shook her head, not quite managing to take in what she was seeing.

"Good morning, Young Mistress Malfoy," the pile of cloth said.

"Good morning," Hermione heard herself answer, wanting to kick herself, or rather her mother and father, for making sure she had to concentrate to manage rudeness.

The pile of cloth rose in the air and unfolded itself. Floating in the air was a robe. New underwear, shoes and stockings—stockings, for Merlin's sake—swooshed over to the bed and settled beside her.

Hermione looked closer at the elf, who was now visible, and just might be the tiniest one Hermione had ever seen. And it was smiling at her, its eyes shining with happiness.

"I don't recognise you," Hermione said to the elf. She hadn't lived in Malfoy Manor for the last four years, but house-elves grew old, and new additions to the staff were unheard of unless one born to the household came of age and started working or an elf was given clothes and left.

"I is Plucky, Young Mistress. Plucky is coming here with Young Master."

Draco had brought it? She looked closer at the little creature. Its tea-towel must be the cleanest she had ever seen, and that included the ones the house-elves at Hogwarts had worn back in the day. It was draped around the elf in intricate folds and was decorated with pictures of colourful ... Were those moths, of all the strange pattern choices?

"I has orders," the elf said, preening. "I is Young Mistress's personal elf now, I is. Young Master told me this morning. I is to take orders only from Young Mistress." The elf sidled closer to Hermione. "Roach, the big elf who guards the door, decides what the house-elves is to do. He says, 'Plucky, you is new. You is to clean the lavatories. You is to do it by hand. Not magic.' But I says to him, 'I is Young Mistress's elf, Young Master is saying so. You is old Master's elf. You is responsible for the cleanliness of the lavatories, so you best hurry.'"

The little house-elf giggled, but then seemed to realise that she had said something that might get her into trouble.

"I is meaning no disrespect towards the old elves of the household, Young Mistress," she said and bit her lip, giving Hermione a wary glance.

Hermione couldn't help it; she laughed. A cheeky house-elf found at Malfoy Manor! Not even Dobby had been cheeky! They did seem to have bad luck with some of their elves. Served them right.

"I know you didn't, and I won't tell," she said when she'd finished laughing. The elf didn't laugh. But she did have laugh lines around her eyes, deep ones and plenty of them. Watching the elf, Hermione felt so much better.

"So tell me, how come Draco brought you back here?" Hermione asked, her curiosity genuine. She might get something, anything, she could use from the elf.

Plucky's laugh lines disappeared, and her lower lip started to wobble while big tears pooled in her eyes.

"Come, sit with me," said Hermione, moving over, trying to make it clear that she wanted the elf to sit beside her without exactly ordering her to do it. She was surprised when Plucky climbed up and seated herself on the bed without any pretence or protests that she didn't understand.

"So, how come you ended up at Malfoy Manor, then?"

The elf fidgeted and put a lot of effort into studying the moths on her tea-towel, still looking sad and forlorn.

"First Plucky's old Master disappeared. Plucky searched and searched, but Plucky failed him." She sniffled, and a tear-drop finally rolled down her cheek. "I is a masterless elf afterwards, and I needs work. I is becoming a Hogwarts kitchen-elf." Plucky made a face and gave Hermione a tearful look. Then she seemed to reach a decision and whispered, "Plucky is a very bad elf. Plucky hates cooking and cleaning and house-work, Plucky does."

Hermione hid her threatening bout of the giggles by coughing.

"I'm not too fond of those things either, so I understand," she said when she managed to articulate again.

Plucky gave Hermione a suspicious look but did continue to tell her story.

"Chief house-elf Kreacher is often sending Plucky to shop for kitchen things and foods. He says Plucky moping around the kitchen is being bad for house-elf morale. I is a good shopper though, chief house-elf Kreacher says," she said with obvious pride. "I is sent to London to shop for Headmistress McGonagall's birthday, and I is sent to Greece to find honey candies for Professor Slughorn. I finds Young Master in Italy when I is shopping for wine."

"You found him?" Hermione asked, something about the statement jarring.

Plucky glanced at her and jumped down from the bed with a decidedly guilty air.

"How did you find him?" Hermione asked.

"Young Mistress needs to get dressed now," Plucky said, ignoring the question. "They is waiting in the drawing room." Plucky smiled, and before Hermione had time to react, she was dressed and readied with a breathtaking efficiency, and all the while Plucky evaded or flat out refused to answer any more of her questions.

6

Chapter 6 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

Disclaimer: I don't own the characters within the story, and I don't earn any money. JK Rowling owns them, and I hope she earns loads.

The same is true for Lisa Kleypas. The prompt I chose at the HP Harlequin Fest is taken from the back of her book 'Stranger in My Arms', and this story is based on that text.

A/N: This story was first published at the HP Harlequin Fest at LJ. This is a longer, edited version of that story. I also want to thank my beta, Amylouise. Thank you so much for helping me with the story, even after the Fest was over.

6

Something was wrong, and that something was Draco.

It wasn't just his looks; it was his personality too. He was much more focused. In the bad old days, he would have sprawled on a settee, sullen and uninterested in what was going on around him while letting his father make all the decisions. Today he was sitting next to her, back straight, listening intently to what Markus Licinius was saying. And that was significant since the lawyer was the only person she'd ever encountered who, as far as droning on about irrelevant details went, could rival Professor Binns. But while she was ready to scream at the lawyer to get to the bloody point of the meeting, Draco was listening closely to everything that was said without showing any emotions at all, or even fidgeting.

"... and added to the new text concerning the heirloom is the point of heirs born outside wedlock. It states that any child of Draco Malfoy will inherit a part of the Malfoy estate. The first male child of Draco Malfoy born of a purebred mother will inherit the major part of the estate, as defined in detail by supplement five. In the case ..."

While Mr Licinius droned on, Lucius was leaning back in his chair, looking the picture of innocence, while cocking an expectant eyebrow at his son. Then his eyes slid to Hermione. She felt her cheeks heat.

She was back in the pattern where Lucius, Narcissa and Draco with one look could reduce her to blushes and stutters, making her feel less than she was. And she didn't seem able to counter the feeling at all. She looked away from Lucius and instead focused on the gorgeous view outside the window.

That was when she felt a small touch on the small of her back. She looked at Draco, who gave her a level look in return, before she pulled away. Then he looked away from her and at his father.

"You may stop there," Draco said, surprising Hermione with the interruption.

Narcissa, however, started fiddling with her wedding band. Always a sign of worry. Mr Licinius just looked annoyed. Hermione assumed it was on account of him being

interrupted in the process of humiliating her.

"Mother, Father, I think it might be prudent for me to explain certain new developments and decisions on my part," Draco said, still not showing any kind of emotion.

"Of course," Lucius said and bestowed on Hermione a look of mock compassion. "And what kind of developments would those be?"

Draco looked the participants of the meeting over. And there it was again: that strange feeling of something being off. He was demanding attention, and they were all heeding his demands. He had never carried that kind of respect before, not with his family, and not even among his peers.

"I've been gone for four years. Needless to say, that has had a certain influence on me. As I've already told you ..." Draco's eyes slid over Lucius and Narcissa, "... I lost my memory after the accident, and it had only just started to return when Plucky found me."

"How did you end up in Italy?" asked Hermione. "You went overboard outside Jersey. At least, that's what Zabini told us."

"Don't interrupt," said Lucius, cutting her short.

Draco smiled at his father.

"Thank you, Father. Where was I ...?"

"Memory. Or rather your lack thereof," Hermione said, wanting him to get on with it. There must be something in it that she could use to her advantage.

"Memory, yes. I still don't remember everything. The greater part of what's still missing concerns you and our marriage, Hermione." He gave her an intent look. "My memories of you are only those from Hogwarts, I'm sorry to say."

"I think I might know what this is leading up to," said Lucius. "Draco, your wife is an intelligent woman. If you've had a child outside wedlock during the time you were away, she'll understand, I'm sure."

The way Lucius sometimes jumped to the wrong conclusions was almost funny.

She wouldn't mind a bastard child of Draco's; she would welcome one. Lucius and Narcissa would be so eager to spoil and pamper any child of Draco's that she would fade into the background. She wouldn't mind a harem of Draco's mistresses living at the Manor either, as long as they kept him exhausted and out of her bed.

If there was a child, she might even become so uninteresting that she could get a divorce. She smothered the hot little spark of hope the thought ignited. Because as long as Lucius had it lodged in his mind that he needed her for appearances' sake, he wouldn't let her go.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Father," said Draco, voice dry. "As far as I know, I haven't fathered any sons...or daughters, for that matter."

"A shame, but that will be amended very soon, I'm sure," Lucius said with a shrug and a crooked smile.

Draco responded with the coldest sneer she had ever seen him produce. And honestly, that was saying something.

"Hermione and I need to get reacquainted before we take a step like that."

Hermione felt a small snap in her neck as she turned her head to look at Draco, her mind clambering for an indication that she might have misunderstood what he'd just said.

"I beg your pardon," Lucius said and started to rise from his chair. Narcissa put her hand on his arm and gave him a hard look. He sank down on the chair again. Hermione wasn't able to even protest since her mind was scrambling to make sense of what was going on.

"You must excuse your father, Draco. This has been a difficult time for us. And you know about the importance of family and your duty to it," Narcissa said, giving Draco a meaningful look.

"Indeed, I do. However, you need to consider Hermione. This is very unexpected for her. And while I have had a couple of weeks to think the situation over, she hasn't."

"I would be quite willing to give you a divorce," Hermione said. Please Merlin, that must be what he was trying to get around to saying. That he didn't want this marriage any more than she did, and wanted to find a new wife.

"How are you parents these days, Hermione?" Narcissa cut in.

"Yes, I seem to remember that your father never did recover properly from that attempted robbery five years ago. Does he still limp?" said Lucius, baring his teeth in what anyone who didn't know him might have confused with a smile.

Hermione's breath caught at the reminder of what had happened the first time she'd tried to leave, but she still continued. She couldn't give up now.

"Draco, please. The Malfoy name is already restored. No one would be surprised if we were to divorce in these circumstances," said Hermione, despising herself for resorting to begging, but maybe, if he wanted it too, they would let her go.

Draco gave her a look that could have been interpreted as almost compassionate.

"But I don't want a divorce," he said and reached for her hand, pulling it to him even as she resisted him. He carefully turned it over and smoothed out her fisted hand. "You see, I was surprised to hear of the marriage. I couldn't imagine what had brought it on. But the more I thought about you, the more I liked, even enjoyed the idea of having you for a wife. Very intelligent and pretty; what man wouldn't want a witch like you as his spouse and, of course, as the mother of his children? It is something I want, at any rate."

No! This wasn't happening.

"You should know that I realise you need time. I will give you the time you need, but I do intend to have you in the end."

If Harry and Ron had been at the meeting with her, the three of them would have laughed like crazy when they were alone afterwards. Lucius' face of horror; Narcissa looking more like Bellatrix at her worst than Hermione had thought was even possible; and Mr Licinius, who resembled a hyena just robbed of a delicious carcass by a vulture, were all pure comedy, they really were.

But as it was, Hermione didn't laugh at all. Not at the meeting and not afterwards. Afterwards, she cried until her eyes were swollen and her nose clogged.

7

Chapter 7 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

7

It was a dream. She knew that it was a dream this time. The Draco-Inferi wasn't really on top of her, laughing at her, breathing hateful words in her face, hurting her. He ... it didn't exist.

She screamed to break the dream, but still couldn't shake the nightmare and wake up. The Inferi was still on top of her, ripping and tearing at her nightdress.

"Hermione, it's a dream. Wake up. Now." She heard the order as someone grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a firm shake.

The disembodied voice and the decisive shake helped, and she was finally able to get rid of the last remnants of the horrific images her mind had produced. But when she opened her eyes, the nightmare still continued, but in a new guise.

Draco was sitting on the side of her bed, looming over her, his white hair reflecting the light from the flickering candles on her bedside table.

She screamed again. Then she went for her wand beside her in the bed.

The wand was gone.

"It's very foolish to bring someone out of a nightmare without removing his or her wand first, and since your dream seem particularly potent ... "

She turned and faced Draco, at the same time scooting as far away from him as she was able. He held up her wand and then extended it out for her to take, handle first.

"Don't even think of using it," he said as she reached for it.

She would use it. She would defend herself if she had to. She stared at him, trying to read what he would do next. She couldn't figure him out this night, though. If anything, he looked awkward and a bit uncertain despite his confident phrasing.

"What kind of dream would scare you that much? What's it about, I wonder? The Dark Lord?"

"No, the battle," she said. "It's a recurring one."

He looked away and smoothed down his robe.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No. It wouldn't help." This time she told him the unveiled truth.

Draco rose and moved to the armchair beside the bed, where he sat down and pulled a blanket over himself.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm staying the night. Since we aren't quite sharing everything yet, I'll sit here."

What on earth?

"I'll be fine, you can go back to your rooms. There is absolutely no reason for you to stay here."

He leant over and blew out the candles, leaving the room in complete darkness.

"You are my wife. I have every reason to want to ensure your well being."

"You never did before." The silence in the room lasted for far too long.

"Then it's time things changed, isn't it?" said Draco, his voice calm and level, instead of abusive, as she'd been expecting.

"But you'll be uncomfortable in that chair." It was a last-ditch attempt; her last hope to get him to leave, and it couldn't have been lamer.

She heard rustling as he moved.

"I could join you in your bed. I really wouldn't mind."

Such a stupid thing for her to say. An obvious retort on his part. She swallowed hard, pushing down her fear. He would be in her bed any minute now.

"No. Please. Not yet. We need to ... to settle some things first."

She heard him sigh.

"I was trying to make a joke. I don't make a habit of bedding down with unwilling women."

But he did. He liked bedding down with unwilling women. He enjoyed forcing women to obedience. Not that she'd risk him taking offence by questioning him at this time.

"Yeah," she said. "Good."

She burrowed down under her duvet, listening to him breathing. The breathing eventually turned into a low pitched snoring. She didn't remember ever hearing Draco snore.

But on the other hand, everything about this encounter had been strange. He was ... what? Different, of course, in several ways. Different was one thing, but this felt like it was more than just the result of years gone by, because he was acting out of character.

The man in the armchair wasn't Draco. He just couldn't be, and what was that going to mean for her in the end?

After she was sure that he was sleeping, she threw every protective spell she could think of on the bed, warding it as best she could. Despite her efforts, she didn't dare to fall sleep. She stayed awake all night, clutching her wand and waiting for an attack that never came.

8

Chapter 8 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

8

She was sitting in the bay window staring at the parchment she had written in an attempt to structure her thoughts about Draco. Or rather, her thoughts about the man who wasn't Draco. The man who wasn't her husband.

She must have read the parchment 600 times by now, and she wasn't any wiser.

Motives for impersonating Draco:

The Malfoy money, estate and businesses, and/or

Revenge.

The question was if the first part would be enough for the culprit in terms of revenge, or if the unknown someone planned to do worse than sneak in and take over. That would be a whole new can of nastiness if, let's say, Lucius were to be found in the library, *Avada Kedavra'd*. Not an altogether unpleasant thought, but still ...

Hermione sighed and continued reading.

Known ways for someone to change their appearance:

1. Polyjuice potion

Not likely. Difficult potion that demands a certain amount of skill. Short lasting. Takes a long time to brew. Needs ingredient from the person you want to impersonate, and Draco has been missing, or probably dead, for a long time.

2. Metamorphic abilities

Hereditary trait. Runs in the Black family. Possible connection to Narcissa's family? Other known Metamorphmagi aside from Tonks and Teddy? Other families?

3. Charms/Spells

Are there any known charms to change appearances? If so, it would demand a high level of skill since they are obscure at best. Very old charm or spell? Very new?

4. Animagus abilities

If it's possible for a witch or wizard to learn how to become an animal, is it possible you could learn to turn yourself into another human being? If so, would it be possible to copy another human being's looks? Only one or several?

She had never seen Tonks impersonate another person. She had just changed her appearance. She needed to look that up too.

She looked at the last word on the parchment.

Who?

Who would have the cunning, the ability, and the motive to do something like this? And why would that person want to continue to live in a sham marriage? She should be considered a threat to him, and on account of that he shouldn't want to keep her around other than to please Lucius.

And options one, three, and four demanded a wizard that was very advanced in his field. And option four was no more than pure theory at this point, while option number two was such a rare occurrence it was unrealistic on that account alone.

She stared at the notes again. They would do her no good unless she got to a library to do some research.

Lucius' library.

But if she went there, odds were that she would run into Draco, who'd spent most of his time in there reading since she had arrived at the Manor. She didn't want that since he touched her every time they got near. Not big things; he just stroked her hand or her arm. She shuddered. Looking at him made her skin crawl. But the really frightening part was that she was only repulsed by his touch if she looked at him. She shivered and rubbed her arms where he had touched her then. A glance out the window at the grounds below revealed a silvery glimmer among a group of trees at a distance.

It was, as expected, Harry's stag Patronus meandering through the trees and out into the Malfoy garden. The first time it had arrived was the second day of her involuntary stay at the Manor, right after her things had been returned, and she had been able to send a message through to Harry.

It never disappeared until Harry had made sure that she had seen it. It was amazing, the length of time he could keep it going these days. On the other hand, he was a happy man now. Maybe it was as simple as that. Her own poor little otter had appeared only to immediately fade away again after her marriage to Draco. She hadn't even tried Summoning it for years now.

She sighed and took out her Galleon, which was shimmering white.

"You OK?"

She tapped the coin with her wand.

"Yes."

The coin shimmered white again and two new words appeared.

"Rodent boy?"

Hermione smiled.

"Lucius demanding. Busy."

"Good. Keep in touch."

"I will."

The Galleon shimmered yellow and went back to normal, and Hermione drew a deep breath. She leaned her head against the window and looked down at the garden where the stag had been just moments ago. The only thing remaining was a long wisp of glowing silver fog dissolving in the breeze.

She would have to try to go down to the library again. If she timed it right and had some luck for once, it would be empty this time.

9

Chapter 9 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

9

Once again, she was thwarted in her attempt at searching the library.

Draco was sitting on one of the settees reading, and for a moment she thought that he'd discovered her, even if she had taken a hurried step back from the door. When she peeked in again, he turned the page and continued reading. She realised she was holding her breath and exhaled as silently as she could.

For a moment she couldn't decide what to do; she could return, but hiding in the reading room again held no appeal. She turned and hurried to one of the drawing rooms instead, opened the patio doors and left the house. She chose one of the paths leading away from the building and set off at a brisk pace. The Malfoy gardens were huge, and there was no problem in getting a good distance away from the house.

The path led her past a small pond and a small gathering of trees.

Thank Merlin, Draco hadn't seen her leave.

Draco Malfoy, her evil, horrific husband. Or not. He still might be someone else, not her husband, but equally evil and horrific. She hurried on, since she wanted—*needed*—distance between her and Draco. As much distance as possible was a good thing. When she became breathless, she slowed down. It was irrational of her to behave like this. Silly, even.

And there was a way she could get out of this mess: If she could prove that it wasn't Draco in there, she could return home and continue to try to get him declared dead. If she could prove it wasn't Draco, Lucius might even be so desolate this time that he would leave her alone.

And that brought her back to the *who*?

The first problem in identifying the culprit was that all the believable candidates she knew of really weren't all that believable when you thought things through.

Filius Flitwick and Minerva McGonagall, believable candidates in terms of ability, were both still alive, but she just couldn't picture either one of them doing something to gain access to the Malfoy estate. Greed just wasn't their thing. Revenge might be though, especially in Minerva's case, but it would still be more likely that they would march up to the house, knock on the door and ask Lucius to name his seconds, and then kill him straight out in a duel. And besides, both Filius and Minerva were at Hogwarts teaching a new batch of children, and the two of them seemed as mentally stable as ever.

Shacklebolt was an option, but he was a very visible Minister of Magic, and he had nothing to gain by taking over the Malfoy estate in such a Gothic and elaborate way. If he wanted to have it, he could take it today if he wished to do so. And nothing indicated that he had a more personal axe to grind as far as Lucius went.

Hermione had reached the end of the path and found herself in front of a pretty stone pergola with grey pillars dotted with patches of lichen and topped with an ornamental cast-iron roof. She drew her wand and then hesitated. She really should try a couple of diagnostic spells. But what was the use?

She stepped in and waited.

Nothing.

She might live to see another day then.

She sat down and let her mind drift. Zabini? Shrewd one, but he seemed to rely on his good looks rather than magic to get ahead. Nott then. Nott could be an option. He'd been a bit of a loner in school. Good at almost every subject they shared, excellent at Ancient Runes. And she didn't know much about his family. She could put Nott on her list.

George then? Creative enough for sure. But his sense of humour was still very much intact and keeping him sane, and that sense of humour would make it utterly impossible for him to pull a thing like this off.

And then there were all the unknown possibilities: the Unmentionables, surviving Death-Eaters and everyone wanting to get at Lucius Malfoy for one reason or the other, which meant a whole lot of people.

What she really wanted was some believable candidates, so she could list them. And as far as magical abilities went, there were five of them she would have wanted: Dumbledore, Voldemort, Professor Snape, Bellatrix, and Sirius. The only problem being that all of them were dead, if not six feet under.

And Bellatrix and Sirius would have been out anyway, to be honest, on account of their impulse control problems alone. And the madness factor was much too high also. A slight bit of a problem for both of them. Even if she would never share that particular opinion with Harry, who still defended and excused anything Sirius had ever done.

And really, Dumbledore and Voldemort would have been out too, on account of both of them being too arrogant to even bother hiding their identities.

That left Severus Snape, who would have been a perfect fit, but alas, he was still as dead as the rest of them.

She rubbed her face with both hands. She wasn't getting anywhere. She needed access to that effing library and soon.

"Miss ... Hermione?"

Draco was standing in the entrance of the pergola.

"I saw you leave. I thought we might talk."

"Couldn't we have done that in the house?"

She rose and tried to sidestep him as he entered, but he took a smooth step in the same direction as her and cut off her retreat.

"We could, if you stopped avoiding me. And I suspect you go to great lengths to do so, since I have, many times, been quite unable to find you." He had the gall to smirk, but she shouldn't be surprised.

He was standing much too close now, and she took an automatic step back to avoid him. The stone bench behind her hit the folds of her knees and she lost balance, landing on the seat with a thump, hurting her bottom.

Draco sat down next to her, almost folding his long frame down on the low bench. The silence was awkward as they sat there at different ends of the bench.

"Was it that bad, our marriage?" Draco asked, breaking the silence.

"You enjoyed it," she said, refusing to look at him and not pretending not to know what he meant. If she tried a pretence like that, she would just look frightened and childish.

"You must understand that I have been given a new life," Draco said.

New life? Hermione dared a peek at him. He was staring at the view in front of them; the square green fields separated by low stone walls, beyond the gardens.

"I was stuck. In duty, old promises. Loyalties, both false ones and some very real. Old friendships. Can you understand?"

Oh Merlin, his mood was strange. What if he was Draco after all? She started to move further away from him. Besides, it didn't matter who he was, since it was likely that he was a danger to her either way.

Draco's hand shot out and caught hers.

"Don't." He pulled her closer. "Don't leave. I've been thinking very carefully about you and me. We could be a good match."

He pulled her a bit closer and lifted his hand to her head, letting a strand of her hair curl around his finger. Such a sweet gesture, not at all something Draco would do.

"You are so intelligent ..."

She looked at him.

"Worthless Mudblood slut." Draco was screaming the words at her, and she just didn't understand. She loved him ...

She drew her wand. Slowly.

"I think you're pretty," Draco said. "And since you married me, you must find me attractive, too."

"No looks, no money, no fucking breeding!"

But he'd said that he loved her? That they belonged together. Why was he behaving like this? On the day of their wedding? She didn't understand.

"So strong in magic."

That she was. The lying little ferret! With a hard yank she was free again.

"Impedimenta."

She hadn't planned it, she just heard herself shriek the hex, and then she retreated.

"Why?" He was roaring the word at her, in obvious fury. "I was trying to ..." And that was when she realised that he was actually breaking out of the spell and coming towards her with long, decisive—if very slow—strides.

Hermione shouted the spell once more, turned and set off running as fast as she could, back towards the Manor.

10

Chapter 10 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

One day after the encounter in the pergola, Hermione found the library empty, none of the other inhabitants of the Manor being present. Not even a house-elf was dusting the books or the furniture.

She worked her way through the shelves as fast as she could go without missing anything, finding books on every conceivable subject, except any even touching on the Muggle world. Not all that unexpected, but she had thought she would find at least something in the vein of *know thine enemy*.

When she had searched for a couple of hours, she'd found three heavy old tomes that looked promising. One of them was about hexes used to disfigure your enemies. The hexes ranged from the one which had your victim sprout antlers to hexes that tore parts of the face away.

The second book dealt with hexes deceiving the eye rather than changing a person's real appearance.

The third one was a peerage of sorts, describing all the pure-blood families in Britain. The book described the family connections, assets, and hereditary traits. Just browsing through it made her realise how few pure-blood families actually existed, and how many people called themselves purebloods without matching the very strict and precise definition of the term the book presented.

And she would just have to make do with what she'd already found, since she didn't dare to stay any longer.

She picked up the books and was just about to leave when she heard Lucius and Draco's voices coming towards the library. She looked around, trying to find somewhere to hide. There was only one possibility, so without hesitating any further, she went down on her hands and knees, pushed the books under the sofa, and then she crawled behind it herself. She was forced to lie flat on her stomach. The fit was tight enough for her to feel claustrophobic.

"...what your intentions are toward your wife," said Lucius as he entered the room. Two sets of black boots made their way through the room. She heard crystal clinking and something was being poured. They were having a drink, so this would probably take a while.

One pair of boots returned into her field of vision, and someone sat down in the sofa. Black bootlaces. That would be Draco then.

"I assumed you would enlighten me, given time. But, since you haven't ..."

The silence that stretched between the two men was of the kind that made you aware how loudly clocks tick, and Hermione was desperate to control her breathing. She couldn't be found like this, not with the books beside her.

"What you don't seem to realise, Father, is that I told you the truth at the meeting. I have forgotten my marriage. I remember her only from school." Draco chuckled. "Did I ever tell you that she slapped my face in our third year?"

"She slapped you? You did retaliate, didn't you?"

Hermione could hear how furious Lucius was at the mere thought of her slapping his precious son and getting away with it. She shivered.

"Do stop it, Father. Besides, I elongated her teeth in fourth grade. I was really aiming for Potter, though."

Lucius laughed. "She got caught in the crossfire then. Poor thing." The mock pity made her want to punch Lucius, instead she had to settle at poking her tongue at his silver laced boots, now visible to her again.

"They grew past her collar. She took it badly when she was told that it didn't make much difference."

"You are digressing. Is it deliberate, one has to wonder? You see, I still want to know what you meant at the meeting," Lucius said.

"As soon as you have told me how and why Hermione and I ended up married. It is a bit disconcerting not knowing, since I disliked her when we went to school together. And that's still not taking into account that she detested me in return. So, how did you manipulate a marriage? A marriage she isn't happy with, apparently. I have a fair idea about why you'd want it, but not how you went about achieving it."

She heard Lucius draw a deep breath, and then he started to pace. She could see his boots moving back and forth. He wasn't all that willing to tell the story then. But then again, he shouldn't be. He had sacrificed Draco, after all.

He wouldn't look good.

"It was difficult after the war," Lucius said. "The trials ... we expected the worst, but Potter spoke on your mother's behalf. Your situation during the Dark Lord's reign let you off the hook, thank Merlin, and at this point I still had some useful connections." Lucius stopped pacing. She heard liquid being poured again.

"Then *The Quibbler*, *The Daily Prophet* and the Skeeter woman started their campaigns. We lost business. We weren't invited to the functions where we needed to be. Then Potter and that Weasley girl got married. And it all became clear. You needed to marry one of the heroines of the War. A Mudblood heroine. Preferably the most renowned one."

"And she agreed to that?"

Lucius started to pace again but slower this time. And he chuckled.

"Of course she didn't. Whatever her heritage might be, she is a smart girl."

"Amortentia, then," Draco said.

"You're starting to remember!" Lucius sounded pleased.

"Not at all. Deduction. Nothing obliterates free will as Amortentia does. I would deem it one of the most damaging potions there are. I always wondered why Slughorn chose to teach us about it."

"You are starting to sound like Severus."

Draco chuckled. "Perhaps. He was my Head of House, so why not? How did we administer it?"

Hermione shivered in revulsion at the memory.

"You went to her flat. She was too polite to throw you out, Merlin knows why. She is surprisingly well-bred that way. You invited her out for a drink and added a dose of the Amortentia to that drink. Rather straightforward."

"I've noticed the politeness problem too. She is a bit foolish that way, one must say. Too trusting."

He had been so persistent, she remembered, and rather than having him in her home, she had gone with him.

Lucius chuckled. "After that, she followed you like a puppy, and you were married within three months. A whirlwind romance, *The Daily Prophet* called it."

"Clever. When did we *stop* administering the potion?"

Lucius laughed: a deep, sensual laugh. So strange that someone so horrible had such a laugh.

"After the wedding. It wore off during the consummation, or so you told me. A little resistance always gives it an extra edge, yes?" Lucius laughed again.

Hermione swallowed hard. For a moment the memory of that night had made her want to vomit. She would get them somehow, even if it took her years.

"Ah. And that's why she's so eager for a divorce. And you are threatening her parents to keep her in line." It wasn't a question; she could hear that. Draco was just stating a fact.

"Clever boy," said Lucius, sincere in his praise.

Draco scoffed. "Please. You made an outright statement at the meeting. Very blunt, Father. I do hope your lawyer is trustworthy."

"He is loyal to the highest bidder, so no worries there. And it was a very good meeting, wasn't it? And you did notice that I ensured that you could lay claim to the pure-blood children you breed outside the marriage? Since you have that little memory glitch, I felt the need to have that fact brought to your attention. For a while I even thought ... but that would have been hoping for too much, I realise."

And doing it the way he had, at the meeting, had added to her humiliation. Merlin, how she hated the man.

"Now, Draco. Tell me." It was an order this time.

There was a long pause, and when Draco started to speak she could almost hear him measuring the words as he spoke. Something the New Draco tended to do, as opposed to the old one.

"I spent almost four years not knowing who I was. I lived with Muggles most of that time."

"Draco!" Lucius's shock was genuine. "I'm so sorry. You never told me that, and I didn't realise."

"When I started to understand what I was, it was difficult. However, when Plucky found me and recognised me, I decided to come back here."

"I understand. It will take time, but I'm sure you will get back to your old self, don't worry."

"I want this marriage, Father. And I want her. It's strange how I didn't see it before. How well we fit. The only thing that remains is how I'm going to undo the harm that was inflicted on her."

"You can't be serious!"

Draco rose.

"Of course I am serious."

Draco's boots disappeared, and again there was the clinking of crystal.

"Draco, we need to discuss this, this was..."

"...Not what you intended when you sacrificed me. I know." Draco sounded regretful. "However, what matters is what I want."

"I will not allow this to happen," said Lucius. He was angry now. Furious even.

"Allow? You seem to forget, Father, that I'm of age and have managed alone for years. I can do it again. I can walk out of that door..."

Hermione heard the sound of glass shattering, and something sharp cut into her cheek. She managed to keep quiet, putting her hand over her the wound to ease the pain.

"I know that Mother throws tantrums when not getting her way," Draco said. "But you too, Father? And here I was, thinking that we Malfoys were supposed to show decorum at all times. Unlike the Blacks."

Draco was goading Lucius? And she was stuck under the sofa when they were going to try to kill each other any minute now.

The clock was ticking again. Why would anyone let that loud, relentless ticking go on when there were perfectly good spells to deal with it?

"You are upset, Draco," said Lucius. "You're overwhelmed. I'm prepared to admit that I might ... have pushed too hard. We, your Mother and I, are just so very pleased you have returned. I'll leave you, and give you some time to think about this. I'm sure we can come to some ... understanding ... later."

Lucius walked out of the room and her tension started to recede a little. For a moment she had thought Lucius was going to choke on his last words.

Then Draco spoke.

"I know you're there, Hermione."

No.

"I'll be generous and let you choose: Do you wish to be dragged out from behind that sofa by your hands or your feet?"

At least, he sounded calm, so Hermione crawled out. She'd rather come out by her self than being forced. Draco was watching her as she rose, sipping at what looked like Firewhisky.

"You heard?"

She nodded.

"So that was the beginning? That's what I have to work with, and why you're so hostile?" When she nodded, he shook his head in what almost could be despondence.

"You even hate the way I look, don't you?"

"Yes," she said, and then she decided to finish it. "I might have detested you in school, but after what you and your father did, I hate you, and if I knew I could get away with it, I would ensure that you would never be able to father any children in your lifetime. It would be a fitting punishment."

Draco smiled.

"You don't have it in you, lioness. You might be able to fight to the death for survival, but I'm willing to bet you'd only do it facing a direct threat. Unlike me, I might add. I'm quite satisfied with using back-stabbing tactics, preferably preventive ones." He took a step toward her. "I'll make it up to you. Everything I did, everything my Father did

and keeps on doing."

"No. Even if I believed you, which I don't, I'm not allowing you to." She pulled out the books from under the sofa, taking care to hide the titles, and then walked towards the door.

"You've cut your cheek. Let me help you," Draco said.

"No, thank you. I'd rather bleed."

"The view of our future together is very bleak if you choose this path."

Hermione smiled at him and nodded.

"Yes, isn't it? A divorce would remedy that. Pansy the Pure-blood Pug still pines for you, so the wife and heir thing would be easy to achieve by getting rid of me and marrying her."

This time Draco smiled, and the smile was genuine. Seeing it made the small hairs on the back of Hermione's neck rise. It wasn't Draco standing in the room with her.

The smile was all Draco's, yet at the same time all wrong. It was as if a photograph of Draco had been superimposed over someone else's features.

"Pansy? She would, wouldn't she? Your problem is that I don't want Pansy. You see, the more I learn about you, the more I want you. And I don't give up. I did once and that will not happen again."

Anger would have scared her less, and the walk back to her room had never felt longer.

11

Chapter 11 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

11

"It looks better," Draco said, his voice no more than a deep purr. He brought his hand to her cheek and stroked it. Not over the cut, but beside it, taking care not to touch it. And this time, she was forced to endure his touch, since she had nowhere to go, sitting beside him at the dinner table.

She took a big mouthful from her second glass of wine. When had she stopped being repulsed by him? She was getting used to his looks—at least for the most part—and the touching part, and the touching part she preferred not to think of.

"What did you do to yourself?" asked Lucius, looking at the cut with obvious disgust.

And damn her stupidity, she hadn't prepared the necessary lie.

After removing the shard and dabbing it with Murtlap Essence, she had crawled into bed, feeling frozen to the bone, and then she had refused to come down to dinner, claiming she wasn't well, which was the absolute truth at the time. She had slept for fourteen hours straight and stayed in her room long enough to forget about the cut on her cheek. Not smart in a Slytherin household.

"I ... I ran into a bush outside. A twig—" She stopped talking when she saw Draco lift a mocking eyebrow at her, making it clear he didn't find the lie convincing. Hermione gave up, took another mouthful of the wine, looked down at her plate, put the glass down and continued eating.

"That might scar," said Narcissa narrowing her eyes to see better. "How terribly clumsy of you."

Narcissa gave Lucius a suffering look, and he sighed.

"I'm sure it's nothing," Hermione said.

"I'm sure she's right. And it isn't as if she takes an interest in how she looks, so a scar wouldn't bother her," Lucius said, directing his comment to Narcissa.

"Quite," said Narcissa.

Hermione started to relax again, since she had expected something more malign from them.

"When I was a child, I was taught that it's rude to talk over someone's head. Did I misunderstand, do you think?" asked Draco, directing his question to her.

Hermione gulped down another mouthful of the wine, gave Draco a non-committal smile, and shook her head.

Narcissa put down her cutlery. She managed to make a whole lot of noise while doing it. Lucius growled, actually growled, something indistinguishable.

Draco put his hand on Hermione's thigh, gave it a small squeeze and then removed it again. It was probably the wine, but it really didn't feel like Draco touching her. Which was a good thing. Or a bad thing. Whichever.

"Draco," said Lucius. "Your Mother and I think it's time to start reintroducing you to our friends."

And there it was: It wasn't over, then. That first little burst of insults had only been the introduction to the main event.

Draco shrugged.

"I suppose it has to happen sometime."

Lucius looked almost relieved. "Indeed. We are planning a small gathering on Saturday, two weeks from now."

Narcissa smiled at Draco. It was one of the woman's benign smiles, filled with pride over her much adored son. Funny how motherhood seemed to work well enough for Narcissa when not anything else, emotion-wise, seemed to function like it should.

"We know you think it's too soon, but you do need to establish yourself in society again."

"Indeed," Draco said, looking in equal parts bored and disgusted.

"We have invited Charles and Rose Parkinson—"

"I assume the invitation also includes Pansy," said Draco, face blank of emotions.

Narcissa gave Draco a wary look. Hermione would have done the same in Narcissa's place. On the other hand, she wouldn't have been stupid enough to put herself in Narcissa's situation, springing this on Draco. The New Draco was an altogether different beast than the Old Draco, and she knew that without having spent all that much time with him. It was very strange that his parents continued to treat him exactly the same as they had always had.

"We also invited the Greengrasses."

"But of course you did," he said, dragging out every single vowel as he spoke. "Daphne and Astoria will come then." And he finished by not asking a question but stating a fact.

Hermione signalled one of the elves to refill her glass and bit her lower lip, trying to hold back a very undignified bout of the giggles. The absurdity: her parents-in-law inviting the women Draco had had affairs with during the course of his and Hermione's miserable marriage for a cosy get together.

"A foursome then." The words slipped out without Hermione really intending them to. She'd been drinking too much wine. Stupid of her. On the other hand, she needed the wine to get through the dinner.

She took another sip from the glass.

Draco turned his head and looked at her, his eyebrows closer to his hairline than she'd ever seen them before. Was that shock?

"Of Slytherins ... going to Hogwarts ... at the same time ... gathered here?" Hermione tried, and quelled another urge to laugh, this time at her own wayward tongue.

Narcissa blushed, and it wasn't becoming. Reddish patches broke out on her cheeks, throat and even in her décolletage. "No, Daphne is married now."

"A threesome then," Hermione said. "I'm sure Draco is going to enjoy himself."

And then Draco laughed, and Hermione couldn't help it; she couldn't contain her giggles any longer. When she was back in control, Hermione looked up, and again she got the eerie feeling that Draco's picture was superimposed over someone else. Because the laughter wasn't right either, she realised. It was a low rumbling laugh that gave the impression that he was holding back, and Draco had never laughed to begin with; he'd snickered or smirked.

Lucius harrumphed.

"If you two are finished? Qandisa Zabini and Blaise will come too, Terrence and Amelia Chamberlain of course, and a few others." He gave Hermione a malevolent stare. "I trust you will be able to handle it, Hermione? To dress and act accordingly?"

Hermione put her cutlery down and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. That was enough for one evening. She rose from the table and turned to leave.

Draco, the New Beast, had stopped laughing. "And that was necessary why exactly, Father?" he asked Lucius.

Hermione glanced back at the table. Not only at Draco—barking the words at Lucius whose mouth was hanging ajar at his son's sign of open hostility—but a Draco looking as if he was on the verge of hexing Lucius.

Hermione, looking over her shoulder, almost walked into the door, but turned her head just in time and escaped the room unscathed. Someone said something behind her, and then there was a hard thump and the sound of something breaking.

She sped up and almost ran up the stairs.

12

Chapter 12 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

12

She was halfway down the corridor leading to her room when Draco caught up with her. He grabbed her arm and turned her toward him. Hermione tried to get away from him, but instead, she found herself standing with her back against the stone wall, his hands holding her upper arms, leaving her no room to manoeuvre. Her breath caught even as she tried to breathe regularly to fend off the panic.

"Don't let them get to you," he said in a fierce whisper. "They are going to push and push until you make it clear you will be pushed no more. And you can trust me to do the pushing back for you, if you'll just let me."

"Please, let me go." Her voice was steady. She couldn't believe it, but it was, even though she was so scared she wanted to scream.

His hand slid up her arm, cupped her cheek for a moment, and then stroked a tendril of hair away from her face. His hand was shaking.

Please, Merlin, let it not be excitement.

Her own hand went up and grabbed his wrist, trying to pull it down, but he was too strong and just continued stroking her hair.

"For now I will," he said and let her go. "For now."

He turned to leave, and maybe it was the wine that made her say it out loud.

"I can't stand to think about having you in my bed again. You must know that. Every time I look at your face, I remember how you fed me Amortentia, and what you did to me on our wedding night, and so many nights after that," she said, rushing the words out.

His back stiffened, and he stopped what he was doing.

"I have started to realise that." He turned and faced her again. "Not exactly what I had in mind when I came here ..."

"I could never love a man that would do a thing like that."

His face was hidden in the shadows of the corridor, and she couldn't see his expression.

"I'm wealthy, and I look well enough—"

Hermione laughed. She heard how shrill and hysterical she sounded and stifled it.

"Every time I see you, Draco ..." She shook her head and started to leave.

"Anyone would be better?"

She nodded. "With very few exceptions."

"Indeed," he said and reached for her so abruptly that she staggered. She never did get a chance to run as he pressed his length against hers, wrapping his arms around her, his height making it impossible for her to see his face.

He smelt wrong: of sandalwood and cinnamon. Old-fashioned smells. Strong smells. Draco used to wear some kind of musky scent, but somehow it had been weak and unsubstantial on him. Even in school, it had bothered her. This was something else entirely.

"You smell like a cold winter day," the man that wasn't—couldn't be—Draco mumbled into her hair. "Like electricity and cold air blowing in from the ocean."

She felt a sudden urge to burrow her head against his chest and just inhale him. So she did.

He kissed her then. Small awkward pecks on her hair and cheeks that titillated her to a degree and frustrated her even more.

"Please," she said, closing her eyes and framing his face with her hands, kissing him on the mouth.

And he tasted good too. Better than Ron, even.

The kisses were drugging, and a low guttural sound from him made Hermione open her eyes again.

Blond hair glinted in the candlelit corridor. A pointed chin, high cheekbones and a straight nose.

She was kissing Draco Malfoy.

The panic made her fight to get out of his arms, but he wouldn't let go. He stopped kissing her and just held her close again.

"Don't," he said. "I will not hurt you. I will not do anything you don't want me to. Let me just hold you for a little while. Don't look at me. Forget who I am. You did for a moment, and when you did, you enjoyed me touching you, kissing you. So please be still."

She wouldn't be able to get away, so she calmed herself and just stood there in his arms.

And he smelt good, and he had tasted good, and it had felt good when they kissed, and he had tried to protect her against his parents, and she had no idea what was happening to her at all ...

She would never ever enjoy kissing Draco. She never had.

The way he smelt had nauseated her. She had hated the way he kissed, forcing his tongue into her mouth, pinning her down. Causing her pain if he could. This wasn't in any way like that.

"You're not Draco," she said to his chest. "I want to know who you are. Please. I'm not going to give you away. I can't be married to Draco. I can never ..."

"Are you saying anyone would be preferable?" he asked her again and pulled her even closer.

"With few exceptions," she said once more. She felt a tear trickling down her face and turned her head, wiping it away against his robes before he noticed. Being attracted to Draco and enjoying standing in his arms was just too hideous to contemplate.

"What if I turn out to be one of those few exceptions," he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "And where would that leave us, do you think?"

13

Chapter 13 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

gave her a look so filled with disdain she reached for her wand. "You used to have a tendresse for Quidditch players, yes?" he said—and now the wording, his tone of voice and his sneer were a perfect match.

When he morphed, it seemed effortless. He didn't close his eyes like Tonks used to do. He didn't even seem to concentrate. He just grew two inches while the breadth of his shoulders grew too. The blond hair turned red and his nose lengthened.

Ron. Oh, Merlin. It was Ron standing in front of her. And the smile on his face was even more wrong than it ever had been on Draco's. She leaned against the wall since her knees wouldn't stop wobbling.

"No." The word came out as less than a whisper, just air leaking out of her mouth.

"No? And here I was thinking he would be the one whom you'd end up with eventually. With a gaggle of children to feed, a house to clean, and a mind screaming from the pain and agony that comes of too little intellectual stimulation."

He knew about her and Ron. "I know you from somewhere."

"The term 'know' might be stretching it. But I suppose one could say that, to make it less complicated. Let's try someone else shall we? Is your other friend more palatable to you, maybe?"

He shrank an inch. The hair turned black and messy, and the eyes became a vivid green. Greener than Harry's eyes had ever been, and the expression on his face was frightening. Harry's face wasn't a soft one to begin with, but now he looked menacing and dangerous.

Then his face softened, and he took a tentative step toward her.

"No? I can be whoever you want me to be. Whomever you like. All you need to do is tell me what you want."

He morphed again. His posture was lost, and the hair settled and flattened while his nose grew. Victor this time.

She heard herself whimper.

"What do you find pleasing?"

He grew thinner, with elegant lines in body and posture, while his skin darkened. The hair was short and cropped close to his head.

Zabini.

"Stop it! I want to know who you are. Who you really are. Please. I'm not going to give you away."

Zabini rolled his eyes at her and then gave her an ugly scowl.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

And then his hair grew to his shoulders. His nose protruded from his face like the beak of a bird of prey. His eyes turned black and now, finally, the facial expression was exactly right on his face.

She blinked. And then she blinked again. Reality became blurry at the edges.

"You're dead." She'd said that before not long ago.

Severus Snape sneered at her. "Obviously not. But maybe Draco as an option is less distasteful after all? Am I one of the few exceptions perhaps? One of the few that would, in fact, be worse?"

Professor Snape was alive! He hadn't died on the floor of the Shrieking Shack in that horrific, unfair way. Her chest clenched with happiness. Then her chest clenched again, so hard it hurt her and she took a step away from him.

"How do I know it's really you?" The question came out as a whisper.

He stepped close, and she could sense his scent again. She had never imagined him, anyone, smelling so good.

He lifted his hand and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Are you hoping, I will reveal another face, instead of this one? You will be disappointed if you do."

Why would he think she would want that? And why had he come back as Draco?

She stepped forward and touched his face. He flinched, but didn't step away from her.

"Is this your real face, then? How do I know?" she asked.

"You can't know. Not even being an insufferable know-it-all can help you. You could spend the rest of your days trying to find answers in your beloved books, and you still wouldn't be able to find the truth in them." He pressed his forehead to hers, and she found herself staring into the black of his eyes.

"You need to trust me."

She had trusted him once. She could trust him again.

They were sitting in Draco's room. It looked the same as it had on their wedding night, and Hermione wanted to run. But this time it was Professor Snape sitting in the armchair by the fireplace.

He was not Draco, and at this point, with her still reeling, it was all that mattered. Not that anything else made sense, especially not being kissed by him with a passion no one had matched before. Not even Victor, who had scared her with his level of ardour when he had pushed her up against the stone wall and kissed her at the Yule Ball.

Hermione looked at the differences in him. His skin wasn't as sallow as it once had been. He wasn't as gaunt as he had been either. He looked healthier. Maybe he was related to the Spanish or maybe the Portuguese adventurers that had travelled to Britain and then stayed on for one reason or the other. Maybe he was a Spaniard in body and heart, and being where he belonged became him.

"Does your family come from Ireland?" she asked.

"Pardon?"

"Ireland. Your family, Professor? I thought that maybe you had ancestors from Spain or Portugal. It's quite common among the Irish."

He looked at her for a long time before speaking.

"You will call me Severus, and not as far as I know. My mother's side of the family originated from Wales. My father's family came from the north. Mine and iron workers the lot of them, or so I've been told."

Was it pride in his voice? How odd. She had somehow expected him to resent a heritage like that; that he would have preferred being a pure-blood wizard, in spite of what he done for the Order—for them all. But maybe it wasn't so strange. He must have changed after—or perhaps during—the war. She knew she had.

Then it struck her. "You're Young Master, not Draco."

"Pardon?"

"Plucky is your house-elf!"

Severus nodded.

"She used to belong to Hogwarts. One of the few perks of being a teacher there is that you get a house-elf assigned to take care of you."

And that would be part of the explanation why S.P.E.W. hadn't got any support from the teachers.

"The elves consider it an honour to be appointed for Professor duties, as they call it. Dumbledore picked Plucky for me himself. I thought it was his way of punishing me, but I fast learnt that she has hidden talents—"

"Shopping," Hermione said.

"Yes, she also has an uncanny ability to sniff out rarities and an even uncannier ability to haggle. We dealt well together, and eventually, she decided to bond with me. She's mine now."

Hermione nodded. Odd as it was, she could see why it worked between them.

"But how did you survive?"

He sneered at her and crossed his arms.

"Not because of you and your inept friends. But you didn't really think I would be around the Dark Lord and that abominable snake of his without dosing myself with plenty of antivenin?"

"You weren't poisoned; you bled out. We were there." She sounded defensive. And she could hear how idiotic she sounded, even as she spoke.

Severus gave her a cold, hostile look, stood up and started to pace back and forth, robe billowing like in the old days. Hermione could feel her cheeks burn. Such a stupid thing to say.

"The three of you left me in the filth to die. So no, you were not there. But I wasn't only dosing myself against poison. I had taken other precautions too. You do know that I have a history of dabbling in potions? The Blood-Replenishing Potion was surprisingly easy to tweak for my purposes."

Hermione wanted to cry. She should have checked; she had always known that she should have bloody well checked if he was really dead, but it had looked—he had looked—like a wax doll, like an inanimate object. He had looked less than he used to be. And then there had been the battle—and even that wasn't close to a valid excuse.

"I'm so sorry. So very sorry." She rose too and placed herself in front of him. "If I can do anything to make it up to you ..." She hesitated when she saw the look on his face. For a fleeting moment she thought he looked pleased, maybe even triumphant.

"You can," he said.

So stupid of her, to forget she was talking to Severus Snape, master manipulator extraordinaire, possibly only second to one Albus Dumbledore—and perhaps not even second to him, all things considered.

"How?" she said. "I'll do anything, within reason."

At least the wording was worth a try.

And for the first time since he had stepped into the Potions classroom her first year at Hogwarts, she saw Severus Snape laugh. And realised that he had dimples. In her wildest fantasies, she would never have imagined Severus Snape sporting dimples, of all things. And that despite his wonky and yellowed teeth, he looked much nicer when he laughed. So nice that several things that had been out of the question a moment ago, felt very reasonable now.

He reached for her and pulled her close.

"But I'm not a reasonable man, now am I? And I'm asking you to stay on as my wife. Or rather Draco's wife."

Then he kissed her. And, Merlin help her, she kissed him back. Eagerly.

15

Chapter 15 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

15

It was awkward kissing someone so tall, and apparently, he had problems with her height too because he backed her to the bed, kissing her all the way over.

"I could kiss you ... touch you ... all night," he said between kisses, his voice a low rumble close to her ear.

They reached the bed and the two of them toppled over. Hermione landed on her back with Severus on top of her, his weight pinning her to the bed. He took hold of her wrists and pulled them over her head and kissed her again. Hermione tried to wriggle her hands free, wanting to touch him, but instead, he held on tighter.

No. Not pinned to the bed without any possibility of getting away. She tried to free herself, but couldn't. She bucked hard, wanting to get him off her. That seemed to get his attention, and he lifted his head.

"What are you doing?" He looked at her, black eyes narrowed.

"Please! You need to let go." The words came out as a panicked babble, and she hated that. She could hear her own shallow breaths, but couldn't control them.

Something ignited in those black eyes of his. Anger?

Please, please, not anger.

"I am not satisfactory, after all?"

It was going all wrong.

"Please." She tried again. She need to tell him why or he would ...

"You could have had me look like anyone, but no..."

She tried to free her hands again.

"Draco used to pin me down." She blurted out the words since she would start crying any minute now. Her head was spinning. She wasn't sure if it was the alcohol, or the situation, or both, but she was reeling.

"Pardon?"

He let go of her hands as if she had clawed at him and supported himself on his arms, lifting his weight off her. He didn't stop looking into her eyes, though.

She tried again. "He liked to pin me down, so he could do what he wished, without me being able ... I hate it."

Severus was kneeling on the bed beside her now, not touching her at all.

"I suspected he hurt you. I forgot."

She just nodded as she sat up. He stroked her cheek, then trailed his finger down her neck and over her shoulder. It felt nice, and her heart rate slowed down. He tugged her closer until she was seated on his lap.

"I'll not hurt you." His voice was again a low rumble in her ear. "Please, let me touch you." He held her closer and kissed her. "If Draco was alive, I'd make him pay," he said, and then he kissed her again. She let him because she wanted to.

He took his time kissing her, and by the time he started to fumble to get her robes off, she didn't mind him touching her. He failed to get the robe off though. When he trailed his hands over the front of it, he scoffed.

"Your robe is fastened with hooks? Did you do this on purpose?" Severus's voice was no more than a frustrated hiss, and she couldn't help it; she giggled. She had never giggled before, during or after sex, in her life. She dragged her teeth over the right tendon on his neck by way of an answer and listened to his low moan.

"Get it off or I'll rip it off." She met his eyes and realised he meant it. Her robe would be ruined in a matter of seconds if she didn't remove it. She slid off his lap and rose. But standing there she felt herself stiffen again. She was standing on the bed with him kneeling in front of her, intending to strip naked. She couldn't do this.

He smiled, and there were those dimples again. Focusing on that smile, she started working through the hooks as fast as she could before she lost courage again and left the room, running. The robe fell around her feet, and she kicked it away. She unfastened the bra and threw it on the floor, then got rid of her knickers and stockings.

And the intent look he gave her, like he wanted to devour her ...

"Even your nipples blush," he said and pulled his robe over his head and then got rid of his underwear.

Embarrassed as she was, she still couldn't help looking. He struck her as well proportioned. A bit too thin...wiry, hard muscled and angular. A lot like a Muggle long distance runner. She didn't dare to look at his groin. She wasn't sure she wanted to know. She wasn't sure about what she'd got into, in fact.

Then he was on his knees at her feet, holding her hands, pulling at her until she bent down. He kissed her again, and she almost fell down in front of him.

"You are beautiful." His hand went to her breast, and he brought his mouth to it and sucked at the nipple until it was so sensitive she didn't know if she wanted to push him away or press him tighter to her, making him, somehow, suck it harder.

She ran her hands over his back. It was so smooth, and his response to her stroking him was immediate: He hissed and pulled her closer.

"Straddle me." He used a huskier version of his Professor's voice now. And, oh Merlin, he wanted her to sit on him.

She jumped when he put his hand between her legs, but his touch...as decisive as it was...didn't hurt at all.

The finger he slid into her was long, and she could feel the hard knuckles as they entered her. She shivered at the feeling, but it still didn't hurt.

"You're wet. It will not hurt. Straddle me. You will take me tonight, not the other way around. Trust me. Please." He pulled his hand free again and just held her, nuzzling the side of her face.

She buried her head against his neck, took two deep breaths, and when he drew a soothing hand over her head, she did what he had asked her.

It was easy. She hadn't even thought it could be so easy. No grinding. No humping. No pain. He just slid into her. And when she took him, her clitoris scraped against the thin trail of dark hair running down from his navel to his groin and they both moaned.

"You feel nice," she said in a low whisper.

"I'm not nice," he answered, wrapping his arms around her and pushing hard. She moaned as she felt him thrust into her.

"You liked that?"

"Yes! Yes, again, please."

"Say my name." He didn't move and forced her to be still when she tried to move instead.

"What?"

She tried to kiss him, but he pulled away not letting her.

"Say my name."

She tried to move, to get him to move, but he was holding her still, impaled on him.

"Please, Severus, again." She was panting from the pure frustration of it.

Finally, he did it again, and this time she managed to follow his movement. He buried his head in her neck and nibbled at it as he pounded hard into her. She dragged her nails along the small of his back because that seemed to excite him. But she wanted more, so she moved her hands, holding onto his shoulders, and rode him in unison with his movements. Then she couldn't do anything anymore. Every muscle in her body locked, her head fell against him, and she couldn't even breathe as he continued to thrust into her. Every one of their movements made his pelvic bone hit her clitoris and her body coiled tighter each time.

Then he changed pace and went just a little bit faster.

Her body went out of control. She screamed herself hoarse from the pleasure of it all and thrashed so hard she felt his arms tighten around her to keep her in place. When it was over, she was sobbing, hanging like a limp rag over his shoulder, moaning from the aftershocks as he continued to thrust into her. She felt him grow inside of her, and he roared her name as he came.

She didn't want to move. She could stay where she was forever.

"You need to get some sleep. You'll sleep here with me from now on."

She nodded without lifting her head, which was still resting on his shoulder. Merlin, she was exhausted. How he had the strength to start issuing orders she didn't know.

Without letting her go, he managed to lay them down and cover them both with the duvet.

"You do know you're mine now?"

She nodded again. She didn't really have the energy to discuss the wording. He needed to amend his idea of ownership, but they could discuss that later.

"Yes. Yours. Go to sleep now." She snuggled closer to him and he put his leg over hers, making it almost impossible to move. She didn't mind.

Severus was there with her, and she felt safe for the first time in years, and the best part was that he had managed to prove what she had never quite managed to convince herself of: Draco had been wrong about her.

16

Chapter 16 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

16

It had been a while now since Severus and she had ended up in bed for the first time, and it worried her that they still hadn't talked. Or rather, they had talked; he was still taciturn, dour, and on occasion, nasty, but she understood Harry's mother better now. She could see why they had been friends. In his own way, he was endearing. Miserable as he could be to be around, he was still the most amazing conversationalist ever: acidic, ironic, sharp-tongued, and hilarious. It saddened her that he had no sense of fun, but she had time to work on that.

But Severus hadn't been interested in talking about their relationship or the situation they were in. She was thoroughly shagged though, as Ginny would have put it.

She supported her head in her hands and looked out over the garden just as Harry's Patronus appeared. It walked up to the house and paced back and forth in front of it, looking up at her window.

She fished out her Galleon from her pocket and looked at it. It was glowing white.

"Raided KA shop."

Nothing new there. Raiding shops in Knockturn Alley seemed to be a great part of Harry's job. She didn't know how he could stand it. It was amazing how well he handled the utter mind-numbing boredom of his job.

The coin glowed white again and new words became visible.

"Draco there."

That couldn't be right. She tapped the coin with her wand.

"No. With me all day."

This time his answer was swift.

"He was there!"

Harry must be wrong. She prepared to tap the coin again but didn't have the time. Another message came in.

"Saw me. Hid face. Ran." There was a short pause. "I'm sure!"

She fumbled when she tried to send an answer, tears starting to make her vision blurry. She was overreacting. Draco was dead, and Harry was wrong.

But what would happen to Severus if the real Draco showed up? And what about Severus and her?

Her hand was shaking so badly she dropped the coin that, of course, rolled under the bed. She was sobbing now, and the tears made it impossible to see where it had gone.

"Who are you hiding from? I do hope it isn't from me?" Severus asked, voice slow and questioning.

She hadn't heard him enter, and she pulled her arm back from underneath the bed and rose from the floor.

Severus had morphed into his own form, and after taking one look at her, he radiated anger.

"You're crying. Who made you cry?"

She took an involuntary step backwards, not wanting to take him on in this mood.

"Who?"

Now he was roaring. She was sobbing, but at least managed to start speaking.

"Harry ..."

"Ah. Well, I'll take care of him for you. It'll be my pleasure." He looked calm enough, if you ignored the smile.

"No!" When he turned to leave, she went after him and grabbed his arm. "Harry told me his Auror team raided a shop at Knockturn Alley. He ... he says he saw Draco."

Severus froze and stared at her.

"You're in contact with Potter?"

She nodded.

"Can you reach him now? I need to know the name of the shop."

Hermione went down on her hands and knees by the bed, and now she managed to spot the coin.

"I'm sure Harry can—"

"And I'm sure he can't. Does he know about me?"

"No, I haven't told him yet."

"Good. Keep it that way."

She sat back on her haunches and tapped the coin.

"Which shop?"

Severus leaned over her and watched as the coin burnt white, and Harry's answer ran along the edge.

"B&B"

"Borgin & Burke's?" Severus sneered, his contempt obvious. "One might have expected that the Ministry had been able to close them down by now. After all, it's been what? Five years?"

"Don't be snide. If Draco's alive, it's a question of time before you'll be found out! Please. You can't stay here, you'll be in trouble!"

Severus watched her for a long while.

"And would that bother you?" he asked.

"Yes, it would. I don't know what I'll do if Draco's alive, and you have to go. I want to come with you ... but my parents and ..." She was crying again, and the worst part was that she couldn't get her thoughts in order.

Severus nodded and, oddly, he looked pleased.

"You're mine now," he said. "And no one will ever take what's mine again." And then she was in his arms, with him kissing her, without her knowing how she'd ended up there.

"Go to bed. You need sleep. I'll find a solution."

"Please. Don't do anything bad," she said, her voice no more than a whisper.

Severus, who had morphed into Draco again, looked back at her.

"Are you trying to convince me not to kill Draco, if it is him? In a rather understated way, I might add. I could have missed the hint. And one would think that you, of all people, would enjoy the thought of Draco dying. Or at the very least, suffering severe pain."

She wanted to howl in misery, but she bit back the sobs, and only a tear trickled down her cheek. She wiped it away.

"I do, actually. But I don't want you to do it. Not for me."

He walked toward her, and she met him halfway, wrapping her arms around him.

"No one would ever know, Hermione. If Draco is alive, I can name at least five ways to get rid of him, just off the top of my head. Give me time, and I can produce twenty." He put his finger under her chin and lifted her head up so he could look into her eyes. "And no matter what method I chose, no one would ever find me out." He let her head down again and stroked her hair as she buried her face in the folds of his robes, inhaling his scent. "I would kill for you, Hermione. You do know that?" he said, his words a low growl.

"I know. But please don't."

She didn't know how to continue, so she fell quiet while he pulled her even closer.

17

Chapter 17 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

17

She washed her face and looked in the mirror. She had black shadows under her eyes, and her cheeks were blotchy from all the crying these last days. She sighed and turned away from it.

She was worried about Severus, and she missed him. Even without the feelings of intense relief that he wasn't Draco, she liked him, surprising as it was.

And there was the way he made her want him before he took her. The last time, the time before he left to find out what was going on, he had once again made her sob when she came, and afterwards, he'd been so smug about it that she'd wanted to kick him. Especially since he wouldn't let her go with him and had spelled her to sleep to stop her following.

He was still as flawed and dangerous as ever. He was lacking in the conscience department and was perhaps the most selfish man she'd ever encountered—with the possible exceptions of Draco and Lucius.

And Merlin help her, she wanted to be with him.

The door to her bedroom clicked shut.

Was it him? Please, Merlin, let it be him.

She hurried out of the bathroom just as Severus morphed into himself and sat down in the armchair, his hair veiling parts of his face. And that was when she became furious at him.

"You couldn't even send me a message?"

She heard how shrill her voice sounded but she couldn't, didn't even want to, hold back.

"You bastard! You just disappeared—"

Severus gave her annoyed look and cut her off. "No, I couldn't. I've been busy."

"Do you even care how hard it's been for me to keep Lucius and Narcissa at a distance? I claimed you were sick, and Plucky has been lying to ... to everyone, supporting my story."

It was only eight days since they'd ended up in bed together the first time, and he was just sitting there sneering at her!

And then she looked closer at him: He looked exhausted, the grooves around his mouth seemed deeper than she remembered, and he was squinting. He looked even worse than she did.

"Are you in pain?"

He just nodded by way of an answer.

"Are you hurt?" She didn't want him to be hurt.

"No. Migraine."

He closed his eyes against the light and let his head fall back against the armchair.

The anger got stuck somewhere around her stomach, and since she couldn't do anything else with it, she brought it along when she fetched him some Pain-Relief Potion. When she returned, he had put an arm over his eyes.

"Severus, drink this, and I'll help you get to bed," she said.

He cracked open an eyelid, took the potion and drank it, and he didn't even protest as she helped him to remove his robes and then tucked him in.

He fell asleep as she watched him. Funny that she had thought him so old, so scary, and so ugly when she'd been his student. He didn't even look particularly old, and even if he wasn't a handsome man, he had something. Presence, she supposed. He was still scary though, and the thought of what he might have done made her weep again.

18

Chapter 18 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

18

It was the evening of the party, and Plucky was raking through Hermione's hair, her dismay obvious. She had discovered that Hermione's hair was impervious to any magical intervention as far as charms and spells went. Despite, or maybe because of, the tension she felt thinking about the evening ahead, Hermione couldn't stop giggling as the little elf kept swallowing what Hermione suspected were curses as she tried to get Hermione's hair in order.

"Plucky, are you swearing?" Hermione asked, trying to stifle her glee.

"I is *not* swearing, Young Mistress, I is a good witches' maid and good witches' maids is never swearing. I is commenting on how curly ..." Plucky gave a strand of hair a vicious yank, "... Young Mistress's hair is."

Hermione looked at herself in the mirror. Every single hair seemed to live its own life because of Plucky's vigorous attempts at taming it. And she caved in. The poor little elf would go and punish herself, and even if aggravating the Malfoys, especially Narcissa, by coming down looking like she'd been hit with a lightning hex was so very tempting, it wasn't worth the price.

"Plucky, if you could get some Sleakeazy's Hair Potion? You'll find some in the evening bag I brought the day I arrived. It's the only thing that has ever worked on my hair."

Plucky looked as if she was going to cry.

"Plucky is cheating if she is doing Young Mistress's hair that way." Her lower lip started to tremble, and Hermione patted her thin little arm.

"It isn't your fault. My hair's always been this way." She gave Plucky a friendly nudge and that seemed to perk her up a bit. In a burst of activity, the elf swung around and skipped over to the wardrobe.

"Young Master is choosing Young Mistress's dress robes," Plucky said, eyes shining with admiration for her Young Master. Plucky opened the doors of the wardrobe and revealed a dress robe in deep burgundy with wide sleeves gathered at the wrists by broad cuffs. The cuffs had a long row of small gilded buttons. Gold embroideries depicting climbing vines adorned the skirt.

"It's very pretty," Hermione said. It was the most beautiful robe she had ever seen, in fact. Severus had taste. The Malfoys wouldn't have to be ashamed of her tonight.

Apart from the heritage thing, of course, which they couldn't do anything about.

Plucky snapped her fingers and, with a deft combination of elf magic and manual work, she helped Hermione don the robe. With the aid of the hair potion, Hermione's hair was turned into a chignon dressed in a silver net. Small curls were escaping from their confines, softening the severe hair style.

She looked okay, she supposed, all things considered.

"Plucky is knowing Young Master is needing Young Mistress, he does," Plucky said, surprising Hermione.

Honesty couldn't really hurt. Not with Plucky.

"No, he doesn't. He hasn't even told me where he went, never mind what happened. I don't even know if Draco is alive or dead. I just don't ... I can't stay."

Plucky's eyes widened. "You is planning to leave? Without Plucky and Young Master?"

Hermione nodded.

"As soon as I figure out how to protect my parents from Lucius. I might have to send them away again."

Big tears formed in Plucky's eyes.

"You can come with me," Hermione said but that only made Plucky cry for real.

She was on her knees trying to comfort the desolate elf, when a pair of black boots appeared in her field of vision. Draco the Vision was standing over them. He glanced at Plucky.

"Plucky, calm yourself," he said. "I'll need you later." He looked at Hermione and stretched out his hand to her. The gesture was imperious, to say the least.

"Do you know which House feared me the most at Hogwarts?" Severus asked, as she put her hand in his, and he pulled her to her feet.

"Ah, Hufflepuff?"

He chuckled. A dark reverberating chuckle that was both scary and compelling at the same time.

"No, Hermione. Slytherin House. Most of the students were fed, by well-meaning parents, the stories about my days as a Death Eater. Among quite a few of them, I was considered a good role model, you see. The only problem was that my old exploits are the proverbial stuff that nightmares are made of." He leaned close to her face and lowered his voice. "And Draco, my love, is most well informed."

He straightened and gave her a penetrating stare. "You understand?"

She nodded. "He's alive, then."

"Indeed." He leaned forwards and kissed her.

"What are we going to do?"

He shrugged. "Since you wouldn't let me dispose of him the easy way, I'm going to have to be unorthodox. And we will not end up owning the Malfoy estate, unfortunately. That is your fault, and I will never let you forget it. You need to join the party now. You are to smile and chat and take anything thrown at you without batting an eyelash. Draco is the surprise guest." He gave her a tight smile.

"I'm going to have to live with Draco again," she said. She felt numb and frozen and wanted to crawl into bed and hide under the duvet.

"No, what you will have to do is trust me."

Trust him. That meant he was trying to get them out of this mess.

"I've told you that you're mine." He smiled and the smile blurred into something in between Draco's and his own.

And what he had decided was his, he held on to, one way or another. Wasn't that what he had done with Harry's mother, after all?

She nodded, and he barked a laugh.

"I always found it odd that you were placed in Gryffindor and not Ravenclaw." He stepped so close that he was looking down at her.

"Maybe not so odd after all," he said and kissed her.

19

Chapter 19 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

19

She took a sip from her glass, feeling the warmth from the wine spreading in her body. Not that the warmth was needed; it was the anesthesia that was of the essence.

Once again, she noticed Pansy working her way towards her, and she ducked away, at the same time managing to dodge Slughorn. Potted plants, at least if they were big enough, were good things indeed.

It would be time for dinner soon, and Hermione's throat constricted. Sometimes she hated Severus. He could have told her more, instead of just demanding her trust. And as a result, the best thing she could hope for, the only thing she dared hope for, was that the dining room would be cooler than the drawing room. The opulent drawing room was lit with flickering candles, and she could feel a trickle of sweat working its way between her breasts.

"Why are you standing among the plants? You need to join me and Narcissa now," Lucius said, and she was forced to step out of her hiding place. "We are going in to dinner, and I'll escort both of you." He looked splendid, she had to admit, and so did Narcissa. They were dressed in celadon green with silver lining, bringing out their pale colouring. For a moment she felt intimidated, and then she remembered one of her family vacations where the family in the hotel suite next to theirs had worn matching track suits. She pressed her eyes together for a second and bit down her hysterical giggles.

"Shall we?" asked Lucius and offered her his arm.

It was a short walk to the dining room, and the guests chattered and laughed as they seated themselves. Lucius remained standing at the short end of the table as he talked, laughed and urged them all to sit, acting the perfect host. One chair, the one on his right, remained empty.

When the scraping and talking had died down, and the wine had been served, Lucius was still standing, waiting for everyone to sit up and take notice of him, she assumed. Not until the guests stopped talking and gave him their complete attention did he start speaking.

"Dear friends, we are celebrating tonight, and I'm so very happy to see so many familiar faces, so many friends, willing to be at our side on this joyous occasion." He graced them with a smile and stretched out his arm to the open entrance to the dining room. "I never doubted he would return. I give you my son, Draco."

Nothing happened.

Hermione looked at the door and then at Lucius as silence smothered the room like a thick blanket. Further down the table the guests started to whisper and mumble as the tension in the room grew.

"Draco!" This time, Lucius barked Draco's name as an order, and outside the door, Hermione could hear whispers, something very much like a growl and a barked order she couldn't quite discern. Then came the sound of scuffling, and Draco came stumbling backwards through the door.

Draco turned and tried to correct his robes. He looked pallid, haggard and so much older. The malevolent look he gave the room in general was in equal parts defensive and filled with anger.

This wasn't Severus.

This was Draco.

She wanted to vomit as Draco gathered himself and sauntered towards his father. Lucius was annoyed, she could see that. He had wanted to show the world Draco the Vision, and instead, this wreck of a man had entered the room and not even done it on cue.

"Thank you, Father," Draco said when Lucius plastered a smile to his face and embraced him, patting his back with what seemed to Hermione as unnecessary force.

And, Merlin. Draco was wearing robes matching his parents! She had to fight against the hysterical giggles that were threatening to escape.

The guests around the table had been quiet up until now, but now they were all talking, the noise almost deafening.

"My friends, calm yourselves." Lucius was back in his stride again, smiling at his guests. "My son wishes to speak."

Draco glared at the door, and for a moment, Hermione thought he would try to flee. But instead, he addressed the guests seated at the table, as ordered by his father.

"I'm very happy to be back with my family." Draco swallowed and gazed at the door again. "I'm not very clear on what happened after I fell overboard, on that unfortunate journey. Suffice to say, I ended up in Spain with no memory of who I was or where I came from. I was lucky. Good people took care of me and by a stroke of luck, Plucky, a house-elf from my days at Hogwarts ... "

Plucky entered the room and nodded and smiled in an entirely sycophantic way that didn't really suit her and came off on a false note. Not that anyone seemed to notice since the guests were listening to Draco with rapt attention.

Lucius also seemed pleased enough.

"... Found me and helped me regain my memory." Draco drew a deep breath and gave Hermione a fleeting look she couldn't interpret. "I also have some news that saddens us all. I have been back for some weeks now, and unfortunately, my wife and I have discovered that we have grown apart. I'm happy to say we are on amicable terms, but we have, nevertheless, decided to go our separate ways. The divorce proceedings have started, and we are assured that our divorce will be finalised at speed."

"Oh, Draco!" Astoria shrieked his name. "I've missed you so much!"

"Why would you miss him?" And that would be Pansy, and her voice was even shriller than Astoria's.

Draco looked from one woman to the other, eyes widened.

"Draco! This was not what we agreed ..." Lucius' voice was drowned out in the general chaos that erupted in the room, people shouting questions at the Malfoys, while Lucius was saying something she couldn't hear to Draco.

Divorce. She was getting her divorce!

Severus? She looked around the room searching for him. He wasn't there. Someone touched her hand, and when she looked, Plucky was standing by her side.

"I is helping Young Mistress to move. Young Mistress is to come with me."

She didn't hesitate. Hermione scrambled out of her chair and followed Plucky. Her brain seemed to have gone into some strange limbo and refused to take in what was happening.

Ginny was waiting for her in the hallway, together with her bags.

"Ginny?"

Ginny smiled.

"Yes. I am to remove you from the house."

Hermione looked more closely at her and started to giggle.

"Stop it," she said, and went into Severus' arms and hugged him. It was strange to hug someone the same height as her.

"I must have done a very poor job with Ginny."

"No. You got her right. I just know when it's you." She kissed the not-really-Ginny standing in front of her, and then she had to stifle a sob. "I thought you'd left me behind."

Severus stroked her back.

"I told you to trust me."

20

Chapter 20 of 20

Her forced, unhappy and loveless marriage had ended when Draco Malfoy was lost at sea. Now he's back.

20

Severus was a very angular man, and he took up a lot of room in her narrow bed. Not that she minded. She kissed his hideous nose and lay down on his shoulder again. It was bony and rather uncomfortable, but she didn't mind that either.

"How did you do it?" she asked and kissed the side of his neck too. Yesterday she'd been too happy, too confused and too dazed to do anything but follow his lead. But now she wanted to know.

Severus looked at the roof, giving her better access to kiss his ear lobe.

"It's a long story. Draco wasn't hard to find. Apparently, he had planned to disappear for good since he found that his life here was less than he had come to expect. He is very resentful towards Lucius on that account. He put away what he thought to be sufficient funds before staging his own death. But being who he is, a complete idiot, he squandered the money. He was sniffing about, planning to return, when I showed up, looking like him. He was trying to figure out who I was and how to get rid of me when Potter spotted him. Burke was only too willing to sell him out."

"But I thought Draco had money."

"No. Lucius has money. And the old adage about a bird in hand as opposed to birds in the woods is one Burke lives by."

"But won't Draco tell?"

"Of course he will tell. He has already told his parents the story by now."

Hermione sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest.

"The whole story? But if he tells them the truth you need to leave. You need to go now!" She shoved at him, trying to get him out of bed.

Severus gave her a glance that clearly told her that he thought she was being a moron, and for a short moment, she wondered if she could live a life where she would be getting looks like that on a regular basis.

She stopped shoving since he refused to move.

"He is telling them that it wasn't Plucky that found him, but me. That I took care of him until his memory returned, and then went back, in the guise of being him, to help ease him back home and understand what he was going to encounter when he returned. He is also making it clear that I had no wish to reveal myself at the party, but that I will indeed come forward in due time."

Severus smirked at her, pulled her down to him and kissed her until she didn't care much about the story he was telling.

"I also convinced him that it was in his best interest to stick to my version of events. The hex I placed to ensure his cooperation is rather gory if it's set off."

Hermione felt calmer. He was clever. It wasn't at all like being around Harry and the Weasleys, straightforward, honest people as they were.

"Anything else I need to know?"

"Yes. Draco will also inform his parents that I wanted you as a token of his gratitude. That's a grotesque enough request to please their palates, I would think. I will also set up a meeting with Lucius and ensure that he's convinced that my interest in you is strictly dishonourable. At that point, he'll also trust that our friendship will stop me from demanding what's my due. He'll be wrong. I will want a reward, of course. The reward will be yours and Draco's exceedingly quick divorce, accompanied by a very large settlement for you. I am one of the war heroes. Almost level with Potter, I'm led to believe, and heroes would never resort to demanding money for their services, would they now? So the money will be yours."

Hermione laughed. Because she couldn't help herself. Then she snuggled closer to him.

"I wish ..."

"What do you wish? Tell me." Severus leaned his head in his hand and looked down at her.

She couldn't help smiling at him and his imperious tone of voice, even if her thoughts had been morose. And he would be able to arrange anything.

"I wish I could get at Lucius and Draco."

Severus smirked. "You already have."

That was a very worrying statement coming from him.

"I have?"

"Indeed."

He was holding out on her on purpose. "What have you done? Nothing that will get us into trouble, right?" The words were so much like the old days when she had uttered them on a regular basis, usually directing them at Harry, Ron or both of them.

"The Malfoy line ends with Draco."

"What? How do you know that?"

"Since last night, Draco has been rendered unable to breed. No heir for him."

It took Hermione a while to take it in.

"Oh," she said. "That's a roundabout way of revenge."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "It was your idea. I thought it had merit."

It had been her idea, even if she hadn't realised it at the time. She couldn't help smiling. He'd remembered.

She hesitated, but in the end she had to ask. "But then they will not know you did it, will they?"

"Of course not." He gave her a bemused look.

"But if you exact revenge on someone, isn't the point that they know who did it, and why?"

The look he gave her this time was downright disgusted. "No! The point is that they suffer, and you get away with it. No wonder Minerva, intelligent as she is, did such irrational things sometimes. If this is the Modus Operandi of the Gryffindors, I'm astounded that—"

He was working up to one of his epic rants, and frankly, she'd had enough of them in her school days. She really didn't have the patience to listen to another one. Especially one based on old house prejudices. She rolled over him, pushed him back down on the bed and kissed him. He tried to hold her off for a couple of seconds but then yielded with a groan.

There was more she wanted to know of course. And there was a lot that needed to be straightened out. But not this minute.

This minute, she wanted to do something else entirely.

The End

A/N: Hello. You have read the whole story now. I hope it entertained you. It was fun writing it. And I want to take this opportunity to thank you: for reading, and in some cases even reviewing it. Some of the things you have mentioned or asked about, I'll bring along with me as I write my next story. So, thank you so much for keeping me company on this journey, and I hope I might hear from you again.