

The Heir

by sarablade

Hermione needs a father for the child she had with Lucius, just before she killed him.

Proposal

Chapter 1 of 3

Hermione needs a father for the child she had with Lucius, just before she killed him.

From his secure seat by the high window he could stare without having to look aloof or hide behind his hair. The one-way mirror took care of it.

He took in her shorn skull, her sunken eyes, the grey color of her papery skin, the thin spidery hands tormenting each other in the folds of the second-hand robes even from the other side of the mirror, the smells of the robe and of... well, her were so different. Meaty and retaining some kind of self-satisfaction, well-rounded for the robe's, while hers was all fear and stress. She emitted high vibrations, keen intellectual activity on the very verge of paranoia, (*justified paranoia, mind you*, the incorrigible corner of his mind snickered)... and plain hunger and gloom... some kind of terrible determination, too. Reckless, but humbled.

Azkaban will do that to you, he silently commented to himself. *Teach you to grovel properly*. "You have less than four and a half minutes left," he said neutrally.

She seemed to shrink even more, shoulders stooped in humiliation and submissiveness. "I'll attempt to not waste your time, sir." Even her voice, once shrill and suffused with the knowledge of her brightness, was lower, tired, shy. Ashamed. "Just... Please hear me out. Sir. It's not as crazy as it seems... if you think of it in all the ways I'll present." Pause. "With your permission, sir."

He stayed silent.

After a time he said, "Three minutes forty."

Her breath hitched. "I have come... I have come to ask I mean, to beg you to marry me, sir." Shoulders hunched even tighter against his spiteful chuckle, head down, she held her skeletal hand up in warning and prayer.

"I'd never presume to... do this, sir, but really... It's the only way. The child... The child will be up for adoption next week, when I'm formally released from Azkaban. There's been a decree, sir, you see. And Narcissa and Bellatrix are going to claim him. I have no standing. No money, no domicile, nothing. No job. And a record as a murderess. No family. So you see, sir. The only way to keep him is to be married to a man who would adopt him, the baby I mean, sir, and stand against the sisters. Or... or maybe convince them without the need for a custody trial."

She took a deep, trembling breath. "You're the only one, sir. And... there would be compensation. Please just hear me out, sir. The baby has money, which will be released to the adopting parent. And my part of Luc... of his father's heritage will also be released to my husband... to the adoptive father, if he's a citizen in good standing."

Lucius had specifically willed her a nice chunk, and, as if by prophesy, had added in his own grand handwriting, "WHATEVER the mode of my death, and regardless of her circumstances." Oh, the Crucio Narcissa had thrown her at the reading of the will during the trial. The newspapers had gushed for a week.

"I'll gladly forgo any right to it in the marriage contract. It is, as you know, a sizable fortune." She faltered. Breathed in deeply. "And there's... me." Her voice was barely over a whisper. "I know how I look, sir, but I can glamour myself with the best of them. Anyone you can think of. And I've..."

He cut her off mid-sentence.

"Why don't you go to your little friends? They'd certainly appreciate the use of that money... and of those other enticing perquisites."

Never, in all the years she'd been the butt of his dripping contempt, had it been so cold, so utterly disgusted.

He wanted to hear her say it. She swallowed and forced the words out of her mouth.

"I have nobody to go to, sir."

"And why would that be, Miss Granger? Or should I say, Malfoy Breeder? Are you still allowed to bear the family name when you've murdered the chief of the family, Malfoy Breeder? Or... are your little friends afraid you'd kill them, too?"

This time she squared her thin shoulders against the burn. He wanted to see her flounder in her misery, and he would get his wish. If it depended on her, he'd get all his wishes, now. Provided he took them in. *Oh, G-d, please let him take us in...*

"Because they're all dead, sir. Everybody who could have stood a chance against Narcissa in Wizengamot trial, or cared to try. Harry, Ron, the twins... Neville is abroad for the years to come. And all the others, Narcissa would crush them. People depend so much on everybody's good graces to make a living, now, sir. She's got the money, she's got the social standing... she's got it all. I can't ask... And besides it wouldn't help. There is nobody, sir. Only you."

She steeled herself further. "Also, sir... I've been schooled by Mr. Malfoy. He used to talk about you when he... when we were having... you know. About what you and he did when you went out together. Used to do. To... to witches and women. I know much of it is frowned upon today, sir. But I'll participate. Eagerly. I'll comply happily with all your whims. Pander to all your pleasures." The last sentences were obviously rehearsed. She'd delivered them haltingly, and he couldn't help bringing his own face closer to her intense features on the other side of the mirror, couldn't help noting how striking they looked, how ravaged.

The slanted light showed the green smudges on the chin and cheekbones. Somebody had crunched her head against a wall, not so long ago.

"Really, Breeder?"

Her head was hung low again. "With your permission, sir. Yes, sir."

"Are you a masochist, then, Breeder?"

"If you'll want me to be, sir."

He cut her shortly. "Answer me for yourself. Not what you think I want to hear. I'll Legilimens you."

"Yes, sir. If you please."

His left cheek the painful one hitched with discontent at her meekness. But under it he could feel her whole being straining against the degradation and the deeper, underlying misery which brought tears to the back of her throat, to be visibly, painfully swallowed from time to time. She was really desperate, then.

Of course, said that same corner in his brain. *Who would propose to you, if they werenot desperate?*

He shrugged the interferences away. "Do you like pain?"

A rapid rise in the already galloping rhythm of her heart. "NO. Er... I mean, no, sir."

For the hell of it he toyed with the idea of showing himself and giving her a real heart attack.

"So what are you doing here, offering yourself like the greedy slut you've apparently become?"

She took a deep breath. "You see, sir, there is going to be a lot of pain, anyway. It can be mine, inflicted by you at intervals for any number of years, for your pleasure, or... or the boy can suffer, for the whole of his childhood, pain inflicted by Bellatrix and Narcissa, for their own pleasures. Be shaped by them."

Even behind the protection of the mirror and of his experience, he shivered.

Her thin voice floated to him. "So you see, sir, the question answers itself, doesn't it?" A modicum of strength came unbidden in her delivery. "I have no intention of relinquishing this baby to those two half-demented harpies. And when I say half... But I have nothing. No weapon, no standing. No rights. All I have is myself... and you, sir, and the belief once again you'll do what's right. Only this time I'll do everything in my power to make some of it up to you, sir. With everything I have, even if it's not much right now."

"Spare me your goodwill, Malfoy Breeder. And why do you think Madam Malfoy," he emphasized the disparity between the two titles, Narcissa's dignified one, and the derogative despicability of hers, "would relinquish a boy, on whom she should by rights inherit her husband's authority, to me?"

"Because..." Why was he making it so difficult? Once again the foolhardiness of her move blocked her throat, once again she felt the urge to go fling herself on the mercy of the impoverished, broken remains of the Weasleys, to cry on Molly's shoulder and let Arthur fight for her. She clamped the thought down. Narcissa would fly at the Weasleys' throats with a vengeance, and they were just not up to the fight. Not anymore.

She looked straight at the mirror. "Because she owes you, sir. A son for a son, in some way. And you were Lucius' best friend. If it means nothing to her, it'll ring with the Wizengamot. You're the natural choice, after all."

"I'm barely anything natural anymore, Granger." He bit his half-lip. "Your five minutes are up."

Her sunken eyes shot to the approximative place of his head, through the one-way mirror.

He felt as if her look had melted the glass. So much hurt. She swallowed another sob. Unfolded herself and made a pitiful effort to square shoulders so thin the very robe crumpled them down.

"Is there anything else I can offer you that would tip the scale, sir? Anything? When I find some work I'll be well-off, sir, even without the Malfoy money. I don't need the money, sir. Or maybe a time-limited arrangement? Only a few months?"

She had stopped on her way to the door, facing the mirror.

"One more word, and I'll give Narcissa a letter testifying to the Wizengamot why I believe she should be awarded the child. I'll stamp it with my Order of Merlin, which you were so instrumental in securing for me."

She turned on her heels and went for the door, heroically keeping her head high.

His eyes followed her. When she was almost at the door he asked, "Where are you sleeping, Malfoy Breeder?"

She stopped in her tracks, half-turned towards him again. Her eyes were so piercing he touched to mirror to feel its protection.

"May I talk, sir?"

"Mmm."

"In Azkaban, sir."

"Why's that?"

"They won't release the child until I have an official domicile, sir."

"Won't your so-called friends do even that for you?"

"I can't ask anybody, sir. Narcissa would be on to them and retaliate. They've all lost a lot these two years, sir. With the events."

Rogue Death Eater rebels targeting the families of the War heroes, and the Wizengamot as usual doing its useless worst. Narcissa rumored as the brain behind the attacks. Stood to reason Granger wouldn't impose on her friends...

He never knew what had prompted the next words. "I have a disaffected cellar with a window by the back entrance. I guess after Azkaban it'd be the pinnacle of luxury for you. I'm ready to rent it."

"Thank you, sir. But it wouldn't be practicable."

"I'd wait for the payment. Or... we could work something out." He hated the way he sounded. He didn't even want her that way, for Merlin's sake. Not anymore.

"Still, sir..." She swallowed again. "I have absolutely no money. Meaning, utterly destitute. Exactly seventeen Knuts in my pocket, and this robe and shoes. In Azkaban they give the child food and clothes. Diapers. There's an old woman there, looks after him when I'm out looking for work. I mean, she's looking after him right now, and I have a week to find work. I'd have nobody to leave him with here. No food to feed him. No clothes."

"You went out for the first time this morning, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's almost nine in the evening." He'd left her waiting three good hours, standing in the antechamber, because he could. "What did you eat today?"

"I put three lumps of sugar in the tea they offered me this morning. And cream. At a job interview. And... I had Chinese for lunch."

"I smell something rotten on you."

She paled even more, her face turning downright grey. He fleetingly thought she would look like this in her coffin.

"The Chinese... it's... I found some leftovers behind a restaurant. In the morning." She stood there woodenly, rattling the facts as if it was her natural place on Earth, scavenging for food, no money to buy diapers, begging a monster to take her in and offering herself in payment.

"The baby-darling of establishment and media alike. Minerva's pet. Potter's goddess. Head Girl."

"Yes, sir. Look where it got me. Brave New World."

His head snapped involuntarily. Had that been... humor?

"I'm sorry, sir. This was uncalled for," she mumbled.

"I surmise it went well?"

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"The interview, girl. Can't you focus?"

"I'm sorry, sir. They'll contact me."

"Where?"

"Gringotts, sir."

"They won't take you. You need a private investment firm."

"I had only time for the one interview today, sir."

The crackling of the fire in the silence reminded both of them of the cold of the November night outside, and of Azkaban. None of them said a word about it.

"Be here tomorrow morning at ten, Malfoy Breeder."

"Yes, sir."

She curtsied to the mirror and was gone.

Interview

Chapter 2 of 3

She could feel the physical heat emanating from him. And his inherent malevolence. He smelled of Firewhisky, expensive leather and dark coffee, over something... unhealthy. "You have some nerve, Malfoy Breeder..."

A/N: Not mine, the known characters.

Please review...

She stood in the corner of the gothic high window of Snape's unheated cavernous antechamber, blindingly staring at the rain outside, mindful not to touch any of his furniture, as the elf had sternly warned. From the inside Snape's home looked gloomy and grand, hollow in spite of the heavy, mildewed centuries-old furniture and tapestries. An abandoned museum.

She tried to concentrate on the way her feet hurt in the old Azkaban-issue shoes — and on the job interview Bill had arranged for her this afternoon — to avoid thinking of the upcoming confrontation. Her head swam with hunger, stress, and the after-effect of the crying bout she'd had after leaving Emery.

Five days left, meaning it may have been the fourth time before last she ever kissed her baby good-bye in the morning. She grimaced, opening a wound on her lip again, began to chew it mindlessly.

The huge, menacing clock was ominously ticking away. One hundred and six. Back when the world looked as if it only needed some idealistic young dedicated people, however few were left of them, to be set whole and good again, she'd become an Unspeakable. Some part of her trained brain still automatically logged in that kind of peripheral knowledge. Time elapsed, surroundings...

And now it suddenly warned her of an approaching presence.

She'd lost her edge though — or the intermittent crybaby sniffing she'd been afflicted with since last spotting Emery's too-thin, too-pale small hand waving her good day through Azkaban's gate had messed with her senses — because she didn't get to whip around or even compose herself before his voice, thin and nasty, cut through her ears.

"Don't turn around. If you turn around or look at me without my express permission, it'll be the last time you enter this house. If you speak without my express permission... it will *annoy* me."

She dipped her head in acquiescence, did not bother to bring it back up.

His steps — soft, menacing — creaked closer on the ancient floorboards, closer... until she could feel the physical heat emanating from him. And his inherent malevolence. He smelled of Firewhisky, expensive leather and dark coffee, over something... unhealthy. Something that reminded her of the emergency medical care part of the training.

"You have some nerve, Malfoy Breeder."

She pinched her broken lips and concentrated on not shaking. Really? She felt as if all her nerve had left her so long ago... She sensed him looming nearer, his hair and nose brushing her skull. Unwillingly, her breath hitched.

He chuckled. A low, self-satisfied throaty laugh, sure of the man's power over the woman standing right before him.

"*Do you know*, Breeder, do you have *any idea* what I'd look for in a *wife*? Are you so far gone from your previous persona that you didn't research the meaning of being married to a *Snape*?"

Although she'd grown taller during her pregnancy, he had to stoop so his mouth was flush with her left ear. The weird smell got stronger.

"Look ahead, Breeder. Keep looking ahead. Do you know how the last six *Snape wives died*?"

She willed herself silent, although her mind screamed answers. Nodded dumbly as her hands fluttered to her throat.

His hands firmly circled her wrists from behind, putting them back down to her sides, and went back to her throat, barely touching it.

"Right. They were either strangled... or slowly smothered to death." His voice took a violent quality, ringing in her ear. "By their husbands. Did you know that, Breeder?"

His hands were roughly massaging her throat, squeezing her trachea, causing her to cough and send her hand to the wall not to fall. Color spots were flying before her eyes as she struggled for air. She knew better than try to fight back.

Suddenly, he took his hands away, stepped back. His voice was calm again, his school voice. "Except one. Can you tell me which?"

She nodded between the coughs, careful not to look at him.

"Take your filthy hand away from my wall," he hissed. He took a step back. "You smell, by the way."

She complied as if burned, taking in rough bursts of air spasmodically, hugging herself for balance, coughing. She was blinded by the tears coming out of her eyes.

"Put your hands on your head. Stand straight." He stepped close to her again, his left hand at her throat, going down to the chest, grazing a nipple, up again to the buckle of her robe, to her throat. His fingers slid inside the robe, probing the hidden skin. She fleetingly asked herself if she'd rather be... had, or strangled, before realizing he'd probably do both.

But her breathing stopped by itself when suddenly her robe fell at her feet, and she felt the rough abrasion of a very thorough Scourgify. The hair, the skin, under the nails like with a rough pocket-knife... internally. She closed her eyes against the intrusion and the thought of her grey, Azkaban fraying underclothes (grandmother's sagging bra, granddad's ripped undershorts) and ungainly shoes, her skeletal body and the marks on her skin.

I'll glamour myself, she wanted to scream. *I'll turn into the very embodiment of your fantasies. I'll open to you, and suck you, and massage your feet with my—*

"Kindly stop the cheap come-ons, Granger," he snapped.

He'd been in her head.

He snorted. "You want to be my *wife*, Breeder. A good *wife* shouldn't want to keep any secrets from her *husband*, should she?"

She tried to wet her desiccated lips with an equally dry tongue. Where were all the tears when one needed them? Had he just alluded he'd be ready to marry her? Indeed? She tried to calm the wild beating of her heart, the images of Emery growing near her, the sudden elation, the —

"Of course not," he sniggered again. "But I must thank you for the amusement which infused the very nice chat I had with Narcissa yesterday evening. She and I found ourselves in agreement and separated in good cheer." The icy bitter tone of his voice belied the words.

She pushed her nails into her palms to overcome the urge to turn and look at him, to decipher his face.

Of course not marry, Narcissa and he had said *in agreement*.

Suddenly the tears were not hard to come by. Her stomach churned painfully and she feared she'd be sick. She had lengthily debated the risks of going to him, known there was a possibility he'd turn against her and help Narcissa, but in the end she'd refused to believe it. She still saw the war hero in him, the—

"Refreshingly candid," he drawled. He chuckled at the flash of anger in her head at finding him lurking there, aware of her thoughts. "I have a proposal, though."

"Are you listening?"

Deal

Chapter 3 of 3

"How far are you ready to go, Granger?"

"How far are you ready to go, Breeder?"

"To keep my child? I'll do whatever it takes, sir. Whatever."

He blew on her ear from behind, slow and deliberate. The coffee and whisky on his breath made her nostrils flare. Her eyelids closed as a shudder ran down her spine. Six months pregnant and then one year in Azkaban was one and a half years without coffee, and she wouldn't spend the money on herself until she found work. And... the leather scent mingling with those of coffee and alcohol and this... that something medicinal and sweet and slightly putrid and terribly male. She just had to take that supplementary, hungry breath, inhaling deeply.

Again his maddening chuckle. "Azkaban has taught you well indeed. Or was it Lucius?"

She closed her eyes tighter, in humiliation this time, and did not dare to open them again as the side of his finger painted her neck, from under-ear to shoulder ball.

Unconnected thoughts and pictures flashed in her mind.

Don't antagonize him. Lucius, suave and worldly, smiling to her over a sparkling glass at the conference in Seattle. "You and I, Hermione, we can change the Wizarding world for the best. Together." *Will it hurt? I can take anything.* Emery nursing, his eyes angled upwards to see her face, milk trickling from the corners of his rosy lips, where a smile curved them around her nipple. *I'll do anything; just take me with the baby.* Lucius panting over her, smacking her face again and again, grunting in rhythm with his thrusts, "You'll love this, dear, when Severus does this to you with dragonhide gloves," his own hands red with the blood from her broken nose, smearing it all over her body each time he'd grab her to gain better purchase, or just cause pain. *I'll kill him myself before I surrender him to the sisters...*

Her mind jumped to the birth in her Azkaban's cell, with the warden touching himself disgustingly, gazing at her spread-eagle form from behind the sullen midwife. *At least there are no Dementors in our section...* To Emery, sitting precariously with a doll made from rags, burbling liquid sounds, and suddenly raising his blond head and clearly, distinctly calling to her "Ma...ma" and then falling over himself and both of them laughing...

To Narcissa in Visiting Lady's garb, cooing and reaching at Emery, her eyes hungry and cold, and Emery cowering in the corner...

To Emery crying as the male warden *but no female matrons, either* - took him from her to give him to Narcissa...

To Emery screaming last week as the warden beat and raped her in her cell, his cot just out of reach from the man's boots, and both of them crying quietly afterwards, huddled together, his small humid heft a comfort. *Four more days... only four days... I've got to find a safe place for him.*

"Yes," Snape whispered in her ear. "I believe you'll do whatever's in the child's best interest."

She nodded again. "Yes, sir."

His second hand, gloved in black leather, came up to rest on her other shoulder. "Don't look back." His tone was urgent. His voice came from where he was standing, just behind her head. He took a deep breath, released it, and the smell got stronger.

"I will take the boy in. Shut up," he said violently when she opened her mouth to thank him. "I will file for adoption. In return, you will formally turn over all your parenting rights to me... and disappear. The decree banning you from travelling abroad or into the Muggle world will be remanded on the day of the completion of the adoption process by special grace, and you are fully expected to avail yourself of your new freedom. In fact," he drawled, "the farther the better."

"No." It was a totally unconscious utterance. Her head moved from right to left automatically... she felt herself beginning to pant.

"Go back to the States. You enjoyed yourself so much there... Brilliant academic career ahead and all. You can always have other children... *Raise them in the land of endless possibilities, with no birth impediments...*" His voice ran the entire gamut from bitterness to temptation in each word, as he quoted the words she'd told him herself, a world ago.

"But..."

"If you say one more word before I allow you to, I'll give that recommendation letter to Narcissa, who offered me a fortune for it yesterday evening, by the way." *Run, little girl, run before it's too late. If you only knew...* Aloud he said, "Narcissa's enmity towards you has not abated. Far from it. She's agreed to approve my adoption request, but only if your rights are also turned over to me in the bargain, and if you disappear from our world." *And if she gets all the money Lucius willed to you and to his son back.*

His stomach churned with anger and frustration at being made, once again, the fool who paid for others' sins and foolishness, and who would be loathed and despised for it. It churned even more at the thought he'd have to mortgage his house, double fool, and even that would not cover the sum Narcissa asked for. And, triple fool, he'd agreed all the same.

The thought of telling the girl about the financial "arrangement" with Narcissa, and incur yet another bout of slobbering gratitude from Granger after the disgraceful displays at the post-Battle-of-Hogwarts inquiry and during their meeting in the States, was even more repugnant to him. Taking the money Granger had offered... there were things even Severus Snape wouldn't do, he thought bitterly, never acknowledging most of the world would have taken the girl's money and still found themselves downright noble

for even talking to her. In her circumstances.

He'd find the money somehow; renounce the secluded, quiet life he'd made for himself to "go earn", as his father would've said. After all, he smirked to himself, it wasn't as if he never went out anymore, or if he couldn't lay his hands on all the money he wanted. If he wanted it enough. Only, it made it all the more crucial that the girl would go away. It would never do for her to find out about this, or be caught by the assassins the Malfoy widow would set on her if she began working in a visible Wizarding position. The alternative... He'd deal with the alternative later, if there was no choice, if the girl was stupid and stubborn enough to stay near her miserable offspring. Considering the story of his life, he thought grimly, he'd probably have to deal with it. Things did just not arrange themselves for the best, where he was concerned. And now he had a *baby* to take care of... The one mistake he'd always avoided.

He'd agreed to pay huge sums he didn't have, for the privilege of being saddled with a child he didn't want. For the protection of a woman who'd smilingly scorned him... and would probably do it again, when the next occasion presented itself.

He savored the sour taste of bile in his throat as his lips went up in a feral smirk on the right side of his face. The left one, what was left of it, twitched uncontrollably. He let his hands contract on the frail shoulders as the wave of familiar anger went through him, reveled in the small moan of pain which escaped Granger's lips. *You think you hurt?*

A shift in her stance warned him she'd gone back from lowly supplicant to full Hermione-mode. Straining to hear all the nuances in his speech, to suck as much information as she could from the non-verbal cues. She was certainly dying to look at him. He smirked again. Let her look at him, and she'd probably die, indeed. From fright. Or maybe not, after all. She'd done really well in the medical semester of her training, back then.

Aloud, he continued, "I will be the sole guardian and parent of the child."

She said nothing but raised one hand, palm up, as if to ask, "What else?"

"I guess you agree, then," he dropped.

"Permission to talk, sir?"

"Accorded." As he answered he asked himself if she'd consciously employed the para-military form used by the Unspeakables, subtly nudging him and herself towards the semblance of a dialogue where both sides had some kind of status, even if hers was subordinate. "And spare me your thanks."

"I'm afraid I can't agree to such a solution, sir," she said quietly, although his hands on her shoulders felt her heart pounding harder and faster even more than when he'd been strangling her, and her whole body had been slightly shaking.

"Are you crazy?"

"No, sir. I'm desperate, but not crazy. I'd agree to anything, provided it ensured the safety and welfare of the child. This clearly wouldn't. You don't want to be saddled with a *child*, sir. You don't even like children. The sisters would settle you with a nanny of their choosing, or they'll buy or intimidate the one you'll choose, and you won't be after her to supervise all the time. The child would be made miserable."

"Miserable? He'd be brought up here, not in the Malfoy family, educated by professional preceptors, adequately fed and clothed, taught horse- and broom-riding and music until his admission to Hogwarts, where I would personally ensure he should not be bullied because of his birth. His future assured until he's able to provide for himself." Not that he had any idea how he'd finance all those...

Her head reeled. Going to battle hadn't felt half as dangerous as the gamble she was embarking on right now. "I assume," she said carefully, "I assume he wouldn't be subject to violence or... acts of a sexual character. I assume his emotional welfare would be left to the care of somebody... somebody who'd truly love him?" She hadn't planned on saying the last words, and they came out in a strangled, weirdly hopeful whisper.

His anger swelled to well-known, comfortable, erupting-lava fury, the kind which had enabled him to kill and maim on command, taking pleasure in satisfying the urge to make the world outside feel the turmoil he felt inside. Who was she, to set *love* as a condition to release the child. Did a child need *love* to grow? And her ridiculous concern with violence? As if a few blows here and there would hurt a boy? He'd just offered to *adopt a child*, for Merlin's sake, agreed to make himself a pauper in the bargain while bartering with Narcissa not to have this impudent, ungrateful chit attacked, and now she demanded *love*? With practiced ease he channeled his rage into hurting the girl standing before him, coldly.

He released her shoulders and took a few steps back. "Well, I'll just wish you success in your quest, then, Malfoy Breeder. You can put your robe back on and leave in your free time." He fisted his hands not to use them on the wraith before him, waiting for her to leave the room. At least... that's the reason he gave himself for not turning on his heels and leaving her there.

"If you please, sir. I'm not unreasonable." Her words were barely audible as she focused her eyes on the rain outside the window. "I'm ready to relinquish all the Malfoy money, and my own when I have some. I won't be his mother anymore, if you don't want me to." Her voice almost broke on that one, but she steeled herself and continued, "But how can I leave him now, when nobody knows who'll take care of him?"

It's clear you're unable and unfit to take care of a child, he heard in his head. And although he wholly agreed, he didn't want to hear it from her, nicely worded or not.

She was still talking. "He's not even weaned. Just... just let me stay the time to find him a good nurse, to introduce you and her to him, and I'll go. Just let me be sure the sisters won't get their paws on him. You won't feel me in the house, sir. Only to take care of him. Or I can cook, if you want me to. I can clean. I can brew. I'll mend your clothes. Just let me see he's well taken care of. Then I'll go, if it's your desire..."

From the movements of her elbows he could see she was twisting her hands again. A plan was beginning to form in his head to maybe save his unworthy scaly skin for a little more, maybe even to not have the girl's blood on his hands by the end of the week. But his fury hadn't abated. Love, indeed. She'd pay. Had he turned into a lesser man? For not having been *loved* enough? *Of course not*, goaded that untamed corner of his brain, the "sane place" Minerva joked about. *Just look at you, flourishing and sowing happiness all around you.*

His anger swelled fierier. "That easy, Breeder? What do I get out of it? Cook? Clean? Brew? Did you turn into a house-elf, all of a sudden? Although," he added snidely, "that could have been foreseen from your fourth year already." He chortled. "You offered an altogether different range of services when you ridiculously petitioned to be my wife, Granger. You positively boasted about your sexual prowess."

He let a heavy silence fall upon the room. "So?"

"I'd gladly do anything you'd want me to as long as you'd let me stay with the boy and see to his welfare, sir." Her voice was toneless.

"Gladly?"

"With great enthusiasm." Still that toneless dead voice, but tinged with despair. Good.

"We've just established you as a prostitute."

She let out a small mirthless laugh. "Yes, sir. We just did."

He didn't like the emphasis she'd put on the "we". Did she allow herself to be ironic? "Well, that solves the categorization problem. You cannot be Malfoy Breeder anymore after you killed the man you were supposed to be breeding for. I'll be generous and let you choose. Would you rather I call you Granger Whore, or only Whore? Or maybe, *Love Whore?*" He might lack practice, but he still could do nasty, he noted with satisfaction.

She hesitated a second. "Love whore, sir, if you please." The disgust in her voice was patent.

He chortled. "Why's that? Feeling cozy? Don't lie to me," he barked. "I'll enter your mind."

She spoke quietly. "Because, sir, in the eventuality you'll let me stay long enough for the child to reach an age when he asks questions, I'll be able to think of something."

"I'll call you how I bloody well feel like it at any moment. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." A beat. "Do you want me to draft the papers, sir?"

"Which papers?"

"The agreement, sir, about the parental rights and the adoption request. The approval for transfer of the money. The affidavits. And my status as... hired help to take care of the boy until the adoption is completed, or as long as you see fit."

"Do you expect a *salary?*" He'd go bankrupt before the year was over.

"I think food and lodging would be enough, sir. And ten free hours a day for holding a day job. I'll see to it the boy is taken care of during this time, sir. At my expense."

"Forget it, Whore. The boy is mine, and I will pay for his schooling. I will choose the school, too."

She tried very hard not to think of Severus Snape interviewing kindergarten teachers in their natural environments. "Yes, sir. I'll bring you the draft papers tomorrow."

"Don't think of finessing any cuteness, Whore. I'll have a lawyer go over it, and I'll personally see to the accuracy of the wording."

"Of course, sir. Ten o'clock tomorrow, sir? I... I will need parchment, and a quill, please, sir. Maybe I'll have a job by tomorrow, but..."

"I would not bet my head on that one, Whore. Or maybe a whoring job?"

"I'm not looking for one, sir." She said it very quietly. "Apart from the one I just got."

"Let it be clear, Whore, that while employed in this house you will not have... commerce with another man. Unless I direct you to. And while you live here, you will have no visitors whom I haven't personally approved in advance."

"It shall be duly taken note of in the contract, sir."

She'd come back on time, and waited patiently in the antechamber until his lawyer and he had made the very few changes her draft needed. Her eyes were haunted now, and her hand had trembled when she'd been called in to sign the papers and take the corollary Unbreakable.

It was done. She'd relinquished her child for... a position as unpaid house help, with feudal perquisites for the employer, as she'd worded prudishly. Snape had smirked and added painstakingly graphic detail. He'd also added a meager weekly salary and the mention "except if said Granger was to be responsible for said incapacitation" besides Hermione's own name as the temporary guardian if he should find himself impeached.

"We've seen you at work," he'd smirked.

He'd silently admired her workmanship. Every detail had been taken care of, scrupulously, down to the confidentiality clause. She'd deftly conditioned her waiving of rights upon Narcissa's same in a downright artistic manner, and had meticulously checked Narcissa's paper, the one which had cost him all his money, before accepting and countersigning it.

The boy was his, as soon as the Wizengamot approved the petition. On the other side, it could take months... The child was in the antechamber, kept by the elf. Somehow Snape hadn't got to seeing it yet. He was in no hurry to, on the contrary.

All in all he felt quite good he'd maneuvered its mother into staying to take care of the brat and feel grateful, too. Even if her negotiating technique had been so transparent, he had to give her credit for having used it. In the circumstances.

Narcissa's fury at learning the girl would stay both alive and in London he'd taken care of the previous evening, in a memorable haggling session in which he'd sunken his soul a little lower yet, *for the greater good*... He'd smirked joylessly as his own Unbreakable was recorded.

The lawyer was gone, leaving the girl alone on the other side of the one-way mirror in his smoking room. Confidentiality, eh?

"By the way, Whore?" He was growing tired from the epithet and hadn't used it when the lawyer was present, but... from the second he'd signed the pledge to "lodge, feed, hold harmless, protect and defend" the boy, she'd been markedly less tense, if still unsure and high-strung. He had to keep her down, even if he didn't really remember why. Maybe just habit.

"Yes, sir?"

"Aren't you curious how I look?"

He could see the ghost of a smile on her wan features. "I did not seek you out for your pretty face, sir."

Verbatim quote from her own words at the Seattle conference. Only then, she'd been the young rising star, and he the aging, jaded hanger-on, War Hero but by the grace of Granger testimony. Well, well...

"I will not accept any insolence, Whore."

"No, sir. The irony was directed at myself."

"Don't cut me off when I talk. I was going to say that since you've apparently developed what you feel is a sense of humor, I expect you to... never mind. We'll have time for that later." His voice changed. It was lower and charged, almost erotic, bitter beyond all measure. "Let's see what's left of your sparkling wit, when you've looked me in the face, in the face you've just undertaken in writing to kiss and be pummeled under for *until I see fit*."

He vanished the mirror with a flick of the wrist then looked at her hard, his hand raising to hold her chin so she faced him squarely.

She cringed. "Oww." It wasn't disgust, more the moan of a Healer confronted with a particularly nasty wound. Even though he'd seen seasoned Healers throw up when they looked at him. But this girl only showed concern. A sudden unwelcome flashback brought him back to that same concerned face, unlined yet but streaked with dirt,

closing in on him in the Shrieking Shack as he fought to breathe.

Then... he should have known... he should have known the bloody goody-two shoes wouldn't be able to spare him the affront of her pity. He saw it invade her brown eyes as her hand, as if from its own volition, went up to his mauled cheek in a... caress?

Fury rolled over him again. He caught her bony wrist in his fist and twisted it cruelly behind her back. "You. Will. Not. Touch. Me. Unless. I. Tell. You. To. Is that clear?" In his rage he gave a supplementary vicious turn to the wrist. He heard and felt the sickly tear of the ligament as she let out a muffled shout of pain.

He let go as if he'd been hurt, and not her.

She stood before him again, nursing one arm with the other, eyes downcast as if she'd done something wrong. His anger dissolved, leaving him alone to fight the queasy feeling in his stomach.

"Heal yourself and get the child to his rooms," he said gruffly.

He'd had the house-elf clean up and paint a room with an attending walk-in closet. He'd himself put a small bed, a bookshelf and a lamp in the closet. He'd even arranged anew the Prince nursery furniture in the main room, before feeling stupid and calling in the elf again to finish the work. He'd emotionlessly looked on as the creature scrubbed off old blood stains ingrained in the wood of the small cot and dresser in the nursery. *Granger probably used other education methods*, he'd thought as he absently caressed the sharp corner his own head used to be bumped against each time he'd wet his bed. He remembered thinking, also, that maybe it was the last time somebody wiped a child's blood from this furniture.

By now, looking at the girl cradling her arm, somehow he doubted it.

Her doubtful voice shook him out of his reverie. "Sir?"

"What?"

"I can't... I have no healing power until the Azkaban release is finally formalized," she said. She looked at him diffidently, tears of pain still pooled in her eyes. "Or would you prefer... I could just wait it out." A disagreeable sliver of cold glass entered his chest.

"Don't be stupid," he sighed as he healed her with a swish of his hand. "You've got work to do."