The Basket Case by Stray

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Chapter 1: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

August 11, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic which you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart.

A/N: chapter edited for mistakes – nothing substantially changed in the plot, though.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen, Tigressa and Scarlett

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Chapter One

Another morning dawned with the sun shining into his generously furnished spacious bedroom. The smell of delicious breakfast on his bedside table kept fresh by a charm. His body was satisfied and his sheets rumpled from last night's activity. The person whose company he had enjoyed had already vacated his bedroom before he woke up, leaving him to his esteemed solitude, as she had been commanded to do. Life was just perfect this time of the day. He liked to submerge in his thoughts and the laziness of being who he was, living the life of the rich and carefree.

He was disgustingly rich. He was strikingly handsome. He was admittedly witty and cunning. He was a pureblood wizard from an old, esteemed family, married to a pureblood witch who was praised to be one of the most beautiful women in England. He was envied, respected and bowed down to by most of the wizarding world. Draco Malfoy's life was everything he had always wished for.

He was about to celebrate his twenty-fourth birthday in a few months. He reminded himself to be proud of being so young and already having accomplished all that. Had his father still been alive, he would have been proud of his son, he thought with a self-satisfied smirk creeping onto his face.

Yes, he would be proud of him!

Sure, he didn't have the nifty job in the Ministry, as his father had had – yet. He didn't have the Minister eating out of his palm (but he was sure his father wouldn't blame him, seeing as how Granger wouldn't ever trust him, no matter what he said, did or how much he paid to 'charity' cases). She was too young to be Minister of Magic, anyway. Draco was sure that after the masses' fear of wars and Dark Lords had died down, they would realise that fact, and replace her with someone more appropriate for the position – a pureblood wizard of a respected family with more experience in politics, obviously. She was too young, too idealistic and a Mudblood to boot. Draco didn't say it out loud, because he didn't want to be accused of having chauvinistic views, but he also thought that a woman was not suited to govern a nation. Of course Draco wouldn't be too surprised if he was the one requested to take that position after the Mudblood's timely retreat. His father's teachings hadn't been wasted on him; he knew exactly how

he should use the considerable amount of galleons at his disposal.

Oh, he wasn't so conceited to actually believe that he would have a chance of being elected, had he applied to the position. But an invitation would look good in his political career; even more so, if he politely refused for now, kindly agreeing to take the position of advisory to the new Minister instead. He didn't doubt for a second that he would be able to, after such measures. That would suit better his purposes, anyway; to dictate from the shadows, while other people took the blame for his actions. The only setback would be that it wouldn't satisfy his vanity, but he wasn't the impatient type. (Well, not always at least.) He knew that good things came to those who could wait - and while he was waiting, he could still manipulate the strings from the background.

There was only one issue in his life that he couldn't wait for much longer, and that was the question of an heir. He was already twenty-three, and had been married for six years – the seventh anniversary of his marriage was nearing now. And he still had no successor; Pansy hadn't got pregnant even once throughout the six long years. If he didn't know that she was equally concerned by it (for very valid reasons), he would have suspected that she used some means of contraception on purpose.

Pansy was a trophy-wife. She was blonde (now), fair, slender, willowy, elegant and refined - at least when she wanted to be - with a figure of a Greek goddess and the face of an angel (after she had surgically corrected her nose in St. Mungo's and had lost a few pounds, to meet Draco's conditions for their marriage). Draco understood that she didn't wish to deteriorate her hard-acquired perfect figure by bearing a child, but she also didn't wish to be stripped of her titles and fortune as the Lady of the Malfoy Estates. Since the two issues had contradicted each other, she had to choose, and Draco didn't have a grain of a doubt which alternative she had chosen. Nine-plus-some months of not looking perfect were worth retaining the whole mountain of galleons and her position in wizarding society.

But time was running out on them. The law of the Malfoy family – some long deceased ancestor's magically legalised last will – had declared that the prevailing Lord of the Malfoy Estates had to produce an heir of his own flesh and blood before he reached the age of twenty-five. If he failed to do that, all of his titles and the family estates would go over to his nearest kin, the next in line who had already satisfied these requisites. (That had been how his grandfather became Lord Malfoy after feeding an abortive potion to the Lady Malfoy of the time, and so successfully impending the birth of the next heir in the last moment. Of course, the deed couldn't ever be brought into connection to him.)

Draco had several cousins who would have jumped at the possibility to get his inheritance, but one of them – the most likely to get his titles if he failed to produce an heir – was the worst of all. His name was

Cyrus Malfoy. He was six years older than Draco and had had a son at the age of twenty. That son was guarded like some hidden treasure, as he was the means for his father to get what he wanted – the Malfoy Estates. Cyrus, just as every other Malfoy aside from Draco and Lucius had gone to Drumstrang, so he knew his business well enough, and Draco didn't doubt for an instant that he would have to be wary of him.

Now Draco had only three months until his twenty-fourth birthday; that meant he had approximately six months to impregnate his wife so that the child would be born before his twenty-fifth birthday. After a successful conception, it was a trivial matter to ensure that the gender of the infant would be male. The method was a combination of spells and potions, which could be purchased in Knockturn Alley. The ritual, with everything involved, was a bit on the dark side of magic, but not enough so that the Ministry would feel compelled to prohibit its use. It stood the test of time as a very common practice in the Malfoy family and most likely in other pureblood families as well. The degenerative side effects had been never spoken of, as being dangerous only in the long run. (Draco sometimes wondered why centuries wouldn't count as the 'long run' in his family.) There was also the possibility of miscarriage, but seeing that he could afford the best of the medical personnel and security measures, he wasn't overly worried about it. Besides, he would have plenty of time worry after he succeeded in getting his wife pregnant.

For the first few years of their marriage, they hadn't been overly concerned by the issue of an heir. Why should they have been? They had had time – or so they had thought. Neither of them had felt the need to have a child at such a young age. Instead they opted to enjoy their newfound freedom that their marriage brought them - as strange as that might sound -, and spend some of the money that had come with their becoming the new Lord and Lady Malfoy.

They hadn't married out of love, few of the members of rich pureblood families ever did. Sure, they had liked each other enough. They had a 'fling' – as Pansy liked to call it – with each other over the years they had gone to Hogwarts, and after it had ended, they still could tolerate each other's company enough to live under the same roof. But neither of them wanted to force the other to dedicate themselves completely to their marriage. Both of them were released from their parents' supervision, were of age and were free to do as they wished – with certain boundaries. Both had a row of lovers and flings – it had been tolerated if not expected of them, seeing as who they were. Discretion of course was a must, but both had been already experienced in the art of secrecy.

They hadn't ever been in love with each other, that was quite obvious. Not that either of them could relate to that particular phenomenon from close up. They understood each other; their personalities were similar, even if their field of interest was not. They considered the other a friend (in Gryffindor and Hufflepuff translation, closer to a business affiliate). So after Draco's twenty-first birthday – during the

fourth year of their marriage – when there still had been no sight of a progeny, they had come together and sat down to a conversation regarding the matter.

Draco had insisted that Pansy see a mediwitch and be examined for the possible cause of her infertility. When Pansy had brought up the matter that maybe Draco should do the same, she got the answer that it had been already done, and the result had unquestionably confirmed that he wasn't at fault in their inability to produce an heir. Pansy noted the statement and submitted herself to the examination by no fewer then four mediwitches and wizards. All of the examiners had given the same result: she was in good health and hundred percent fertile.

So the next two years were spent with Pansy imbibing strengthening and fertilizing potions, counting ovulation periods and utilizing them to full extent while serving one's obligation as a wife – all that to no avail.

Now, with only six short months to spare, the time had come when Draco Malfoy had seen appropriate to give way to despair.

Draco Malfoy was an unparalleled individual. His uniqueness lay – true to a former Slytherin – in his exceptional ability of bending the facts. He was so good at it that most of the time he was able to convince not only his subjects but also himself of the truth of certain statements. When he had told Pansy that the fertility of his seed was not to be questioned, he merely expressed his wish for it to be so, when he had no real facts to underlay its authenticity whatsoever. Sure, he had always believed in his own perfection, and to undermine that belief with something as ridiculous as sterility would have been unthinkable. So the thought hadn't even crossed his mind. The little white lie, that his condition had been already examined and declared impeccable, had come naturally to him, and the truthfulness of the second part of that statement hadn't been ever questioned by his mind – until this time.

Now, lying in his bed early in the morning (it couldn't have been later than half past ten), he felt very foolish, thinking about it and questioning his sanity. Of course he was not faulty! He was a Malfoy, for Merlin's sake. Malfoys were perfect; that was almost a law of nature, much like gravity. No one questioned gravity, and not ended up in St. Mungo's psychiatric ward!

As ridiculous as the idea seemed, though, it had somehow found its way into his thoughts every time he didn't wish to question his state of mind, and had driven him nearly mad. So he had decided– just to

ease his mind – that he would undertake the necessary measures and let himself be examined by a specialist who could then tell him that – just as he suspected – everything was in perfect working order with him; and then he would Obliviate every person who had witnessed this embarrassing manifestation of this uncharacteristic and un-Malfoy-ish insecurity. At least the thought that he would get to manipulate people into acknowledging his superiority was Malfoy-ish, and therefore made the whole scheme if not entirely acceptable, at least a bit more all right.

He had gone so far as to inquire about the requirements of such an examination in St. Mungo's. Of course, he paid the personnel who got involved to shut their mouths until it was over and then he would get to Obliviate them. Also, he had given the name of Pansy as the future recipient of the examination. Not much later though he realised that he couldn't possibly keep it in secret from everyone. The bucket of ice water hit his face when the social column of the Daily Prophet had released an article about the Lady Malfoy's possible malady of gynaecological nature. He had been lucky that Pansy, when she had first heard of the news, had thought that the Prophet had got wind of her earlier examinations and written about it just now and hadn't connected the news with her husband.

He had been distressed about the matter, but then realised that he had gone way too far to quit now. If he didn't pull through with this, he wouldn't ever find his peace of mind. He noticed that he was far too distraught to be able to deal with the matter rationally when two weeks later he had found himself sitting in the waiting room of a Muggle Urologist Doctor's practice as the nurse called his assumed name. For a second he debated whether or not to stand up and run as far away and as quickly as his feet would allow, but his body thought differently and brought him obediently into the examination chamber.

The procedure had been infinitely embarrassing and uncivilised, but at least it had been short. He tried to forget it as quickly as he could after he stepped outside of the building. The results arrived in his Muggle post office box he had set up for this reason only, two weeks later.

'Low sperm count' – the 'urologist' had written. Whatever that may mean, he wasn't about to believe a Muggle charlatan! Whatever had possessed him to take up such a measure? He was a Malfoy, and Malfoys were perfect. Who was a lowly Muggle to ever question that fact?

…

Exactly.

TBC

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Chapter 2: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

August 15, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

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Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Scarlett

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Chapter Two

One week later, while he was reading about ancient potions in the Manor's library, the book dropped out of his hand as the realisation hit him.

Why hadn't he thought about that earlier?

He didn't understand, but he wasn't about to dwell on such ridiculous assumption such as thinking he was losing his touch. No, he just hadn't had to resort to such an activity as brewing a potion himself anymore. In fact he hadn't done that for years. Not because he wasn't interested in it or – as certain individuals he knew –wasn't skilled enough to practice the art of brewing; it was simply the matter of not needing it anymore, as he had all the money he needed to purchase the best brewed potions from all over the world for everything he may have needed.

This, though, wasn't something he was about to buy openly from another wizard. Even if he paid for the information to remain secret, he was aware that the destiny of such secrets was to be traded for something of value.

But why worry if he could do it himself? Not that he had believed that Muggle fraud even for one second, but it couldn't hurt if he tried, even if it wasn't of much use. The fact that he could do it warranted the action that he would do it, simply because he was Draco Malfoy, and as such perfectly capable of dealing with the risks and hindrances of the task. What was he thinking? There were no hindrances that he, as a Malfoy, couldn't deal with; even less if it was about a certain Draco Malfoy and potion brewing.

He had left the book lying on the ground – the house-elves were sure to put it onto its place – and headed towards his private potions laboratory. He was very proud of the equipment and the ingredients stock that the elves always kept in order and fresh. There was a half-finished potions project, still in stasis from six years ago that he had forbidden the house-elves to touch, but he wasn't ever in the mood to finish it so he had left it there. Not that he had ruined it – well, the colour wasn't exactly what it was supposed to be at this stage, but that could be just the stasis bubble's diffusion of light – Draco Malfoy had never ruined a potion in his life.

One wall of the laboratory was lined and completely covered by bookshelves of rare potions books. Nine-tenths of them he had never touched, but he had used the rest of them on a regular basis while he has still been interested in brewing.

He stood before the line of shelves, engaged in his thought as he tried to remember if he had ever seen a

male fertility potion in one of them. After five seconds of useless contemplating he pulled out his wand and cast a keyword searching spell that he had learnt in Hogwarts at a time he had been spying, as usual, on Potter – Granger had been particularly fond of this one, and Draco had deemed it worthy of learning – he could surely make a better use of it than a Mudblood.

The spell caused approximately fifteen books to light up with an eerie purple glow. One of them was his sixth year Potions book from Hogwarts and he thought he couldn't lose anything if he checked it out first.

To his disappointment the potion was one that would be only useful for women, when their period wouldn't normally make possible the conception, but they would have to be in perfect health. Then he looked at the second book, an improved potions book he was quite fond of and had used frequently in the two years following his graduation. That potion was able to cure infertility, but was designed for women only, too. He put it back and went through systematically every highlighted book.

To his frustration he found that most fertility potions were made for women. There were only two that both genders would be able to use and one intended for male recipients. He celebrated his luck, because the last one The Draught of Bestowed Life, was the easiest to make and the one to which he had all ingredients at hand, he didn't think that the universal ones would be too effective anyway. The only thing that slightly troubled him that the potion he decided to brew was that it was in a book full of Dark Magic.

But, what the hell? He was a Malfoy and wasn't about to get scared by that fact. He had been surrounded by the Dark Arts his whole life and knew that not all of them were as dark as most people thought. The darkest thing about it was that it would require a drop of his semen and blood - so what? It was understandable that the most effective way for a potion to work was to be brewed from individualised ingredients. It just made the potion easier to make and require less of the more rare ingredients and tedious pampering that their light-magic counterparts did. He just would have to be careful to dispose of everything that could be used as a proof to verify his involvement in any Dark Arts spell; and avoid certain people and places, which could detect the residue on his body for a few years, as to not to be caught by the Aurors.

The potion was very simple and the description was barely one and a half pages long. No need for incomprehensible words or long quotes from ancient history books. Whoever had written that book had Draco Malfoy's full appreciation and gratitude for leaving off the unnecessary lengthy explanations and

limiting themselves to the subject matter.

After reading through the description twice and checking that he definitely had all of the necessary components he left the book on the table with a signature charm that told the house-elves that they weren't required to put it away. He decided to start the potion the next morning – right after getting the last two components. After a bit of contemplation he had changed his mind to draw the blood freshly at the time it was required in the brewing process, then he took a little vial with him to collect the result of his occasional morning activity the next day, since he could hardly produce that while he was in the middle of making the potion. It was just his naturally elegant way of combining business with pleasure.

After waking up the next day he promptly realised that he had nearly forgotten to get it. And after he remembered and slipped down his hand into his pyjama pants, he realised with horror that his morning erection was about to wane, despite his nimble fingers' tending, at the thought of why exactly he was doing it. He didn't understand why he was so nervous about a potion. Sure he was going to make it, but that didn't mean that he actually had problems with his… his… potency! Two nights ago was proof enough, damn it! He was just doing it because… he wanted to; that was the only reason. And it wouldn't harm him. Even if he didn't need anything to be cured…

That aside, he needed the spunk and he wasn't about to get it soon if he thought about such things for much longer. Potions were hardly an exciting topic – that is exciting in the sexual way. Well, certain things about Potions were, or rather certain individuals… he opened his eyes and stilled his hand before he could continue that thought. He reminded himself that he had grown out of that, just like he had grown out of wetting his bed at night when he was eight. Erm, bad thought. Bad thought! That hadn't actually happened, that had been only a nightmare, a recurring nightmare when he had been a child. But his mother had told him that it had been only a dream, hadn't she? Of course it had been!

He jumped up from the bed and started to pace in the room. On his turn back he found himself opposite the full length mirror of his suite and took a moment to look at his reflection. He was wearing white silk pyjamas (his hand was still down his pants, holding onto the remainder of his morning wood) and his blonde tresses were just a bit rumpled from sleep, but not too severely. His hair was thin and he didn't neglect his hair care, so it didn't get too knotty. He would run his fingers through it a few times and it looked as if he had combed it – not perfectly, of course, but still better than most people's hair after having been actually combed. Of course he was a Malfoy, so looking perfect was just natural for him – and not just his hair. He had perfect features and a perfect, well proportioned body. It was nearly a shame to cover it with clothes, but as a result most of them fit him as a second skin.

Speaking of clothes – he would want to remove his pyjamas before submitting to the act of self-gratification. Usually he didn't care about them; the house-elves brought fresh night clothes every day and cleaned the used ones. But now he would need the outcome (he winced slightly at that choice of wording) in a jar, not everywhere in his pants.

He started to open the buttons on his shirt and as he did so, he noticed himself starting to harden again. He remembered his games when he was younger – not in school, because there he had had hardly any privacy, but in the summers at home in his room – this same room. He used to undress before this same mirror and observe his body while he stroked himself into attention, and the sight had always increased his excitement to a great extent.

If he didn't look at the face of his reflection (he tried to avoid doing so, because the expression of rapture on his features used to disturb him greatly) he could imagine that it was somebody else he was looking at, without that person's knowledge or consent. That had always worked for him in the past. Of course it could have been simply that his body was perfect and was able to attract everyone, even himself.

In the beginning he used to get off on actually observing himself with the knowledge that it was his own body. The feeling had been so much more intense than just lying in a bed and wanking with his eyes closed or staring at the canopy, but that always left him with a sense of wrongness afterwards – a feeling that he had done something that was unnatural in a way – so he had tried to force himself to stop. When that hadn't worked, he used to imagine that the reflection of his body belonged to someone else, and the mirror was actually an enchanted window.

He had always known that he was an exceptional beauty – in the masculine sense of the word, of course. He had seen other boys in the Quidditch showers and they simply couldn't measure up to him. Except one, but later he realised with a feeling of relief, that that must have been just the play of lights and shadows. It had been dark, and he hadn't seen him properly at the time, as he had been hiding between the cleaning supplies, and most of the blood had vacated his brains towards his nether regions. He had gotten off watching him, but that was just because he was intrigued and excited by the idea that the other one didn't know he was there, observing him during his most intimate ministrations to his own body.

While his thoughts had drifted randomly, he was already at the bursting point. He quickly grabbed the vial standing on his night table. The small distraction served to slow down the end, but he got what he wanted only a few minutes later, when he envisioned what he had seen that night – something very similar to what he had currently seen in the mirror, except that the curls nesting the hard length, which

had been massaged and tugged by strong fingers had been the colour of the night. He was almost able to see it as clearly as if he had been transferred back in time right to that moment again.

After his body had stopped trembling he opened his eyes and looked down at his hands – one holding the vial that had white-ish gooey gobs smeared on the inside and outside alike, the other still absently stroking his softening member. The carpet before him was a mess, as were his hands. Even the mirror got some. He grunted disgustedly, but didn't really care; the vial's contents would be enough for the potion, and the elves would clean the room after he left for the day.

He brought the vial with him into the bathroom and cleared the outside with a wet towel, then corked it and deposited it onto the bathroom shelf, after having cast the signature charm on it for the house-elves, while he used the toilet and took a quick shower to refresh himself.

He tried to eat breakfast before he ventured down into his laboratory, but found himself unable to ingest more than a few bites of his favourite pastry and some tea. He was just excited about having the opportunity of taking up his favourite hobby again, he thought. Maybe he should look for the potion he was about to make in other sources too, to see if the book was correct? No, that was only a waste of time. He wasn't nervous and trying to stall, was he? He would get down and start the brewing right away, he decided, and stood up from the breakfast table.

He spent his whole day down in the long unused room of the manor, taking his time and double-checking every measurement, the right time for adding the components, the right temperature of the cauldron, and had reread the formula many times. By doing so, the brewing lasted nearly twice as long as it should have, and he was compelled to acknowledge that he had got a bit rusty during the years he hadn't touched the cauldron, but he was still a Malfoy and he could do everything he made up his mind to.

After he had bottled and corked the potion, he sat at the table, eyeing it for nearly two hours. The book said that the time at which the potion was imbibed was irrelevant, as it worked instantaneously and had a lasting effect. The author recommended drinking it with an empty stomach, so it wouldn't unsettle his guts. Seeing as he practically hadn't eaten anything the whole day, he thought now would be a fitting time, rather than going without meals for another day and taking the potion at a later time.

He reached for the bottle with slightly trembling fingers that he resolutely tried to ignore, then grabbed

it quickly and in the next second it was sliding down his throat. He had time to growl at the foul aftertaste before he promptly dropped the vial and pressed his hands to his abdomen where a sharp, stinging pain had started to develop with lightning speed. He felt bile creeping up his oesophagus – so much for not getting sick, thankyouveryfuckingmuch!, but before he could take a step toward the lavatory built next to the lab for emergency cases, he felt his head lightening and the world before his vision went black.

TBC

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Chapter 3: The Basket Case

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by Stray

August 15, 2005

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Chapter Three

Draco woke up in a state of dizziness, realising that he hadn't gone to sleep in his bed. Instead he was lying on a hard surface whose coldness was chilling him to the bones. After a while he also noticed that he was lying in something sticky and vile smelling; upon opening his eyes it turned out to be dried vomit.

He groaned again when he tried to scramble onto his feet and noted the stiffness in his muscles – a severe case of bed soreness – without an actual bed to blame it on.

He scowled at the mess on his clothes and wondered if he had thrown up the potion as well? Perhaps he shouldn't have thought of the fact that he was going to be drinking his own blood and spunk at the time it had been going down his throat. But the pain that he had felt in his lower regions before he blacked out could only have meant that the potion had begun to work before he had thrown it up. Or that he had made a mistake in brewing, but that was highly unlikely. For one thing, the potion was so easy to brew that he would have been able to make it as a first year. For another, he was Draco Malfoy, potions ace extraordinaire, and he couldn't have possibly fouled a potion, but since that was already established it wasn't worth to waste his thoughts on that. As his father used to say, brewing was like riding a broom, it couldn't be forgotten. Come to think of it, he had never seen his father do either of those things.

Suddenly he realised that he was hungry – very hungry, according to his growling stomach. But he wouldn't possibly be able to eat with the stench of vomit all over his clothes and – he fought to urge to hyperventilate at the realisation – in his hair!

He needed a shower, pronto!

Half an hour and a long, warm shower later he felt considerably better. The warm spray of water soothed his sore muscles in a delicious way, and he contemplated calling the masseur, until he remembered that he had incinerated his owl address after the highly embarrassing accident when he had come into the towel wrapped around his hips in the middle of a massage session. Of course he had known previously that the man was gay, he just hadn't thought that homosexuality would be contagious by touch. Under normal circumstances he would not have felt aroused from being touched by another man (he himself didn't count).

“Bimbo!” what a stupid name for a house-elf, he thought while yelling it.

The creature appeared before him with a pop and bowed right away until its long nose touched the floor.

“I want to eat, make some breakfast!”

The creature straightened himself slowly and looked at him with fear in its eyes as if it had something to tell but was afraid to do so. Draco sighed tiredly.

“What do you want?”

“Master doesn’t want to wait for the dinner party?”

Dinner?

“What time is it?” he asked, scowling. It hadn’t occurred to him that it would be later than eleven in the morning.

The house-elf’s eyes flickered quickly in the direction of the wall clock then returned to his face. “It is quarter to six, Master. The dinner party starts at seven, as usual.”

Dinner party? He didn’t remember any party that had been scheduled for that night. Pansy always told him in advance when she invited guests; she didn’t want to repeat the occurrences after the first few occasions she had neglected to do so. Perhaps it was a last minute arrangement, which she couldn’t have told him about, seeing as he had been down in the laboratory the whole day.

“How many did she invite this time?” Draco asked the house-elf, since it wasn’t entitled to know the names of the Masters’ guests, only their numbers.

“The usual seven plus Master and M’lady,” it told him.

Usual? That word again. It prickled the back of his mind and something seemed inevitably wrong with it. Then it clicked in his brain.

“What day is it?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“Saturday,” the house-elf said as if it wasn’t strange at all for its Master to be asking for the date. “Master has slept for three days.” So it wasn’t. But…

“Why didn’t you put me into my bed, if you knew I was there? Why haven’t you informed anyone? I could have been ill or I could have died!” Come to think of it, it was lucky that he hadn’t been discovered by other than house-elves, but still…

“Master put a signature charm on himself,” the house-elf answered, eyes growing huge at his bellowing voice.

Draco scowled. He had done no such thing. Except… Oh, that. He had put a signature charm on the vial containing his sperm while he was showering as to not be cleared away during that time. Then he had put it into the potion, which he then ingested.

He promptly forgot to punish the house-elf though, when it occurred to him that if he had spent so much time unconscious, then the potion must have had some effect. Now that his plan had started to work out, he could barely wait for it to take a step further. But he mustn’t rush this, he reminded himself. Now he would go down there, smile through the evening and ignore the blathering of the bunch of rich, gaudy women and uncouth men whose company his wife was so fond of – and eat enough to have lots and lots of energy for what would be coming after he got rid of their guests.

Later that evening, when there were only the two of them in the house again – not counting the house-elves, but most of the time Draco didn’t acknowledge their presence as more than the presence

of the furniture in the manor, even though several pieces of the furniture had better conversational skills than the average house-elf – he opened the door to Pansy's private suite and bed chambers. She had known that he would be coming tonight, because it was that time of the month again.

He had already got himself ready for her before he left his own bedroom. He found that it would go much quicker if he did that. He wasn't embarrassed anymore by the fact that Pansy just didn't do it for him. She was beautiful and everything a trophy-wife should be, except one thing: not her trophy-husband's type. Draco liked the more… massive kind. Not the fat ones by far! His favourite company was the wife of the gardener by the name of Rose, a Squib woman, who worked with his husband in the fresh air the whole day and had the body of an athlete. She was a few years older than him, but didn't look her age yet and her body was in perfect condition. Draco had come into the habit of calling Rose to him for a bit of warming up before he visited his wife to fulfil his duty as a husband.

Sometimes he wondered what it would be like if he had married Millicent, but even if she was closer to the type of woman he enjoyed in his bed, she wasn't the type that would be suitable for his social and political status.

Pansy lay on her bed, wearing some kind of night gown made of a shimmering, transparent material, which felt like silk – she had purchased it for their fifth anniversary – and tried to look sexy. Probably she was damn sexy for someone who could appreciate her attributes.

Draco dropped his velvet dressing gown, under which he wore nothing. He noticed that his erection had waned a bit already, but nothing irreparable. He gave himself a few tugs while he approached her on the bed and it started to come back again.

Pansy didn't try to touch him, as she would have done a few years prior. She just spread her legs and put out the lights completely, as Draco always requested of her. She probably presumed that it was more exciting for him to do it in the dark, but the real reason was that Draco didn't want any visuals which could interfere with his own mental imagery if he accidentally opened his eyes during the act.

She had already got over the foreplay by herself and was ready to take him into her body. Draco suspected that she used some kind of lubricant and a dildo, but fortunately he hadn't seen either of those.

He slid into her with a practiced easiness and began to thrust at a comfortable speed that was best for him to get off. He wasn't concerned by her pleasure; Pansy would take care of herself after he had left her room. She made low, throatily moans and he could hear the wet noises of their bodies slapping against each other. Those were actually good for his libido.

It didn't take ten minutes for him to shoot his load. Pansy pushed him off to the side when he collapsed on top of her, and let him rest for a few minutes. Of course she couldn't refrain from opening her mouth.

"That was quick and efficient, darling," she sneered. He hated when she did that, mostly because she was right. Then she slipped her hand down between her thighs and started to finish what his attempt didn't do for her. Draco fled the room without a word.

The next day he surprised Pansy by calling a mediwitch to confirm his prediction of the success – the book said that the potion's effect took place immediately. He was enraged and disappointed when the mediwitch told him that Pansy was still without child. He wasn't the one to give it up without trying, though. He repeated the process of introducing his seed into her body at night and then calling the mediwitch every day for no less than the following three months. After the second week he even brewed a fertility potion that allowed Pansy to get pregnant even when it wasn't the right time of her period – to no avail.

On the eve of his twenty-fourth birthday he decided that he needed the advice of someone more knowledgeable than him – not that there were many, mind you. He would pay a visit to Severus Snape.

TBC

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Chapter 4: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

August 15, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen

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Chapter Four

Snape was less than impressed with Draco when he burst into his house without an invitation and with the attitude of a two-year old whose toy had just been broken. He was dangling the Potions book in his hand as evidence, and slapped it down onto the table after Snape had just let him into the room. He had sworn to himself to remain in control, but control proved a bit hard to achieve (and, frankly, overrated) after having drowned nearly a half bottle of cognac to steel his nerves and fuel his determination.

Snape looked at him with an arched eyebrow and an expression of surprise rarely to be seen on his countenance.

"Have I forgotten to send a birthday-card?" he asked with a touch of sarcasm.

The birthday-card reference sent Draco's thoughts off track for a few seconds – thanks to the freely

imbibed quantities of alcohol, and the resulting expression on his face must have been worth of a first year Hufflepuff after having got back his first potions assignment – graded below troll. Snape permitted him a little recovery time, as he recognised the symptoms of inebriation, though Draco had always been cleverer than to let himself be seen in such a state while at Hogwarts.

Thus Snape guided the presently not very dignified Lord Malfoy to a comfortable (but not too comfortable) chair and let him try and explain with his currently less than eloquent vocabulary the purpose of his visit. What he heard made him feel uncomfortable with the extent of information he really didn't want to know, and furious because of the irresponsible behaviour of the young man. He had expected more of an ex-Slytherin - especially if this ex-Slytherin was Draco Malfoy.

During the drunken tirade, Snape changed his opinion about the state of intoxication of his most prized ex-student. He didn't think he could have acquired so much from of the young man sitting before him without him being drunk – or resorting to some of his highly illegal potions. Halfway there his attention turned onto the book Malfoy had so subtly deposited onto his table and read the title and author. His brows shot up in disbelief.

He stopped the flood of words with the raising of his palm, then swiftly stood and fetched a sobering potion from his personal stack.

Draco tossed back the vial without so much as a question and Snape severely hoped that Draco had recognised the potion rather than having become so careless that he would drink something unknown another person had given him – even if that person was Snape.

Draco shuddered from the taste and the instant sobering effect of the potion, then he suddenly felt light-headed - not from being drunk, but because he had just realised what all he had disclosed to his former professor. The cognac didn't seem to having been such a good idea now.

"Mr. Malfoy," he heard his former professor saying in his best school-voice, "had you read the book before you started to brew that particular potion?"

Draco shook his head and hissed at the pain that suddenly flared in his temples. Apparently the sobering

potion didn't take care of the hangover; it just accelerated the absorption of alcohol in his body.

"Would you please do it now?" Snape's voice sounded somewhat airy and a half octave higher as normally, as he was fighting to restrain his fury. Draco looked down onto the book, turned it over and began to read.

Beguiling Brews and Bewitching Concoctions by Dorian Lockhart

He looked up at his professor, with a perplexed expression. Then his eyes grew larger and he read it once again.

"You must have realised by now, Mr. Malfoy, that some wizarding families are just…" he finished the sentence with no more than a disgusted snort.

"You mean…?" oh, the cognac was definitely a bad idea. His brain felt like a handful of squirming maggots stuffed into his skull.

"He is the nephew of your ex-Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor. Just as much of a fraud as his uncle; cannot even get his alliterations straight, as you can see… He was in his second year of Hogwarts when I started to teach, and a mediocre Potions student. He wrote his assignments by copying parts from his classmates' works and pasting them together – usually missing the point of the whole thing. I imagine, this book was written much in the same manner." He opened it at the page that contained the fertility potion and studied it for a few seconds, then looked up at Draco again. "In fact I recognise this part to be taken out from a book I own a copy of. Let me find it for you."

Draco sat in a state of disorientation while he watched Snape search his shelves for the book in question. He felt the shadows of something disconcerting and dreadful rising in the background, but his thoughts were just a jumble of white noise (the maggots had apparently transformed into a swarm of hyperactive mosquitoes); the full depth of what had happened hadn't reached his consciousness yet.

"Here," Draco jumped slightly as Snape put down an old tome before him with a resounding thump, which had been opened approximately at the middle – Draco hadn't even noticed when he got back

from the shelf with it.

He started to read, but the ancient-looking calligraphic cursive writing blurred before his eyes and he forgot the last sentence just after he had read the next one. Snape apparently noticed his still not quite sober state, because he handed another potion to him. Draco drank it again without looking what it was. At least it worked.

He looked down onto the page again, this time comprehending what he saw.

The Draught of Bestowed Life

The whole two pages were filled with the description of the potion, and when he turned a page, he discovered that it continued further. In fact there were ten pages full with the explanation about the effect, historical background and the ingredients of that potion alone. Draco swallowed and, looking up at Snape's now openly sneering face, he started to read it letter by letter.

On the third page he reached a paragraph that he had recognised from the book he had brewed the potion from; there were only slight deviations, presumably to correct the ancient sounding language of the original script. It was about the detailed description of the potion's effect. The paragraph ended, and Draco now realised that it had been only the preliminary and rough summary of what followed below.

He continued to read on with a beginning sense of dread, which got stronger and stronger as he progressed further in the text. Then came one sentence, which he had to read twice to completely understand its meaning.

After he had understood, he promptly passed out.

Draco woke up with a taste of something bitter and foul flooding his taste-buds. He recognised the Knock-Knock-Wake-Up potion, and wondered why Snape couldn't just use Enervate on him, as every normal wizard would.

“Time to wake up, princess!” he heard Snape’s fake-cheerful voice that had nearly the same effect on him as the potion before. “I have already wasted three good bottles of potion on you today. But seeing as it is your birthday, I shall not be petty, consider it as your birthday gift.”

Draco groaned, and for a second he imagined that he had only dreamed the whole incident, that nothing of it had been real. But the naked truth stared into his face as he opened his eyes – when he had lost consciousness, his head landed on the open book and the illustration of an idiotically smiling man, who must have swallowed a watermelon, was only an inch before his wrinkling nose.

“What does it mean, Professor?” he unconsciously reverted back into the old term, as he felt that Snape knew much more than he had given away before he put down the book before his ignorant ex-student. In fact, he wouldn’t have been really surprised if it turned out that Snape had had known exactly what Draco had got himself mixed up in. He just wanted to rub his nose into it, and Draco grudgingly admitted to himself that he had probably deserved it.

“Do I have to spell it out for you?” Snape snorted again. “The potion is a ‘male fertility potion’ not Viagra!”

‘Via what?’ Draco muttered under his nose, but Snape didn’t seem to have heard it.

“It makes the male body fertile, as in: able to conceive and carry a child to term. It was designed for Dark Lords who wished for an heir - at the time it was still a belief that witches were less powerful than wizards…” Draco felt himself getting paler. It was one thing to read about it and another to hear it from Snape, because Snape would never say something like that if he didn’t mean it. “…That is not important now. What is important in your current situation, as I understand, is that in order to achieve all this, the potion made you now truly unable to create a child of your own the ordinary way.

“You must understand that this potion is very old and isn’t very refined. It is also a very simple one with few ingredients. The effect is therefore very… drastic. Whoever created this potion didn’t care for preserving qualities the wizard who consumed it wouldn’t need if the potion worked - which makes sense if you consider that Dark Lords used this potion on their captured enemies. To preserve their reproductive ability wasn’t their major concern; also, that would have taken much more preparing, additional ingredients to weaken and modify some aspects of the main ones… Why am I telling you

this? You must remember it, since it was taught to you as a first year." Snape's voice drifted off, and Draco could tell he was also a bit affected by the whole situation.

"But… what do I do now? I must get an heir before I turn twenty-five! How long before the effect can be reversed? Can you brew the potion for that?" Snape looked at him disbelieving, but he didn't answer any of his questions. "What?" Draco asked frowning when the silence got too long.

"I regret to say, but I cannot do that."

Draco looked at the older man as if he had grown another greasy head – or had gotten the one he already possessed to sport flowing shiny clean hair. Did he not understand what was on stake? He couldn't believe Snape's unwillingness to sacrifice some of his precious research time for a good cause, like this. Oh well, he could speak another language, if needed.

"I will compensate you generously. I get you every rare potions ingredient or book you ever wanted. It will be worth your time, I promise."

Snape glared at him with a funny expression. "No, I meant, that the effect is irreversible," he told him in a cryptic voice. He had gone to the back of the room again without further ado, and this time he returned with a glass full with Ogden's best Firewhiskey, which he pressed between Draco's trembling fingers. It was followed soon by the bottle and another glass for Snape.

Not much was said for a good hour, during which half of the whiskey vanished from the bottle.

"So what do I do now? You know about the rules of my family. I need an heir," Draco said meekly, with an expression of complete desperation.

Snape looked at him for a good minute, gripping and shifting his whiskey glass in his hand, leaving greasy fingerprints all over the once clear surface.

“I’m sure it is only the alcohol speaking out of me, but did you consider conceiving an heir the… other way around?”

Draco looked at him still uncomprehending and shook his head. He decided it was time for the puppy-dog eyes. “Help me, please! There is no one else who can help!”

Snape scowled again, and seemed to consider, apparently thoroughly discussing the exact degree of his involvement with the half-empty bottle.

“All right, if you insist on it, I suppose, I could…”

It was that instant when Draco realised exactly what it was that Snape had been suggesting, and what he was proposing to…

“Eeew! Yuck! Don’t be ridiculous! Even if I did that, I wouldn’t wish for any child of mine to bear your looks! Gods! Pansy is the lowest I am willing to go! Besides, we are related; I don’t want to be my child to be inbred…”

Snape looked mildly affronted, but Draco didn’t really notice the signs. Then the Potions master tried to conceal the sudden uncharacteristic display of hurt in his eyes by snorting under his nose at the ‘inbred’-remark in a very unattractive way that reminded Draco of a swine.

“Oh gross! Now I am sure I don’t want my child to be related to you in any way!”

Snape darted him a glare and shot up from his stool, muttering again under his nose something about ungrateful brats and it being too bad, since Draco himself was related to him.

“Okay, then get out,” he told the younger man on a glacial tone after a second of hostile silence.

“Excuse me?” Draco remained as clueless about his own obnoxiousness as ever.

“I said, get out! Get out of my house!”

“What? Have I said something?” Draco looked a bit stricken; he had rarely witnessed his ex-Head of House in such a furious state – at least not because of him. He contemplated apologising to him, but by the time he came to a decision he had been already shoved out of the house, the door banged shut behind his back.

He emitted a whiskey-flavoured sigh and went further from the house to Apparate away, when the door behind him opened again. Snape stepped out of his house and closed the distance between them, offering something in his outstretched hand.

Draco took it – it was another vial of potion, a blood red coloured one that Draco couldn’t identify based on the colour and thickness alone.

“What’s this?” he asked the potions master who seemed to have composed himself already, though there were distinct lines irritation etched onto his face.

“That is, Mr. Malfoy, a party-drug for Death Eater tortures. It was used to lower inhibitions and sexually arouse the imbiber. You might need it in the future, considering you haven’t got much of a choice if you want an heir. I should think, at least, use this before you attempted to brew another potion yourself,” he snorted disgustedly. Draco nodded and felt the alcohol’s numbing effect evaporate from his mind. He was familiar with the look in Snape’s eyes, as his own father had used it on him countless times, and he hated it – the look of disappointment.

TBC

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Chapter 5: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

August 15, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic which you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Chellé, every remaining error is property of mine.

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Chapter Five

No, no, no! He absolutely wouldn't do it! He couldn't do it! No matter what!

But if he didn't, he might just become knutless in the matter of a year. Not to mention, the laughingstock of the high society. Were it one of his Slytherin 'friends' thus affected, he would advise him without hesitation to do it. It was just a matter of stomach… Eew! Bad image! Anyhow, one night with a man… couldn't be worse than one night under Crucio…or could it? And then nine months of carrying out the child - he wouldn't have to give birth to it without magical help, would he? He didn't think that was even possible for a man, fertility potion or not.

Surely Snape didn't mean it like that when he had said that he would never be able to sire a child the way… the way a man did. But his nights (he even started to spend more than ten minutes with her on occasion) continued to be unsuccessful. Pansy was irritable and Draco couldn't just perform on demand. She should have valued his efforts at least with a bit more understanding, not snapping at him every time he dragged over the medi-witch for the usual morning examination. Sometimes she managed to make Draco ask himself why he bothered with her if there was another way, which was just plain creepy. He shuddered every time he thought about what Snape had implied.

It was just so… undignified! And unfair, he decided. He had heard of male pregnancies, but they were more of a deviation than routine. And it had certainly never happened in his own family. He wasn't sure how it would be accepted by them. Not that it mattered, because he wasn't going to let himself become the object of ridicule by exposing the fact of where exactly the child had come from, should he decide to hazard himself to this whole torture… It would be better to just lie about it and tell everyone that the child is from Pansy. He could always say that he deemed it more secure to remove her and himself from the country for the sake of the unborn child until it was due. No one would get suspicious, and in the end he could Obliviate Pansy and make her believe that she was the one who carried their child to term…

He snapped out of his thoughts at this point as he realised that he was already considering doing it. No, I am only exploring the possibilities, he reprimanded himself, as every good Slytherin should be in a situation like this.

But on the other hand, couldn't he just get the sperm of some wizard and impregnate himself with it? He felt slightly nauseous when he thought of what that would entail, not to mention, he wasn't sure if it would work. By most accounts of fertility magic it was the actual encounter what triggered the start of the process – together with the bodily requirements, such as the seed of a wizard in his body. He vaguely remembered having read something about that in Snape's book – he cursed himself that he didn't thought of asking Snape for permission to borrow it, because the drinking and then the various potions mixed together didn't have a very positive influence on his long-term memory. After Snape had booted him out of his house, though, he wasn't going to crawl back and apologize to him, just so he would have a chance to have a look at it. He didn't know why Snape had gone off the handle, but after seeing how angry he had been, Draco was sure that he would refuse to let him borrow the book.

And what about that blasted potion Snape had given him? He wouldn't have done that if he wasn't sure that it would be required, should Draco ever decide to act in that way. Or he had given it to him to make him think there was no other way – as a sort of revenge for whatever Draco had offended him with. Well,

he was far too intelligent and cunning to fall for such pitiful tricks! He was going to have to think of something on his own.

The thinking had required more time than he had thought, as Draco wanted to survey the situation in its entirety. He wanted to weigh every possible solution to find the best among them – and the one that involved the least risk of getting him into a potentially embarrassing or excruciating situation. His days were occupied with devising and going over plan after plan and working out some of the most brilliantly cunning solutions he had ever invented in his whole life – until he realised that there were barely more than nine months remaining before his birthday; - leaving him with only a week's time to resolve the situation.

Not nearly enough, since the best plan he had succeeded to come up with to this time was still to swallow the bitter potion (literally) and get pregnant – in the traditional way. Where there was a will, there was a way. And there was a will, namely the ominous last one of his ancestor. And there was a way, too, even if it was a desperate one.

He had decided in advance that no one could know about what he was about to do, not even the father (the other one) of the future child. So it would have been done secretly. He would have to Obliviate the other wizard afterwards, or at least make sure he couldn't identify him later as Draco Malfoy. But to be able to do that, the other man had to be – at least in the beginning – a willing participant.

The willingness could be ensured by either paying or seducing the person, as using Imperio would have been too risky. But seeing as he would be the one to submit himself to the other man, he didn't like the idea of placing his trust into a person who could be bought. The second alternative was definitely the better solution – considering that he wouldn't have to tell his subject the reason why he needed to… get that done to him, and his partner would be less suspicious of a hidden agenda behind a romantic involvement – which meant that he would have an easier job of surprising him with the memory charm.

That all brought Draco to the point where he rediscovered the existence of homosexuality. Being queer wasn't a topic at the dinner table with his usual associations. Draco had very little knowledge about them, so he decided to take all time necessary and conduct a thorough research – not because he cared one minute what Snape thought about him, mind you! He hadn't ever liked Care of Magical Creatures, but it looked like now he had to take up the subject again to research Queers.

He tried his school book Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them first, but he wasn't put out much when he didn't find a reference in it, though Half-Veelas, Half-Giants and Centaurs were listed. His next choice was a considerably thicker volume from the Malfoy Library printed in the year 1624 – The Magickal Races. Draco had read the book when he was younger and remembered having found 'Mudbloods' in it, as the book was of a time before Mudbloods and Half-bloods were – for political reasons - falsely acknowledged as the sub race of the wizarding species. In newer books the term 'Mudblood' had been replaced with 'Muggleborn' and in still newer the reference had been completely erased.

Draco spent an afternoon looking through the book to no avail. Perhaps the problem was the same as the Mudblood-Muggleborn confusion. Queers had so many names: Fags, Poofs, … He couldn't have possibly thought of every one of them, now could he? Come to think of it, he didn't know which one of them was the official name– it could have been just as well something in Latin. Or it could have been that Queers weren't born – to his knowledge at least – they become that because of something like… a massage - just like a Werewolf's bite caused a human to turn into another Werewolf. But then Werewolves were listed in every Creatures-book. The only thing he had known for sure about them was that opposed to lycanthropes, Queers weren't forbidden to procreate, because their children didn't necessarily turn out to be Queers. That meant that he had the chance to detect Queers who had been pureblood wizards before their infection. He just had to focus on their magical power, since purebloods were established to be the most powerful.

He considered asking the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures in the Ministry, who was a good friend of his (translate: he accepted his money), but he didn't want to look stupid and more importantly, he didn't want anyone to know about him inquiring about this subject. When the book research led to a dead end, he decided that it was time for direct study.

He decided to observe Queers at their natural habitats, the Gay Bars. He visited a few Muggle ones in London under a Disillusionment charm, where he found a very drunk Finch-Fletchley. At a later time, using Polyjuice to disguise himself, he compared his notes with the information freely given by the ex-Hufflepuff to who he thought was a boy-next-door-type guy exploring his sexual orientation. After he had everything he needed, including the open ticket to some special event in that particular nightclub, he Obliviated the Finch-Fletchley. Draco considered taking all of his memories about the place, but considering that he spent his nights there every second week, it would raise suspicion if he forgot about it completely. But to make sure he wouldn't turn up there that night, he hexed him with a cold that would go off on that day.

The event took place on a Saturday night, and the wizard gay nightclub was in Copenhagen. There were

no gay clubs for wizards in England, but even if there were, Draco wouldn't have chanced to encounter there someone who might recognise him while he was about to chat up another man like a common slut, with the intent of getting laid.

He had decided to dress up as a woman for this occasion, for two reasons. First of all, he needed to disguise himself, and by being in drag, he would have a valid reason for using glamour charms on himself, as most of the make-up wizarding women and make-believes wore were based on glamour charms. So disguise would be easier, because if someone noticed, it could be explained as beauty enhancement. The second reason was that – quite frankly – dressed up as a woman he had a bigger chance to get fucked by the end of the night. By wearing the skirts it would be evident which position he preferred – which he didn't, not really, just for this one thing! There would be no embarrassing questions asked about that at least!

Pansy was away at a party that night, so Draco didn't have to look out for her to avoid getting caught and questioned by his wife as to why he was leaving the Manor at such a late hour – dressed in his mother's clothes.

He decided that he wouldn't use Pansy's wardrobe for that purpose. His late mother had had much more style. Draco hadn't let anyone touch her quarters after she passed on, and knew there were a few dresses in her large wardrobe, which wouldn't need much resizing. Narcissa had been the same height as he was, and their hips were also the same size. There would be some enlarging work to do on the clothes in the shoulder and chest region, so Draco would be better off choosing a dress with a shoulder-strap and no sleeves, like that shimmering silvery silk one, which looked like it was poured over his body rather than worn on it… his mother's body, that is… he wouldn't know how it would look on him…

He could wear hose made of a thin white material that also had a silvery sheen to it (he had never understood why his mother never had worn them together?) and white garters with white lacy underwear, as he didn't think that boxers or Y-fronts would go with the dress, and the matching bra – he still remembered where his mother had kept her bras.

Also some jewellery – not much and not too expensive looking ones, because he didn't want to look like someone who had money. He remembered the platinum chain with the teardrop pendant on it; it had been a gift to his mother when she was four years old, but she had been always fond of it and wore it when she had been just at home and not in a public place. She had told him that it had been a birthday gift from her grandmother. It was a very old family piece, and the pendant was a Portkey to a summer residence of the Black family – it had been crafted and enchanted before the authorisation law had come

into force. Unfortunately the only people who could activate the Portkey were the female members of the Black family, so around his neck it would be just some pretty but not very useful item.

He had found his mother's sapphire ring that held another secret: a container that was used to store little quantities of liquids. Draco didn't have a doubt that the most frequent use for it had been to hide poison, but tonight it would be used to store some of the potion Snape had given him. Later in the evening he would be able to slip it imperceptibly into his drink after he had found the wizard, whom he intended to become the father of his child. Eurgh! That had sounded so, so wrong! But there was no time to contemplate such things. He knew if he did that, he would not be able to pull through the night. He had to preserve a cool head and try not to think about why's and how's. It was for the best if he only concentrated on the task at hand, and took it step by step.

After he had showered and dressed appropriately he threw a glance into the multi-faceted full-length mirror in his mother's room, making sure he had resized the dress perfectly. It looked much the same as it had on his mother's frame, except for the breasts. His mother had had sizeable ones, so the front of the dress hung loosely on him. He contemplated transfiguring his body to fill out the dress, but he couldn't stomach that. Besides, he was supposed to look like a man dressed up as a woman, and not a real woman in every detail. So he just fitted the cloth and the bra under it to the form of his body. He was disturbed to notice that the shape of his pectorals under the top looked like tiny lumps of breasts, nonetheless, but he decided that he would look at the bright side and not let himself be troubled by the implications (he wasn't fat! that was hundred percent muscle!).

Now he had to spell off the hair from his legs before he slipped them into the stockings. He had to try a few times before he succeeded, because he had never needed to use that particular spell before, so he didn't have any practice with it. After mastering it, though, he decided to repeat the spell on his arms and armpits too, considering he was wearing a dress with no sleeves that would conceal it. Once done, he didn't look that ridiculous. The overall view was not too bad because of his slim frame. As he wasn't actively participating in any strenuous activity these days, his once Quidditch-toned body has lost some of its earlier firmness and filled out a bit. The muscles were still there, but they weren't quite as defined as when he was a teenager. He wasn't fat! He just didn't look quite so angular and sharp-boned anymore. His shoulders may not be as broad as his father's had been, but that merely gave him a sophisticated elegance rather than the brute intimidating force his father had used to operate with, even if he hadn't ever resorted to physical means.

His hair and face were next. He decided to change his hair colour to a richer blonde tone, much like his mother's hair had been, and on a nostalgic impulse he also added the glorious, near-waist-length curls of his mother as he had last seen her wearing them. He was rather surprised how much this little detail had

altered his appearance. After looking into the mirror and almost seeing his own mother looking back, he decided to keep it. But that was all the similarity he would be able to attain without raising suspicions if he met someone who had known his mother. He altered his features a bit, not to imitate a specified someone, rather than slightly changing the shape of his nose, hairline, cheekbones, eyelids, brow and mouth – to a rather astounding total effect. The result was nothing like his usual looks. He quickly decided to change his eye colour to a warm hazel with long eyelashes, darken his brow so it matched the colour of his hair and change his skin tone to a rosier shade, then add a shiny hue of coral to his lips as the last touch.

Looking at the whole picture, he still wasn't satisfied, because now the colour of the dress and hose had clashed with his 'natural' coloration, so he had to change the silver into a rich crimson. He didn't believe in the general Slytherin-rule of not wearing either red or gold – why would he voluntarily let the enemy monopolize them? Apart from that, he looked smashing in red!

Damn! He looked nicer than what his wife could ever hope to achieve! He didn't really know if he should feel pride; or would be annoyance the more appropriate sentiment in a situation like this one?

As he looked himself up and down, he realized that he still hadn't chosen any shoes. The cupboard of his mother's was full with them, and since his mother was the same height as him – 5'8" – and had rather large feet for a woman (and used glamour on her shoes to make them look smaller); he didn't have to enlarge them much. The only problem was presented that his mother had only owned shoes with stiletto heals – she hadn't had to worry to over tower Lucius with his 6'2" frame – Draco wasn't sure if he could master walking in them quickly enough. He chose a pair of red lacquered leather sandals that had only an inch long heel and tried them on. Oh! He didn't realise that his mother had quite that large feet, as they fit him perfectly. He practiced walking up and down, and in the matter of mere minutes he got the general hang of it.

Now he took a large, black, hooded winter cloak from his own wardrobe that would conceal his appearance completely, cast a warming and repelling charm on himself – his feet would be needing it the most, as he was only wearing a footwear that consisted entirely of straps – and he was ready to go.

Suddenly his heart started to thump with the realisation of what he was about to do.

He was about to go out into the night, to some friggin' glary camp place he didn't know, get the first best

wizard into the first best bed and get knocked up!

Time stood still for five (very loud) heartbeats.

He could do that. And he would do that. He had already made his decision and there was nothing, nothing in this world that could make Draco Malfoy give up his plans. Nothing could stop him. Nothing would come between him and his inheritance!

TBC

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Chapter 6: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

August 15, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic which you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Chellé, every remaining error is property of mine.

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Chapter Six

It was cold in Copenhagen, even though the summer had not officially ended yet. The pamphlet of the bar he had nicked from Finch-Fletchley had an inbuilt Portkey, which was set to that night at a random time between eight and half past nine, so - Draco reckoned - the guests wouldn't arrive all at once. While he waited for the Portkey to activate, he briefly mulled over the Portkey laws in Denmark that enabled a wizarding establishment to hand out Portkeys in such quantities.

It was approximately nine-thirteen when he felt the pull behind his red silk covered navel and in the next moment his sandal-clad feet hit the damp cobblestone yard of the Nightclub with an Unpronounceable Name.

There were no guards at the door, nor did he have to pay an entry fee. He suspected that the prices of the drinks copiously made up for that. The inside of the club was full with Queers, loud and aggressive music and not too much illumination. There were coloured beams of light that stroked over the dance floor and the dancers – or rather Poofs - were writhing and wiggling to the beat, sweaty bodies pressed too close together. Most of them were wearing male clothing, even if more daring than something that would be worn in a heterosexual club, and approximately one tenth of the Queers were dressed in drag, ranging from the flamboyant feathers and stripes-like attires to something similar to what Draco was wearing.

One more thing he noticed only upon a more thorough inspection of his surroundings: the club was full with Harry Potter-impersonators – at least he couldn't give another name to the whole lot of bespectacled, scar-faced, tousled-haired crowd. Though, come to think of it, he had never seen Potter wearing such clothes – clothes, which not only fit but were very, very revealing and worthy of the Gryffindor bravery, which Potter certainly never lacked. Apparently he somehow developed into some kind of supreme male-ideal, or just some great Queer-icon of the wizarding world. Draco hadn't ever heard of Potter being a Queer, but to be honest, he had lost track of him not long after his marriage and the beginning of his new, independent life.

Draco looked around once again, fighting his repulsion against the thought that he would be required to mingle with that crowd. He steeled himself, took a deep breath and stepped into the loud hall. He felt

like a scuba diver at his first time of submerging into a strange, scarcely illuminated alien world full of invisible predators and annoying little parasites, as he took a large breath and plunged down into Gay Culture.

Some of the Queers standing next to the entrance had noticed him, and their lingering glances pleased Draco, even if he didn't appear to notice them. "Looks like my disguise is perfect," he thought, they didn't suspect that he wasn't one of their sort. No one of the observers met his requirements – they were all lousy, already drunk specimens with no style for clothing or behaviour.

Draco made a beeline around the dance floor and deposited himself on a high bar stool, ordering a fruity, not too strong cocktail in a colour to match his dress. The barkeeper smirked at him a little when he ordered it with those criteria, but the smirk was more one of appreciation than amusement. He was probably used to such orders working at a place like this one, Draco thought, while he accepted the layered pink and red drink with the name of 'Bone-growing potion'. He took a sip then blushed a bit when he realised what exactly the name of the drink insinuated – nearly all of the beverages had the name of some imaginary potion with a not so subtle sexual hint to it. Draco briefly wondered if the names listed on the menu meant the same in English as in the other languages in which they were printed, and a few mouthfuls later if – as the name suggested – the one he got really contained aphrodisiacs or not.

He was sipping the reddish beverage slowly and surveying the supply of possible sperm donors amongst the gyrating masses. There were no females, of course, but because of the other transvestites it didn't seem so odd. Draco's memories supplied him with the knowledge that at the Slytherin parties there had not been many girls either. First, they couldn't be trusted, second, only a few select girls had been willing to put out. Not because they had been prudes, but because most of them were expected to marry into a wealthy pureblood family and those were a bit old-fashioned if the purity of the bride came into question. Admittedly, Pansy had been also a virgin before their wedding night – although a much practiced virgin. Draco hadn't doubted for a second, she had tried everything imaginable that hadn't involved actual penetration.

The first invitation to the dance floor took Draco off guard. He looked at the Queer who had the gall to make a pass at him with surprise. He spared him only one look and sent him away. The individual was too sweaty and bulky; he reminded Draco distinctly of Crabbe or Goyle. That aside, he realised that it would be easier to get into a Queer's good graces by dancing with them, so he decided to try and find a suitable partner for that activity. The life of an aristocrat with full-fledged pickiness wasn't that simple though.

The next one was too old with funny whiskers; the one after that was younger but didn't understand English. Draco kept brushing off every offer, getting more and more anxious to find a proper candidate, until he realised that with that attitude he could sit there the whole night long, consuming countless glasses of various cocktails and wouldn't get closer to his actual goal.

He decided to accept the next invitation whichever Queer was offering it. It wasn't like he had to keep dancing with that one; he could shift to other ones in the herd (or was pack the correct term? Werewolves lived in packs, didn't they?) and find the right subject more effectively. He just finished his second drink when two young Queers in rather colourful attires cornered him. They reminded him of the Weasel twins – they were impertinent and bold enough to virtually feel Draco up while they guided him through the crowd – except for the blond hair and for the fact that they didn't look like two of a kind. They must have been brother Poofs but not twin Poofs, Draco decided.

Draco was rather surprised how much he liked dancing. Perhaps it was because of the previously ingested alcohol, or because of the loud, enthralling music, or the fact that he had not had the opportunity to participate in that kind of activity since the house parties at Hogwarts. He hadn't realized how much he had missed them – Pansy only liked the more sophisticated social gatherings with classical music, transfigured exotic plants and smorgasbord, which Draco had always found rather boring.

He soon realised that he couldn't dance the way he was used to in his tight dress and high heels, so Draco reverted to the writhing, seduction-like dance-style he had seen other cross-dressers doing. It worked unexpectedly well; soon he had the attention of the majority of the Queers standing in his vicinity. He didn't even have to do the mingling as he was passed from one dance partner to the other in quick succession.

Draco was handed a number of unidentified drinks – not all of them alcoholic – and kept on the floor through the better part of the night. He didn't really protest. He had forgotten for a while where he was and why he was there, and instead enjoyed the attention he was lavished with and the atmosphere of the place - the rush he had been deprived of for so long; since his marriage. It didn't even matter from whom he was getting it – it felt a bit like being with the young of the Pegasi in the Care for Magical Creatures class those years ago.

He didn't count how much later, but after having been partnered with practically every Poof not wearing a skirt – and even some of those who were, Finch-Fletchley had told him that outer appearances didn't

mean so much in the Queers' society as the body underneath –, he was led to one of the tables on the side of the hall. The five or six Queers, whom he had danced with for the last half hour gathered around him and provided him a place to sit without having to ask. Of course, after having bestowed his glorious presence on them it was the least they could do.

The Poof named Brian ordered drinks for all of them. Draco got a pale cream liqueur served in such a narrow glass that some of the creamy substance had always spilled down the corners of his mouth when he tried to drink from it, and he had to lick it off his lips and fingers. The drink's name was 'Head Boy', and Draco got it after he had told the specimen with the name Sven that he had been one in school. After all he would have been, if not for things outside of his influence.

It did not escape Draco's attention that he was the only one wearing a dress at the table, and all the Queers were competing for his affection. Most of them were good looking, physically strong and around his age. Draco was surprised that when he spoke to them, they seemed almost like normal wizards. Draco was trying to decide between them, when one of the waiters stepped beside his table with a glass and a bottle of very fine champagne. He was surprised, but he recognised an offer that was presented to him and this was undoubtedly one.

"From the gentleman there," the waiter winked at him and pointed out a Poof sitting at the bar, staring at Draco openly. The gaze Draco felt lingering on him was intense, but not intrusive. "The gentleman wants to know if he will be allowed to join your company."

Draco couldn't lift his eyes from the stranger; he didn't remember dancing with him earlier. Also, he looked a bit more reserved than the Queers at his table, and was wrapped into an aura of mystery. The words of the waiter barely registered in his mind, but when they did, he nodded and gave permission.

"You sure?" Jan, the blonde Poof suddenly placed his hand onto Draco's bare shoulder in a gesture that should have meant warning, but Draco could imagine that from the viewpoint of the stranger it represented possession, as if Draco was already spoken for. Jan was obviously the alpha male among them; his leadership was recognised even by the waiter, who hadn't gone yet to deliver Draco's answer, waiting for the final word of the highest ranking Queer.

"Why?" Draco turned towards Jan and then his gaze swept over the others sitting with him. All of them were agitated and frowning, as if they felt their territory endangered by an unknown male. Draco was

amused by it, and the stranger had piqued his curiosity, too.

“He is trouble, sweetheart” Brian told him through his clenched teeth. “Everyone says so.”

Draco lifted a brow in perfect (ladylike) manners. “Why is he a trouble?”

“Believe us, he just is,” Sven said. Draco scowled at them. He thought that he had the Poofs figured out by now, but he honestly didn’t understand what they were trying to tell him. Their vague warnings weren’t enough to convince him, more like the opposite, because they just aroused his interest more. So he just shrugged at them and nodded towards the still waiting waiter in acceptance.

The waiter left the bottle and the glass on the table after opening it, then walked back to the stranger and told him something – most likely Draco’s answer. Draco was surprised when after he had given his consent, his previous companions stood up and said goodbye to him, leaving him alone. He didn’t much mind; he could always find them again in the masses of gyrating dancers when he decided to ditch his new candidate.

The mysterious Queer stood up with determination and strode to his table, all the while looking into his eyes. Draco couldn’t avert his gaze. He recognised all right that this one was something else. He must be something like the lone male here, the outsider who didn’t belong to the herd, that’s why the other Queers had abandoned him when he asked for his company, Draco thought. Unfortunately, he hadn’t thought to ask Finch-Fletchley about the mating habits of the Queer population, so he couldn’t tell for sure.

When he got closer, Draco started to feel his aura; the man’s whole presence radiated power and personality. Not the refined air of someone from high society, but still, he had class. In a strange contrast to all this power, his appearance was rather ordinary. His clothes were casual and didn’t demand the same attention as the things about him, which couldn’t be seen. However, Draco’s attention was distracted again by his magical strength even from afar; his skin practically tingled with it when the stranger sat down beside him at the table.

Suddenly the reason for his being there jumped into the forefront of his thoughts and Draco knew that he had found his perfect subject - although he hadn’t even looked at him closely, except his eyes. So he

decided to make up for it now.

The second look wasn't more flattering than the first. To his dismay, the man was one of the Potter-imitators. His hair seemed a severe case of Potter-head and he looked somewhat scrawny and geeky. Actually it was quite disconcerting, that even though his most prominent features looked different, a few tiny details on him resembled Potter. At least he didn't have a lightning bolt magicked on his forehead like Jan and some of the other Queers from his hunting pack.

The stranger's gait indicated that he had had a few shots already. Though usually Draco didn't think of being drunk as an attractive feature, this time he didn't mind it so much. If his partner was inebriated, probably he wouldn't be able to recall anything about him later, and Draco wouldn't have to use a spell that could be traced back to him to wipe the memory out of his mind.

The only problem was his colouration. Draco contemplated strongly if he wanted his future heir to have these features, not to mention that both Pansy and he were blondes and it would be a bit strange if their child came to the world with jet-black hair. But the power he radiated appealed to Draco immensely. He had been always attracted to power and by power, and his body was reacting to the sheer magic he felt emanating from this wizard. That was the moment he decided for real that he would do it.

"You can call me Scott," the Queer told him, sitting down. His voice was dark but unexpectedly clear, when Draco considered the amount of alcohol he must have already consumed that night.

"Scott," he repeated the name, rolling it around on his tongue, trying to get used to the flavour. Then he realised that he was expected to return the introduction and tell his prospective partner how he should be called. The Poofs from before always called him pet names, so he didn't have to think of a name yet. He had to find one quickly – something of which it should be obvious that it is an assumed name, therefore it wouldn't be questioned.

"Ah, you may call me Clover," he tried to purr on a seductive tone, but he didn't know if he succeeded with the noisy background.

Scott gave him a once over in a not terribly subtle way. Draco didn't mind; he noticed it earlier that in this place no one tried to be subtle, and he figured that there was no need for subtlety as with women.

Queers were direct – a trait that he wished normal society would adopt. Besides, he didn't mind getting attention for his looks after he had spent so much time creating them.

"You should be called something more… red. Like 'Rose'." This was the most pathetic pick up line Draco had ever heard. Now, though, he didn't mind it at all, given that his goal was to be 'picked up'. He just smiled at the Queer indulgently, and realised that Scott had obviously more to drink than he had first assumed.

"Oooh," he cooed, "but roses have thorns. Clover brings luck." Draco allowed himself a smirk that could be taken as seductive; he felt he was starting to get on the right track with his chosen one. Scott didn't debate his statement, just shrugged and drank.

"So, are you going to bring me luck tonight?" he asked after he put down his empty glass. Draco continued to smile at him.

Bingo!

A/N: "Clover" translated literally from my mother language means "horse testicles". LOL

I also wanted to apologise for the long wait and thank to my readers who helped me by pointing out typos and errors! Some of the previous chapters have been reposted to correct those and also, because I got a new beta. But the plot didn't change, so you don't have to reread it if you already have.

A/N2: A terribly embarrassing mistake of mine: Copenhagen is in Denmark not in Sweden. Now corrected *phew*

A/N3: The glorious, gorgeous, glittery art of glamoured Draco is a contribution of Ildi, who somehow figured out the date and surprised me with this! Give her lots of hugs!

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Chapter 7: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

August 30, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

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Chapter Seven

"Here we are."

Draco was the first to step into the room. His heart was beating madly, so he tried to feign calmness, and turned to take a look around, but it was a bit hard in total darkness. He was waiting for Scott, who followed him, to cast Lumos, since he didn't want to cast any spells here. But instead he heard a clicking sound, which made him jump and then suddenly the ceiling lit up. Draco had never before seen electric

lights.

Scott brought him into a hotel – a Muggle one to boot. But Draco guessed that the danger of discovery would be reduced if he steered clear of wizarding places. In any case, he didn't know what he expected of this night; to be invited into Scott's flat? The more impersonal the setting the better, he thought. So amid the humiliation and pain that was soon to follow he could keep in mind that this was strictly business. Even the name 'Scott' sounded impersonal. On second thought, he was sure that it was also borrowed - as much the Queer guy's own as 'Clover' was his, which, he guessed, made sense. He had heard from Finch-Fletchley that some of the Queers try to fit into normal society, keeping their real nature secret. Scott must have been one of those Queers.

Draco had decided though, that calling him 'Queer' in his mind now that he was about to have… he cringed at the thought… sex with him, would make the whole business much more derogatory than it already was. He decided sticking to calling him 'Scott'.

He tried to bring under control the unwanted jitters that had started upon leaving the bar and setting foot again onto the darkened cobblestones. They had intensified with every minute he spent on thinking about the situation and more exactly about what would follow after they got to their destination. Now he was shivering, which had been initially caused by the chilly night-wind, and had not subsided when Draco had felt Scott place his palm onto the small of his back in a supporting gesture, in order to direct him in their side-along Apparation.

"I'm going to the bathroom, if you don't want to go first," Scott looked at him with an unwavering gaze.

Draco quickly shook his head no, and then watched the other man's retreating back disappearing behind the white lacquered door. He sat down gingerly onto the made hotel bed – a queen-sized one covered in cheap, light blue bed-linen clustered with a floral pattern. He snorted disgustedly when he felt the rough material under his palm. He was still cold, even though the room temperature was comfortable. He rubbed his hands together to get back the feeling into his icy appendages, when his fingers bumped into the ring he was wearing. He remembered exactly why he had put it on. Well, this was the best time for it, Draco thought. He opened the hatch and drank the contents of the hidden container. The slightly oily potion went down on his throat leaving an alcoholic and herbal taste behind in his mouth, and he was grateful for the warmth that followed.

Draco shivered again, this time from the increasing heat that started to spread through his blood vessels as soon as the potion landed in his stomach – which made Draco think about how Potions' magic often contradicted human anatomy. When his conscious mind caught up with his thought process, he quickly stifled the errant thread. He had to focus his mind and not let his apprehension get away with his thoughts, if he wanted this to happen according the plan. He had to keep a cool head and maintain control.

The sudden silence of the tap having been turned off in the bathroom, and the realisation that he couldn't recall when the sound of gushing water had started, directed his attention again toward the other man and the goal of his mission. Draco took a deep breath, keeping it inside for a few seconds until he felt his lungs starting to tingle and ache with the lack of oxygen, the not-quite-pain clearing his head of all the unwanted thoughts. By the time Scott emerged from the bathroom Draco had all his wits where he needed them.

He observed Scott on his short way to the bed where he was sitting, looking straight into his eyes. Draco couldn't make out their exact colour, but the determination and lust reflected in them was unmistakeable and had a quite sobering effect on him. He accepted the hand Scott was extending towards him without breaking eye contact. He could feel the slight wetness of the skin – either the remains of him washing his hands a few seconds earlier, or the first traces of sweat breaking out. And there was the overwhelming feeling of power again, seeping into Draco's nerve endings through their touching fingers, tingling his skin all over.

Draco allowed Scott to pull him up by their clasped hands and fought back the protests when he saw him leaning towards his face. He expected Scott to kiss him; instead he felt the man's mouth descending onto the side of his neck. The first touch of lips on skin was unexpectedly light and dry. With the other man being that close to him, Draco had anticipated smelling alcohol in his breath and was surprised when the light puff of warm air caressing the side his face only tasted of menthol. The mouth slid slowly lower, until it reached the strap of his dress. Warm, slightly calloused fingers followed the mouth, easing down the silk material off his shoulder gradually. Draco tensed up for a second, but he allowed it. His mind felt strangely fuzzy; the instinctual apprehension of letting another man do this to him struggled against beginning arousal and the desire to submit himself completely – must be the potion starting to work, he thought.

Scott wasn't in a hurry. He devoured Draco's neck leisurely. Draco couldn't decide if he felt relieved that he had time to think, or be irritated with the sluggishness of the procedure. He wished for the night to be over already.

Scott must have sensed Draco's impatience, because he lifted his head and his eyes were questioning as to what Draco wanted. Now that he didn't seem so drunk anymore it felt harder for Draco to convince himself that he still had the control over the situation. He just wanted it to be over and done with, but to get there he needed to play the eager little bitch who desired nothing more than to get fucked already. His acting skills though, lacked severely when they were impeded by irritation. Finally, Scott seemed to have decided that it was time for the next step.

"Do you prefer using charms or lube and manual preparation?"

Draco blinked a few times. He didn't have a clue what Scott was asking about.

"I—um. I don't need that!"

The slight frown on his face made Scott mirror his expression and slowly take a step backwards, breaking contact between their bodies.

"Bugger! Don't tell me you have never done this before!" Draco didn't answer apart from wincing. He somehow thought that he would be able to keep up pretences if he let Scott believe that he was experienced. Something must have given him away. "Bloody hell! You haven't, have you?"

Draco shrugged. He could see the confusion on Scott's face, but also the signs that said that he was too far gone already for this detail to concern him enough to change his mind. Draco's face was set into a determination opposed to Scott's questing gaze directed at him. Finally the other man groaned and turned towards his discarded jacket to rummage for something in its pockets.

"Fine. Strip," he told Draco on a terse tone, still with his back to him.

Draco shrugged and slipped out of the dress, then discarded the sandals and the hose. When Scott turned around again, he was about to unclasp the bra, and his fingers stopped in the middle of that movement when the smouldering gaze of the dark haired man bore into his eyes again. The desire and

power was there again, which made Draco's stomach constrict. He was glad that the potion's mind-altering effect seemed to come back again after this unnerving interlude, as he felt desire flood his mind. He decided that he was probably better off if he didn't try to think now.

Scott stepped before him and reached for the clasp of the bra. Draco's heart skipped a beat in fear and he hesitated before allowing him to unhook it, which was kind of silly, because he, unlike women, didn't have anything to hide under it. While he was occupied with his warring sense of weirdness and determination, Scott disposed of the bra and started to loosen the garter belt. The soft touches on his naked skin tickled Draco's abdomen and made the muscles in his belly tighten.

He looked down to follow the proficient movements of Scott's deft fingers with his gaze and was surprised by the sight of his own erection tenting the front of his mother's lace panties. That was only a second before the other man brushed his hand over his hardened flesh. Draco couldn't suppress a moan when his balls were cupped in Scott's palm and then squeezed – not enough to cause pain, just the right pressure to increase his desire. The desire, which was now undoubtedly there. Draco would have been mortified by the realisation, had he not known that it was only the potion working. Even that knowledge didn't prevent the light shiver that thought caused to run down his spine, but thankfully Scott interpreted it as desire. Draco quickly squashed any embarrassment he felt. If the potion made him able to accept this, spared him from some of the pain and humiliation, then why object to it? If it made him even enjoy it… well, he would deal with that later. He didn't want to think about that now.

In the next second the warm hand deserted his nether regions. Scott's fingers scooted under the sides of his only remaining piece of clothing and eased it down his hips, which made him swallow.

"Lie down," Scott nodded towards the bed. Draco obeyed without asking the question currently on his mind, which undoubtedly would have made him seem even more inexperienced. But – while he proceeded lying down on his stomach - he couldn't stop worrying about why Scott would want him on the bed. He had heard about Queers having sex by 'bending over'. How in the hell was he supposed to bend over when he was lying on a bed?

He heard the rustling of clothes behind his back, followed by the cling-clang of a belt buckle being undone and the swishy sounds of yet more clothes being taken down. He didn't dare look at what must have been there, didn't dare open his eyes when he felt the mattress dip at his side, and had his eyelids tightly closed when he felt the touch of warm skin somewhat covered with hair, after Scott settled on top of him. He couldn't detect any other material, say a cotton brief or boxer shorts rubbing against the sensitive underside of his thighs, and he nearly yelped again, keeping his eyes shut, when the other

man's forward movement pressed something into the valley created by his limbs squeezed together firmly – something hard and soft and warm and even hairier.

Scott didn't seem to be disappointed with his partner's passivity; Draco reckoned that it wasn't that uncommon from a bottom. The black-haired man leaned forward and pressed the whole length of his… torso snug to Draco's back. With one movement he swooped Draco's lengthened gold tresses out of the way, and started to bestow hot and soft and wet and insistent kisses onto the nape of Draco's neck. Draco – to his own surprise - slowly started to relax; his muscles lost their initial nervous tautness as the kisses travelled down his spine, occasionally straying away from the straight road southwards to bestow the glorious warmth onto his shoulder blades, ribs, sides and even in one of his armpits. The kneading touches that had followed the mouth, were a thousand times more effective in gay-izing him than a simple massage. Scott was persistent there, sometimes teasing the skin with his tongue or biting it softly, coaxing an increasingly vocal reaction out of his (victim) partner. Draco's stomach knotted, when he felt a wet line drawn across the skin above the back of his left knee, but he tried not to think too hard about the kind of quill that's tip was leaking the moisture. Anyhow, the potion had him gone already far enough for that not to be a cause of worry.

"Turn around," Scott's soft command came as a surprise after having only the moans Draco wasn't hearing (even less making!) breach the silence for so long. The palm having slipped under his shoulder had already lifted his torso and the rest of his body followed in its wake.

Draco had to blink away the dazzling lights after having kept his eyes shut for so long. The glowing, naked figure of Scott slowly gained contours and filled with the shadows and gleaming planes of muscles, bones and sinews. The only dark spot remaining was the thatch of coarse curls at the base of his cock jutting forward proudly, stiff and glistening with need. Once Draco's eyes focused on the spot, he couldn't tear his gaze from the erection, which was threatening his overactive imagination with unspeakable things, from which he couldn't decide if they were frightening or arousing or both at the same time. He had attributed the confusion to the opposing feelings generated by the effects of the potion and his base preferences. He closed his eyes again and consciously fought down the dread slipping into his bones until he could focus on the task ahead, and called upon the false convictions forced onto his mind by the drug.

He was astounded how easy it proved, after finding himself on the receiving end of Scott's talented kisses once again. No one had ever made Draco realise that the skin of his throat was quite so sensitive. The other man was on his hands and knees above him, and Draco tried to burrow his naked body into the bedding as he felt the sudden warmth of the other's body appearing in a not-quite-touching distance. He was nervous again and very still; the sounds of his racing heartbeat and ragged breathing

were the only things he was able hear. But Scott didn't do more than make him dizzy with the scorching kisses placed on his neck. In his reclining position Draco felt very vulnerable, but more aroused than when Scott was doing the same thing with them standing. He tried not to wonder how much time had passed already since he had imbibed the potion and for how much longer the effect of such small dose would last. It was still working, and Draco figured that it would be easier if he didn't fight it.

Scott shifted lightly above him and in the next second an unexpected sensation jolted Draco's body, as their cocks brushed together. They both moaned at the same time. Draco wasn't about to protest when his partner slowly lowered himself onto him, his torso still supported by his elbows, so he wasn't squishing Draco – but it wouldn't have mattered the other way, because the delicious friction of their erections rubbing together to a steady rhythm let him forget everything else.

The ferocity, with which Scott tore himself away a few minutes later, when the movement of their hips had increased to a desperate writhing, surprised Draco to the point of moaning his sudden loss. The lack of Scott's closeness didn't last long, only for a few seconds while he jumped up from the bed and grabbed something from the night stand. It was the thing he had been searching for earlier in his jacket, and Draco didn't have a clue how it got there. Scott kneeled back onto the mattress between Draco's thighs after lifting and pushing them apart.

There were no words needed to explain Draco what Scott was about to do when he suddenly lowered his head and licked up the underside of his erection. Draco had had a few blowjobs in his life – even from Pansy. He knew that it would feel good, and usually he was able to completely disregard the person administering it to him. So he closed his eyes again and let the feeling of a warm mouth, an insistent tongue and heavenly suction wash over him. He didn't know and, frankly, didn't care if the potion helped him out by increasing his need, but nothing had felt quite like this. He opened his eyes to a crack and watched the dark head bob up and down between his thighs… and he couldn't close them again. He couldn't give himself back to his feelings and ban any visuals from his mind as he was wont to do. His eyes opened wider and he felt a jolt of surprise on finding the image before him a complete turn on. Suddenly he was so very close to the edge, but as his muscles started to tremble, getting out of control, the suction ended and the clever lips pulled away, allowing the air of the room to surround and chill his moistened cock.

Draco groaned again, and tried to imagine that it wasn't over yet. The fingers gripping him and starting to slowly, teasingly stroke along his erection helped along his imagination, but the sudden coldness below his balls didn't fit into his fantasy at all.

“Relax,” Scott’s voice sounded huskier than how Draco remembered from before. As if hypnotized, he obeyed the instruction without question and submitted himself to the arousing sensations of his hardness being caressed and slowly kneaded; repeatedly diverting his attention from what was happening simultaneously to his bottom. It was a strange feeling, but Scott and the potion made sure that it wasn’t that painful. Being penetrated with one finger was uncomfortable, but Draco couldn’t deny that being touched and having something up there felt almost good in a strange way. Two fingers caused a stinging sensation, which only increased as Scott no doubt forced more and more into his body, but after the second Draco couldn’t really tell how many. It just felt like whatever was stuffed in there was entirely too big to fit in comfortably. And then Scott touched something within his body, which sent a shock of sensation through him.

“Aaargh!” Draco gasped in shock.

“Did I hurt you?” Scott’s brow furrowed gently as Draco squinted at him.

“T—too much,” Draco emitted a sob again, Scott’s fingers brushed that place once more, and he expected to feel his erection waning, but instead he only became harder. He didn’t understand it, since the feeling wasn’t very enjoyable; perhaps the aftermath, when it did feel kind of tingly and enhanced all the other sensations, which let a slippery warmth pool in his stomach. Scott seemed to be a bit disappointed with his reaction, but he was more careful from then on, and after a while Draco almost felt disappointed when no more of those jolts crossed through his body.

After a while the pleasure and discomfort seemed to balance each other out. He felt strangely detached, and his mind just didn’t seem to catch up with his body at being properly aroused, even if he was harder than he could recall ever being. His drifting attention was caught by a scar on the underarm of the hand working his erection. It was slightly dented, as if something had been thrust through it, but it was also faded, which indicated that it was an old one. Draco had had such scars – if not that large ones – before he had learnt to magically remove them… and he didn’t know why he was thinking about things like this right now.

The fingers and the stroking hand suddenly disappeared, and their loss was like a strange feeling of abandonment. He didn’t open his eyes though, only when Scott smacked his thigh and told him to get up.

Draco jolted upwards, as if waking up too suddenly from a nightmare. Scott wasn't looking at him, and Draco observed his partner administering the slippery substance, which was now coating his neither region, on himself.

"Okay, come here! You can be in control like this…"

Scott flopped onto his back, pulled Draco over into straddling him, positioning his rigid cock to his loose and slippery entrance. It tingled in an interesting (delicious) way. Draco could feel the blunt head slipping half into him; his pulse suddenly doubled and his knees gave way. He started to drop downwards, but Scott quickly caught him, his palms supporting Draco on the underside of his bum.

"Easy there! I will let you go as slow as you need it, you can set the pace. Can you hold yourself yet?" Scott's voice sounded a bit breathy, which didn't reassure Draco much.

Draco felt his face heat up, but he wasn't capable to coherent speech yet, so he just shook his head no.

"Okay, then I am going to lower you. Tell me if it's too much and I should stop!"

Draco took a shuddering breath and couldn't stop himself from trembling and widening his eyes like a five-year-old boy hearing noises coming from his wardrobe at night. Or perhaps… that was a bad metaphor right now, eww! He didn't have much time to elaborate on it though, because Scott didn't wait for his answer. The arms holding him up ceased to hold him, and his body was slowly but steadily opened up and filled by something hard and thick and entirely too long, because when the movement suddenly stopped and he was sitting on Scott's lap, he thought that it just barely stopped before poking at his heart. He didn't dare move, fearing that it might do that after all, but a few seconds later, as his body became accustomed to the sensation, and it didn't feel that monstrous anymore. Besides, he thought, he had seen Scott's size and it really wasn't that big. But it was still alien and disconcerting. He didn't know how long it took until his senses started to admit sensations from the outside world again, but he was glad Scott didn't rush him.

Draco was sitting on Scott's lap and could feel every inch of the hard, thick length embedded into his body. He was so embarrassed, and excited the same time. And he was more embarrassed, because he was excited, and even more excited, because he was embarrassed. He wondered if something would

start to make sense soon.

“Move,” Scott nudged him gently while caressing both of his thighs and slipping both hands under his bottom again to help him lift himself up. Draco sighed softly. He felt defeated by his own mind. He just wanted for it to be over, so he gritted his teeth together and obeyed.

His leg muscles felt like a bundle of squirming Gillyweed under his skin as he tried to will them to work and lift his body. The movement caused Scott’s firm erection start to slip out of his arse, and Draco was so surprised by the strange prickling that he let himself slump back after only a few centimetres. Scott groaned as he unconsciously flexed his anal muscles while trying to get used to the sensation. But after the first try, his body still shuddering and his heart wanting to punch a hole through his chest, he settled into a slow up-down motion, inhaling as he lifted his body and letting out a shaky breath every time he went down, impaling himself onto Scott’s thick length.

Draco shut his eyes and concentrated on the movement, consciously telling his body to rise and descend, while Scott’s cock moved more and more easily in and out of his body, but that didn’t prevent him from feeling every square millimetre of it. His head started to fall back on its own accord, while his mouth opened into a curious shape of O, glistening with moisture from his tongue, which was darting out to wet his lips from time to time, because they seemed to go dry again with every heaving breath. He felt the gelatine substance rubbed into his entrance warm up and lose some of its viscosity, rendering the friction smoother, more enjoyable. He was so lost in concentration that he never noticed when the activity ceased to be uncomfortable and gross, and started to turn into something primal, enormous and— oh! There was it again!

Draco didn’t need support from Scott anymore, who removed his hands and slipped them up stroking Draco’s flanks and rubbing on his nipples, shoulders, sliding them down his oddly smooth and sensitive arms and thighs, then repeating the motions over and over again, until Draco could feel the warmth and tingling left by those strong fingers along his whole body. It was as if the other man’s fingertips were leaking magic, charging his skin with power and desire, urging him to move faster, let the massive cock invade him deeper and harder, and it felt shamefully good.

Dear Merlin! Why did this have to happen to him? It would have been acceptable to let himself be taken, bear the pain and humiliation in order to achieve his goal. But not this! He didn’t expect this for sure! He expected to be ‘bent over’ and this thing done to him, not that he would have to actively participate in it! Now he was supposed to ‘set the pace’ and ‘be in control’. And control – sadly – meant that he wanted more of it, more of the delicious warmth and the sparkles beneath his eyelids every time he

managed to hit that spot in himself. But this was so wrong! How was he supposed to justify his actions, to dismiss it as something he only put up with for the sake of his inheritance?

"C'mon Draco, just close your eyes and imagine that it is Rose or Pansy" - except that neither Pansy nor Rosie would fuck him up the arse. "Ah! Let's pretend it's Millicent!" Draco always wanted to have a roll around with Millicent. He was adept enough in imagining the situation, and he didn't have actual memories that would contradict this fantasy, so it was ideal. He could most definitely picture Millicent as someone who would get a strap-on and do Draco if he asked her to without further ado. Except that she probably would have just bent him over something and rammed the dildo into his arse, not let him fuck himself with it – ride it at a pace and depth he felt comfortable with, while stroking sensually at his skin everywhere he… she! could reach… Draco let out a frustrated sob when he realised that he wasn't able to pretend it was anyone other than a man doing this to him. And even his own sob betrayed him and turned halfway into a sigh of pleasure! Oh Merlin! How was he expected to survive this— this gay sex-thing? Damn Snape and his potion!

Finally Draco felt the hands that had been occupied with sending maddening sensations all over his body curl around his erection and massage – yes, massage! – it firmly and deftly, slipping over the head and tugging the excess skin tantalizingly along his length until he couldn't hold back anymore and came with a shuddering sob. His thighs clamped around the other man's torso and his sphincter squeezed so hard that Scott was barely able to drive home those last desperate jabs, which ultimately made him spill his seed deep into Draco's body.

Draco emitted a long-suffering sigh, and slumped down onto the hot, sweaty and very masculine body in a bundle of trembling limbs. He felt the other man's spent length slip out of him and groaned when the air started to cool down the slippery moistness covering his sore behind. He wanted desperately to have a shower; he wanted to get back his strength, enough to disentangle himself from the too warm and sticky embrace he was pulled into, clear his head of the heady musky scent of the other's skin so close to his nose instead of inhaling it instinctively and deeply – and get the hell away from this bloody place of his humiliation.

But in the end he just stayed where he was and tried not to think at all in those last minutes before a light slumber overtook his conscious mind.

TBC

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Chapter 8: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

September 4, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Chellé, every remaining error is property of mine.

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Chapter Eight

Draco was jerked awake by a horrible high and insistent shriek from outside and for a minute he wondered which of Pansy's ridiculously expensive and no less useless exotic creature escaped again and was currently howling and wreaking havoc in the rose garden. But even before he cracked open his unusually blurry eyes he knew that something wasn't right. Firstly, the bed sheets covering his body and the pillowcase under his head were of such a low quality, he wouldn't even dress his house-elves in something like that. Secondly, the smell wasn't anything he had been accustomed to in his own bedroom – the aroma of blooming peach trees under his open window or the wafts of bacon and French toast

from his breakfast. Instead it smelt like old, dusty wallpaper, unwashed bodies and sex. Thirdly, he was naked. He hadn't been in the habit of going to sleep naked since that ominous Death Eater call a few years back in the middle of the night, where he had been woken up by the pain in his forearm, and as a first reaction instantly Apparated before the Dark Lord. He thought he wasn't ever going to live down that night.

Finally the ruckus stopped and Draco opened his eyes – only to be faced with the hotel room of last night, now empty save himself. Last night when he… at this point he forced his thoughts to a screeching halt and swallowed down everything else.

The only thing he needed to remember that it was done. He had done it.

But was it a success?

Draco sat up abruptly and looked down at his bared stomach – he cringed silently when he spotted the dried remains of his own body fluids on his skin, but he had more important things to think of right now than his personal hygiene.

He had observed the medi-witch performing the spell on Pansy every morning for the past three months. He remembered every wand movement and every word of it, even though he had never cast it himself. He took a deep breath and pointed his wand tip towards his belly while saying the Latin words, then observed his wand as it turned an unnaturally bright aquamarine colour.

It was done.

He sighed again, and slumped back onto the cheap bedding, holding his wand before his face for long minutes, so he could be sure it wasn't a fluke. He didn't feel any different. Finally, he cast Finite, which returned his wand to its usual wooden colour, and couldn't decide if he should be relieved or nervous.

As he turned his head sideways, he felt something rustling under his hair, and reaching there he found a piece of Muggle paper. It was a note from Scott, no doubt.

I didn’t want to wake you up, because you looked like you needed the sleep. Little advice there: don’t mix your drink with potions next time.

If you are ever interested in looking for me to in the future, you can usually find me at the same place.

Scott

Well, that wasn’t a love confession. Not that he was expecting anything like that. Nor did he plan to take him up on the offer ever again. But at least he now knew where he could find the man so he could wipe clean his memory of last night’s events. Right now he felt too tired physically - but more so emotionally - to go searching after him. He just wanted his home, his four plus some-hundred walls, his irritating wife and his stupid house-elves who couldn’t ever do anything right except shepherd’s pie - which they never made anymore, because Pansy considered it too plebeian.

Draco stood up wearily and groaned. He hated his life right now, and he felt he had every right to do so.

He considered the best way to go home, because Copenhagen was too far form Wiltshire to Apparate there directly. And in spite of him being pregnant and wearing his mother’s clothes with his mother’s hairdo, he strongly doubted that the pendant on the chain around his neck would consider him female enough to Portkey him into the Black summer residence. Fortunately there was a “cottage” near Hamburg Pansy had brought just a few years ago, which had a direct floo connection with Malfoy Manor. The pamphlet had had a return Portkey too, but Draco hadn’t counted on being this late and didn’t want to risk meeting Pansy in this getup.

He didn’t even dress, just grabbed every piece of his mother’s clothes laying around on the floor, covered himself with his hooded cape and Apparated into the cottage. Once he was there, he banished everything, save the jewellery and the cloak, and raided his wardrobe. Unsurprisingly, as with every Malfoy estate, the cottage was stocked with a full set of robes and everything they would possibly need and even things they would never need, just in case. Draco even found a set of Death Eater robes complete with mask that he quickly ignited and watched burn to ashes in the fireplace along with the pamphlet. He had nearly forgotten to undo the glamours and transfigure his hair back to its original state before stepping into the fireplace and stating his destination.

He had found the Manor to be empty upon arrival. Pansy was most likely still sleeping after her night away. Draco didn't mind, he wasn't keen on meeting with her until he had planned out in every detail how to continue his life from now on. Obviously, he couldn't tell Pansy that he was pregnant. But he didn't have any inclination towards continuing that ridiculous pretence they have been playing with each other for the last few months. By now Pansy must have caught on the fact that she would never get pregnant with Draco's child – she hadn't been a Slytherin for nothing. And if he knew her, she would be soon taking action about it. Draco groaned. It would have been better to marry Millicent or some Hufflepuff after all.

The only possibility was to make Pansy believe that she had become pregnant and was carrying the Malfoy heir. Imperius was out of question, seeing as it had become highly detectable since the Dark Lord had made the mistake of putting every second person working in the Ministry under it. They had developed an incantation for detecting it, and the detection devices had been installed to practically every public place. He would be discovered the second Pansy decided to buy a new robe for herself. A memory charm would be more ideal, if only he were better at casting charms! There were certain potions that could fortify the slight lack of confidence in his skills (so, he had only got an A on his Charms OWLs, because he had failed his practical, but that had been Potter's fault, not his), but after the fiasco with his last brewing he had acquired the opinion that a bit more precaution wouldn't hurt. What had been Snape's parting words? Next time Draco was to go to him before he attempted to brew another potion. And as much as he hated his ex-professor's contemptuous attitude, he wasn't beneath accepting an offer if he saw it to be beneficial. It was Snape's fault to begin with that he was now in this situation, it would have been only just for Snape to get him out of it.

Suddenly Draco wasn't feeling as tired as before. He decided to pay Snape a visit immediately.

Snape wasn't happy to see him 'this early in the morning'. Ever since he had quit teaching, Snape had been able to finally change his day-to-day schedule, seeing as he had always been a bit of a night owl. Normally, Draco wouldn't have ever thought of visiting (or getting up, for that matter) before ten o'clock, but he hadn't even thought of checking the time before he apparated to Snape's house. He had been too preoccupied with the reason behind his visit in the first place to stop and consider someone else's interests before he intruded on their privacy.

Snape had greeted him (if sneering was to be considered a form of greeting) wearing an old dressing gown, from under which a worn and greyed nightshirt peeked out, to Draco's great disgust. Fortunately, he had stopped to think before he had made a comment on it, since he didn't want to bring Snape's

easily aroused wrath upon him even before he got to the subject of his visit.

So this time Draco waited, trying to conceal his impatience, until Snape finally emerged from the bedroom having taken the effort to appear a bit more groomed (which had fallen flat, but Draco wasn't about to tell him that).

"What do you want, Mr. Malfoy?"

The question and the irritable tone were certainly expected, yet they left Draco searching after the most appropriate words. Finally he just groaned and decided that the best way to deal with a grumpy Snape whose help he needed was just to come right out and say it.

"I'm pregnant," Draco said, looking into the other man's black eyes. His tone was deathly serious; he didn't understand why Snape's first reaction would be to laugh his arse off. Worse yet, he was laughing in his face. And Draco was not supposed to be offended?

"What's so funny about that?"

Draco managed to keep the resentment in his voice to a minimum, and Snape had apparently caught up to the fact that he wasn't bloody joking, because he stopped laughing at once, and gave him a very sinister look.

"Mr. Malfoy, you…" he started, but then he got a rare insecurity in his voice and stopped altogether.

"Yes, I bloody well have done what you told me to do!"

He wanted to continue, but Snape turned his back on him and hurried off into the next room, where, Draco knew, he kept his Potions supplies and prepared potions. Not much later he came back with a bottle in hand and offered it to him.

“Drink this.”

But Draco wasn’t about to just obey him; he just scowled and crossed his hands in a defensive position before his chest.

Snape sighed, and the stern expression on his face softened to a mild tiredness. “Mr. Malfoy, you have to drink this, please. I refuse to simply take your word that you got yourself pregnant, and this potion will reveal the truth.”

“What?” Draco shook his head with vehemence. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Snape, he was just still angry with him for laughing earlier. And why wouldn’t he believe him, anyhow? Besides, he just remembered the medi-witch saying that using random magic could harm the infant. “No way! I won’t let you damage my inheritance!”

Snape winced at something, but didn’t retract his hand offering the potion.

“Mr. Malfoy, this won’t do any damage if – IF you are really pregnant. That’s just it. I have to know, but I’m not a medi-witch. I don’t know the appropriate spells. I can’t ascertain whether you are pregnant or not unless you drink this; or would you fancy me casting Avada Kedavra and then count how many I have succeeded in killing…”

Draco huffed and finally accepted the vial. “All right!” He knew there was no use arguing with Snape once the Potions master had set his mind on something. So he gulped down the concoction, which tasted something vile, but what should he have expected from Snape after having somehow offended him.

“Now what?” Draco asked, trying to banish the foul taste with an excess amount of saliva, though he would have preferred Firewhiskey, but he wasn’t about to ask Snape for anything not absolutely necessary.

“Now you go to the bathroom and urinate into the vial,” Snape told him with an evil smirk. Draco’s eyes flared, but he wasn’t about to disobey now.

“Oh, bloody hell!” he exclaimed just to express his utter dissatisfaction, and strutted away to the loo.

After returning (and not having dried his hands – let Snape guess what exactly the moisture on the exterior of the vial was) he handed the result to the other man and sat down to his usual place.

Snape, seemingly unaffected, put it down onto the middle of the table and sat down himself opposite to Draco. It lasted longer than the spell with the wand, but the colour the liquid turned to was suspiciously the same hue as that of his wand while using the detection charm. Snape had looked relatively calm and even a bit snide until the change occurred, but after that he had leaped off his chair with a not-so-well concealed shock on his face: both of his eyebrows disappeared under his shaggy hairline, instead of just one.

“For the love of Slytherin! How is this possible?”

Draco snorted. “Remember, fertility potion? You were the one who said I couldn’t get an heir any other way than to let myself be… impregnated. Don’t pretend now you have no clue, it doesn’t become you.”

Snape looked at him, disbelief still on his face, then back to the potion, then back to him again.

“Well, yes, I said that. But I didn’t expect it would actually happen; that’s all,” he said sniffling for the sake of his competence.

“You thought I wouldn’t have the balls to do it, did you?” Draco sneered, then winced at the use of the unfortunate metaphor.

“No.” Snape fixed him with an unreadable gaze. “I expected you to be thoughtless enough to go out and

bend over to someone. I just didn't expect it would actually produce a positive result."

Draco scowled again. For a second he was about to correct Snape about the 'bending over' issue, but he let it slip in order to concentrate at the more important matter at hand.

"What? Why?"

Snape sighed and after banishing the offending vial from the middle of the table, he sat again with a heavy thud. There was a few minutes silence before he started to speak again, which left Draco with an ever-growing sense of uneasiness. He knew he wouldn't like what he would hear next.

"Remember, Draco," the blonde hadn't missed the change in how Snape addressed him with his given name instead of 'Mr. Malfoy', "How I told you that this potion was developed for dark lords."

"Yes. So?" Well, that didn't do anything against the increasing feeling of uneasiness.

"There was a reason why only dark lords attempted to use it: it requires an immense amount of magical power to actually produce a child this way - power that usually only wizards of the level of dark lords have to their disposal. To my own knowledge the only two people who had this kind of power were the Dark Lord and Albus Dumbledore."

Draco felt his heart skipping a beat, but he knew for a fact that neither of those could have been the mysterious father of his child. This new revelation gave him a few things to think about, for example…

"Didn't you offer to be the… donor last time?" he asked on a deliberately confused tone.

Snape's countenance became pinched, and he crossed his arms before his chest. "I did. So?"

“You mean you have power equal to a Dark Lord?”

Snape now put on a defensive scowl. “I’m the next best thing. And obviously, you didn’t need quite that much power to have positive results,” he sniffed and turned away his head. Draco shrugged. He wasn’t about to tell Snape anything of that night; it was enough for him to have to remember it. He didn’t know who actually Scott was, or how much power he possessed, but if Draco’s senses have been accurate, then quite a lot.

“So just who did you spread your legs for?” the question caught Draco unawares, which it shouldn’t have.

“Wouldn’t you just like to know?” he asked, shielding his mind against the inevitable probing of Snape’s icy mental fingers. But fortunately the Potions master wasn’t in the habit of trying to get into Draco’s mind by force; he just couldn’t help to sneak a few glimpses if someone let their defences down enough, and the opportunity presented itself.

“Anyhow, I didn’t come here for this. I need a potion for Pansy. I need to make her believe that she is pregnant.”

Snape just threw him an incredulous-inquisitive glance, and held on until Draco snapped and shot up from his chair. After some coercion, explanation and – Draco was disgusted with himself – profuse apologising Snape agreed reluctantly, and gave him exactly the potion Draco was hoping for.

“And just how do you plan to deceive the medi-witch concerning this fake pregnancy?” he asked finally, when he seemed to have ran out of every other argument.

“I don’t need to deceive her, I pay her,” Draco smirked now that he had the upper hand again.

“Draco, what you really need is a medi-witch to supervise your… condition. Male pregnancies are extremely rare, and incalculable. Not to mention, you will definitely need help by the delivery.”

“I have you,” Draco shrugged. He didn’t see why this was such a big issue. The pregnancy was achieved by magic, and magic usually took care of things much better than nature ever did.

“Ooooh nooooo! You won’t drag me into this any deeper than you already have. I am willing to brew your potions and keep my mouth shut about this, but nothing more. And that’s my final word, Mr. Malfoy.”

Back to the family name again, Draco noticed; that didn’t promise anything in his favour. He cringed at the thought of involving even one more person in what he considered to be his dirty little family secret. But he saw that Snape wasn’t about to budge, and he had to get back to the matter of Pansy. The sooner she was out of the way for his plans, the better.

This time again he left Snape’s place with a potion buried in his pocket. He considered using it at dinner that night, but then he decided that he needed a bit more planning. First he needed to bribe the medi-witch, Madame Prunes, so she would back up the fake pregnancy-tale. From his earlier dealings with her he knew that it would be an easy task, seeing as Pansy was already blackmailing the old hag to keep her mouth shut about her frequent visits and their outcome. After that treatment Madame Prunes surely wouldn’t object to a few extra Galleons, not to mention the revenge she could have on Lady Malfoy.

Draco had arrived home with a smile on his face that he quickly hid when he heard Pansy’s voice calling him. It looked like she had been waiting for him, ordering the house-elves to inform her of his arrival. Draco scowled; usually she was happy to keep to herself, it must have been something important.

He directed his steps towards the sitting room reserved for low-class visitors, from where he had heard her voice. That in itself was strange. Just who was with her this time of the day? He turned the corner and stepped into the room only to see Pansy sitting on the couch and drinking tea amicably with… Madame Prunes? His wife had lifted her head as soon she heard him entering and her face lit up in a terrific smile – Draco gulped; he hadn’t seen Pansy smile like that since the day she had been led into the Malfoy vault in Gringotts. But he didn’t have the time to ask her about the cause of cheerfulness, because she had foregone him.

“Draco, darling! I have wonderful news!”

Draco blinked. Something was definitely wrong here. He forced a smile onto his face and asked, “Yes?”

“I am pregnant!”

TBC

A/N: I'm sorry for not having apologized beforehand for Draco’s discriminative views against homosexuality. I kinda thought it would be obvious that they aren’t mine. But if you want to extract an apology out of Draco, you will have to wait until you can take skating lesions in hell. :) I also apologise to any Muggleborns, half-giants, half-Veelas and werewolves who happen to read this fic.

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Chapter 9: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

September 22, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money of it. I’m not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I’m not a native English speaker, but I try. And this

is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen

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Chapter Nine

Pansy was WHAT?

She was smiling. Draco hated that smile. It was the one reserved for charming unsuspecting subjects, or for things well done. And now it was directed at him. He could barely prevent himself from stuttering and blinking like a bloody clueless toad in a Potions laboratory before its intestines would be used for ingredients.

"That's… wonderful," he managed at last, and the smile plastered on his face felt like it was ripping apart his facial muscles. Pansy and Madame Prunes seemed to have written it off it as the genuine delight of a husband who had just heard the best news of his life. Draco sank down into an armchair with a painfully straight back.

How was this possible? Had Snape lied to him about the potion? Draco hadn't lost the ability to sire children the normal way?

"But yesterday morning…"

"Lady Malfoy is about one week along. The spell is only able to detect natural pregnancies after a few days have passed," Madame Prunes told to him on a very patient voice. The wrinkles on her face had clustered into a loving-grandmother-mask, which seemed to hang off her countenance just so the

vulture-like glowing of the eyes could be glimpsed beneath it. “Do you want me to show you?”

Draco numbly nodded, and then observed the medi-witch demonstrate the same trick with the wand on Pansy he had performed on himself that morning. The outcome was the same as well: a brightly glowing blue colour. Draco felt the world constrict around him. He took a couple of deep breaths, and made sure that the smile remained firmly fixed on its place. He shouldn’t have worried; Pansy and Madame Prunes took his reaction for a mix of joy and relief that after such a long time they had finally succeeded, and Draco sure as hell didn’t want to disabuse them of that notion, so he continued to play along. But even though he knew his acting abilities were honed to be impeccable with years of practice, he was still surprised by how normal his voice sounded when he next spoke.

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“It is too early to tell that yet,” Madame Prunes answered on that sugary voice in just the past few seconds Draco had already learnt to detest. He nodded in a well-mannered fashion, and stood up, because he felt he couldn’t possibly bear to remain there any longer.

“In that case I have a few things to take care of – the sooner everything is done, the better. Madame Prunes,” he turned towards the old witch. “I am going to prepare your rooms. You are to move into the Manor for the time being.”

“Yes, of course.” His order didn’t take the medi-witch by surprise, as it was agreed on beforehand. It seemed only natural that the Lord Malfoy would want her to be always available to his pregnant wife. On the other hand, it wasn’t a big secret that the other reason he insisted on moving her into the Manor was that he didn’t want to give her the opportunity to disclose anything about the pregnancy. It was understood and expected of a prominent family like the Malfoys, even though the public didn’t know anything about the Malfoy code on inheritance.

Draco left the two women to themselves in the sitting room and directed his steps toward his office. He forced himself to empty his mind until he could sit down in the company of a glass of his favourite cognac and go over the things he had to do methodically, to try and put everything into its place before he went batty.

He sat down with a heartfelt huff and yelled for the only house-elf whose name he knew. When it appeared with a plop, Draco asked it to bring him lunch, as he figured that the twisting in his stomach was at least partly caused by not having had breakfast. After eating, he asked for the bottle and a glass, but it seemed that in the life of Draco Malfoy this was the day of unpleasant surprises.

“Master shouldn’t drink,” he heard the simpering voice of the house-elf from somewhere in the height of his ankle, as it bowed its head until its nose hit the lush oriental carpet of the room.

“What?” Draco’s voice was that of utter disbelief. Never before had he heard of a house-elf disobeying its master – at least if that master was a Malfoy.

“Alcohol not good for the baby.” The tone of voice went up one octave while getting even shakier, and continued in a flood of words that was meant to pacify the Master before he decided to punish the creature for its presumptuousness. “Bimbo can make herbal tea to make Master calm! Or warm milk. Bimbo can make hot chocolate that was Master’s favourite when he was little or a cup of…”

“Enough!” Draco felt really exhausted now. He was just too tired to argue with a house-elf. That was how he ended up with a mug of warm, chocolaty beverage – something he hadn’t drunk since he had been about twelve years old, and hadn’t known how much he missed until then – and a grovelling creature before his feet.

“How do you know about… it,” Draco asked gesturing vaguely towards his stomach, which didn’t feel at all as if there was something unusual occupying part of it.

“House-elves can feel it. It is necessary to protect and serve Masters,” was the answer he got. He couldn’t refrain from questioning the creature further.

“Can you tell me if my wife is pregnant or not?”

“Yes, Bimbo can tell. Mistress is with child.”

“And can you tell me for how long she has been with child?”

The house-elf looked at him with impossibly large eyes. “Bimbo didn’t serve Mistress for a month before this morning. Before that Mistress wasn’t with child. Now she is.”

Draco groaned. Of course he could just ask the other house-elves, find out which one served his wife regularly, but he wasn’t sure that the elf wouldn’t tell his wife about his questioning. After all, house-elves were most loyal to the person they were directly serving, and Draco didn’t doubt that Pansy had laid claim on three or four of the Malfoy house elves. Normally, she would only need one or two, but she had always been greedier than it was good for her.

Draco dismissed the creature and tried to think while slowly sipping the cooling chocolate. The taste brought back old memories he didn’t need to distract his concentration right now, but his mind felt too weary to direct it towards more productive thoughts, so he just leaned back into the comfy armchair and decided to relax for a while.

Later that day he took care of standard issues, such as sending an owl to the family solicitor who was generally responsible for all the legal business within the Malfoy family, including anything considering inheritance. The solicitor, Agnus Malfoy, was from an impoverished branch of the family, so he posed no danger in the fight for the Malfoy inheritance. In fact he had succeeded keeping his position over the years by remaining firmly neutral in these inside battles. Besides, he was too old to be considered competition and he had only daughters (all married profitably). It would have been too dangerous to let anyone else know about the heir being underway, but it would have been just as stupid not to let know at least one person in case something unforeseeable happened.

Draco also made arrangements for Madame Prunes’ belongings to be transferred into the Manor. She was already packed, so the elves had an easy job with moving her things. The following days were spent with organising other matters, such as putting up special wards through the Manor and hiring guards to keep an eye out for anything that could be a threat for Pansy. Draco made sure the Manor’s medical supplies had been replenished with potions and other necessities according to Madame Prunes’ instructions.

All the while he had succeeded in postponing the need to think about the situation, which was a bit

more complicated than simply the expectation of a new heir in the Malfoy family. He also succeeded in ignoring his own condition, except for casting the pregnancy test on himself every morning. In the back of his mind he harboured the vain hope that one day it would give a negative result - that it would simply go away, cease to exist. But most of the time he just avoided thinking about what the result of the spell meant. It wasn't that hard, since there wasn't anything unusual that would remind him of his altered state, except that piece of magic. But to think that he had another life growing in him seemed so surreal, as if it was only in his imagination and not the reality.

Draco was used to magic that was palpable. When he cast a levitation charm, something lifted into the air. He Apparated, and in the next moment he found himself somewhere else. He uttered the spell for magical fire, and something burst into flames. He cast his self-developed grooming charms and his hair looked perfect once again. But the change of colour on his wand didn't seem to mean anything else except that.

It was just a colour - a colour that frequently featured his most recent nightmares. In those nightmares it always forewarned of something horrible, an impending doom, of a torrent of events he wouldn't be able to stop. When he was awake, though, he was able to convince himself that it was just something ordinary. After a few days and a bit of practice it didn't evoke anymore the same heart-clenching uneasiness as it did in his dreams. It was nothing more than a colour that his senses started to tune out automatically.

Even so, in the milliseconds before he habitually turned away his glance, he noticed that it was a colour that seemed to be everywhere in the manor – hidden within the complicated patterns of two thousand year old Chinese urns, on the coat buttons of a long deceased Malfoy ancestor's portrait, on the petals of a flowerbed in the gardens he saw from Pansy's room every morning he visited her there, on the old pillowcases some of the house-elves wore... He started to develop a very strong revulsion against that particular hue, even going so far to order the house-elves to get rid of or change everything with that colour in his study. After that had been done, Draco started to use the room as a refuge, as the lack of that particular colour seemed to have a calming effect on his nerves. He also stopped to cast the revealing charm in the mornings. It wasn't of importance.

Instead of worrying about himself, he tried to look at the situation from an outsider's point of view. He concentrated on solving the problem as if it had nothing to do with his person apart from the fact that it was about his inheritance. It wasn't that big of a stretch. He was a wizard, and thus it was his firm belief that magic had a solution for everything. Besides, he had Pansy to worry about, and, as he came to call it, his real heir.

He still couldn't believe that Snape had lied to him.

Either that, or he had to consider the even less convincing alternative that Snape's vast knowledge about Potions and his books had failed Draco Malfoy.

At any case, it left him in a rather uncomfortable predicament, one in which he had to get out of on his own. He wouldn't place his trust other people anymore. That wasn't what his father had taught him, at any rate. He had become lax about his affairs and now he was paying the price. He had sworn to himself that it wouldn't happen again. It was his own life; he was the only one truly concerned enough to find a way out of this trap. And while he was thinking, or rather trying not to think about it, time flew by. One week and then another passed and he wasn't getting any closer to finding a remedy for the situation.

The easiest way would have been to find another potion and get rid of the bastard growing in his body. But he was a Malfoy, and as such, he had been raised to always have a backup plan for every possible situation affecting his life. He realised that now that Pansy was pregnant – and he knew that despite any effort to keep the news secret, it would take no more than a few weeks for it to find a leak out somehow – once the assaults against his heir started, his wife would be the one targeted. Draco would try to protect her with everything he could think of, but in case one of the attempts succeeded and Pansy lost her child, he would still have the heir he needed, and Pansy could be persuaded one way or another to accept it as her own. In the case both children should live, they could be designated fraternal twins – it wouldn't be suspicious with all the trying and potion-treatment they submitted themselves to before the actual conception.

Draco was still wary of letting himself be examined. Instead of that he started a widespread research in the Malfoy library according male pregnancies. He found the majority of the references in historical books, mostly only in passing, but he was able to figure out that a male pregnancy would basically call forth the same bodily needs as a female one. And seeing as Pansy was in the same condition, it wasn't that hard to convince the house-elves to keep all the occupants of the Manor on the same diet without anyone getting suspicious. Draco had spent more and more time with his wife, particularly when she had her daily examinations by Madame Prunes. He learnt the charms and procedures by the sheer amount of repeat performances, and started to apply them on himself – though not without apprehension at first.

Two weeks after he had sent the owl to Agnus Malfoy, Draco got a response which detailed the legal arrangements already made to introduce the new member into the family once it was born. He also

included a spell that was required to be cast on the infant to determine the fatherhood of the child. It was a special spell keyed to the Malfoy blood, which told with hundred percent certainty – opposed to other paternity tests – if the child was a Malfoy or not. It could be done after the first month of the pregnancy, which was another advantage against common medical tests that could only be applied after birth.

It was only a formality. Pansy didn't bat an eye when Draco approached her another two weeks later, in the morning following her usual examinations and asked her to stay there for a few minutes more until he could perform the test. The results were recorded on a blank parchment, which appeared out of thin air and it contained the script already – without the usage of quill and ink that could have been charmed to falsify the results. The protection against forgery had played a large role in designing the spell ages ago. Afterwards Draco made a copy of the parchment and passed it to Pansy, thinking she would want to keep it for sentimental value, and went about sending the original to Agnus.

Draco was about to put the seal on the parchment, but something on it caught his attention. The spell was a very detailed one; it gave exact account of the time of the conception besides confirming that at least one of the parents was a Malfoy. It was an interesting detail that Pansy was also part Malfoy, one thirty-second to be exact, but that wasn't what Draco found so interesting. It was the date written on it, which appeared to be 2 September – the same day Draco visited the gay club in Copenhagen. He didn't remember even seeing Pansy that day or the night before that. Draco only met her after he got back from his visit with Snape, and then she had already been declared pregnant. He wondered how accurate this spell was, and he was tempted to try it on himself, but he didn't dare do it – who knew where all those records appeared? Draco didn't want to risk discovery by a stupid experiment he could have done without.

After a few minutes of frowning hesitation Draco swiftly repeated the copying charm and sent the original parchment to the lawyer. Agnus would be able to detect the magic used on it, but Draco wasn't concerned about it, since he hadn't tampered with the document and the revealing charm the old man was surely to perform on it would verify that.

One week later Madame Prunes established that Pansy's child was a boy, which had Draco sighing in relief, since so he wouldn't also be encumbered with the preparations of the gender-changing ritual to boot with everything he had on his schedule already. Unfortunately, it also meant that he wouldn't have a valid reason to ask Pansy to submit herself to the very tiring and time consuming process of determining the exact day, hour and second of the conception, a fact he needed to know ever since he saw the results of the bloodline revealing charm. The steps of the gender-changing ritual would have had to be performed each day at a predetermined time between the seventh and eight week of the

pregnancy, which would have required Draco to know this detail, but now he could only rely on his observation regarding his wife's reaction upon learning that she wouldn't have to reveal it.

He had expected relief, perhaps a hint, which would have betrayed her guilty conscience – if she even possessed something like that. But he only perceived a momentary smug glint in her gaze, which she didn't even try to conceal, looking straight into Draco's eyes instead. That didn't help to get rid of the uneasiness regarding Pansy's pregnancy, which started in some undisclosed nook of his mind the moment she had told him about it, and became increasingly harder to ignore when he saw the conception date on that magical parchment. Until that moment he had been able to suppress the feeling that didn't fit into his daily routine of ensuring the securing his inheritance, but now it became too obvious that something wasn't right about Pansy's recent behaviour. Draco didn't like how she acted as if she had something up her sleeve; it insinuated that Draco couldn't do anything against her, even if she was guilty of something against him. Of course, being pregnant with the only Malfoy heir, who would be Draco's only hope to keep his estates would have certainly upped her stakes and put more than enough aces into her hand.

The only reason Draco was able to shove away the feeling of being threatened was that she wasn't aware of the whole truth. So in that sense he also had a card up his sleeve, even if he wasn't planning on revealing it to her if he could help it - or couldn't make her forget afterwards. He knew Pansy enough to calculate that her next step would be playing her trump and demanding whatever she wanted from Draco. He only had to wait and play dumb, as if he hadn't noticed anything. Pansy may have been a Slytherin and cunning enough, but her skills for reading people was lacking at the best of times.

Draco didn't have to wait for long. In fact it was on the same night a house-elf had appeared with his meal – Draco recognised it as one of his wife's, if only from the frilly golden fringe hanging down of it's rich, pink velvet pillowcase, which screamed Pansy. After serving him his dinner, it started to stammer out something about finding a strange parchment he had found accidentally in the Mistress' bed chambers, and felt necessary to show it his Master. Draco accepted the parchment with a nod, instantly recognising Pansy's handwriting. There was only one word written on it, a spell unknown to Draco, but he was experienced enough in her ways to know it was the clue he had been waiting for. Pansy was ready to make her demand.

The hour following a forcedly calm dinner was spent in the library researching the clue. It was ridiculously easy with the help of Granger's keyword finding charm; Pansy had obviously thought that he would spend the whole night deciphering it. The sense of superiority he started to feel upon easily solving her riddle all but disappeared when he finally found out what this spell was supposed to do. It was also a detection charm – a simple one even a first year Hufflepuff would have been able to cast. It

was used to determine whether a man was able to sire children or not.

Draco froze on the spot. He had no doubts that Pansy had already cast the spell on him, most likely while he had been sleeping, so he wouldn't know. And according to the message she hoped to convey via the parchment, it showed her the same result he had tried to correct by brewing and consuming the fertility potion. Draco briefly wondered if she had cast the charm on him before or after he had done that, but he shook himself out of that thought before he wasted any more time exploring a dead-end. Out of mere curiosity he pointed his wand at himself and performed the magic. He wasn't able anymore to be surprised or shocked, for that matter, by the outcome. He only felt weary and wondered why he had let himself be led astray by a false sense of security, but it wasn't that much of a riddle, really. He had wanted it to be true, so he tried to make it true. It was ironic that now he would have to thank Pansy for opening his eyes, as a result of her having tried to trick him into something. And he would thank her – in his own way, which she wasn't likely to appreciate. Thanks to her, now everything made perfect sense.

Now he realised that he had done a disservice to Snape. He hadn't lied nor had he been mistaken.

And the child with whom Pansy hoped to secure the Malfoy inheritance with couldn't be Draco's.

TBC

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Chapter 10: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

October 9, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen. Actually, I made quite a lot last minute changes, so there may be more mistakes in this chapter than usually.

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Chapter Ten

When Draco came back to his bedroom, he found a note from Pansy, asking him not to come to her room the next morning, but to have tea with her in the afternoon. Draco understood her thinking. She had been married to him long enough to know that he wouldn't be able to contain his temperament upon seeing her; and this matter didn't concern Madame Prunes, who would be there and would undoubtedly overhear everything being said. Draco quickly composed an answer and sent it her via a house-elf, then slipped between his sheets and spelled off the lights. He didn't even try to fall asleep naturally instead he reached into the top drawer of his nightstand and took out a mild sleeping potion. He realised only in the morning that he should have taken a Dreamless Sleep Potion instead.

The nightmare that woke him in the middle of the night was the worst he had ever experienced since the beginning of his… condition. As is common with dreams, he didn't remember how it had started. He only remembered having spoken to Pansy in it. She had held a little boy in her arms that had looked exactly like Draco on all his baby photos, complete with the blond hair, big grey eyes, pudgy baby fat and mischievous smile.

"It looks just like a proper Malfoy heir, doesn't it?" Pansy had lifted up the little boy for closer inspection, whose smile hadn't slipped, even after she had handled him as if he were an object. Then she goaded him, saying, "But this heir isn't yours, Draco. That's yours."

She had tilted her head towards the middle of the room (Draco had noticed only then that they were in the sitting room where Pansy had told him she was pregnant). The thing that had been sitting there on the middle of the carpet, wearing no more than a soggy diaper, had surpassed every other nightmare he ever had, because Draco had known that it had been the result of the potion and that night in Copenhagen. When he had looked at it, the face snarling back at him had been his father's, with odd dark hair, and skin as blue as the colour Draco hated the most these days.

The little monster had stared at him with a vicious grin, and Draco could see a row of tiny, pointed teeth in its mouth. Draco had stared at it with a bewildered look, and he had only wrenched away his gaze when Pansy began to speak.

"Draco, you think you can win with that? It's not a real heir. And look at what it did to you!"

Draco had followed her hand gesture towards his abdomen with his eyes, where he had noticed a bloodied tearing in his otherwise immaculate aquamarine coloured robes. The bright blue clashed horribly with the vivid crimson of the blood. It was then that Draco noticed that the blood had come out of a wound under the robe. He had parted the hideous coloured garment to see what was under it. The wound proved to be a baby-sized gap on his abdomen.

He woke up with a start and jack-knifed out of the bed, tearing away the crumpled, sweaty sheets tangled around his body. After storming into the bathroom and starting the shower he slipped out of his pyjamas in a near automatic move and stood under the steadily gushing spray of hot water. Draco didn't know how long he was just standing there, unmoving, face turned upwards, letting the water beat against his closed eyelids, forehead and cheeks, then cascade down his nearly insensate body. He tried to ease his mind from the dream by conducting his nearly regular morning wanking session, but, as lately after this kind of dream, he couldn't get hard, even after furiously massaging and pulling on his limp cock for over ten minutes.

Finally, he turned off the tap and stepped out of the stall frustrated and consequently in a furious state. He didn't care if he left a mess, though normally he didn't like messes, even though the house-elves would have taken care of cleaning them up. He dressed quickly not even looking at what he pulled out of his wardrobe. Thanks to being Draco Malfoy, he inherently wasn't able dress badly, but he still wasn't his usual impeccable self when the door of his room banged shut behind him. The ancient gold-framed mirror next to his door frowned at him when he hurried past it, but it wasn't commenting on his

appearance, which told Draco that he must look worse than he had imagined.

He didn't watch where he went, he just had to let some steam out, and that's how he ended up in Pansy's room. His feet carried him there, just like every other morning, and it was already too late to remember the note his wife had sent him. Madame Prunes gave him a disapproving look upon storming in, but Pansy just assumed one of her honeyed, condescending smiles, similar to the one in his dream. She was having breakfast in bed, seemingly not even noticing as Madame Prunes waved her wand over her body, muttering under her breath. Draco doubted that half of those examinations were really necessary more frequently than once in a month, but he understood the old witch's concern about not leaving the opportunity open for anyone to say that she had performed her work in a less than satisfactory manner while tending to the Lady Malfoy's pregnancy.

Draco's momentum was temporarily halted by the familiar scene, it seemed as if nothing had been changed by the note Pansy had sent him the night before. His wife certainly wasn't acting any differently. She was looking at him while fixing a rather large portion of greasy bacon and stringy, half cooked egg yolk onto her fork, which she promptly shoved into her mouth. Apparently, she had no problem with her appetite. Draco cringed at the sight, and made the mistake of inhaling a large gulp of the air smelling strongly of fat and smoked food before launching into his tirade that should have made him feel better. Except, it didn't. Unfortunately – or fortunately, if he considered that he really shouldn't have been saying anything about last night's discovery with Madam Prunes present – he didn't even get that far.

The lungful of aroma laden air had turned his stomach so quickly that he didn't even have time to leave with his dignity intact. He had to flee the room with his palm clapped over his mouth to keep in what impolitely and rather insistently wanted to come out right that second. He made it to his own bathroom. In his hurry to get to his destination he couldn't care less about doors left open behind him nor small objects having been knocked down here and there.

Once there, he threw himself down onto his knees, ripped up the toilet seat and leaned over it in a hurry. He emptied his stomach into it, gripping the sides of the immaculate white porcelain with eyes tearing up. He was violently sick for what seemed to be forever. He didn't understand what was happening to him. After his stomach had settled down finally, he slumped down tiredly onto the tiles and flushed the toilet before the smell made him sick once more. Pressing his throbbing temple to the lukewarm tiles he cursed floor heating for depriving him from his pain relief, but he didn't have enough strength just in that moment to sit up and press his aching forehead the sink, which should have been colder. Looking up in the middle of a beautifully executed agonising groan he always considered to be one of his special talents, he saw Bimbo, the house-elf, the one that had made hot chocolate for him,

standing in the door with a potion vial in its hand.

Draco fought down his returning urge to gag at the thought of hot chocolate, and reached out for the bottle, recognising it as one of the anti-sickness potions he had brought for Pansy. The house-elf handed it to him without a word, and Draco gulped it down greedily, not caring for the bitter taste of bile that went with it, since he hadn't rinsed his mouth yet. He felt instantly better after that, and was so relieved that he forgot himself and thanked the creature, scaring it so deeply that it disappeared with a loud squeak and a headache inducing pop in a matter of milliseconds.

When it returned, Draco was already done washing his face and cleaning his teeth, the empty potion bottle banished, so no one would find it. Though he doubted that after the scene he made in front of his wife and the midwife, they couldn't guess the cause of his sudden departure.

Draco was looking into the mirror, eying his own deadly pale face, random drops of water still dribbling down of his chin, while trying to figure out what was the cause of the sudden sickness. He frowned when he realised that he couldn't go to a medi-wizard with it, since there was a chance that he would be either mistreated based upon an incomplete and therefore incorrect diagnose or his pregnancy would be revealed. The only person he could go to was Snape.

Draco hoped that during the one month that has passed since their last meeting, Snape had reconsidered his declination to help Draco with his condition. He was also secretly glad that he hadn't gone back to him after Pansy had informed him about her pregnancy to accuse Snape of lying or worse: having been ignorant. Of course, if he had, Snape would have told him straight away that the child couldn't possibly be his - before he went to readjust the wards around his house to kick out Draco if he tried to Apparate into the area.

Draco sighed and shook his head to stop useless contemplation. That was all in the past, and right now he had more important concerns. One: to find out who was the father of Pansy's child, and two: to find out what had been the cause to this sudden illness and get a cure for it as soon as possible. After a bit of contemplation, Draco decided that the later must have been the dinner he had last night or the state he had found himself in the morning and gave no cause for concern. He didn't feel worse in any other aspect that would indicate an illness or poisoning, (he cast the poison revealing charm he had been taught by his father first opportunity when he could wield a wand, just to make it sure) in fact he felt much better than before he had got sick. Additionally, his uncontrollable anger with Pansy had subsided to a controllable level and he didn't feel the urge to go into her room and yell down the roof. He hoped that it would last and he would be able to prepare himself and his plan for the afternoon when he

confronted his wife.

Pansy had chosen a neutral place to their meeting, the green saloon, where they usually received Ministry guests. In any other situation Draco would have insisted on choosing the stage himself, but in this case the only paraphernalia he needed was the vial of Veritaserum his late father had succeeded to keep hidden through all those years and countless Ministry inspections. Draco had never made use of the potion in the past, but the knowledge that he had it at his disposal had given him a sense of obscure security in his dealings.

Draco had always thought that when he used it, it would be to gain influence or prestige or something valuable, not to deal with family issues or an unfaithful wife. And as such, he wasn't able to summon any portion of the victorious feeling he had always associated with the first time of having the opportunity of using such a potent tool. Right now that issue didn't seem important opposed to the desire to learn who the father of Pansy's child was.

He summoned Bimbo and gave the creature a fair amount of the potion. It would look suspicious if Draco insisted on flavouring the tea for Pansy, even more so that he had no clue how she liked it, given the fact that he was about to conduct an interrogation with her being the subject. And frankly, why bother when he had perfectly good means to deliver the Veritaserum into her tea – via willing helpers who obeyed his every whim without questions? Draco wasn't even concerned by them telling Pansy about it, since he planned to make her forget the whole ordeal. It wasn't how he had planned to use the potion Snape gave him, but now he was doubly glad that he had got it.

Draco sauntered into the green salon five minutes before the appointed time. He didn't have to worry that Pansy would get there before him since she was notoriously tardy. The only reason she didn't come late to her own parties was that they were held in the Manor, but even so she managed to preen before her vanity until the first guests arrived, and then it was up to Draco to play the unwilling host to substitute her, since he didn't want strangers to go exploring around the Manor.

Now was no different. Though Draco had ordered the house-elves to only bring the tea after she had arrived to avoid mistrust, she managed to be so late that the annoying creatures had popped into the room three times already, asking if they were allowed to serve yet. The fourth time happened just after she had seated herself in a chair facing Draco, and he gave his consent, sighing with barely masked irritation. He suspected it was her tactic to rile his nerves, giving her the advantage of negotiating with a cool head while he flew off the handle by just the smallest jab at his pride. And jab she would. He had been familiar with her methods of getting what she wanted. Except now Draco came prepared, and

while he showed her frustration and impatience, he wasn't quite as far gone yet as he pretended to be - though he hadn't preserved his calm as much as he would have liked to either.

Draco observed in silence as the elves prepared the two cups. He wasn't able to distinguish the cube sugar impregnated with Veritaserum from the plain ones, but he wasn't bothered by that fact, since that meant Pansy wouldn't be either. He averted his gaze to take in the form of his wife while they waited in silence for the house-elves to vanish. Pansy had already filled out a bit, thanks to the generous breakfasts, lunches and dinners, because considering that she was in her second month it was too early to show yet. Draco was barely able to hold back a shiver when his mental eyes conjured up the image she would produce in a few months.

"Is it cold?" Pansy asked. She must have spotted the shiver. Draco was very surprised when she turned towards the fireplace and upped the flames with a spell. Usually she would instruct the house-elves to do that for her. Not to mention that he didn't remember the last time she had kept his convenience in sight. Draco observed her putting her wand into the sheath concealed between the material of her wide sleeves, and then resting her arms across her not-as-flat-as-it-should-have-been belly hiding them in her garments. It was a habit of hers Draco was familiar with. It betrayed that she wasn't as calm as she wanted to make him believe if she needed to hide her hands – most likely because of their subtle trembling.

Draco held back a sigh when the house-elves popped out of existence and Pansy reached for her cup, taking a first careful sip from the steaming hot beverage. Draco imitated her actions and was surprised by the strong, herbal flavour of the tea – it must have been one out of Pansy's recently acquired stash to help deal with one of the many inconveniences of pregnancy, like back aches, swollen ankles or stretch marks. Never mind that they wouldn't occur for a few months yet. Draco wasn't bothered by that. He discovered that he really enjoyed the rich flavour; though he usually didn't drink tea, he decided to ask the house-elves later about the type of the herbal mixture.

The Veritaserum was a fast working potion, but Draco still wanted to wait until Pansy had more than just a taste of it in her system. He didn't have to wait for long. She swallowed the hot liquid so quickly that Draco wondered how she managed it without scalding her throat. He mirrored her actions unconsciously, and before he noticed his own cup stood empty next to hers, the hotness in his stomach causing sweat to break out on his forehead. At least, he wasn't shivering anymore.

"I got the impression that you wanted to tell me something," Draco grabbed the initiative after seeing that Pansy was content with just smiling at him infuriatingly, and waiting for him to begin the

conversation.

“I think I pretty much told you already.” Her smile grew wider, but surprisingly, Draco couldn’t detect any enmity in her gaze directed at him. “I trust you have tried out that little spell I left behind for you?” It wasn’t really a question, even if her tone kept it politely as one.

Draco nodded without a word, and then took a deep breath. “So you decided to search for a solution elsewhere.” Pansy mirrored his previous gesture without any sign of guilt or embarrassment, as if it was perfectly natural to cheat on one’s husband if he proved to be unable to fulfil his husbandly obligations. She didn’t start to dole out excuses, but was satisfied to let him continue with his questioning.

“Who is the father of this child?” Draco asked finally, figuring that it would be best to clear the situation as soon as possible.

“Cyrus,” she told him without much ado.

Her answer surprised him, to say the least. He remembered the paternity spell that said that the father was a hundred percent Malfoy, but he had expected her to have cast a spell on her foetus or to have succeeded, Merlin knew how, to deceive the charm. But now he realised that she hadn’t needed to do that if the father was already a Malfoy. The solution was really so simple and elegant. The spell would classify every male for a member of the family who was of age and born with the Malfoy name, from an ancestry that had been recognised as Malfoy in the past. Her plan would have been a brilliant one, wasn’t it so risky due to the person she chose to be the father of her child.

“Why Cyrus?” Draco asked. She could have picked any other Malfoy. Why choose especially the one who was also after the family inheritance, and therefore dangerous… But now Draco realised that that had been exactly why Pansy had made this choice. Whatever the outcome, she would be the mother of a Malfoy heir. Pansy must have seen the realisation dawn in his eyes, because she let him continue to unravel the mystery.

“It is because he is the next heir in line,” he said and she nodded. “If I don’t succeed in producing a child before my next birthday, he is going to be declared as the new heir.” It was a brilliant plan; Draco silently

congratulated her for having successfully backstabbed him.

Pansy's smile slipped at the sight of the murderous look he gave her. She frowned, sat up in her chair, and refilled her cup with another helping of tea. At least finally she felt the need to explain herself Draco thought angrily.

"Draco, don't you see it?" Her gaze bored into his eyes, the smile having dissolved completely now. Draco sensed that her next sentence would reveal the plan behind her of her actions.

"I have researched the spell that would have to be cast, once the baby was born, to determine its heritage. It doesn't reveal the name of the father – or the mother for that matter. The spell doesn't have to be cast for a few weeks, until it can be determined that the baby would survive and be healthy. By that time you will have failed to fulfil the criteria to continue being Lord Malfoy, so the title will have already transferred to Cyrus. Since the child is his, the spell is going to declare the baby to be the descendant of the current Malfoy Lord. But as I am your wife, no one is going to suspect that you aren't the father, and therefore no one will question your claim of being the rightful heir," Pansy told him on a slow, hypnotic voice.

There was a few moments silence while Draco digested all that. He had to acknowledge that her plan was even more ingenious than it sounded at first hearing. It was a surprising fact, but actually none of the business or legal documents he had to sign called for a magical evaluation of his status in the family ranks. His position of being the head of the Malfoy family only required confirmation in extreme cases, such as this one. It was likely that he could go through his whole life without ever being discovered.

"Did you do it on the night before you told me you are pregnant?" Draco asked her, because he still needed to clarify a few facts. He was mostly concerned about the issue of Cyrus' involvement. Pansy nodded.

"I went to his party after taking one of your fertility concoctions, slipped him a lust potion and got him into bed with me. I believe you aren't interested in further details on what that entailed..." At that Draco shook his head hesitantly. "And before you ask, I Obliviated him afterwards."

“Oh,” was all he could say to that.

“So? What do you think?” Pansy looked at his frowning face with a gleam that said she was infinitely proud at her machinations. And she had every cause to be, except…

“It’s not going to work.” Draco barely refrained from clapping his hand on his mouth like a five year old child that just realised that he had said something he shouldn’t have, but the words were out before he even knew he was going to say something. He hadn’t wanted to divulge anything about his own pregnancy, so he had to watch his mouth. He blamed his distracted state of mind for not having paid better attention. It wasn’t like him at all to let the filter between his mind and his mouth slip. But the damage was already done and Pansy sank her teeth into the truth morsel like a Thestral into fresh meat.

“What? Why?” she inquired with a barely suppressed irritation. Draco was sure, she was thinking that his answer was a product of his inflated ego Pansy accused him of having repeatedly in the past, or his need to prove that everyone else was beneath him by finding all the little inconsistencies in her actions and nagging her about it. Draco would have been content to let her believe that. Except that his mouth seemed to shoot off again without his mind’s consent.

“Because I am going to have an heir, too,” he heard himself saying.

Pansy fixed him with a scornful look. “You got yourself a bastard from another woman?” she asked disbelieving.

“No.”

“So what then? How would you get an heir otherwise?”

“I am pregnant.” What the hell? Draco gulped anxiously. What the hell had just happened? The conversation had taken place so rapidly that his thought process hadn’t even had the time to react before the words were out of his mouth. His last revelation had shocked Pansy enough to reduce her to a stunned silence, thank Merlin, so Draco had enough time to catch up with the last minute’s events.

Had he truly just confessed Pansy out of the blue that he was pregnant? He hadn't even admitted it to himself in as many words yet. What had made him say it just like that? He couldn't think of a valid reason, but then the realisation hit him like a ton of bricks whose levitation charm had prematurely given out. He couldn't control his reaction to look at Pansy with a mixture of feeling violated and being alarmed. She blinked once and then gave him one of her infuriatingly sweet smiles.

"Oh! A simple Switching spell, Darling. You don't think I came unprepared and would let you put Merlin knows what into my tea? Veritaserum, isn't it? I have to say that it worked fabulously on you. Was there anything else you wanted me to drink? An abortive perhaps?"

Draco shook his head, because the blasted potion he had successfully dosed himself with made him to. She must have switched their cups after she had adjusted the fire, he realised. The hiding of her hands in her sleeves had been to conceal her casting a spell rather than to cover up their nervous trembling as he had originally assumed.

"Good to know you don't want to get rid of my child, at least for now. May I ask how you have succeeded to get yourself pregnant?" she inquired with a combination of annoyance and amusement, the first thanks to having just learnt that her plan had misfired and the second undoubtedly to thinking funny that he had got himself into this unlikely predicament.

Draco, having been forced to truthfulness, shook his head again. No, he definitely didn't want her asking how he got pregnant, because then he would have to confess everything, and knowing her sadistic nature, she wouldn't stop before having him completely humiliated by asking for the finer details, not being satisfied with a crude explanation. He tried to stand up to employ Slytherin's main directive of living to fight another day, when he realised that his robes were glued to the chair. Pansy now had her wand out openly, pointed at him, and if it wasn't enough degradation that she succeeded surprising him with the sticking charm, she also summoned his wand to her. Draco had no other choice than to condescend to a most likely utterly embarrassing session of interrogation by his wife.

"So," she leaned back in her chair comfortably, fixing him with a pointed glare that would take in every one of his reactions in addition to his words, "When did this happen exactly?"

“On the 2 September,” he answered wearily. She surprised him with a short, shrill laugh.

“On the same day, I see. And who is the father?”

Fortunately this was a question the Veritaserum had opted several answers for, such as ‘I don’t know’ or ‘Scott’, but he decided to go with the less harmful and also the truest of them. “I am.”

Pansy scowled at him darkly, which showed that she wasn’t so at ease as she would have liked him to believe. Draco realised that she had to feel cornered, and made him reconsider his approach to the questioning. He didn’t want to make her angrier, not just because of her condition, but because he had experience how an angry Pansy could behave irrationally, and in his current defenceless position he didn’t want to risk her wrath. The smelliest cat was already out of the sack, wasn’t it? She could do no more damage to him than to humiliate him completely by making him retell the story in all of its horrific details, but that would only affect his pride and perhaps his stomach but not his life. So Draco decided to go along with her, explaining the mishap with the fertility potion that had lead straight to the events of that night.

After having finished his story, Pansy looked at him with a newfound understanding in her eyes Draco couldn’t place until she opened her mouth.

“I should have known you are a pansy,” she told him airily, bordering hysterical. “Figures. A pansy for Pansy…” She sighed upon realising that she didn’t make any sense.

“I’m not a… pansy… whatever,” Draco objected half-heartedly. Not because after hearing the tale from his own mouth he also began having doubts on his own claim on his heterosexuality, but because the extensive confession had tired him out emotionally and mentally. He hadn’t even noticed when the Veritaserum had ceased to affect him, he was just too exhausted to think of new lies and excuses he could feed to his wife.

“So, how was it?” She asked with a mean gleam in her eyes.

“How was what?” Draco lifted his head not even trying to conceal his confusion.

“To have sex with a man,” Pansy snorted. “I bet you enjoyed it more than anything we ever had.”

“It was nothing like that!” Draco tried to instil a slight offence and casualness into his tone. Pansy didn’t need to know how much that had taken out of him. “It was what I had to do in order to secure the Malfoy inheritance. Nothing more than business. In fact even less than that. The sex was just the component in a spell. Anyhow, they aren’t more than animals.” He didn’t have to explain whom he meant by ‘them’.

“Oh, yes. I forgot your pureblood… pureness. But apparently being a pureblood doesn’t make you that pure, if it hadn’t stopped you before committing bestiality, now does it?”

Draco paled when he realised that she was right. Then he turned a violent shade of pink, because despite of being right, he knew that she didn’t really believe in what she was spouting. She was a pureblood from a venerable family, but apparently her education hadn’t extended to the true meaning of being a member of a pureblood wizarding family. Her views considering certain aspects of life were disgustingly liberal. Had Lucius Malfoy known about this in advance, Draco was sure he either wouldn’t have made his son marry her, or he wouldn’t have stopped before he had moulded her mind, too, into the form and shape of a true Malfoy wife, not just her exterior. But his father having failed that, Draco should have done it in his stead, had he not been preoccupied with enjoying his newfound freedom. Well, perhaps after the whole predicament with his inheritance had ended.

His contemplation was interrupted by his wife’s voice.

“So what was your plan?”

“Plan?” he had to remember first about what was the conversation between them.

“Yes, plan. You are Draco Malfoy. You always have some kind of… plan,” obviously she had to restrain herself from putting some impolite adjective into that sentence. “Before you got yourself pregnant, or

just before you came here today, what was it?”

And so Draco had no other choice than to launch into another explanation about how he had planned to explain the child. Pansy wasn’t really enthusiastic about the part where she got Obliviated into thinking that the baby currently residing in Draco was hers, too, but apart from that she acknowledged the plan to be a well founded one and agreed to go with it (except the Obliviation part) until there weren’t any more complications. Draco sighed with relief when she proclaimed the meeting to be finished and stood up from her chair.

“Oh, and Draco,” he turned back from the door. “Just in case you have planned to relieve me of this memory, you should know that by tomorrow everything about it will be secured in a Pensieve, so don’t bother with it, Darling.”

Draco just looked at her and nodded hollowly until she left, and then tried to stand up – tried being the key word. The sticking charm was still in effect. Draco suspected it would take some time to dissolve, which meant that he wouldn’t be able to reach Pansy before she had a chance to preserve her memories. He slumped back into the seat and let out a defeated sigh.

Why, oh, why haven't I married a Hufflepuff?

TBC

A/N: the last sentence is a reference to my favourite a cartoon as a child. I don’t expect that many of you are going to recognise it, as it wasn’t broadcasted in many countries, and the above sentence may have been lost in translation, too. I just felt the need to explain. Don’t ask why. :)

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Chapter 11: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

October 17, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen

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Chapter Eleven

Damn Snape! Damn Snape! DAMN SNAPE! Eurgh!

This had somehow become Draco's Sonnet #7 to the Toilet Bowl as he emptied the contents his stomach every morning for the following week. The first six sonnets he had written while attending Hogwarts, one in every year, and they all were variations to the same theme: Damn Potter! Damn Potter!... His poetic inspiration didn't quite reach the standard of "Weasley is our King" when he was pissed off.

He just wished he could stay away from the funny foods at night because they always caused trouble in the morning. At night it seemed perfectly fine for him to swallow down large pancakes soaked in a whole pot of peanut-strawberry jam syrup (something the house-elves made especially for him, and he hoped that no one else would ever learn about that). At least this time he had refrained from putting the

mayonnaise and mustard into the mix. Alright, he could see how his body would object to ingesting all that, but it shouldn't have been this dramatic about a bit of junk food.

What he didn't understand was why the Madam Gobbler's Anti-sickness Potion for Pregnant Witches didn't seem to work at all, except with helping to calm his stomach after he had got rid of everything that could have possibly been in it. They seemed to work alright for Pansy, and she even had the cheek to tease him about it, saying that she could hear him all over the manor. Draco was sure that she was lying, because after the first time she teased him with that, he was careful to cast a soundproofing spell onto the bathroom walls. She probably just cast a look at him, took in his pinched countenance and was able to make a likely guess about his morning activities. Not that she cared whether Draco was suffering or not.

Ever since that afternoon-turned-into-night full of revelations a week earlier she was acting antagonistic towards Draco, as if he was threatening her life or her position. In a way he was, Draco knew that she would see it as a danger for her if he were to tell her about his solution for the heir issue. That was the main reason he hadn't wanted to. Pansy was just unreasonable like that; even if she was able to comprehend that the child Draco was carrying would increase the likelihood of her remaining the Lady Malfoy, she just didn't like the idea of a child that wasn't of her womb. Draco started actually worrying about her being capable of putting poison into his food to cause miscarriage, so he performed every poison detecting charm his father had taught him and seldom ate dinner in her company anymore. Perhaps she was wary of the possibility that once Draco's child was born, it would be declared the heir, and, to prevent any future conflict regarding the inheritance within the family, her son would be disposed of, either by taking it away from her and bringing it under in a wizarding orphanage or simply killing it.

Draco knew that his grandfather would have (perhaps even had) done that; maybe even his father wouldn't have stopped before committing infanticide, but Draco wasn't cut of the same cloth. He liked to think that he was more modern than to practice methods that were used in the Middle Ages. He had inherited his mother's sensitivity for such matters and that really wasn't his fault, even if his father had never accepted this as an explanation to why he hadn't wanted to dirty his hands with blood. Perhaps he should have told Pansy that he had no intention of harming her child, but he wasn't sure she wouldn't take it the wrong way – a trick to lull her vigilance and catch her unaware once the child was born.

If she had asked, Draco probably wouldn't have admitted to Pansy that he had the same apprehension for Cyrus' child she was harbouring for Draco's, but secretly he had come to the realisation that since he knew for sure that her progeny wasn't of his own seed, it did matter that he had something of his own. He knew he wouldn't ever think positively of that night, even if it would bring something positive as a

result. Perhaps it wouldn’t be an issue if he hadn't made that decision and had entrusted his future to the hope that Pansy eventually would get pregnant. He wouldn’t have a choice other than to accept Cyrus’ child as his own and the situation would have only changed when or if Pansy got pregnant with his own son after that. The point was that now neither he nor Pansy would ever get the chance to find out, and she was afraid of what he was going to do in order to ensure the primacy of his own blood. It wasn’t a question that he would, even if neither of them knew with a certainty that it would be a boy.

That was just the problem. Draco didn’t want to go to a medi-witch, and he wouldn’t have ever chosen to reveal his condition to Madam Prunes. Pansy had never asked about how he got the necessary medical attention in his condition, she just assumed that he had his own ways. In fact, apart from worrying about the fate of her child, she preferred not to pay attention to her husband’s pregnancy.

Draco had done everything he considered necessary by himself. The only spell he wasn’t able to perform was the one to reveal the gender of the foetus. Unfortunately the charm was a very complicated one, only taught in healer training. Even if Draco could have learnt to cast it correctly by himself, he wouldn’t possibly be able to read the result it gave, since that also required an amount of medical expertise. Not that it would have stopped Draco in trying to learn it. He just had to realise that his superior Malfoy intelligence had been designed to work with things of different nature, like politics and manipulating people for example, and not made for learning magic he and his ancestors would have been – under normal circumstances – able to obtain with very little effort, cast by a specialist.

Now he had two choices. Either to find a medi-witch or wizard to cast the charm on him in secret and then deal with the consequences, or prepare the ritual and perform it himself without knowing the child’s gender, hoping that it wouldn’t damage the foetus or his body. He had exactly one month and six days to choose what he wanted to do, but for now he opted for obtaining all the necessary components for the ritual, so in case he decided for it, they would already be at hand.

After the trip to Borgin and Burkes he could make a visit by Snape to ask him for more effective potions for his morning sickness. Also, he needed to have a second opinion considering Pansy’s case, and if there was anything Snape would give readily, it was advice. Perhaps he could even come up with an idea how he could get Pansy off his back, because he surely didn’t enjoy having to live his life with a constant feeling of peril in his own house.

It was nearing noon when he appeared in Knockturn Alley exactly to the spot before Borgin and Burkes’ poorly furnished shop-window that contained only a few mangy “good-luck charms” made of the front paws of an animal of indeterminable breed, and an inordinate amount of dust that perhaps still

contained the essence of long gone Dark Arts artifacts once on display soaked into it. Nowadays it proved to be poor judgment to exhibit such objects where every passing Auror would be able to see them, and no sane wizard or witch had visited the shop looking for any kind of real Dark magic since the Ministry clean-ups not long after the Dark Lord had been vanquished.

Borgin and Burkes still had the reputation of selling Dark Arts objects, but only old and reliable customers, such as the Malfoys, had known for a fact that it wasn't only a rumour to lure in those too ignorant to tell the difference. The Ministry had strict control over these kinds of establishments, and supposedly they were inspecting the shops to insure that they wouldn't sell anything like that. Everything they bought was to be submitted to a Ministry inspection to determine its nature, and was confiscated if it proved dangerous. Some less useful dark artefacts or things that had already lost their power were still permitted to be sold, but that – again – only attracted tourists, collectors, those disgraceful Goths and overambitious Mudbloods who were under the belief that they could actually use them for something obscure.

The real business was conducted behind closed doors and only those who could be trusted enough not to let anything out to the Ministry had knowledge about it – and of course those who had enough money to pay for the various items sold. In Draco's case the situation was reversed. Ever since his father had been arrested in the Department of Mysteries, the Ministry entertained themselves with random raids on the Manor that hadn't ceased to be a regular occurrence until the last few years. So it was not very safe to keep Dark Objects lying around in his home, since neither he nor anyone amongst his acquaintances had a use for them. Unfortunately, the house, as many of the old magical residences, was equipped with its own mind and liked to reveal random pieces hidden in its depths from time to time. Sometimes he turned them in as a sign of his cooperation or gave them to unsuspecting people as a means of bribery – it didn't hurt that while they thought they had gained something priceless from Draco, he would also gain blackmail material or incriminating evidence about their being in possession of a Dark Arts artifact. If neither of those was profitable he usually sold them to Borgin and Burkes.

They were remarkably cautious in these matters; they usually sent their assistant to the Manor to present the price offered and discuss the conditions of the transaction. They had the advantage of knowing that the Malfoys actually wanted to get rid of the objects, but Draco had to give it to Borgin and Burkes that they had never disabused that leverage against them – probably because of the prospect of future business or because of the respect they had for his late father.

Draco opened the door nearly bumping into another customer looking at the glass cases displaying various potions in dark, unusual looking bottles. They were all custom made, looking old and dusty, the coloured glass or engraved crystal surface concealing the colour and texture of the fluid it contained –

which, to Draco's knowledge, was actually the same love potion Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes sold to schoolgirls and aging witches. The other glass cases contained other 'Dark' objects. There was a shrunken hand that looked just like the Hand of Glory, and there was the same assortment of bones and ugly jewellery claimed to have harmed previous owners. The walls were decorated with torture devices, wizarding paintings said to be cursed and even a living bird, not resembling anything Draco had ever seen, nodding in a cage over the counter. Behind it Draco spotted a dark-haired wizard currently with his back at him, who looked to be too young to be either of the shop's owners.

Draco remembered that they had acquired a new assistant. He was the one who had come to the Manor six months ago when there had been some items that needed to be sold. Draco hadn't met him, but according to what Pansy learnt from the new employee, he had been working there for the last two years, only in less important tasks. He must have been charismatic and rather purposeful, as he even succeeded in charming Pansy with his looks and smooth mannerisms. She had spoken about him for weeks following, and Draco had suspected that she had planned to include him into the long list of her affairs. He didn't know if she had succeeded or not.

Draco was prepared to show this man, should he be the one to attend him, that he wasn't someone to play games with, but he hoped that Borgin and Burkes had trained him appropriately, so that Draco wouldn't need to resort to intimidation. Unfortunately the wizarding world of now was filled with uncouth Mudbloods and half-bloods, and this man was likely to be one or the other, since a pureblood wouldn't stoop so low as to work as a shop assistant, even if they needed a job. Purebloods usually found a way to acquire better paid and less degrading careers, usually as a Ministry employee, even with that Muggle-loving Mudblood in charge, or in legal or business circles.

Draco stepped up to the counter and lightly cleared his throat. But instead of the assistant turning towards him, Borgin chose exactly that moment to emerge from a storeroom in the back. He was surprised to find him there, and looked like he was busy, but tried to appear accommodating and polite. He didn't even let Draco open his mouth before he was foisted off on the younger man.

"Aaah! Mr. Malfoy, what a pleasant surprise! You haven't honoured us with your presence for a while." It didn't escape Draco's attention that he looked slightly nervous and he would have appreciated it if the old wizard had spoken a bit less loudly, as it had already garnered the attention of the other customer. As if he had read Draco's thoughts, Borgin had started whispering, leaning a little too close to his face for Draco's taste. "I have to apologise, but today I can't attend to you. You might be acquainted with our young help. I assure you that he is most capable of taking care of all your needs."

Draco nodded a bit confused, while he heard Borgin calling the man behind the counter by the name of McNeil, explaining him that he was needed to serve Draco while Borgin himself took care of the other customer, then hurried off. Draco turned towards the man he was left alone with, and then stumbled back one step, as if seeing the face before him for the first time.

It was dark in the shop, but that face had been imprinted into his memory so firmly that he had no hope of ever forgetting it, or not recognising the one wearing it. The man, even though he had been stacking goods onto dusty shelves just a few minutes before, looked impeccable with his jet-black hair now combed tightly into place, wearing simple, black robes that accentuated his height and stature. Draco was nailed by the hard but attentive look of dark eyes.

“Mr. Malfoy? What can I do for you?” he asked when Draco seemed to be frozen onto the spot with all the blood running out of his face at once.

“Are you alright?”

Draco came to himself hearing the polite inquiry and started to rummage his pocket for the ingredients list he wrote. At last he found it and gave it to the man… McNeal, Borgin had said? Draco didn’t hear his surname, but he assumed that it wasn’t actually ‘Scott’, even if that was the name he had gone by the night Draco had last seen him.

“I need these things in the exact measurements and pieces…” he pretended to be thinking. “What was your name again?” It wasn’t the most elegant solution, but he felt he would collapse any second and he was thankful that his voice didn’t tremble.

“Oh, I haven't introduced myself, I’m terribly sorry. My name is Simon McNeil,” the name rolled off of his mouth like a foreign word, as though he were uncomfortable with it. He seemed a bit flustered, which broke the collected countenance he had previously shown Draco. It was such an odd sight, but it vanished before he could commit it into his memory or determine its meaning.

Draco was sure that the man, whom he still called Scott in his head, couldn’t have possibly connected him with the transvestite he had had a romp with nearly two months earlier. Most likely he was just taken by his good looks, yes, that must have been it. If so, Draco really couldn’t blame him for that,

knowing that the man was a Queer. Even if he currently wore his everyday normal wizard persona, he was most likely still attracted to men, as his transformation into a human wasn't real, like that of a werewolf. At least Draco reckoned it was only pretence.

Scott… McNeil was still perusing the parchment Draco had handed him. The list wasn't a very long one, and most of the items on it weren't even near to being Dark, only one or two he needed for the ritual. Then he turned his back and started to rummage through the shelves with a proficient familiarity, having the things Draco had written up together in no time. When he turned back, Draco had calmed himself enough to be able to concentrate on the purchase. He wanted to make sure he got everything on the list. It didn't hurt to look out for shifty shop assistants when buying something in this particular street.

"What about the Thestral blood?" he asked when he didn't see the usual tiny black vial among the other things. This was the only component he couldn't have bought somewhere else, not even in Knockturn Alley, and Draco was not prepared to take no as an answer. However, that was exactly what he got.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir, but Borgin and Burkes doesn't keep Thestral blood in store. At least, not since I've been here."

"What?" Draco didn't try to hold back himself, he wasn't a patient man by default but especially in the last few weeks he had had a hard time controlling his temper. He was absolutely sure that Borgin and Burkes was indeed the only place he could have acquired the blood without having to leave the country; in fact he had seen some last month when he had been there – which wasn't as long ago as Borgin insinuated upon spotting him, and definitely not enough to make him forget that he had seen it.

McNeil leaned forward, as if he wanted to imitate the previous gesture of Mr. Borgin, and Draco couldn't suppress a gasp when the distance between them was reduced to a mere few inches, so he could not only feel the power that radiated from the wizard, but even take in the faint fragrance of a masculine cologne unknown to Draco mixed with the natural scent of his skin. Instantly other sensations associated to that familiar-unfamiliar smell invaded Draco's senses and he had a hard time not showing his inner turmoil while he stood there frozen, waiting for the next move Scott… damn it! McNeil would take.

The dark-haired man didn't do anything untoward; he just lowered his voice and tried to look as if he wasn't doing anything suspicious, while his eyes darted quickly towards the other side of the shop where his boss was talking about the quality of the wares the other customer was inspecting.

“Listen, Malfoy,” McNeil hissed into his ear, causing goose bumps appear along Draco’s spine and raising the fine hairs on his nape and arms thankfully concealed by the high collar and long sleeves of his robes. “That,” he nodded his head towards the other two people, “is an Auror. I don’t think you’d want see Azkaban from the inside for trying to purchase an illegal drug in the presence of someone who could arrest you on the spot. If I were in your place, I’d grab my things and disappear from here as quickly as I could.”

Draco felt the body warmth of the other man on his cheek for a second when Scott withdrew himself from his personal space, but the threat of almost getting caught by the Ministry had thrown his brain functions back onto the right track.

“How much?” he asked on a casual voice that showed thankfully no trace of his nervousness. After hearing the answer he paid the price and left the shop without really taking in his surroundings. From outside he Apparated directly to Snape’s house, his subconscious having remembered that that was his next stop. But standing on Snape’s doorstep and rattling the rather tasteless Goblin-head doorknocker, he wasn’t actually able to put together in his mind how he got there.

Snape opened the door with an offended look on his face that didn’t change much when he saw who it was. But seeing Draco’s appearance even paler than usual, he let him in without a word. Once inside, all the adrenalin fuelling his rapid flight vanished from his bloodstream and Draco slumped inelegantly into the too hard armchair nearest him.

TBC

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Chapter 12: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

October 31, 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn Vance

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Chapter Twelve

"I need something strong," Draco whinged pathetically, with his face buried in his hands. This time, Snape could tell that only half of it was acting and the other half was real distress.

Draco felt a mug pressed between his lax fingers, and he grabbed it instinctually, lifting the beverage to his mouth. But then, when the warm steam reached his face, he got suspicious. He sniffed the contents, and grimaced when it turned out to be tea.

"Ugh. I know you have got older, but you haven't turned completely into Dumbledore yet, have you?"

Snape didn't deem his question worthy of an answer; he just gave him a very effective staggering look, which made Draco immediately shut his mouth and sip his drink. The tea felt good; it calmed his nerves almost instantly, and it was strong, after all. Draco assumed that Snape had also put something more potent into it than just tea leaves, but he couldn't tell what; it tasted exactly like normal tea should.

“So? What happened now?” Snape’s snarl didn’t leave a doubt about how welcome Draco was at that moment, but if Snape had been in the middle of brewing, he would have told Draco already. It must have been just Snape’s usual overflowing friendliness.

Draco looked up from his already half-emptied mug. He was tired and a bit hungry, even if he had eaten a late breakfast just before he had left home for Knockturn Alley. He turned his face away before Snape used the opportunity to sneak past his lowered defences into his mind.

Apart from Pansy, he hadn't told anyone about Scott. She hadn't been that keen to hear all the dirty details as Draco had feared, and Draco wouldn’t have volunteered telling her anything past the most basic facts, nor ever ask for her advice. Not even if she hadn't turned hostile towards him after learning about his past actions. Pansy was his wife, how could he ever expect her to respect him if he went to her for advice? Snape was the only other person who actually knew what had happened that night. And right now Draco desperately needed someone to discuss the newest developments with, or at least pour out his soul to. He shuddered at that person being Snape, but at the same time he realised that there was no one else he could confide in.

He groaned and put the mug down.

“I am probably going to regret this later, but all right, I’ll tell you what’s wrong. I just learnt that the man I used to…” he gestured towards his stomach as he was wont to do during the rare occurrences he was referring to the thing… child in him, “isn’t a foreigner, as I initially thought. I wanted it to be someone whom I would never meet again, that’s why I… went there. And now this… person turns up in Borgin and Burkes, even has the audacity to tell me not to try and buy dark magic there. He refused to sell me Thestral blood. He told me they didn’t deal in that kind of thing, while I know for a fact that Borgin and Burkes has it always in stock.”

“Went where?” Snape lifted a brow. He didn’t let himself be distracted by the rant containing random potion ingredients not exactly subtly slipped in between the lines, as Draco had expected him to.

The last time Draco had visited Snape – on the morning after his trip to Copenhagen - he had refused to tell him anything more about the ordeal than the fact that it happened. Snape had been – and, apparently, was still - cross with him ever since for ‘withholding possibly essential information’. It looked

like this time Draco wouldn't get out of it. He still felt reluctant to divulge where he had gone and what exactly getting pregnant had involved – he didn't want Snape to come to the conclusion that he regularly visited such places. But then, feeling his former Head of House's prickling stare on him wasn't any better, so he finally conceded.

"A gay club, okay? I met him in a Copenhagen gay club."

Snape made a high-pitched noise that sounded like the air being let out of a balloon through a tiny hole. Draco shivered. And people wondered why no one had ever heard Snape laugh? Draco could have done without the experience, thank you very much. But even being appalled couldn't divert his mind from being embarrassed that he had been – once again – laughed at, causing the skin of his cheeks to warm up with all the blood running into them.

"You went into a gay club?" Snape sneered. "While I certainly agree with the notion of getting involved with someone from a different milieu, I would have thought you would be choosing the father of your child more…" he gave Draco another unreadable look, and his voice went down an octave on the last word, "…carefully."

"I would have if there was more time," Draco protested furiously.

Snape wasn't impressed. His eyes bore into Draco's like a knife into butter. "There was time, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco blinked abruptly upon realising that Snape had succeeded, making him look into his eyes and present his mind as a little slide show for him. He didn't know how much of his memories the other man had succeeded in catching; the intrusion had been so subtle and short that he didn't even notice it until Snape corrected him based upon something he couldn't have known just from their conversations.

"Was that really necessary?" he asked, irritated with Snape's presumptuousness. He might have been older and his former mentor, but that didn't give him the right to treat Draco like a child. Alas, he could only blame himself, since he had known Snape had the intention to spy into his mind since he had practically fallen over his doorstep.

Snape had a distant look and a slight frown on his face. He was deep in his thoughts, most likely putting together and analysing the random pictures he had lifted from Draco's mind. Draco didn't want him to rummage around in his memories of that night, considering that half of the time he hadn't had his clothes on. On second thought, Draco didn't want him to see the clothes-part either. He needed a distraction, and the best distraction was giving out information, because then Snape had to concentrate on what he said instead of the 'pretty pictures'.

"Did you know that the Ministry sends out Aurors to spy on Borgin and Burkes?"

Snape glanced back at him with a sharp look. This time Draco deliberately lowered his eyelids; he was prepared to close them or wrench away his gaze if the Potions Master tried anything, but Snape didn't seem interested.

"And how would you know about that?"

Draco leaned back in his chair and assumed a more comfortable posture.

"I told you I was there today to buy a few necessary things, among others Thestral blood, which I didn't get because the shop assistant, that Scott McNeil, refused to sell me any."

"I have some Thestral blood in my storeroom, but may I ask for what purpose do you need it? Brewing potions in your condition is not exactly without danger, you know. By the way, don't you mean Simon McNeil?"

Draco was mortified at his slip of tongue. He hoped that he hadn't made the same mistake while he had been in the store! "Oh. Yes, Simon. Do you know him?" Draco had recognised the momentary startled look Snape gave him at the mention of the name. It was evident that he did.

The Potions Master shrugged and attempted to sound casual while telling him something along the lines of buying one of his less common ingredients there every month or so. If Draco hadn't been that well acquainted with his mannerisms, he would have bought it. "So who is Scott?"

Damn it. Unfortunately, Snape was just as skilled in reading Draco's facial expressions as the other way around. He was able tell that the slip wasn't without a cause. "'Scott' was the name he used when I met him there, for… you know what," Draco grumbled, irritated with the other man's sharp eye.

Snape's face paled, or he shifted into a position where the light shone onto it brighter, making it loose colour, as he made an abrupt move towards Draco.

"Simon McNeil is the father of your child?" he inquired in a strangled voice.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Oh, don't be so melodramatic! He is under no circumstances the 'father'. I am the father. He was just a tool to achieve my goal." Draco didn't understand why Snape refused to see the big picture. The child would be his heir, his blood, and the key to his inheritance, no one else's. No one apart from Draco would be able to understand what he had undergone in order to get what he wanted; it rightfully belonged to him and no one else. It was of absolutely no consequence who else Draco had used in its creation. He didn't plan to tell anyone about it, why would he? It didn't even merit speaking about it any more.

"In any case, as I told you, I am in need of Thestral blood. I would appreciate if you could give up some of your stock to me. Naturally, I am willing to pay the market price for it. I don't even need much, just a few drops for the gender-changing ritual."

Snape lifted a brow in a familiar questioning gesture. Of course, having close relations to the Malfoys, he must have had knowledge about the ritual; most likely, he had even participated in one or two. Seeing his stand as Potions Master and the kin no Malfoy would officially recognise as one, he was the natural candidate when a matter like that required the assistance of someone with Snape's abilities. His competence was well known and his loyalty to the family was granted by ancient lineage magic: the Malfoy blood that flowed in his veins and the fact that his mother had been only the daughter of a maidservant. Therefore she, and every one of her descendants, had only obligations towards, but no rights within, the Malfoy family. Snape wasn't in the position to refuse help in a serious matter that a Malfoy requested of him, which had cost him dearly more than once in the past.

Draco refused to feel any kind of guilt for his parents and himself at having exploited that in the past, or for planning to continue with that practice in the future. He just cursed himself for not thinking about

this possibility before he had rushed into this heir business. Of course, he had very good reasons for not wanting to impose himself on Snape in the past. Draco had had to be careful not to waste his help on insignificant issues if he had wanted stay in Snape's favour after the fiasco with the old codger, but the current situation was of such a high importance that it justified the means he was about to invoke. And in addition, he had to consider the possibility that if he didn't recruit Snape, the odds were that someone else, who wasn't on his side, would. No true Malfoy, including Draco, would let a perfectly good opportunity slip out of their fingers just because of some petty thing called ethics that neither they nor Snape believed in, and the man knew that perfectly well.

"Let me guess. You want my help with the ritual?" Snape asked – not because he didn't anticipate something like that to happen, he just wanted clarification of what exactly would be expected of him.

Draco nodded once. If Snape had told him that his condition wasn't favourable for brewing potions, by all means, he didn't need to endanger his inheritance.

"So it is a girl then?" Snape asked what seemed to be the obvious, already half in thought and just thinking aloud, therefore the indifferent answer Draco gave him had startled him for a minute.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" The Potions Master scowled at Draco. "I would have expected that the first task you gave your mediwizard or witch would have been to determine…"

At Draco's blank expression, Snape slowly closed his eyes and then opened them with an almost hurt expression. He gave a noisy sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"No, don't say anything. I'm going to guess: you didn't have the forethought to seek a mediwizard about this… pregnancy of yours." At least Snape was no less ill at ease about his condition than Draco. He could have shown more understanding towards the delicacy of the situation Draco was in.

"This is not a regular pregnancy, in case you haven't noticed," he hissed at the dark haired man. "I can't exactly take the risk of letting the wrong sort of people know about it."

Snape fixed him with his gaze for a second while he seemed to think about something; then, after telling

him to wait, he left Draco alone while he disappeared into his private rooms.

Draco didn’t have to sit there alone for long. He had barely drained the contents of his freshly refilled cup – courtesy of a skinny house-elf Draco hadn't even known Snape owned – when his former professor returned, dressed in a long coat that fully covered his robes and some kind of Muggle-looking boots. Seeing the latter, Draco barely refrained from a sneer, but he masked his expression by turning away and donning his own coat.

Snape gave him a once over and declared his appearance “good enough”, which made Draco sputter, since his clothes were way better than “good enough”; in fact, Snape in his best coat looked barely more than a street urchin next to him.

“Where are we going?” Draco asked, since he assumed that Snape hadn't just decided to take a walk around the house.

Snape looked at Draco after having closed the door and reinstalled the wards behind them.

“We are going to Muggle London. I know someone who is willing to help and can be trusted with your little privacy-problem.”

“Who is it?”

“You don’t know him. But if it isn’t enough that I trust him, there is the fact that by agreeing to examine and – if necessary – treat you, if it comes out, he is going to be in more trouble than just a bit of publicity.”

Draco nodded. That at least was a reassurance he would be able to use, would it become necessary to ensure secrecy. Snape indicated that Draco should put his hand onto the older man’s shoulder in order to be able to Apparate them both to the location only he was familiar with.

The place where Snape took them was like the Muggle equivalent of the worst part of Knockturn Alley. Draco couldn't fathom for the life of him what Snape wanted in this part of… London? He wasn't even sure they were still in Britain until he saw a street plate next to the door Snape was heading for, stating that they were about to enter Two Indy Street. Draco had an uneasy feeling in his gut that instilled him to stay alert.

The door lead into some kind of art store; at least Draco thought it had to sell something connected to art, as the walls were covered with coloured pictures of the most diverse kind. There were line arts and oriental drawings next to a vulgar collection of skulls, snakes, dragons, roses, weapons and naked women. The inside was dark, like that of Borgin and Burkes, but Draco doubted that it was in order to preserve some of the more light-sensitive Dark artifacts, seeing that it was a Muggle establishment. The most peculiar thing was the large leather-covered chair in the middle of the store and the odd metal paraphernalia stationed around it.

When they entered, a little bell attached to the top of the door made known their presence, and soon the curtain separating the main area from the hind section lifted to let through a tall man clad into hideous Muggle jeans and a chequered flannel shirt. He looked a decade older than Snape – as well as Draco was able to tell in the semi-darkness. He had pale, longish hair with more grey than blonde in it, tied into a messy pony-tail. His squared jaw was framed by a funny moustache that drooped in the middle and trailed down to his chin, where the two halves were tied together. All in all, he looked very much like an aging 'hippy' as depicted in Pansy's Muggle studies book, which she had shown him once. Draco grimaced in disgust. What was Snape thinking, bringing him here?

"Severus?" The man was apparently surprised to see the Potions Master, but neither scared nor pleased by his visiting, which were the most common reactions Snape got from people who knew him – at least on the rare occasions when Draco was with him to observe. Snape nodded, greeting the man as an equal, which made Draco more confused. This couldn't be a Muggle, could it? The man then looked at him, but his face showed no indication of recognition. Draco didn't know if he should be glad or offended by this, if his doubts about the stranger's non-magical origin were right.

"I guess, we should go inside," the man said, indicating the curtained opening he had come from, and sealing the shop door with a muttered spell that confirmed Draco's suspicion. Snape had started towards the back with a familiarity that suggested this wasn't his first visit here, obviously expecting Draco to

follow him, which he did.

The room in behind the curtain was something of a surprise, as it didn't reflect the main shop area. It was small, but well lit and nearly sterilely clean. Draco didn't have time to recover from his surprise, when their host had cleared his throat behind him.

"Draco Malfoy, if I'm not wrong?" he asked, but it was apparent that the question was mere civility, as he was in no doubt about Draco's identity. He offered his hand – it was large with long, calloused fingers and definitely cleaner than Draco would have thought based on his appearance. Draco took it. The man had a firm handshake.

"My name is Sturgis Podmore, you can call me Stu or Doc, as the Muggles here do." Draco refrained from grimacing at those undignified Muggle names. Had the man no respect for himself at all? "I take that Snape, the old bastard here, didn't told you anything about me."

Draco was only able to nod, while Snape, standing in the background, grimaced at the all-too-familiar treatment, and the other man continued his introduction.

"I am a Healer, or more precisely, I was a Healer until I was chucked into Azkaban for six months for trespass in the Ministry approximately ten years ago. It wasn't very beneficial for my healing career in St. Mungo's - though I understand that no hospital would want to employ an ex-criminal."

Draco nodded again. Even though he had been never a member of the Order of the Phoenix, he had heard the story from those who were as one of the war-anecdotes, and was now able to connect it with the name Sturgis Podmore. He had never wondered what had happened to the man who got caught, and evidently none of the Order members he had spoken to had known it either. Though, it seemed now that Snape must have.

Draco looked around in the illegal wizarding clinic in the middle of a Muggle ghetto. He spotted the framed Healer diploma on the wall. It had been torn into two and both parts were stamped with a large red script that read: REVOKED.

Draco was surprised by a sardonic laugh behind him as Podmore noticed what Draco was looking at.

“I like the second one better.”

Draco looked at what the Healer indicated. Next to the diploma was another one in an identical frame that was the copy of the original – without the tearing and the red letters – made by the hands of a child with Muggle coloured pencils. Draco had already suspected that the Healer had also Muggle patients, which didn’t seem to encourage the decision to put himself into the care of this man, but Snape interrupted his thoughts.

“Introductions done? Good, because we came for a reason.”

Podmore pocketed his hands and turned towards the Potions Master with undeniable amusement. “I thought so, too. How can I help you?”

“Not me, Mr. Malfoy.” Snape inclined his head with an impatient jerk towards Draco.

Podmore lifted his wand and started with a batch of examination spells cast on Draco without further questions. He worked quick and efficient with an aura of someone who knew what he was doing, which had a calming effect of Draco, who didn’t think much of him after seeing the Muggle background.

“Interesting,” the Healer said after a few minutes’ silence that was only disturbed by occasional pops and zaps of magic. “Do you have any idea what could cause these highly unusual values? Light poisoning? A miscast spell? Muggle STD?”

Draco scowled at the last assumption – who did the man think he was? - and desperately wanted to disabuse the Healer of that notion. But he still didn’t trust Podmore enough to tell him about his condition. Snape apparently didn’t have the same scruples. For some reason he seemed to be irritated with Draco, enough to override his right to choose to whom he disclosed information about himself, and taking the matters into his own hand.

“Pregnancy,” the Potions Master supplied in his usual acerbic manner.

“Fascinating.” The wand stopped in the middle of another charm. “May I ask how that came about?”

Draco thought it was too late to be secretive. But he still wasn’t keen on telling the particulars to a complete stranger. So he was perfectly content to leave the talking to Snape, who seemed to be both better acquainted with the Healer and more composed than Draco was at the moment. Though Snape’s description was a bit too detailed for his taste, sometimes including information that the Potions Master must have snatched out of Draco’s mind, because he couldn’t remember telling him those. Having been a spy for so long and needing to feed both sides regularly with satisfying information had the unfortunate effect of turning Snape into a terrible gossip, if the situation required his input. At least being a spy had also taught him the importance of discretion, so Draco didn’t have to worry that he would tell about his condition to another person without his permission.

In the end Podmore got a fairly good summary of the events that lead to the current situation, though Snape had left out the part of Draco having brewed the fertility potion himself, he just told the Healer that he had been mislead regarding the true nature of the concoction. Draco noticed the slight change in the Healer’s stoical demeanour at the mention of the ‘other father’s name. Great! Did that mean everyone in the wizarding world knew who Scott McNeil was? Though considering the nature of this establishment, it wasn’t that strange that Podmore would have the acquaintance of a shop assistant working at Borgin and Burkes, Draco tried to calm his nerves.

After having ascertained that both Draco and the child’s health were satisfactory, Draco asked the Healer for the charm to reveal the gender of the foetus. Podmore had to dig up an ancient tome in order to reacquaint himself with the charm as he hadn't used it since he was forced to leave St. Mungo’s, but he assured Draco that he was perfectly capable of casting and interpreting it.

When, despite all of the reassurances, it didn’t work, he just lifted a brow and said, “We have a problem.”

Draco didn’t like it. Snape, who had been content to sit on a chair next to the far wall without so much as a comment or change of his stony expression, scowled and stood up.

“What is the problem?” Draco asked. Was this man really a Healer? He hated these unknown situations, but at least Snape didn’t seem to have doubts in Podmore’s abilities, and Draco had no other choice than to trust in his former professor’s judgement.

Podmore didn’t answer instantly; he tried to cast a few more spells on him, which made Draco irritated, because he didn’t know what they were. They turned out to be more advanced medical charms than those Draco had been already acquainted with from the books he had studied.

“It looks like magical incompatibility. Don’t worry, Draco, this is a common occurrence in pregnancies. It just means that your magic is not compatible with that of the foetus – most likely because it inherited the magical traits from the other father.” Draco really wanted to let loose a reprimand. How dare he call him his given name? But the meaning of what the Healer had just said gave him more of a concern right now. Magic had been that had created this thing inside him. It didn’t mean any good if the magic proved suddenly defective, now did it?

“What does that mean? Can something be done?” he asked, trying not to show how concerned he was by the whole thing.

“Yes, there is a potion you have to take.” Draco gave a relieved sigh. “I’m sure Snape can make it for you. However…” and that didn’t promise anything good, “you should have taken it weeks ago. Now that the foetus is almost two months old, it won’t be as effective. It will keep you from getting ill, but it won’t deter temporary loss of your magic on occasion.”

“What?” Draco had never before lost his magic. To think that this pregnancy could cause that to happen was a terrifying aspect.

“And furthermore, any magic cast on the foetus is useless. There is a natural barrier that developed in these two months. It shields the child from your that magic would be harmful for it, so it prevents any strong magic cast by an outside source to reach the child. That means, I can tell whether it is healthy or not, which it is, but the spell to determine its gender, for example, won’t work on it. I’m sorry.”

This was bad. This meant that Draco was forced to perform the gender-changing ritual without knowing whether it is necessary or not. Fortunately, the ritual was different for changing the gender to male and female, so he wouldn't change the foetus accidentally into a girl if it was a boy to begin with.

And it also meant more examinations for Draco. Unfortunately, what couldn't be determined by magic, had to be examined by… other methods. Draco was shown a cubicle with a white curtain for privacy, a chair and a hanger to place his robes on while he put on the white hospital gown. Then he was examined by methods that reminded him too strongly of the Muggle urologist he had had an appointment with before this all started. He didn't like it at all. But thankfully, it was over quickly. While he was changing back, he heard the faint voices of a conversation from outside – the curtain was apparently impregnated with a partial silencing spell, though Draco couldn't for his life guess what for.

"What about our 'other patient'?" That voice belonged to Podmore. Snape shushed him and started to speak in hushed tones, but Draco was able to understand only pieces of it.

"… not now… haven't met… give him his potions…any change?"

"No, he hasn't been here in a couple of months. I'm starting to worry, to be honest." Podmore's deep baritone was more discernable than Snape's hissing. Draco's hand stopped in the middle of hanging up the hospital gown, and, as an acquired habit, he began to eavesdrop shamelessly. "I know he has this super secret job right now, but he should really be more concerned about his health. There was a reason he was dismissed from the Auror department, he shouldn't take it lightly. Does he even know about this… recent development?"

Then Snape hissed something urgently - or was that reprimand? - at which Podmore murmured in an offended manner:

"I'm a Healer, not a baby-sitter."

Draco was aware that he had been there too long already, so he reluctantly pulled open the curtain and stepped outside.

After having arranged another visit with the Healer, Snape ushered Draco outside. Draco supposed that Snape would insist that Draco keep him company while he was brewing the potion Podmore wanted him to take. He wasn't delighted at the prospect of another lengthy questioning session from the Potions Master while he was forced to wait. As much as Draco resented the man for bringing him here, he had felt elated having had confirmation that everything – well, almost everything – was all right with him and the child, so even though he felt tired and knew that he had a long afternoon to look forward to, he couldn't bring himself to worry about Snape right now. Perhaps, he would be able to avert the topic from himself and extract some interesting information about that mysterious conversation he had overheard. And he still had to get the Thestral blood Snape had promised to give him.

TBC

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Chapter 13: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

12 November 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn Vance

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Chapter Thirteen

This time they were in his bedroom. There was a mirror in the room behind them and a bit to the side. Draco could see parts of himself and Scott reflecting in it. He could see his own torso starting just under his armpit, the faint outline of ribs and the concave of his usually flat belly, now pulled in and rippling with tremors of pleasure. He could see the curve of his arse held spread by a single slick thumb to reveal the little opening in the crevice between his cheeks. Every one of his muscles was trembling with anticipation, including that tight ring he couldn't wrench his gaze away from in the mirror. It was wrinkled and slightly darker than the skin around it, sprinkled with random hairs that had grown back since he had got rid of them that night. The knowledge affected him in the opposite manner as he would have expected, as he was, surprisingly, even more aroused instead of being repulsed by the imperfection.

The rest of his body was hidden behind a gloriously naked, golden skinned body. There was a warm palm between his shoulder-blades, pushing him down to the mattress, so his bum was thrust upwards by the position, exposing his most private body parts to the mirror – the tip of his hardened prick, the underside of his tightening balls and the crevice of his arse. He observed as a strong but gentle finger - several shades darker than his own complexion and shining with some kind of oil – smeared glistening liquid around his entrance with maddening meticulousness, then, breaching it, slowly disappeared into his body. At the same time he felt the pressure on his sphincter as it gave way to the delicious torture and his insides were filled with the ghost of a presence that was nowhere near satisfying. Still, he wasn't able to tear away his eyes from the flexing arm iterating the movements of the finger – and then later, fingers – slipping in and sliding out of his arse with the same easiness, as if there was no more resistance in him. It didn't feel right, didn't feel real enough.

In – and out – and in – and out – with a maddening slowness that made him quiver with wanting more – to see more and feel more.

Draco felt tears leak out of the corners of his eyes and glide down his chin, which was pressed into a white pillow. The fingers sped up until all Draco was able to feel was a jumble of vague pleasure and the ghostly, prickling sensation of being filled. There was a thumb lightly touching his balls, and he let go, gave into the madness that felt so good and so wrong at the same time, and released in white-hot spurts, all the while those fingers worked inside of him, touching nerve endings that weren't meant to be

touched…

Draco sat up with a start, still disoriented in the darkness, and registered two things. One: he was alone. Two: there was a warm wetness coating his stomach and seeping through his pyjama pants, soaking into the bed sheets. He pulled off the covers and let the night air on his heated skin, cooling down the thin, sticky film of sweat covering his whole body.

It had been just a dream. He tried to calm himself with several great gulps of air. They came out raspy and panicky. So he stopped before his own reactions worsened his already precarious state of mind. If nothing else worked, he would have to force himself to be calm. But how could he, when his whole body was tingling with the residual sensation? He moved and felt a slight slipperiness at his entrance. And then he remembered what had taken place the night before.

A week and a half had passed since he had met the man who had called himself Scott at Borgin and Burkes. A week and a half that had been filled with strange, erotic dreams, after which he had no problem getting off in the shower come morning. Sometimes more than just once per morning, he reckoned, shamefaced.

Draco reasoned that it wasn't really about Scott. He had read somewhere about pregnancy causing the skin to become more sensitive, and the sexual drive escalating in some cases. Though thinking that he would still suffer wet dreams past the age of twenty-four was hilarious and, quite frankly, disturbing. It had been nothing more than bad luck that he had been reminded of Scott by his presence in Knockturn Alley. He had been the last person Draco had sex with before his pregnancy - it was no wonder his dreams drew the images from the occasion clearest in his memories. So he had tried to remedy that situation by calling in Rosie for the last few nights.

It didn't seem to help, though. Despite his heightened urges and increased sensitivity, his encounters with her had been rather disappointing. There was the thing that Draco had desperately tried to concentrate on her person, prevent his mind from wandering into dangerous waters. His subconscious seemed to derive a perverse pleasure out of flashing in not-quite-memories about Scott when he felt particularly good – only to be shaken out of the illusion when his hand touched curving hips and ample bosoms. He tried to condition his body not to feel disappointed by the reality. Because it did - for the first second before guilt and fear had taken over, telling him in his father's voice that what his treacherous mind yearned after was wrong. Definitely wrong! That made him try to concentrate on his bed partner and force an adequate level of pleasure out of the encounter.

But, even though he had spent a row of passably enjoyable nights with Rosie, his dreams still featured Scott.

And then the previous night, in his desperation, he had asked Rosie to put her fingers there while she had given oral pleasures. She hadn't said anything, and Draco hadn't been able to see her expression in the dark when he had closed her fingers around the small bottle of scented massage oil that had been conveniently left on his bedside table. But now Draco could practically picture her disgust rolling down at him in waves. He had been so embarrassed by asking and then later when she had complied. But neither sensing her revulsion nor his own shame had prevented him from enjoying the clumsy sensations he was given.

In the light of the day, it all just seemed wrong and unclean, unnatural. How could he enjoy something like that? What was wrong with him? What must Rosie have been thinking of him? He didn’t know how he whould be able to look into her eyes ever again.

After he had came down from the high and reality had set in, in a bout of despair, Draco had grabbed his wand and had tried to Obliviate her just when she had been about to depart. He was sure he hadn't succeeded – he hadn't asked Snape for a potion when he had planned to cast the same charm on Pansy for nothing, he really was no good with it. Now he was actually glad he hadn't used it up on Pansy, because he needed to act before she had the opportunity to tell anyone about last night.

Draco got up, disgusted with himself, and walked into his bathroom with a back as straight and stiff as if he had swallowed a broomstick. He fixed his gaze firmly at the white tiled walls as he removed his soiled pyjamas and tossed them onto the floor in a knot. He knew that the house-elves would have removed them by the time he was done with his shower. He set the water to a lukewarm temperature that made him go slightly goose-bumped. It was not that cold, just uncomfortable enough to prevent him from getting an erection. He didn’t think he would be able to handle another humiliation from his own imagination right now, as he was positive as to what kind of images it would summon if he tried to wank right now. He didn’t want to get excited from his skin prickling when he touched it strictly with the intention of getting clean either, so he used a washcloth too rough to feel even remotely sensual.

After he was done with the basic necessities in order to feel, if not entirely clean, but at least a bit less dirty, he downed the potion Snape had given him, cast a Disillusionment Charm, and sneaked up on the woman working alone in the French garden, trimming the hedges to keep them orderly and well-shaped.

He cast the memory charm and observed the few moments of disorientation that came upon her after it had taken effect, but he had nothing to worry about. She went back to what she had been doing as if nothing had happened, continuing humming the children's song where she had left off. Draco let out the breath he had been holding and turned towards the manor, while musing if she would wonder why Draco had stopped calling her, because he knew he wouldn't be able to look at her and not feel the shame about what he had made her do. It was better if he forgot about her existence and went back to his normal life.

The new anti-sickness potion he got from Snape was more effective in fighting his morning sickness than the old one, so he was actually able to get down real food instead of just dry toast and tea, though his appetite wasn't any better this morning than two weeks previously. He ate breakfast automatically, not tasting at all, just chewing and swallowing. All the while his mind was working, though he couldn't really discover any logic in his own thoughts. He had more important things to do than wrestle with his own conscience all day. Yes, even Malfoys had a conscience, just not for the same use as other, lower-class people.

Draco forced his thoughts around his agenda in order to shut out everything else. It was the day of the monthly bribery, so he had to make an appearance at the Ministry. Following that, he had a lunch appointment with the head of the Ludicrous Patents Office, as it was always beneficial to know about new things. As people usually tended to underestimate the importance of this office of the Ministry, no one cared much about what was going on in there. It was the perfect place for an inventive wizard who was able to put two and two together and get a fair win out of the junk people brought in nowadays. If the position weren't already filled with a rather shifty Slytherin, Derek Digmore, and Draco didn't have the Manor and the lordship, he would have tried to get in there. As it were, they had a mutually beneficial agreement about trading information and sometimes small things no one would miss for shining Malfoy Galleons.

After the lunch he planned another visit to Knockturn Alley. Snape had refused to give him Thestral blood, saying that it was impossible to predict what kind of effect it would have on him if it accidentally touched his skin. He would have to be very careful while he was preparing the ink the ritual required for drawing the runes himself. Snape had offered to mix it, but Draco didn't like how shifty Snape acted while making the offer. At first he had outright refused to help him in the ritual, saying that even if it didn't present a danger if the foetus was already male, of which he wasn't so sure, it most likely wouldn't work because of the magical shield around the uterus. It seemed to be a very transparent excuse, since everyone knew that rituals didn't act like regular magic taught in school, and Snape of all people should be the one to know that.

Rituals were older and, admittedly, more complicated and specialised than charms or curses. That was exactly what made them so different – that they worked their magic slowly, step by step, leaving the subject enough time to adjust. That meant the shield, properly weakened by a dose of Podmore's potion, would eventually give way to the slow but insistent prodding of the energy set free by the ritual, and let it through. Only after a long argument had Snape agreed to conduct research regarding this theory and, if he found everything agreeable, prepare the requisites to the ritual. His willingness, though, still hadn't seemed very convincing. As a result, Draco figured it would do no harm to go back to Borgin and Burkes and buy some Thestral blood himself – just in case Snape 'changed his mind' about helping him at the last minute.

The Auror from last time was unlikely to be there again, to prevent him from getting what he wanted. And Draco was absolutely sure he would be able to deal with both Scott's presence and absence. Admittedly, he would have preferred the last one, but it was nothing he was about to worry over. The man had absolutely no significance in his eyes. He was just a Queer and a shop assistant, even if he was a pure-blood, it didn't mean Draco was to treat him as an equal. Though he couldn't figure for the life of him why a pure-blood wizard would willingly lower himself to accept a job as shop assistant – perhaps something to do with him being a Queer. In any case, it didn't matter whether he was there or not, as neither was Draco afraid of meeting him nor did he go there in the hopes of getting to see him, or something equally ridiculous.

Even if he saw and spoke to Scott, what could he possibly tell him? 'You had charmed me into dreaming about you, now you remove that spell, or else!' That sounded worse than something out of that talk show on WWN some of the Ministry wives were constantly blabbing about at Pansy's parties.

Though, on second thought, it was possible that his strange dreams and unnatural desires were caused by someone placing a curse on him.

Or he was poisoned after all!

Draco stopped midstride towards the Floo room, while trying to think of who would have had the opportunity to do either. When realisation finally dawned on him, it had lifted the heavy stone from his heart like having swallowed a handful of imaginary Fizzing Whizbees.

Of course! It had been the Death Eater-potion Snape had given him - the one that had allowed his mind

to think that the act he had been about to commit wasn't wrong and unnatural, and even to enjoy it to a certain level. The effect had been so similar to what he had been suffering from these last couple of days; he couldn't believe he didn't think of that sooner!

Draco's mind was spinning while he tried to sort out the information and solve the riddle. It was a known fact that most potions weren't without a side effect if imbibed with other ones. There was a whole branch of potion theory that concentrated solely on experiments aimed at discovering and documenting these effects. Though he had drunk the fertility potion much earlier, it had been (and would be until his death, if he remembered the explanation in Snape's book correctly,) still working in his body in order to create the progeny at the first opportunity. It was entirely imaginable that the two potions interacted with each other, modifying and reinforcing the final result.

Somewhere in the middle Scott had been thrown into the mix, too, because only that would have explained why the date-rape-potion had been only reactivated after their second encounter. Did that mean that only a repeat performance of that night would stop his misery? Draco sincerely hoped that it wasn't the case, because that was out of question. He was certain that Snape would be able to whip something up to heal him. It wouldn't hurt to stop by before he Apparated to Knockturn Alley, at any rate, so he would have the opportunity to inquire of Snape about the outcome of his research and gauge whether he needed to prepare for conducting the ritual without the Potions Master's help or not.

When he became aware that he had been pacing up and down before the fireplace, he stopped and forced himself to take several slow, deep breaths in the hope that it would have some kind of calming effect on him. His frustration, courtesy of his less than restful nights and depleting mornings after, was still present in the back of his mind. He hoped that he wouldn't have to wait too long for the antidote, but he hadn't practiced self-restraint for years only to get undone by a bit of anticipation. Now that he knew the solution, he was able to control the urge to jump into action immediately, as opposed to what he would have done when he had been younger. He would go through his day as planned, visit the Ministry and Borgin and Burkes, and would squish Snape in between if he still had a little time to spare. If not, tomorrow would be good enough, as he didn't expect for Snape to have the counter potion for him at hand. Until that time he would have to endure a bit more.

Now that he knew he wasn't at fault in what was happening to him, he was able to see everything from a more elated perspective. Not that he was actually looking forward to tonight! The fact that his wet dreams… nightmares weren't caused by his own mind but some foreign substance in his body didn't make them suddenly not wrong. Though it wasn't a Malfoy habit to deprive themselves of free pleasures if they didn't have to pay the piper afterwards, no real Malfoy would have thought of disgracing the

family name with such animalistic behaviour.

No, Draco Malfoy wasn't the man to do that either, but he would bear the hardship cast upon him with his dignity intact.

TBC

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Chapter 14: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

14 November 2005

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Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

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Chapter Fourteen

The day at the Ministry turned out to be profitable, and had Draco in unexpectedly good spirits by the end of it. After years of stalking the Ministry in half-official affairs, he had now succeeded in catching the Minister herself in the middle of a private conversation that had the potential of revealing blackmail material on her. Draco wouldn't have thought that it would come to this when he had left home. Nor would he have thought that Snape of all people would provide him with the information. The involvement of the Potions Master had taken him aback, as he hadn't known that Snape had kept in contact with anyone besides Draco and – as it had turned out - Podmore. He had always thought that the man was living in seclusion like a hermit, dedicating his life to his Potions studies.

Draco was just about to leave through the back exit in order to avoid the Dark detectors installed in the main foyer – as he would need to do for several years until the signature of the fertility potion vanished. He certainly hoped it would vanish.

His was coming from the Department of Magical Games and Sports, which he had visited to 'reserve' tickets from an acquaintance for the more popular upcoming matches, such as Montrose Magpies against the Holyhead Harpies. He still didn't believe how quickly a few free tickets could get him into the favour of a wizard with Quidditch-obsessed brats at home. And when the tickets weren't needed, he would just use a few to spend an afternoon under a Glamour Charm in the 'delightful' circle of his bodyguards. Not that he had the chance to indulge himself in this kind of luxury anymore. It had become too dangerous, and, frankly, he longed for the company of someone with whom the conversation would consist of more than 'Go fetch me a Butterbeer!'

Even if his protectors nowadays were a whole lot more intelligent than Crabbe and Goyle had been, they still weren't his equals. It was a funny thing, he thought, for a Malfoy to wish for someone who could be his equal instead of accepting the natural order that had placed everyone else beneath him. He was sure, if he had said something like that to his father, Lucius would have personally taken care of having these thoughts knocked out of his head. Draco, though he cringed inwardly at the memory of his late father's preferred educational methods, was of the same opinion. When his father had died, Draco had decided that he would honour him and the Malfoy blood by getting rid of these kinds of destructive thoughts.

Draco was about to enter the back staircase of the Ministry that led to a secluded Apparation point on the second level that was intended to be used by the Aurors as a shortcut when they had an alert. He was most surprised when he heard Snape's voice – smooth with the kind of persuasiveness only he was able to achieve – resonating from behind the corner. From the voice that answered his greeting, Draco

had been able to tell that he was keeping very prominent company. Draco inched forward cautiously until he was able to take a peek out from behind the corner. Luckily, he was in a dark hallway, and the speakers had their backs to him, standing before a closed office door. Draco wondered who would work in such a secluded place, clearly out of the main heartbeat of the Ministry. The position must have been one of the less important ones, like the Centaur Liaison Office, but if it was, why was the Minister visiting here?

“He isn’t there, Severus.”

The voice jolted Draco out of his musings and he adjusted his senses for observation. He would have time to find a meaning behind the words and gestures later, when he replayed the memory in the Pensieve he kept locked up in his office at home.

The tone was softer and richer than the newly teenaged voice of the know-it-all witch-wannabe Draco remembered from his school days. Even though she now occupied the highest position of command, Draco had always steered clear of the Mudblood Granger since the end of the war. In fact, he hadn't seen her up close since he had received his Order of Merlin, Third Class.

That had been another slap in the face. Draco had been the only one to be awarded with the Third Class; everyone else who had been rewarded for his or her efforts in the war had received either Second or First Class. All of the war heroes had been honoured with a plaque in the main hall of the Ministry, highest up were the ones with their First Class medals, then the ones with Second Class, and finally, at the bottom of the list was the lone plaque for “Draco Malfoy – Order of Merlin, Third Class – honoured for his indispensable services.” - right under Loony Lovegood, of course, as if his name hadn't been already bound enough to hers – against his will.

Draco Malfoy deserved more. After all, he was the one who helped to, well, not to tip the balance of power, because he wouldn’t have done what he had if he hadn't been one hundred percent sure he had chosen the winning side, but to enable finishing the bloodshed in the quickest way. War might be good for gaining financial and political influence, but with the power base the way it was then, Draco had known that he would never get into a good position to reap its fruits. Not to mention the radical depletion the war had caused in the selection of quality robes and chocolate, and the lowering of wine-prices in which the Malfoys had a significant percentage of their interests invested. There was no question that it had to end.

His move had also saved the Malfoy name from the delicate situation, in which it had been placed by unfortunate circumstances. Even Lucius Malfoy's portrait, which had acted nothing but grumpy ever since its appearing in the old study of his father, had been impressed with Draco's achievements. It was such a petty move by those Muggle-lovers to degrade him with the lowest possible reward. He should have got at least an Order of Merlin, Second Class. No wonder he still hated Granger to the degree that he didn't even try faking sincerity.

Unlike him, though, Snape looked rather cosy with her. Sucking up to Mudbloods now? Draco thought with horrified interest. Naturally, Snape himself was only a half-blood. It wasn't only that Snape's grandmother had been a maidservant, but also that his father had been a Muggle. Draco hadn't forgotten that, of course. It was just rather easy to overlook it, because even if he knew Snape's pedigree was beneath his own, he still looked up to him for his knowledge and genius in Potions and Dark Arts. He would never be able to forget that Snape had been the one – apart from his father – from whom Draco had learnt everything he knew about being a wizard. The other teachers in Hogwarts were useless – more like something of a joke. No wonder Draco had excelled in Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts – the two subjects Snape had taught – and not in the others.

Draco's thoughts digressed, so he snapped out himself of his thoughts to concentrate on what was happening. He knew that it didn't matter if his brain missed something, as the Pensieve would – no matter what – show him the slightest of details, but only if his senses had actually registered that detail, so he had to concentrate on it.

So far Draco had remembered Snape asking about the one inhabiting that office and – upon discovering that he wasn't there at the time - wanting to leave something for him. Whichever unimportant Ministry employee they were speaking about didn't interest Draco until he heard the name from Granger, because Snape carefully avoided using it. It was Harry. Draco couldn't think of anyone else Granger would be associated with within the Ministry with that name other than Potter. That naturally gained his interest.

He hadn't met Potter since after Lord Voldemort's demise. Even then he had only seen him from afar, as he had been too occupied with saving his own life, thank you very much, to gawk at his old school nemesis, even if he had been involved in a duel with the Dark Lord himself. Draco didn't know – and frankly, didn't much care about – what he had been doing since then. He knew that Potter hadn't died, because the Prophet would have definitely been full of the 'tragic event' for weeks afterwards, wringing out every aspect of it for higher sales rates. Later he had heard that Potter was working in the Ministry,

but his luck had been always with him and he hadn't encountered Saint Potter all these years.

For some reason Granger offered to take ‘the package’ for Snape, saying that the contents were not something one would leave unguarded in a building full of nosy people. For a second there, Draco thought that his presence had been discovered, but then Granger continued the conversation, and Draco doubted her to be cunning enough to try and use his eavesdropping for her benefit. At last she succeeded to sweet talk Snape into giving her the ‘package’, which then changed hands with a slight clinking noise. Draco guessed that it had several vials of potions in it.

Now there it was, the big question: why would Potter need potions from Snape that had to be kept guarded, or rather - as Draco reckoned – kept secret from the Ministry? From the body language of Granger, who hadn’t learnt to disguise her reactions like Snape, Draco figured that she wasn’t really happy to have them near her, which suggested that they were either dangerous or not something she was supposed to have with her. Was Potter taking illegal potions?

The next bit of conversation proved even more interesting – apart from the part where Snape continued to act all sugary towards Granger, as if he was just about to declare his undying love for her. Snape was most likely just acting, but Granger seemed not to suspect anything and Draco could tell that she was flattered by the Potions Master’s attention. Draco had the urge to gag, so he decided to ignore the sickening performance and concentrate on the conversation.

“How is he, Severus?” Granger asked, making big, anxious eyes at the Potions Master. “You know he doesn’t like to talk about it, but I’m worried about him.”

“He is going to adjust.” Snape hurried to pacify her. “He will have to continue with the treatment for a few years at least, until his body adjusts to the abstinence. I don’t speak with him regularly, but from what I hear from Sturgis, he still has relapses. He was never very good with self-control, and you know how he gets when he is frustrated. The suppressant and the antidepressant can help him only so much, even if he did take them regularly instead of when the mood strikes him.”

Draco didn’t want to believe his ears. Though Snape had composed his words rather ambiguously, the jist couldn’t be misunderstood. Potter had been on drugs. Apparently, Snape was supplying him with a potion that should have helped him stop using, but Potter proved not to be strong enough to give it up entirely and would get back into the habit from time to time. Now the then incomprehensible piece of

conversation he had overheard at Podmore's suddenly and quite surprisingly gained a meaning. It had fit with this one perfectly, so it must have been Potter they have been talking about.

Granger sighed and scowled minutely. "That's not good news. I was only just able to prevent the Auror department from discovering it, and prevent everyone save Shaklebolt from knowing the real reason why it got too dangerous for him to remain in their ranks, but if he continues to be careless… I don't know how long I will be able to hush this thing up."

Oh! That was even better! Not only was Potter on drugs, but the Minister was acting as his accomplice by using her position. If that wasn't a catch, then Draco didn't know what was!

"What if the media gets wind of it? I don't even want to think about what their reaction would be! Or the… other consequences." Apparently, Granger was just as aware of the precariousness of the situation she was in. Draco played with the idea of selling out the story to the Prophet – he still had his connections with Rita Skeeter, who, quite surprisingly, succeeded in remaining in her position as freelance writer who actually got published. She didn't have a very good reputation, so she couldn't get a permanent job, but the issues in which her articles appeared had always the highest sales.

But no, as attractive the idea seemed, Draco knew that he would able to gain much more if he kept the secret to himself – for now. When he was finished with Granger – and perhaps with Potter, too, he could still do an old acquaintance like Rita a little favour with it.

The rest of the conversation had gone much in the same manner, only reinforcing the deductions Draco had already made. He waited until their good-byes – at that time he was already sickened beyond means by the incessant flirting Snape had carried out. In his defence, Draco had to give it to Snape that his acting skills were superior. Had he not known better, even Draco would have been deceived into thinking that his affection was genuine. Though he was obviously only playing her, Draco still shuddered at the possibility to what degree this deception went. Granger wasn't stupid, even though she was a woman and a Gryffindor, and as such, she was most likely prone to follow her emotions rather than her sense. But why was Snape taking the trouble to flatter Granger? She already trusted him; he had been a member of her precious Order after all. And frankly, if killing Dumbledore hadn't shaken her faith in Snape, Draco doubted that being rude would. Ugh. There were just people for whom flattery wasn't becoming, and Snape was one of those people. Wasn't he ashamed of himself – puffing himself up like a peacock? Wasn't he too old for this monkey business? And how could Granger fall for it at all? He had been his teacher and could have been his father, for Merlin's sake!

Draco shook his head and sneaked out to the staircase, swiftly going up to the second level and Apparating to the restaurant where he had agreed to meet Digmore.

Why Snape would have any interest in getting friendly with the Minister all of a sudden was anyone's guess. Draco wasn't about to step between them; she wasn't that important anymore, and this new information dispersed in all the right places would definitely help to get rid of her at last. This might result in him and Snape ending up in two opposite sides of the scale, but Snape had dug his own grave by the fact that he hadn't thought it appropriate to confide in Draco about his machinations. That and his dubious consent in helping him with the ritual made him resent the man a bit. Draco decided to have a little conversation with him about his allegiances.

TBC.

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Chapter 15: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

23 November 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Vaughn Vance and Kathleen

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Chapter Fifteen

In the end, it took five days for Draco to pay Snape a visit. Mainly, because he was hard-pressed to find anything more about Potter's little problem before confronting Snape about it. Now, five days later, he still wasn't closer to unravelling the secret, and he needed proof if he wanted to convict Granger. His sources couldn't come up with any useful information about Potter yet, only that he had left Auror duty on a rather short notice because of health reasons. Unfortunately, his previous cases were still sealed, as they have been dealing with war-time crimes. That's why Draco had decided to delay confronting Snape about that, but with certain other matters he needed urgent assistance.

During those five days, he had taken a Dreamless Sleep potion every night, which had put a stop to his dreams, even though in the mornings he always felt a bit washed out. It was hard for him to stay up every morning immediately after waking up, but it was a necessary evil, since the potion had usually stopped working by that time. Had he fallen back asleep, the dreams would have inevitably come, as he had discovered on the first morning.

Now he was standing again on Snape's doorstep, and he couldn't help but feel a sense of déjà vu. Lately a certain kind of pattern seemed to have developed in his actions, as he found himself going to the Potions Master whenever he had some kind of problem. It wasn't really surprising. For years now Snape had been the only one besides his wife he had been able to confide in and could go to for advice - though Pansy seemed to have dropped out of this small elite circle as of late.

"What do you want? I have an appointment, so whatever it is, be quick with it!"

That was the first sentence Snape addressed to him after they had exchanged the usual greetings. Draco furrowed his brows. Snape must have been riled up by something to be this short with him.

“An appointment? Does it happen to be with Granger?” Draco risked a hunch.

Snape turned towards him and his movements stilled for a second, as if the lifting of his brow required his full mental capacity and his brain wasn’t able to maintain function to his other body parts. “Actually, it does. I don’t know how you figured it out, but I don’t see how it concerns you either.”

“She is a Mudblood! Of course, you are a blood-traitor and a half-blood yourself, so I really shouldn’t expect more from you, don’t you agree?” Draco was hissing angrily now, against his best intentions, as his attempt to bring himself under control crumbled and failed completely.

He knew he should have saved the information for a more sensible use at a later time, but the words were out of his mouth sooner than he could restrain his temper – that was happening with an alarmingly increasing frequency in the last three months, and Draco knew it to be the work of hormones. Still, he didn’t have to like it.

“I don’t know what you’re on about, Mr. Malfoy. And I thought you would have grown out of the petty name-calling; it is hardly politically correct. Sometimes, I seriously wonder how you expect to achieve any kind of position in politics as long as you continue to belittle powerful people, such as the Minister.”

Snape’s tone remained icily calm, as if he wasn’t affected by Draco’s slandering, merely correcting him on proper etiquette. If that hadn't done it, the last word would have brought Draco to his senses. Had he continued his rant, the next words out of his mouth would have been: “She won’t be Minister for long!”, but he was able to stop himself before he could give away that he had not only seen but also heard the conversation. So instead of giving away his secrets, he took a few deep breaths and considered what he wanted to say.

“I saw you with her the other day in the Ministry.”

“You did. So?” Snape didn’t seem to be ruffled by the admission.

“What have you been thinking?” Draco felt another surge of anger rising up inside him, but he was controlling it and kept his cool this time. “She might be the Minister, but she is still a Mudblood. Not to

mention, you could be her father." He saw Snape's brow beginning to rise again, but Draco didn't let him interrupt his speech. "Don't tell me that there is nothing between you two. I know what I saw! I am not blind."

Snape waited patiently until he was finished his diatribe, even though he was noticeably in a hurry to make his appointment, before he answered.

"I will not tell you there is nothing between us, because that wouldn't be true. She was one of my best students for seven years, even if her attitude drove me mad. After that, we worked together for three months and lived under the same roof. So I guarantee you that I know her quite well. But," Snape lifted one hand with the palm outwards when he saw Draco opening his mouth, "I know what you are implying and there is no, was no, nor will ever be any kind of romantic involvement between the two of us."

Draco shook his head. Did Snape really think a Slytherin would be that gullible?

"I saw you holding her hand."

"That was a handshake."

"And smiling – smiling at her!"

Snape didn't even try to pretend anymore that he wasn't annoyed with Draco. He would have been able to cut diamonds with his voice when he spoke next.

"Of course I was smiling. She was a Gryffindor, in case you have already forgotten. If I had maintained my… normal expression, she would have either thought that I am angry with her or that something is 'wrong' with me, and wouldn't have ceased to try and question me about which one it was. Believe me, I have been there and done that."

“I don’t believe you.”

“I assure you that I have no interest in her person. I was merely being civil. Alas, I’m not willing to continue this ridiculous discussion any longer. I’m sure there was a real reason for your visit, so I would appreciate if you could kindly get down to it, so I am able to arrive in time for my appointment.” The number of stressed words usually grew in direct proportion with Snape’s annoyance level.

Draco saw that it was no use trying to make Snape talk about this anymore if he was determined to lie to him. He was only succeeding in making him angry. Still, he couldn’t believe that Snape thought Draco would actually fall for that load of nonsense he had been spouting. That aside, the Potions Master was right. There were more pressing matters to his visit than a silly love affair.

“There are two reasons, actually. One is that I wanted to ask what you have found out about the ritual.”

“Yes, the ritual.” Snape grimaced. It seemed to Draco as if he didn’t want to speak about that.

“I have consulted Healer Podmore in addition to several books, and we have agreed that you shouldn’t do it. I couldn’t find anything specific, as there have been no instances of performing this ritual in the circumstances you are in – that is neither knowing if it is actually necessary nor being unable to determine it. Also, the magical barrier around the foetus would without doubt interfere with the ritual, even if its nature is different than that of a spell. The point is, no one would be able to tell how, before it actually took place, and I don’t take you for the kind of person to conduct dangerous experiments on yourself and what could determine the future fate of your inheritance.”

Draco didn’t answer. His scowl started the moment Snape had warned him off of the ritual, and it just deepened as he listened to his elaborate description about why he shouldn’t do it. The whole explanation sounded suspiciously as if Snape had made it all up; it didn’t add anything to what he had already told Draco. As he had expected, it was clear that the promise of research was just a stall tactic to placate him into idleness, while Snape was pretending to help – and it wasn’t a very convincing pretence either.

Draco didn’t know what he should do; he needed time to think about it in private. He knew, though, that Snape expected him to object and start arguing with him, so Draco humoured him, and then he made it

look as if the Potions Master was able to convince him not to do it. Snape didn't seem to suspect that it was all an act, but Draco thought it safer if he didn't dwell on the topic, so he came to address the subject of his other problem.

"The other thing I came for is an antidote to that inhibition-lowering potion you gave me. I know that normally the effect shouldn't be permanent, but it seems as if it has somehow combined its power with the fertility potion – at least that's my guess, as I wasn't taking anything else at the time, not even a Pepper-up potion."

"I don't understand." Snape gave him an impatient look. Draco really didn't care to give a more elaborate explanation, but it seemed as if it wouldn't be spared of him.

"I started to have these dreams recently…" Draco's gaze met anew with Snape's raised brow, but he got no questions, just a silent prompt to continue with his explanation, which he did with a sigh.

"I dream about that night, more specifically, I get these nearly irrepressible urges to partake in that kind of… sexual activity. This is clearly not normal. The symptoms are the same as when I first took it, therefore it must be the work of that potion."

Draco finished speaking, but Snape didn't open his mouth for several seconds afterwards. He looked as if he had to restrain himself from showing his feelings, which didn't happen frequently, as Snape was usually quite adept at self-control. Draco didn't like the implications his mind supplied for him about the cause of that at all.

When Snape finally started to speak, he gave the answer as willingly as if Draco had asked him for his favourite cauldron. And then the answer he deigned to provide him with didn't seem to make much sense either.

"It wasn't a drug. It was just a placebo."

That must have been a seventh year potion, because Draco wasn't familiar with it. So he asked Snape to explain it to him more clearly. Snape, seeing the confusion in his eyes, sighed and switched into

teacher-mode.

“In general, a placebo is a substitute for the real thing. It has no actual effect. What I gave you was just a general antibiotic mixed with herbal liqueur, as I figured that it wouldn’t be fortunate if you contracted some kind of STD while you were on your holy escapade. I didn’t think you would actually go through with it, but you proved to be more stubborn and Gryffindorish than I gave you credit for.”

Snape seemed to have finished his explanation come rant, but all Draco was capable of was blinking at him. What did he mean by not real? He nearly started panicking; the only reason he didn’t was that he realised that Snape was lying to him – the same way as he had been lying about the ritual, even though Draco hadn't yet figured out why. Apparently, Snape took his lack of answer as an offence, because he grabbed his cloak from the chair, put it on himself, and started to do up the buttons, while giving him a sneer usually reserved for Gryffindors only – for which Draco now apparently qualified as well.

“Did you really think I would risk storing highly illegal Dark potions just for their sentimental value? You know as well as I do that nowadays people get arrested simply for possessing them.”

Snape scowled and looked at the clock on the wall.

“And now, if you will excuse me, I have to go. I am already late, as it is. If you have any questions feel free to give me a fire call another time.”

With that Snape escorted a still very confused Draco to the perimeters of his wards and then Apparated away without another word.

TBC

A/N: I am sorry for the lateness; it was entirely my fault for re-writing the chapter in the last moment. And, yes, I know it is shorter than the previous chapters.

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Chapter 16: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

23 November 2005

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Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn Vance.

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Chapter Sixteen

Draco didn't understand how the hell he hadn't realised the change in Snape's demeanor sooner. There must have been a pretty complicated and potent kind of magic cast on Snape for him to turn so completely against Draco: to neutralise the power of the Malfoy blood and change his personality to the point where he would betray him. That, or the perpetrator was another member of the Malfoy family; in which case the blood bond was not an issue, more like a convenient tool to make Snape's betrayal easier to achieve. It was still surprising to Draco, because even if Snape hadn't grown to like Draco during the years having spent with playing the role of his star pupil a bit better than others of his family, he knew that he was the most sensible choice to associate with out of the various Malfoys who had the necessary power to protect the Potions Master from the rest of his kindred. In retrospect, Draco admitted that he

had been a fool not to demand from Snape that he pledge his loyalty to him, in order to pre-empt a situation exactly like this one from occurring.

Draco was certain that Snape had been lying to him the whole time he had been there and who knew what lies he had told before that. Now that he thought about it, it was entirely possible that Snape made him drink that potion with the intention of harming him, and the full knowledge that it would have this effect on him – even though he must have done some pretty quick thinking, as Draco had just told him about the fertility potion a few hours prior. Driving someone into madness was one way to incapacitate one's enemy, so that explained the aim of the potion. Scaring him into believing that the ritual would harm the foetus would have given a fifty percent chance that he would give birth to a female child, thus cutting him off from his inheritance. Perhaps Snape had even known about the possibility of his and the foetus' magic proving incompatible, and, by not telling Draco, he had managed to set another obstacle before him.

He knew that he couldn't trust Snape anymore, but he had to keep up the appearance for the sake of his own safety. For as long as the person manipulating the situation believed that he still trusted the Potions Master, he or she would try to conduct his or her plan through him not by some other means. Snape, at least, was a factor Draco now knew and expected, even if he was reduced having to guess the details of his interference, as he had no way of ascertaining how much the person behind this knew about his condition or what measures he or she planned to take short of forcing Snape to drink Veritaserum. It was entirely possible that this person had access to the Potions Master only once in the past when he or she had ordered him to prevent Draco from retaining his inheritance with every means he could think of. This person had most likely forsaken any further contact with Snape, not wanting to risk discovery by Draco, who was known to appear at Snape's place at any given time of the day without notifying him in advance about his impending visit.

Draco had maintained this habit in order to prevent his attacker from contacting Snape, and had eventually asked the Potions Master for a vow in order to preserve his secrets. Most likely it wasn't of much use, as Draco couldn't bring himself to insist on an Unbreakable Vow, only a weaker variant of it. As stupid as it sounded, he didn't want Snape's death on his conscience, because the Unspeakable Vow would have killed him when he was forced to break it – as he undoubtedly would – even though the Potions Master's untimely death would prevent Draco's pregnancy from being found out. Fortunately, the fact that Snape was able to make even this weaker vow proved that he hadn't given Draco away yet.

At least he knew that he could still trust Podmore. He was a Healer, and as such, he was bound by the Hippocratic Oath, which was just as unbreakable as the Unbreakable Vow. Draco knew that, as some Muggles dared changing the centuries old text and then Healers also started to use the altered version

instead of the original one when initiating their apprentices, it now also contained patient confidentiality. This was the only Muggle influence on the wizarding world that most pure-bloods approved of since it spared them the use of an additional spell, though they wouldn't actually acknowledge that the change was instigated by Muggles.

As Snape had refused to help him with his dreams, Draco continued to rely on Dreamless Sleep potion every night, even though Podmore hadn't advised taking it too frequently, preferably not at all during his pregnancy. Draco read the instances regarding the effects of the potion on pregnancy in several medical books, but he couldn't find anything other than the usual litany of unbeneficial consequences of long term administration of the potion on the sleeping patterns of the recipient, such as minor addiction to the potion, insomnia if not taken, and the reduced stress tolerance because of the lack of the REM phase, whatever that meant – the book had been written by some bloody pseudo-scientist Mudblood witch who had apparently thought she would be able to find a Muggle solution for every wizarding problem. As it were, Draco was still feeling better than he had while he had the dreams about Scott.

While continuing to visit Snape randomly during the day, Draco also started studying everything necessary for the gender-changing ritual. He had two other routine appointments with Podmore, at which, apart from maintaining that both he and 'his baby', as Podmore liked to call it, were healthy, had been useful, for the Healer had found a spell for revealing the exact time of the conception, which had finally worked on Draco. It had also been determined that even though he had taken the potion to help with his magic-incompatibility regularly, the magical shield around the foetus still hadn't diminished one bit. That wasn't the best news, but Draco was still determined. Finally, he had succeeded in getting the Thestral blood from Borgin and Burkes via owl order, using the old code language his father had developed to make their correspondence illegible to everyone else in the rare occasion that the owl was intercepted.

Draco spent long hours in the circle of the family portraits inquiring after the ritual, and found several of his ancestors to be very helpful. He wanted to know if the ritual had been performed on him when he was just a foetus in his mother's belly, but was resigned to the fact that he would never actually know the truth. Unfortunately both Lucius' and his grandfather's life-sized portraits had proved adamant in concealing that information from him. He had always wondered where his mother's portrait had gone after her death. Was it even in the Manor? Most likely, she would have been the only one inclined to answer his questions and also, Draco missed her wit and her practical advice on skincare.

In the weeks prior to the predetermined time of the gender-changing ritual, Pansy had continued to give him a wide berth. Draco was a bit wary of her absence, because when she was there and pestering him about parties and shopping trips that she was missing out on until her child was born, he could at least

keep an eye on - and out for - her. Though the wards would have told him if she had left the manor or had invited someone Draco hadn't approved of, her absence was a little disconcerting; even though Draco was glad he didn’t have to listen to her.

As it was, he was busy enough without her pestering. He received daily reports from Madam Prunes, which were given to him in writing when he had stopped visiting Pansy every morning after the Veritaserum-incident. That way Draco knew she wasn’t lacking anything and was healthy, though most likely bored out of her mind. In the few times he had seen her from afar, he was again and again taken aback by how huge she had already become, even though Draco was only starting to sport a tiny lump that wouldn’t disappear anymore when he sucked in his stomach. Draco was thankful that it was easy to conceal even without glamour charms by not wearing skin-tight trousers – those had started not to fit him, anyhow - or putting on loose robes.

For the week of the ritual Draco had arranged for Pansy and Madam Prunes to be away in one of the Malfoy summer residences. He had spoken with her personally, and she had agreed on the spot. She had seemed to be glad about the prospect of getting away; as if she was afraid of something there she hadn't wanted Draco to know about. He wondered if he was the one she was afraid of, even though he repeatedly tried to reassure her that he didn’t have any untoward plans with her and her child, or was it something else.

It had taken a week for him to arrange all the necessary precautions: to set up wards around and in the residence that were at least halfway as decent as the ones on the manor, and to relocate enough guards onto the new place. Even after this, he wasn’t entirely satisfied with the safety precautions, mainly because those wards weren’t linked to him personally. But he didn’t want Pansy and Madam Prunes to be present during the ritual, so he had to reassure himself that it was only for a week, and the secret of her absence wouldn’t be made public knowledge in such a short time.

He didn’t trust his guards in that matter, though the majority of them would be most likely be stuffed with the sufficient amount of Galleons, which would make them hold their mouths, but there was always one for whom it wasn’t enough, even though they knew they would lose their employment by selling the story to the newspapers. If Draco had had his say and there weren’t legal obstacles that prevented demanding some kind of pledge of loyalty from his guards, which bound them magically to himself, he would have insisted on it as a requirement of employment. As it were, this was one of those cases when Draco resented most deeply the cessation of feudalism.

When it was time, Draco checked the wards one more time and put up the last barrier that would

prevent anyone – even house-elves – from entering the room he had chosen for the purpose of the ritual. Unfortunately, the Ministry had forbidden the use of protecting charms based on the Dark Arts, so Draco had been forced to dismantle the majority of the family wards. The rest of them were too antic and too interwoven with each other to allow them to be taken off securely, and Finite Incantatem almost never worked. Draco had been forced to employ a large and not exactly cheap crew of curse breakers in order to fulfil the obligations bestowed upon him by the new government, but after they had declared their work done and had given the Ministry an official list about the wards they hadn't been able to neutralise, no one had bothered him about them anymore. Of course some of those wards were cast with the blood of the family, so only members of the family would have been able to remove them. The curse breakers had kindly agreed to leave that fact out of their report.

Thus, the Manor hadn't been left entirely without protection, and Draco was now able to invoke some of those wards. He wouldn't have risked it every day, but the occasion called for special measures. It was a lucky coincidence that the ritual had to be started so late in the evening. The Ministry employee watching over Dark activities was most likely already dozing or using the solitude of his night shift to listen to some South-American Quidditch match broadcasted over the Wizarding Wireless Network, and by the time the new shift came, he would have the wards down again. He had to rely on that, because unfortunately he didn't have connections inside the Department of the Magical Law Enforcement – an aching deficiency, but those people, all of them chosen with the help of those new personality tests, were virtually unbribable.

Draco entered the room and locked the door behind him. The ink made of the Thestral blood and other, less offensive ingredients, was in a small pot he was carrying in his hand. For the first night – the initiation – he wouldn't need anything else. He only had to draw the starting symbols on the naked skin of his stomach using nothing else than his finger. It would have been more preferable if another person did the drawing, as he only saw what he was doing in the large mirror he had placed for that reason into the middle of the room, but he had practiced them enough that he wouldn't make a mistake while doing it. The symbols would have to remain on his skin for the length of the ritual, so he would have to abstain from his routine personal hygiene, such as bathing, for that time. Draco wasn't looking forward to that, but it wasn't as if he hadn't already done worse in order to ensure his inheritance.

He was only wearing his richly coloured, thick dressing robe and a pair of soft, grey trousers under it, because he didn't want to stand around naked while his upper body had to remain uncovered for the duration of the ritual - even though no one else would see his nakedness. The truth was that with the latest developments he had become uncomfortable with looking at exposed male bodies, even his own. That aside, he had to lower the fire, since the ink would have clotted together – thanks to the Thestral blood - if the air was any dryer and warmer. He shuddered when he took off the robe and the chilly temperature hit his back. He felt his nipples harden into pebbles and goose-bumps form on the skin of

his arms, making the fine hairs stand on end.

Draco closed his eyes for one second and breathed in slowly and deeply a few times to gather himself. He opened them the instant the grandfather clock signalled midnight. It was funny that the conception had fallen exactly to that minute of the night when both of the clock's hands would point at the number twelve – but things like that were not exactly unexpected when magic was at work. Draco would have liked to think that it was a good omen, signalling that his undertaking would bring success. His decision strengthened with that thought in mind. He stepped in front of the mirror with the inkpot in his hand, and dipped a finger into the small jar until he felt the cold, slick material surround it.

He started to draw the runes on himself – beginning in the middle, at his navel and advancing slowly to the sides in a growing spiral pattern in which they followed each other counter-clockwise. The magical ink stuck onto his skin as if it had already became a part of it as soon as Draco finished a rune. It had a strong, metallic smell mixed with the too-sweet odour of decaying rose petals (even though there was no such ingredient in it) and the stench of cockroaches. Every line on his skin, even the ones he had drawn there first, was shining wetly in the crimson of the magical blood – similarly to those disgusting Muggle cosmetics Mudblood witches liked to smear onto their mouths.

When he had finished the spiral pattern a half hour later, Draco lowered his hand and closed his eyes to rest for a moment, then gathered his concentration for the final touch: creating the finishing circle around the spiral. He was already past the hardest part; this one would be like children's finger-painting as opposed to the complicated symbols he was already finished with. The simpler characters in the outer circle were ones he had been already acquainted with from Ancient Runes class. They didn't even count as Dark Magic, as their only purpose was to form a protective circle around the middle to prevent accidental damage to the pattern by everyday activities. This was a more recently developed part of the ritual that allowed the recipient to avoid being chained to an altar for a week without food, clothes and unable to move or take care of their basic needs.

Draco lifted the inkpot and was about to dip his finger into it again when a sudden tremor shook the whole foundations of the Manor. Thanks to the reactivated wards Draco had bound to himself, he was able to feel that the vibration wasn't only restricted to the physical world, but also the magical core of the ancestral place. The wards gave him mixed signals about the cause. He tried desperately to concentrate, but couldn't make out half of them. The only thing he knew was that something fundamental to the Manor's magic had just gone wrong in the matter of mere seconds.

A loud rumble had interrupted his train of thought, and the centuries ago magically affixed plaster-work

began falling from the high ceiling all around him like the shattering of overweight snowflakes. His first thought was of self-preservation – he had to get away from there, flee as fast as he could, even though the ritual wasn't finished yet.

He heard loud, yelling voices from the first floor - there were strangers in the previously empty Manor. Someone had managed to break through the wards and invade his home. Draco would have liked to believe that the timing was coincidental, but experience suggested that the trespassers came most likely with the intent of disrupting him in the middle of the ritual. The people outside were either from the Ministry after sensing him practicing Dark Arts, or they had been sent by the one who had Snape under his or her thumb.

Either way - it didn't bode well.

While his mind was sorting through the alternatives, Draco's body moved as if on autopilot. He grabbed his dressing robe from the chair it had been deposited on and pulled his wand out. He couldn't put on the robe since the protective circle wasn't finished yet, so he shoved it out of the way with a quick move.

The voices from outside stilled, but Draco could feel the intruders through the wards; they were getting closer. They were doubtlessly using a detection spell to find him. For several seconds the only sound Draco was able to hear reverberating in the darkness of the huge room was his own laboured breathing while he was searching for the secret door between the lush carpets and complicated patterns covering the walls. He didn't know if there was actually one there or not; the only thing he knew was that the Manor had more trapdoors and secret passages than public ones. Every generation of Malfoys living there had built their own set, since the ones put there by their ancestors were most likely heavily warded even against them. Since Draco was now the only real Malfoy living in the Manor, though, the house and the magic, no matter who created it originally, were bound to protect him against every outside threat, while his being the Lord Malfoy was the reason why he had been able to activate the wards.

Finally, he found the hidden door and stood before it, trying to get a feel of the magic that was operating it. It had been so strongly warded or cursed centuries ago that he didn't dare touch it with any conventional lock-opening spell. He quickly worked out what kind of detection charms he should use on it, and readied himself to cast the first one, when the door suddenly burst open – from the other side.

To say that it was a shock to him was the understatement of the century. Draco took one step backwards, wand firmly pointed at the lone figure emerging out of the darkness behind the new opening - and then nearly got another heart attack, as the faint candlelight in the room revealed the well-known face out of his dreams right before him.

The dark-haired man took another step out towards Draco, who stood frozen into the place. Scott's gaze shifted not so subtly to take in his figure from head to toe, and then it came to a halt on the runes smeared onto his bare stomach.

"Bugger! I thought he was having me on."

The words muttered in disbelief seemed so uncharacteristic for the current situation that they jolted Draco out of his shock. In that moment the yelling from outside resumed, and that seemed to make Scott be able to wrench his gaze away from the glistening design drawn on its human canvas, and look into Draco's eyes. His gaze bore directly into his mind; Draco became dizzy alone from the intensity of raw power; he felt like he had been caught in an invisible net and was being pulled inescapably towards the other man.

Scott then grabbed his arm and conjured something out of his robe pocket - a Butterbeer cap that was promptly pressed to the skin of Draco's chest. In the next instant he felt the pull of a Portkey being activated, and before he could figure out what was happening, he found himself in a brightly lit office that was definitely not any part of his home. Scott dropped his hold on him and slumped tiredly into a garish red couch, closing his eyes and starting to massage his temples with a weary sigh, seeming to lose his interest in Draco.

The sudden silence and stillness was disorienting. Draco realised at once that he was still holding the inkpot in one hand, his wand in the other, his bare stomach was glistening red with the runes that remained miraculously undamaged, and the cap, now useless, was still stuck idiotically to his naked torso, like a cheap toy badge of honour. He lifted his wand to flick it away; it landed with a metallic sound and rolled under the desk covered with parchments.

The noise made the dark-haired wizard open his eyes and look at Draco, who stood there before him, the tip of his wand now pointed at his host.

“Where am I? What do you want from me?” he levelled the question at Scott, who groaned and stood up. Draco didn’t like that now he had to look up in order to maintain eye contact with him.

“Relax, Malfoy. You are in my office, and I don’t want anything from you. I have rescued you, if you haven't noticed.”

“Your office? Just who the hell are you? And rescued? What from?”

Draco’s row of questions elicited a scowl. He knew he had sounded petulant and childish, but how else whould he get the explanation for what had just happened? Surprisingly, though, even if the other man felt irritated by his questioning, he proved to be willing to give him some answers.

“From the Aurors. It was a lucky coincidence that I was in the Auror Headquarters when they received the tip that you would conduct some kind of hare-brained ritual tonight. Didn’t I tell you not to purchase Thestral blood?” Draco got an eye-roll directed at him. “Anyhow, you were lucky that I got there before them… and that I didn’t take my usual dose, so I was able to get through all that Dark Magic. I thought they had taken care of that years ago…”

The last sentence was mumbled tiredly, but Draco didn’t let himself be distracted by the apparent exhaustion his self-proclaimed rescuer was displaying, nor the short surges of power that started flooding the place with raw magic. Though the latter had proved harder to ignore with every passing minute. It made him dizzy, just like in the Manor – just like in the Copenhagen club.

In spite of feeling a bit harassed and out of his element at that moment, Draco tried to paste together the incomplete pieces of information he was able to gather in order to make some sense in the chaos of the last… half hour? Was it even that long since he had felt the first shockwave in the wards? Come to think of it, now he couldn’t feel them at all.

Either he was too far away from the Manor, or they had been deactivated - perhaps both.

A groan had again demanded his attention, and Draco’s gaze focused on the other wizard, who was currently staggering towards a locked cabinet – not that it offered any kind of security, since the key was

still in the lock, he had only to turn it in order to open the case. Draco's eyes followed Scott's movements as he fished out a potion bottle, and lifted it to his mouth to swallow the contents in a quick, smooth move. He grimaced shortly, and then sighed contentedly.

"You still didn't answer my question. Who are you?" Draco demanded, his mind still a bit fuzzy from all the excess magic that permeated the very air around him, but as the seconds tickled by, it slowly but surely started to dissipate, leaving Draco with more control over his senses and clearing his thoughts.

Who was this man? The office he had claimed to be his didn't seem like it belonged to Borgin and Burkes, and the Scott (Simon!) McNeil that worked there surely wouldn't get free entrance to the Auror Headquarters, only to accidentally overhear as someone gave an account of suspicious activities about to be conducted by Draco Malfoy at his residence. There was also the matter of the potion. It triggered a vague connection with something he had recently experienced that started an unpleasant vibration in the deepest recesses of his mind. If that wasn't enough, it seemed as if the mental vibration had began to infect reality because as Draco looked back at the man currently occupying his thoughts, his features also seemed to be quivering.

Draco blinked once, but his mind instantly supplied him with the explanation: this was what it looked like when Glamour Charms collapsed, because of an outside source breaking them. When the illusion ended Scott turned, fully facing Draco, and lifted a brow.

"Do you recognise me now, Malfoy? Or do you still need to be told?"

Draco shook his head no, though even he didn't know if it was to answer one of the questions or because his mind refused to believe the vision that was presented to him.

"Potter?" he breathed just before his eyes rolled back, and his muscle control deserted him to leave his body to the mercy of gravity.

TBC

A/N: When I said that I would post twice this week, I didn't mean it like this: that I would skip last week.

Sorry, you know: last minute changes and then I got myself into a crisis over how I should write the next chapter (ch18). But I think I'm going to be able to keep my usual posting schedule, so sorry for you people who expected more. But, hey! There is Harry at last! ^^

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Chapter 17: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

23 November 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn Vance.

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Chapter Seventeen

Draco regained consciousness to the sensation of a warm, damp cloth moving carefully over the surface of his stomach. At first he didn't connect the sensation to anything, but then he remembered what he had been doing before he had been abducted, and, with a gasp, he tried to sit up. There was a warm hand on his bare shoulder, pushing him back into his horizontal position. Draco obeyed it, as his sudden

movement induced a sharp pain behind his temples, so he resolved not to make any more sudden moves until it was gone.

His eyes opened to the too bright and therefore blurry image of a dark-headed man looming over his prone form. Potter – he connected the sight with his last memories. He saw a hand holding a soggy cloth retreating from his belly, where it had been slowly wiping away all traces of the ritual that still marked his skin with a red smudge.

“What are you doing?” His voice came from his throat as a feeble croak. And it sounded altogether too defensive.

Potter looked at his face, and then scowled, as if Draco had done something to him. By then his vision had cleared enough to be able to make out the other man’s expressions.

“I’m clearing this thing off of you. And saving your life, by the way.”

“Oh.” Draco didn’t have any other response to that. If he had been a little less tired, he might have pondered about, or at least asked why his life was in need of saving. However, he was drained to the point of not caring, though he couldn’t think of what exactly had exhausted him so much. Fortunately, his silence prompted Potter to supply him a more detailed explanation.

“You nearly succeeded in doing yourself in, Malfoy. I don’t know what’s wrong with your brain. Did you not understand when Snape told you that the ritual would be dangerous? If you don’t value your life above your riches, I would have thought at least you’d care about the life of your baby.” The tone was soft, but reprimanding nonetheless, as if Potter was speaking to a very ill person. And Draco didn’t like the sound of how Potter had said the word ‘baby’. As if he had the right to criticise Draco about how he was handling this thing with the pregnancy – exactly like Snape and Podmore’s reaction. Draco couldn’t understand why everyone thought it would be anyone else’s concern.

“How do you know about… all that?” The question wasn’t very eloquent, but Draco didn’t want to speak about what Potter thought he did wrong.

“Snape.” Naturally, Draco thought, the traitor. “He will be here soon with the Doc.”

Draco panicked for a second. He couldn’t trust Snape. He couldn’t let that man anywhere near him while he was in this vulnerable state. At least Potter seemed to be his usual Gryffindor-self, even if he was in contact with Snape, his prized (and sneered-upon) honour wouldn’t let Draco be subjected to the Potions Master’s mercy, would it? Another near-panic gripped his throat when he thought about the other person Snape was apparently bringing with him. Then his sluggish mind worked out that it was most likely Podmore Potter had been referring to as “the Doc”. Podmore was still on his side, wasn’t he?

The seconds tickled away in an unspoken tension. Draco didn’t like the silence and the waiting, and he wanted to know what had happened, anyway, so he asked Potter to tell him.

The other man sighed and gave him a look. Draco recognised with a start how familiar that look seemed, even though the face associated with it was a different one. Great! Potter even managed to look like Scott when he was not wearing the Glamour. Draco cringed at the realisation that he was Scott, but he thought it wasn’t the right time to think about that if he didn’t want to risk another near-panic attack and have a major nervous breakdown with his childhood enemy and cause of that breakdown in attendance. He closed his eyes and resolved to concentrate on the explanation Potter launched himself into.

“As I told you before, I was at the Auror Headquarters when an anonymous tip came in that there was something fishy going on in Malfoy Manor. I managed to sneak away and Apparated into the premises while Kingsley was most likely still in the middle of putting a team of Aurors and Hit wizards together out of people who have the appropriate experience to deal with the wards on your house. I knew what might be going on, since Snape had told me a few things previously. He had asked me to keep an eye out for you in Borgin and Burkes and prevent you from buying Thestral blood. I saw your order, by the way, but I wasn’t able to do anything about it, since it had already got into the wrong hands. But it might be of consolation to you that I don’t think anyone else knows that you intended the ritual for yourself. Where is your wife, anyhow?”

“I have sent her away.”

Draco had been still digesting the information when the non-sequitur question took him unawares, and he answered it before the thought had occurred to him that it was no concern of Potter. To prevent any

other slip, he decided to continue with the questioning himself.

“How did you manage to break into the Manor? The Dark magic should have killed you as soon as you attempted to. Come to think of it, you came through the back exit, too…”

Potter seemed to be uncomfortable, but then, after a short time, he decided to take the path of honesty and tell Draco.

“I can… sort of see it. If I go without my medicine for too long, that is. But in this case it came handy, since I was also able to see that those rune-things were about to break through your magic and kill your child and then you too. Had I not wiped them away, you’d be already dead.”

Draco paled at the revelation. The meaning of the first part of Potter’s speech didn’t even register in the light of his near-death until a bit later. But by then he was already surrounded by the two other people whom they had been waiting for and he had more urgent things to discuss with them than Potter’s apparent freaky ability.

Snape and Podmore had arrived through the Floo, and Podmore didn’t even stop for a quick greeting before he had already brandished his wand and startled Draco with the batch of sudden medical spells hurled at him. As he tried to defend himself before he realised that he wasn’t going to be hurt he also realised that his wand was out of his reach. Potter must have put it away somewhere, because Draco distinctly remembered having it in his hand before he had fainted because he had been overwhelmed by the concentrated magic in the office, and Potter’s unmasking. Come to think of it, Draco only noticed then that the power permeating the tiny room was now on a considerably lower level, even though Podmore was constantly casting.

Suddenly, a sharp cry and a loud zap filled in the office, and in the next moment Podmore dropped his wand and started to shake his wand hand the same way he did when he wanted to free himself from the fat and particularly clingy Pygmy Puff he kept in his practice and, for a reason incomprehensible to Draco, called ‘Damn Tribble’. It turned out that one of the spells had backfired on him.

“Hm.” Podmore cradled his chin in his other palm while he examined his wand hand for any damage. “It looks like you managed to worsen your situation,” he told Draco in a clinical tone. “That spell was safe to

cast on you until now…"

"If you say, 'Fascinating', I will personally strangle you!" Snape stepped up next to Podmore and fixed him with a withering glare. The other wizard straightened himself after picking up his wand.

"I wouldn't say that!" he told Snape indignantly, but Draco couldn't get away from the notion that there was something going on he didn't understand. But then Podmore had seemed always a bit funny; for example, he had repeatedly addressed Potter with his father's name, even after he had told him that he didn't fancy being called 'Jim'. At least, he didn't show any other sign of going senile, so it must have been an inside joke. Draco wouldn't have liked to place his life and inheritance into the hands of a mentally addled person.

"What I wanted to say was that something – I presume the ritual – had started to dissolve the protective barrier around your child. Now it is back, and stronger than before. That's what you get for not listening to your elders."

Draco swallowed and the thought occurred to him that perhaps Snape hadn't been deliberately trying to sabotage his efforts, but protecting him. But if that were true, would he need to revise his conclusions about the other aspects of his old mentor's betrayal, too? He was just too tired to think about that.

After having exposed Draco to the humiliation of having to lie down on the couch and having his abdomen pressed and prodded repeatedly before the eyes of Snape and Potter, Podmore let him off of the hook and allowed him to get dressed. Draco wished for nothing more than that; unfortunately, all the clothes at his disposal were already on him. In the end Potter found an old robe for him to wear – it looked like a worn standard issue Auror's dress uniform, which it most likely was.

Draco put it on with a slight disgust at the coarse material, but he felt shamefully appreciative for Potter's support at the same time – and by that he didn't only mean the robe. He tried to quell the feeling before it could get any further, but he could already feel it grating on his defences. No wonder he had gone off of the handle when Potter accidentally touched his skin while helping him into the robe.

"Get your filthy paws off of me!" he barked, and then promptly looked away, telling himself that he couldn't smell Potter's aftershave that had become so familiar after only two occasions in which he had

had the opportunity to familiarise himself with it.

Potter retreated with a look of surprise in his eyes, and then promptly offered to make a visit to the Aurors' office, so he could find out what had happened in the Manor and if it was safe for Draco to return. Draco watched as he put up the Glamour Charm again, and shuddered when he turned towards them and gave Draco a last look of concern. He wondered briefly if it was safe to let Potter go while he stayed there with Snape and Podmore, but in that moment he just wanted Potter to leave him alone and not affect him the way he was. He hoped that the other two didn't notice that; unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

"You seem a bit peevish, Draco. Have you been sleeping well?" Podmore asked with a lifted brow after Potter's hasty disappearance.

Draco was, frankly, startled by the question. Had Snape told the Healer about the dreams? He looked from one to the other in a state between alarm and irritation, but he wasn't able to read either man's expression well enough to hazard a guess.

"Yes, thank you. I am taking Dreamless Sleep potion." He decided it was safe to tell that much.

"Dreamless Sleep?" Snape frowned. "How frequently have you been taking it?"

Draco turned towards him, and considered not answering, but then he reckoned that he had to keep up the appearance of not suspecting anything about Snape.

"Every night for the last ten days. So you don't have to worry, I am sleeping quite well." Draco bore his gaze into Snape's eyes, and put a particular stress on the last word, hoping that Snape would catch on to the meaning and not mention anything about those dreams in Podmore's presence – and certainly not in Potter's, who would be coming back any minute. He had been concentrating on conveying his message; therefore the twin yells of incredulity caught him unprepared.

"What?"

“Have you gone mad?”

Draco scowled. This over-dramatised eyebrow lifting had got a bit old when everyone else was doing it too.

“I have read up on it. The Dreamless Sleep potion has no harmful effects on a pregnancy,” he said.

“That’s right.” Podmore nodded. “Not on the pregnancy itself, but the human psyche. I knew someone who had gone completely paranoid from taking it for too long, and had got himself nearly killed, because he thought that his friends were working against him and for his greatest enemy.”

“Is someone talking about me?” Draco jumped at hearing Potter’s voice coming from behind his back. He hadn't heard the door being opened, but the surge of power prickling the skin on his nape was unmistakeable. It rendered him uneasy and, to his utter mortification, aroused.

As it turned out, Potter was only dropping in to tell them that he would be gone for a while, and that they were welcome to use his office, but they might want to consider casting a Silencing Charm on the door, and if he wasn’t back before their departure, Draco would do better if he spent the night at Snape’s or somewhere away from his home. And then he was gone again. Draco hadn't dared to turn towards the door until he heard it click closed.

“Why is he helping us?” he turned back and asked Snape, pulling the old robe closer together – it smelled of Potter. He thought it wouldn’t hurt to try and discover how much information Snape was willing to share with him.

“Do you really have to ask?” The Potions Master looked at him incredulously. That made Draco angry.

“He said that you have told him about my condition. Why?”

“I wanted him to keep an eye out for you.”

“But he could have done that without that knowledge.”

Snape sighed, and paused for a second before he gave him an answer. “He would have been able to sense it, anyhow. At least so he was already aware of it and it didn’t deter his attention from getting you out of there in time.”

“What do you mean by he would have been able to sense it?” It was then that Draco remembered what Potter had told him right before the other two had arrived. He had said he had been able to avoid magical danger while entering the Manor, because he could see it. Was this the same?

“That’s not in our authority to tell you.” Podmore interrupted before Snape could say anything else, and Draco saw with dismay that the Potions Master agreed with him. “If he wants to tell it to you, then he will do so himself.” So Draco was again left in the dark, as in so many other times in the past. What irked him the most was not even that, but that he hadn't even realised it until the truth had come out.

“You didn’t even tell me that it was Potter. You both knew, and didn’t tell me!”

Snape didn’t seem to be humbled by the accusation, at all.

“I remember you making clear that the child was yours alone and no one else’s concern. You didn’t seem to be interested in the father any more than using him for getting what you wanted. But even if you were, you understand that Potter works undercover. The fact that we knew about his identity was completely accidental, and in a way we are both restricted by doctor-patient confidentiality…”

Draco wanted to tell Snape that he hadn't seemed to care about ‘doctor-patient confidentiality’ when he let Potter know about his pregnancy, but he was interrupted by a voice from the other side of the door even before he started.

“This is sehr interesting.” Draco couldn’t identify the person to whom that voice belonged to.

“Does that Tracker Charm function properly, Schwiegerfrei? This is the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office.” On the other side, that was definitely Potter.

“It does. Er ist… He is here, McNeil.”

“Why would Malfoy hide in Potter’s office?” Draco would have found it funny that Potter was speaking in the third person about himself, if the sentence hadn't contained his name. Was Potter trying to warn him? Draco was now glad that they forgot about the Silencing Spell completely.

He hurriedly looked at Snape and Podmore; the latter was indicating for Draco to get into the Floo and quickly. Before he was able grab the Floo powder, though, the door slammed open with a resounding crash, as the result of the combined power of Alohomora and a well-placed boot applied to the wooden surface.

“Halt! Hände hoch, und drop die wands!”

Snape’s and Podmore’s wands clattered on the ground and three pairs of mildly confused eyes looked at the intruders. One of them was Potter, as Draco had already guessed. The other one was an Auror he didn’t know, but he seemed vaguely familiar. This wasn’t the proper time for remembrances, though, as Draco quickly found himself opposite of the Auror’s wand point.

“Draco Malfoy, you are under arrest for documented practice of Dark Magic. Please come with me without resistance.”

Potter/Scott scowled at the three of them from the background, as if he was asking them what they were still doing there, but it looked very much like he was not in the position to help Draco get out of this predicament.

TBC

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Chapter 18: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

16 December 2005

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Vaughn Vance and Kathleen

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A/N: This chapter is partly dedicated to Idamonae and Jennavere for corrupting it. (If you don't know what I'm speaking about, read this). The other dedication goes to my two most faithful betas, because I wouldn't have come this far without them. Thanks!

Chapter Eighteen

Draco didn’t move except for lifting his brow. Who was this person to dare demand such ridiculous things like handing over his wand and following his unimpressive orders? For one, he didn’t even have his wand; Potter must have stashed it away somewhere. In any other case it would have irritated him to no end, but this time it came handy, as he didn’t want the Aurors to put their paws on it.

Perhaps he was a bit edgy from what had happened to him so far; so he didn’t hesitate to ask just that in a disdainful tone directed at the intruder. Scott (who was really Potter, he corrected himself) was rolling his eyes at his mannerisms. Draco could see him from the corner of his eye standing behind the Auror, even if his gaze didn’t stray from the man who was currently presenting him with the business end of his wand.

“I am Auror Helmut Schwiegerfrei. And you should do what I say because you are here and now officially under arrest,” the man answered, seemingly unconvinced by Draco’s threatening attitude. To his dismay, he was then told his rights, and the arresting procedure had gone according to the regulations, so Draco wouldn’t be able to claim a technical mistake in order to be set free. In the end he had no other choice than to grudgingly obey the Auror and let himself be escorted to the Auror Headquarters, which was on the same level, only a few turns and corridors away from the location of Potter’s office.

During the time he was marching haughtily in front of the Ministry official, Draco tried to briefly assess the man. The covert look he had given Snape just before leading Draco away while at the same time completely ignoring Podmore hadn't escaped his attention. Though, that wasn’t the only thing that made him think. Draco pondered why the Auror was so familiar to him. And then he remembered at once. How could he have forgotten that ridiculous wizard and his inability to speak proper English? He had been present at Draco’s own wedding – Draco had become quite angry with the idiot for persuading the orchestra to play polka, and then he also had the audacity to sing with them! At that point more or less everyone had been pretty inebriated; Draco had still been embarrassed by the mishap. He remembered having thought that Cyrus had been the one to put him up to it, and the one who then sold the story to the Prophet in order to ridicule him in the absence of his father.

Draco shouldn’t have been surprised that the office was full with Aurors even this late… or to be more exact, this early in the morning. Of course, the people there were most likely all parts of the raid team that had broken into the Manor. Draco regretted that he couldn’t show them exactly how much he appreciated their efforts, but he wasn’t a Malfoy for nothing. The slip into his smooth public persona came to him without conscious thought, because that was the only way to deal with plebeians like these. If the first question directed towards him surprised him, he didn’t show it.

“Why are you wearing an Auror’s robe?”

“Not that it is your business in any way, but I’m wearing this because my clothes got… damaged, and someone was kind enough to let me borrow a substitute.”

“You mean you stole it.” Draco turned his head towards the sleazy Auror, whose robe didn’t look any better than the one he was forced to wear, even though Potter must have had it in that closet for several years.

“No,” he supplied in a cool manner. Draco didn’t deem the comment worthy of more explanation.

He was asked a few more questions, but he wasn’t naïve or tired enough to actually answer them without the presence of a legal advisor. It looked like he wasn’t the only one worn-out; some of the Aurors in the back were nearly dropping down from their chairs, too. In the end it was decided by the Head Auror that he should be moved to a quiet, solitary place and questioned later. Draco didn’t object to that.

He was escorted to the small area of cells located within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, where prisoners were kept in custody before their trials. To his great relief, was no one detained there at that moment, so he didn’t have to face the shame of the wrong people learning about this little mishap before he was out and within reach of his moneybag.

He was showed not so gently into a small room with one wall replaced completely by iron bars. It only contained a slim cot, a toilet and a washbasin. Apart from those extra appliances, the setting bore an uncanny similarity to the dungeons in Hogwarts’ lower levels that went unused for decades - if not centuries - before he had chosen them for a place to hide in during the last months of the war. Draco wasn’t left much time to take in his new environment after the bars clicked in place behind him, though, as the lights went out again. Draco found himself in total darkness, which was only alleviated by the fluorescent ghostly face of a magical clock on the opposite wall. So he was being forced to sleep. Not that he minded much, since he was rather knackered regardless of having slept a good hour on Potter’s couch – that was a thought he would have rather avoided pondering about. So he stretched out on the bunk, pulled over the coarse rug he was provided with for warmth, and, despite the uncomfortable

bedding, he was sound asleep within two seconds.

He woke up rather suddenly from a dream only one hour later, though. That was when he had been reminded that he hadn't taken his usual dose of Dreamless Sleep Potion that night, which then lead to the usual consequences. Fortunately, the dream he had wasn’t about Scott, so he didn’t have to be embarrassed by waking up in sticky clothes and not having the opportunity to do anything about it, short of asking his keepers for a shower and clean clothes. Then again, this dream had left him anxious and made him tremble for a completely different reason.

He had dreamt that his child was born, and it turned out to be neither a boy nor a girl. What he had felt when he was told the first time hadn't been very pleasant. But it got worse. The child had aged eleven years from one moment to the next and it had somehow also become a girl, though that somehow had ceased to be of importance at that point. Draco saw her off to Hogwarts at King’s Cross, with an embarrassing amount of well wishes and enthusiastic waving after the red express rolling slowly out of the station. But after arriving home, he had got an owl that his child had suddenly died on the first night in her new dorm room. That was when Draco started up in alarm with his heart beating wildly in his chest. He didn’t understand why this dream had such a powerful effect on him, as it hadn't been very realistic, but it was enough to make him not want to sleep again.

The dream must have been a consequence of what had happened the previous night. He had almost lost his child – his only chance to keep his inheritance - and his own life too. Draco didn’t understand why his dream had focused on the child rather than the money. But instead of dwelling on it, he thought his interests would be better served if he directed his attention to more important things, namely on his current situation.

He was trying to relax as much as he could manage in his uncomfortable sitting position without falling asleep, and focus his still emotion-blurred thoughts on how he was going to get out of there. The first thing he had to do, as soon as someone bothered to look after him, was to contact a lawyer – preferably the family solicitor, Agnus Malfoy, or one of his sons-in-law, as he didn’t know whether Agnus also worked with criminal law in addition to his job of managing his clients’ financial and business affairs. He had to know what exactly he was charged with, but that would only happen in the morning. The Auror – Helmut Schwiegerfrei – had accused him of practicing Dark magic, but that could have meant anything, it could have been only a ruse to keep him detained and obtain a reason to raid his home to find real incriminating proof against him. Well, he would know come morning.

While in this condition, Draco studiously avoided all thoughts concerning Potter. Instead of that, he tried

to figure out where he stood with Snape. The man had administered potions to influence his mind and refused to help him with the ritual (though Draco grudgingly acknowledged that Snape was right on that one point). When he later confronted the Potions Master, he had lied to him about his interference and his connection to Granger – Draco still shuddered at the memory of the two of them together. But then he sent Potter to save him. That meant that whatever Snape had been obligated to do, he still was on Draco's side and had tried to salvage the situation as much as he was allowed to, even though he had revealed his secret to the man, and had neglected to enlighten Draco about the real identity of Scott…

Draco usually stopped himself when the train of his thoughts got him this far. He wasn't ready and his mind wasn't clear enough to think about Scott just yet. Scott, who was Potter. Potter, who was the father of his child. Potter, who was obviously not a pure-blood! Potter, who had some mysterious illness, which, Draco hoped, wasn't hereditary. Potter, who was a Queer…

Hah! At least there was something he could have a good laugh at.

All in all, the night wasn't very productive; all that furious thinking just caused him to develop a nasty head-ache. He was too tired and tempted to just close his eyes and surrender to the overwhelming tiredness despite his resolution to keep awake. But when Draco Malfoy took something in his head, then it happened accordingly.

He was relieved when the lights were turned on. The cell area was not provided with spelled windows, so the light came from the ceiling charmed to glow – much like Muggle lighting. It made Draco uneasy, even though it was definitely better than the eerie torchlight of the old dungeon cells he remembered from his self-imposed exile. The clock on the wall told him that it was seven a.m., and he was hungry.

Just as the thought formed in his mind, someone opened the door on the end of the corridor that separated the prison area from the outside world. Draco couldn't see the visitor – his guard, most likely - until the person stepped before the bars of his cell. He had no idea if he had been hoping for to be someone familiar or a complete stranger, but out of all the people he could have thought of having to deal with, he just found himself eye to eye with the worst of them. It figured that she always got there when he was at his lowest.

"Lieutenant Draco, what are you doing here?"

His still blurry eyes focused on a metal tray that was pushed into his cell through an opening in the bars just above the floor. He grabbed it without thinking and tried to relate the word ‘breakfast’ to the bowl that contained porridge lying before him and a glass of pumpkin juice.

Draco groaned. “I’m here to try prison food.” But the sarcasm, as always, was completely lost on this person.

The porridge looked thick and didn’t look very inviting in the first place. Nonetheless, Draco felt hungry, so he lifted the tray onto his lap and begun to ladle his lacking meal into his mouth.

“It’s rather good, isn’t it, Lieutenant Draco?” She smiled at him, and Draco would have liked to aim a nasty hex at her face to make her understand that he bloody didn’t like that nickname she seemed to be so fond of – hadn't liked it when he had acquired it in the first place.

But the food actually tasted good, flavoured with just the perfect amount of sugar and ginger. Draco concentrated completely on eating and his tired mind tuned out the inane chattering his visitor seemed to automatically launch into whenever she thought there was someone listening to her. He was surprised at how quickly he finished his porridge, and that he could have eaten more if there were any chance of persuading his keepers to let him have seconds. Belatedly, he realised that he hadn't taken his usual anti-sickness potion, but his stomach didn’t show any signs of wanting to reject breakfast.

He put back the tray onto the floor, and to his surprise it vanished instantly. Apparently the Ministry was still saddled with some of the multitude of freed house-elves that had previously belonged to Death Eater families and had been used against their old masters during and after the war. Draco was only glad no Malfoy house-elf, other than that Dobby, had let itself get caught and tricked into freedom, so their secrets hadn't been revealed. That was one of the reasons his family had survived the war.

“So, are you going to let me out now, Loony? Or do I have to sit here and chat nicely with you until you decide what to do?” Draco asked. He thought it was time to contact his lawyer, since he wanted out as soon as possible.

Lovegood looked at him for a few seconds, as if in thought, then opened her mouth.

“You are not very nice, Lieutenant Draco.”

But she still seemed to be accommodating enough.

Draco contacted Agnus, and was relieved to learn that the old man was qualified to represent him and stood to his service. After the short discussion, Draco had to go back into his cell. He had nothing to do except think, but he tried to avoid having to ponder about certain things. Things like what if he gets convicted and his condition will be revealed while he is in prison? Or the fact that now he had to live with the uncertainty of whether his child was going to be a male and the heir of the Malfoy inheritance, or a female and so, worthless, rendering him as poor as a Weasley come his twenty-fifth birthday. The only outlet his tired mind found from his thoughts was sleep, which caught him unawares. He slept fitfully, but thank Merlin, without dreams, through lunch and then the better part of the afternoon, until Loony Lovegood came in again with his lawyer in tow.

Agnus Malfoy was nothing if not meticulous and cunning; he was an older, smoother, more refined and less impatient version of Lucius Malfoy hidden behind the mask of the honest citizen. Whoever would believe that about a lawyer, Draco had no clue, but apparently Agnus was quite adept at advancing his cases with it. By the time he came to visit him, he had gathered most of the facts about the charges against Draco and by the time Agnus left him to the solitary of his cell, Draco’s mood had significantly improved.

As the lawyer had informed him, the initial indictment had been the activation of the wards – as Draco had suspected. The good news were that the Aurors had planned to charge him with crimes weighing more than the activation of some puny remains of Dark magic he could have pleaded to have done accidentally. The maximum he could have got for that were a few months, but with a lawyer like Agnus, Draco didn’t expect anything more than a hefty sum to pay as penalty for his ‘carelessness’. That’s why the Aurors hadn't gone into the lengthy procedure of preserving the records about the wards’ activation – the phrase that his activities had been documented had been just wishful thinking and a means to pre-empt resistance from his side. They had wanted to catch him on the scene in the middle of some obscure Dark ritual instead – of which they had almost succeeded. But the point was that now they had no evidence for either of those charges apart from the statement of the night watch and – as it turned out – his coded letter to Borgin and Burkes about ordering the Thestral blood, which they weren’t able to interpret unambiguously enough for it to suffice as proof in court.

The Manor was still under Auror lock down, as they hadn't given up on finding something there, but the only really incriminating item, the ink containing the magical blood, had been in his hand when Potter's Portkey had spirited him away from the Manor. Draco remembered holding it when Potter had revealed himself and the excessive magic had made him faint, but he hadn't seen it after he had regained consciousness, so Potter must have taken care of it. Draco wasn't worried about Potter having turned it in as evidence against him, or planning to. Were that the case, the Aurors wouldn't still be rummaging through the Manor in the hopes of finding something on him.

The more pressing matter was how they had learnt about his undertaking. Apparently, someone not only had passed the letter he had sent to Borgin and Burkes to the Aurors, but had also told them about the ritual he had been planning, though that hadn't been put into the official records. The ritual was Malfoy family magic, only a Malfoy or someone associated with them on a more personal basis could have known about it and what it entailed. To be able to come to the right conclusion based only on that one ingredient and on the most likely the time of the ritual severely limited the number of suspects.

There was Snape, who Draco hadn't told explicitly, but was sure enough to deduce it correctly. And there was Pansy, who had got it out of him through the Veritaserum. Draco was sure that she had been able to make an educated guess about why Draco had decided that she needed some fresh air urgently exactly at that time – but she hadn't left the Manor for months and she had had to be very tricky in order to get out a message without Draco noticing it, so she wasn't a likely suspect, it wasn't her interest to sic the law on her husband.

The fact that Pansy was still somewhere far away had thrown the Aurors off track, which could only mean that whoever had tipped off the Law Enforcement about the ritual had told them that his wife would be the 'victim' of it – which didn't mean that that person hadn't known the truth. Draco was doubly grateful now that he had had the good sense to send her away, and that Agnus had seen about it that she would stay where she was for the time being. Not only because she knew the truth about Draco's condition, and he didn't want to risk an over-zealous Auror getting the brilliant idea of taking her statement under Veritaserum even though she hadn't been there on the night in question, but because strangers in the Manor meant that Draco had no control over who all could get in there under the disguise of a Ministry official and make an attempt on her life.

She was safer at her current hiding place; even if that meant that the Prophet would doubtlessly print an article about her absence in the following days. If Draco put his connections to use, he could even persuade the author to make a story out of it that represented him in a more favourable light together

with the ‘slandering and unfounded detainment he had to suffer’ at the hands of the Ministry. Perhaps he could even get it printed that the Minister was also secretly involved, and then there would be only one step to the insinuation that it wasn’t the only underhanded case she had been implicated in during the last few months…

But this wasn’t the time for daydreaming, so Draco got back to the task at hand. There were other clues that demanded his attention, and one of them was the question of the wards on the Manor. The Aurors had broken into the house as if there were no guards and no magical protection surrounding it, which was fairly disconcerting. The guards could have been outnumbered by the Aurors; Draco hadn't thought he would have to prepare for a bloody siege! But the wards were a completely different matter; they could have been only breached if another Malfoy allowed the intruders into the Manor. Pansy couldn’t have been that one, since she was away and her authority couldn’t have surpassed Draco’s so that the wards decided to obey her instead of their controller. Draco had a few suspects in his mind, but if he added to it that the Auror who had arrested him was the brother of his wife, there was only one person everything seemed to point to: Cyrus Malfoy.

Cyrus Malfoy was the next in line for the Malfoy estates. He was the father of Pansy’s child and he was the godson of Severus Snape – Draco remembered having heard from his father what a scandal that had provoked from the rest of the family. Of course he would have more leverage with the Potions Master than Draco, because in a pure-blood family being a godfather wasn’t only about Christmas gifts and practical advice on womanising, and like every little aspect of a proper wizard’s life, it involved magic. Still, Snape must have to found a loophole in it if he was able to send Potter to Draco’s rescue.

Another matter Draco had to find out was how much Cyrus knew about Pansy. She had insisted that she had Obliviated him after their little tryst, but she could have been lying to him and still been in contact with his cousin. She could have struck a bargain with him, though Draco couldn’t imagine an intelligent woman like her seriously believing that if Cyrus got what he wanted, she would come out of the situation on the winning side, even though she carried Cyrus’ child. The man already had an heir; he didn’t need another one – in fact, that only complicated the situation in most of the wealthy pure-blood families.

In the end Draco worked himself into a nasty headache and established that he needed more information about Cyrus, Pansy, Snape and the whole situation before he would be able to settle for any kind of sensible plan. Hell, even wears-his-heart-on-his-sleeve-Potter had become an enigma to him! But he still didn’t want to think about Potter, and he was able to stop his thoughts before his imagination had him carried away with memories about Scott, and he wasn’t sniffing at the borrowed robe again!

Luckily it was time for dinner and Lovegood entered the prison area before Draco could work himself into a crisis with his food. This time he didn't mind her babbling about something along the lines of explorers having discovered the breeding habitat of Crumple-Horned Snorkaks in Sweden in a place called IKEA, where they were sold as designer furniture, because of their defence mechanism of transfiguring themselves into inanimate objects when humans got near them. Draco didn't understand a word, but it was good enough to direct his thoughts onto a more secure track before he went to bed without his potion again. This time he knew he wouldn't be able to stay up another night, not to mention that his hearing would occur the next day and he had rather preferred to appear there well rested.

Sleep almost turned out to be a messy matter, but thankfully he had woken up with just minutes to spare before he would have creamed his pants and succeeded to take hold of the evidence in his palm, which he then got rid of in the washbasin.

Draco found his way back to the cot, sat down onto it pulling the blanket around his shoulders and frowned. He didn't want to go back to sleep again; he felt rested and the clock on the wall showed quarter to seven in the morning, it wasn't that early. He wished he could swish away the darkness with a spell, but he didn't have his wand. As a little child he had been afraid of darkness, which was disciplined out of him by his father, but he still didn't like it. It was like he had gone blind and gave him the false confidence that if he couldn't see anything, he couldn't be seen either – which certainly wasn't true. Draco was sure that the establishment had several surveillance charms installed. He hoped that the one who had seen him suddenly jumping out of his bed wasn't going to say anything about it, or at least won't mention it in his official report.

The darkness was maddening, so he decided to close his eyes against it. He lay down again and stretched out, since the bunk was too narrow to sit on it comfortably, as he had established the previous night. With his clothes and the blanket pulled taut over his body he came to the embarrassing realisation that he was still hard, and the rubbing of said clothes didn't do anything to help alleviate that situation. He tried to will his erection away, but there was no helping it with his mind still reeling from the earlier dream and stuffed with images about Scott… actually it was worse, because this time his mind had decided to acknowledge the facts and had replaced Scott's face with that of Potter.

Draco turned towards the wall to hide his state of arousal at least. He wasn't a teenager anymore, it was bound to go away, since he knew that giving into the urge and getting rid of it manually would inevitably bring back the images out of his dream, and his sleep-fogged mind wouldn't be able to resist replaying them. Just thinking about it in a fleeting manner like this had brought it back.

Actually, Draco resisted the urge to dismiss it altogether. As sick it felt to call forth the images, he had to consider the dream, because it seemed to be different this time. It ended with intercourse with Potter, but the beginning, folding out of his vague recollections, was anything but sexual. It started out with a memory of the days full of anxiousness he had spent in St. Mungo's with several other witches and wizards from his battalion after the last battle. When the fights ended with Voldemort's death, they had all tried to Apparate out of a field where the two anti-Apparation shields set up by both sides clashed together and created a very unstable amalgam. Everyone thought that they had crashed down and tried to Apparate away, only to get splinched in the most hideous proportions. All right, perhaps Loony had deserved her Order of Merlin for taking all of them out of there by a bunch of unauthorised Portkeys she had hanging around her neck. Perhaps that had been what gave Potter the idea for the Butterbeer-cap Portkey, too.

It had taken a week until all of the body parts laying abandoned on the battlefield were found and reinstalled onto their rightful owners. Draco had lain there for two days missing a leg, half of his fingers, one ear and his belly button. His only consolation had been that it could have been worse: the guy occupying the bed to his right had lost all of his hair, and he had heard horror stories about someone having left behind one of his testicles. At least, thanks to his fair complexion, his body parts were easily identifiable and he was one of the first people to get them back. Still, by the time they had found his right index finger the nail on it had grown long and had broken up, leaving a dirty ragged edge! Someone must have stepped on it. Draco hadn't been able to get rid of the dirt for a week.

The dream had skimmed over those details and then it had continued with a scene with him still lying in the hospital bed and recovering from the tiring process of getting his limbs re-attached. From that part on, everything that had happened had been a product of his damnable fantasy because in the next moment Potter had entered the ward.

He had looked irritatingly unscathed, even though Draco had seen him immediately after the battle and had barely recognised him from blood and gore that had been smeared not only on his body, but his face and glasses as well. Admittedly, half of it hadn't been his own. But the dream hadn't seemed to care for details like healing wounds and bruises, or perhaps it had been just too dark for Draco to be able to see clearly. He hadn't been alone in the room, but everyone else had been sleeping, he had been the only one still up, as if he had been waiting for something – or someone – to appear.

From that moment on, things had escalated and turned into some wild orgy on a hospital bed, because it felt like there had been entirely too many hands and legs for only two people…

Draco’s thoughts came to a screeching halt as he didn’t want to recall any further element of the dream. Even so, he hadn't noticed that his hand had slipped back under his partly undone robes and into his still open trousers beneath the blanket, fingers encircling a massive hard-on that Draco knew he wouldn’t be able to just will away after this. He hadn't really touched himself since he had started to take the Dreamless Sleep potion for fear of releasing the images, but right now he just wanted to get rid of his little problem before the lights went up, so he got to work furiously, his hand getting damp with sweat, and the pictures of a naked and alluring Harry Potter coming to him unbound helped him along towards his release quicker.

Just as he came with a gasp he tried to keep silent, the lights went up and he heard the noise of metallic clattering coming from the direction of the door. He sat up, eyes wide open, but thank Merlin he was still alone and had time to wash up a bit before he got company. He already hated these barbaric conditions; he was accustomed to his shower once a day, fresh clothes and his facial care. He still didn’t need to shave every day, his father was the same, but here they haven’t even given him a bloody mirror! Perhaps it was their method to soften him for the interrogation. Draco decided that he wouldn’t give in, no matter what.

Loony brought his breakfast, the same as the previous day’s, and kept him company while he was eating. He didn’t have a real appetite; his stomach was uneasy, but he forced himself to eat up, since he knew that Veritaserum tended to be more potent when ingested on an empty stomach.

Half an hour later, Agnus Malfoy arrived in the company of a few Aurors – Schwiegerfrei wasn’t among them this time, to his relief. Draco squared his shoulders and let himself be escorted out of his cell to the hearing. Loony was walking behind him, and Draco only then noticed how quiet she had been this morning.

“Nothing to say this time, Loony?” he asked haughtily, because he needed to release some steam.

She looked up at him with a disturbingly blank gaze, and opened her mouth obediently, but neither to gloat at him nor to offer her condolences. Of course Draco didn’t really expect either. Instead he got another one of her twisted life philosophies.

“My father always said life was like a bag of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans, you never know what

you're going to get, Lieutenant Draco.”

TBC

A/N2: This will be the last instalment this year. The next chapter is going to be up in January as soon as I have got it betaed, but I can’t tell when, since it’s not yet written. Happy Christmas to everyone and I hope, you are going to stick with me the next year, too.

--Stray

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Chapter 19: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

9 January 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I’m not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I’m not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don’t like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn Vance

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Chapter Nineteen

As much as Draco had dreaded this interrogation, he was just as surprised when it ended without him having confessed some potentially dangerous truth. At the sight of the sour expression on his questioners' faces – the most prominent being that of Schwiegerfrei's – he couldn't suppress a smug smile. His 'favourite' Auror had been granted permission to be present and there was no question in Draco's mind about to whom he was going to relay all the information that had been revealed by the questioning. Now that he was through the procedure, it ceased to be dreadful – in fact, in retrospect, it seemed rather ridiculous. Those questions had given him the impression they had been written by a first year Hufflepuff for a DADA project. Draco hadn't even had to dance around the truth very much. They had been too detailed, which fact disabled their potential danger.

Have you attempted a ritual of Dark Magic on the day of … - of course not, since it had been night.

Are you in possession of Thestral blood? – No, he had used it all off for the ink.

Have you practiced a Dark Ritual on your wife at… ?

Have you ever activated the Dark Arts wards on your Manor? – This was the first question Draco had answered with a 'yes'. He had figured that he shouldn't bother denying this, since he couldn't have been chucked into Azkaban for an 'honest mistake'. Apart from that he hadn't wanted the Aurors to feel like their efforts had no results; that would have just made them more edgy and compelled to apply more pressure on him in other topics.

Have you used Dark Arts recently? – That question had been asked directly after the one about the wards, so Draco had just told them that yes, the activation of his family wards does qualify as Dark Arts. They hadn't asked whether he had used dark magic for something else or not.

The questioning had continued much in the same manner for another two hours. Agnus Malfoy had been present at the interrogation, ensuring that there had been no questions asked outside of the ones strictly linked to the case. Draco was grateful for the moral support he had provided, even though no

direct contact had been permitted. Agnus had to remain behind Draco's back and keep the five feet distance in order to prevent him from giving out signals to his client whether it was safe to give a direct answer to the current question or not.

After the interrogation was over, Draco was declared a free wizard again; but as the investigation was still running, the Manor was still not accessible to him. Additionally, he was 'asked' to remain in the country at a place where he could be reached, should there be any developments in his case. He was informed that Severus Snape had offered his hospitality for that time. Agnus advised him to take it, since the Potions Master was in good standing with the Ministry. Draco didn't have to think about it twice before he accepted. He supposed that Snape had something to tell him in private if he had made the efforts to arrange for Draco's temporary accommodations. He was aware of the fact that the situation could easily become dangerous for him, but he had also some questions to ask, and he figured that if he insisted on evoking the old right of hospitality, Snape would have a hard time bypassing it in order to cause him harm.

To his surprise, his wand was handed back to him just before he was supposed to leave. Agnus told him that Potter had given it to the Aurors the previous evening. He had claimed to have found it in his office, and had given a statement that he had allowed Draco and the others access to the room. Draco was also informed that Potter hadn't pressed charges for the 'stolen' robe either.

To his irritation though, he was also told that since the robe was government property, he had to leave it behind, and when he asked for some kind of replacement, he was given a hideous striped tunic that had no sleeves and that Draco recognised as prison garb. Fortunately, he didn't have to wear the matching pants. At least he didn't have to wear it for any length of time since he would be able to Apparate as soon as he had left the Ministry. Snape's home didn't have a direct Floo connection – the man was too paranoid to allow one to be set up even for this short time.

Draco hadn't expected the Potions Master to come and escort him to his place. However, Snape was waiting for him in the Ministry's foyer, where the two Aurors left him to his own devices. Aghast, Draco noticed that the entrance hall was crammed with reporters and nosy people whose only business there was to witness Draco Malfoy's leave from his brief detainment. The fact that they had apparently known about the exact time of his release had left no doubts that his affair had been made public by the media.

Draco cursed under his nose – because a gentleman never cursed in front of company, and even less if that company consisted of low-life vultures trying to leech on his good name. They made him nervous. If it wasn't enough that he had just come out of the prison, he had been disgraced by having been forced

to wear something far beneath his status.

Snape must have sensed his disquiet. He stepped next to Draco to lead the way. Draco tried not to react to the questions he was asked, the flashing lights of cameras, or the mocking calls coming from behind, thrown at him by anonymous slanderers not having the courage to let their faces be known.

The way from the lift to the Apparition point in the Ministry's main foyer seemed to be the longest five minutes of his life. He had to concentrate on maintaining a dignified pace, as it wasn't becoming for a man of his status to give away his discomfort by rushing. Walking beside him, Snape matched his stride perfectly, and Draco was grateful to the Potions Master for purposely shielding him from the flashing cameras.

At last his feet stepped onto the Apparition platform. Snape nodded to him to go first. Draco nodded back and took a deep breath. He gripped his wand tightly, even though he didn't need it for Apparating, but to have it back gave him a sense of security he didn't know he had missed until it was returned to him. He stole a glance at the crowded foyer once again; his only thought was to get away from there as soon as possible. The adrenaline surged in his body and he felt the increasing of magical energies as always right before he Apparated, but his mind wasn't wholly focused. Instead of arriving before Snape's house, there was a loud bang and he found himself on the Ministry's floor.

A sharp pain shot into his left forearm, but for several minutes he was too dazed to move. The sudden multiplication of camera flashes forced him to quickly regain his orientation, and finally, he looked at the body part that had caused him the pain. He felt all blood leave his face and his heart start thudding painfully in his chest at the sight of the formally flawless skin that now sported the ugly remains of that cursed mark he had hoped to never have to see again.

Draco spun to his feet and pressed his other hand to the blemish, even though he knew it was useless: those vultures around him had all seen it; dozens if not hundreds of pictures were taken of its reappearance. He didn't want to see the faces around him and was glad that his vision was still blurred by his previous lapse. He Apparated away without conscious thought this time, purely on instinct telling him to flee from that place.

He was still a bit disoriented and wobbly when Snape appeared next to him in the next moment, but the chill winter air helped him to clear his mind almost instantly. He shivered as freezing winds blew through

his tunic and froze the cold sweat that had broken out on his skin. The only place that felt too warm was the spot he was still covering with his palm.

“Come with me.” Snape’s familiar terse tone jolted him out of his reverie and he fell into pace with the man while he led him through the wards and ushered him into the house. Once inside, Snape made the flames in the grate flare up and start to warm up the house.

“Let me see.” Snape ordered, holding out his palm. Draco obeyed without a word of protest. He lifted his hand from where it was covering the mark and was startled momentarily by the angry red blotches around it. Snape held his elbow in a firm grip while he examined his arm. Draco shivered at the tingling caused by the soft touch of the Potions Master’s cold fingers. Even though the skin had become insensate after the Dark Lord’s death where the Dark Mark had been burned into it, now it felt abnormally sensitive around the blackened area.

“What kind of Glamour did you use on it?” Snape asked him, even though most likely he had already known what the answer would be.

“A permanent one.”

“Did you cast it?”

Draco shook his head. “No, I asked…someone… to do it for me.” His voice drifted off.

He was aware that Snape was at once staring at him with a questioning look in his eyes, but in that moment he was too occupied with his own thoughts to pay attention to it. Snape most likely wanted to know who that someone was. And Draco would have told him.

That is, if he could remember.

But as it were, his mind was blank. He knew that he hadn't cast that charm, but he couldn’t recall

anything about the circumstances in which it was cast on him, only that it was meant to last and not go off in a proverbial puff of smoke in the middle of the most embarrassing situation of his life. It had scared him, frankly, not to have any memories about it, only that it was done sometime after the end of the war.

Suddenly he became aware of Snape's cold mental fingers feeling around his mind. He recoiled at first, but then he let it happen in the hopes that Snape would find something that had escaped his attention. After a few seconds of gentle probing, though, Snape withdrew with a sigh on his lips and no new answers, whatsoever. He fixed Draco with his dark, penetrating gaze for a second before he stepped back and released his arm.

"Go and take a bath. You'll find fresh clothes in the guest room. I better notify Podmore."

Draco was glad for the offer. He had been yearning for a shower ever since he was chucked into that cell. The remains of his ritual were still clinging to his skin, even though Potter had done his best to remove them. He decided to exploit the opportunity, and after a quick but thorough rinse in the shower and washing his hair, he filled the tub to the rim and relaxed back in it, closing his eyes. The warm water was strangely cold on the skin of his elbow and the prickling didn't seem to cease. Somehow touching it seemed like a bad idea, so he restrained himself as long as he could, but in the end the tingling drove him into near madness and he started to gently massage the soreness around the mark without realising what he was doing.

The skin was still too hot, hotter than the water surrounding it, and this bothered Draco in the beginning. But the sensations when he started to rub on it were strangely compelling, so instead of stopping, as his common sense told him to, he continued with the massage. It was as if the touch could make the tingling and the unnatural heat lessen by spreading it out through his whole body. Or perhaps that was his other hand stroking along where it could reach.

After ten minutes he had become relaxed. His mind drifted somewhere else – to a place that only existed in his mind, or was it a memory? But he wasn't alone in that place; he felt another presence next to him. It was as if this other person was only so far from touching him; his skin tingled with anticipation. It felt good – too good, and he only noticed that he had become hard when the imaginary person started touching him there – and for an imaginary being the touch felt far too realistic. He should have been suspicious, but he was enjoying the peace and the sensation too much to care. In the next moment the imaginary person materialised before his mind's eye and he found himself locking gazes with Harry

Potter.

Potter was touching him everywhere beneath the water surface. Curious tingles roamed his body; the hands smoothing down his skin were leaving yearning in their wake. Potter's hand, previously stroking the Dark Mark on his forearm, shifted to Draco's hard on, just holding it in his palm. Draco was enjoying immensely the sudden prickling that somehow transferred from the area around the mark into the massaging fingers that were now squeezing around his prick.

Potter was pulling him off with deliberate slowness. Draco couldn't describe the experience as anything else but sensual. The tugs on his shaft somehow succeeded in feeling gentle and firm at the same time, while Potter was varying them with occasionally swiping his thumb around the head and teasing the slit. Another hand was drifting down between his thighs, lifting his balls and rolling them around. Draco moaned. His legs opened instinctively when the tingle started moving down below, trickling down his perineum, reaching his crack, and circling his entrance. He felt himself being opened up by gentle touches barely there. A finger slowly but determinedly pushed into his arse, deeper and deeper… And Draco came, his body trashing around in the tub, splashing water onto the stone floor.

When the afterglow dimmed and he opened his eyes he realised that he was alone in Snape's guest bathroom, the water starting to cool around him. His body was bent into a position that was quickly becoming uncomfortable, and one of his fingers was still inserted into his anus. He pulled it out abruptly with a strange mix of shame, disappointment and confusion, and quickly scrambled out of the tub, slightly disgusted by the thicker blobs of semen floating around in the bath water. He lathered his hands with copious amounts of soap and washed them thoroughly while the tub emptied, then rinsed off any possible remnants of his earlier activity.

It had been his imagination running away with pent up tension – his logical mind tried to reason at first. But it all had seemed entirely too real for a fantasy, and he could still feel the magic at work. When he looked at his arm, the part of his mind still caught up in the earlier events expected the mark to have vanished, concealed by a strong Glamour Charm, and for a second there he was startled when he spotted it unchanged in its place. Where had that conviction come from? And what the hell had just happened? There had been too many weird things happening to him in the last months to write it up as simple coincidence. The prospect that something may be wrong was terrifying him. And he couldn't get the feeling out of his mind that this – again - had something to do with Potter.

The voices of a conversation drifting through the closed door jolted him out of his reverie and he realised that Podmore must have arrived. He forced the memory away into the farthest recesses of his mind and

decided that he would have time to ponder about it later. Now he had to hurry up and get out to see the Healer.

When he looked into the mirror, his face was red, and it wasn't just from the humid heat that had built up in the bathroom's enclosed space. He looked positively scruffy with his hair in wet disarray, days old stubble and dark circles under his eyes marring his appearance. He took care of what he could manually, because he knew not to use magic until Podmore had had an opportunity to examine his arm. That meant he had to leave shaving and styling his hair for later. Merely the fact that he was clean (even if he didn't feel like that after what had just happened) and would have decent clothes to put on would improve his appearance by large.

Podmore wasn't there for long, as he had rather urgent business to attend to. He studied Draco's arm and told him that it was most likely the after-effect of the ritual, or more precisely the consecutive strengthening of the magical shield around the foetus. He advised Draco to avoid using strong spells for the next few days and start accustoming his magic to the shield by beginning to cast simpler charms. That left practically every kind of magical transportation out of reach, and now Draco was doubly confined to Snape's house. The matter made him slightly uneasy, but it wasn't as if he had any other places to be in the following days.

On the other hand, this gave him a covert opportunity to spend time with Snape and to question him about things he had done that involved Draco's inheritance. At least he hoped that he had guessed correctly when he assumed that Snape's willingness to take him into his house indicated his intention to come clean – as much as his other allegiances permitted him. Draco was positive that with careful and thorough questioning he would be able to dig out the answers he needed.

He wanted to start the next morning, but to his surprise Snape was ahead of him in the matter, because right after they finished dinner, he invited Draco to have a drink with him in his study. Draco was, to say the least, surprised. He had never before been permitted into that room. He knew that it was Snape's sanctuary, as it also housed his Potions laboratory with all the experimental and not yet licensed Potions work he had devoted his life to.

Draco was not disappointed by it, though the strangely homely setup of the other half of the study surprised him a bit. From the furnishings in his living room, he wouldn't have considered Snape as a person who appreciated comfort and cultivated tasteful design, but now that he was here he realised his mistake. Snape's living room showed the aspects of his personality he wanted other people to see. This place was where he really lived and not the one out there. Draco was a little taken aback by the fact that

the second he put his foot into it, the atmosphere of the room relaxed his agitated nerves and he almost began to feel at home.

Snape stepped to a bar and grabbed a crystal bottle – only to put it back after a second, scowling, and summon some hot water from the kitchen to prepare tea for the two of them. Draco held back his smirk and tried to look appreciative at the gesture, but inwardly he wished for nothing more than something strong to drink - or a large banana split with a topping of Chocolate Frogs trapped in sticky caramel, perhaps with a sprinkling of almond and pistachios and tomatoes, yes, definitely tomatoes… Draco gulped silently. Damn! Where was a house-elf when one needed its services?

“Mr Malfoy?” Snape’s voice stopped the track of his thoughts. Draco discretely wiped off a trail of drool from the edge of his mouth while accepting the cup of steaming tea that was handed to him by the Potions Master, wishing strongly it was something else. The instant he had touched the cup, though, there was a loud bang and in the next second his fingers were curled around the very thing that had featured his recent fantasy – no, not Potter’s cock, but a bowl the size of a house-elf’s head filled with vanilla ice-cream, large clumps of delicious looking bananas and Chocolate Frogs pedalling in caramel syrup – apparently he didn’t really want the other things, but he got something yellowish instead, which after the first taste proved to be curry sauce.

Snape looked at him, momentarily startled, but then he acted as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, murmuring “Bloody cravings!” under his breath. He didn’t even reprimand Draco for improvising a rather complicated transfiguration spell – without a wand, no less - but he eyed him rather disgustedly when he tucked in enthusiastically, having forgotten himself for a moment. Snape apparently decided that if Draco could have what he wanted then he wouldn’t hold back either, and pulled out his bottle – that, or he needed a drink to be able to stomach the sight.

“So, would you mind to tell me why exactly you deemed it appropriate to ignore my and Podmore’s warnings about the ritual?” Snape asked him while already refilling his glass, having tossed back his first drink in one gulp.

Draco swallowed down a wiggling piece of chocolate before answering. It gave him some time to think about what he was willing to divulge, but in the end he decided to be honest – in this question at least.

“Your advice didn’t seem too convincing to me after you lied about Granger and the Death Eater drug. I

thought someone had put you up to thwart my efforts…" He let his voice drift off, hoping that Snape would get the hint, but instead Snape pulled up his nose.

"I wasn't lying to you," he stated calmly. For a few seconds their gazes bore into each other's without blinking, but then Snape sighed and rolled his eyes.

"All right, perhaps I wasn't entirely truthful," he admitted in an annoyed tone. Draco just lifted a brow, waiting for an explanation. He was calm on the outside, but in the inside he was desperately urging Snape to utter the words that would put an end to his nightly suffering, even forgetting his dessert in the process.

Snape pouted – a rather frightening occurrence – and then sighed again for show before launching himself into a rather lengthy explanation.

"All right, so everyone knows that the Minister hadn't been in a serious relationship for years. The Prophet would have undoubtedly printed it as cover story if she were dating someone. And at the time she had broken up with Weasley, she had made it clear that it was his inferior mental abilities that had put her off of him. I have always considered her a bright woman, and she seems to lay more value on intellect than on physical appearance. We have much in common… and I'm not getting any younger. It seemed to be a sensible plan to try my chances with her; but unfortunately she is a very private person and doesn't seem to open up easily. I have put a good deal of work into wooing her, alas, with limited results…"

Draco lifted his hand dazedly, which stopped Snape in the middle of his frustrated declaration.

"Wait! What does this have to do with the Death Eater drug and its antidote?"

"Nothing?" Snape looked at him, as clueless as he felt after having to hear about such disturbing topic as the Potions Master's love life.

"There is no such thing as an antidote. I told you already that it wasn't a real drug. That wasn't a lie."

Draco put down the bowl before he spilled the melted goo that remained from his banana split, as his hands couldn't seem to cease trembling.

"So what do you think it is then?" he asked, confused and with an uneasy feeling in his stomach.

Snape looked down at him for a moment; Draco hadn't expected him to show any understanding towards his situation, but apparently the two – now two and a half – glasses of alcohol and the talk about his own unhealthy obsession had softened his brains – because to Draco's knowledge Snape didn't possess such sentimental things like a heart.

"Have you considered the possibility that your attraction to Potter is… natural?" he asked in a tone that clearly wanted to let him down softly instead of dropping him off the highest tower of Hogwarts. "I know that Lucius didn't approve of it, for more reasons than I'd care to list, but seriously, you wouldn't have been the first wizard to be attracted to his own gender."

"What…" Draco felt as if his mouth had dried out. Natural? What the bloody hell was Snape talking about? But of course he was half Muggle; as brilliant as the Potions Master's mind worked in magic-related areas, it was still infected with those ridiculous Muggle ideals that wanted you to believe that becoming Queer was not a disease, but something natural. Draco was not that surprised about Snape's apparent acceptance of them. What really bothered him was the question of what his father had to do with this all? He had been dead for six years now. Or was he? There was a twinge in Draco's mind that told him that there was something rotten in the state of Denmark, and obviously, it wasn't just the gay bar in Copenhagen.

TBC

A/N: check out the gorgeous art Ildi made for me here!!!

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Chapter 20: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

22 January 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn Vance

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Chapter Twenty

"…foy… Mr. Malfoy… Draco! Is everything all right?" Draco felt two hands descending onto his shoulders in a firm grip and blinked open his eyes. When had he closed them?

"Wha...?" Draco gave a jump as he found Snape's blurry face so close to him. It gradually shifted into focus, revealing the Potions Master's peculiar expression for the fraction of a second, before his features blanked out again. Draco recognised the look, it was that of intense concentration.

Had Snape tried Legilimency on Draco? But if that were the case, he would have felt the unique prickling

sensation within his mind he had been trained to look for. Snape was a skilled Legilimens, but Draco had known him for so long that he wasn't able to conceal his traces anymore.

"I asked if you were all right," the Potions Master said, interrupting his thoughts while backing out of Draco's personal space.

"I am." Draco quirked a brow. Why shouldn't he be? Draco pondered about it for a second, with only blankness to answer him, before seemingly disjointed pieces of information coming from nowhere just seemed to flood his mind.

Ugh. The mere image of Snape and Granger together turned his stomach. No wonder he had almost blacked out for a second. He couldn't understand why Snape had considered it important to tell Draco that he planned to take her to on honeymoon to Denmark! Apparently, the man was convinced that Granger had a natural attraction towards his intelligence. Or perhaps that she was given a Death Eater drug so she wouldn't open up to Snape?

Draco couldn't recall the Potions Master's words clearly. They most likely hadn't been anything important, and the mental image gave him a nasty headache. It was better to forget them before he threw up his banana split. He had a more pressing topic to address, from which Snape clearly intended to steer away.

"Do you think I don't know what you are trying to do?" Draco leaned back in his chair. Snape looked at him, eyes sparkling below furrowed brows.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

Draco sneered. "All this blathering about the Mudblood. You are trying to divert from the topic."

He saw Snape wince when he called Granger by that name, and was reminded of Weasley's reaction from years before. Oh, that was rich! It seemed that the Potions Master wasn't only considering wooing Granger to gain some good breeding stock or because of her political position, but he had actually

developed feelings for her.

“What is the topic?” Snape asked finally. Draco decided to take the straight road. He wanted answers, and he would get them.

“I want to know everything you did to me on the orders of your godson.”

“Cyrus?” Snape seemed bemused. “I guess it would be pointless to deny that he had attempted to recruit me for his cause. Of course he couldn’t have known about the Unbreakable Vow I made to your mother before your sixth year in Hogwarts.” Draco was minutely glad that there was no mention of Dumbledore in that last sentence. The admission surprised him, though.

“That old thing? I thought that was over and done with.” Draco looked questioningly at the other man.

“As your mother doubtlessly told you, there were three parts to the Vow. To keep an eye on you while you were prancing around to accommodate the Dark Lord’s wishes, to finish your assignments to the Dark Lord when you failed to fulfil them, and to protect you from harm to the best of my ability. As the Dark Lord has ceased to exist, the first two are no longer applicable. To the last one, though, was no time limit assigned. I am saddled with you until one of us doesn’t walk this earth anymore.” That last sentence called forth a deeply ingrained disgust from the depths of Snape’s soul that was supposed to show Draco just how saddened he was by this fact. Somehow Draco couldn’t muster any sympathy for him.

He was glad for this revelation and started to rearrange his plans around it, but he wasn’t blinded by the promise it gave him. This Vow was not a life guaranty, even though it did bear certain advantages to him. But ‘to protect from harm’ wasn’t the same as ‘to not cause harm’. And there was that little phrase, ‘to the best of his ability’. What if it wasn’t within Snape’s abilities to prevent Cyrus from using him against Draco? His mother had been too soft-hearted, or else she would have used ‘at all costs’ instead.

“So… you are saying that you didn’t give out information to Cyrus or anyone else that could have been used to harm me in the last few months?” He deliberately placed an emphasis on the words ‘harm me’ to trigger the Vow.

“Yes. That is what I’m saying.” Snape’s answer was direct, and he didn’t show any sign of magic trying to influence his answer, such as stuttering or pausing before his words, looking away or his eyes glazing over. Draco was impressed.

“And before that?” He pressed the matter further.

“No. I haven’t.”

“Are you telling the truth? You know that your lying would cause me harm.”

“I am telling the truth. And I am not lying. Nor am I keeping secrets from you that would harm you in any way. And before you ask, I am not lying or keeping things away from you to protect you from harm either. Have I covered everything now?” Snape asked, trying to sound irritated, but all of his answers were direct. Either he was actually being honest with Draco, or he had practiced beforehand, knowing that Draco would eventually ask the questions.

Draco sighed. There really was no other way to find out if Snape was under any influence other than to continue the questioning methodically, and hope that at one point he would ask something that the Potions Master hadn't foreseen and cause him to betray himself. It would have been so much easier if Veritaserum could have solved the problem, but it wouldn’t have been of any use. The Unbreakable Vow was stronger than a mere potion whose effect wore out in mere hours. It should have been evident that if there was spell on him, which had been able to override the Unbreakable Vow, most likely it would have rendered the target resistant against truth serums all the more. He had no other choice than to continue as planned.

Draco asked about everything that came to his mind, the ritual, Podmore, Potter, Cyrus, even Granger, but he only got the same straightforward answers as before – even if they had been the same “I can’t tell you about that” when he inquired about Potter’s mysterious illness or the potions Snape supplied him with. That last one was actually a slip from Draco’s side, as he hadn't planned to reveal to Snape that he was aware of his contribution, even though Snape knew that Draco had seen Potter imbibe such a potion on the night of his rescue. That was a clue to retire for the night and continue the questioning at a later time, when his mind was fresh again.

Draco woke up the next morning altogether too early – to Snape's insistent shaking and demanding for him to get up and speak to his wife, who was apparently on the Floo and had refused to call back later in the day. Draco could hear Pansy screeching in the background, her incorporeal voice harassing Snape with threats such as coming over if he didn't get her husband before the fireplace in that instant.

Draco groaned and blinked at the clock that advised him to go back to sleep, but after every one of Pansy's shrieks the hand swung more and more vehemently into the direction of "In mortal peril". Draco didn't want to let Pansy wait until it remained there for good, so he got out of his warm bed, grumbling under his breath. It just figured that his sleep had to be disturbed on the only night when the dreams had actually stayed away.

He didn't even have enough time to make himself comfortable in front of the fireplace before Pansy practically attacked him with a piece of paper Draco recognised as the Daily Prophet. He had no clue how she had succeeded in getting it where she was secreted away, particularly because it was fresh from that morning.

"WHAT IS THIS?" She threw the paper through the fire, so that it hit Draco directly on his nose. She was seething while she waited for him to pick it up and read the cover page.

Draco paled when he saw what she was so furious about; so furious that foam was practically bubbling out of the corners of her mouth. Of course he had been expecting this; and that was exactly the reason why he hadn't wanted to actually read the article.

Draco Malfoy Revealed!

The frequently asked but never answered question

about Mr. Malfoy's wartime identity seems to have

finally garnered a response. Whether or not he was

a Death Eater had been concealed from the public

by the Ministry and Mr. Malfoy himself. Mr. Malfoy

had been detained on suspicion of using Dark Art in his home. (See side story on page 3.) Now, in an accident in the Ministry's foyer yesterday, when Mr. Malfoy was about to be released from custody, a magical backlash caused the Glamour Charm that had concealed his Dark Mark to splinter and reveal the grave but not entirely unexpected truth.

…

Draco didn't read it further, instead his eyes were drawn to the close ups taken from his arm and the mark near his elbow. The sight seemed strange, as he hadn't seen his mark from that angle before, but that was undoubtedly Draco's underarm on the pictures. It was a small consolation that the photographers concentrated solely on his arm, so the pictures didn't directly reveal the horrible prison garb he had been forced to wear, because they also had caused the paleness of his skin to look sickly rather than aristocratic.

He tore away his gaze from the images to scan the remainder of the article before he turned back to Pansy. The reporter contributed some rather antagonistic guesswork about his past. He seemed to be convinced, and wanted to convince everyone else too, that Draco had joined the Dark Lord willingly and that his final gesture of revealing information to the Order of the Phoenix about the Death Eaters had been an act of cowardice. He stated that Draco's motives hadn't been to save the wizarding world from a power-hungry madman, but pure self preservation. Draco swallowed a lump in his throat. He didn't know why he let himself be bothered by the libel. For one, he would make sure that the reporter lost his job come the next day; for the other, his deductions were more or less true, even if Draco wouldn't have phrased them the same way. He was no coward!

To his utter shock, though, at the bottom of the article, one paragraph was entirely dedicated to a semi-official statement Harry Potter had apparently given to the Prophet only a few minutes before the deadline. In which he maintained that the Ministry had proof that Draco Malfoy had been coerced into taking the Dark Mark and that he had been working for the light side for a while before the final battle and his renouncing of the Dark Lord. Potter mentioned that the documents concerning Draco had been classified top secret, and wouldn't be released from that classification in the foreseeable future. Draco

didn’t know what to think about that part of the article. Why did Potter lie for him? Had Snape asked him to do that as well?

The article ended with a comment from the editor of the Daily Prophet, which promised the readers that they would get back to the topic soon in an exclusive interview with Potter, as his comments seemed to be insinuating that he was in the possession of more of Draco Malfoy’s secrets, and that the Prophet would make its top priority to get those secrets revealed.

That last sentence made Draco’s heart miss a beat and his mind reel. The editor apparently believed that Potter would readily answer every one of their questions and give out “Draco’s other secrets”. That he couldn’t let happen!

He was dragged back into reality by Pansy’s renewed screeching, which she had mastered perfectly courtesy of his grandmother. Draco again cursed the day when the portrait – Merlin only knew how - turned up in one of the frames decorating the second floor hallway after her previous home, number twelve, Grimmauld Place, had been burned to the ground. He knew he should have unleashed the Ministry’s curse breakers on the bloody picture when it refused to get unstuck from his walls no matter what he tried.

“Draco Malfoy! I demand an explanation and it better be a bloody good one! I’m not gone for a week, and if it wasn’t enough that you got yourself arrested by the Ministry, you had to top it off with causing a scandal like this!...”

She went on and on, but Draco had tuned her out after the first few sentences. Thankfully, the fire between them vaporized the amount of spittle that would have otherwise landed on his face. He kept his expression carefully blank, eyes trained on his wife, and let her prattle on while reminding himself that it wouldn’t be wise to let himself into a shouting match with her. Regrettably, both of them were under the influence of excess hormones, which could turn this into something he was neither prepared nor willing to go into.

“Pansy,” he interrupted her while she was busy taking a breath. He tried to sound level headed and soothing. “Do you really think I did this deliberately?”

Luck was with him; she actually stopped and seemed willing to listen to reason.

“No, but still. It was incredibly stupid of you. We don’t need this attention right now.” Draco was surprised at the calm tone she had managed to attain. There was a small tremble behind the words. He knew of course that she was simply afraid.

“I promise to set everything in order. You know I am capable of doing it. And they can’t do anything to me based on mere accusations. They have no proof against me.”

Pansy’s mouth was pursed, and she looked away from Draco for a few seconds, thinking.

“I think I am going to stay here for a while more,” she told him finally. Draco nodded. Of course, Agnus probably already advised her to do that, and if necessary, he would put off her return until Draco enabled her to do so, but Draco would let her keep the illusion that it was her own decision rather than something her husband had forced on her.

“That would be probably the best. You are safe there. And the manor is still infested with Aurors.” Draco spit out the last word as if it was the most despicable thing in the world. “I’m sure you don’t want to be saddled with our guests.”

Pansy nodded regally. “No, I rather prefer my solitude right now. The last week was like a vacation. I feel much more refreshed and I could be enjoying a relaxing time were it not for the matter of your latest mishaps.” At that point she frowned at him again, but it was gone after a second this time, just a reminder of her wrath.

“What about you? Are you going to be all right?”

Draco nodded and didn’t quite manage to hide the bewilderment in his eyes. Since when had she started caring about him? The next question, though, made it apparent that she was worried about their reputation, not Draco’s wellbeing.

“And Harry Potter? What other secrets does he really know about you?” Draco had to remind himself that Pansy had no idea about Potter’s involvement into his life, and he reckoned that it was best to keep it that way.

“Nothing you should be concerned with,” he told her. That seemed to satisfy her, or she just knew him enough to recognise that she wouldn’t get anything more out of him that way, and so she was willing to consider the topic closed. She terminated the connection after she had Draco promise to notify her about every important development, and let her know when she could come back to the Manor.

Draco spent the next day and a half trying to find a crack in Snape’s resistance and get him to reveal Cyrus’ or someone else’s influence on his mind - without any success. Snape went along with Draco’s attempts, even if he started to show signs of irritation from time to time, but his reasoning, his explanations and justifications of his motives were consistent; Draco couldn’t find a fault in them. This infuriated him to the point where he considered the application of Imperius to get Snape to tell the truth, but he knew that even the Unforgivable wouldn’t have been one-hundred percent dependable either if there was already one mind-altering magic influencing his will. No one could tell what the mixture of those would result in. This kind of magic was not very reliable when it came to the finer details. That’s why Draco was positive that when he found Snape in the right mood or asked the right question, he would be able to break through his shell. As time passed, though, Draco had to admit that it wasn’t an easy task.

He didn’t dare hope that the fact he hadn't yet succeeded meant that Snape actually wasn’t under any spell influence. Only time would reveal the truth, if it could be revealed at all. Unfortunately, time was the one thing Draco didn’t have. For now he was safe, protected by the guest rights, but as soon as he was out of Snape’s house that would lose its power. He needed Snape on his side, but he couldn’t afford to trust him if he wasn’t entirely sure that he could.

Draco began to feel like he was wasting his time, so he started asking different questions, and somehow the topic turned towards Potter. Gathering information about the speccy git was never a waste of time. After Pansy’s call Draco had coerced Snape into setting up a meeting with Potter for him, and until then he wanted to acquire as much knowledge about him as he could. Snape proved to be insistent on refusing to reveal Potter’s secrets, but he was willing to divulge general facts about his life. Draco already knew that Potter had started out his career as a high profile Auror, until only a few years later he had retired from active service and had got a token job inside the Ministry. Draco should have guessed that his current occupation was to head the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, as he had heard Potter himself

saying that before Auror Schwiegerfrei had banged into the room. Apparently, he had the position for three years now, which made Draco think about the fact that it coincided with the point when the random raids for Dark Artifacts on the Manor stopped. It looked like Potter was more competent than his predecessor. To acknowledge that wasn't something Draco normally would have been inclined towards. But Potter had donated the other half of the genetic material of Draco's future heir, so it was no wonder he was trying to find positive characteristics in him rather than focusing solely on the negative ones.

Apparently, Potter branched out his office's range of business a bit, searching for Dark Artifacts in other places, which explained his job in Borgin and Burkes. Snape was actually telling him this part, since Potter's cover was now blown, and he wasn't going back to work there. He was silent about Potter's reason for having used a Glamour to meet with the Aurors that night. If Draco had to guess, it either meant that Potter's undercover work had been so secret that not even the Aurors were informed about it, or that it had been unauthorized. Knowing Potter's penchant for trouble, Draco was rather inclined to believe the latter. The private aspects of Potter's life appeared to be more of a secret - at least where the public was concerned, because Draco had the misfortune to learn firsthand how Potter had become so proficient in Glamour Charms. In everything else Potter seemed to be the way Draco expected him to be. His ways hadn't changed much since Hogwarts, and neither had Snape's private opinion of him, as it soon became apparent, even if he had maintained the illusion of camaraderie in his presence. He was still friends with the Weasel and the Mudblood, but Draco was reluctant to let Snape speak about that topic, since he always started to wax poetical about Granger, which in turn made Draco irritated. He couldn't tell whether Snape's real reason for doing so was to annoy him with it, or he really was that enamoured by the Minister.

After only two days, they had succeeded in exhausting each other's patience to such a degree that Draco was actually glad to get out of there when Potter told him that something had come up and he wouldn't be able to Apparate to Snape's house, so Draco would have to visit him in his apartment, if he was insistent on speaking with him. The other alternative, to wait another day or so until he was free to come, didn't even enter Draco's mind. Snape looked torn between whether he should discourage Draco from going or be glad that he would have his solitude back for at least a few hours. Draco knew that the other man felt deprived of his beloved Potions work, since the Potions Master wouldn't permit Draco to come near a cauldron in his condition. He didn't even consider for ten seconds before he told Snape that he would be away, most likely for the rest of the afternoon.

TBC

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Chapter 21: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

16 February 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn

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Chapter Twenty-one

On second thought, Draco should have notified Potter before crashing into his living room through his fireplace in a most undignified manner. Of course it was the fault of those stupid wards, which had taken their time in checking him from every imaginable angle, so that Draco arrived on his hands and knees rather than in a standing position. He should have known not to travel into an unknown fireplace, but Apparition was regrettably out of question. He hadn't known where Potter lived; he only had the Floo address which Snape had given him. Because Snape's residence wasn't connected to the Floo network, he had to submit himself to the degradation of having to make use of a nearby pub.

After the fireplace spat him out, Draco found himself with his nose buried in a tacky bearskin rug, and

was instantly attacked by something small, round, very fast, squishy and squealing like a pig.

“HARRY! COME HERE, HARRY! A LITTLE GRAY MAN’S COME TO AB-DUCT YOU, HARRY! HARRY! HARRY! AIEEEEEEEE!”

Draco quickly curled into a ball, hands pressed onto his ears to be able to withstand the vocal assault. A few seconds later, he realised that the punches and kicks he was receiving didn’t really hurt his body as much as his pride. Thus he opened his eyes, grabbed the strange creature, and held it at arm’s length.

His first thought after glimpsing it was that Loony might have been right and Crumpled-Horned Snorkaks really existed. At a second glance, it became apparent that it was undoubtedly a human child of five: a little girl with two crooked pigtails on the top of her head. She had a strong resemblance to Crabbe when, in their sixth year, he had drunk the Polyjuice potion Draco had brewed after having run out of the stolen stock. He hadn't had enough time and thought he would be able to shorten the brewing process. The result of it had been an eleven year old girl with Crabbe’s body mass.

He tried to calm his attacker by offering a biscuit he had brought with him as an emergency ration, only to get zapped by a fierce magical discharge. He felt a light tingling in his own erratic magic, and he expected it to respond in kind. He was surprised when instead the magic’s almost instant response was to reach out and try to envelop the child in a soothing aura. It was so strong that it was even visible, but lasted only for the fragment of a second and then flickered out of existence. It really only scared the kid more, rather than achieving what its purpose had been. Fortunately in that moment, Potter appeared in one of the doorframes and the little girl started off to Potter, nearly tripping him over as she clutched tightly to his feet.

Potter’s gaze wandered from the living Bludger to Draco’s crouching form.

“Malfoy? I didn’t think you would come.” Well, that was obvious, Draco thought. “What are you doing with my niece?” he asked and then turned his head downwards, towards the source of insistent yanking on his trousers. “What is it, Pinky?”

“Harry! He is an alien! I saw him coming from up there! He shot me with his plasma gun! But my space

armour reflected it!”

Potter’s glance became sharp abruptly and wandered to Draco. He knew Potter was checking him for his wand, and now he was glad that he had it safely tucked away in his sleeve. He lifted both hands palms upwards to show Potter that he didn’t carry a weapon.

“I’m sorry about that,” Draco found himself unexpectedly apologizing before Potter scolded the girl more. “It was an accident. My magic is a bit unpredictable right now. But I meant no harm. It was just to calm her down.” He refused to acknowledge the fact that the mention of his first plushie’s name made him sentimental. He surely wasn’t starting to like a Muggle kid because she was called the same!

Potter’s rigid posture sagged with relief and his reproaching gaze turned towards the little girl.

“He doesn’t have a plasma gun, Pinky,” Potter said in an exasperated tone. From the stern look, Draco guessed it wasn’t her first time raising a false alarm. “And he is no alien. He is a wizard, like I am. He came through the fireplace, didn’t he?”

Draco was relieved that Potter accepted his explanation right away, and didn’t inquire further. Most likely because the vague gesture Draco had made towards his belly made Potter insecure, which also reflected on his face.

Meanwhile, the girl’s expression changed from sulking to excited at the mention of the word ‘wizard’. Her previous fear of Draco vanished at once, and he found himself being the target of the human Bludger once again.

“What’s your name? Can you do tricks, like Uncle Harry? And can you shoot laser beams from your wand? Did you kill aliens with it?” And the questions seemed to have no end. Draco suddenly didn’t know what to do with the bundle of excitement bouncing up and down like a large beach ball, bombarding him with inquiries. However, before he could open his mouth to fend off his attacker, Potter saved him by calling her back. She speedily obeyed and attached herself to Potter’s legs again.

“Pinky, go to your room. I have grown up things to speak about with this uncle,” Potter told her sternly.

Of course she didn't want to. She wanted to stay and watch 'this uncle' show her tricks. Draco snorted at the stupid name, while watching the little drama unfolding between Potter and the girl. Both of them proved stubborn as hell and neither seemed to be about to budge soon.

The girl yanked on Potter's trousers desperately with her eyes tearing up. She was just a hairbreadth away from breaking out in a mighty bawl. Draco silently congratulated for her performance, even though her Muggle talk about aliens and lasers confused him, thus preventing him from really paying attention to her words. His confusion notwithstanding, it was obvious that it was all just an act. Draco still remembered those tricks as clearly as if it had been only yesterday that he himself had been that age.

Apparently, Potter wasn't falling for her fake tears either. He just sighed, tugged his trousers she was pulling on to emphasise her viewpoint back up, and then told the little girl once again to go and play in her room. She didn't want to. Potter gave her a stern look – without any visible effect. She tried a few more things until Potter threatened her with no "wizard-tales" before bed, and Draco could see that this time she would really start crying if Potter kept it up.

"Let her."

Draco didn't know what made him say those words. Perhaps his mind was muddled because his hormones were going crazy and his magic was topping it off. Or because he saw his younger self in the girl. He most certainly wasn't beginning to like or pity her just because of her name!

His interruption rendered both the girl and Potter speechless for a second. Then Draco was rewarded with a loud squeak and another Bludger attack that Potter averted in the last second, scooping up the girl into his arms.

"Sorry about that," Potter said. Draco swiftly scrambled to his feet, after he had realised that all the while he had been kneeling, and that the position had brought his eyes level with Potter's crotch. He didn't want Potter to misinterpret Draco's bewildered gaze for checking out his package. And he wasn't!

While he was standing up, Draco's sight travelled upwards and then he was staring again. He didn't want to believe his eyes when he spotted the most hideous pink tee shirt he had ever seen. It was clearly of Muggle origin, with a black and white line art of a skull and two crossed-together marrow bones

decorating the front – but thankfully, there was no sign of a snake. Potter caught on as to what he was looking at.

“It’s not mine. It’s Pinky’s,” he said, eyes glinting with slight embarrassment.

“Pinky’s?” Draco fixed Potter with a suspicious glare.

Potter shrugged and was proceeding as if he misunderstood Draco’s question. “Her mother’s idea of a pet name. She was named after my aunt, but Petunia is too serious a name for a child, I guess. Some parents just don’t think before naming their children. For your child’s sake, I hope you won’t make the same mistake…”

Potter was babbling, Draco noticed as much. He was most likely just as uncomfortable with the situation as Draco, even if he hadn’t appeared to be at first glance. Draco didn’t answer; he couldn’t think of anything to say to that, so Potter seemed determined to fill the silence.

“She was sleeping over last night. Her parents were supposed to come for her this morning, but something came up and my cousin asked me if I could watch over her for a bit longer. As if I had any other choice…” Potter’s nervous babbling turned into an irritated grumbling and then stopped altogether. “That’s why I couldn’t come to Snape’s.”

“Isn’t your cousin a Muggle?” Draco blurted out the question. Where did that come from?

“He and his wife both.” Potter looked back at him, brows raised. “But why are we speaking about my family? You didn’t come just for that, did you?”

Draco nodded rigidly. It was a little strange to talk about these things while a five-year-old was looking at him with avid curiosity, but apparently Pinky didn’t want to risk Potter’s benevolence, because she was as quiet as the dead – the polite sort of dead, that is; she caused no trouble at all.

“I came for two reasons. Firstly, to talk about that article in the Prophet, and secondly, to ask questions Snape wasn’t willing to answer.”

“Well then, out with them,” Potter said, and then he abruptly stood up. “Do you want coffee?” He was already halfway out of the room before the question even registered in Draco’s mind. He had no other choice than to follow him with Pinky in tow.

Once he caught up with him, Draco accepted the offer, and then observed Potter stuffing some monstrous Muggle box with pre-ground coffee beans and water while he tried to collect his thoughts. He wanted to threaten Potter to step back from that interview, or to keep his mouth shut about Draco’s business, so it came to him as a surprise when the first sentence leaving his lips had nothing to do with either of those things.

“Is it safe for you to take care of a small child while you’re on drugs? Don’t her parents mind it? Or they don’t know about it at all?” Draco congratulated himself for a good opening, and tried to bury his unbecoming concern for Pinky deep into the hidden dark recesses of his mind. His style was to always attack first, mainly when it came to his interactions with Potter. Seeing the confusion appear on the other man’s face, he felt instantly better.

“What do you mean, Malfoy?” Potter asked. Draco could tell that he was trying to restrain his anger.

“You know what I mean,” Draco stated with an air of superiority.

“Are you talking about the potion Snape brews for me?” Potter asked after a few seconds of silence, which he used to make it seem as if he was seriously trying to guess what Draco had been talking about. As if! He needed to become a much better actor before he could compete with Draco in sneakiness.

“That too, and just why you take that potion, and an explanation of why you were sacked!” Draco nodded. He looked cool on the outside, but on the inside he was a quivering mass of hormones. He sincerely hoped that whatever answer Potter gave, it wouldn’t be something that would affect his child.

“I don’t know how this would be your business in any way.” Potter gave him a dark look and huffed. “But

I'm going to answer anyway. The answer is just one word: Voldemort."

Draco lifted a brow. "Of course, Potter, every single detail in your life comes back to the Dark Lord. He is the one to blame for everything."

"You're so full of shite, Malfoy." Potter shook his head. Meanwhile, the coffee was ready, and he busied himself with pouring the dark liquid into two cups. There was a third, larger one next to them in which Potter poured milk with three spoonfuls of cocoa powder, and stirred it together without warming the milk first. Draco's disgust notwithstanding, apparently, Pinky liked her drink just that way.

"The potion is for subduing the excess magic I have obtained – or rather regained – when Voldemort died. Sugar? Cream?"

Draco was momentarily thrown by the sudden change of topic. "Three and yes," he answered finally, and was prepared to urge Potter to continue his tale, but it seemed that his input wasn't needed. Potter gave him his cup and directed them towards the living room couch. When they were all seated – with Pinky occupying Potter's lap - and sipping their respective beverages, he picked up where he left off.

"I don't understand everything about it myself. Hermione and the doc tried to explain it, but then they got always tangled up in Latin phrases and magical theory I was supposed to have known about, since it was taught in Hogwarts… whatever." Potter gesticulated, frustrated, and Draco realised that he had been staring at him without blinking. He quickly averted his eyes to gaze into his empty cup. The coffee-grounds that remained on the bottom took the shape of a diaper. Draco put down the cup quickly, as if he had burned himself.

"In a nutshell, Voldemort was siphoning away some of my magic through our link, and when he died he gave it back to me and then some of his own. My body was already past puberty and it can't adapt to it anymore. The result is that I'm leaking magic and need the potion to be able to contain it."

"Leaking magic?" Draco deadpanned. "You have magical incontinence?" Draco asked, remembering the expression from when he was five and his grandmother had been still alive.

Potter nodded and gave him a sheepish smile. Draco sniffled with disgust.

“You mean the kind that old ladies have?”

Potter blushed beet red and refused to answer. Pinky looked from him to Draco and back with large eyes, her mouth dropping open, but she refrained from commenting.

Draco didn’t know whether he should rejoice that his child wasn’t going to be born with an illness or some nasty addiction - in fact, it was most likely going to be the strongest wizard or witch of its time – or be disappointed, because Potter’s ‘big secret’ wasn’t something he would be able to use against Granger in order to finally sack her. This wasn’t a crime, just something terribly embarrassing, though Potter didn’t even seem to be aware of that. If Draco made the Prophet write it, the only achievement he could get out of such a “scandal” was the hilarity of one half of the wizarding community and the compassion of the other.

“So that’s why you’re not an Auror anymore,” Draco said to divert Potter’s attention from the reaction he was trying to conceal.

“I wasn’t fit for duty. There was no guarantee that I could take the potion when I had to, like during an assignment or a stakeout. Without it, I’m prone to magical accidents and… let’s just say my perception goes crazy. Sometimes it’s useful, but most of the time it’s just annoying and confusing as hell. I was relieved of duty because I’m a danger to people and myself,” Potter confessed, his voice getting small. It almost caused Draco to pity him, too.

“And that’s why you got the position in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office and are hunting for Dark Artifacts while working undercover in Borgin and Burkes, and in your free time saving people in need…” Draco didn’t want to think, let alone speak about what else Potter was getting up to in his free time.

“I was bored.” Potter shrugged. “But if I weren’t, you wouldn’t be sitting here right now.”

“Thank you very much for reminding me of that.” Draco felt his expression harden.

“So, are you off the hook now?” Potter gestured with his hand awkwardly. Draco lifted his brow.

“For your information, Potter, I haven’t done anything wrong. It’s just because of those bureaucrats that the case isn’t closed yet.” Draco lifted his chin.

“I take it that the interrogation went well,” Potter said, trying to pry information out of him. His nosiness started to irritate Draco.

“Those were the stupidest questions I have ever been asked. As if a first year Hufflepuff had cooked them up for a DADA project,” Draco repeated his epiphany, because he thought it was quite witty and to the point. “I wonder which idiot came up with them".

“That would be me,” Potter said, rounding his lips.

“Oh.” Draco winced at the revelation. That was just one more thing he had Potter to thank for.

He didn’t like to be reminded of the fact that Potter was… if not quite his ally, at least not an enemy. Apparently knowing about his child had altered his normal attitude towards Draco. As if! Draco didn’t like to contemplate about what it would cost him to disabuse Potter from any kind of delusions of fatherhood he was secretly nursing. But he would have time to think about that when Potter actually brought up the topic. Until that time he would just act as if he was oblivious.

“So, you wanted to talk about the article in the Prophet?” Potter prompted when the silence stretched for too long. Draco nodded and mentally prepared what he wanted to say.

“I forbid you to talk about me to the reporters. If you so much as say my name out loud, I am going to sue you. I warn you, I have good lawyers. Better not let it come to that. You wouldn’t be able to pay the fee if you lived for a hundred and fifty years,” Draco articulated the words so Potter would understand them perfectly.

The other man, though, only smiled at him.

“Whatever gave you the idea that I would willingly talk to any newspaper, let alone the Prophet?” he asked lightly.

“The article said…” But then Draco stopped to think about what he just said, while Potter continued to look at him, as if he was waiting for Draco to get the clue. Damn him, he was!

“Swear it!” Draco demanded. He didn’t care if Potter thought him to be an idiot or overbearing. His future was at stake; he couldn’t risk neglecting to get reassurance for the sake of politeness. And this was Potter, anyhow. Since when did he feel the urge to be polite with Scar-head?

But Potter just laughed. “As you wish. I swear I won’t talk about your being a git, who is pregnant to boot, to anyone. Or did you want a magical contract?”

Draco considered it for a second, but for a valid contract he would need witnesses, so that was out of question. In the end, he had no choice but to believe in Potter’s word and the fact that he had been sorted into Gryffindor. He was just about to tell him that he didn’t want it when the doorbell rang. Potter jumped up and excused himself without waiting for Draco’s answer. Draco couldn’t miss the obvious fact that Potter acted jittery for some reason, even after they were past the potentially stressing topics.

He was jolted out of his thoughts by small, puffy hands grabbing his knee and a considerable weight trying to settle itself into his lap. Draco jumped a little when the questions started anew. Potter popped his head into the room to say that he was going down because the lift wasn’t working, and then laughed at the most likely peculiar look on Draco’s face.

“Just practice, Malfoy,” he said. “You’re going to need the skills in a few months, anyhow.” And then he was gone.

“What’s your name?” Pinky tried to gain his attention again by almost numbing his left thigh when she

leaned on it.

“Draco,” Draco answered. He was wondering about his sanity. Why was he allowing a four-year-old Muggle girl to call him by his given name?

“Is it true that you’ll have a baby?” she asked. Draco winced. He hadn't expected her to know yet what the word ‘pregnant’ meant.

“Um… yes,” Draco told her, hoping that she would be happy with his answer and stop pestering him for more. It was just as likely as the Dark Lord’s soul getting into the Muggle heaven.

“Is it going to come out of your belly?”

Draco nodded. “But that is a secret, do you understand?” She nodded vigorously. Draco should have known. Every little child was excited when told a secret. “You have to keep it. Can you do that?” She resumed nodding so hard Draco was wondering how her head was still on top of her torso (because he couldn’t see any proof of the existence of a neck) and not rolling around on the carpet.

Fortunately that was the moment Potter had chosen to reappear, and thus, saved Draco from the rest of the interrogation.

“Pinky, your parents are here!” he shouted. His cheeks were flushed red when he poked his head into the room again. He must have run up and down the stairs. “Hurry up and get dressed! Where is your overnight bag?”

Draco leaned back and observed the homey display of Potter running about the flat, alternately chasing after Pinky and her elusive clothing pieces. For the first time, it didn’t give him goose bumps when he thought about having children. He had always thought that Malfoys weren’t the type to enjoy family life. They were just breeding out of obligation: to pop out the next generation that would inherit the fortune. Lucius’ example had taught Draco to pity people who gave up their freedom for their children. Now though, his hormones made him feel a strange kind of nostalgia when he thought about his own, soon-to-be family. He wondered if he would mourn the loss of this feeling, or be glad for having returned

to his normal state of mind once the pregnancy was over, and the weird magic making it possible had settled down.

“I’m taking Pinky down. Her parents refused to come up here without the lift,” Potter interrupted his musing before he took the little girl’s hand and they both disappeared through the door.

Draco stood up, stretching a bit, and stepped to the window. Looking outside, he calculated that Potter was living on the fourth floor. On the street, he spotted a man and a woman – both bearing Pinky’s figure, so it was a safe guess that they were her parents. Both looked very impatient. They were conversing so loudly that Draco could hear their every word. Not that he was interested, as they were talking about rather mundane things, mainly the woman accusing the man of intentionally delaying them from getting there on time.

Finally, after a few minutes, Potter and Pinky arrived, and the woman abruptly grabbed the girl’s hand and started to tug her forcefully away, while Potter was conversing shortly with the man. Then he was gone again, and Draco continued to watch the family while he was waiting for Potter to get back there.

“Mum, I know a secret! Should I tell you what?” Pinky squealed, trying to out-shout her parents. “The uncle’s gonna be a mummy!”

“What barbaric burial customs those wizards have!” the woman snorted with disgust, and ran a hand through her perfectly styled hair. ”Or do you think your freak of a cousin will be still alive after that?” She gave a theatrical shudder. And then she started to scream and jump up and down.

“Dudley! There’s something in my hair! Get it out quickly! Help me! Don’t just stand around with your mouth open! Get it out NOW!”

“Mum, you’re funny!” Pinky giggled, and with a puff of smoke, she changed her mother’s hair into an unbecoming green colour.

“Oh! That’s your fault, Dudley! She has it from you for sure!” the woman continued to screech in the

most undignified manner.

“Shut up! I’m not a freak! She must have it from you…” Finally the sentence was cut into half by the slamming of a car door.

“And Muggles say wizards are barbaric!” Draco scoffed. He let the drapes fall back into their place and stepped away from the window.

When Potter came back, Draco was playing with a ring he had found in one of the glass cases. It was strangely familiar, but he couldn’t place the impression. He didn’t miss the pointed look Potter gave the ring in his hand, though. As if he expected Draco to steal it. Draco put it back down, pouting that Potter would assume something like that about him.

“Did you want to speak about something else?” Potter asked. His unwavering gaze was disconcerting Draco somewhat. All of a sudden, it seemed strange not to have Pinky there, and Draco started feeling light-headed and the return of his habitual scorn for Potter all at once.

“No. In fact, I am going now,” he answered and edged into the direction of the fireplace.

“Er… don’t you want to stay for a while longer?” he heard Potter’s almost hesitant voice asking from behind his back. Draco turned towards him with genuine surprise.

“Why would I?” he asked, still confused by his own abnormal behaviour from earlier with the little girl, and therefore starting to become snappish. Potter just shrugged it off.

“Right,” he said, pointing his wand at the fire to revive it a bit. “Never mind.”

“Farewell, Potter.” Draco nodded politely before he stepped between the flames. He heard his words echo shortly afterwards, and then he was dragged through unfamiliar fireplaces towards his destination.

TBC

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Chapter 22: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

19 February 2006

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Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn.

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Chapter Twenty-two

A week later the Aurors finally gave up on finding something and relinquished the Manor to Draco. Pansy had already Fire-called him a few times that week saying she was bored and wanted to come back. Draco couldn't imagine what was the difference between living there and in the Manor; it wasn't as if she had

been going out or inviting guests since her pregnancy became known.

At the time he arrived, the house-elves hadn't yet managed to rid the house of those abysmal 'Do not enter!' and 'Under Auror investigation!' ribbons those hounds had hung over the doors and windows both on the inside and outside. His dismay was only increased by the two visitors he got right after his arrival at home.

The first one was Cyrus, who sneered at the 'new decoration' and dared to lecture him about Malfoy pride. Draco hadn't seen him for nearly a half decade, so now he used the opportunity to survey him. It was a sobering experience. Cyrus had aged at least fifteen years during that time. His hair was the same snow white as before, but the bags under his eyes and the new lines on his constantly strained face made it look like the signs of aging instead of what it was: his natural lack of pigmentation. The impression was only accentuated by the sharp, judging look his mismatched eyes - one ice blue and one blood red - directed at everything without differentiating. He was only ten years Draco's senior and looked as if he could be his father. In fact, his features were eerily similar to Lucius' after a night spent enduring the Dark Lord's mood swings.

Draco didn't invite him inside to offer refreshments or a drink. If Cyrus didn't mind imposing himself on him before he could settle back in, then Draco could reciprocate the impoliteness and make him say what he wanted while standing before the front door. Fortunately Cyrus didn't stay long, only to voice his profound disappointment in Draco and offer the usual threats.

His second guest was announced by the house-elves only a half hour later, and made him wonder whether people who wanted something from him placed detection charms around the Manor, even though formerly he believed that impossible, and the presence of Aurors wasn't a guarantee against unwelcome visitors either; in fact, they had most likely taken down all the wards, and thus offered free entry to all.

Draco received her in the library amongst thousands of books - of course this was the library designed to entertain important guests, so no literature that mentioned Dark magic more than in a precursory way would be found here. Skeeter didn't comment on the tapes or the reason of Draco's recent absence from his home. She approached the subject right away in her usual direct, imposing manner.

"It has taken me a long time, but I have some information about Potter you might be interested in." She

lifted a brow and was waiting for Draco to answer. Draco remembered now. He had been the one to assign her with the task after he had overheard the conversation between Snape and Ganger.

It wasn't really surprising that she only came now. She wasn't the same sharp reporter as when he had been a student in Hogwarts. She had begun to lose her edge at some time during those years. The last time Draco had given her a job, it was to invent a scandal about Oliver Wood. Puddlemere had demanded a spectacular sum in exchange for annulling his contract and selling him to the Falmouth Falcons, whose owner was one of Draco's more influential friends. But the scandal Rita fabricated hadn't managed to render that price any lower, only to force Katie Bell's retirement from the Pride of Portier, as she was the one accused to have had an illicit affair with Wood. And that again had resulted in Draco losing a bet, because the Pride had lost every single match in the following season. The unwelcome memory of his past humiliation didn't help to alleviate Draco's already poor mood after he had just found his house in shambles and had to listen to Cyrus' diatribe.

"You're late. I'm not interested anymore," he spat out. "I already gathered the information from another source." Of course, he wasn't going to mention that the 'other source' had been Potter himself.

Skeeter's brows twisted into a knot and a mock-pout formed on her lips.

"I think you'll be, once you are willing to listen. But first I want my payment."

"I said 'no'!" Draco snarled at her. He wasn't going to pay her one Knut.

"Well, then…" She seemed angry with Draco. Good, he thought. He had wanted someone to take his temper out on and house-elves were so unsatisfying. "You are going to read about it in the Prophet," she stated.

Draco nodded and summoned a house-elf to see her out. He thought briefly about warning Potter, but then he clamped down on the idea firmly before any ridiculous need to see him again could surface. It wasn't like it was Draco who had told Skeeter about Potter's problems with continence, and he was willing to testify to it under Veritaserum, if Potter wanted. Potter was a big boy; he could take care of himself. Draco didn't need to concern himself with Potter.

And now that he was over that, he needed to reset the wards and in general, prepare the Manor for Pansy's return.

The next morning, Draco was having breakfast in the dining room with his wife - something that hadn't happened in months. The atmosphere was quiet, but not the uncomfortable kind of quiet. In fact, Draco could almost call it intimate; not quite the same as in a real family, or even close to the familiarity he had observed between Potter and Pinky, but at least a start of something that could become like that with time.

Pansy behaved herself rather well compared to their hectic talks through the Floo from earlier that week. She hadn't even mentioned the Ministry or the papers since her arrival the previous afternoon, and she didn't insist on bringing Madam Prunes, so it was only the two of them. She didn't seem to be angry with Draco or afraid of him anymore. The breakfast proceeded in a very laid back manner - until the Prophet arrived.

Even then, Draco didn't notice the change in Pansy's expression right away. She didn't start shouting and refrained from hexing him. It was only the increasing paleness of her face and the trembling of her lips that should have alerted him that something was wrong, but he was so relaxed and enjoying his rare peace in the present company that he hadn't. He was just offering his cup to a house-elf for a refill when she gave a small sound. It was muffled by her hand covering her mouth, but Draco was still able to make out surprise and disbelief in it. She dropped the paper onto the table and then stood up rigidly and took a step backwards while Draco looked at her questioningly. He had already opened his mouth to ask for the reason of her behaviour when she finally spoke.

"Why do you have to always do these kinds of things, Draco?" she asked with large eyes, tears just gathering in their corners. "Why?" That last one was no more than a disappointed whisper.

After that, Pansy turned her back to him and left without another word. Her hands were tightly curled into fists, which indicated that she was on the verge of a very nasty breakdown of the tearful kind, but she refused to let her tears fall in front of her husband.

Draco just blinked, sitting straight in his chair for several seconds after the door had closed behind her, and then finally he reached for the discarded newspaper. There was almost no writing and no picture on

the first page, but the headline filled half of the page. Draco read it thrice, gulping and feeling more and more light-headed after each read. The name in the bottom right corner was naturally Rita Skeeter.

Draco Malfoy: The Wizard Who'll Have Harry Potter's Baby!

Draco skimmed through the following article. It was surprisingly short, unadorned by literary tools, such as complicated compound sentences and similes. It sounded more like a war report, and thus, hitting home the fact that this was no fiction, thank you very much, but nothing but the naked truth.

Draco was going to kill Potter!

It all made sense now. His slighted promise and his casualness. He had meant to rattle Draco out in the first place, and of course he had gone to Skeeter right away! She couldn't have got the information from elsewhere, as Podmore was obliged to remain confidential and Snape would have sooner stepped on her before she could have entered his property. Even if Draco didn't trust him not to succumb to Cyrus' machinations, this one fact he knew with absolute safety.

He forced himself to remain calm on the outside and to carefully choose his clothes for the day on which he was going to kill Potter, thus giving time to himself to wind down a bit. He had blown up several glass figurines with accidental magic and had to order a cocoa with lots of sugar before he managed to calm down to the level he deemed appropriate. He refused to acknowledge the fact that his hands were still trembling when he entered the fireplace to Floo to Potter's flat, since he didn't trust himself not to get splinched if he tried to Apparate.

"POTTER! Where are you!" he shouted once he landed on the bearskin in front of Potter's fireplace. He didn't even care that he was sooty or that the damned thing spat him out again to arrive on all fours. Potter wasn't in the living room, but he didn't have to search for long until he found him in the kitchen. To his surprise though, Potter wasn't alone, despite the early time. To his even greater surprise, his company was Snape.

When Potter spotted Draco racing towards him, he jumped. His gaze was fixed on the murderous expression on Draco's reddened face.

"Malfoy!" he said, but then instead of the gloating Draco had been expecting, he only said, "I'm sorry."

Draco came to a screeching halt before him and lifted his arms halfway into the air. He wanted to strangle Potter with them, but before that, he wanted to hear his explanation and wrangle some apologies out of him, as insufficient as they might have been at this point.

"What," he questioned, "did you think you were doing?"

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" Potter was acting clueless. "What am I supposed to have done now?"

Draco's anger was above rage now. His expression turned disdainful and his insides cold.

"Telling one infernal reporter whose name I am not willing to take into my mouth about my pregnancy and that you're the father ring any bells?"

"Oh, come off it, Malfoy! Why would I tell her something like that? Besides, I promised that I wouldn't and I keep my promises. Gryffindor, remember?"

"Don't pull the innocent act; it isn't working with me. Slytherin, remember?" Draco snarled back at him. "You. Told. Her. About. Our. Child!" Draco was now poking Potter's chest with every new word uttered.

"Now, you only needed to say 'My father is going to hear about this' and it would have been just like old times." Potter mocked him. "This is ridiculous. And anyhow, why are you speaking about it as if it really is mine? It's clear she's gone mental. Who would believe something like that?"

Potter gave a small, anxious laugh, but it stopped, just like Draco's breath halted after that question, his finger still raised accusingly in front of Potter's chest.

"Because it is," sounded the cryptic remark from their side.

It was typical that Snape, who remained silent all along, would have chosen exactly that moment of stunned silence to interfere.

Potter threw a sharp look at him, but of course Snape's expression remained utterly serious, save the hint of amusement tingling in the corners of his beetle-eyes, and he wasn't backing away either. It rendered Potter stuttering.

"But that's not possible!" he exclaimed, running a hand through his contemporary shaggy hair, which didn't improve his appearance at all. That was the instant Draco came to the revelation.

Fuck! Potter didn't know that? But Snape had said he told him. His thoughts chased each other rabidly, creating a swirling chaos in his head. He wouldn't have to be afraid of Potter claiming any paternal rights, because he didn't know he was the other father. But now he does know, he reminded himself and cursed again.

"It is, I assure you," Snape tried to drive it home to Potter. Meanwhile, Draco was occupied with his own thoughts.

"But how? And when? Or did you just steal something of mine and use it in a crazy experiment?" Potter shook his head and looked at Draco, expecting him to answer his questions. Draco sneered. Why not?

"Copenhagen? Three and a half months ago? The 'woman' in the red dress. I designed the Glamours in order to be able to… meet someone in a more… intimate milieu…"

Potter's face went pale very suddenly.

"That was you? I… I thought…" He grabbed a fistful of dark hair on the top of his head and tugged, while his eyes went glassy with remembrance as he tried to fit the pieces together. "I had too much to drink already and skipped my potion. I thought it was just my senses blurring together and creating an image again…" he muttered.

"What?" Draco shouted. "You could see through my Glamours? You knew it was me?" Potter looked up at him with the innocence of a child gleaming in his eyes.

"I thought it was just someone resembling you. And anyhow, I told you already, my perception was blurred. Did you know that it was me?"

"Think, Potter!" Draco made an impatient gesture with his hand before the other man's face. "If I had known, I wouldn't have chosen you," he explained as if Potter really was the child he looked. At his words, Potter's expression became even more hurt for some reason Draco couldn't fathom and wasn't in the mindset to ponder about right in that moment. He decided it was because Potter was dismayed by the revelation of him being the father of Draco's child.

"I didn't know," he said again, shaking his head. "How could I have?"

"I thought Snape told you," Draco huffed. "I thought that was the reason why you were willing to come for me and get me out of the Manor before the Aurors got there."

"No, that wasn't it. The reason I came was…" Draco noticed that Potter became cautious and stopped to think about how he would continue that sentence. "It was because of the life debt I owe you." At Draco's puzzled expression, he added, "Never mind," and shook his head before changing the topic, his expression shifting abruptly from confused to annoyed.

"Snape hadn't even told me the exact time of the ritual had you planned."

Both of their glances turned towards Snape, who had a look on his face as if he was watching a very amusing theatre show. Of course he could find it amusing, since he was neither of the involved parties.

"I told you that with this ritual, the time of the day must be the same as the time of the conception. I did tell you," Snape said smugly, rendering Potter just the more enraged.

"You did no such thing, you half-wit ponce! You just diverted the topic and asked me about whether I visited some clubs lately… Oh."

"Oh," Snape nodded. “I hoped against all hope that you could figure it out from that. Clearly, I was mistaken. Power isn’t everything.”

"Come off it; that line was old, even for me.” Potter rolled his eyes. “Why didn't you just tell me straight away?”

"Patient confidentiality," Snape answered with a perfectly serious face. Draco sighed and lifted a brow, but neither one of them deigned that with an answer.

A half a minute later, Potter turned and used the prolonged silence to stuff his coffee-making thing. They waited, all three of them submerged in their respective thoughts, until the strong brew came out, and then settled themselves in the living room, each holding a cup.

"I think it was Pinky." Potter sighed after the first gulp of coffee. His gaze was fixed on the beverage rather than looking at Draco or Snape.

"What was Pinky?" Draco asked. Snape looked as if he had no clue what they were speaking about.

"Remember when I had to walk her down to her parents?" Draco nodded impatiently. "I felt something… a presence that shouldn't have been there… I think that was Skeeter in her Animagus form. And then I heard Pinky saying something about you to her mother."

"Would have been hard not to," Draco agreed.

"Skeeter must have sniffled something in that conversation and then, starting from there, ferreted out more information from You Know Who knows where."

Great! Potter was the guy with the crappy puns in the worst situations. Draco blinked once until he managed to untangle that sentence, and a glance sideways told him that Snape wasn't impressed either. "Please, refrain from using the F-word in the future. Thank you."

"That still doesn't explain how she knew that you are the father. I haven't told that to anyone except Snape and Healer Podmore."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Then perhaps she she made the leap from the fact that you were visiting me…"

"In which case, she was right," Snape reminded Potter smugly.

Potter turned away his face, pondering. A small crease formed between his brows, and Draco started to feel light-headed again.

"Potter, you're leaking," Snape warned in a casual tone. "You just took your potion, so please make an effort and control yourself."

"Sorry." Potter took a deep breath and closed his eyes. By the time he opened them again, Draco felt more like himself and Potter gained a determined look in his eyes. Draco had a bad feeling about that,

and not without reason, as it seemed.

"I want to be able to have a part in that child's life," Potter said finally, with a serious expression.

Draco sighed. It felt as if he was trapped in a nightmare. The whole setting was surreal enough: him sitting in Potter's living room with Snape commenting the show while sipping coffee made with a Muggle coffee-maker, and then Potter presenting such a ridiculous demand.

Draco looked at him incredulously, trying to use his best impression of his father's holier-than-thou-frown. He hoped that would be enough to convey the message about the complete bizarreness of the demand and force Potter to forfeit the idea. But just to make it sure, Draco proceeded to spell it out for him.

"Have you gone mad, Potter? To have any more contact with you would be practically acknowledging that you have something to do with me and give credit to that ridiculous article."

"But it already says that I have," Potter pointed out. He looked confused and slightly hurt again.

"It doesn't matter. If I just let her do as she wishes, and people start thinking it's true, that would ruin my family and my name. You don't actually expect that I would consent to that, do you? Skeeter has no proof. There is nothing she can come up with to prove her story, if I go to the editor and demand a retraction and then sic my lawyer on her."

"But… you can't do that!" Potter exclaimed.

"Of course I can," Draco tried to explain it slowly so even a Gryffindor like Potter would understand. "In fact, I am going right now. And you are coming with me, and going to tell the editor that you never had any past relations with me. As for the future, we are going to live by that!"

TBC

A/N: Yay! And now I managed to throw in some Matrix references, too! LOL

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Chapter 23: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

5. March 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn.

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Chapter Twenty-three

It went better than Draco had expected. The editor of the Daily Prophet, Howard Stallwart, was nothing if not a coward of a scandalmonger. He wetted his pants in fright at the first mention of the power of the

Malfoy family and then agreed to the retraction, most likely praising his good luck for getting out of the situation without legal hassle or bloodshed. Draco didn't even have to resort to bribery.

All through it, Potter was standing behind his back and keeping silent. He had slipped into his 'Scott'-persona before leaving his flat. Draco had insisted on Potter accompanying him to the Prophet, but Potter reminded Draco that he would probably better off not being seen with him right now.

Draco didn't pay much attention to Potter. At one time he got a glimpse of the unreadable and rather dark expression on his face in the reflection of the windowpane behind Stallwart. Draco didn't doubt that his menacing presence, which rendered the air heavy with tension, helped along in the editor's quick decision to agree to whatever Draco demanded of him, as the man’s eyes darted to the side anxiously every now and then. Draco was a bit taken aback by that stance. He wouldn't have thought Potter was capable of looking menacing. Not even the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters had been afraid of him; until the moment they met the business end of his wand, and realised it would be the last thing on earth they would see.

Draco didn't let his attention be diverted by Potter. He concentrated on sorting out the editor as fast as possible. In the end, Stallwart promised him to start writing the article right away.

As much as Draco wanted to just get away from it all, and be able to relax within the protection of his own four walls again, he didn't want to fall into the trap of being too rash. He willed himself to be patient and decided to wait there until the article was done in order to be able to read it before it was printed. He was a bit surprised when Potter followed him into the meeting room where Draco was directed to wait, and offered refreshments by a starry-eyed secretary.

The moment the door closed behind the woman, and they were left to their own devices, Draco turned to Potter. It was almost unnatural how he was able to keep his calm all along. He could have almost forgotten that it was Potter under the Glamour and thought it was a completely different person.

"You seem awfully relaxed about this, Potter!" Draco seethed. Potter just shrugged it off.

"Why is that? Don’t you care anymore?"

"Articles are released about me every day. Not one tenth of them are true. There was a time it used to piss me off in a major way, but not anymore." Draco couldn't suppress the irritated flinch. Was Potter insinuating that Draco was overreacting? "There is a good side to that, namely that people no longer believe them; they just read them because they are about me. You know, Ron called me this morning and laughed about it for a good ten minutes. He said it is the most ridiculous thing that has been ever written about me. He doesn't believe a word of it."

"Oh." Now Draco was convinced that Potter was mocking him. 'That's good for you then. Unfortunately, people in my circles aren't so forgiving," he spat. "But if that's true, why did you bother to come here?"

Potter took his time sipping his coffee before answering. "You looked positively murderous. I couldn't let you just come here and kill someone in my name."

Draco narrowed his eyes. Potter was lying, and he didn't even make the effort to conceal it. Draco knew, sooner or later, he would hear the real reason. He waited in silence until Potter became unnerved enough by his stare to loosen his tongue. On second thought, he shouldn't have been so keen on making him speak.

"Malfoy, I meant what I said earlier. If this child really is mine, then I won't just stand aside and…"

"You still doubt it is?" Draco asked, irritated by the sheer audacity of Potter. He would be the only one obstinate enough to bring up the same topic again after Draco had told him off.

Potter just stared at him for a second in consideration. "No, I don't," he murmured after that. "But that wasn't my point." Draco didn't wait for him to finish.

"I know what you want, and I'm saying it again: no. This child is mine. I don't care what role you had in its creation, that role is finished. I don't want to see you ever again after we part today."

Potter looked at him incredulously. "This child is going to need its parents," he said softly.

Draco lifted a brow. "And it's going to have them. Its father and its mother both."

Unknowingly, Potter had just given him a tool to his own defeat. The little orphan in him felt sorry for a child with a twisted family. All Draco had to do was to make him understand that he wouldn't fit into this child's life. Draco had a wife who would be its mother. Potter would be just an intruder who only made things complicated for the three (or with Pansy's child born, four) of them.

It seemed that Potter's thought process had just walked down the same lane, as he had been reminded of the fact that Draco had a wife, too. His expression darkened with the understanding, and he nodded, but still a bit indecisively. He was undoubtedly still searching for a way, but his inherent Gryffindorness advised him to step down and leave them alone. Draco could practically follow every little thought as the conflicting emotions reflected in Potter's rapidly changing expressions. It had been too easy.

Somewhere deep down, Draco understood Potter, but he didn't want to dwell on that feeling. Instead he contented himself with revelling in his triumph over him, and enjoying the sight of the hopelessness that overtook Potter's face for an instant before it was replaced by an uncharacteristic stony coldness. Potter turned away from Draco, pretending to observe the pedestrians out of the window while drinking imaginary coffee from his long before emptied cup.

One hour after they had been shown into the room, the secretary came for them again. They were escorted into Stallwart's office, and Draco was handed the ready article. He could feel the warmth and the barely controlled magic radiating from Potter, who was reading above his shoulder. He finished faster than Draco, who was chewing out every word twice, attempting to read between the lines. In the end he found it satisfactory, and was about to put down the copy when a familiar feminine voice, glowing with indignation, caught his attention from the other side of the door.

"Unhand me in this moment!"

"Shut up and open the door, wench!" Draco stiffened involuntarily and took a step backwards, bumping into Potter. What was he doing here?

The answer came sooner than he had expected, as Cyrus Malfoy stepped into the editor's office, dragging a seething Rita Skeeter with him by her arm. Under the outrage, though, Draco saw fear in her eyes, as she was manhandled into the room and shoved forward unceremoniously until she collided with the desk. She was able to maintain her bearings if not her dignity, pushing herself up from the untidy wooden surface and whirling around abruptly to face her attacker.

"Who do you think you are?" She was almost shouting.

Draco swiped his glance surreptitiously through the room. Stallwart didn't look like someone intending to come to his reporter's defence. He was observing the scene with trepidation from the protection of his desk; though he had sprung up when Rita had upset the furniture upon colliding with it, and was now clinging to the back-board of his seat. The secretary had almost sunk into the wall in her attempt to hide; her eyes were as large as saucers, and were following Cyrus' every move. She looked like a scared cattle after spotting the wolf inside the kennel. And Potter… was still standing behind Draco, entirely too close to him, with one palm resting on Draco's back, as if he wanted to soothe him. How dare he act as if he had the right to be this personal with him! Draco seethed on the inside. He would have shaken it off disgustedly, were he not afraid of people noticing it if he moved.

The main attraction, though, was Cyrus' nearing outburst. When it came, it wasn't directed at Skeeter, but Stallwart.

"I am Cyrus Malfoy. This woman wrote an article that you dared print in the trash you call newspaper. An article to degrade and humiliate my family with accusations so disgusting and vile that I absolutely refuse to repeat them. Do you really think I'm going to let you get away with that?"

The air was thick with tension; just like the times Potter was having trouble controlling himself. However, it wasn't his fault this time: the air wasn't saturated with magic. Draco had somehow been able to keep a cool head. As it seemed that Cyrus hadn't even noticed his presence, he took a step forward. The warm spot on his back instantly vanished. He refused to acknowledge the uncomfortable chill that took its place.

"I have already taken measures, Cyrus. Your presence isn't needed here," he said softly but firmly. He knew how to handle his cousin's tantrums. Unfortunately, Cyrus had the worst temper in the family; he

was more impulsive and aggressive than his father had been, and that couldn't even be blamed on nerves frayed by too many Cruciatus Curses.

Cyrus' mismatched eyes focused on him, and instantly flared with rage.

"You! Why aren't you crawling back under your rock? Obviously, you are unable to handle even your life. How dare you bring such shame on the family name?"

"Cyrus." Draco was inwardly seething, but he managed to keep his voice down. "Right now, you are the one who shames our name. This uncivilised behaviour is unworthy of a Malfoy." He certainly hoped that his words would have the desired result: to remind Cyrus where exactly he was before he did any more damage.

Apparently, it was too much to wish for.

In the next instant Draco found himself lifted off of the ground by Cyrus' hands clutching the front of his robes. Before anything else could have happened, though, Potter's fingers curled around his cousin's wrist, forcing him to let Draco down. Cyrus moved towards Potter then, but the wand pressed into his jugular made him think twice about attacking. In the end, Cyrus took a step backwards. He seemed to have cooled down a bit.

"And who might you be?" he asked with his usual poise, as if the last few minutes hadn't happened at all.

For a second, Draco was surprised that Cyrus hadn't recognised the Boy Who Lived. Then he remembered that Potter was now here as 'Scott'. Before Potter could have given away his true identity, Draco said the first thing that had come to his mind. "He is my bodyguard."

Potter must have understood Draco's intention, because he stepped back and assumed his just declared role.

Stallwart chose this moment to take a part in the conversation. At least he had selected his tone well, if not the appropriateness of his intervention.

"Don't you worry, Mr Malfoy, we are just preparing a retraction of the previous article. It is going to be published on the front page," he simpered in his best subservient manner.

"A retraction?" That was Skeeter screeching like a banshee. "You can't do that! That would cast doubts on my veracity!"

"What kind of veracity are you speaking of, wench?" Cyrus snorted. "Be glad if you don't find yourself thrown into prison for this."

"If you try that, I will invoke my right to testify under Veritaserum. Let's see how you high and mighty folk deal with that!" she sniffled.

"You mean it's true?" Cyrus snapped, his eyes bulging out of their sockets and fastening on Draco again.

"Of course it isn't," Draco retaliated. Potter was grumbling something unintelligible behind his back, but this wasn't his fight, and it wasn't as if anyone was going to pay attention to a bodyguard.

"But, dear cousin, I shan't believe you until I have proof firsthand," Cyrus told him, his voice having unexpectedly turned from his earlier rage into goading. He pulled out his wand and turned it at Draco.

Before Draco could react though, multiple pops indicated the arrival of Aurors, who had been undoubtedly called by employees of the Prophet after witnessing the way Cyrus had manhandled Skeeter.

"Stop! What is happening here?" one of them asked. There were three of them, none of which Draco

remembered, but as their gazes swiped over Potter, they seemed to recognise him. At least that was what their greeting nods indicated.

"Nothing much," Cyrus answered flippantly, his voice now assuming the cultured accent one would expect of someone his social standing. "We are currently trying to shed some light on a mystery."

No one could have prevented what happened next, not even Potter, who moved between him and Cyrus a millisecond too late, just missing the spell that his cousin had fired at Draco from the wand already pointed at him. Two of the Aurors immediately grabbed each of Cyrus' arms and the third cast a Petrificus Totalus on him, which was repelled by the protection spells most likely woven into his robes. The wand slipped out of Cyrus' hand and twirled once or twice in the air until the spell came back at it, and it fell down to the floor in the middle of their small circle with a loud wooden clatter - its colour already changed to blue.

Cyrus' high-pitched laughter filled the room, while Skeeter murmured something that sounded like, "Blimey, it's true after all!" in an incredulous tone.

Draco felt the blood drain from his face, while at the same time magic that wasn't exactly his own surged through his body and escaped through his pores and clothing. It made the magical lights sparkle before they went out, while other charms around the office and on the people present extinguished with a flash. Draco felt his hair loosen and spill over his eyes as the grooming charm holding it in its place vanished. His knees gave out rather suddenly and unexpectedly, but his imminent fall was stopped by arms wrapping around his middle. Arms on which the Glamour Charm was constantly flickering in and out of existence. He felt the unmistakable pressure of a Side-Along Apparition, but he had neither the time nor the inclination to protest against it, as the blackness that began to envelope his mind shifted before his eyes and robbed him of his consciousness.

He woke up to the voices of a conversation filtering into his ears. He was lying on a couch, which he identified as Potter's upon opening his still blurry eyes. He blinked several times to banish the grogginess, but he didn't have to worry about appearances this time, because he was alone in the room. The conversation was most likely being held in the kitchen.

He was able to make out two female voices along with Potter's, one younger and one older, but he couldn't identify them, even if they sounded somewhat familiar. The older one was gently scolding

Potter for keeping his preferences secret, even from his family.

That was somewhat surprising, as Draco didn't remember Potter having a family besides those Muggles to whom he was only attached by strings of mutual hatred, as a vague memory was supplying Draco. How did he know this, a small voice was asking in his head. Of course, he had observed the interaction between Potter and his cousin, but the knowledge seemed more intimate than what that brief glimpse gave him. And it also seemed older.

Draco didn't have time to dwell on it longer, because now the younger female voice was lecturing Potter about how he should have known better than… and then a list of supposed and real mistakes followed. Draco groaned inwardly. He would have recognised that diatribe anywhere, as he had been subjected to it often enough during the war, though he couldn't recall the exact occasions. He definitely didn't feel sorry for Potter! It was his own fault to have chosen Granger as one of his friends.

The most frequent of the accusations was the "how could you with Malfoy of all people?"-one. Potter was insistent in his protestations that he hadn't known at the time, until they made him retell the whole shameful tale with the gay bar and Draco dressed up as a whore. He stiffened and thought it would be better to pretend that he was still unconscious for a while, at least until the light-headedness passed, so he could risk Apparating. He didn't intend to join this little merry band. Besides that, he would probably need to visit Podmore. But even more urgently, he needed to contact Agnus in order to make arrangements with the Prophet, as Draco no longer thought that things could be smoothed over without setting some serious legal actions into motion, or promising financial compensation in form of a settlement out of court. And as that could be easily taken as bribery, it would be much better if Draco didn’t become directly involved into it.

He had listened to the inane conversation that revolved around the same topic for a while - Potter was clearly overwhelmed by the two women there - before he stood up and searched his robes for his wand to fix his hair. Potter didn't have any mirrors in his living room, so Draco was reduced to having to use a glass-cabinet to verify the effect. But he wasn't a Malfoy for nothing; he was capable of working with whatever meagre resources he had at his disposal. In the end, he stood in all of his usual shine, ready to take on the situation.

He Apparated directly into his study in the Manor, or at least that had been his aim, but his feet landed on fresh snow. He looked around and saw that he was just outside of the fence. He forced himself to calm down before his currently wacky magic became even more unpredictable. He couldn't afford waiting until his medical condition was sorted out; there were things he had to take care of as soon as

possible. He didn't think it would be safe if he tried to Apparate again, so he resigned himself to reaching his study by walking. He wasn't too far, anyhow.

He arrived at the gates within five minutes - five minutes in which he had to find out how lacking his robes and cape were against the cold winter winds of Wiltshire. He seriously feared his fingers would freeze off if that continued any longer, as he tried to fight open the heavy iron-wrought gates. He had barely any feeling in them anymore, and perhaps that was why he hadn't noticed instantly when his touch didn't seem to affect the wards keeping the gates locked that something was amiss.

After five minutes of trying and getting annoyed by his lack of success, he heard an unmistakable laugh from his side. He jerked up his head in time to witness the last bout of that crazed sound leaving his cousin's lips - his cousin, who, as opposed to Draco, stood inside the fence.

"You can stop trying to get them open. You won't succeed, cousin," Cyrus informed him jovially.

"What are you talking about? And what are you doing on my property?" Draco asked.

"Your property?" Cyrus' eyes looked impossibly wide, just like his smile. "It doesn't seem to acknowledge you as its owner anymore, or am I mistaken? No, I'm not." Another infernal chortle.

Draco swallowed. It was true, and he didn't like it at all.

"What have you done?"

"I?" Cyrus seemed to enjoy the situation more and more with every passing second. "It was you who has done things you weren't supposed to do. Bad things. Evil things. Naughty things…" His cousin's voice turned sing-song. "Our family cannot tolerate that kind of behaviour, didn't you know?"

"Nonsense!" Draco snapped. "You have broken into my property and corrupted my wards." It would have been possible for the wards to obey a new master if the old one was found unworthy of the family, but

Cyrus couldn't have possibly managed to attain the right to dismiss Draco from his position in the family this quickly. How long had he been out cold on Potter's couch? Surely, no longer than a few hours, as the sun was still up. "I demand admittance right this minute!"

"But I just told you: it's not your property anymore. The family council has decided it after hearing your crimes."

Draco felt his heart stand still for an instant and then start pounding again with a crazy rhythm.

"You… you can't have done that! I have the right to defend myself before the council," he shouted.

"True, true…" Cyrus seemed to think about it. "You will have the opportunity. Not that it would matter much, mind you. After all, the proof is evident. I suspect that you will get an invitation in a few weeks. But until that…" Cyrus made a hissing sound by sucking in air between his teeth. "You are still banned from accessing any of the family fortune. That includes the Gringotts accounts, the real estate… perhaps you can keep the robes on your back if you ask me nicely."

Draco felt betrayed and utterly angered by that impossible sound Cyrus called laughing - even more because it was directed at him. Unfortunately, the wards lacing through the fences stood between them, preventing him from hexing his cousin into next Sunday, because if it weren't for those, he would have done it by now without batting an eye.

Cyrus didn't deem him worthy of more conversation, he Apparated into the house without even saying good-bye.

Draco didn't know if he was trembling from anger, exhaustion, the cold, or all of those together. He stood unmoving for several seconds while he tried to comprehend what was happening, and think of his next move in order to make everything all right again. Things had to be alright, because Cyrus mustn't win like this! Draco couldn't lose everything like this!

"Draco…"

He almost missed the faint sound until he heard the footsteps as they made crunching sounds in the crispy snow.

"Draco!"

He whirled around, until he faced the figure wrapped tightly in dark robes against the cold.

"I'm so sorry, Draco."

"Pansy?" he said, teeth clattering.

"Oh, Draco! I didn't want it to happen like this," she said in a voice close to crying - perhaps she had been crying previously - and lifted her wand. Draco was too slow to even erect a shield before the spell reached him, but it turned out to be just a Warming Charm.

"I'm sorry, but you look like you are freezing. You have to take better care of yourself, especially now."

Draco felt like laughing, just as madly as Cyrus had been. But as the warmth spread out in his limbs, he sobered and was able to think about his situation.

"What happened here?" he asked his wife. "How is it that he permitted you to stay after he had done to me this?" His tone must have been accusing, because Pansy's flinch was unmistakable, even under the voluminous amounts of fabric.

"He… he knows, Draco."

"What does he know?"

"He knows he is the father of my child."

"You told him." Draco didn't know why he was surprised. Of course, Pansy would have told Cyrus, knowing what was at stake.

"No, I didn't." Draco didn't want to believe that, but it seemed as if Pansy was prepared for a lengthy explanation, so he decided to hear her out.

"Remember when I told you that I had Obliviated him after that night?" Draco nodded. So she had lied. That wasn't really surprising either. "I thought I had. But actually, it had been the other way round. We had duelled, and he had won. Then he had Obliviated me, making me think I succeeded."

Draco nodded absently. As resourceful as she was, Pansy was just a woman. No wonder Cyrus had easily outsmarted her. But even if he knew that Pansy was pregnant with his child why would that matter to him? It would be nothing more to him than an illegitimate child - something Pureblood families got rid of when they obtained knowledge of its existence, and even more likely if it was a boy.

He asked Pansy, because she must have been aware of the consequences; she was a Pureblood as well.

"Don't you know?" she asked, mildly surprised. "There was an article about it in the Prophet a few days ago. His wife killed their son when it became evident that he was a Squib. And then she took her own life in the hopes of atoning for giving birth to something like that." Draco didn't have to ask for clarification, he was capable of reading between the lines. A Squib, be it a boy or a girl, didn't count as an heir to the family. It was most likely Cyrus himself who murdered both his son and his wife - after securing himself another heir in the form of Pansy's child. And she had walked right into his trap. Cyrus' plan must have been to marry her all along, after getting rid of the 'ballast' both for himself and for Pansy, which she confirmed with her next words.

"Cyrus visited me last week at the summer residence," Pansy continued her explanation without needing a prompt from Draco. "He lifted the memory charm and explained his plan to me. I didn't want to give in;

you have to believe me, Draco. I told him that he could never get you. He just laughed it off, and said I had time to consider his offer until he had the necessary papers in his hand. He was preparing to do this ever since you were arrested by the Aurors. I think he has Borgin in his pocket, and was planning to present his statement as evidence against you. He was only waiting until he could find that assistant to confirm that you even tried to buy Thestral blood when you were there. But now… he doesn't even need to arrange that. He told me everything that happened in the Prophet today."

"How did he find you there?" Draco asked while attempting to process all the information Pansy had poured on him. Not that the answer would be of any importance.

" I… I have no proof, but I think it was through Madam Prunes," Pansy murmured.

Ah, that was the reason why she hadn't seemed to trust the old crone since her return to the same degree as before.

"I'm so sorry, Draco," she started again. "I've always loved you as a friend. There even was a time I thought we could be more. But I have to think of my future, and most of all, I have the future of my child to consider. I cannot let him grow up in poverty, when his rightful place is on the top of the Malfoy family." And Draco did understand. He knew Pansy; she never tried to pretend to be someone she wasn't. Her highest goals were to become the matriarch of an influential Pureblood family and the mother of said family's next heir - not the unworthy wife of a man who got himself up the duff on a night of sodomite debauchery. Those were the same qualities Draco had been relying on in the past.

"Here, take this." Pansy reached out quickly between the bars of the fence. She thrust something small and square into Draco's palm, and then pulled her arm back so quickly that if it hadn't been for the feel of that small object in his fist, Draco would have thought it had been only his imagination.

"I have asked the house-elf to pack a few of your things which wouldn't be obvious if they were missing. Mostly clothes and personal items. It's not much, but I can't do anything more for you. You have to go now."

Draco nodded, still unable to believe that this happened to him, and turned to Apparate, when he heard

Pansy's faint, last words.

"I don't hate you, Draco. I can't hate you, even after you did this to me, and with Potter of all people! I don't understand… I thought… your father had told me that he had managed to cure you of that curse… Just… how was this possible?"

There was a crack of her Apparating away, and Draco was left alone to contemplate what choices remained for him now.

TBC

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Chapter 24: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

15. March 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn.

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Chapter Twenty-four

"Malfoy…"

Draco was startled out of his thoughts by the voice calling his name. His head hurt and he felt dizzy, even though just a few seconds ago he had been all right. Perhaps his earlier breakdown had worn him out more than he had expected. But what had Pansy meant by that? Her last words had echoed in his head for the past ten minutes, and with every second that passed they made less and less sense.

"Malfoy!" There was that voice again. Why couldn't it just leave him alone?

He whirled around, expecting to see someone, but there were only those infinite white fields before him. Had he been hallucinating? His eyes blurred for a moment and he realised that Pansy's Warming Charm had long since given out. It must have been the cold. He had read that people usually became sleepy and dreamed something nice before freezing to death.

But no, it hadn't been his imagination. There was a rustle, and then out of a little fuzzy shadow, which widened and took shape, Potter's figure furled into clear view. He was holding something shimmering in one hand - it was his father's Invisibility Cloak - Draco's memory supplied him rather suddenly with the knowledge - and his wand in the other, which he had used to end the Notice-Me-Not Charm. No wonder Draco couldn’t detect his presence until both were gone. He knew he should be angry with Potter for having blatantly eavesdropped on his conversation with Cyrus and Pansy, and then revealing it in such a casual manner, as if he had had every right to do so. But he felt too confused and overwhelmed to really care.

"What are you doing here? How long have you been here?" he asked instead, trying to get rid of the dizziness by shaking his head.

"I felt you Apparating away. I've put a Tracking Charm on you while you were out. I knew you would try something like this. Come, Malfoy, you have no business here anymore," Potter said, and took a step towards him.

There was a tentative emotion in his eyes, which Draco confused with contempt at first, but then he remembered who Potter was, and decided that it was more likely compassion. Anger surged in him at the thought of anyone pitying him. Anger was good right now. It helped him clear his mind a bit, as it diverted his attention from its previous activity of trying to make sense of Pansy's words.

"What's it to you, Potter? Why are you here at all?" he spat.

Potter seemed puzzled by the sudden change in his tone. "I told you, I followed you. The doc is waiting for you. He arrived just seconds after you left," he said finally, and although Draco couldn't sense deception behind it, he felt that Potter wasn't entirely honest either.

"No, I mean, why are you so nice to me all of a sudden? This here cannot be enough of a reason." He flattened his palm against the slight mound on his abdomen, which still remained effectively concealed by his robes most of the time. "Last time I saw you, you were screaming insults at me in the Dark Lord's dungeon, and would have cast the Killing Curse at me if you still had your wand."

Potter blanched considerably, and opened his mouth to speak, but for several seconds no voice came out of it. "That was a long time ago. People change," he muttered finally.

Draco made an impatient gesture with his hand. He didn't like to remember the war any more than Potter apparently did.

"Don't you dare pity me! This doesn't mean anything," Draco stated finally, waving in the direction of the Manor. He wished he could wipe away that look in Potter's eyes. "This isn't the end of me. You needn't save me. I won't just give up!"

"I didn't think you would," Potter said, looking slightly bemused. "However, you have been standing out here long enough. Your wife was right in what she said; you should worry more about your health. You

should really come with me now, Malfoy. The doc is waiting."

Draco felt a surge of irritation at Potter's gall, telling him what he should and shouldn’t do. But loathe as he might, this time Potter was right.

When he wanted to take a step, though, he realised that his body was more under the weather than he had thought, because his foot didn't seem to hold his weight anymore. And then there was Potter again, holding him up against his chest like a dead weight for the second time that day.

"I'll Apparate you," he said, while trying to get a firm hold on his waist, as to not lose him on the way, for which Draco really should have been more grateful. His resentment must have showed on his face, because Potter gave him an apologetic look before saying, "You couldn't Apparate into my flat on your own, anyhow, because of the wards."

Draco felt the starting pressure of his body being folded into a pinpoint of concentrated magic, and a moment later, gaining back its normal dimensions surrounded by the plebeian design of Potter's living room.

"Easy there," Potter said, and sat Draco down onto the couch like a rag doll.

All right, that was embarrassing. And Draco didn't mean just the fact that his body had suddenly decided to give out on him, but that Potter felt the need to treat him like a child not capable of taking care of himself (never mind that he really wasn't).

"Doc! We are here!" Draco rolled his eyes at Potter shouting like a market-woman. He realized he was in a mood in which pretty much everything irritated him, starting with the raging burgundy colour of the sofa he lay on and not even ending with the soft pitter-patter of rain on the windowpane. He had to wait five more minutes until he heard the toilet flush (which momentary mortified Draco. What barbaric circumstances! Who would want to live in a hole like this? Even at Hogwarts there was more privacy.) And then water gushing as Podmore most likely washed his hands.

The best indication of Draco's worsening mental condition was that he found the drumming on the glass

louder and louder every second, until he had to release some steam, which came in the form of complaining about the noise to Potter.

Potter made a funny face, and went to the window to look out by barely lifting the curtains - Draco only now noticed that the curtains were drawn.

"It's not rain, Malfoy. Just owls. But don't worry about it, the wards will hold for a while longer," he said when he came back.

"Owls?" Draco asked, throwing a quizzical look at Potter.

"Well, I knew there was a reason why I was putting off coming out…" Potter pointedly wasn't looking at him. "I guess the Obliviators are going to have some work with the aftermath." That was when a distinct explosion could be heard from outside, followed by loud shrieking, which made the words of the Howler completely unintelligible.

"Dammit!" That was Podmore coming into the room hastily. "I advise to evacuate the ship as soon as possible, captain," he told Potter. "Some Birds of Prey are pretty intent on breaching the hull."

He cast a few quick diagnostic spells on Draco, and then lifted a brow.

"I don't know if it would be safe to Apparate you again right now, never mind Apparating yourself. Just how many times did you do it in one day, anyhow?"

Draco tried to think about it. The beginning of the day seemed to have been so long ago. He had taken the Floo to Potter's flat, but then they had both Apparated to Diagon Alley. When he had collapsed, Potter Apparated him back, but that didn't count, since that wasn't him, and then he Apparated again to the Manor. The travel back to the flat had been once again executed by Potter. That meant only two by himself. Draco told this to Podmore, who chucked with his tongue. Draco knew why: it shouldn't have been enough to knock him out like it had.

"Do you have a Portkey we could use?" he turned to Potter.

"No, but I could make one." Potter thought about something for a second, and then he ran off and started rummaging in a nearby cabinet. He returned with a piece of parchment and an oblong blue object. Without asking, he sat down on the sofa next to Draco. He had to pull up his legs in the last moment as to prevent Potter from sitting on them, but his scowl brushed straight past Potter, who wasn’t paying attention to Draco.

Draco looked at the parchment with interest. It was a Ministry document with a large, black header: 'Portkey Authorisation Form'. Potter's name was under it and the Minister's signature on the bottom, but the rest of the required fields, such as 'time', 'destination' and 'purpose of travel' had been left blank. Potter was now scribbling madly with the curious object Draco thought must have been a Muggle pen to fill out the gaps. When he was done with it, he cast something from his wand - Draco didn't need long to recognise the iridescent shape that had scared him so effectively in third year at the Quidditch match, when he had tried to make Potter fall off of his broom. Potter stuffed the scrolled together parchment into the thing's mouth, as if it was an owl, and it vanished through the wall soon after, somehow taking the parchment with it.

"Board the shuttle, Doc, we are going to warp!" Potter patted the small space that remained on the couch, while Draco resigned himself to the fact that apparently he was surrounded by idiots. He didn't understand why questions even arose regarding pureblood supremacy.

He didn't see what happened after that, because his attention was diverted from Potter by a distinct crash of glass shattering, and there was a sudden rush of hundreds of wings flapping from the other room. By the sound of it, Draco realised that the owls must have been going crazy due to the sheer number of them, and because the Howlers they were carrying had begun to explode one after the other. Their hooting sounded pretty hysterical. But before Draco was covered by singed pieces of parchment and owl pellets, a lurch in his stomach indicated that they were already on their way towards some unknown destination.

Draco opened his eyes when the world had stopped spinning, and registered that the Gryffindor-red couch - together with its passengers - had somehow landed in the middle of Snape's house, completely wrecking the colour scheme.

In the next second Snape appeared in the door leading to his study, wand pointed forward, as if he had been expecting an Auror raid or a terrorist attack to take place in his living room. Upon seeing them, he lowered the wand and rearranged his features into his usual condescending expression.

He must have read the Prophet because he didn't stop to question their presence, just gave a disdainful look to the couch.

"Well then. I am going to finish your examination, Draco." Podmore stood and pointed his wand at him again, after dismissing the presence of Snape with a nod for a greeting. Draco and Snape both let him.

"Seems like you'll need another dose of the potion for the Magical Incompatibility sooner than expected." Podmore lifted a finger to his chin. Draco saw Snape raise his head and stalk out of the room towards his laboratory. After a few seconds of hesitation, sensing that his presence wasn’t welcome, Potter sprang up and followed him. Draco was glad he finally got the clue. His didn’t fancy becoming permanently cross-eyed from the excessive amount of glaring at Potter.

Podmore started asking questions about what kind of magic he had done lately and if it had worked as it was supposed to or not. Draco told him everything he thought could be important, he even told him about his 'accidents', like the comforting magical aura for Pinky. Then Podmore made him retell his day with every possible detail.

"Are you sure that's all? Isn't there something else you could think of?" he asked finally.

Draco shook his head, only to be reminded of the stinging headache he had since that afternoon. Headache?

"There is something!" he said, sitting up, even though a flash of pain made him see stars.

"What is it, Draco?"

"I…" Draco tried to collect his thoughts, but the headache seemed to worsen with every passing second. Normally, he would have been whining with pain at this point, but this something seemed too important to give up on only because it got uncomfortable to think about it. And that was when Draco realised that exactly that was wrong about it - whatever it was.

"I can't tell what it is," he started, massaging his aching temples with the tips of his fingers. The feeling was too familiar. As if it had happened occasionally, not just that day. That was, Draco realised, because it had. And now he could remember feeling it at times, but he couldn’t recall what triggered it. Perhaps he should tell that to Podmore.

"Whenever I start to think about it or am reminded of it, my head starts to hurt and my thoughts get fuzzy. I just can't seem to concentrate long enough to…"

And that was when he fainted with a small noise in his throat.

"Draco!" He woke up to Podmore lightly shaking his shoulder. He was still on the couch, in the same position in which he had been in before he had blacked out, so he thought it must have been only a few seconds, or minutes at best.

Draco moaned and wanted to go back to sleep, but he wasn't allowed to.

"I'm sorry for waking you up," Podmore told him in a low voice, seemingly careful not to worsen his headache with unnecessary shouting.

"Normally, I would let you be, but I have to know more to be able to get a start on getting a diagnosis. I have cast a Pain Relieving Charm on your head, so it shouldn't be a problem. But if you feel again that you can't think straight, you must tell me, so I can stop asking questions. Are you ready?"

Draco gave a noncommittal sound of agreement; he was wary of moving his head too much.

"All right, then. Can you tell me exactly when your head started hurting?"

"Before Pansy went back to the Manor, I think. She said something…" Draco couldn't finish the sentence. His thoughts were swirling, and besides, his mouth was dry. He asked for some water, and after taking a gulp of it, he promptly felt better. His voice didn't sound as weak as before either.

"I'm not sure what it was… Something about my father... Potter was there, he can tell you!" Draco cursed himself for not thinking of that sooner, but it was so hard to think while his mind wasn't cooperating.

Podmore nodded. "And before that? Any other occasions?"

"I think there were more. Once I had a conversation with Snape about… I don't remember."

"When was it?"

Draco shook his head. It was frustrating. He knew it had happened, but when he tried to recall the details, he couldn't grasp any more than a faint feeling of déja vu. And he was sure there had been other times, other hints, but his mind had just discarded them as unimportant. He could practically feel magic in work to make him so completely disregard something potentially important. With so many clues, even a Hufflepuff would have got suspicious by now - that was what his sixth sense told him, and that made him extremely irritated. Not to mention, Podmore's charm began to wear off pretty soon, and he could feel the first twinges of a monster migraine.

"Don't bother him about it, I think I can tell you what you want to know," Snape said as he entered the room with a steaming cup in hand.

He walked to the couch and handed it to Draco, telling him to drink up, which Draco did. Podmore didn't protest. Draco instantly felt the Sleeping Potion starting to take effect. He was asleep before Snape and

Podmore were properly out of the room.

He didn't know how long he slept. His sleep was deep, but it was interrupted several times by short intervals of wakefulness. However, he could always go back to sleep again, and his dreams were peaceful. Once he woke up from one about his mother stroking his hair in a comforting manner, like she used to when he had been little.

After a while he realised that the caressing hadn't been only in his dream, but upon opening his eyes he saw that instead of his mother, it was Potter who sat by his side with his hand moving slowly up and down above Draco's head. He quickly squeezed them closed again and hoped that Potter hadn’t noticed that he was awake. After closing his eyes sleep claimed him once again, and in his dreams his mother's image was replaced with that of Potter. And as much as he would have liked to be freaked out by it when he was awake, while asleep, the same scene seemed perfectly normal.

When he woke for the final time, it was in his own bed or, more precisely, the bed he had used during his short stay at Snape's house not so long ago. His robes had been changed into sleepwear, and he was alone. Glancing at the clock proved to be useless, since it only told him what he had known on his own: that he wasn't fit to get up yet. He wasn't planning to, at any rate, except to use the toilet. When he looked at the window he saw that it was day again, and his stomach told him that it was way past breakfast time. That made him reconsider getting up, since there was no way Snape would serve him breakfast in bed.

After finishing in the bathroom, he saw that Potter's couch was still there. He must have had no inclination to bother with it when he left last night. The image of the red monstrosity being the first thing Snape would see in the morning as he left his bedroom amused Draco somewhat.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a dark shadow moving on one of its armrests. The couch stood with its back to the centre of the room, so Draco had to circle it in order to see what it was. His good mood abruptly changed when he spotted Potter's sleeping figure curled up under a blanket.

He frowned and berated himself for allowing Potter to surprise him. Just why couldn't he make some noise, snoring for example, like every normal wizard? But no, Potter was sleeping like a log: just as still and silent. What was he still doing here?

Draco was inclined to wake him up by giving him the shock of his life, but then unbidden images came into his head about the previous night. Inexplicably, he felt as if he should be ashamed, even if he hadn't been the one to ask Potter to provide comfort - but then, he had readily accepted it. He had even gone back to sleep feeling content, instead of slapping away Potter's hand and berating him for his audacity to touch Draco so casually – which he should have done on more than one occasion lately.

Now that the damage was done, he would probably be better off if he just acted as if he didn't remember any of it.

Fortunately, he didn't have to pretend for long. Both Snape and Potter were up in half an hour, but there seemed to be a new strain between them that wasn't there last night. Snape didn't even acknowledge Potter's presence. Potter looked flustered, by which Draco wondered whether Snape had caught him by molesting Draco and gave him a dressing down. He tried not to look too pleased about that.

Draco and Snape sat down to the breakfast table, while Potter Apparated to some undisclosed location where he said he would be staying for the next few days. As if Draco was interested. He left the couch behind until he could make sure his presence wouldn't be too much of a bother. In another half hour, the couch was gone as well.

Snape informed Draco that Podmore had promised to come by later in the afternoon to be there when Draco took the potion that should make dealing with the Magical Incompatibility easier for him, and then explain what he thought was wrong with Draco.

He was sitting on pins and needles until Podmore's arrival. He gulped down the foul smelling brew without so much as a flinch, glad to be done with it. It wasn't that part of Podmore's visit he had been looking for the most. Podmore even had to reprimand him to stay in one place, as if he were a little child, when he examined the effects afterwards, but it just made him more edgy, if that was even possible. Finally, Podmore lowered his wand and, taking a chair, sat down opposite to Draco with a serious expression.

"Now. I am going to try to explain the situation. You have been…

"…but it is possible that you'll experience short memory lapses afterwards, as the curse influences your mind's ability to remember...

"...The memories are there, but you cannot access them properly, as if they were blocked by a Memory Charm, only it's far more advanced than that, most likely some Dark....

"…Additionally, your thought process is also impeded by it when you start thinking about … thus the headaches and perceived fuzziness…

"Can you follow me to this point?"

Draco blinked and then nodded so hesitatingly that it could have been taken for a 'no' as well. He felt like a heavy weight settled inside his stomach.

"Unfortunately, I cannot make an accurate diagnosis using standard diagnostic spells, nor is it advisable to cast a counter spell or administer a potion, should I succeed to find the exact curse that causes it until your child is born. Do you follow?"

Draco nodded again. That at least sounded coherent.

Unfortunately, that was the last time where he was able to give a positive answer to this question. After that point, his memory only consisted of disjointed words, sentences that seemed to be spoken in a familiar but completely different language - and the blinding headache occasionally relieved by all too mild charms. He knew he had been asked more questions and had tried to answer them to the best of his ability, but afterwards he had no memory of it whether he had succeeded or not. Podmore was very patient with him.

Finally, the questions stopped and Podmore left. Draco would have liked to think that was because he had finished his examination, and not because he had given up on ever being able to drag something

useful out of Draco's useless mind. But the fact was, he didn't even remember that.

He felt like an utter failure. His mind was in chaos, his inheritance was in peril - even though he had gone beyond the unimaginable to secure it - and now it would be his downfall. He still had no place to go, and he knew Snape wasn't really happy with Draco imposing himself on his hospitality again. The only consolation he had was that at least he still had access to the vault, which he had inherited from his mother's part of the family, so he wasn't completely dependent on other people's kindness.

He wasn’t about to give up. He needed to come out on top, if only to prove himself that he still could. And there was something else that reminded him of his resolution. When his hand rested on his stomach, he could feel that something inside him. Either it wasn't there before, or he just hadn't paid any attention to its presence other than the inconvenience it caused and the riches it could grant. Now it seemed wrong to think like that.

He knew full well that this new feeling was just a work of hormones; it would pass sooner or later. And besides, he couldn't let his thoughts to be occupied by useless things like that. He had more important issues to concentrate on. He mustn't make another mistake. But it still felt like a tangible proof that there were still things they hadn’t taken away from him yet.

After dinner a letter bearing the Malfoy insignia came delivered by a stern looking eagle-owl. He didn't need to open it to know what it was: the summoning to his 'trial' before the Malfoy family council.

TBC

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Chapter 25: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

26. March 2006

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Chapter Twenty-five

The next morning Snape showed him the Prophet from the previous day. The one in which the retraction should have been printed on the first page. But in place of the article, which Draco had gone over so meticulously, there was a statement from Cyrus, declaring his deep shock at the revelation, and - as the new representative of the Malfoy family - declaring that 'even if they suspected that something wasn't right with Draco Malfoy, they had no knowledge about the seriousness of the situation until they had read about it in the Prophet'. But since until that time Draco had been the head of the family, they couldn't take action against him without the ultimate proof. Finally, he promised a profound examination of the matter. He made it sound as if Draco were a criminal.

His mind chose this moment to remind him that the use of a Dark potion had indeed been a violation of the law, and thus, Cyrus' insinuation wasn't unfounded. But Draco also knew that now that his cousin had got what he wanted, he would only reveal that to the public as a last resort. No sense in incriminating the family when it was already under his leadership. Draco had no doubts, however, that Cyrus intended to use the accusation against him in front of the family council.

He threw down the Prophet, his anger directed at his cousin, when a small article at the bottom of the page caught his eyes.

The article quoted an unofficial statement from the Minister of Magic, in which she stated that she didn't think it condemnable if a wizard decided to give birth to a child. Quite the opposite, in fact, as it - as she was heard saying – 'was a brave and noble contribution to the efforts of increasing the numbers of the waning wizarding population'. Neither the source nor the author of the article was named.

Draco's brows lifted in astonishment. It was quite sneaky - if at the same time unbelievably unfair - of Granger to use him and his bad fortune to raise her popularity by giving out such statements - just a few months before election time. The pure-bloods would recognise their own idioms about breeding in it, and the ones raised by Muggles would think her viewpoint was refreshing and modern - just what they needed from a politician in a leading position. And if the reaction of the masses turned out more negative than positive, she could always say that the article had been a fluke.

Perhaps Snape's feelings weren't as misplaced as they had seemed at first. Though the thought of them as a couple still gave Draco goose bumps.

He was quick to chase the image out of his mind by turning to the advertisements page to look for a new house. He decided that he needed to show he wasn't completely impoverished, and he had to get back his image. In his current situation, it was vital to exhibit strength and confidence - what better way to do that than to move into a posh house in the middle of wizarding London? There was this newly raised residential district down Diagon Alley - completely concealed from Muggles, of course - with houses so expensive that some of them stood still empty years after being built. He would have the Minister of Magic, celebrities, and rich patent owners as neighbours, which in itself was a guarantee that the security was taken seriously there.

Unfortunately, he was quickly disabused of this notion by Podmore, who arrived just after breakfast. The Healer straight out prohibited him from staying unsupervised for any length of time until they could deal with this newly discovered condition of his. Either he stayed at Snape's, or if he insisted on leaving, he employed a nurse who would keep a constant eye on him and inform Podmore if a situation arose. Now that his pregnancy had been made public knowledge, Podmore said, he had no reason to hide anymore.

"Perhaps, and I'm not saying that I want out of the deal, but you might consider consulting a Healer who

specialises in pregnancies, and another who can deal with spell damage."

To be honest, Draco had thought of that earlier, but in the end, he decided that he didn't want any more people poking around in his private life - be that his mind or his… privates of other nature. Podmore was competent enough, and if he didn't feel up to the task, Draco knew he would tell him straight away. He wasn't a man to mince words. That was why Draco found it easier to trust him than to trust any high profile Healer his family had employed in the past. Of course, he didn't divulge his reasons when he told Podmore that he would continue to leave his health in his capable hands.

Giving up his plans for living in his own house was another matter, though. Draco wasn't happy about it, since it would help him gain back some prestige, but in the end, he decided to discard the idea. It wasn't as if he enjoyed living with Snape, but he had no inclination whatsoever to entrust himself to a complete stranger if a situation arose in which he really needed help.

"You could always ask Potter," Snape quipped, bringing Draco's thoughts to a screeching halt and causing him to look at him incredulously.

"What do you mean, 'ask Potter'?"

Snape didn't answer, merely lifted a brow looking at Draco expectantly. Wasn't Snape rightfully angry at the speccy git for having molested Draco? Did he really want him out of his house so badly he was willing to ignore the obligations assigned to him by the Unforgivable Vow, and subject Draco to Potter? Or was it just a bad joke at an inappropriate time? If the latter were the case, it would be the first time, ever since he had known the man. After a few seconds of consideration, Draco decided to ignore the last part of the conversation in favour of retaining his sanity.

Just because of this, he felt no qualms about continuing to make himself a nuisance to Snape.

After both breakfast and the subsequent physical examination by Podmore had been finished, Draco Fire-called Agnus Malfoy in order to help him with the impending 'trial'. As surreal as calling his hearing before the family council by that name sounded, Draco had no illusions about it not being one. He knew that it would be more demanding and serious than the one he had had just a few weeks previously in front of the Aurors. There was a difference between state laws and the laws of the Malfoy family -

namely that the latter ones weren't just enforced by the state. They were magically binding. There was no way out of them via his usual methods: blackmail and bribery. His only hope was to find some loophole in the numerous rules, which he could employ to his own advantage. And to do that, he needed his lawyer.

Draco was momentarily afraid that he wouldn't get the support he needed after that article in the Prophet. However, Agnus' approach to the matter proved a pleasant surprise. That is, if a respectable Malfoy being enthusiastic about a Mudblood's political views was ever to be considered pleasant. Either way, if the fact that Agnus actually - and rather uncharacteristically, for a Malfoy - supported the Minister would help Draco in achieving his goals, then he would be able to shut his eyes and accept the support that came out of it.

Agnus Apparated to Snape's house at dinnertime. Draco was surprised that he and Snape not only knew each other, but also, as it turned out, were old friends. Draco hoped that the acquaintance wasn't made while both of them had been attending the same convention for the Hermione Granger fanclub, but was reluctant to ask for fear that the answer would be a positive one.

After a far more generous and good-humoured meal than what he was used to at Snape's, they retreated to discuss the matter of his trial. Snape offered his study for the occasion - to prevent ill-timed Fire calls from disturbing the discussion, he said. In exchange, Draco chose not to remark on Snape accompanying them into the back room without asking for permission first. Draco would have granted it, had Snape let himself be concerned with mundane things like common courtesy.

"First, you should be prepared that you could be officially disowned for giving the family a bad reputation. In fact, I am almost sure that is going to happen," Agnus told him after watching Draco seat himself.

Draco felt his heart standstill for a second. The old man didn't sound like he was joking.

"If that's true, then what's the purpose of this conversation?" Draco asked, trying to mask his fear with anger.

Agnus didn't seem intimidated by his mood. He gave him a soothing smile.

"The purpose is securing the inheritance for your son. I assume you are expecting a boy."

Draco gulped and nodded half-heartedly. Apparently, Agnus didn’t let himself be bothered by the unusualness of the situation.

"The recently discovered fact is that Cyrus doesn't have an heir. Even if his son was still alive, he couldn't have inherited, since he turned out to be a Squib."

"But Pansy, my wife, is pregnant with Cyrus' son. I'm damn sure he is going to marry her as soon as he can, and then he will have a legal heir," Draco objected.

"Not exactly." Agnus seemed to think while sipping red wine Snape had so generously offered him while Draco had to content himself - once again - with tea. And this time he didn't even manage to turn it into a parfait, just a sodden glass of pumpkin juice.

"See, even if he marries Pansy now, there is still the small matter that at the time he created the child, he was committing adultery. With your wife - not only the wife of a family member, but also the head of the family of the time. That has him in a precarious situation."

Draco sighed dejectedly. This sounded well and good, but he knew it wasn't enough.

"You are aware that my child isn't exactly legal either. To my most recent knowledge, no child out of wedlock can inherit."

Agnus nodded to that, but to Draco's astonishment, his stance didn't lose from its previous confidence.

"Nevertheless, I wouldn't give it up so easily, were I in your position. I think I can find a way, but even if I

don't, you shouldn't surrender before the battle even begins."

"So what do you suggest we do?" Draco asked. He couldn't exactly explain it, but the old man's confidence had somehow infected him as well.

"We have to research old and musty documents. I think the library in Malfoy Manor would be the best place for finding what we are seeking."

Draco didn't know how he had done it, but by the next morning, Agnus had somehow gained entrance into the Manor. Apparently, Cyrus - even as the prevailing head of the family - had no right to prohibit family members from using the family library in the Manor.

Cyrus still tried to discourage them by taunting and sneering with the pretence of 'greeting' them, and showing them into the library. He was acting as if he had always been the Lord of the house and Draco wasn't living here just until a few days ago. Draco had already resigned himself to his cousin's presence and vowed not to let Cyrus get to him, which he had been holding to surprisingly well at that point. Therefore, he was taken by surprise when, after entering the library, Agnus shut the door into Cyrus' face and cast an Imperturbable Charm on them, then at the room itself. Far from him to object, however!

The stack of ancient documents was in a part of the library Draco hadn't ever visited before. It was surprisingly clean, free from dust, bugs and rodents that could have damaged the old parchments. Draco could feel the magic protecting them from the passage of time. If it was true that Dark Arts books were able to take care of themselves, then it was doubly true for legal documents of pure-blood families.

They started transferring the documents into great piles on top of the large library tables. Actually, Draco was the one to do the actual transferring, and Agnus was the one who looked through all of them to see whether or not they would be of any use in Draco's particular situation. Draco didn't know how he was doing it. He was sure, if it had been him, he would have needed at least as much time to sort out just one parchment as Agnus used to go through a whole stack of them. Practice and a keen eye, Draco supposed.

His arms started aching by the time he was done with one shelf. The magic in the documents prevented them from being subjected to any other magic, be it to summon them or the one Draco was fond of

when he had to find books with specific keywords in them. (The one he had snagged from the Mudblood Granger.) He wasn't certain that the spell would have worked on separate parchments and files, anyhow, as the incantation explicitly referred to books.

A house-elf had brought them sandwiches at lunchtime - courtesy of Pansy, no doubt, as Cyrus would have gladly left them to starve to death if he could. Draco felt a pang in his chest. She would know why they were there, and that if Draco found something that let him keep his inheritance, that meant cutting the ground from under her feet. Still, she was still generous enough to offer them food. There was a lump in his throat at the thought. He quickly waved his wand above the tray to check for poison before picking up a slice and a cup of tea - just to be on the safe side.

They continued working until late afternoon. The sun had set hours before, coating the marble busts of past Malfoys in a rosy hue much like diluted blood for a second. That reminded him of the fact that his child's blood was much the same: diluted by that of Muggles'…

He hoped that he could manage to keep that fact quiet before the council. He knew for a fact that there was no family law that forbade the introduction of less than pure-blood into the family. The reason for that was simply that it would have been unimaginable for a Malfoy to ever sink so low as to get mixed up with someone of a less than impeccable breed.

Sometimes Draco wondered about himself and this child. He should have got rid of it for more than one reason, yet he hadn't. Perhaps he wasn't a true Malfoy. If he were, it wouldn't have been conceived in the first place. At least, he couldn't ever imagine his father - being caught in similar situation - waltzing up to another man in a gay bar and getting himself up the duff. He would sooner have killed every rival who dared to oppose him.

But Draco wasn't his father; that much was already apparent. Draco had no doubts that if his father had been still alive and learnt about his predicament, he would rip out this 'contamination' of his son's flesh with his own two hands. Actually, he had had some rather realistic and no less gruesome dreams about exactly that happening, and he preferred to avoid thinking about the details, thank you very much. Of course, had been his father still alive, Draco wouldn't have needed to resort to such measures…

Nevertheless, there was no sense in worrying about 'what if'-s. There was only here and now. Draco thought he would do better to remember that.

Unfortunately, 'here and now' consisted of stacking parchments - a rather menial task that didn't give his mind much else to think about.

Just when Draco had heaved what looked like the last stack of parchments onto the table, a house-elf popped again into the library and told Agnus that he had a Fire-call from the office. It turned out it was one of his sons-in-law requesting his presence with a client, and he had no other choice than to go. He told Draco to make sure the house-elves delivered the selected documents - almost one shelf's worth – to his home before hastily saying good-bye. Draco would have done that even if he hadn't been asked to. He didn't trust Cyrus not to meddle if he just let the parchments there unsupervised. Not as far as he could banish him, and with his current magic, that wasn't very far.

Just when he was thinking of him, Cyrus showed up. Draco thought he must have been waiting behind the heavy oak doors for him to exit the library, because he leaped in front of Draco, like a thief in the woods would jump out from between the bushes growing on the road side. Looks like Agnus forgot to remove the Imperturbable, Draco thought, and shrugged mentally. The house-elf had already finished delivering the documents to their destination, but Draco wasn't about to lift the spell. Podmore had warned him about exercising too much magic right now, hadn't he? Cyrus would have to do it.

"Thank you for your hospitality." Draco couldn't pass up the opportunity to goad his cousin.

"You're welcome," Cyrus drawled in a tone that suggested he was everything but. That was actually more than all right with Draco. It meant that Cyrus hadn't written him off completely yet.

"I heard you're living with my godfather. Must be hard to be dependent on other people when just a week ago those same people were so far beneath you." Cyrus' voice drifted off. Draco almost snorted. Would his cousin never learn the subtle ways of goading?

"Yes, well, your godfather is a loyal man. But you wouldn't know that, I guess…"

There. It was like killing two birds with one stone. Besides having one off on him, if Draco needed any more proof to be able to trust Snape again, the angry flinch of Cyrus' facial muscles was just that.

"Not like your wife. She is a fickle little thing, you know. She drifts where the wind blows."

Draco kept a straight face and didn't answer to that. It was true, after all. Well, except the part about her being 'little'. Had Cyrus seen her lately, or was he keeping her locked up in a warded cell until she was due?

"She came to me and practically begged me to get her pregnant, you know? She must have realised that you wouldn't stay head of the family for much longer…" Cyrus' voice was practically dripping with honey, but his jabs only hit empty air.

It seemed that Pansy had 'forgotten' to enlighten his cousin about their last conversation and had managed not to get caught by him after all. That was a surprise. Draco had lived in the Manor long enough to know that Cyrus could have easily supervised her every step with the help of the wards if he wanted. Still, he didn't do it.

Draco thought he knew why. It was apparent that Cyrus thought he had already won. He was making the mistake of being overconfident. He was only looking forward and wasn’t keeping an eye out for what was happening behind his back. Draco recognised the pattern - he had been the same blind fool, after all, and look where that got him.

"Yes, I know," he told Cyrus finally, acting nonchalant. But he left it at that. He wasn't about to betray Pansy. Let him just guess where Draco got his information from. It gave him some satisfaction that his cousin looked less arrogant than before his declaration.

"Why don't you just give up?" Cyrus asked in the end, not even trying to restrain his anger. "You have no chance of winning! You must be clear on that."

"We'll see," Draco said lightly. The unrestrained emotions being on open display on Cyrus' face made it easy for Draco to keep his calm and turn the dagger his cousin was pointing at him right back around. He was almost able to forget that Cyrus was actually right.

No, he shouldn't be thinking like that. If Agnus hadn't given up on his case, the least Draco could do was to not give up hope. He resolutely ignored the fact that Agnus didn't have anything to lose if he couldn't find a way for Draco to win.

When Draco arrived at Snape's house late in the evening (just in time for dinner, he hoped), he heard voices from the study. They were the voices of Snape, Podmore, and Potter, of all people. Draco wasn't in the mood for meeting him. But somehow he knew that the conversation was about him. He instinctively hid himself in the corner behind the half-open door.

"I don't care what he says, Potter! You do not abandon him!" That was Snape. He seemed angry, if the tone was any indication. It was the same Draco had had the pleasure to hear whenever Snape used to retract points from Gryffindor and give Potter a detention.

"But what should I do?" Potter sounded cross; most likely because the voice caused the same memories to resurface in his mind. "I can't tally after Malfoy whenever he goes somewhere!" For once, Potter got it right. "What do you want me to do? Marry him?"

For some reason, Podmore found that terribly amusing. Draco didn't.

"If that's what it takes, yes!" Snape barked.

"Not on your life," Draco murmured to himself from behind the doorframe. He risked a peek through the small crack between the doorframe and the door wing. Potter slumped down, dejected, as if he had heard him. Seeing him like that didn't give Draco the satisfaction it should have. He was too occupied with being angry at Snape to be able to enjoy the moment. How dare he joke about such things? Had he absolutely no respect for Draco? Had Draco been wrong about being able to trust him after all?

"I would if I could," Potter grumbled, which made Draco promptly re-evaluate his earlier assessment about him.

Potter had gone bonkers as well.

"But even if he wouldn't feel violated just by my presence, there is the small matter that he is already married. And that we are two wizards. Same-sex marriage isn't permitted in the wizarding world anymore."

What did Potter mean by 'anymore'?

"And you know this how?" That was Snape again.

"Asked Hermione. And you can believe me when I say she would know."

"Ms. Granger? She would, wouldn't she?…" Draco watched, abhorred, as Snape's gaze turned glazed while speaking about her.

Potter looked flustered, most likely embarrassed by this display or disgusted by the indications. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then he closed it and scowled for a second, until Snape's eyes returned to him.

Draco decided that this was the time to let his presence be known before Potter and Snape's insanity could progress any further. He slunk back to the front door and opened it, then closed it with an audible bang to announce his arrival. A second later, there was an echoing crack coming from the inside, and when Draco entered the study, there was no sign that Potter had been there just a few minutes previously.

The next four weeks were a nightmare of anxious anticipation and tiptoeing around Snape, who became increasingly irritable with every passing day Draco spent there. He only planned staying with him until the trial, which was to take place in the first week of January.

He was Fire-talking with Agnus almost daily, and in the end, the old man supplied him with documents to

peruse; saying that perhaps his eyes would see something the other man's didn't. It wasn't terribly productive, because Draco spent more time fidgeting over the parchments than reading. But at least he was out of Agnus' hair for a time and would let the man do his work.

Podmore visited him regularly. His magic didn't trouble Draco much, most likely because he didn't go anywhere and didn't expose himself to stress that way. The constant niggling about his future at the back of his mind didn't seem to count; perhaps because it wasn't anything sudden. Sadly, it was something Draco had been living with since he took that blasted potion, and so his body had become used to it.

Podmore had tried a few question and answer sessions with little success – actually, the only positive about them was that Draco usually slept through the next day and didn't spend it with incessant worrying.

True to his side of the overheard conversation, Potter made himself scarce. Snape wasn't happy about that at all. His attempts to drop some of his responsibilities regarding Draco on Potter's shoulders were just too transparent, really. His constant nagging about Potter living his life in blissful ignorance somewhere far away was starting to tire Draco to no end. As if he didn’t have enough problems already without being reminded of Potter, too, who allegedly had an unhealthy obsession with Draco's person. He thought Podmore must have found him a nice mental institution to help him get rid of his delusions. But when Potter sent him a present for Christmas, the return address was some kind of den or cave, which made Draco think that Potter had perhaps become a hermit in his grief about not being able to shack up with him.

All in all, this had been the worst Christmas of his life. He was glad when it was over, even though he wasn't looking forward to the imminent hearing. Not to mention that his pregnancy rather obnoxiously started to show itself, and he wasn't keen on appearing before the council sporting a visible lump at his midsection: an obvious reminder of the reason why he was there in the first place. It wasn't something to be proud of, as Podmore and the occasional scattered statements of the Minister wanted him to believe. Not to mention the fact that for all of their combined efforts, Agnus hadn't been able to find anything in favour of Draco, and he was rapidly running out of time.

That was two days before the appointed time.

Draco sat down to the breakfast table with a heavy feeling in his stomach. He had been ordered to eat

properly; his body needed nutrition, even if he didn't feel like that. Draco had discovered that if he just started eating and didn't think about it, he was able to put away the required amount without even noticing. The general rule was not to read any papers or letters before he was done, so they couldn't put him off of his food.

After dabbing his mouth clean and laying down his napkin, he finally turned his attention towards the large grey owl perched on top of the back of the chair next to him. It had been there since Draco had entered the kitchen, eyeing the crumbs hungrily, but obviously being well-trained enough not to help itself to the food without it having been offered, nor before delivering its post.

Draco waved for it to come closer and plucked the scroll off its leg. While unrolling it, he absently took a peek, trying to find out whether the owl was a male or a female, without success. He wasn't good at this, be it about owls or whatever non-human beings. Pansy had taunted him enough about not being able to tell the respective gender of their house-elves, despite having spent the majority of his life amongst them.

He shook his head. What was he doing, reminiscing and getting nostalgic when he had a letter in his hand that would probably determine his future?

He had been right. The letter was from Agnus. It said that he was able to finally find something in Draco's favour. Draco dropped the parchment in surprise. His heart started beating quicker and he couldn't hold back a smile. He felt like his hope hadn't died after all.

But then his eyes dropped, skimming over the front page of the morning Prophet, being drawn to a familiar name coming up in one of the small articles at the bottom of it.

Murder Victim Found in Knockturn Alley

TBC

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Chapter 26: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

3. April 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn.

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Chapter Twenty-six

"I have to go."

Snape regarded Draco with a strange look and a lifted brow when he suddenly pressed up from his sitting position beside the table, the chair's legs screeching from the force with which he had pushed them back. But since his plate was empty sans some crumbles, which showed that he was done eating, he didn't object.

"Where to?" Snape asked after some hesitation.

He preferred to keep out of Draco's business, but as long as he lived under his roof, he still considered Draco his charge. His concern was overbearing in a way only something forced could seem to. Snape watched over him like a sentinel. Draco felt as if he was back to eleven and attending Hogwarts again.

"Haven't you read the Prophet this morning?" He answered with another question, his irritation showing through it.

"Yes I have." To top it all, Snape had the gall to remain perfectly unruffled. "My condolences, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco's eyes widened. What did Snape mean by condolences?

"You're saying it as if… as if it meant nothing!"

Snape remained silent and waiting, obviously not willing to go along with what he called Draco's childish behaviour. Draco felt offended by that simplification of the facts. He wasn't acting childish – he was with child. There was a difference.

He sighed and stopped pacing in the living room. He didn't look at Snape when he answered, knowing that seeing him so calm would only serve to pour fuel onto the fire, so he fixed his gaze on the view outside of the window. The eerie silence of the snow-covered hills helped to still his nerves.

"Agnus has been murdered," he said. He found that saying it out loud and trying to think of a logical way out of the situation helped to even out the tremors of anxiety in his voice. "I have to get to his place. He wrote me a letter saying he found something, but not what it was. I have to find it before Cyrus remembers to retrieve the documents Agnus had been working on."

Snape didn't answer. When Draco turned to look at him, he seemed to be conflicted by warring

thoughts, probably about whether or not he should let Draco go on his own.

"Do you think you'll be able to get anything? I'm sure the place must be crawling with Aurors. They have most likely turned over everything and already confiscated those documents as potential evidence. I doubt you would be welcome to poke your nose into their investigation."

"If you're trying to appeal to my logical mind, it's not working," Draco commented dryly, heading towards his room to dress into something more tasteful and respectful than the loose, comfortable robes he had become used to wearing in the house.

"When has it ever?" He heard Snape muttering before he closed the door to his room. His keeper must have decided Draco would be fine, after all.

An hour later found him in the Floo foyer of the Malfoy & Sons Lawyers' Office. Obviously, the name hadn't been changed when 'sons' was replaced by 'sons-in-law' in the last generation, or probably even before that. It was tradition to take on the name of one's wife when marrying into a prosperous family business. Perhaps Agnus hadn't been a genuine Malfoy either, Draco mused. His unconventional views rather supported that hypothesis… He shook his head and clamped down on his errant thoughts instead of allowing them free reign. He had business to take care of.

After a few minutes of waiting, he was greeted by an irritated man wearing grey formal robes. He looked immaculate in every aspect, which made Draco suspect he was one of Agnus' sons-in-law.

"What can I do for you?" he asked tersely. Draco could hear the noises of people moving around in the house behind his back.

"I am Draco Malfoy," he introduced himself. But if he expected the man to show humility at hearing his surname, the casual lift of one brow, which said 'couldn't have guessed', belied that expectation.

"First, let me express my condolences for the death of your father-in-law," Draco said, abruptly realising how inadequate and inconsiderate his words may have seemed for what had happened. The man didn’t need to be reminded of his loss by every stranger the first thing he met them, but propriety demanded

he do so. He was surprised when the man didn’t even bat an eye. Either he had heard this so many times already that he couldn’t be bothered by it anymore, or he hadn’t been that close to Agnus.

"I have come because Agnus was working on my case. He wrote me that he had found something essential, presumably just the day before he was killed. I would like to look through his files and notes concerning the case."

Draco tried not to show just how important this was for him. He didn't want to seem like he was begging, hanging on the last straw. If this family was similar to his own in anything other but the name, doing that would have only earned him contempt and not a way inside.

"Certainly. My house seems to have become the gathering place for vultures, anyhow." The man opposite him sneered, which prompted Draco to square his shoulders in outrage.

Before he could say something though, the man continued. "Oh, I didn't mean you, of course. But why not investigate yourself? My late father-in-law's office is a bit crowded right now, you must understand. I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't find what you're looking for in that mess."

"Thank you." Draco found it hard to say those words through gritted teeth. "I won't bother you long, Mr… sorry, I didn't get your name." He matched his act to his opposite's mock-politeness perfectly. Acting was like a second nature for him, he just wasn't accustomed to using it against people who should have been on his side.

"James Butler-Malfoy at your service." Draco thought he sounded like a sulking servant who had just been reprimanded by his master for being rude to the guests. His ancestors might have been in service, perhaps even to the Malfoys. The man was nothing more than an upstart would-be aristocrat. Now Draco came to doubt he was even a pure-blood.

"Was anyone before me asking for those documents?" He tossed the question at the man as he stepped around him, employing every bit of his well-educated pure-blood poise to show him his place.

"You mean, besides the entire Auror Headquarters? Your cousin, Cyrus, had already been here,"

answered the malicious voice from behind his back. Draco tried not to flinch at the bad news.

"Had Agnus perhaps left something for me then?"

"Nothing that I know of," his host said as they stopped before an ornate door to the left.

"We are here. Good luck finding what you're seeking, Mr. Malfoy." And with that, he was left to his own devices.

Draco opened the door with a determination not to let himself go down before he tried everything within his abilities. He stumbled into resistance right upon wanting to enter the room though, in the form of a junior Auror standing there and blocking the entrance.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you can't go in there. The room is under quarantine until the investigation is closed," the Auror told him in a no-nonsense manner.

Draco knew better than to stop and try arguing with him. He was only a little wheel in the clockwork.

"I have to speak with the leading officer of this investigation, please. Mr. Malfoy was working on my case when he was killed, you see."

"One moment, sir." The Auror nodded, a bit too quickly, recognising that he had a potential witness before him. Not that Draco planned to divulge anything, mind you. He kept back the smirk that threatened to show on his face.

"If you would wait here until I return with him."

Draco nodded, and watched the Auror disappear within the crowd inhabiting the study - Agnus' son-in-law hadn't been exaggerating when he insinuated the number of them. They had already made a

mess of the room. Stacks of parchments were lying on every bit of horizontal surface; all of the books had been pulled down from the shelves and heaped up in one corner; the carpets had been laid rolled up along the walls; the vases had been emptied and most likely upturned for anything hidden in them - even the paintings had been removed from the walls, on the off chance they had been hiding a safe or such. Draco felt the urge to laugh at that – not that it would have been a particularly cheerful laugh – but when he saw the officer heading back, he bit the insides of his mouth and kept his expression neutral.

Unfortunately, his efforts seemed to have gone wasted when he found himself face to face with the leader of the investigation.

"You!" He couldn't restrain his minute reaction at the sight of Auror Schwiegerfrei sauntering towards him, with a nasty smile plastered on his face.

"Mr. Malfoy." Schwiegerfrei mock-bowed towards Draco, blatantly eyeing his middle section while he was at it, making the skin on Draco's back crawl with uneasiness. He could barely restrain himself from curling a protective arm around his stomach. There was a glint in Schwiegerfrei's eyes upon seeing his reaction, which he blatantly exploited, and then he turned towards the junior Auror to tell him to resume his post while he led Draco to an unoccupied corner of the study.

He should have known - that was Draco's first thought after he regained his control over his emotions. Schwiegerfrei didn't even try to act as if he wasn't enjoying the situation, or to seem even vaguely helpful. Draco wondered for a second whether Cyrus had a hand in his assignation to the case, or was it just a lucky turn of events for him. And then the thought occurred to him that perhaps Cyrus had something to do with Agnus' death as well, in which case Schwiegerfrei was most likely here to hinder the investigation.

Under the appearance of arguing and trying to wring some kind of permission to read through the documents scattered about in the room from Schwiegerfrei, Draco had a good look at the 'investigation' that was conducted under his nose. It seemed more like a Mafia search than an official routine operation to secure the scene. Stray parchments thrown everywhere, discarded cigarette butts in the elegant crystal platters, a heavy chair deposited on top of the antique inlaid writing desk without a care that it might damage the delicate wood… Draco didn't want to believe his eyes when he saw one of the Aurors picking up a golden paperweight the size of his fist and, after weighing it, pocketing it in plain view of anyone who cared to watch. Not that anyone apart from Draco did.

That was the last straw. He couldn't just stand there and observe how the ancient and noble Malfoy family was laid in ruins and the wreck of it picked apart by an uncaring and undeserving mob. He closed his eyes and counted to five before opening them again.

"Thank you for your help, Auror Schwiegerfrei," he sneered at the man standing before him, with little effect, while his eyes were surreptitiously following the Auror from before on his way out of the room.

"No problem." Schwiegerfrei had the nerve to grin at him, clearly feeling to have come out on top this time.

Draco nodded absently, having already half-turned away from him, and headed towards the door.

There was no one in the foyer, but Draco saw the front door swinging closed just as he exited Agnus' study. He took off on a run after the thieving Auror to be able to catch him before he Apparated away, for that must have been his intention if he had bypassed the Floo. He started breathing hard even after the first few feet, but there was nothing that could have halted him by then.

"Stop right there!" Draco shouted upon sighting his target. He didn't care if he looked undignified running after the man like a wronged stall-keeper. Actually, he thought it would do him good to work off the pent up frustration of both the last half hour and the previous weeks, and vent his rage on a convenient object.

The Auror looked back above his shoulder and, instead of running from him or Apparating away, he seemed to be waiting for him, as Draco had ordered. That threw Draco off a bit, but not enough to end his momentum.

When there were just a few feet remaining between them, the man waved his wand in front of him, and Draco's first thought was that he was casting a Shield Charm. The air began to shimmer around him, and the shimmering only stopped after Draco got a hold on the front of his robes in order to shake him until he confessed every one of his sins and coughed up what he had stolen.

In the next moment, Potter's familiar face emerged from behind a Notice-Me-Not Charm.

Draco let go of him with an irritated huff.

"That trick again, Potter? It's getting old."

"Perhaps." Potter had the gall to laugh at him. "But this time it wasn't for your benefit."

So that's why no one cared for him in there, Draco suddenly realised. By the way…

"I didn't think you'd resort to stealing. I thought it was your Weasel friend who needed the money desperately."

"Do you mean this?" Potter reached into his pocket and pulled out the paperweight, throwing it up into the air with the same fluid movement and catching it again, as if it was an overweight Snitch.

"Yes. Exactly that," Draco sniffled.

"Relax, Malfoy. I've stolen it for you," he stated, as if it had been a perfectly normal thing to do.

But before Draco was able to get out an answer, Potter put it back into his robe pocket and, with his other hand, he reached for Draco's arm.

"You don't want to be seen with me, again. We better take it to another place."

Draco had barely enough time to nod in agreement when he felt the earth being pulled out from below

his feet. When they touched down again, he glared at Potter and clutched his belly. He had felt for an instant as if two big fingers had just pinched him around the middle to squeeze his child out of him. It had scared him, even if he knew that it was only an impression generated by the Side-Along Apparation.

"Oh. Sorry." Potter seemed apologetic while keeping him upright. "Should have remembered. I hope you won't throw up," he mumbled.

"Thanks for your concern, Potter," Draco sneered and twisted out of the firm grip Potter had on his waist. "Where are we?"

"My flat." Potter grimaced. "What remains of it."

Draco looked around, noticing the state of destruction everywhere. The flat looked as if a battle had been recently fought in it: the furniture was battered, missing large chunks at places, as if they had been hit with an Exploding Hex, but the holes were most likely caused by overdue Howlers. The scraps blasted off them were spread out evenly on the singed carpet, together with the broken corpses of a few gifts and bits of red envelope looking disturbingly like dried blood scattered about everywhere.

Draco didn't recognise the room they had Apparated into. There was a small, child-sized bunk pushed to the wall, which indicated that this must have been the room where Pinky had been staying last time.

"Stay here," Potter told him. "I'll check if the coast is clear." And he did.

Draco Vanished the debris from the bed and sat down waiting for Potter to return, and for his head to stop spinning. After a few minutes, both did.

"Looks like you've already made yourself comfortable." Potter seemed amused by that. "This room seems to be in the best condition, anyhow. The only one in which the window is still unbroken."

"So, Potter, are you going to explain me why you felt the need to steal that little souvenir - for me?"

"Sure."

Potter sat down next to him and held out the paperweight on his palm in front of Draco. He used his other hand to point his wand at it, and after a few seconds of avid concentration, the vaguely egg-shaped bulk began to get flatter and squarer. The golden glint faded and the uniform colour separated into a darker and a lighter one, until one became the colour of egg-shell and the other that of indigo. In the end, the object in Potter's hand settled into the form of a stack of parchments with messy, curling writing on it.

"Here." Potter pushed it between Draco's hands. "Said it was for you."

Draco leafed through the stack. He recognised Agnus' handwriting, and after the first few lines, it was apparent that the notes were just what he had gone to Agnus' house for. How did Potter know?

"I think you'd better get back to Snape's." The voice of Potter jolted him out of his perusal of the documents.

Draco nodded shakily. This was it! There was the clue somewhere among those lines. But did he have enough time to find it? The parchments weren't ordered, as if they had been put together in haste. Some of them upturned, some of them another size altogether. There was even a Muggle paper of some kind of cigarette package between them with a few jotted down words scribbled down on its clear side.

"You're right. I have to go now." Draco stood up with renewed determination, his mind already on his goal. If he wasn't capable of going through it himself, he would ask Snape for help, or…

"Potter, do you have something important to do right now?"

"No. Nothing. Why?"

Snape greeted Draco with an arched brow when he saw Potter emerging from behind his back as they stepped through the doorframe leading to the living room. It was a rare occasion that he would be found sitting there, reading the Prophet for all appearances - in the middle of the day. Had he been waiting for Draco to come back?

The Potions Master cast one glance at Potter, and then he stood up without a word and left through the door leading into his lab. When he returned, he had a bottle in hand, which he gave Potter. He gulped it down mechanically. Draco realised at once the reason of his less than steady knees and the occasional loss of his balance, when the white noise in his head receded almost instantly.

"You were leaking again," he admonished Potter with disgust written all over his face.

Potter shrugged.

"How do you think I was able to find this?" He nodded towards the stack of parchments in Draco's hand.

Draco stared at them for a few seconds and then shrugged. It was high time to start with the research.

For hours they sat in silence, in a half-circle around the dining table. The parchments were divided into three stacks between them. They swapped them when they had finished with one.

Snape began to sort through his stack, trying to put it into some semblance of order, placing parchments that seemed to be about the same topic together. When that didn't work, he tried to order them based on their size, which he gave up fairly quickly, and with an annoyed huff and a shake of his head, he just started reading the topmost one.

Draco went through his share of the notes franticly, often having to re-read sentences or whole paragraphs after realising that his eyes just skipped over them while he was attempting to make sense of

something he had read previously. His mind became tired of trying to complete abbreviations never before seen, make sense of lists that lacked any title and seemed like expressions thrown together at random. He usually enjoyed crosswords, but that was when he wanted to have some creative fun and not when he was struggling to save his future.

The only one being silent was Potter. He sat by his own stack with a crease of concentration between his brows, reading away. When he was through his own stack, he made two even piles out of it and deposited each of them in front of Draco and Snape respectively. Having done that, he grabbed the heaps they had put aside and pulled them over to continue reading. He repeated the process one more time. He had already finished the whole stack while Draco and Snape were still in the middle of reading.

Draco quirked a brow at Potter when, looking up, he spotted him staring at the wall again. He had been doing it for the last ten minutes. Potter must have sensed his gaze on him, because he blinked and his eyes focussed on Draco.

"What's on your mind, Potter?" Draco blurted out the question, trying to mask his sudden discomfort that had nothing to do with the current subject of his worries and more with the unflinching stare directed at him.

"I'm getting hungry," was Potter's answer.

Draco rolled his eyes. He had no idea why he had thought Potter could be of any use to him.

"I could do with some food as well," Snape murmured without looking up. Potter nodded.

Bloody hell! At this rate he could have asked Crabbe and Goyle for help, Draco thought with despair. Except that Crabbe was in Azkaban and Goyle most likely in a place with palm trees, sandy beaches and girls dressed in not much more than floral garlands.

"I don't like Chinese, so either Thai or Italian." Potter stood up from the table, pulling his coat over his shoulders.

"How about lasagne?"

"Would you please stop this nonsense?" Draco shouted when he couldn't stand listening to the conversation in silence anymore. "We are in the middle of a serious matter, if you haven't noticed yet! We can't waste time with…" But then a loud rumble coming from his own stomach interrupted his tirade.

He hated the knowing smile Potter gave him in return.

"I'll be right back," the speccy git said, turning his back to them and leaving through the door. After a few minutes, Draco heard the sound of someone Apparating.

He was so immersed in his reading that he had completely forgotten about Potter. He didn't even hear him coming back. He only looked up when a steaming plate of mouth-watering pasta in some reddish sauce was pushed under his elbow. He murmured a 'thanks' and began to eat without really paying attention to what he was doing, except the writing in his hand. When his fork clinked on an empty plate, someone put another helping on it, and he continued eating automatically, until he finished the last line and realised that he had already put away a second portion as well. He stopped mid-chewing and looked up with a blush to see Potter and Snape observing him with amused interest. He chose not to comment on it.

Snape levitated the dirty utensils into the kitchen and summoned some wine for himself and Potter. Draco got a glass of water, which he regarded with a scowl. As soon as he touched it, though, it turned into a mug of cocoa. He hadn't known that he wanted to drink cocoa, but he wasn't entirely unhappy with the outcome.

"Has anyone found anything to go by?" Snape asked after a sip from his glass.

Draco looked at him with a glare and was about to snap at him that no, he hadn't, and obviously Snape hadn't either, or else he wouldn't be asking this question. Potter, though, proved to be the quicker one again.

"I think I may have," he said, contemplating.

Draco turned his head towards him so quickly that he wouldn't have been surprised if he had broken a vertebra in the process.

Thank Merlin, Potter wasn't one to mince his words, he got right to the task of finding the part in question, and after leafing through the stack, he pulled out an old and yellowed autographed photograph of Gilderoy Lockhart. There was only one sentence written on the back, together with the page number and paragraph where it could be found. Apparently, it was copied verbatim from the original Malfoy code: the ominous last will.

Draco read the line - it wasn't even a whole sentence - once and then a second time with ever growing dread. He threw the photo down when his hands started shaking too badly.

"This?" he asked incredulously. Potter nodded, and Draco couldn't see any hint in his expression that this was somehow a capital joke at his cost, and that there would be something else - something real… But Potter's gaze was unwavering. Meanwhile, Snape had read it as well, and started nodding, contemplating.

Draco shook his head. Were they both completely out of their minds? Or Agnus for that matter… What had he been thinking?

"This is never going to work!" he said with a lump in his throat.

Now he was finished, for real.

TBC

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Chapter 27: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

9. April 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

"This is never going to work!" Draco said again, shaking his head. "There must be something else in there!"

"We have already gone through the notes at least ten times," Potter moaned in protest. Draco gave him a nasty glare. Of course, he would be complaining, it wasn't about his inheritance!

"Potter is right." Snape interrupted before Draco could answer something along those lines. "It's three o'clock in the morning already. We have been at it for hours. We all need sleep, but mostly, you need to sleep and quit working yourself up." And with that, Snape dropped the pile of parchments in his hand and stood up.

Draco wanted to yell at him. If any of his students had this kind of attitude towards a Potions essay, Snape would have done more than just shout. Didn't he understand just how important this was for Draco?

Potter pushed himself up from his seat as well, leaving Draco the only one still searching. But he wasn't giving up just like that!

They could go to hell!

He shook his head angrily, but instead of commenting, he went back to work. There was no time to waste on petty arguments now. If they didn't want to help, then Draco would manage on his own.

But apparently he wasn't allowed to. He felt the warm weight of a hand on his shoulder. He knew it was Potter; Snape wouldn't touch him so casually, except to manhandle him.

"Come on, you must be tired, too. After a few hours of sleep we will have fresh minds and will perhaps notice something else. But right now, I don't think you can even see the letters."

As soon as Potter uttered those words their reality became apparent to Draco, as if Potter had hexed him. The writing blurred before his eyes.

"I have to continue…" he muttered weakly, partly to himself. He jerked his shoulder to shrug off Potter's hand, but his attempt wasn't good enough, because it stayed where it was. Potter's warmth seemed to seep under Draco's clothes and suck out all of his resistance, giving way to bone-deep tiredness.

At this rate, he wouldn’t even need the Sleeping Potion Snape handed him. It was evidence of his exhaustion that he accepted it with only a small grunt to indicate his disapproval, and gulped it down automatically.

His eyes drooped shut, and he felt his body being lifted from the chair by two strong arms. The last thing he remembered before slipping into sleep was the faint voices of Snape admonishing Potter.

"You pervert! Put him down and use Mobilicorpus like a normal wizard!"

"You're the pervert. I wasn’t even thinking anything by it."

"I won't have this kind of behaviour in my house!"

"Weren't you the one who wanted me to take care of him?"

"You can take care of him when I'm not in the room. Have you no shame?"

With a strangely divided sense of reality, Draco thought that Snape deserved whatever Potter subjected him to for abandoning Draco like that - even when the inherent wrongness of the image of Potter doing things to him registered in his mind. He felt the shadow of a malevolent smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He decided to team up with Potter against Snape, and, to demonstrate his new allegiance, he burrowed his face in the soft fabric of Potter's shirt, inhaling the faint smell of sweat and some common Muggle brand of deodorant.

Thank Merlin, at that point he finally passed out. He didn’t know what he would have done, only to feel embarrassed about later, had that continued. It was humiliating enough that he dreamed about Potter again.

The next morning, the red couch was back, complete with the tattered but soft-looking tartan blanket and Potter sleeping like the dead on top of it. It wasn’t the original couch, though; Draco noticed that

two of the chairs were missing. Snape won't be happy with Potter randomly transfiguring his things; Draco could see another storm brewing.

"What is it with this couch?" Draco muttered absentmindedly, not even realising that he had said the question out loud until he heard Potter's voice, still creaky from sleep, answering it.

"I became used to sleeping on it while I was engaged to Ginny." And that was a lot more than Draco wanted to know about him.

Draco sat down to the breakfast table to hurriedly get down a few bites of toast before he left. He was already dressed and ready to go, except that he had to have something in his stomach. He had made the observation that – strangely – this was the best way of avoiding nausea and reducing the vertigo he had been experiencing after Apparating lately.

"Where are you going?" Potter asked after nearly ten minutes of silence, his untidy hair poking out above the backrest of the sofa. Draco had hoped he had gone back to sleep and would stay like that until he was out of the door.

He was squinting at him without his glasses, and overall, looking very rumpled, which subsequently brought back the memory of Draco's earlier dream. In it, Potter appeared looking the same way; the only difference had been that there was a considerably smaller distance between the two of them.

Draco gulped back the lump that formed in his throat at the disturbing familiarity the memory triggered in him. There was no reason whatsoever to feel anything like that for Potter. After all, hadn't he decided that even if he couldn't control what happened while he was sleeping, he wouldn't let those bizarre fantasies affect his real life? For all he knew, it could have been Potter's leaking magic affecting him in a way that produced those dreams. Draco sure as hell didn't want them.

"Hey, I asked a question!"

A shudder passed through Draco at the nearness of Potter's rumbling voice. It had been coming from

directly behind his back. He had completely forgotten about the fact that he had been asked a question.

Or had he phased out again?

He quickly swallowed a few sips of his hot tea to drive away the chill, which caused the hairs on his arms and nape to stand on end at that possibility. When he felt collected enough, he answered the question curtly, indicating that he wouldn’t accept any kind of reproach, nor would he change his mind about what he had planned.

"I'm going to Agnus' office to hire one of his sons-in-law to represent me tomorrow. They must have some knowledge about my case and might be of more help than you or your worthless notes," he stated, primly dabbing his mouth with the serviette before banishing the remnants of his breakfast and standing up quickly.

His movements were jerky and nervous instead of their customary graceful fluidity, and he hated it. It reflected his state of mind accurately, and perhaps the lack of sleep, because despite the potion he only managed to sleep five or so hours before he woke up drenched in his sweat and come. He consoled himself with the thought that some of his nervousness was on account of the real Potter's presence after the appearance of his imaginary self in that particularly juicy dream, and his calm would return after getting away from him.

He really should have known it was too much to wish for.

"Wait for me!"

Potter's yell came just when Draco had thought he had succeeded in slipping out of the door unhindered.

He cursed inwardly and plastered a nasty expression on his face before turning back, in the vain hope that Potter would somehow – despite of what past experiences indicated – get the hint that his presence wasn’t wanted.

"I'm going alone," Draco barked categorically when, turning around, he saw Potter hastily pulling his outside clothes on and snagging a slice of toast from the table on his way out.

"Fnape'd kill me 'f I'd letchoo," he mumbled around the toast, causing Draco's expression to break out into an involuntary grimace, signalling his disgust at the display.

What a convenient excuse, he thought, but he didn't say it out loud. Instead of the uncalled for comment, he tried to appeal at Potter's sense of logic.

"Potter, I'm not going to appear there in the company of a babysitter. What would that say about me?"

"Um… the same thing it said while you were prancing around with Crabbe and Goyle at your back?"

"That has nothing to do with the current situation. Besides, with Crabbe and Goyle you could tell at the first glance exactly what their function was. You, on the other side, are too scrawny to appear even remotely like a bodyguard. No, you'll stay here and finish your breakfast." After some thought, he added, "I promise to come back."

Potter appeared to be rolling his eyes.

"Oh, all right!" But before Draco could declare it a victory, Potter continued by saying, "I am going to Disillusion myself."

At that point, Draco had enough and decided to give up the fight. He had no time to waste on engaging Potter in a verbal battle.

After arriving by Floo, Draco was greeted by the same wizard with the name Butler-Malfoy, if his memory hadn't failed him.

"Mr. Malfoy, how can I be of service to you?" Was he imagining things, or had the man's expression become even more resentful than it had been the previous day?

"I came to ask for your assistance. Or rather, for the assistance of someone who is knowledgeable about your late father-in-law's business, and who is able to provide me with legal support tomorrow. I assume you know what is about to take place tomorrow…"

"Certainly." The man nodded, and Draco could see a minute glint of derision in his eyes. "You better come in, Mr. Malfoy, you look tired, and in your condition…"

Draco thought it was fortunate for him that he hadn't finished that sentence. He scrunched his eyes in distaste when the man turned his back and wished Agnus were still with him, instead of this bloodhound of a relative, whose help he had no other choice but to rely on. That is, if it was going to be given to him, because he could see now that he wouldn't get it without a price, if at all.

Agnus wasn't there, but the strange prickling on his nape informed him that Potter was. Draco didn't like it that he had to deal with his presence as well. It forced him to keep his guard up doubly: keeping a constant eye on his mission and trying to pay attention behind his back at the same time.

Potter wasn't out to get him; but Draco sometimes had a hard time convincing himself of that, seeing that the git usually managed to startle him with his sudden appearances at the worst possible times. Even now, Draco was prone to forget he was there, as Potter made his presence barely noticeable. That, in itself, would have been an admirable effort, had it not amounted to the exact opposite effect it was intended for: distracting Draco so badly that he found himself completely out of his wits. He sincerely hoped that it wouldn't come to that this time.

It was as if they had been expecting him to turn up there. Draco reckoned that after the previous day, they probably had. When he entered the room – most likely the work room of one of Agnus' sons-in-law – two other wizards were already sitting there. They introduced themselves as Jonathan Hopkirk-Malfoy and Stuart Perkins-Malfoy, respectively. Their brother-in-law joined them and Draco was sat in the chair facing the circle of the three, while he felt Potter's presence settle behind his back.

He could practically taste the magic leaking out of him on his tongue, like an overdose of Fizzing Whizbies. He wondered if he was in danger of levitating out of his chair. Figured that Potter had forgotten to take his dose – again, Draco thought tiredly. Was the universe (or more likely Potter) out to torment him?

"Are you unwell, Mr. Malfoy? Do you want a glass of water?" James Butler-Malfoy asked. It served as some amusement for Draco that he looked properly worried about him now, not just acting as if he was. Draco was halfway to telling him that he shouldn't worry, it was just his protector making his life hard for him, so it was probably for the better that he couldn't manage to speak intelligibly in that moment. He was only capable of nodding, so he did that.

When the glass was handed to him, he drank it greedily. He felt somewhat better after that. He tired to gulp down the nervous little sparks that had gathered on his tongue without avail. The tickling feeling was slowly spreading upwards from the roof of his mouth through his nose, and turning into an irritating itch behind his eyelids.

Finally, his squirming brought him into a position where the back of his head accidentally touched Potter's stomach. In that instant, the dizziness stopped. Potter made a move to pull away, but thank Merlin, when he heard the little choking noise coming from the back of Draco's throat, he understood the message and stayed put.

After that, Draco didn't care for playing with words and trying to frighten them into helping him, he just wanted out of there as fast as possible. No wonder he hadn't succeeded in his endeavour.

"We are terribly sorry, Mr. Malfoy, but you must understand our situation," Butler-Malfoy told him. In a way, Draco did understand. "We are extremely busy with the cases Agnus left behind, and the investigation still requires the majority of our time. It is just not possible to take on your case as well on such a short notice. Neither of us would be able to represent you tomorrow with a clean conscience, knowing that we lack the necessary information."

What he wasn't saying, though, was that neither of them wanted to suffer the same fate as Agnus. They were more afraid of what Cyrus might do to them than whatever threat Draco was capable of conjuring

up off the top of his head, and money, clearly, wasn’t an issue.

Thinking back, perhaps it was for the better. How would he have been able to place his trust in someone who was only helping him out of fear? If nothing else, the example of the Dark Lord had taught him that that was a bad foundation to build on. However, the realisation didn’t prevent him from giving Potter a dressing down when they were back at Snape's house after their little escapade.

"I wouldn’t be so disappointed in your place. It was a bad idea to begin with," was Potter's only answer to the lengthy and rather loud tirade that had made even Snape come out of his den and listen to them with an annoyed grimace on his face.

"Don't tell me how I should feel! Why don’t you just leave me alone?" Draco snarled at Potter, and banged the door of his bedroom closed.

It was a wonder how he managed to fall asleep after that, but it was probably just his exhaustion from the rollercoaster that was his life with Potter in it.

Draco wondered when the git had become a part of his life. When had he silently slipped behind the screen to cast his constant shadow on the picture without Draco noticing? It was as if Potter was a fungal infection, which he was unable to get rid of, because he would always come back and find a new gap in his defences to infest.

After that, he didn’t wonder why Potter was still there when he came out of his room to eat dinner.

Draco gave him the cold shoulder, making a show of ignoring his attempts for reconciliation. What even gave Potter the idea that they should become friendly? They hadn’t liked each other from the start, so why should that change now? Aside from the fact that Snape wanted him out of his house, so he was trying to foist Draco off on Potter, that is.

Draco didn’t let his appetite be spoiled by all this, though the food tasted rather like sawdust, and the appearance of a big bowl of creamy chocolate pudding was a dead giveaway that he hadn’t managed to shut out the constant niggling dread of what was about to come the next day as well as he had believed.

And then, to top it all, Potter came to his comfort with such a lame line, Draco couldn’t believe him.

"Malfoy, it will be all right. You just need to believe in it."

"What do you mean it will be all right?" Draco nearly flew off the handle.

"You have to trust Agnus. He was a lawyer, after all. He knew what he was talking about."

"Potter," Draco turned towards the dark-haired wizard and poked his chest accusatorily with a finger, "he wasn’t talking about anything! That line you believe to be my saving grace is just some words scribbled on a photograph, for Merlin's sake! We have no idea if this was what Agnus had found before he was killed, and I don't even know whether I should hope that it was or that it wasn’t."

"I think it was," Potter started, but Draco silenced him with another poke in order to continue his rant.

"And as for being a lawyer, it doesn’t matter. First and foremost, this is not about law. If it were, I could just plead not guilty, saying that technically, my situation wasn’t covered by the code. But it won't be a court deciding whether or not I get to keep my inheritance. It will be the magic."

Potter looked at him for a few seconds, listening raptly, and Draco thought that even he couldn’t be as dim as to not understand what he was talking about. But just when Draco thought he did, Potter's reaction was the exact opposite of what Draco had expected.

"Precisely," Potter said with a winning smile on his face.

"Potter, I thought you understood…" Actually, he now thought he should give up on that hope.

"I do. It is you who doesn’t understand," Potter stated, leaving no space for objection.

"How so, if you could be bothered to explain to me?" Draco sputtered. What did someone like Potter know about magic that Draco did not?

"It's easy." Potter smiled again. "Magic is in your mind. If you believe that you can do it, then you can do it." Draco furrowed his brows. Potter, seeing the disagreement in his expression, sighed and looked as if he was searching for a way to explain it so Draco could understand. If the situation weren't so grim, Draco would have been highly amused by his antics. Then he seemed to have found it, because his face lit up and the lines of concentration evened out on it.

"Watch this, Malfoy: er… Summonus Fireboltus!" he cried.

Despite the desperateness of the circumstances, or perhaps because of it, after the initial shocked silence, Draco broke out in a hysterical laugh. To his satisfaction, Potter's face went up in flames.

"Potter! That's not a real spell!" While gasping for air, Draco wondered what Potter's intention was with this ridiculous display, because he didn't think it was to take his mind off the situation. His laugh came to an instant halt when, after a half minute, Potter's familiar old broom came whizzing through the open window, and landed, with a smack, in his palm.

"I don't know, Malfoy. It seems to work just fine for me." Potter looked at him smugly, the colour of his face, meanwhile, having returned to normal.

"How… How did you do that?" The cause of Draco's gasps this time was incredulity instead of mirth.

"It's magic," Potter said, still terribly proud of himself.

"But magic doesn't work like that! You can't just… talk gibberish and expect to do magic!"

Potter lifted a brow cockily.

"I believe I can."

Draco still found it hard to find sense in what had just happened. He knew he was fishing for excuses, but this was something that opposed everything he had been living by his whole life.

"But what about… you know… 'Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest'?" That had been Professor Flitwick's favourite story to scare first years. Draco had heard it so many times that he could quote it verbatim, so Potter would have undoubtedly heard of it as well. Besides that, magical theory books described at least a dozen similar occurrences.

"He was a wizard," Potter said, as if that explained everything.

"Of course he was a wizard. You don't mean to tell me that accidents like that don't happen to Muggles, because they can't do magic in the first place, or do you?"

"No, I mean, he was a pure-blood. Or someone raised by wizards. He was raised to believe that if he misspelled a spell, something like that would happen to him. Most likely, he was deadly afraid of making a mistake. No wonder his magic obeyed his beliefs."

Draco felt the dizziness come back at once and sat down on the nearest flat surface, which happened to be Potter's red couch. His fingers tangled nervously in the tartan blanket, and in the back of his mind it registered that the fabric was exactly as soft as Draco had imagined it to be. But the notion slipped away instantly, because he was trying to wrap his mind around the revelation that was in front of him.

"So… let me get this clear," and then Draco did something he never had before: he raked his fingers through his previously immaculate hair, "you're saying that I'll be able to make it work tomorrow with the help of what you think Agnus had found – if I just believe in it enough?"

"You always were a bright one, Malfoy, even if you rarely used your intelligence for something useful. You'll figure this out." Had Potter just complimented him?

He needed to think this through, and to be able to do that undisturbed he needed to rid himself of Potter. He stood up to lock himself into his room. On his way, his gaze fell on the too bright face before him and felt the bile rising in his throat at the exaggerated cheerfulness, so he quickly averted his gaze.

"Do not think this makes everything alright!" he snarled at Potter, noting with satisfaction that the creepy smile vanished at once.

Potter shrugged, seemingly nonchalantly.

"I don't think it does."

"Good."

"Good night, Malfoy."

Draco didn’t return the courtesy, except for grumbling under his breath about why Potter always had to have the last word.

TBC

A/N: The part about wizard Baruffio was taken out of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, in case anyone was wondering.

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Chapter 28: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

23. April 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Initially, Draco had been angry with Snape and Potter for allowing him to sleep in on a day like this. Now, after having waited for ten long minutes outside of the courtroom – how convenient it was that Malfoy Manor even had one of those at the disposal of its owners – he was profoundly glad they had saved him from suffering like this for hours before it would have been time for him to leave.

He gave his robes and his appearance another last-minute check, smoothing out the creases on the front, but when his hands bumped into the slight outside curve of his abdomen, he abruptly stopped and rearranged the voluminous folds in order to conceal the slight lump. In the middle of this process, the

heavy wooden doors gave a sudden creak and started to open, in order to grant him entry.

Draco turned sharply on his heels to face the courtroom and lifted his chin to look around before entering. He felt a sudden leap in his throat as his eyes took in the crowd gathered in there.

The room was filled with mainly blonde, grey-eyed, pale wizards and witches. Apparently, Cyrus had invited anyone who was even remotely related to the family to come and take part in Draco's public humiliation.

It didn’t really surprise him though, when he couldn’t spot Pansy among them. With the nature of this case, and knowing all well the most likely direction in which the discussion would progress, it would have been foolish from Cyrus to put her on display, even if she wasn’t pregnant with Cyrus' inheritance.

Naturally, Snape wasn’t invited either. Even though he was Cyrus' godfather, Cyrus was able to excuse his absence with the fact that Snape wasn’t a Malfoy either by name or by blood. Although, Draco would have sworn that some of the others present weren’t either.

Draco did a double take when, sitting next to one of Agnus' sons-in-law, he spotted none other than Luna Lovegood. She had a dreamy smile on her face, and when she noticed Draco looking at her, she wiggled her fingers in his direction, mouthing something like 'Hello, Lieutenant Draco!' Draco shook his head and decided to ignore her presence. He didn’t need her to embarrass him with her usual loony behaviour, which she positively would if he gave her any attention.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to be inconspicuous, before he started moving towards his designated place in the middle of the round room: a lone unoccupied chair with some kind of small desk before it. It had been clearly designed with the intention to render the one sitting there to feel uncomfortable and insignificant before the court.

Cyrus, unsurprisingly, occupied the stand opposite Draco. It was the traditional place of the head of the family, so naturally it was large and ornamental. It was strategically placed five high steps above ground level, so that even when he was sitting and Draco standing, Cyrus would be looking down at him.

Draco took his seat with the most dignity he could manage. He stifled the urge to move the chair too suddenly when, after sitting down, he noticed that it had been – most likely on purpose – placed too close to the table. The ledge was now digging into his stomach. Not much, just enough to make him feel self-conscious and force his robes to stretch around his body. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Cyrus' face breaking out in a nasty grin and knew instantly whom he had to thank for it. Draco didn’t want to disgrace himself by loudly pushing his chair back, nor did he want to give Cyrus the satisfaction of watching him squirm. In the end, he made a show of sighing, looking at his cousin derisively, as if he had been the victim of a childish prank, and then he stood up and moved the chair to the right distance. So, at least, he was able to save face.

To Draco's relief, it wasn't Cyrus who led the council, but a man sitting on his right. Draco recognised his father's younger cousin, whom he had only met once when he had been little. Apparently, he was now the senior in the immediate family. Draco hunted down his memories until he finally found the name in it: Lentus Malfoy.

Lentus' presentation of Draco's case was surprisingly impartial, but it was still overflowing with prejudice against him. With the obscurity he used to circumscribe what he thought Draco must have been doing in order to obtain an heir, he had succeeded making it all sound even more improper than if he had just described the events in their naked reality. His speech lasted almost an hour – fifty-seven minutes of utter embarrassment, when after the first ten Draco had already thought he couldn’t be any more humiliated.

When the echoes of Lentus' last words finally subsided in the large room, he turned to Draco once more. Draco knew what was about to happen now – the man couldn’t have been more obvious if he had given out programmes beforehand.

"Draco Malfoy," he said, and then paused. "Now you'll have to answer the accusations against you."

Draco nodded. His throat felt suddenly dry, and the first twinges of nausea tried to take over his senses. He knew he was panicking. He needed some time to pull himself together first. He needed some kind of distraction.

"May I have a glass of water first?" he asked, conscious of how this must have sounded. He didn’t want to seem weak, but the sacrifice of his pride now was more than worth it if, as a result, he would be able

to buy some time, and collect himself enough to come out as the winner in the end.

"You won't be able to get out of this. There is no sense in stalling," Cyrus sneered. Draco only lifted a brow at that as if he didn’t deem it worthy of an answer. The truth was that he couldn’t have managed a coherent sentence now if his life depended on it.

He really didn’t want to repeat his request, but he realised he had no other choice when no one wanted to grant it to him. They all looked at him as if it was a part of some great plot to trick them.

"I am not stalling," he forced out the words between his gritted teeth. "I am going to answer. I just wanted to have a glass of water."

"Your wants aren’t of importance in this house anymore," Cyrus mocked him, just when a house-elf popped into the room, offering a glass to Draco.

He took it with a smirk on his face, and couldn’t help but gloat about it, even if his hands were still shaking.

"Looks like you're wrong about that."

It didn’t seem to have much importance, but actually, the fact that the house-elves still honoured his requests showed that the Manor, still recognised him as its rightful owner. If that was true, perhaps Agnus and Potter's idea wasn’t a complete failure after all. Who would have thought that such a simple thing as a glass of water would be able to revive his hopes?

Draco could tell that Cyrus didn’t like what just happened at all. His face looked pinched. Seeing that another storm was brewing, Lentus leaned close to Cyrus, whispering something, most likely giving him a reprimand of sorts. After that, Cyrus tried to conceal his anger by conjuring up an air of fake amusement. He was a terrible actor. He didn't succeed in making it believable at all.

"Do you plead guilty or innocent?" Draco heard Lentus' voice boom in the sudden silence after the byplay.

Draco took another gulp and put down the glass before his trembling hands could betray his nervousness. He was going to kill Potter if this didn’t work!

"Innocent."

The heavy silence was torn by the short incredulous laugh coming from Cyrus. Draco had expected it to come, but it had caused him to cringe nonetheless.

"What do you mean, 'innocent'? Everyone can see that you are with child! A simple spell can prove it!" Draco didn’t like the calculating look in his eyes. He looked at him as if he had done something shifty.

Draco only nodded.

"I didn’t say I wasn’t."

"So what then?" Cyrus asked, now confused.

"I am pregnant."

After that statement, it felt like all the air was sucked out of the room. He thought it would be hard to admit it aloud, before an audience of people who seemed to be all against him. He hadn’t been wrong. It was absolutely, nauseatingly, gut-wrenchingly, bone-rattlingly dreadful – but at the same time, it felt also liberating.

"So you admit it!" Cyrus pointed at him like Potter had pointed at the Dark Lord before eradicating him.

"You are guilty, then!"

"No, I'm not," Draco objected, wishing that Cyrus would finally shut up and wouldn’t cut him off every time. His wish was unexpectedly granted by Lentus' hand descending on top of his cousin's arm, which finally silenced him. Draco nodded his thanks briefly towards the man before continuing his explanation, but only after taking time to wish Potter into the seventh hell if this didn’t work.

"It isn’t against the rules to be pregnant," Draco stated. He was surprised how casual his voice sounded when inside, he felt like jelly that had been left out in the sun too long.

Lentus nodded, considering, but not convinced. "It isn’t, that's right. The code doesn’t say anything about this alternative, since no one had considered the possibility of a Malfoy man becoming pregnant – by his own doing to boot, if I might add." He gave Draco an admonishing look, as if he was a child who had played with Mudbloods in the sandbox, and had to be reprimanded for it, before continuing.

"But you cannot have an heir that way. The last will of Reginald Malfoy states clearly that only a pure-blood boy, the child of the current lord and his wife, can inherit the family fortune."

"With all respect, sir, that isn’t what is actually written there," Draco said, without wavering.

Lentus' brows darted upwards, while Cyrus had a gobsmacked expression on his face. Draco was pleased that he managed to shut him up at last.

As he had expected, there was a brief pause while the code was brought out and placed before Lentus for perusal.

"Page twenty-three, paragraph four." Draco helped him to find the correct place more quickly. His heart was throbbing wildly in his throat, but he willed his breathing back to normal while he was waiting. Finally, Lentus started reading the indicated part out loud. There was a ringing in Draco's ears, which made it hard to understand his words, but he knew instantly when Lentus reached the correct place.

"'… the child is not considered an heir if he is born to a woman who is not married to the current Lord.'" Draco saw Lentus' brows lift when he reached the end of the sentence. The man continued to read along in silence, until he read the whole page and the beginning of the next one, his eyes skipping back now and then to the place where the ominous half-sentence was to be found. Finally, he looked up with a slightly perplexed expression.

"It seems like you were right--" he began, but was instantly cut off by Cyrus, who stood up at once. His face was assuming a rather unhealthy colour and a throbbing vein bulged out on his temple.

"This is preposterous! That's just wording. As you said before, this possibility wasn't covered by Reginald Malfoy's last will because it has been unimaginable up till now that something like this could happen!"

"Whatever the reason," Draco interjected before Cyrus could work up himself even more, "the fact is that – according the code - I was within my rights to take this form of action. My child is still the rightful heir."

"IT IS NOT!" Cyrus roared, but he was forced to sit down by Lentus again.

"Actually, it is not our place to decide," the older wizard said. Draco knew what was about to come, and Cyrus might have as well, because there was a nasty grin on his face again.

Draco instinctively grabbed the table when he saw the oldest daughter of Lentus: a woman with a strong resemblance to his late aunt, Bellatrix, step in front of him, with her wand pointed at his face; but then he forced himself to calm down. He could do without freaking out for stupid reasons when there were real ones to be frightened of at this point. This was the part he had dreaded the most, the part on which he didn't have any influence – only if he chose to believe Potter. And right now, he would have believed in anyone and anything if that was going to save his hide.

Belatedly – because the Malfoy Paternity Charm was already cast and soaring towards him – Draco thought of warning her that it might get repelled by the spell barrier surrounding the foetus. But then it reached him, and there was a faint prickling sensation travelling down his body, which was absorbed

upon reaching his abdomen. At the same time, a strange kind of peace washed through him, and he just knew it was going to be all right. Instinctively, he put his right hand flat on his belly, feeling the magical energy of the spell through his clothes. But when the first bout of insecurity came, that it was going to harm him or his child, another wave of tranquillity was set free, and now he could feel that it was coming from somewhere under his palm. He couldn’t help but wonder at that.

It took a considerably longer time than when he had cast it on Pansy – had that only been a few months previously? It seemed far longer than that. But in the end, a parchment adorned with clear, spiky writing materialised on the small table top in front of him. He only caught a glimpse of it before it was snatched up from the table and handed to Lentus, but it was enough.

Father: full-blooded Malfoy

Mother: full-blooded Malfoy

Child: full-blooded Malfoy

This was perhaps the result of how the spell had interpreted the situation of the child's 'mother' being a male. Draco knew this was going to be enough for the magic incorporated in the last will of Reginald Malfoy. It was another question whether or not this would be enough for his relatives, to which Draco had already known the answer, even without needing Cyrus to point it out to him.

"This doesn’t mean anything," his cousin said to Lentus as if Draco weren’t present at all. "This child is still going to be born out of wedlock. The family has already decided to disinherit him as soon as the new heir is born." And here, Draco and most likely everyone else, knew he was thinking of his own son, carried by Pansy.

"Please, correct me if I am wrong, but it seems like your so-called heir isn’t exactly legal either, seeing as the witch carrying it is still married to me," Draco commented casually. He was surprised of the sound of the slight uproar amongst the many Malfoys sitting in the room. It seemed that they hadn’t known about this little titbit.

"Don't compare me to yourself!" Cyrus burst out. "At least, she is a woman: a witch of respectable lineage, who had been betrayed by the infidelity of her husband! It was just natural that I tried to help her when she asked me to. Tell me, how long have you pursued this illicit relationship of yours with that

half-blood man? Or have there been more?"

Draco was taken aback for a moment, though he really should have expected Cyrus' accusations to take this path. If the situation had been reversed, he wouldn’t have left it without mentioning either. It still took him a while to collect his thoughts in order to sound eloquent and keep his explanation strictly clinical - instead of shouting into his cousin's face that he was wrong in so many ways!

"There was nothing of the kind you're trying to insinuate here going on. For your information, I selected the donor based upon his magical levels, without knowing his identity. Outside of that, I never pursued a physical relationship with men. Or do you have a proof of the opposite?"

"You are lying!" Cyrus bellowed, but, again, Lentus pushed him back down into his seat and silenced him with a look.

"You know he cannot be lying, Cyrus," he told him cryptically.

Cyrus didn’t seem to want to give it up just yet, though. He abruptly turned towards the people sitting in the back rows and fixed his stare on a plump, grey-haired witch. Her face seemed faintly familiar to Draco, but he didn’t have time to search his memory for her identity, as he had to concentrate on Cyrus' words.

"The Ministry has records about Draco Malfoy having spent two months in the Order of the Phoenix's headquarters during the war," he began, "– under the same roof Potter had been living at the time. Isn't that true?"

The questioned witch looked startled that she was being singled out this way, clearly not having anticipated the attention she was receiving. In the end, she just nodded.

"That has no significance in this case, Cyrus," Lentus reinforced his earlier statement. "Draco has told us already that he hasn’t committed sodomy."

Draco wanted to ask what all that was supposed to mean, but before he could, the older man turned towards him again and posed another question.

"Draco, would you please tell us why you felt it necessary to choose this method of obtaining an heir. After all, you have a wife, who is quite virile, as previously revealed proof suggests…"

Draco felt his blood rush into his cheeks and he bit his lips. Unfortunately, he wouldn't get away with not answering this one, and perhaps it was for the better.

"It became apparent that I wouldn't be able to otherwise… potions accident…" he mumbled.

Cyrus outright laughed at his bad luck, but to Draco's surprise, he seemed to be the only one to find the situation amusing. The other people present just turned towards their neighbours to discuss the new revelation.

In the end, it was Lentus who brought their attention back to the task at hand by clearing his throat.

"It seems like we have a situation here," he declared, formulating Draco's thoughts. Cyrus seemed to like this turn of events even less.

"We have nothing of the sort," he objected in a surprisingly civil tone. "We agreed that I'm going to marry Pansy as soon as the divorce is declared. Then I'll have a legal heir, and thus, can be installed as the new Lord Malfoy."

"Funny how I don't remember ever agreeing to such a thing," Draco interjected lightly before anyone else could have said anything, but inside he was seething. Of course, he had known about Cyrus' intentions for a long time now, since Pansy had kindly told him about them, but it was still infuriating that he, as the husband, wasn't even asked about his opinion.

"We don't need your agreement, you're disinherited!" Cyrus snapped.

"You can't have disinherited me without having a legal successor, which you aren't yet." With that statement, Draco felt his confidence strengthening at once.

Even if Cyrus had bewitched the gates to prevent them from admitting Draco into the Manor, even if he had made Draco believe he had been disinherited by the wishes of the family, it wasn't legal yet. The Malfoy code didn't permit the disinheritance of the head of the family without introducing a successor. Cyrus couldn't have been declared the new Lord Malfoy in his place, since he didn't fulfil the requirements either. Even the Manor still regarded him as its owner – the house-elf wouldn't have obeyed him otherwise. But just when his mood began to improve, Lentus' next words trounced his expectations.

"You must be clear on the fact that after having embarrassed us with those scandals, we cannot permit you to remain the head of the family, Draco." And, judging from the assenting noises, everyone in the room apart from Draco seemed to be agreeing on that. Of course, Agnus had told him as much; he really shouldn't have been shocked by it. And he wasn't, not really. It just seemed so final now that it had been spoken out loud.

He briefly toyed with the thought of telling them that it was Cyrus who was responsible for those scandals. But he knew it would be no use. They would only sneer at him and hold him responsible nonetheless, as he was stupid enough to get into these situations, which Cyrus had been able to exploit for his own gain. And how could he blame them? If there was someone else standing here in his place, he would do the same and think nothing wrong of it.

Draco finally nodded, defeated, and listened to Lentus, who wasn't speaking to him, but to everyone present.

"Fact is that currently we have no legal heir. So we must do the next best thing in this situation and make one of them legal." There was another approving murmur in the room, and Draco's heart lurched again. One of them, Lentus had said. That meant Draco wasn't yet entirely out of the running.

He could almost believe in it, but his expectations were abruptly destroyed by Lentus' next words.

"I'm sorry Draco, but you get no say in this one. I declare the marriage between Draco Malfoy and Pansy Malfoy nee Parkinson hereby void."

And that was it. Draco felt the magical marriage contract being lifted as if he had been trounced by a bucket of cold water. But the feeling only lasted a few seconds, and after that there was nothing, as if it had never happened.

"Cyrus, now you are free to marry the mother of your heir," Lentus said with a slight trace of disgust in his tone, as if he hadn't liked to be forced to resort to such measures. Or perhaps he just didn't like Cyrus much.

"And what about me?" Draco couldn't help but ask.

"If I were you, I would pull my tail between my legs and run as far as I can. Preferably somewhere where no one knows me," Cyrus told him, his voice almost dripping with triumph.

"You cannot dispose of me just like that! The magic has recognised my child as a Malfoy. Therefore my claim on the title of the heir for him is legal."

"Yes, Draco, the magic might have, but we know better, don't we?" Lentus said, and Draco could see that he was feeling uncomfortable, as if Cyrus seizing the title wasn't to his liking either. Or was he feeling sorry for Draco? Either way, this could be his chance…

He was prepared to use it to wring some kind of concession for his child out of Lentus, when he was interrupted by a female voice coming from the back rows. He nearly fell off his seat when he realised whom it belonged to.

"If Cyrus is permitted to legalise his claim by marrying Pansy now, shouldn’t Draco be granted the same privilege? After all, he hadn’t done anything that conflicts with the rules."

Oh no! He didn’t need Loony to interfere now!

To everyone's surprise, it was Cyrus who spoke, and not only spoke but also agreed with the proposition, an insane glow in his eyes.

"Indeed, why not?" Here, he turned towards Draco with a mocking sneer plastered on his face.

"I propose hereby to willingly surrender the title to your heir, if you can manage to acquire legal status for him – presuming it's going to be a boy. How's that, Draco, old pal?" And then he laughed.

"Well, that's settled then," Loony Lovegood declared, and to everyone's deepest astonishment, there was a responding twinge of magic filling the courtroom, signalling that the contract was just made effective and valid.

Draco's eyes couldn’t have grown wider if he had accidentally sprinkled Enlarging Emulsion into them, but to his credit, Cyrus' were the same size. There was an oppressive kind of silence in the room, only to be lifted by the sudden vigorous whispering spreading among the audience.

"Looks like we are done for today," Lentus declared and then stood up. "The session is closed, good afternoon to everyone."

And with that, he was already on his way out.

Draco sat in his chair, waiting both for the crowd and his head to clear a bit, when he spotted Loony in the process of leaving the room. He sprang up at once and intercepted her before she reached the doors,

and whirled her towards him with a hand on her shoulder.

"What were you thinking, doing this?" Draco knew he was shouting, but he didn't care. People were turning to look at him, but no one wanted to stay to witness the spectacle, and soon he was alone with the insane witch who seemed to take great delight in ruining his life on a regular basis.

"Why, Lieutenant Draco, I gave you a chance. It is now up to you what you make of it."

Taking in her composed and very much not airy stance, Draco realised that she was right. If he was honest with himself – and somehow he just wasn't able to cook up a believable delusion right in that moment – he had to admit that Cyrus wouldn't have let him have his say, and Lentus had to have agreed with him. This was his only chance. He had to make the best out of it.

After arriving back at Snape's house by Floo, which Snape had finally allowed to be connected to his fireplace, he didn't even take off his cloak. Instead, he burst into his room with the intention of finding the mangy package Potter had sent him for Christmas. It was pushed under his bed and had started to smell a bit by now. Draco hoped that Potter hadn't sent him something living that had died in there, but upon hastily opening the parcel, it turned out to be a now mouldy strawberry cheesecake. He felt a pang in his belly. Strawberry was his second favourite after chocolate, after all. But then he pushed everything secondary to the side in order to be able to concentrate fully on his main objective, and picked up the wrapping that he had come for.

"What was it?" He tried to remember Potter's new address while searching for it, but his mind was only coming up with useless suggestions in a rapid succession, like: warren, rabbit hole, pig pen, lion's den, snake's lair, Hippogriff nest, bat cave...

His trembling hands had a hard time smoothing out the crumbled pieces in order to find the return address among them, but finally, he did. He didn't linger for even a second longer. Jumping up, he rushed back to the fireplace in the living room and gathered some Floo powder into his hand. The fire was already burning high, he only needed to throw it into the flames and shout:

"The Burrow!"

In his hurry, he forgot to tuck in his elbows and pull in his neck, so he bumped his left wrist into a strange fireplace before whirling forward into another one and another one, until he finally arrived at his destination. As he wasn't used to his centre of gravity being lower, he landed on his face. He saw red. Fortunately, it was only the red of the familiar sore-thumb-coloured couch, which ultimately broke his fall.

He didn't look around, only enough to register that Potter wasn't there. He heard the unmistakeable noise of pots clattering mingled with the voices of a conversation coming from an adjourning room.

"…so you cast 'Accio' nonverbally while saying that? Brilliant!" That over-cheerful baritone sounded uncomfortably familiar, but it wasn't Potter's.

"I think it did work, dear," a woman's voice answered: definitely not Potter.

"It worked with Ron. Remember our sixth year? With…" Was that…? Draco strained his ears to hear it better, only to be disappointed when it was cut off by the other man's voice.

"…the Felix Felicis Potion? How could I forget? I really did believe you poured it into my goblet, you know?"

"But you didn't really, or did you?" That was the woman again.

"Of course not, Mrs…"

Draco didn't listen to it after recognising Potter's voice as one of the speakers. He instantly headed into the direction it came from.

When he finally stumbled into the room, he had to grab the doorpost to prevent himself from collapsing.

His sight was still blurred from the dizziness caused by the swirling within the Floo that had not quite passed yet, and from the combination of exhaustion and agitation because of what had happened during the trial and because of what he was about to do now. He spotted an inky blob among the many couch-coloured ones and focused his remaining strength on focussing in on it, while blurting out the sentence that had been in the foreground of his thoughts ever since he had left the courtroom:

"Potter! We are getting married!"

TBC

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Chapter 29: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

1 May 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Now that Draco was over the initial shock, his vision started to clear, and he was able to take in the sight before him. He was in a kitchen full with people. Now that he was able to see clearly, it became apparent that not all of them were Weasleys. In fact, the dark head he had assumed to be Potter belonged to… was it one of the Patil twins? She was sitting at the table with a stiff back and arched brows.

At her side was the Weasel with one of his bear-like arms draped over her shoulder in a familiar fashion, wearing a hideous orange tee shirt with the Chudley Cannons logo. His face bore the expression of slight surprise, but not the utter astonishment Draco had been expecting to find. He slowly turned his back to Draco and looked at someone sitting on his other side. That was the moment when Draco was able to spot Potter. The Weasel's bulk had almost fully concealed him from Draco's sight.

"Blimey!" the Weasel exclaimed. "I didn't think he would have the guts to actually come here and demand something like that of you!" And that wasn't the reaction Draco had anticipated, to say the least.

Potter remained silent, but there was snickering coming from the other side of the table, which was filled with even more Weasleys. Draco recognised the twins – their similarity was a detail hard to miss - and the she-Weasel who had cursed Draco with that vicious Bat-Bogey Hex in his fifth year at school. There was another red-headed man, slightly older than Draco. He had no idea who it could be, but based upon the colour of his hair, Draco couldn't mistake him for anyone else but a Weasley, most likely, one of the Weasel's older brothers.

Draco was opening his mouth to demand an explanation for what the Weasel had meant by that, but a voice coming from his side had interrupted him.

"Oh dear! I didn’t think you'd be here so soon! I didn’t even have time to make tea!"

Draco whirled around on his heel so abruptly that he nearly lost his balance and had to grab the doorpost in order to steady himself. He saw a dumpy woman approaching him at a dangerously high speed, her greying hair in disarray, trying to tie the sash of a frilly apron behind her back on her way.

Draco was frozen on the spot. He didn’t even react when she stopped next to him, placing a hand on the small of his back and steering him towards the table, brooking no opposition. He recoiled from the too casual touch, but since she didn’t let Draco have his say, he had no other choice but to obey. He was pushed down categorically to the previously empty chair at the head of the table, feeling every pair of eyes directed at him. But that wasn’t what he was concerned with, not even the fact that with that seating arrangement he had ended up next to Potter. His eyes didn’t leave the little plump woman's figure, who was hurriedly flicking her wand, mobilising the various kitchen appliances to prepare tea and biscuits.

"You!" he blurted finally, when his vocal cords seemed to be in working order again.

The woman turned towards him with a reproving frown on her face.

"Yes, me," she answered briskly. "I am Molly Weasley, nee Prewett. My grandmother on my mother's side was a Malfoy. And I'm glad that the kinship is only that distant. It seems that Malfoys nowadays don't even teach their children basic manners."

Draco wasn’t even capable of sputtering. Had he just been reprimanded by a lowly Weasley?

"Oh no, she's gone into mother-mode again!" he heard one of the twins muttering to the other, but he didn’t pay further attention to it. His honour had been insulted, and he had to right the accusation.

"My name is Draco Malfoy," he found himself saying with a set jaw. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, madam."

His words were followed by more snickering coming from the twins and the frown on Mrs. Weasley's face deepening even more.

"You really don't remember me, do you?" Mrs. Weasley's voice was uncomfortably full of sympathy. Now it was Draco's turn to frown at her.

"Of course I remember you. You were there just now, telling everyone that I am supposed to have spent two months at the Order Headquarters with Potter…" in his peripheral vision, Draco saw Potter straightening his back and lifting his head at that. "But… that isn't true, is it? How much did my cousin pay you in exchange for that testimony?"

Everyone at the table seemed to suddenly come alive with anger. There were little menacing gestures directed at him, but Draco didn't let himself be intimidated by it. Mrs. Weasley put her hands on her ample hips and assumed a stance she most likely had perfected while dealing with her offspring.

"Are you accusing me of lying? Because if you are, you couldn't be more wrong! Never in my whole life have I told one lie! Well… only for the cause… But that isn't important now. I am a decent witch. If you were one of my sons, you'd have kitchen duty for a month, and I don't care how old you are! Do you understand me?"

"She might do it anyway," Draco heard the Weasel whispering to Potter, not exactly quietly. "It isn't as if she hasn't in the past."

Draco gulped. There was only one answer he could give to that.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley."

After that, the air seemed to clear of all the pent-up tension, and Mrs. Weasley's face suddenly brightened, though the concern wasn't gone from it entirely.

"Good," she told him, and then busied herself with pouring the tea into large mugs and dealing out the biscuits.

"Let's see if I still remember…" She looked at Draco, contemplating. "Three spoonfuls of sugar without milk or lemon, wasn't it?"

Draco was only able to nod numbly.

The picture of him sitting amid the various Weasleys around a kitchen table, drinking tea and munching biscuits in a companionable silence, felt almost familiar, and Draco was confused, because he didn't know where that had come from. If he had been in his right mind, he would have dismissed the notion as ridiculous and been done with it; but there was something in the air that demanded that he think about it some more. And with every minute, the feeling that something wasn't right grew inside him, until he couldn't stand it anymore and had to ask.

"Were you really telling the truth to Cyrus?"

"Of course, dear." Mrs. Weasley smiled at him benevolently. "Don't worry about it; it will come back. But now, I think we should discuss the situation."

Draco didn't understand what she was talking about, but it soon became apparent that the 'situation' was none other than his predicament. Draco felt uncomfortable with the topic being discussed with all those Weasleys present. It was none of their business. It only concerned Potter and him. But apparently, Mrs. Weasley felt that her unwilling involvement in the case and the way she seemed to mother Potter and now Draco as well, entitled her to have a say in it. It was a confusing feeling, as if Draco really had got his mum back – in the form of an unquestionably authoritative, plump, unattractive and not very sophisticated witch, who was in the habit of boiling tea water with her own wand and holding life-changing conversations at the kitchen table.

"So, Harry," she turned towards Potter, "do you have anything to say about it?"

Draco's gaze followed hers, and upon landing on the other man's face, he noticed that he bore a rather dark expression. Indeed, Potter had been strangely silent about the marriage proposal Draco had issued – all right, it had been more of a demand than a proposal, and Draco had perhaps hurt Potter's overly sensitive soul with it, but that wasn't a reason to say no, was it? It wasn't as if Draco had given him much of a choice, anyway. If he had to get technical, he might remind Potter that he had already agreed to it before even the thought could have formed in Loony Lovegood's deranged mind.

"It isn't as if it could be done. There is no sense in discussing it, then, is there?" Potter murmured grouchily.

"Mate! Hermione could arrange it, she said so herself," Weasley said, putting his large hand on Potter's shoulder. Potter only looked up at him accusingly.

"I don't want her to get into trouble because of it. You know what people would say…"

To Draco's surprise, Weasley backed down, the encouraging expression on his face changing into a contemplating frown.

"You're right. I didn't think of it like that."

Draco looked between the two of them, uncomprehending, but after a few seconds of silence, when no explanation came, he lost his patience and stood up.

"Potter! I want to speak with you alone," he said and jerked his head towards the living room. Potter looked up at him with surprise, but when Draco started walking out of the kitchen, he followed him willingly. First, he wanted to go out of the house, to get rid of any possibility of eavesdropping ears, but Potter caught his elbow and directed him toward his red couch. He sat down next to Draco and erected a privacy bubble constructed from a mix of various charms around them.

"What is your problem, Potter?" Draco attacked as soon as the charms were in place. Potter recoiled

minutely, but then he got back his bearing and reinstated the previous dark frown on his face. He stayed silent, though.

"Potter! I am willing to offer a mutually advantageous arrangement. I need my heir to be legal, and, unfortunately, the family council decided that that entailed marrying the father. You. Let's say your M… Granger could arrange that the marriage between us is approved by the law. Would you then agree to it?"

"I…" Potter's glance flickered to Draco's face briefly, and then he turned away. Draco thought he would need to prod him more, but before he could think of something to make the stupid Gryffindor say yes, Potter chose to speak after all.

"I don’t take marriage lightly. I don't know if I could…" he trailed off, shaking his head.

Draco sighed wearily.

"Potter, I am a pure-blood. My kind doesn’t take marriage lightly either."

"But that's different," Potter insisted.

"Just how is that different?" Draco snapped.

"You don't love me." Potter told him, turning his face back to Draco and looking straight into his eyes. Draco couldn’t disagree with that, so he only nodded. "And I don't love you either." Potter told him patiently, as if he was explaining a complicate spell.

For some reason Draco couldn’t fathom, that last admission hurt. He blinked a few times, keeping his expression blank and stifling the urge to ask Potter if that was true.

"In that case, we are going to divorce as soon as possible, or you will be allowed to keep lovers. But you were the one who said that you wanted to play a part in this child's life. Here is your chance. This was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

Potter started shaking his head slowly, but Draco could see that he was just on the brink of giving in.

"Potter! I need this chance to keep the Malfoy money. Our child's inheritance…" How it pained him to say those words! But it had to be. Potter had a too thick head to understand niceties. Draco had no choice but to employ the heavy artillery. "You don't want him to grow up in poverty, do you?"

Potter's head suddenly shot up.

"I wouldn’t let that happen, ever! Look, I have more than enough for myself…" Potter raked his fingers though the rats' nest he called hair. "I could provide for him… for both of you…"

Draco refrained from the derisive remark about Potter having no idea what he was talking about, comparing his pitiful pile of gold to the Malfoy estates. Oh, please! Draco had ten times as much in just the Black vaults that still remained his after he had been disinherited. He saw a chance and pounced on it immediately.

"That might be, but what if you die? Neither of us would have any legal claim to keep anything of yours. Except if you accept the legal responsibility, and don't tell me you'll include us into your will!" Draco exclaimed when he saw that Potter was just about to say that.

"If you ruin this chance for me, I won't ever forgive you. I won't allow you anywhere near this child if you dare do that to me. But if you accept…" Draco couldn’t help wrinkling his nose a bit in discomfort. "…I may be willing to consider giving you some allowances…" And looking straight into Potter's eyes, he made it clear that he wasn’t speaking about things like money. Of course, considering it didn’t mean he would do it, but it was a good enough bait for Potter, nonetheless.

Potter exhaled loudly and seemed to deflate like a punctured Quaffle.

"I just know I am going to regret it," he muttered.

"Is that a yes?" Draco perked up.

Potter didn’t answer. Draco left him alone to continue with his act of looking miserable in peace.

"Where is Harry?" Weasley intercepted him upon returning to the kitchen. Draco went around him and took his former place before answering.

"I left him to give him some time to come to terms with the great fortune that befell him," Draco quipped. He couldn’t help it; for some unknown reason he felt tremendously better. His good humour couldn’t even be spoiled by the presence of the Weasel or the prospect of having to marry his childhood enemy.

"You weren’t this considerate when you used Harry to get pregnant and then didn’t even tell him about it, were you?" the Weasel asked in a resentful tone. Mrs. Weasley, who was in the middle of cooking dinner, tutted reprovingly, but didn’t turn away from her work.

"For your information, I didn’t know it was Potter, so how could I have told him about it?" Draco answered, biting his tongue to prevent himself from adding he wouldn’t have even if he knew. Apparently, hormones were once again making it hard for him to restrain himself.

"I don't believe you," the Weasel snorted. "You were always a lying bastard. You don’t seem to have changed much since."

Draco was on the verge of admonishing him, even though he couldn’t deny it, but he was interrupted by Mrs. Weasley coming to his defence.

"Ron, he can't be lying. I told you that he was fed Veritaserum, and that doesn’t wear off this soon."

Now that was disconcerting.

"What do you mean, I was fed Veritaserum?" Draco asked with a slight trembling in his voice. He would have surely noticed it if he had been…

"Well, I heard someone saying they overheard Lentus Malfoy telling your cousin about ordering the house-elf to do it. But even if I hadn’t, it was fairly obvious, dear. With the way they didn’t question your statements at all, they must have had a reason to believe you wouldn’t be capable of lying." And Draco wasn’t able to argue that. Especially when he found himself complimenting Mrs. Weasley's cooking skills, based upon the delicious smells drifting his way.

Draco felt perturbed about how easily he had accepted the situation of him stooping to converse with a Weasley. But Mrs. Weasley surprised him by being a very pleasant conversationalist. She asked him about his accommodations at Snape's, and then listened to his long list of complaints about it with an understanding ear. At long last, Draco remembered that he should be on his way. In fact, he had already spent more time at the Weasleys' house than he had intended, as it was already becoming dark outside.

"Oh, no! Stay for dinner!" Mrs. Weasley offered. "Hermione will be here, and we can ask her about that change of law." Knowing about the Veritaserum, Draco didn’t really desire to be in Snape's company right now. So he found himself agreeing.

At some point the Patil girl joined them in the kitchen. She offered to help, but Mrs. Weasley didn’t want to hear it and insisted that she sit down next to Draco. Mrs. Weasley launched into an explanation almost instantly. It turned out that Patil was now a Weasley, and actually only a few weeks behind Draco in her pregnancy. She had just started showing. She seemed a bit uncomfortable with Draco being there, and that fact amused him tremendously. Normally, he wouldn’t have started a conversation with the likes of her, but he couldn’t help but exploit the situation.

It turned out that she was actually the undersecretary to the Minister, and Draco saw a good source of information in her.

"It figures that the M… Minister should staff her Ministry with her Gryffindor pals," Draco muttered under his breath, most likely because the Veritaserum was still in effect and had loosened his tongue. Unfortunately, he wasn't quiet enough, and she heard him. At least he had managed not to say that word in present company.

"I was a Ravenclaw, if you must know," she answered and, to Draco's great amusement, looked almost offended by the assumption that she could have been anything else. "And it was the other way around. I got together with Ron because of Hermione," she told him proudly, perhaps to accentuate the fact that she was on first name basis with the Minister of Magic.

Draco nodded, not really caring, but he filed away the information in his mind among all the useful facts that might come handy at one time.

"If you are so close to the Minister," Draco drawled, trying to keep the flattering in his tone to the minimum, because in his experience, Ravenclaws were always quicker on the uptake in sensing when their pride was being used against them, "you can surely tell me whether it is true that Granger could arrange it so that I can marry Potter…"

Draco's voice trailed off at the end, and he turned away a bit, as to not look too eager. He could see from the corner of his eye that she had a delicate frown on her face.

"Of course, I would understand if you said that it is a state secret and you can't divulge it…" he added for good measure.

"No, no, it isn't." She hurried to deny it. "I'm just not the person to talk about it with. I think you should wait for Hermione to arrive."

With that he was shaken off. Damn! He really wasn't looking forward to that talk! The thought of him, Draco Malfoy, having to lower himself to the level where he had to beg a Mudblood for something made him shudder. Perhaps he would be able to persuade Potter to do it for him.

It wasn’t hard to find Potter; Draco had only needed to follow the loud yelling coming from outside. It turned out that some of the people were involved in an impromptu Quidditch match. Potter, one of the twins and the Weasel were on one team; the girl Weasley, the other twin and the older brother were on the other. There were no Beaters or Seekers, just two Chasers and a Keeper on each team. That was perhaps the reason why the Weasel was playing in his school position again instead of being a Beater. Draco supposed it was only fair, seeing that he was the only one with a professional career behind him. It almost pained Draco to admit it, but the match was actually very interesting and fast paced. There were no unskilled players on either side, even though it was already dark and the red Quaffle was hard to make out.

For a second there, he felt a strong wave of longing flooding his senses, urging him to ask whether he would be welcome to join the game, but then he reminded himself that even if he weren’t pregnant, it would be beneath his stand to make a clown of himself like that.

Come to think of it, after lowering his standards and actually accepting a dinner invitation from the Weasleys, where he would be dining with blood-traitors and Mudbloods at a kitchen table to boot, not to mention that he had just blackmailed a Half-blood into agreeing to marry him, he couldn’t have sunken much lower. He wasn’t sure what his father would have said about it, even knowing that this was the only way for him to keep his inheritance. If he was honest with himself - and doused with Veritaserum, he couldn’t be anything else - it would have been more likely that Lucius would have disowned him long before the situation could have escalated to these proportions.

He had been so carried away with his thoughts that he didn’t even notice when the game ended and the players landed. He only jolted out of his thoughts when a hand descended on his arm. It was Potter's.

"Malfoy? What are you doing out here without a cloak?" he asked. In the warm light that streamed out of the windows, Draco could see a frown on his face.

Potter was right, he realised suddenly. He had left his cloak in the house, but he wasn’t cold.

"Warming Charm," he said the moment he realised what must have happened. It was a bit disconcerting that he didn’t remember casting it. It must have happened accidentally – the same way sometimes the

food put in front of him turned into something else in his hands.

"Come on. Hermione is going to be here any second now," Potter told him, and started to walk towards the door.

Draco nodded absentmindedly, but then he remembered that he had to talk with him before the Mudblood's arrival.

"Potter! Wait!" he shouted, and to his mortification, he was actually running after Potter, catching him barely before he could open the door.

"What is it?" Potter turned to him in surprise.

Now that he had Potter's attention, Draco had to think quickly as to how to direct the conversation to the topic of having Potter talk to Granger instead of Draco, because asking outright would have been just disgraceful.

"I… So I was living with you at the Headquarters for two months?" Draco cursed himself for his lack of eloquence. But Potter didn't seem to notice it; he just gave a tentative nod, as if he was trying to figure out what Draco wanted, trying to steer the conversation in that direction.

"And…" Draco suddenly found himself blushing, but he also suddenly found that he needed to know the truth about it. "Was it true, what Cyrus was insinuating?"

Potter lifted a brow in question. Draco cursed his dim wit and bit his lower lip. It seemed that he was forced to say it out loud.

"Is it true that you and I had a… thing… back there?"

Now Potter looked downright amused. "What do you think?" he asked. Damn him!

Draco wanted to say 'no'. He wanted to categorically distance himself even from the idea. But when he opened his mouth to do it, no sound came out of it.

Just how much Veritaserum did they give to him? There must have been considerably more than only three drops of it in that glass if it was still working after all this time – and he had only drunk a few mouthfuls of it.

"Well?"

"I don’t want to think about it at all," Draco answered finally, wondering just how he had landed in this position.

"Then why ask?"

"Potter! I just want to know. Is it that hard to understand?"

"Why does it matter if you don't remember anyhow?" Now Potter definitely looked sullen. He turned away from Draco and opened the door.

Draco was fuming that he was just left there, by Potter of all people, without getting his answer. He wanted to yell that it mattered because he needed to know, and that it wasn’t his fault that he didn’t remember. He just needed to know! And that was the absolute truth.

And that was when it happened. This time it didn’t even take Potter leaking magic all over him; he wasn’t even there anymore. Draco's body just went rigid on its own, his eyes clouded and his head spun. And after that, he didn’t know what happened.

It felt as if he had landed in a Pensieve memory, but at the same time, there were alien thoughts in his mind, sensations flooding his senses. Draco saw himself – as much younger man – and he realised that it was that younger Draco's mind he was seeing into.

Draco was running, thinking that he needed to get out of there or it would be all over. His parents were dead - or so he believed, the mind of the grown-up Draco supplied - killed by the Dark Lord. But if he fled, he couldn't possibly stay alive on his own. So in a last, desperate act, he ran down the cellar and grabbed Potter. Surely, if he returned him, his side wouldn't kill Draco. Surely they would protect him.

From his pocket, he took out the ring his mother gave him: a Portkey to a safe place, she had said. Potter was unconscious and barely breathing. Draco didn't know why the Dark Lord kept him alive, but it was painfully obvious just by looking at him that he wanted some information, or else, just tortured him out of fun. No, he didn't believe that. But Potter being still alive proved that the Dark Lord had not yet got what he wanted.

Only, the safe house wasn't there. Or, Draco realised with a feeling of dread, it was there, protected by an Unplottable Charm or the Fidelius, so he wouldn't be able to see it.

He had no other choice but to drag Potter with him - he wasn't strong enough to Apparate both of them. And besides that, he didn't know where to, nor was he composed enough to dare try, even though he sure as hell didn't lack the necessary determination...

In the next instant, the scene ended and Draco was engulfed in a thick fog. When it finally cleared enough so Draco was able to see, he found himself standing on a forest ground covered with dried up leaves and thick undergrowth. The other Draco's thoughts filled his mind again, filling the holes in place of what he couldn’t see because of the mistiness of the memory, for now he was sure that that was what it was. The events continued to play before his eyes, like a wizarding photograph.

Draco didn't know many Healing Charms. There was the one he had used to heal the hickeys Pansy and others left on his body - skin as pale and thin like his bruised easily. He knew minor spells to heal small cuts he occasionally made when he needed his own blood for a potion or else, a spell to clean a wound quickly and effectively, for the times when he cut his hand while brewing and poison seeped into the cut from the ingredients or the brew itself. All in all, he felt profoundly lacking; but in the end he was surprised how effective the combination of those worked on Potter's appearance, even though he

couldn't hope to heal any internal damage, like the broken bone in his arm, which he put back in order and Petrified to keep it straight, or the mental damage from the Cruciatus Curse and whatever else his tormentors had chosen to use on him.

Potter was most likely just glad that the only person around him wasn't hurting him. He didn't care for Draco - Draco didn't think he even recognised him at first. Of course that wouldn't have been enough, if not for Draco's own weakness and his yearning for the comfort human contact could provide him.

It wasn't that surprising, really. They had to sleep close together to keep each other warm, Draco didn't dare leave Potter until he wasn't recovered enough to follow him, even if that meant that they had to eat bread transfigured from dry leaves or dirt, and drink water summoned from the dew on the leaves at dawn. When Potter broke down with fever, Draco held him close, and tried to wipe away the heat from his brows and cheeks with his robe sleeve that he had held out to the rain to dampen. He hoped that Potter wouldn't remember him crying for him not to leave Draco alone, or if he did, he would just think it had been one of his fevered dreams. When Potter was cold and the Warming Charm wasn't enough, Draco spooned his body behind Potter's. Later, when the nightmares came, he would hold him and pet his head in a manner his mother or Pansy would do to him. Much later, when he was coherent enough, Potter would reciprocate the gesture.

Potter was the first one to kiss Draco on the forehead after a particularly bad nightmare and Draco the one to return the gesture the next night - only that kiss went somewhat lower. From that point on, it was purely instinct and need. The next morning, waking up with his naked sweaty body stuck to another one was decidedly the most awkward moment in Draco's life. But all awkwardness was forgotten when Potter - only half awake - smiled at him and burrowed his head into Draco's neck, sighing contentedly. Later, upon discovering that both of them, like the healthy teenagers they were, had a morning erection, the happenings of the previous night were repeated by daylight, and neither of them could or would pretend that they didn't know exactly what they were doing. Potter didn't even hesitate to go down on Draco after asking him for a cleaning charm, since his own wand had been left with the Dark Lord, or destroyed by then. Draco wasn't affronted; their only means to clean themselves was magic since they wouldn't find a bathroom in the woods...

The scene changed and the mist came again. This time it lifted almost completely, and when it did, the surroundings changed to a strangely familiar house with house-elf heads mounted on the walls. The other Draco was alone with Potter in a room.

Nearly six weeks had passed between their hasty flight and their arrival at the doorstep of Potter's Order.

They took Draco in and offered him protection from the Dark Lord. How could they not after he had saved their precious Chosen One? But that had gained a secondary importance, as Potter didn't even try to pretend that the thing between them was anything other than what it seemed. He took it for granted that Draco would stay there with him, as vehemently as his cronies, Weasley and Granger, had protested against his presence. And Draco, feeling that even if he had lost everything with his parents' death, he had gained something new and precious, was content to sink into the short blissful oblivion that that arrangement provided him with.

Draco saw his younger self stepping in front of Potter and taking one of his hands between his own, lifting them to his heart in a gesture his older self found ridiculously sappy and unbecoming. His face reflected feelings he had been sure to that point he had never known.

"Harry," he said, "I am in love with you."

In the next moment, Potter's arms came up around his younger self's frame. The fog was starting to build up again, and Draco couldn’t see what happened, but he could still hear Potter's answering words.

"I love you too, Draco..."

The next scene started in a kitchen with the now-familiar setting of Draco sitting around a kitchen table among red-heads and Potter at his side, drinking tea.

That was when he learnt that his parents, against all odds, were alive. Faking their deaths was a part of the Dark Lord's newest plan, which his parents had regrettably failed to inform him of beforehand. After that, during the attack on Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, when he found himself face to face with his father, he really should not have been as shocked as to forget everything about Potter for a few stunned minutes, which was enough time for his father to grab his arm and Apparate them home.

The transition felt almost instant. Draco's eyes popped open without the usual grogginess of the first few seconds after waking up. He was immediately aware of the fact that he was lying in a bed; looking around, he recognised his room at Snape's house. He was wearing his nightshirt and not much else, but the covers were pulled up to his chin.

There was a glass of water and some kind of potion on the bedside table next to his bed, but when he reached out for it, he glimpsed something red from the corner of his eyes. He didn’t know why he was so surprised. He should have expected it, really, but he still gasped when his eyes took in Potter's ever-present couch and the messy dark head peeking out from under a red tartan blanket on top of it.

TBC

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Chapter 30: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

21. May 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I’m not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I’m not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don’t like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn.

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Chapter Thirty

"The doc said you should drink that immediately after you wake up," Draco heard Potter's voice coming from the darkness.

Potter yawned and sat up on his couch, wrapping the blanket tightly around his body. It was a bit chilly in the room, Draco noticed, though his own warm blankets did a good job of keeping the cold at bay. It was Potter's fault if he was cold. Why did he choose Draco's room to sleep in, in the first place?

"Why are you here, Potter?" Draco questioned him, trying to mask his surprise by acting offended. "Were you spying on me in my sleep?"

There was a few seconds of silence, then a sudden barking laugh coming from Potter made Draco realise just how childish he had sounded. It seemed that he wasn't fully awake after all. Or was his less-than-witty comeback the result of that strange dream he had woken up from?

Thusly reminded, Draco's mind was instantly bombarded with a series of very realistic images taken out of his dream: about him and Potter being snuggled up together in various positions and surroundings, saying and doing things that made his head hurt and his chest constrict, rendering breathing difficult.

Draco shook his head, trying to expel them from his mind by replacing them with memories about his childhood and his parents. He was accustomed to doing this. It became a routine used to bring an end to the discomfort that always accompanied the dreams, whenever they would come. Usually, it worked fine, and the symptoms diminished completely after a few seconds.

Not now, however. Just as quickly as they were gone, the treacherous flashes from his dream were back again, flooding his mind. The reaction they induced in his body was also instantaneous and more serious than ever before.

Draco swayed when a new wave of headache came up, and the air just didn’t seem to be able to get into his lungs through his windpipe. After a few seconds of desperately trying to breathe in vain, he realised that he would suffocate if the growing pressure on his chest didn’t leave off soon. He knew he was panicking, but that knowledge only worsened his state instead of helping him to conquer it. Never before had it been this bad. He thought he would die for sure if he didn’t snap out of it in time.

Potter seemed to have noticed the state he was in. Through the swirling mass of black dots in front of his eyes, Draco could see him jump up from the couch and draw closer to him. To his horror, his symptoms worsened as the distance between them diminished.

Draco wanted to yell at Potter to go away, to leave him alone, but no sound would come out of his mouth, and of course, Potter wouldn’t listen even if he had heard him. In the end, Draco thought that the best he could do to alleviate the situation was to close his eyes and pretend that Potter wasn’t there at all.

He felt arms closing in around his torso, and knowing they belonged to Potter, their touch was like burning embers on his skin. Draco was convinced that if he opened his eyes, the scorch marks would be there for real. In any case, Potter was quick to act. In the next instant, Draco felt something cold and hard thrust between his lips, clinking on his clenched-together teeth. He recognised it to be a potion bottle and forced his mouth to open. Whatever was in it, it couldn’t render the situation any worse than it already was.

The liquid was cold and thick; it tasted like metal in his mouth, but at least the effect was instantaneous. Draco's body slumped back and his burning lungs welcomed the first gulps of air with great relief. His head also stopped hurting, and Potter's touch, which he could still feel through his nightshirt, ceased to burn. He should have pulled away, but right now he was too happy that he was able to breathe again to let himself be bothered by such a nuisance.

After a few minutes of resting and quietly thanking whatever was out there for keeping him alive, Draco opened his eyes and straightened up, shrugging off the arms that had supported him. The residue of the potion still clung to his teeth and palate in a thin layer that would have to be washed down with some water.

"What happened?" he croaked and then coughed as some potion residue was accidentally sucked into his windpipe. Potter handed him the glass of water without a word. Draco accepted it and drank greedily.

"How much do you remember?" was Potter's tentative question. It surprised Draco somewhat, but, knowing his history as of late, he couldn't really blame Potter for asking.

Before giving an answer, he pondered whether to do it or just send him away. He really didn't want to discuss his health with Potter, but seeing as how Potter was his only available source of information, he bit back the insult that was on the tip of his tongue and decided to co-operate.

"We were outside the Burrow. I asked you to tell me whether it was true that we had an… affair during the war. You refused to answer and got angry with me for asking. You left me there… and then I woke up here." Draco was surprised by how calm he had sounded while reciting these things, considering that, as he now realised, it was all Potter's fault that this had happened to him. He suspected that it was an effect of the potion he had just drunk. There must have been a strong sedative in it.

"You fainted," Potter said after a few seconds of silence.

Draco turned his head towards him with something like 'Well, isn't that obvious?' written on his face, though it wasn't very effective, since the room was nearly dark. Potter didn't react at all. He just sat there, unmoving.

Why is he still sitting this close to me? Draco pondered, but he couldn't bring himself to move away.

"Did you…" Potter's voice sounded strangely constricted. "Malfoy, did you… see… things? While you were out," Potter clarified.

Despite the unnatural calmness that was currently keeping his emotions in check, Draco's heart skipped a beat when the question reached his ears.

"What do you mean?"

Potter looked uncomfortable.

"I mean… things about… us."

Draco stiffened. For a brief second, he was on the brink of panicking, fearing that these questions would dreg up the unwanted flashbacks again. He was about to reprimand Potter about what he thought he was doing, but it seemed that the potion was enough to subdue them. That was a relief, because Draco suddenly felt that he needed to know why all these things were happening to him, and it seemed like Potter had the answer.

"Why are you asking?" he demanded, not wanting to be the first to give up information.

Potter bit his lip and looked down to his lap before mumbling the answer, so that Draco had a hard time understanding his words.

"You were talking while you were unconscious..."

Draco gave a little throaty noise of surprise. "So you were spying on me!"

He could practically hear Potter rolling his eyes in frustration.

"So what did you see?" Potter asked with a sudden ferociousness, fixing Draco with his gaze.

Draco was glad that the Veritaserum seemed to have already worn off, because he didn't want to answer. He knew that his dream was much more than that. He couldn't have explained how he knew it, except that he had this feeling about them. But the events he had experienced while being unconscious were just too abysmal to accept as more than the products of his imagination. They just couldn't have

been real, and if so, Potter had no right to ask about them.

"None of your business!" Draco snapped, turning away.

Potter made a huffing sound. He grabbed Draco's shoulder and pulled him back, so they were face to face again, and his eyes bored into Draco's, as if he wanted to gaze right into his soul. Draco blinked and looked away. He didn't think Potter was a Legilimens. Even if he was, he certainly wouldn't be able to cast the spell without saying the incantation and using his wand. Snape had only been able to do that because he had known Draco for a long time. Notwithstanding, caution never hurt.

"Answer me, Malfoy!" Potter barked, but then he seemed to have realised that he was being rude, because he forced his voice to go back to normal again. "Fine. If you won't tell me, I'll tell you about it, you only have to nod if I guessed right."

Draco tried to shrug off the hand holding his shoulder, but Potter wouldn't let go. He apparently interpreted his gesture for an agreement to continue as well.

"Let me think… first, I heard you muttering something about shackles and dungeons, your parents, the Dark Lord and a Portkey. I think you saw the time when you came for me during the time I was a prisoner of Voldemort. Am I correct?"

Draco nodded reluctantly.

"Later, you mentioned a forest. You said there was blood everywhere, and then you began to mutter healing spells. I gather that was about you and me hiding in the forest after our flight."

"Yes…"

And then, to Draco's growing discomfort, in the same manner, Potter proceeded to retell everything that Draco had dreamed about as if he had been there and seen those things alongside Draco - all the saucy

details included. Draco became more and more edgy, squirming under the firm hand on his shoulder. He only now realised that if it had been real, Potter must have been there as well.

If Draco needed any more proof that those things weren't just a figment of his imagination, this was it. Apparently, his dreams weren't only that, but memories buried so deep that only his subconscious had access to them. He didn't have to ask himself or Potter why he didn't remember anymore, as it was obvious that he had chosen to forget, and with a good reason. He would have died happily if he had never regained these memories.

"Was I correct?" Potter's voice sounded strangely distant, even though he was sitting right next to him. "Malfoy! Snap out of it! You don't want a relapse, do you?"

Draco shook his head when he realised that Potter was right and he was in the danger of drifting away. Potter's tightening grip on his arm helped Draco to anchor himself to the here and now. He lifted his head and looked at the other wizard, noting absently that dawn had already come, and meanwhile, the light coming from outside had grown strong enough to be able to see him a bit more.

"Are you okay?" Potter looked at him, scowling, not succeeding in masking the concern in his eyes completely. Oddly enough, this time Draco didn't feel like commenting on this fact.

"I am. Thanks."

It was strange to hear that word from his own mouth, and said to Potter of all people. It was stranger that he had actually meant it. To be forced to acknowledge that he had been involved into a relationship with Potter was bad, but to know that he had holes in his memory he wasn't even aware of was much worse. He was grateful to Potter for not letting him add a new one to the collection, even though he still resented him for the other.

"Good." Potter nodded absently. "Malfoy, you have to understand. It is vital that I know about this, so please, tell me the truth. Did you or did you not see what I just described?"

"Why is it so important?" Draco asked, more weary than irritated. He would have thought that Potter,

being a former Gryffindor, wouldn’t be so keen to see him utterly humiliated. Apparently, he was wrong.

Potter seemed to become frustrated by Draco's obstinacy. He looked as if he was concentrating very hard on preserving his composure before answering.

"I can't tell you the exact reason," he said with a sigh. "Podmore advised us not to tell you anything that would upset you. We could trigger attacks similar to the one you just experienced. But believe me when I say that it is important if we want to know what is happening to you."

Draco swallowed. He wasn’t very keen on having any further 'recollections' from his past that he had obviously chosen to forget, but he wasn’t used to getting so personal with Potter either. He had a hard time convincing himself to trust him because, to be honest, he didn’t want to. But he wasn’t so naïve either that he thought these lapses possessed no danger to his health. That meant he didn’t really have a choice.

"Yes, Potter. I saw exactly what you described. Every single word of it fit. Happy now?" Draco said through gritted teeth.

But through his own scowl, he could see that Potter wasn’t happy. In fact, he looked like what he had feared just came true. Draco was confused by that display. Was Potter actually dismayed because Draco had found out the truth? Didn’t he want him to know? Wasn’t Potter the one who was secretly pining away for Draco?

"What is your problem now?" Draco barked out before he could stop his errant tongue.

No, no, no. He did not feel offended by the possibility that Potter perhaps hadn’t wanted him to know because he didn’t want Draco anymore… that way…

Unexpectedly, the scene from his dream about him confessing his love to Potter came into his mind, unbidden, and there was this accompanying feeling of belonging that felt so unfamiliar…

And it felt wrong. It was like the echo of an emotion from a previous life. Or as if it wasn’t Draco who had been feeling it, but some stranger. And despite that, he still felt bereft for it having been only a memory, still longing for it to be real and not only a faded shadow, a déjà vu. He didn’t understand it.

"Malfoy!"

Draco became suddenly aware that Potter had been calling his name for a while now. He shook his head - as if he could get rid of those ridiculous thoughts that way - and looked up at him. He was taken aback by the fact that now he was actually able to see his tired features, as the sun had come up while he had been apparently enmeshed in his ponderings.

"Malfoy, you have to listen to me." Potter gripped both of his shoulders, shaking him every now and then, as if to trying to keep him from drifting away again. Come to think of it, most likely he was, and Draco should probably be thankful for his efforts.

"I am listening," he said, blinking.

Potter paused for a second to bore his gaze into Draco's eyes, and then nodded to himself, as if confirming that he was, in fact, listening.

"Now. You must not try force any more memories to the surface. In fact, it will be the best if you just pretend that you didn’t remember anything. Just… forget it, okay?"

To say that that wasn’t what Draco had expected to hear was a gross understatement.

"What? Why?" he asked, confused.

"I already told you. Were you not listening?" Potter huffed, but to Draco's horror, he saw right through

the faked irritation and caught a glimpse of the underlying alarm. What was Potter afraid of? "You don’t know how close you came tonight to losing the baby. The doc left you these potions, so if this happens again, it might not go that far. But it could still damage either of you, and I should think you don't want that. Do you understand?"

Draco nodded hesitantly.

"But… what can I do?"

"Just…" Potter shook his head. He looked tired and younger than his age. The picture reminded Draco of Potter's teenaged self – the way he had seen him in his dream: sporting dark circles under his eyes, but determined to win that war and always having a smile for Draco... No. That was the kind of dangerous thought he had been warned about.

"Just… be your usual self. Ignore everything that doesn’t make sense or you don’t want to see." Potter shrugged with an expression of helplessness and amusement mixed together.

Draco scoffed at that, but he reckoned that Potter was right for once.

"So what about Granger?" he asked, heeding Potter's advice and changing the topic abruptly.

"What about her?" Potter blinked at him owlishly from behind his glasses, being caught unaware by Draco.

"Don’t be thicker than you usually are, Potter. Did you speak to her about her changing the law?"

Potter shook his head.

"Thought so."

"Look, Malfoy. I didn’t forget it or anything. I just didn’t have time for it with…" and here he waved his hand vaguely in Draco's direction, "everything else."

Draco would have almost believed him, had he not caught a glimpse of reluctance in the way he averted his eyes.

"What? Do you want me to hold your hand while you do it?" Draco asked derisively, and then, seeing the sudden flash of surprise in Potter's eyes, he revised his words. "Figuratively speaking."

"No. I will do it," Potter grumbled to him. Draco nodded.

"I can only hope that the next time you come back, you will already have spoken to her about it." Like he had been ordered, Draco ignored Potter's affronted muttering. "Now, leave me. I am still tired and need my sleep."

That was true as well. The potion made him groggy, and he needed to sleep it off.

"With pleasure." Potter attempted to sneer at him upon departing, but, being a Gryffindor, he couldn’t pull it off very well. He was halfway out of the bedroom when Draco remembered something and yelled after him.

"Potter!"

"Yeah? What now?"

"Don’t forget the couch!"

When Draco woke up much later in the afternoon, he found Snape outside in a suspiciously good mood.

"Is there a reason to celebrate?" Draco lifted a brow when the man greeted him by raising his Firewhisky in his direction.

"The reason, you ask?" Snape sounded like he had had a few too many glasses already. "Of course there is a reason. It is the fact that I finally get back my house to myself. You'll be gone for good very soon." His speech ended in a little sing-song voice. His singing voice resembled that of a cauldron's, which was cracked due to insufficient bottom thickness.

"Well, yes," Draco said. "As soon as I found a suitable house…"

"No, no, no!" Snape told him with glee in his eyes. "You're moving tonight. Or tomorrow morning, the latest."

"What?" Draco asked, outraged. Snape was supposed to take care of him, wasn't he? What was he thinking now, throwing Draco out of his house? "Where do you expect me to go? There is no chance of finding a place so quickly…"

"But this is the best part!" Snape smiled at him! "You don't even have to search. You're moving in with Potter."

"What? Did he tell you that…?"

"Potter? No." Snape poured himself one more glass. "I ran into Miss Granger this morning. She said to tell you not to worry about it, because she had heard everything from Molly Weasley and was going to

do her best in order to make it possible. Isn’t she a brilliant witch? Simply brilliant!"

Draco nodded, appalled. He was suspicious about what kind of business Snape actually had to accidentally 'run into' Granger this morning. And he should really lay off the bottle, or at least he should keep away from it while in Draco's company. On the other hand, he was glad that the question of his inheritance didn’t rest in the hands of Potter. For the first time, he didn’t mind that the Mudblood had such a keen mind.

And then he remembered Snape's other comment.

"What do you mean I have to move in with Potter?" He gaped in shock. He would marry him, all right, but who said that the deal would include living together with him? Podmore surely wouldn’t recommend that Draco live with a constant reminder of everything he wasn’t supposed to remember. And what was Snape on about him having to leave this soon?

"No," he said categorically. Snape couldn’t make him, or could he?

"Yes," Snape objected, the alcohol rendering his tone strangely calm. He sounded more like he was in the process of explaining something than holding a discussion. That is, he sounded as if the matter had been already decided and he was now only informing Draco of the outcome.

"No," Draco pressed. He didn’t care if he looked like a petulant child, which he must have, because Snape looked at him, understanding.

"Yes."

"No!"

"Yes."

"NO!"

"Yes."

Draco took a deep breath, prepared to yell in order to get his opinion heard, but Snape's drunken expression, which was eerily reminiscent of Professor Dumbledore's 'I understand'-face when he had told Draco in his fifth year that his father had been caught red-handed and been already shipped off to Azkaban, stopped him when his mouth was just about to form the syllable. There was no sense in arguing with him when he was like this. Draco would have to wait until Snape was sober again, but if he was lucky, he would have forgotten all about his ridiculous idea by that time.

As if Draco didn’t have enough to worry about without this.

Podmore arrived through the newly installed Floo a few hours later, temporarily averting Draco's attention from Snape. He gave Draco a perfunctory examination by waving his wand above his head, while he basically repeated what Potter had told him the night before. The only explanation he was willing to give about why Draco had to take the Calming Potion was that the last fit had apparently led to some of the spells affecting his memory to be damaged, for which his body used a significant amount of his magic. This in turn affected the magical barrier around his child. If Draco didn’t want the protection to collapse and poison his child with his magic, or the other way around: be poisoned by the child's magic, he would have to take utmost care that such a thing did not happen again.

This explanation was marginally better than Potter's, but it had also scared Draco more, and the fact that he could feel the nausea stirring when Podmore mentioned the Memory Charm didn’t help his nerves at all.

Unfortunately, Snape's presence didn’t help him alleviate the stress caused by the knowledge of the danger he was in. On the contrary, he proved rather insistent about Draco moving out in the next few days. It seemed as if he had begun an all-out attack on all fronts against Draco. First, during conversations, he dropped the question oh-so-casually as to when Draco would be moving out, because he would be sure to make time for helping him getting packed. Then there were all those hints: the Prophet having been left open at the page for real estate advertisements; the constant complaining about not having any free time for himself and his potions anymore; but the last straw was when he had

tried to convince Potter that Draco wanted to live with him, only that he was too shy to ask outright.

He obviously didn’t expect Potter to insist on staying there with Draco after hearing that. It would have been rather amusing to observe their little argument: Snape trying to go back on his words while Potter getting more and more agitated, had he not been the one who had to suffer the consequences. Potter even invented some pretty transparent on the fly excuse about Podmore having asked him to be there for Draco, as to make sure that nothing bad happened, which Snape fortunately saw right through. As if! Potter should have known already that the bad things tended to happen to Draco whenever he was there.

If he didn’t count Snape's constant nagging on his nerves, Draco had been actually doing all right for the last few Potter-free days. He was taking the potion Podmore had prescribed him regularly, and tried not to ponder about the bizarre images flashing before his eyes, or the even odder moods he found himself in from time to time – just like Potter had advised him to. His attempts to ignore those wretched memories were a full success. He didn’t need Potter now to remind him of everything that he had made such a great effort to forget.

Snape didn’t let himself be taken for a fool either. He might have had a few glasses already, because he began to yell at Potter about how he should take care of Draco instead of Snape.

"I am trying to do just that," Potter said with a grimace that might have been the result of Snape leaning too close to him and sprinkling his glasses with spittle.

"Try it somewhere else! You're not paying me enough to put up with your presence as well! I'll be here with your potions in a moment. You know where the door is."

With that, Snape stormed out of the living room.

Draco frowned.

"Potter?"

"Yeah?" It seemed that Potter only now noticed Draco's presence. He jumped a bit and turned to face him.

"What did Snape mean by you paying him? What are you paying him for?"

Potter gave a nervous laugh and messed up his hair even more by raking his fingers through the thick mane.

"He meant the potion I have to take for... you know... I buy it from him." Draco definitely did not think that a blushing Potter together with his dishevelled hair looked adorable. That was another Draco from another time, and it was high time he learned to differentiate between past and present.

"Why, what did you think?" Potter asked a few seconds later, seemingly perplexed.

"Never mind." Draco shook his head. For a moment there, he had the sinking feeling that Potter gave money to Snape for keeping Draco. But that was just plain silliness. If Snape had wanted compensation, he would have told Draco. He most certainly wasn't the type to be shy about making his demands, and Draco was fully capable of paying him.

"Here you are, Potter." Snape was back with a small wooden box similar to the one Draco had seen in Potter's office in the Ministry. He gave it to Potter, and then his glance drifted to Draco.

"Why are you still here? I thought you'd be packed by now," he said crossly.

"Snape, don't do this. You know I can't take Malfoy to my flat. Even if it hadn't been destroyed, I already have a buyer for it. I am currently staying with the Weasleys…"

"Then go to a hotel, what do I care?"

"And what about the Vow? Shouldn’t it be your job to protect Malfoy?" And just how did Potter know about that? Draco wondered, but the question was still valid.

Snape snorted derisively, not showing any signs of surprise.

"That's just it. I am protecting him: from myself. Because if I have to endure him for any longer, I swear I'll tell him my opinion, undiluted. And I won't care about what Podmore says or what Lucius did to him…"

Apparently, Snape didn’t care right then either. He hadn’t realised that he had said something that he shouldn’t have, but Potter abruptly snapped his head to look into the direction Draco had been standing in. Had been, because now he suddenly found himself on the floor. He heard running footsteps, but his eyelids had already drifted closed without him noticing, and there was the splitting headache and the nausea again, thankfully without the suffocating this time. His body was half-lifted up by two strong arms and he was enveloped into the faint but unique scent of Potter that he hadn’t realised he was able to recognise until then.

"For Merlin's sake! You're acting like he killed your puppy or something! I thought you liked him better than you like me. What's with the sudden…" That was the last thing Draco heard from Potter before the too familiar darkness descended upon him again.

He was back in the Manor, sitting charmed to a chair, with a slowly creeping trepidation seeping into each of his pores. His father was standing in front of him, but he wasn’t looking at Draco. His wand was pointed at the Pensieve before him, which contained Draco's freshly extracted memories about the last few weeks – or more precisely, what the Dark Lord was supposed to believe were his memories.

His father's wand was slowly stirring the whitish substance; he was staring at the quickly changing images that were drifting onto the surface. What was he waiting for? Draco frowned at the apparent indecision reflected in his father's slightly hunched frame. He was now supposed to bring the Pensieve to the Dark Lord, not dither over it. His father was no Legilimens and, as expected, he valued Draco too much to give him over to his master for interrogation. Draco needed him to go straight to the Dark Lord for the plan to work. And then, if it worked, Potter would win and he and his parents would be free.

He tried to mentally propel his father into action. Now that the memories were safely stored in the Pensieve, Lucius' only logical choice was to give it to the Dark Lord. So why was he still there? If not…

Realisation hit Draco like an Expelliarmus Charm in the chest. He wanted to shout at his father, to not do what he thought Lucius was about to do, but he was just a second too late. In the next instant, his father's face sank under the surface of the shining liquid and Draco's voice wasn't reaching him anymore.

It must have been only ten minutes, not more, when his father straightened up with a glint of dangerous realization in his eyes. He turned towards Draco as if he saw a stranger instead of his son, horror and disgust clearly written all over his face. Draco hadn't intended for his father to see the contents of that Pensieve. They hadn't planned it that way. But now it seemed that he had no other choice but to tell him about the plan if he wanted to get out of this situation unharmed.

Draco spent long hours trying to explain everything. He listed all the reasons; he practically betrayed the plan without having any guarantee for his father's trustworthiness. He had no other choice. But it still had not worked. His father hadn't believed him, however Draco had pleaded for him to listen. The enchantment on those memories had proved to be too strong for Draco to break with mere words. Of course, it should have been if it was supposed to work on the Dark Lord. Damn Granger for her expertise! Damn his father for not doing as expected. Why did he have to look into the Pensieve?

Draco was left alone. He heard his parents' voices drifting towards him from the room next to the one he was confined in. His father sounded panicked and his mother tired to use the voice of reason.

"Narcissa, I know it is not like Draco to go and then do something like… this. He wouldn't willingly abandon his family…"

"Lucius, you were the one who sent him away."

"That's not what I'm talking about and you know it. He was supposed to go and infiltrate their ranks, but that doesn't mean he had to switch sides."

"He is here now. He didn’t switch sides."

"Narcissa, you still don't understand. You didn’t see what I have seen and didn’t hear him denying it. I know we haven't raised him to become a… that's too vile for words. I don't even want to think of my son like that. If he were in his right mind, he wouldn’t want to either. And that's exactly my point."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn’t it obvious? Dumbledore, the old fraud, was still a powerful wizard and had a crooked mind. I would bet my title on it that he had warded his precious Chosen One with some kind of curse that works on enemies that get too close to him. Draco is affected by some kind of curse, which slowly turned his head and made him care about Potter. I know that he wouldn’t do such despicable things on his own. And I don't blame him for anything. If someone is to blame, then it is that old coot. Or it is I, because it was my idea to set him on such a dangerous task…"

"It wouldn’t have hurt either if he had known about it, either. But now it isn’t the time for accusations. Calm down, Lucius! You won't accomplish anything by panicking."

"Of course, I know that."

"And don't blame yourself either. What's happened has happened already. We can't make it undone. He is going to get over it. He just needs some time with us, far from that… boy." His mother was too well brought up to use swear words, but she could make ordinary words sound like she was swearing just as well.

His father sighed. There was a pause while they were most likely engrossed in their thoughts, and Draco's bad feeling increased with every second. Finally, his father spoke again.

"I'll see what I can discover about this curse. And I swear I'll bring back our Draco, whatever it may cost."

"Lucius!" His mother suddenly sounded worried.

"Yes?"

"Please, don’t hurt him!"

"Narcissa, if that is what I have to do in order to break this curse, then I will hurt him. Trust me when I say he wouldn’t have had it any differently. If you know him, you know that as well."

Draco didn’t hear what his mother's answer was.

TBC

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Chapter 31: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

5. Jun 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I’m not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I’m not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don’t like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies.

Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kathleen and Vaughn

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Chapter Thirty-One

After the dream about his parents, Draco woke up, still dazed. He was too disoriented to even be able to find his bed, and was distantly aware that Potter was touching him again. Thank Merlin, he wasn't sentient enough for the curse – of which he now knew was courtesy of his own father – to kick in. He could make out the sounds of a mighty row between Potter and Snape; he suspected that he, himself, was the cause of it. At the end of the argument, Snape retired to his workroom and banged the door shut behind him, while Potter carried Draco into his bedroom, put him down onto his bed and started packing his meagre belongings while trying to answer the questions Draco directed at him. The fact that, after passing out in the middle of it and waking up sometime later with Potter telling him that they would be going now, Draco didn't remember anymore what the conversation was about indicated that his questions mustn't have been especially lucid.

Draco half expected the reappearance of the red couch again, but Potter just shrunk his trunks in order to be able to pocket them, made Draco stand up, and Apparated the two of them out of the house.

Draco didn't remember the arrival, so he concluded that he had most likely passed out again. What he remembered, though, made him cringe. He knew he had the dream about Potter and their flight from the Dark Lord again, complete with all the little details he would have forgotten if he had the choice. He had been still half inside that dream, and when he had seen Potter, he must have confused him with his dreams, because he remembered doing things he would never have done had he been in his right mind, like clinging to him and saying things that would have been better remaining unsaid. Now that he recalled his face, Potter seemed to have been uneasy with providing Draco with the cuddle he had demanded, but – after having tried disentangling himself and almost provoking a temper tantrum with his action – he had most likely thought it better to play along. Draco now wished he had just left him there on his own.

To add to his humiliation, he now remembered that he hadn’t been alone with Potter at the time, either. The Mudblood had been there for a short while, but it was long enough for her to witness Draco making a clown out of himself. He couldn’t recall what she and Potter had been conversing about, but the memories of the growing alarm on her face and the kindness in her voice when she had spoken to Draco, as if he had been a child who needed to be reassured, were a good indication of the state of mind he must have been in. Then they had given him something to drink, most likely some kind of Sleeping Potion, because after that he had almost instantly dropped off again - thank Merlin, because as he remembered, he had been just a hair's breadth away from tackling Potter and snogging the living daylights out of him, Granger's presence be damned.

Upon waking up the next morning, Draco found himself in a dingy little room, on top of a narrow bed. He had expected to spot Potter lying on his customary couch, and was prepared to deny everything that had most likely taken place last night; therefore, he was surprised when instead of Potter, he was confronted with Podmore standing above him and sporting a foreboding scowl. He didn’t know whether he should be pleased or alarmed about Potter's absence.

"I'm glad you're finally back," Podmore told him. "Have you been taking the potion I left for you regularly?"

Draco blinked up at him, still a bit groggily.

"Yes, I have."

The Healer nodded grimly.

"That's what I've been afraid of. You forgetting was too much to hope for. This means that the situation is worse than I expected."

"Am I or my child in danger?" Draco asked. He didn’t like his voice; it sounded altogether too frightened and small for his taste.

Podmore regarded him with a scrutinising look. Then, he seemed to have decided upon something,

because he lowered his wand, pulled a chair close to the bed and settled on it, as if he was preparing to give a longer explanation. Draco pushed himself into a sitting position on top of the bed cover. He was still dressed in his robes, which probably meant that he hadn’t been out for very long.

"For now, both of you seem to be all right," Podmore began, but then he stopped and cleared his throat. "Look, Draco. I don’t want to scare you, but I don't think it would do any good for your nerves if I hid the truth. It seems that whatever had started this process, it won't stop until this curse on you is broken for good. Actually, that wouldn’t be such a bad thing – the mind healing itself with the help of the wizard or witch's own magic is the best way for recovering from mental traumas of this kind – had it not been for your pregnancy."

"So what is going to happen now?" Draco asked with trepidation.

"I think you should submit yourself to a more thorough examination regarding this curse."

Draco didn’t waste any time agreeing. "All right. I am ready whenever you are." He made as if to stand up, but Podmore held out a hand to stop him.

"I meant in St. Mungo's."

That wasn’t what Draco expected to hear.

"Aren't you qualified to treat maladies of this nature?" Draco shuddered at the thought of what would happen if he had to go to the hospital.

"That's not it." Podmore regarded him with a slight uncertainty. "Actually, the removal and treatment of Dark curses is one of the fields I specialise in. But you might want to consider a second opinion." But that would mean, Draco thought, that Cyrus might learn about his condition, too. It might even get into the papers, what with the suddenly increased public interest in the Malfoy name. And Draco really didn’t want to give his family a new reason to disown his child as well.

"I'd rather keep this issue out of the public eye. I'm sure you understand what I'm talking about."

"As you wish," Podmore said, but the glint in his eyes indicated that he hadn't expected Draco to answer any differently in the first place. "In that case, I have several other examinations to conduct on you, but apart from that, I suggest that we let nature take its course and help out a bit when it is needed."

"And that means?" Draco didn’t have the patience for word games right now.

"That we encourage your repressed memories to come out on their own. We will start with small things, so when another memory is freed, you don't lose consciousness. If it is too much in one go, we will have another potion ready for you, which will cause a temporary loss of your short term memory. I know, I know." Podmore held out a hand to stop Draco before he could complain. "I know how it sounds, but even if it has the same effect as the curse, at least the potion is controlled, and prevents your magic from taking your healing process to the point where it could damage your child."

"Looks like you had time to think it through," Draco scoffed, but he couldn’t very well argue with Podmore.

"That's right."

"So what did you mean when you said we'll start with small things?" Draco frowned.

"Well, since your memories seem to be missing mostly from the time you spent with the Order at Grimmauld Place, I thought that recreating those circumstances around you might prod some of them to resurface."

"Does that mean I have to go to this Grimmauld Place?" Draco frowned. He remembered the name as the address of a property that stood on the list of his inheritance from his mother's side. Had the Dark Lord known that the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix could be found so near the house of one

of his Death Eaters, the flow of the war would have most likely taken another turn.

"No. The building was destroyed during the war. But some of the people who had been living there at the time as well could move in here instead. So you'll be surrounded by them and that might reawaken the recollections about your past interactions with them."

Draco shook his head. Suddenly, the idea didn't seem that good at all.

"But do I even know those people?"

"If you don't, then it will be just like the time you first arrived there," Podmore said with a smirk.

"Were you there?" Draco asked, suddenly realising that it must have been that way.

Podmore nodded. Perhaps that explained why the Healer called him by his given name.

"But why would they want to help me?" Draco tried to fish out more excuses so he wouldn't have to do this, even though deep down he knew that it would be for his own good. "And where exactly is 'here'?"

"They will help you as a favour to Harry. And since we couldn't get the headquarters, we took the next best place: The Burrow."

So Draco was back in The Burrow, and as he later found out, the arrangement was less temporary than he would have had it. From the looks of it, Snape had carried out his threat and had actually evicted him from his house. At least, Draco's disjointed memories, confirmed by his packed trunks standing cluttered on top of each other next to the wall on the far side of the room, seemed to indicate that that was what had happened.

As it turned out, he got the room that had once belonged to Percy Weasley, who was now spending his

fifteen year long sentence in Azkaban, convicted of treachery. He had got off pretty lightly, considering he could have been punished with a life sentence or the Dementor's Kiss; the only reason had been that he hadn't really known what he had been assisting with, he had only done what he had been told to do – as Draco had the pleasure to learn from an overly emotional Mrs. Weasley at dinnertime. At any rate, what Draco had deduced from the explanation was that Weasley wouldn't need his room back for another good five years. Not that Draco planned to stay that long, mind. He wanted to get his own place as soon as his health allowed.

For some reason Draco couldn't quite grasp, Mrs. Weasley treated him as if he were now an official member of her family – which, considering the fact that he was about to get married to Potter, wasn't as far a shot as Draco would have liked it to be.

After Podmore's explanation about re-creating the environment that he had no memories of for the sake of his mental healing, Draco thought he would have to endure the constant company of all of the Weasleys and former Order members. To his great relief though, it turned out that it wasn't the case. He had only to put up with the ones who had already lived there: Mrs Weasley, the girl who introduced herself as Ginevra Weasley (Draco wouldn't have recognised her if she hadn't; she looked nothing alike the little girl who had cursed him with the Bat-Bogey Hex in school), Potter and the older brother who had been there the last time – Draco learned his name was Charlie. Apparently, he had taken a longer leave from his job as dragon handler after having sustained a serious injury. Mrs. Weasley had also persuaded Podmore to temporarily move into the room that had once belonged to the twins, so he could monitor Draco's condition round the clock. Draco was too scared of what it implied that they were prepared to go to such lengths to even protest against the fact that they had arranged all this above his head.

The Burrow wouldn't have been large enough for everyone to move there, even temporarily, so the rest of the crowd would only visit at regular intervals. Draco wasn't looking forward to the scheduled get-togethers at mealtimes – with people whom he barely knew, and who were most likely in the deal because of Potter. Though he was sure that the promised free food was one of the reasons why they agreed to help him.

The first of such 'therapy sessions' took place right on the first evening after Draco's arrival. Mrs. Weasley had cooked such a large supper that it rivalled the amount of food getting dished out in Hogwarts per meal. Some of the men had magically enlarged the kitchen in order for everyone to fit in comfortably. Draco was of course familiar with magically enlarged space, but he was still taken aback when he first saw the table – almost as large as the house tables in Hogwarts – and a neat row of chairs lined up on the two sides squeezed into the kitchen of The Burrow, which didn't look any larger than it had

previously been. He paid dearly for being unable to contain his momentary shock: Mrs. Weasley noticed him standing there, frozen to the spot, and ordered him to help set the table.

Draco was so startled by this casual display of disrespect for his social status that his hands moved instinctively and grabbed the pile of plates and napkins that were thrust into his arms, and then he just stood there, dumbfounded. He only just opened his mouth to utter an indignant objection: how dare she just order him around? Even if it had not been beneath his status to do the work of a house-elf, he was still a guest. If this was how Weasleys treated their guests, then she had had no right to reprimand him for his alleged rudeness the last time he had been there. But then all thoughts of protesting slipped from his mind at the words of Ginevra – she insisted he call her 'Ginny' – directed at him.

"Don't just gape around, Malfoy," she said with malice in her voice. "I know it was a long time ago, but at your age, you ought to know where the serviettes go."

"Of course I know!" he snarled back, recognising too late that he had fallen right into her trap. For a brief moment, he contemplated just slamming down the plates in his hand and strutting out, offended, but then he remembered that he was now living here – temporarily at least. It wouldn't do good to bring the wrath of the Weasleys upon himself. Who knew what they were capable of? And it wasn't as if he had anything better to do, anyway. For now, he yielded to the situation, but that didn't mean he had surrendered completely. He decided to show them exactly how serviettes and cutlery were supposed to be ordered at the table of better wizarding families.

Dinner went much more smoothly than Draco had expected, based upon the picture Podmore had painted for him. He had been seated between Potter and Ginny Weasley. Actually, it hadn't been so bad, since Potter had been talking to the Weasel sitting on his other side almost through the whole meal, and the few times he had to interact with Draco, he seemed just as uncomfortable as Draco was.

On his other side, Ginny was involved in an animated talk with a blonde woman Draco was shocked numb to have recognised as Fleur Delacour. She had put on quite some weight since he had last seen her at the Triwizard Tournament, to put it mildly. Actually, she now strongly resembled Mrs. Weasley, even down to her temper, with her rosy cheeks and the litter of small redheads trailing after her. Next to her and opposite of Draco, sat her husband – another Weasley – who looked a bit like a hardened, aging professional Gobstones player with long, silvery scars marring his face, a dragon-tooth dangling from one earlobe and his long hair tied into a neat ponytail but already getting thinner around the forehead. The picture was ruined, though, by the jovial look in his eyes when he shot a glance now and then down the

table, where their numerous offspring were seated among their friends.

The people sitting around Draco, most likely having the meal of their lives, were quite content to chat among themselves. The most frequently audible line was "Just like old times, isn't it?" No one really paid attention to Draco, except Mrs. Weasley, who took care that he got enough to eat and slapped his hand away from the wine bottle when Draco reached for it absently, out of habit. The only other people that noticed his presence were Podmore, who spared him a glance now and then while catching up with his old pals from the Order; and Mad-Eye Moody, whose magical eye swirled around the table regularly, but halted on Draco more frequently than what could have been explained as coincidence.

Draco thought that this kind of behaviour must have matched the atmosphere that had greeted him during his first few days with the Order perfectly.

Draco had hoped he would get to talk to Snape, too. He knew that the Potions master had been in the Order before killing Dumbledore, and since he had been declared innocent after the end of the war, he would have been most likely invited. He had several questions for the man, starting with the most obvious: just why had he felt the need to get rid of Draco like that? The second was a more complicated issue. If his casually dropped comments were any indication, Snape had known exactly what Draco had learnt only now, namely what his father had done to him.

But if that was true, why hadn't he tried to lift the spell off Draco? He would have had several opportunities in the past, even before Draco got himself into this unfortunate predicament. His best guess was that Snape hadn't done anything because he obviously shared his father's opinion about Draco being involved with Potter – if not because he was prejudiced against homosexuality, but because he still hated Potter's guts. Potter had to pay him a lot if he was actually willing to brew potions for him and not take the chance to slip poison into them.

"Potter!" Draco struck out one of his elbows and poked Potter between the ribs none-too-gently.

Potter winced and turned towards him with irritation that slowly morphed into something else right in front of Draco's eyes, as he continued to stare at him. Only, he couldn't place it. The most he was able to tell was that Potter was feeling uncomfortable around Draco, but now that he was thinking about it, he had every right to act like that, after what Draco had done the previous night. It was strange, though. Draco would have thought that Potter would be all over him, now that he didn't have to fear Snape's

watchful eyes. Instead of that, he had barely spoken to Draco. He had only greeted him from afar, and then went off to do his alleged chores around the house.

"What is it, Malfoy? Or did you just want to memorise my features?" Potter snapped, and then he abruptly turned red, like a Weasley. The strange phenomenon saved Draco from the same reaction, as he realised that the momentary lapse in his attention could have been mistaken for ogling Potter.

"Of course not, Potter. Don't flatter yourself. I just wanted to know why Snape isn't here," Draco explained haughtily. "I bet you didn't even think of sending him an invitation."

"That's where you're wrong, Malfoy," the Weasel next to Potter cut in without having been asked. At least he had already swallowed what had been in his mouth before starting to talk.

"So why isn't he here?" Draco ignored him and continued to speak to Potter, who just shrugged.

"Don't know. He said he didn't want to come," was the answer he got. And just like that, Potter turned his back on him once more. Draco felt so frustrated at being ignored like that that he purposely didn't even look in the direction of Potter again until dinner ended.

After everything edible was gone from the table, the majority of the guests stood up, thanked their host for the hospitality and went on with their business. Draco noticed that a few women remained in The Burrow and settled in the living room, conversing about raising children and babies to be born soon. He spotted Katie Bell sitting among the Weasley women (which now also included Padma Patil and Fleur Delacour) with a child not older than a year on her lap. Looks like old Rita Skeeter had got it right after all with the affair between her and Wood. Draco wondered whether it was still going on or if it had ended, but he didn't dare stay there for much longer, for the fear that his presence would be noticed and he would be required to join the little gathering. Now he had no other choice but to sneak up the stairs and retreat into his room.

On his way though, he stumbled into Potter coming out of the bathroom. Potter seemed to be on edge when he spotted Draco coming in his direction. Did he expect Draco to pounce on him and declare his everlasting love? Draco scowled. He cringed at the remembrance of how close he had been to actually do that the last night, but he hadn't been in his right mind then; even Potter should have guessed that

much. Nonetheless, Draco didn’t fancy having to live with him under one roof with the air being this strained between them, when it had clearly originated in a misunderstanding. He felt that he should make it clear once and for all that Potter shouldn’t expect more than casual partnership from Draco, even if they had to marry and live together in order to raise their child.

"Potter! I want to talk to you!" Draco stepped in front of the other man before he could walk by him in the narrow corridor.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Potter seemed suspicious. Draco refrained from rolling his eyes.

"I want to apologise for making myself a nuisance for you yesterday." Draco barely managed to get those words past his lips. Apologising to Potter, what was the world turning into! Alas, he had no other choice if he wanted Potter to take him seriously.

"It's okay, it wasn’t really," Potter answered, then he turned red and started stammering, "...your fault. I meant it wasn’t your fault."

"No?" Draco was confused. Of course, it was Lucius' fault, but he hadn’t told that Potter, so how could he know? Or had he talked in his sleep again? "Whose fault is it then?" he asked, suddenly suspicious.

"Er… I can't tell you that part yet," was Potter's answer. An awfully convenient brush off, if Draco was asked.

"All right," he said slowly, trying to think of a way in which he could gently steer the conversation to tell Potter that despite all appearances, he wasn’t interested, so he didn’t have to, figuratively speaking, stuff his turban full with garlic to ward him off. When he couldn’t think of one, he decided that the direct approach should still work.

"Potter, I assure you that when I'm in my right mind, you don't have to be afraid of me wanting to get into your pants. I swear I won't molest you, and if I do, I think it would be the best for the both of us if you just knocked me out with a spell so I can't continue. Understood?"

"Er… right," Potter answered, somewhat bewildered.

"You can go now," Draco commanded. Potter now lifted his brows.

"Good night, Malfoy," he said, turning away from him and in the direction of the stairs, when Draco got a whiff from his aftershave, most likely freshly applied, and suddenly he felt as if he weren't only there, but, also at another place and at another time. He observed with growing alarm, as his arm reached out – without consulting about the matter with his mind first – and grabbed Potter's arm in order to pull him closer to his body. And then he licked his lips and, leaning forward, placed a lingering kiss on those tempting lips in front of him. It even smacked when it ended.

"Night, Harry," he heard himself saying in a tone that was as removed from platonic as it could be.

As soon as his fingers let go of Potter's shirt sleeve, Draco's mind slipped back into his right time just as suddenly as it had gone backwards, and he realised at once what exactly he had done. Barely seconds after promising Potter that there would be nothing between the two of them!

"What have I told you about knocking me out!" Draco yelled at the apparently traumatised man who had been on the receiving end of his 'affections' just a few seconds ago, and then, leaving him standing there, broke out in a run in the direction of his bedroom.

TBC

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Chapter 32: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

21. Jun 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Vaughn.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

During the following week Draco managed to more or less find his balance and try to fit in, in which the regular schedule his life was now forced into helped a great deal. It was always waking up, getting his check-up from Podmore while he was waiting for everyone else to finish their business in the bathroom, eating breakfast, having a nice soak in the tub, then – as much as he hated that part – helping Mrs. Weasley in preparing lunch, eating lunch with the whole Weasley gang, Potter and alternately people from the Order he was supposed to have been living together with, having a nap while the house was silent because all the little children were also put down to sleep, then having to occupy himself until it was time again to start with the preparations for dinner.

One occupation he found himself indulging in far too frequently was to think about the memories his mind had chosen to reveal to him. According to the last one, it was his father who had placed that spell on Draco, but that wasn’t the part he felt uneasy about. On the contrary, with his present mind, he would have perhaps asked his father to Obliviate him, had he not done it on his own. The thing that

bothered Draco was why he had not asked for it then, or more exactly, why had he even done what he had?

He understood that everything had begun when he had learnt that his parents had died. All right, he was still able to imagine all too well why he had not wanted to stay under the Dark Lord's wings without having his parents act as a buffer to shield Draco from his fits of pique. He did remember the weeks he had spent living barely better than a caged animal after he had fled Hogwarts together with Snape at the end of his sixth year.

He had only himself to blame, though. Snape had advised him not to go to the Dark Lord to report until the Dark Lord's ire had calmed down. Draco had thought that the death of Dumbledore and the fact that he had succeeded in letting Death Eaters into Hogwarts would be sufficient compensation for his 'failure'. That was where he had been wrong. The Dark Lord had been searing with rage at Draco for having exposed his allegiances openly, and what had been worse, he had also caused Snape to reveal himself, even if the end result had been the death of the only wizard alive the Dark Lord had feared. Instead of the praise Draco had expected from his Lord, he got a Crucio as his reward for his efforts.

He had taken it in stride, thinking that after he had been thrown out of the 'audience chamber' cursed unconscious, the Dark Lord had got his compensation and it would be over and done with. He had been wrong. The fact that his father had been still in Azkaban had meant that Draco had been without the protection of an adult Death Eater, and once the Dark Lord got a taste of how easy it was to torture him, he got into the habit and had summoned Draco whenever he had wanted to give a demonstration or just felt like it. It had gone as far as Draco having had to beg protection from Cyrus, whom he had thought a coward because he never joined the Dark Lord, but in retrospect, Draco had to revise his judgement about his cousin. Not that being the guest of his rival within the family would have placed him into a better situation.

Cyrus had exploited the opportunity to the fullest. Thank Merlin, Draco had never been easy to intimidate; otherwise, he would have found himself without his title and inheritance within a short time. As it were, Cyrus had only succeeded in wringing out several short term contracts out of him and to get his hands on several ancient Malfoy artifacts. He had lived under the 'protection' of his cousin for five months, only leaving the mansion to answer the summons of the Dark Lord that came regularly. Fortunately, Draco had been too young and inexperienced to be assigned with tasks to carry out on his own, save the slave work of brewing medical potions for his fellow Death Eaters, injured when they had occasionally met unexpected resistance.

Then the Dark Lord had broken into Azkaban and freed all the prisoners willing to join him, with Draco's father in the front. Draco had thought everything would be all right, only to find himself in that desperate situation mere months later, which had led to his releasing Potter and fleeing with him.

At this point he recalled the other cause of his dilemma: the dreams about him being together with Potter, which may or may not have been real. Draco had tried to find logic in what had happened in them and why those things had happened so much that he himself didn't know what to think. He only knew that they didn't make any sense. There was no way he would have fallen for Potter, even if he had been forced to side with him because his life had been at stake. The one just didn't translate into the other.

To his heart though, they seemed real, and what was worse, they made him remember of times when he felt different… not alone. And that last part was what hit him the most. Never before had it occurred to him that he might have been lonely. But now, being able to easily recall a time he hadn't been, it was suddenly glaringly obvious. It made his marriage with Pansy seem painfully meaningless. And, had the issue with his heir not been there, he would have lived his whole life without even realising it, never knowing what it was missing. Perhaps he would have been happier like that. Now it just seemed cruel that he should find something worth yearning after in something so inappropriate for a Malfoy.

After wrestling with the attempt of banishing the feelings that shouldn't have to do anything with Potter in Draco Malfoy's mind and failing, he could imagine only too well why he was so desperate for his father not to take the memories from him. But there had been another reason as well, which, in the efforts of freeing himself of Potter's ghost, almost slipped by his attention. He had been concerned about some kind of plan, in which those memories enclosed in the Pensieve played a major role. Now that made sense. Draco was now firmly certain that 'the plan' was the logical explanation to everything.

Unfortunately, the flashback didn't elaborate upon what exactly that plan had entailed. It could have been anything, starting from Draco having been fed a love potion to the reasoning of his father: that his unhealthy attachment to Potter had been a product of a spell Dumbledore had cast on the ex-Gryffindor. Draco was sure that Potter was privy to the information, only that the man had a thing for keeping secrets from Draco. Come to think of it, he hadn't been sure what exactly the memories in the Pensieve contained either, only that they had been extracted out of his mind and had been about his dalliance with Potter. No wonder his father had almost flown off the handle upon having been confronted with them. That must have been the reason why Draco had been so insistent that Lucius not look into the Pensieve.

And because it had been intended for the Dark Lord to see. Unfortunately, that had been the only part of

'the plan' Draco managed to recall. He didn’t even know what it had been supposed to accomplish, whose plan it had been and whether or not, in the end, it had achieved its goals. The only conclusion Draco managed to deduce from it was that this must have been the last thing that had happened before he had suddenly found himself standing before the altar and watching Pansy being led in his direction through the narrow aisle. The preparations for the marriage had to have been conducted in a hurry – his family wasn’t even religious.

When Draco was fed up with trying to find some sense in the past, he occupied himself with making an account of the properties and vaults that remained to him. It was a depressingly short list, not the wealth he had been brought up with and had expected to live in until the end of his days, but it would have to do. Most of the Black fortune was in land and real estates that had been empty for a long time now, only running costs to decimate his already meagre pile of Galleons. There was only one vault in Gringotts that was now listed as his, which was a bit suspicious.

If his memory didn't deceive him (again), there should have been at least three of them. He remembered his having seen them with his mother when he had been eleven. It had been the first time Draco had been allowed to sit in the cart, and since his father hadn't been with them at the time, his mother hadn't denied him the fun of riding along while she had conducted her annual checkups. She had distrusted goblins on principle. Now, seeing the report that Gringotts had sent him per his request, Draco wasn't so sure anymore that she had been misguided in her beliefs. He decided to visit the wizarding bank as soon as Podmore allowed him out of the house, even if he would have to suffer Potter's presence as his babysitter.

Speaking about Potter, it seemed as if his soon-to-be husband had avoided him like the plague. Draco didn't understand it. On one side, had he been in Potter's place, he would have been alarmed by Draco's sudden displays of affection – even though it hadn't happened again after the affair in the corridor. But that was Draco, and he wasn’t a Queer like Potter. Right? Potter had only too clearly demonstrated in the past that he was neither averse to engaging in sexual relationships with men, nor to Draco's person specifically. Had that been a ruse designed to deceive Snape or Draco? If it had, what reason would have Potter had for it? Draco couldn't think of any that made the least bit of sense, besides him wanting to be a father to Draco's child. But Potter was too honest and not sneaky enough to carry out such a show.

If he had any doubts remaining, Draco's hypothesis was confirmed by overhearing a conversation between Potter and the Weasley girl. (Draco may have been forced to call her 'Ginny' to her face, but that didn't mean he automatically regarded her close enough to call her on her given name in his own mind. It sounded altogether too informal, and, if he had his choice, he had no intentions to deepen their acquaintance to the level of familiarity at which he would have contemplated using it. Especially not

after witnessing that scene.)

Draco didn't know how the discussion started out; he happened to cross the hallway and only stopped because he heard his name from Potter's mouth spoken in that disgusted tone that made his heart stand still and then flutter with dread – for a reason he wasn't yet prepared to examine deeper, but he was sure that he could feel the tang of those memories in the emotion. He didn't decide consciously on an action, his feet brought him closer to the opening to the living room on their own, his back pressed to the wall and his ear turned in the direction of which the voices came from.

"…no, I do not mind… how did you put it? Malfoy's 'demonstrative urges'," Potter sneered. "In fact, I vastly prefer to be touched by him than to fuck strangers in cheap hotels. And, if the past three years weren't enough proof, I can spell it out to you that I certainly prefer it over…"

"I know!" Weasley hurried to cut in. She sounded a bit anxious and desperate, as if she had expected another tone. "I know, Harry! Merlin, I didn't mean it like that." But Draco suspected – just like Potter, from the likes of it – that she had meant exactly like that. That was the moment when Draco suddenly remembered that she had once been engaged to Potter, and even if Potter wasn't interested in her (or just in her gender generally) anymore, it seemed that she hadn't yet entirely given up on the notion.

Not that she presented any danger to Draco – there were too many reasons as to why Potter would never even consider changing his mind and trying to worm out of the marriage – that Draco knew with his rational mind. Still, the fact that she – or anyone, for that matter – had the audacity to lay claim on something that he considered his, and doing it behind his back to boot, made him sear with rage. Fortunately, the potion he had taken only a half hour previously helped him to keep calm and think rationally before he went and insulted – or worse – one of the people on whose hospitality he was currently depending on. It made him remember that he was a Slytherin and there was no reason for him to act like a Gryffindor, even if he was among Gryffindors.

That was why instead of confronting Weasley, he decided to wait for Potter to return into his room and ask him some questions. He was just about to follow him up the stairs when the fire in the fireplace in the living room suddenly flared, and out of the flames emerged none other than Snape. After looking around, he spotted Potter's retreating back and went to follow him up the stairs without giving notice to anyone about his arrival.

Draco quickly adapted his plan to the new situation, deciding on the spot that he wouldn't let Snape get out of this house without having spoken to him first. He waited until Snape, too, disappeared on the first landing, and then stepped out of his hiding place and scurried after him. Fortunately, he already knew which of the steps were loose or creaked particularly loudly when he stepped on them, and was able to avoid making noise while he followed Snape to Potter's door.

He contemplated about going right in, but then he decided to let Snape finish his business with Potter first, while he stayed outside for a few seconds, listening. Perhaps he would gain some of the closely guarded information about himself, which, Draco was certain both Potter and Snape were aware of.

The door had been carefully closed, but when Draco put his ear to the wood, he could hear voices, which indicated that no Silencing Charm had been cast on it.

"This is the last batch. I have decided to withdraw into the solitude of my work for a while, which means that I don't intend to waste my time on you and your pathetic potions anymore." He heard Snape saying, his voice dimmed by the door, but Draco could still hear the disdain for Potter that it was soaked with.

"But then how am I supposed to get it?" Potter's voice sounded incredulous.

"What do I care?" Snape sneered. "Find someone else to brew it for you."

"Do you know someone else…" Potter couldn't even finish that sentence. Of course, Draco had known beforehand what Snape's answer would be. Potions masters were typically suspicious and jealous of each other's work and achievements. They guarded their secrets closely, burying their wisdom in thick tomes only to be released after their deaths, or when they needed the money for further experiments.

"No, I don't. Why don't you ask around? I'm sure the saviour of the wizarding world wouldn't be rejected. You could put up an advertisement in the Prophet. And before you ask, no, I won't give you the recipe. It isn't patented yet."

There was silence, then a sigh coming through the door, most likely from Potter.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he asked, defeated. "I know you don't like me, but wasn’t I paying enough? If you wanted more, you only had to say…"

"You know exactly why, don't even pretend you have no clue!" Snape hissed. Draco could tell that he was really incensed about something apparently Potter had done to him. Not that Snape had the reputation of a very responsible person. He usually only cared for himself – at least since both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord – the only two people who had been able to instil fear in Snape – had died. It wasn’t surprising that Snape had had his hand in both of those deaths.

"You know it wasn’t my fault!" Potter said petulantly. "You are familiar with the concept of keeping other people's secrets, or aren’t you?"

"You could have at least warned me!" Snape snarled.

"I tried. You did not listen. But why would that be anything new...?"

"You could have been more specific."

"And why should I have been? Your private life is not my concern. It isn’t as if she was leading you around. And even if she was, why is that any reason to take out your disappointment on me?"

"I see, you don't understand, Potter. I shouldn’t have expected you to in the first place. Anyhow, whatever the reason, I have the right to make a decision to stop supplying you with the potion. I just gave you one week's worth of it, if you use it sparingly, it will perhaps last longer. It is enough time to find a replacement for me."

"But it isn’t enough time! I… I have to stay here for Draco's sake," Potter protested. Draco's heart gave a lurch at hearing how casually his given name fell from Potter's lips. Apparently, Snape had caught on it, too.

"So it's 'Draco' again? But that's where you're wrong. In my opinion, Mr. Malfoy needs you as much as a pimple on his aristocratic behind."

There was silence after that declaration. Shouldn’t be Potter saying something? Disagreeing with Snape? But wait! Draco shook his head. Why would Draco want him to disagree? Snape was right. He didn’t need Potter.

"If you ask me, Lucius did the right thing when he freed his son from the likes of you," Snape said in a low, disdainful voice. "Too bad the little idiot had to go and get himself in trouble, only to be saddled with you again."

Draco jumped backwards and hid himself behind the staircase leading up to the attic when he heard Snape's heavy steps nearing the door. Just in the right moment, too, because in the next instant, the door opened and the Potions master strode out of the room, not even looking into Draco's direction. But even if he had looked, it was too dark for him notice the hidden corner Draco was holed up in.

He stood there for several seconds, turning over and over in his mind what he had heard just now. He only remembered that he had wanted to talk to Snape when he heard the unmistakable roar coming from the fireplace as the man threw in the Floo powder and then stepped into the fire. It was too late, but never mind, he had heard everything he wanted to ask about.

Potter's door stood still open. There was a periodic shift in the lights and shadows being filtered through it, which indicated that Potter was pacing before his window, even though Draco couldn’t hear his footsteps. Draco decided to make use of the opportunity that had presented itself to him and confront Potter now. He stepped out of his hiding place and entered the room.

Potter's face showed surprise when, after hearing the door clicking closed, he turned around and spotted Draco standing there. Draco looked around a bit. He had never been in Potter's room before, so he wasn’t familiar with the setting. There were no chairs and there was no way Draco would have sat on Potter's bed, so he decided to stay where he was.

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" Potter asked, frowning.

"Don't you worry, I'm not having a flashback right now," Draco sneered, not because Potter looked like he had been actually suspecting that, but to get the upper hand from the start of the conversation.

Potter nodded. To Draco's surprise, after a few minutes pondering, he cast a Locking and a Silencing Charm on the door.

"I suspect you don't want to be overheard," he added as an explanation. Draco was caught unawares by the casual remark, though he managed to control his features. Did that mean Potter knew he had been eavesdropping on his conversations? Or was it just a coincidence that he should use that word?

"That's right, I don't," Draco answered, trying to sound unaffected. "Not that I have any secrets to keep." There. But Potter was either too slow to catch on to the double entendre, or he was a better actor than Draco had thought. He shrugged.

"You know that I have to keep certain things from you. There is no sense in discussing that."

"Then let's discuss something else. I assume that the secrecy doesn't extend to things that don't have to do with my missing memories."

"What do you want to know?" Potter said, crossing his arms in front of his chest. Getting defensive even before there had been any questions asked, Draco observed.

"Firstly," Draco thought it better to start with something neutral, "I remember Granger having been present when you brought me here. But I haven't seen her since that night." Almost a week had passed, and Granger hadn't been at any of the evening meals with the Order. "Do you know anything about whether or not she is making progress regarding the marriage law?"

"She is." Potter uncrossed his arms and walked over to his bed, sitting down on top of the covers. "She

hasn't been here because she is busy trying to win over as many Wizengamot members to the cause as she can before the day on which the votes are cast."

"Does that mean there is a set date already?" That was good news. Draco hadn't expected the Mu… Minister to act that quickly. And was he now censoring his thoughts? The realisation took him aback and procured a weak feeling of déjà vu, but fortunately Potter's next words distracted him before he could have sunk deeper into the unwanted memory trying to break to the surface.

"There is. The sixth of March."

"Damn, she is cutting it close," Draco murmured, pushing away from the door. He was aware that if the Wizengamot couldn't make a decision in a case, it could drag on for months. He didn't have that much time. He needed to get wedded to Potter before his twenty-fifth birthday in June, or preferably sooner, because they had to be already married if his child was to be born his heir. Additionally, he wouldn't have minded if he could get over the formalities and public appearances while his body still bore a resemblance to the human form.

"She is doing everything in her ability, Malfoy," Potter retorted. Draco was so surprised to be yanked out of his inner thoughts that he even forgot to sneer.

"I know she is," he muttered. Damn, it was only the start of February; he would die waiting for it; that is, if living in this house had not already killed him by that time. He sank down next to Potter before he remembered that he hadn’t wanted to sit on the bed. But it would have looked stupid if he stood up just as soon as he sat down, so he had no other choice but to stay put. Another reason was that his legs ached something terrible and it felt good to stretch them out a bit. He hadn't even noticed how tired they felt until they had been relieved of his weight.

"Look, Malfoy, I know time is an issue for you. How long ahead are you?" he asked suddenly, but the question seemed to be rhetorical, because he answered it for himself after a few seconds of thinking. "Four and a half months? There will be enough time. It will be all right." Potter offered his uninvited reassurance. Draco snorted.

"You told me the same before the trial, and look what happened."

"I'm sorry." Did Potter sound actually apologetic? And what was he apologising for? Surely not for Draco having to marry him. At least, Draco would have thought Potter was pleased with that.

"Oh, come off it, hero-boy! As much as I want to blame you for it, it's actually not your fault. You can't just go around and take credit for everything noteworthy happening in my life…" And why was Draco suddenly empathising with him? Oh no! It couldn't be… not again!

"I think I should go now," he said hurriedly. He had a terrifying premonition just where this might lead and he had every intention to flee before his mind had the stupid idea of draping himself all over Potter again and his body started acting on it. As a result of his hurry, he stood up just a bit too quickly, causing the blood to flow southwards and making him light-headed. He didn't know if he should count himself fortunate or unfortunate for Potter's superior reflexes, with which he managed to catch him before he stumbled and fell.

The only thing he knew that the sudden sensation of Potter's presence – his arms, his scent and even his magic – surrounding him started a reaction in his mind, taking hold on the elusive feeling of familiarity he had felt for a second there, and bringing it back full force.

This time it weren't memories he could distinguish. It was not an undeniable urge to act as if he was re-enacting something out of a well known scene. It was only a feeling of intimacy and belonging. It wasn't violent; it didn't flood his mind with aggressive images or alien thoughts. They were just feelings.

Feelings that were so utterly unfamiliar in their familiarity: love, tenderness, desire – physical and emotional alike – and even submission, to a degree. But, again, that didn't add up, Draco's common sense objected to it. No Malfoy would want to submit himself to anyone. These emotions, even if they seemed to be belonging to him, were too irrational to be, and Draco couldn't convince his mind that it was utterly illogical to feel them.

Luckily, the spell didn't last long. The first strong flood of the bubbling mix of emotions confused the hell out of him. But then it was followed by a strange surge of magic flushing his body, which seemed to have a calming effect on him. For a second, the tranquillity almost managed to make him believe that there

was no inherent wrongness in what he was feeling. But only almost, because after having calmed down a bit, he realised a distinct alien nature to the magic, almost as if it had been forced on him.

Soon his senses stopped running amok, even if it took time for Draco to pick up his thoughts and realise where he was. It was a sudden and, to put it mildly, shocking realisation, though he really should have expected it: he was in Potter's arms.

The former all-encompassing belonging suddenly turned into an overwhelming need to get away, together with his mind starting to scream that there was no way that he would want to belong there. That was almost normal. What was not was the sense of longing to stay regardless, lingering under the surface, which accompanied the impulse given by his rational mind.

"Get away from me!" Draco hissed, forcefully disentangling himself from the suffocating embrace. His head was beginning to hurt. He had to get away from Potter as soon as possible.

Potter moved instantly, backing away a step, and didn't say anything when Draco whirled around without another word and made to flee. As soon as he opened the door though, the handle and the whole door with it almost flew out of his hand from a violent shove coming from the other side. There was quite a bit of yelling involved as well. Suddenly, he found himself face to face with Podmore and Mrs. Weasley shouting at the top of their lungs, almost falling through the opening and sweeping away Draco in the process.

"What happened?" The question came from three different mouths at once – only Potter remained silent.

After the first second of silence, in which everyone was waiting for an answer to their question, Podmore moved aside and brandished his wand, then started casting a series of medical spells on Draco in rapid succession.

"Malfoy had another attack," Potter said, observing them with his hands hidden in his trouser pockets and trying to sound nonchalant. Draco didn’t miss the light trembling in his voice though.

"Yes, I knew that." Podmore scowled.

"If you knew, why ask?" Draco snapped, still angry at Potter – or was it rather himself he was annoyed with?

Podmore didn’t comment on the loss of his self-discipline, only continued to cast spells and make grimaces that failed to reassure Draco about his condition.

"How did you know it?" Potter asked the obvious.

"I have put a few Monitoring Charms on Draco so I would know when he feels unwell," Podmore answered perfunctorily, with the majority of his concentration on his spell casting.

"Hm. Fascinating," he called out suddenly, then he unexpectedly turned away from Draco and began to cast spells on Potter, who had his wand in his hand and took a step backwards before he realised that they were not doing any harm to him.

"Harry, when did you last take your potion?" he asked, frowning again.

"Last night." Potter looked sheepish. Draco didn't even notice when the magic in the room was up a few notches anymore, but if that was true, no wonder that Potter had such an effect on him. He gave the man a scornful look.

"It was my last bottle, okay?" Potter tried to make excuses. "But don't worry. Snape brought me some more just now. I'll take one right now."

"Actually, that won't be necessary," Podmore observed.

"Of course it will be," Draco cut in. There was no way he was willing to suffer another black out because

of Potter's carelessness.

"No. I meant that Harry's magic is actually a bit depleted right now," Podmore said and, turning to Potter, cast another spell on him. "Harry, you won't need to take one until tomorrow morning."

"Well, that's good. Snape said he won't make me any more, so I better started using it sparingly," Potter said darkly.

"Why is his magic depleted?" Draco asked in his stead. Typical Gryffindor in that the most important part eludes his attention, Draco thought, sneering inwardly.

"I can only make an educated guess based on both of your examination results," Podmore started, "but I think it is because he was, to put it like that, helping you out, Draco. Were you in physical contact when the attack came?" he asked.

"I stumbled and Potter caught me," Draco answered a little too hurriedly before these people here thought that he was in the habit of 'getting into physical contact' with Potter on a regular basis.

"I see." Podmore nodded. "Well, that answers it all."

"It does not answer anything," Draco snapped. "What does it mean, Potter 'helped me out'? What happened?"

"You mean Draco leeched off some of my magic through the link I have with our… the child he has growing in him, when his magic wasn't sufficient to sustain the breaking of this curse?" Potter suddenly surprised everyone with his insight.

"Exactly!" Podmore beamed at him. "That is why he both managed to retain his consciousness and get out of it fairly quickly. And the child isn't damaged either. On the contrary, I would say…"

"But I didn’t cast a spell," Draco objected. Then another possibility filtered through the years of dust incrusted onto the knowledge in one of the rarely used recesses of his mind. "We didn't get bound, did we?" he asked, appalled. He knew, after all, from having studied his family's history that there were spells and potions that a Dark Lord could use to bind a defeated enemy to himself as his vassal, or worse, his slave. Now, remembering the things that Snape had said about the Draught of Bestowed Life, the fertility potion he had taken, having been used by Dark Lords to create offspring, there was a very bad feeling pooling in his stomach.

"No, nothing of the sort!" Podmore hurried to reassure him when Draco suddenly started feeling light-headed again, and his complexion had most likely turned even paler. "It was just an accident. Happens sometimes."

"Oh good." Draco heaved a relieved sigh.

"But actually, it gave me an idea..." Podmore looked contemplating with a glint in his eyes that made Draco afraid of what he was about to say next.

"Uh… Doc?" Potter called tentatively, while he was backing up until he couldn’t go any further, save opening the window and jumping out. He, too, seemed to have good instincts.

And had Potter just called him 'Draco' a few minutes before?

TBC

Chapter 33: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

24. Jun 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Vaughn.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

"You call this progress?" Draco asked the next morning, when Podmore brought up his idea again while examining him.

"You might not have noticed, but even during this short time, your condition has already got tremendously better."

"What do you mean?" Draco was confused. "I didn't remember anything else."

"Yes, but the blocking of certain memories was only one effect of the curse. The other was the block on your subconscious which prevented your thoughts from 'straying' into certain directions. For example, you seem to have no problem now with acknowledging your pregnancy. I remember that you even had a hard time speaking the word 'child', which you don't seem to have anymore. Your relationship with Harry is a lot better now as well."

Draco wanted to ask how Podmore had come to that conclusion, but Podmore had not finished yet. "Also, you have come to terms with having had a sexual relationship with another man."

Draco winced at that, remembering his humiliation about the thing that had been dubbed 'the kiss' and that now, apparently, every single person in this madhouse knew of.

"I still do not see why I have to submit myself to this dubious process," Draco sneered. He did not comprehend why Podmore pretended not to understand when he had said 'no' the first time. His opinion had not changed overnight either. There was no way that he would be – for whatever reasons – magically bound to Potter.

"But it would be only temporary, until your child is born. And, actually, it wouldn't be you who were bound to him, but your child. Your magic is not compatible, anyhow, so you would not be able to tie a bond, except if you were both willing and had gone under a purifying ritual."

"But you said accidents happen." Draco brought out his largest piece of objection.

"Sure they do. But they are very rare. That's why they are called 'accidents'."

"Well, it seems to me that whenever Potter is involved in something, accidents are bound to happen."

"Oh, come on, don't be so negative, Draco!" Podmore cried out, frustrated with his patient's stubbornness.

"I am not negative. I am cautious," Draco retorted.

"Would you rather your child paid for your 'cautiousness'?" Podmore answered in a similar manner. He looked cross with him.

"But Potter's magic is too erratic. Indeterminable. I don't know whether I trust it not to damage my child instead of helping it. How can you trust it? You are also his Healer. You know exactly in what kind of condition he is," Draco said angrily. He had – again – stumbled on a private discussion between them, most likely following an examination that had been supposed to determine whether Potter would be suitable for the role or not.

"Yes, but I also know the spell I am going to apply, and it doesn't work the way standard bonding spells work. In fact, it isn't even a bonding spell, if you will; it just employs some of the characteristics of certain bonds, like the free transfer of magical energies. Except that in this case, the transfer only occurs in one direction and only if it is needed. You could look at it like a safety net or a lifeline."

"I don't know…" Draco said with a frown.

Podmore sighed, worn down by Draco's stubbornness, and put away his wand, prepared to leave. "Think about it."

"Why did Potter consent to it?" Draco asked the question that bothered him the most. Who would be giving away their magic willingly without a very, very well-founded reason? Actually, not the 'why' – Potter was a Gryffindor, he did not really need a reason to do something foolishly heroic. It was the fact that Draco didn't want to feel indebted to Potter. It was a ridiculously un-Malfoy-ish attitude – Malfoys took what they could, more so if it was offered to them for free. The thing was, though, Draco was not so sure that it would be for free. Everything had a price, and most frequently, things that seemed to be free of charge wore the largest price tags.

"You mean, apart from wanting to keep his child alive?"

Draco nodded.

Podmore looked hesitant for a few seconds, then he must have decided that the topic wasn't really a matter of confidentiality.

"You see, Harry has excess magic in abundance – that much you know. That is why he has a hard time controlling it. And now that Snape decided to cut himself off of the world and stop supplying him with the potion that can help him with his incontinence, he needs an outlet to get rid of the excess energies. Your little accident of yesterday did give him that, and in a way that was beneficial for both of you."

"But what if I don't need it anymore?"

"Oh, don't worry about that! There is no such thing as too much magic for a growing foetus. The only side effect I can imagine is that it could accelerate the progression of your pregnancy, but that would only mean one or two weeks for you."

Actually, that wouldn't be very bad, Draco thought. No, he corrected himself, it was rather a one in a million deal. If he was honest with himself, he had no worries about accidental bonding and such. He knew the same as Podmore that the chance for that to happen would be even lower than if he did it with someone less powerful, because there was no way that he could pull too much of the other person's magic to him to reach and grab hold of his magical core, which would initiate the bond. The only reason he was objecting against it so strongly was because of Potter.

"All right," he said a tad too hesitantly. No, if he was going to do it, he mustn't still have doubts. He cleared his throat and repeated his words, now more resolutely. "All right. I'll do it."

Podmore wasted no time after that. He went out and returned with Potter within the minute.

Potter was still wearing his pyjamas and looked like he had been just dragged out of his bed. He blinked blearily at Draco, his glasses missing, and scratched lazily on the golden strip of skin that the movement revealed of his chest through the open pyjama shirt, after sitting down next to him on the bed, where Podmore had directed him to. Draco gulped anxiously – not just because now that Potter was actually here and Podmore had the two of them at wand-point, the deal seemed much more real than a few minutes before, but also because he had made the mistake of carelessly inhaling Potter's scent, and it sent all too familiar twinges through his body.

Podmore was murmuring to himself, as if he was going over the incantation once more before casting the spell – which he most likely was. Then he suddenly stopped, and before Draco could have followed the change in his tone, he cast it for real. It was over before the blink of an eye; Draco didn't feel any different afterwards.

"That's it?" he asked, a bit confused. He had expected a surge of energy or the feeling of a magical link, but there was nothing tangible about the spell's effect.

"Yes," Podmore said.

"Good. Then I can go back to sleep now," Potter murmured, then without waiting for an answer, he got up and walked out of the room, yawning.

In the course of the following week, Draco had more attacks, but nowhere as severe as before. After the first one, he learned not to fight them, or Potter's magical energy unexpectedly flowing into his body when he needed it. There were some new memories revealed – mostly those he had seen in his dreams already, just more clear and, to his great relief, less sexual. A good thing, too, because besides Potter, other people from the Order started featuring in them, and he would have surely freaked out if he had a lewd memory of the Weasel or Mad-Eye Moody. It was a relief to realise that not everything he had dreamed of happened the way it did in his nocturnal adventures.

Actually, the memories were rather dull. Nothing much had happened through the two months he had been there. After the first stir of tension caused by his sudden appearance with Potter, according to what he could recall now, he had spent the majority of his time being locked in a room, someone occasionally visiting him – either wanting answers or bringing him a book or two to occupy himself while he had been alone. And then there were the memories concerning the nightly visits of Potter, too… which, thank Merlin, as opposed to his dreams, were rather vague. The only clear piece of memory containing Potter's skinny naked arse was the one about their flight, which Draco had to re-live several times - together with the consecutive confession scene and the one where his father had come for him. It was strange, but when Draco had mentioned it to Podmore, he told him not to worry about it. Draco nodded and sneered at Potter, who had looked distinctly uncomfortable after having overheard the piece of conversation.

Every time the surge of memories happened, Draco cringed from the feeling of the foreign energy trickling into body. The sensation was not the most comfortable, to put it mildly. It felt invasive and

aggressive, and, even though his instincts wanted to fight it, there was no way for him to put a stop to the invasion – the spell Podmore had cast pretty much took care of that. There was an itching sensation beneath his skin every time it happened, and this was one of the spell's aspects he just couldn’t get used to, however many times it had happened. But thankfully, it always stayed around his child, protecting it, so his own magic could concentrate on the healing.

Another benefit of the new arrangement was that it worked over great distances; for example, when he was in his room and Potter was off somewhere in Diagon Alley, which made his presence near Draco unneeded. Draco was glad that Potter was finally out of his hair, and that even if he happened to stumble into him, he was not in danger of a repeat performance of what had happened on the stairs. The first few times after Podmore had cast the spell, he had come close to it, but as soon as he stopped fighting the flood of Potter's magic into his body, he was able to regain control over his actions. Even if he sometimes felt the urge to molest Potter, he had got better at controlling it – to Potter's dismay, he noticed.

Draco couldn’t help but tease him about that. There was nothing better to alleviate one's deep seated embarrassment than to embarrass someone else in turn. And Potter, as obvious and oblivious he was, was just the perfect candidate for that. Draco only noticed that he had started to feel a bit too comfortable with the ambiguous teasing when he almost went too far in the pretence that he couldn't control himself again, and stopped just shy of kissing Potter again. After that experience, he felt the need to cut back on the teasing.

But if Draco thought that, now that he could borrow magic from Potter when he needed it, and thus, wouldn’t be subjected to uncontrollable urges, it couldn't become awkward anymore, he had to be disappointed. One night, he woke up to the sensation that he was thirsty. When no house-elf came to his call, he remembered where he was and realised that if he wanted to have a glass of water, he would have to get it for himself. So he groped his way down the staircase and with luck, he found the kitchen. After finishing his business, he was already half asleep again when he attempted to find his own room. He thought he did find it, because a feeling told him that this was the place where he was supposed to sleep. He should have known not to trust his instincts.

The next morning, upon waking up, he found a warm body spooned to his back and a palm on his abdomen.

His first thought was fright, hoping that he hadn't dropped off in Pansy's bed last night, but feeling the distinct solidness and the lack of curves on that body, he comforted himself with the thought that it must

be just Rosie having overslept and not leaving his bedroom as she was supposed to before Draco woke up. Actually, there was something comforting in waking up with another body curled around his own, and he decided that he liked the feeling. But when he wanted to burrow himself into the delicious warmth some more, there was a grumble coming from right next to his ear.

"Ugh. Go 'way, Ginny. Too warm!"

Draco sat up, the sleepiness having cleared out of his mind in the matter of a second.

No, it couldn't be!

He turned around with trepidation making his fingertips cold and clammy, and snatched the covers off his bed partner with the altogether too manly voice.

"Potter! What are you doing in my bed?!" The only thing that prevented Draco from shouting was the awareness of what people would say if they heard that he had spent the night with Potter.

"Malfoy?" Potter asked in a sleep-thick voice. He squinted up at Draco, either in surprise or because he didn't have his glasses. Then he sat up, and Draco had to suppress the unmanly shriek coming up his throat, because Potter slept shirtless. At least, he could see the waistline of a pair of boxer shorts peeking out from beneath the half-divested blanket.

Potter looked around, scratching his head, then back at Draco with a somewhat more awake gaze.

"I hate to inform you, but this is my room - and my bed."

"What?" Draco looked around, but he could hardly contest that fact. "What am I doing here, then?"

Potter looked, for a second, as if he was about to subject Draco to the worst humiliation of his last…

twenty-four hours, but then he seemed to have changed his mind, because he just shrugged and said, "Don't worry. It must be just…" he trailed off, making a gesture towards Draco's stomach. That gesture seemed to have become the explanation for an awful lot of things recently, Draco observed, only that where before it only indicated his pregnancy, now it seemed to have gained another meaning: the magical link between Potter and the baby.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, and it was only thanks to Potter's quick reaction that Draco survived the mortification of a third person getting to see him in one bed with Potter. The next moment – barely before the door opened to admit the girl Weasley – Draco found himself being pushed down and covered by the blanket from head to toe.

"Harry…" There was a sudden pause and a harsh inhalation, followed by the accusation of, "What's this? Harry? Were you out last night and brought someone home?"

Draco didn't hear Potter's answer.

"Harry, you are impossible! I expected more from you! What about the grand speech you fed me the other day? You still sleep with strangers, even though that poor bloke next door is dependent on you. He thinks he is in love with you, for Merlin's sake! For all we know, he could fall to pieces if he witnessed you being with someone else…"

The rant would have continued longer, and Draco didn't know how long he could have stood it silently. It was only thanks to Potter's hand pushing him down when he was about to sit up and throw off the blanket to tell that… that woman harbouring the greatest delusions of all time… But in the last second, Potter finally found his voice.

"Ginny, would you mind not shouting? Firstly, he is still sleeping. And secondly, it is none of your business. Malfoy won't know if you finally shut up about it and leave."

Ouch, that was harsh, Draco thought, when the door closed not exactly soundlessly. He was sure if he had been really sleeping now, he would have been woken up by that for sure.

He waited another second before throwing off the blanket and confronting Potter about this little exchange. Something was fishy here, he couldn't help noticing.

"So, Potter, what is this crap you told the Weasley girl about me needing you?"

Potter looked flustered – the blush on his face even spread down to his chest – but he didn’t seem to find words to protest. Draco was positively infuriated.

"All right, I understand that she is a pain in the arse, but when did you hear me giving my permission to tell her that I think I'm in love with you to stop her advances? As if!" Draco seethed.

"Look, Malfoy, it's not like that," Potter started, having found his tongue.

"No? Then would you mind terribly to explain me just how it is?"

"I didn’t tell her anything about you liking me, I just didn’t correct her when she assumed… It's not my fault you have been all over me this last week." He shrugged.

Draco fixed him with a murderous glare, but now he was the one at loss for words. He hadn’t thought of the possibility of other people misunderstanding the way he had teased Potter.

"And before you think anything bad of her, Ginny didn’t make any advances towards me. She knows she is not my type." Potter continued, but instead of calming him down, he had only succeeded in enraging Draco more. Who did he think he was, telling such an oblivious lie to his face and expecting him to believe it!

"The hell she didn't! I heard her!" Draco hissed, not caring that he was revealing that he had eavesdropped on their conversation. It wasn’t as if this house, with all the people tumbling over one another, was the ideal place to keep secrets.

Potter looked flabbergasted for a minute, but then a smug grin broke out on his face.

"What is it, Malfoy? Getting jealous?" And then, he had the gall to reach out with a finger and gently tug a loose strand of hair, which had been flapping in front of Draco's eyes, behind his ear.

The touch and the following realisation that he had been, in fact, feeling something awfully similar to jealousy, sent Draco's mind reeling, and he froze for a second before swatting away Potter's hand and jumping out of the bed. He almost tripped on the cover that had curled itself around one of his legs, hiking up his nightshirt and giving Potter an eyeful of his naked thighs, but he caught himself at the last second and managed to leave the room with the shambles of his dignity. Fortunately, he didn't meet anyone in the corridor.

Draco had spent the day in a kind of daze, his mind going over and over the events of the morning. Podmore had told him that he had been getting more comfortable with accepting the more sordid part of what obtaining an heir entailed, or had he been referring to the whole twisted relationship-thing with Potter during the war? Not that it mattered, really. And he remembered Snape asking him, when he had told him that the potion he had given him as a Death Eater drug was, in reality, nothing the like, whether he had considered that his attraction to Potter and the dreams he was suffering were because he liked men. Draco had refused to accept that explanation straight out, but now he started to fear that it actually might be true.

He tried to tell himself that it wasn't jealousy he was feeling, but possessiveness for something that had been promised to him – and if that didn't sound ambiguous, then Draco didn't know what did. But that was not true; Pansy had been his wife for years and he had not cared a bit about the straight line of men disappearing into her bedroom through the first years of their marriage, nor about the select few that she had chosen to remain there after she had been through her man-eater phase. And now he was obsessing about someone whom Potter wasn't even interested in – and they weren't even married yet. On second thought, perhaps that was the cause of his exaggerated reaction. He was afraid that Potter would say no at the last moment, severing Draco's last chance for getting back his inheritance. Yes, there: a logical explanation! But for some reason, Draco's gut told him: that logic hadn't played a role in his reaction that morning.

To complete the disaster that his day was turning out to be, it was one of the nights on which Loony Lovegood had also showed up for the evening meal. He had this feeling right upon having seen her

sitting down in the middle of the redheads that he wouldn’t get away from that night unscathed. At least, she wasn’t placed next to Draco.

His seat was still located at the end of the table between Potter and the new enemy, but neither of them was paying any attention to Draco during the meal. Potter, as always, was talking to his best friend, of whom he obviously couldn’t get enough. His reluctance to even notice Draco on his other side had got a bit too obvious during the two weeks since the first occasion, causing Mrs. Weasley to become quite annoyed with him. She had tried to involve the two of them in one conversation several times, but as soon as Potter had caught on to what she was doing, he wormed out of it with excusing himself to the other room or the toilet, whatever. Draco found this attitude very annoying. No one ignored him; the only reason he let the behaviour slide was that he had no intention to talk to Potter either. He still resolved to teach Potter some subtlety after their marriage, though. He couldn’t permit to anyone associated with him to disgrace his name with such abysmal manners.

He pointedly turned away from Potter and that left him listening to the obtuse conversation between Ginny Weasley and her Hogwarts flame, some Ravenclaw with the name 'Mickey'. There was something suspicious about their hushed tones and how they stopped suddenly when they noticed that Draco's attention was on them, then started talking to Draco about the newest wizarding fashion in a somewhat louder voice, as if they thought that that would gain his interest enough to forget about their previous whispering. Draco huffed on the inside, even when he went along with them for show. He wasn’t interested in something as vulgar as fashion for the common wizards and witches. He had his own conceptions about what he would be wearing, based upon centuries of Malfoy tradition, and his own tailors to realise his ideas. Malfoys did not follow fashion; they were the ones to dictate it.

He pretended not to hear Potter's aloof comment about how perhaps that was the reason wizards still dressed so old-fashioned when he mentioned that.

"Then I guess you won't have any problems deciding what to wear to your wedding," Ginny (damn, the name just stuck in his brain after having heard it so many times recently, and he had started using it unconsciously, despite finding such a slack in his manners terribly vulgar) commented, casually.

Suddenly, there was a growing ring of silence around them, starting out small, but expanding at to the entire table within the matter of a few seconds. Even Potter turned his way.

Draco was surprised and not surprised at the same time by the attention that comment had garnered. As by a silent agreement, there had been no mention about the impending nuptial between him and the hero of the wizarding world. The cause of it varied on a large scale, ranging from the fact that the marriage of two wizards was still forbidden by law, and thus, Draco imagined, it seemed a very distant possibility for the majority of people present – to them feeling uncomfortable with the topic or just Draco's person. Now that it had come to light, everyone was waiting with bated breath to hear what others' opinions about it would be – including that of Draco himself. It was actually the first time that the cause of why everyone was there was brought into the foreground – if only in an indirect way.

Draco suddenly found himself at the middle of everyone's attention, which wasn't necessary intimidating, but not very comfortable either. He supposed he had grown unused to being in the public eye, since his dealings in the Ministry – thanks to his family's past allegiance – required more subtlety. That, or he had just got burnt by the recent bad publicity everyone was so keen on spreading or believing about him too much to be able to now regard any kind of spotlight directed at him as something positive.

"Why, it will be his lieutenant's uniform, of course, am I not right?" the bright voice of Loony Lovegood sliced into the oppressive silence, eliciting a sudden bout of laughter from several people who were obviously familiar with the incident she was referring to. Under normal circumstances, Draco would have been very annoyed with her for bringing it up again – strike that, he was annoyed, but he still preferred having to listen to it than having to talk about this wedding-business with Potter. It was still the least humiliating of the two. And besides, showing that he was able to laugh at himself would garner him some brownie points with these people, Draco thought, so he picked up the dropped line and joined in to the 'fun'.

"Yes, Loony, but only if I get to show up with all the decorations on my chest," he said with a pretend smile on his face. That comment, as he had expected, gained him another bout of laughter, and then Loony drew the attention on herself and proceeded to re-tell the story about Draco's initiation into the Order before his first and only battle on the light side.

"…and then he said, 'I am a pure-blood! I refuse to jump at the commands of a lowly Gryffindor half-blood! I want to be the leader of this unit, or else you can forget about me being in in this stupid war.'" She managed a rather realistic impersonation of what Draco had remembered being his younger self: arrogant and short-tempered to the point of forgetting what he would have been getting himself into. Lucky that they had not listened to him. Seamus Finnigan, the 'lowly half-blood' in question, had gone out into the battle as their commander and died on the front lines. But apparently, no one else did

- or chose to - remember that, according to the rather good mood everyone was in.

Draco didn’t think his complexion had revealed how he was feeling on the inside; in fact, he had thought he was playing his role adequately, until he felt a warm hand descend on top of his own to lightly cover his fingers, which were clutching the side of his chair rather forcefully. He looked up, shocked by the sudden contact, and his eyes met Potter's stare that was also blank to the outside. He felt his face heat up, and looked away swiftly, but he didn’t think he would be able to snatch away his hand without drawing attention to what was going on under the table, so he decided to wait out till Potter withdrew on his own.

The decision turned out to be a very bad one – the prat had been content to sit through the reminder of dinner holding his hand and acting as if he was doing nothing of interest, while Draco suffered through a whole range of reactions. The first minutes' irritation while he was waiting for the other to pull away was soon replaced by a prickling feeling, then a light-headedness that signalled the start of an attack, so in the end, he had no other choice but to excuse himself and retire to his room when the feast finally ended.

He sprawled out in his bed, still in his clothes, his hands instinctively finding his belly, even though the source of the discomfort didn’t originate there. He must have snoozed only for ten seconds or so when he was wakened by soft voices drifting through his door. He listened to the muffled conversation reflexively and recognised Potter as one of the speakers. The other one was a man whose voice he wasn’t familiar with.

"Look, I don't want to come off as rude, but I really can't be more direct about it. I told you no, and I meant it like that," Potter said, sounding frustrated.

"Come on, Harry, you must still remember how good of a lay I was – still am…"

"I'm still not interested."

There was a small, disgustingly coy and feminine sounding laugh. "Ginny told me you would say that at first. Drop the act, we both know it's not true. Even your ex knows you're desperate. And I'm not asking for your hand in marriage." There was the snicker again. It made the skin on Draco's back crawl. He

decided that he wasn’t willing to listen it for any longer. "It's only a fuck."

"And it's called: you fuck off. Now!" Draco snarled after having wrenched open his door and finding himself face to face with 'Mickey'.

"Okay, okay. Don't get your knickers into a twist," the man said, shrugging, when he regained his breath, but the way his face had blanched and the fact that he wasn’t inclined to show Draco his back kind of gave away that he was not as unaffected as he had wanted him to believe.

Potter looked at Draco, then he was about to follow in the other man's wake without a word. Draco was not having any of it. He snatched Potter's elbow and yanked him into his room, banging the door shut and pressing him into it before Potter could react properly.

"I want an explanation," Draco filtered the words through ground together teeth, not caring if he sounded irrational.

Potter did not seem frightened by his unexpected hostility, though. He just looked tired and—was that pleased?

"Thanks," he sighed. "I thought I would never get rid of him. I was afraid he would follow me to my room. It's good you weren't sleeping that deeply, huh?" He gave Draco a sheepish smile – if he'd interpreted what the near darkness showed him correctly.

"You did this deliberately?" Draco asked, incredulous.

"Sorry," Potter mumbled a dishonest apology, because Draco could tell he was not sorry at all. If anything, he looked pleased.

"What do you have to be so happy about, stupid scarhead?" Draco couldn’t help but be infuriated with

him.

"What's that? Reverting to schoolboy insults?" Now Potter was grinning outright.

"I asked a question!" Draco hissed, grabbing the front of Potter's shirt. He could feel another mood coming up on him, but he was too angry to notice the signs.

"You are cute when you are all jealous," Potter said, magic making his eyes sparkling verdant, and the light touch of a hand on Draco's cheek was causing the short stubble on his jaw prickle with energy. And the memory it stirred up in Draco was not from when he had been a teenager, but his first meeting with 'Scott' in the gay bar.

"I am not jealous!" Draco's protest came automatically, then – as if it was the only logical continuation from that point on – he twisted his grasp on the linen and pulled Potter closer, fastening his lips to the other man's in a forceful kiss.

Potter gasped, perhaps in surprise, perhaps in pleasure, allowing Draco's tongue to invade his mouth and undertake Potter's own in tangling dance. He pressed his body tightly to the one between him and the door, not caring when he heard Potter's head knocking into the wood. Suddenly, there were two hands on the sides of his thighs, slowly but determinedly sliding upwards to cup his buttocks and then circle his waist, until they paused on the mound on his middle. And suddenly those hands were pressing on his shoulders, pushing Draco away gently but just as determinedly as they had been in their previous exploration of his body.

Draco resented that the kiss had to end; he stretched his neck so he could keep up the delicious contact with those nimble lips just for a few seconds longer. But ultimately, they separated with a soft smack that sounded thunderous in Draco's ears, as if it heralded the end of the universe as he had known it. And in a way, it did.

When he regained his bearing, Potter was looking at him with an indefinable look to his eyes, holding him at shoulder length, fingers curled around Draco's arms, their heat burning into him even through the cotton of his shirt. Draco felt his face go up in flames of embarrassment about what he only now realised he had done, and he was desperately searching for the right words to make Potter understand that it

was not really him, or that it was a mistake, it wasn’t real... whichever worked the best. But it seemed that his words weren’t needed, because Potter let go of his shoulders, then turned his back silently and let himself out of the door, softly clicking it shut behind him.

Draco was left standing alone in the darkness of his room, after the most mind-blowing kiss he had ever experienced, not knowing what he had done wrong.

TBC

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Chapter 34: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

25. Jun 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Vaughn.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Draco had not got an eye shut for what seemed to be an eternity, but was probably only a part of the night. He was not tossing and turning. It would have been nearly unable to do, since he was lying on his side with the blankets drawn so tightly around his form, it gave him the illusion of a cocoon. He spent his wakeful hours trying to think of what he would do to Potter the next time he saw him. He could not kill him, since he needed him to get his inheritance, and he could not explain what had happened or demand an explanation either. In the end, he decided that he would just ignore it, acting as if nothing had taken place, or as if it had been only one of his weird attacks that made him act like that. It would not be hard to convince Potter of it. The git was as oblivious as they came.

He must have dropped off sometime nearing dawn, because he woke up in the same position after having nearly suffocated himself with the blankets, being drenched in sweat – but at least nothing else. Good. That would make it easier to retain his self-esteem when he faced Potter. At the thought of the other man now linked to his child, Draco could feel a slow seep of magical energy into his body through that link. It felt like tiny little parasites moving under the skin of his abdomen. Draco quickly discarded that image of his mind before he got sick.

He used the fact that it was still very early and no one else seemed to be up yet to take a quick shower. He was not in the mood to sit for half an hour in the bath now, anyhow. He scrubbed his body until he felt himself clean. However, no wet dreams in the night meant that he was in the need of some relief, which he tended to quickly, eyes closed – it was not the most arousing sight, as he could only see the tip of his prick peeking out from under his belly. After he was done, he rinsed the tub – there was no separate shower stall in The Burrow – and towelled his body. The fact that he hadn't been lounging there for enough time to let steam fog the mirror completely meant that he was confronted with the sight of his body. Merlin! No wonder Potter got disgusted with him last night.

Draco had pretty much managed to ignore the changes this pregnancy forced on his body up until this time, but now, it seemed, he could not go on like that anymore. That did not mean though that he would go out there, sit in the circle of young mothers and talk about backaches and swollen ankles. Perhaps

Podmore would be able to give him some potions to ease the symptoms. The only thing he couldn't hide was his growing stomach. The robes could only do so much and Glamours did not work on it because of the magical barrier around the foetus. And even if they did, they could hardly conceal his difficulty in retaining the studied gracefulness of his movements – it felt like being a teenager once again, awkward and everything – or when he began to waddle. He didn't even want to think about that. He hoped by that time he would have his privacy back.

He was in the middle of towelling his hair dry when a sudden creak alerted him to the door opening. He had barely had enough time to pull down the towel and hold it in front of his privates before he was confronted with the sight of a bleary-eyed Potter, who stopped dead in his tracks upon seeing him in there. They spent several seconds of shocked silence, staring at each other, both of them at a loss of what to do. Then Draco saw Potter's eyes start travelling down his nearly naked body, and that thought jolted him out of his trance.

"Potter! Don't look at me!" he cried, and then cringed from the sheer volume of his own voice.

Potter snapped out of his shock, too, and turned around hastily.

"Sorry, I didn’t think you'd be here so early in the morning. You usually sleep in…"

"Potter, stop babbling and go out! Can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?"

But Potter didn't make a move to do so. "Can't," he said. "Gotta take a leak."

Draco almost choked on his own saliva, hearing it put so bluntly. Merlin! Potter really had no pedigree, and this was the man he was about to marry!

"Then give me a robe at least!" he grumbled, irritated. He couldn't even reach the piece of clothing in question, because Potter was blocking his way.

"Here," Potter said, offering him the one he had in his hand when he came in. For a second there, Draco wanted to protest about it, but when Potter made an impatient noise and a move to turn around, Draco thought better of it and pulled it on hastily. The two ends of it barely met on his stomach.

"What are you so twitchy about, Malfoy? I thought you lived in a dorm for six years, too," Potter asked while circling him to be able to stand in front of the toilet bowl, and then turned his back and whipped out his prick, not caring whether Draco was watching or not. Draco snatched away his gaze from Potter's back – he was not wearing a pyjama top again. Sure, he had been used to communal showers and urinals when he had been a teenager and in Hogwarts, but that had been ages ago. And besides that, this was different from then. Those were not people Draco would have ever thought of in the terms of a sexual relationship, but how was he be able to make Potter understand that without having him completely misunderstand things and embarrassing himself?

Before Draco could have contemplated saying anything, or just opening the damn door and sliding out of it unnoticed, though, the sound of the harsh trickle of urine was interrupted by Potter speaking again.

"Besides, we are going to be married and living in one house. You have to get used to things like this."

The declaration caught Draco unprepared. He wanted to retort that when he had his own house; he would not be living under such barbaric circumstances that there would be only one bathroom in it, but the remark reminded him of the events of the last night and left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"We might be living under the same roof, but that doesn't mean we are going to share more," he spat. "Last night was an accident. I assure you it won't happen again once the curse is gone and I'm in full control of my mental facilities. Not that you would want anything like that to happen again. I'm glad we cleared that situation, so there won't be any misunderstandings considering the nature of this bond between the two of us," Draco said, accentuating every syllable, so it would not seem as if he was fleeing from Potter, because he really was not.

"What?" Potter stammered. "Wait, Malfoy, it's not like that!"

"How is it like, then?" Draco waited for a few seconds for Potter to answer, but he didn't. "I thought so,"

he said, his hand on the door handle.

In the next moment, he heard the toilet being flushed and he let himself out of the door, ignoring the noises of Potter hastily dressing and washing his hands – at least that he wouldn't have to teach him – in order to be able to follow Draco outside. He made it to his room, and managed to snap the door shut and erect a Silencing Charm just before the first tremors shaking the wooden surface started, as Potter was most likely trying to enter and, upon realising that he could not, was pounding on his door.

Draco spent almost the whole day holed up in there, lying on his bed – not even feeling the strength to dress – and thinking. Why was it suddenly so important to him whether or not Potter liked him? More so, because the thought of having a physical relationship with a man – or just being thought to be – still gave him the creeps. But last night he was the one who had assaulted Potter, and been offended by his rejection. He did not love him - that was for sure. What did Potter mean to him then?

That was a difficult question to answer. There were multiple answers to it. Firstly: what had Potter meant to him in the past he had only now begun to remember? Second: what could Draco expect Potter meaning to him once they were married? And thirdly: how did those two translate for right now? The second and third were hard to guess. Right now, Draco was too confused, his memories and dreams too chaotic to know where one ended and the other began. But the first one was something he could find out. The only thing he needed to do was to organise the memories and try to remember the feelings attached to them.

He decided that if he was revisiting his memories regarding his past relationship with Potter, he should perhaps start with the clearest of them all: the one in which he had confessed his feelings to Potter, and the other boy had said the words back to him. Not only was this the most complete of his memories, but having seen it so many times, he had no difficulty recalling it once more. Perhaps, a little voice said in his mind, he was supposed to find the answer in it; that was why it had repeated so many times.

He tried to block out the sounds and the images, though, freezing the scene into a never ending moment, and concentrate solely on the emotions that were coming through so strongly. The first impression he got was 'love', but that somehow seemed off. How could he trust himself to recognise love? To his own knowledge, he had never before felt it. And, to be honest, it seemed somehow forced. That's why he tried to break it down into parts.

He opened his mental eyes, finding it to occupy too much of his attention to keep them closed, and tried to find something to take hold of in what he was seeing: it was his younger self being embraced by an equally younger Potter. Draco could not grasp the near blissful expression he was seeing on his own face. Why would he look like that because of a simple hug? Or was it the confession? Potter's presence? What?

There was a strong taint of emotions permeating the memory. Draco couldn't discern whose emotions they were, but since it was his memory, they must have been his, right? But if that was true, why was he even contemplating this question? Because he could not remember having felt something even close to that outside of that memory. Was this feeling really this unique? Was it even love? Or was it delusion?

It was not something constant, more like changing with every breath he took. A large and returning part of it was simple happiness. But the happiness had several causes: contentment, belonging, understanding, feeling safe… there was a strong desire for physical contact in it. Ugh. That was something Draco tried not to dwell upon for any longer than necessary. But, when he tried to analyse it, it felt the same as what had forced him to attack Potter last night. And then there were thoughts of insecurity, thoughts of the future – those were the only negatives, but their presence only seemed to enhance the positive feelings, giving them a sharp edge of reality. There was determination that he would work for them to come true. And once they did, they would be together forever, living in a little cottage, having a flock of children running around their legs – all created of their essences mixed together. He wanted to make Harry happy with bearing his children and knowing he would love him always, even if he got fat and rosy-cheeked like his mother…

Draco sat up with a start, his forehead slick with cold sweat and his breathing harsh and burning his throat. After looking around wildly for the first few seconds and recognising his room in The Burrow, he managed to calm down, consciously regulating his breathing until his heartbeat slowed to the normal rhythm. What a nightmare! That would teach him not to drop off when his mind was in a frenzy of thoughts.

He threw a look at the alarm clock on his nightstand and was taken aback when he noticed that he had already missed lunch. His stomach chose that moment to call his attention to that fact, giving a loud rumble. He would not have minded so much to have slept, considering that he had not got much sleep the last night, were he at least rested. But after that nightmare, he felt like something freshly exhumed and revived. If his stomach would not have protested so strongly against going empty, he would not even have considered going down and eating. He was still nauseated and doubted that he could keep anything down in a state like this. At least, he would not have to see Potter at the table, since he had been most

likely already finished with his meal.

He dressed quickly, discarding the forest green bathrobe that still bore the scent of Potter's aftershave – perhaps that was that had caused the weird dreams, he thought. He would take it out and hang it up in the bathroom later. Potter could find it there; there was really no need for Draco to give it back to him personally.

His plan worked so well that Draco decided to stick to it so he only had to meet Potter at the evening meals and no other time if he was skilful enough in avoiding him. Not that Potter made his job hard. Whenever he found himself in one room with Draco, he usually invented a quick excuse to be somewhere else.

To Draco's great surprise, even Mrs. Weasley, the eternal mediator, played along with the little act, though frowning on occasion, but never giving either of them a hard time about it. She must have known – just like everyone else in the house seemed to know or at least suspect – that something had happened between Draco and Potter that resulted in their recent hostility towards each other. No, it was not even that. Hostility would have required they take notice of one another, which they avoided as much as possible. Even though they sat side by side at the dinner table, it seemed that there was an inter-dimensional rift on the fabric of the universe occupying the space between them, for all they acknowledged each other's presence.

The only time Draco felt the urge to break his resolve was the night – almost a week later – when he saw Mickey taking a seat at the Order dinner table right opposite to Potter. Since that seating brought him in a good view of Draco, too, he had a hard time disregarding the shameless flirting he had not stopped for a second. It made Draco seething with rage on the inside, however he tried to remind himself that he sure as hell was not jealous of Potter – whose only response to the flirting was the occasional bored glance. Once, following that glance, Draco found himself staring into Potter's eyes for a second, and Potter staring back, but the moment was quickly broken when Potter turned away from him without so much as a word to Draco and took up his conversation with Weasley, as if there had been no interruption to it.

After that, feeling confused and trying to fight the unexplainable tightness around his heart, Draco only wanted to have some privacy. It was still too early to go to sleep, and some fresh air just looked a very good idea right now, so he decided to go out and sit on the veranda for a while. Fortified with a Warming Charm and blanketed in the darkness, he felt himself almost instantly better. There was no noise here and no unwanted company, since it was still too cold for people to enjoy being outside for a prolonged

time. This was really the only place where he could have his solitude uninterrupted…

It must have been cosmic irony to have said solitude broken by the intrusion of two figures just when he was thinking that. The door clicked shut again, and one of them cast a Warming Aura against the cold.

"Okay, I think no one saw us come out here," Draco heard a murmur and instantly recognised the Weasel's voice. He should have known that it was him – no one else had quite such a build. That meant that there was a good chance of the smaller of the two figures being Potter. Draco's assumption was proven when the other one also started talking after taking a few gulps of his Butterbeer bottle.

"Bugger! Corner is driving me crazy!" Potter grumbled, apparently considering that a valid reason for drinking some more.

Draco pressed back into the darkness, folding his dark cloak around him and freezing into an unmoving statue. Initially, he had planned to reveal his presence and then ask the uninvited company to leave him alone, but Potter's admission gained his attention, so he decided to stay. It was not his fault that The Burrow was a place where being overheard or overhearing the odd conversation was practically unavoidable.

"You mean 'Mickey'?" The Weasel snickered. Apparently, his good humour was not catching.

"The same," Potter grumbled yet again. "I already told him that I'm not interested; why can't he just get lost? Ginny, too, should really know better than to invite him again."

"I dunno…" Weasley shrugged and drank. "Why don't you just give in and be over with it?"

"Ah! What is it? Are you against me, too?"

"No. But friends are supposed to help each other get laid. You can't save yourself for eternity."

"That's… what an utter crap! Who told you I'm saving myself? Mickey boy just creeps me out. And I don't want to sleep with him," Potter protested. Draco could imagine his pout all too vividly.

"Okay." Weasley held his hands up in defence. Draco could see, in the ray of light coming through the peep hole on the door, that there was only less than half remaining in his bottle. "Spare me the details, mate. I'm not Hermione."

"I know. I wasn't going to…" Potter sighed.

"So what about Malfoy, then?" Weasley asked out of the blue. Or perhaps it only seemed out of the blue to Draco, because Potter murmured, 'Not again' before he drank.

"What about him?"

"Well…" Weasley sounded a bit hesitant. "Why aren't you shagging him? Not that you need to tell me the particulars, like that his prick is too small or something, just… you know… in general."

"No, nothing like that." Well, that at least was good to know, Draco thought, having been ready to declare eternal war if Potter said anything disparaging about his size. "Just… you know... the same."

"I don't." Weasley shook his head, which produced a particularly loud gulp. "You seemed to get along just fine before he lost his memories. A little too fine, if you ask me..."

"But that's just it, Ron." Potter sighed again, making Draco wonder whether it was being tipsy that was making him particularly dramatic; or was it normal for him? "He did not just lose his memories. He chose to forget. Apparently, I'm not good enough for his pert little aristocratic arse."

"Wow-wow-wow! Too much information, mate!" The Weasel's voice was a bit strained.

"Sorry." Potter laughed a bit, not sounding very sorry at all.

"So why do you think he got it on with you at all during the war, if he was going to just discard you from his life?"

"Isn't that obvious? Malfoy is a selfish prat. He wanted a place to hide and thought that being fuck buddies with me would up his chances. And, of course, he was right. It was on the same principle as what he is doing now, only that he switched his method to string me around from sex to a child. God! And I'm the greatest pushover in the world, to let myself be used like that."

Draco really did not know why the bitterness in Potter's tone hurt so much. What Potter had said was true, after all – or part of it, at least. Now it actually made sense for him, how he could have found himself in love with the git – of course, it must have started as something like what Potter had described. And if Potter thought that it had been Draco who had erased his own memories, then it also made sense that Potter would not know – or believe – that that had changed.

"Ah. So I don't have to warn you about that," Weasley said. "Nice to know you are running straight into the disaster on purpose – again. But if you are clear on that, then why do you go along with Malfoy's demands?" A good question, Weasel, Draco thought.

"Well…" Potter seemed uncomfortable. "You know, there is that other issue…"

"But you just said that Malfoy Obliviated himself. Wouldn’t he have forgotten that too?"

Draco's interest perked up, hearing that, at the same time something heavy and indefinable settled in his stomach.

"Yes, but now it's messing with his mind. And it's my fault." Draco felt as if the air had suddenly turned into ice crystals in his lungs.

"Nonsense." Weasley patted Potter on the back, almost knocking the bottle out of his hand. "He was willing then. It wouldn’t have worked if he hadn’t been. Don't you go and have a guilty conscience over it. Hell, it was as much his plan as ours!"

"Yes, and did it work? We should have talked to an adult instead of playing the heroes…"

The Weasel snorted, and Draco would have too, had he been able to breathe. "Good one, mate!"

Potter chuckled, but his voice did not sound particularly happy.

"According to Podmore, there is no real damage. He is going to remember eventually. It's just…"

"What is it, Harry?"

"You know, he tried to kiss me the other day – and when I say 'kiss', I mean it loosely. God, I almost went along with it. I only managed to push him away at the last second. He felt so good in my arms…"

"Harry, I can't get rid of the suspicion that you are slightly overreacting. So what if he kissed you and you happened to enjoy it? If he's using you, then you can use him, too. The universe would not have crumbled into pieces if you went along with… er… I really don't want to talk about that. I think I might need to scrub out my brain with another bottle."

"All right. I think I'd like another one, too."

With that last comment, Potter opened the door and they went inside, leaving Draco alone with his thoughts, pondering about what he had just witnessed.

What was this mysterious thing Potter had been talking about? It calmed Draco down a bit when Potter had said that, according to Podmore, it apparently did not leave any damage on him – whatever 'it' was. And the plan Weasley had mentioned… was it the same one that Draco had seen in his dream/memory about his father looking into the Pensieve? Had Potter been somehow responsible for Lucius having successfully captured Draco? The part about it not having worked would have indicated that, but even if it was, Draco was still no closer to solving the mystery, except the promise that he would eventually regain his memories about that as well.

And Potter… what Potter had said about that kiss and things like that made Draco blush. He felt a little better now that he knew Potter very obviously had not been disgusted by his body… But then he remembered that he still had to decide how he felt about Potter. He knew that – weird dream notwithstanding – he had felt something for him in the past. And apparently, the feeling was mutual – at any rate, Draco could not imagine that Potter only desired his body. Not while looking like this, and especially not after Potter having repeatedly rejected 'Mickey's' advances. That reminded him, he had to have a word with the Weasel girl to stop pushing her ex-boyfriend on her ex-fiancé, or else.

So what now? He could let Potter know that he had not used him – all right, not only – to get away from the Dark Lord. But did he want Potter to know, at all? Did he want something from Potter besides giving his name to his heir? And if he decided that yes, he wanted to… with Potter, could he stomach it at all? The little voice that Draco had found to be so irritatingly insistent at the worst of times started whispering into his ear again, saying that there is a tangible precedence that he would be indeed able to stomach it – and whatnot. And if he was going to tie his life to Potter, at least he could get something positive out of the forced arrangement…

His heart gave an excited and entirely unexpected lurch at the prospect. It was not as if everyone had to know about it, right?

Draco stood up and went inside, new determination invigorating his gait. He closed the door behind his back. The living room was dark and empty. The party was long over and everyone had gone home or retired into his or her room for the night. That's why Draco was caught by surprise when he spotted the lone figure sitting in an armchair, green eyes fixed on him, gleaming in the near-darkness.

"Malfoy? What in the hell were you doing outside?" Potter's voice croaked. There were two bottles of Butterbeer standing on the low tabletop to his right, but Draco could not tell whether both were empty or just one of them.

Draco opened his mouth to answer, but he couldn’t find the right words. What was he supposed to answer? And then, suddenly he found himself throwing caution to the wind and blurting out something that was not an answer to the question asked.

"It was my father," he said.

Potter sat up straighter at his words and looked around, as if he was expecting to find Lucius Malfoy hiding in a dark corner. "What?"

"I didn’t Obliviate myself. It was my father."

Draco backed away instinctively, bumping into the closed door, when Potter gave out an incredulous laugh.

"You were out there. You were eavesdropping again, weren’t you?" But he did not sound angry, more like reprimanding and amused all at once – if that was even possible, and it was not just Draco's nerves playing tricks with his hearing. He shrugged.

"I was there first. You were the one intruding on me."

"And that makes it all right, I suppose?" Potter asked, but Draco was still not able to tell whether he was angry or not. Now he just sounded tired. And Draco had had enough of word games.

"Weren't you listening to what I said? I said it was my father who took my memories," he said, accentuating every word.

"And that makes a difference how?" Potter asked a bit gruffly.

"Don't you understand? It wasn’t my choice. I wasn’t asked about it. And I thought you knew about that!" Draco ended up hissing at Potter, having himself worked up into a fit because of Potter's ignorant behaviour.

"And how do I know you're not lying? Hell, you might even think you're telling the truth!"

"Why would I lie?" Draco said conversationally and went to sit down in the chair opposite to Potter.

"Oh, I don’t know, Malfoy… to gain my trust?"

Draco shook his head. "Okay, then tell me why exactly you think I'm lying."

"Perhaps because I have proof. I visited you in the hospital after the last battle. Do you remember it?"

Draco was about to shake his head no, but then he recalled a dream he had around the time he had been held in custody by the Aurors about that. But that ended with him shagging Potter on the hospital bed, so that might have not been a real memory…

"Sort of…" he said then. But apparently it was the wrong answer, because Potter reacted to it almost violently, leaning forward in his chair and hissing into Draco's face.

"Well, the next time I visited, you did not remember. Nor the time after that. I fucking came every day, and each time you greeted me the way you would have in our sixth year in Hogwarts. We had nearly the same conversation each time, too. And it always ended with you yelling at me to get out and leave you alone. So now you tell me you did not Obliviate yourself between my visits," Potter spat at him, and then leaned back in his chair, fingers gripping the armrest. He resembled a large panther that was only waiting for the right moment to attack, when his enemy was at his weakest.

A gentle shudder ran through Draco's body at the sight of the wildness in Potter's eyes, but it had nothing to do with fear.

"I did not. It was the curse my father put on me. It was supposed to erase anything that had to do with us together… Ask Podmore if you don't believe me," he added when he saw Potter readying himself for another retort.

Potter slowly closed his mouth and regarded him for a few seconds, before standing up and turning to leave. "I will," he said over his shoulder, then he exited the darkened room. Draco waited ten minutes to be sure that Potter had finished his business in the bathroom and went to bed before he, too, stood up and headed for his room.

Draco did not know whether Potter had or had not asked Podmore in the end. By the time he woke up in the morning, Potter was gone – called away on urgent notice. Something about an copycat crime committed by juvenile wizards wrecking Muggle public toilets by stuffing them full with dung bombs or animating them with a lesser known charm and setting them on unsuspecting Muggles. He was away for nearly a week, only stopping by once to dump off Pinky with Mrs. Weasley. Her parents had apparently decided that Potter should keep her for a while, until she calmed down a bit, because she had got too 'troublesome' for them to deal with. Draco had not met him, because he had been enjoying one of his regular half-hour baths at the time.

On the day Potter was supposed to be back, Draco found himself, unexpectedly, in the company of Ron Weasley and Pinky, who was practically in stitches about the Quidditch game Potter and Weasley had promised to take her to that afternoon. She had spent the past few days sleeping over at the eldest Weasley son's home – the one who was married to Fleur Delacour – with their several children. Now she was pestering Mrs. Weasley about pumpkin pies and Chocolate Frogs, leaving the Weasel alone with Draco, who had been reading quietly in a corner.

"Is it interesting?" Draco heard Weasley's awkward question. He could tell that the man did not give shite about what he was reading; it had been only an opening to a conversation – a very clumsy opening, at that.

Draco lifted a brow together with the book so the Weasel could read the title. It was some out-of-fashion text about childbirth and upbringing.

"I got it from your mum. Nothing better to read," Draco answered a bit self-consciously. The book might have been outdated and a large part of it did not even concern him, being a man and not having the appropriate parts despite the Fertility Potion, but it was still about a topic that his knowledge was pitifully lacking in.

"Ah," Weasley muttered and then suddenly turned away, blushing ferociously. Draco would have found it amusing, had it not reminded him of the overheard conversation.

"So… I hear from Harry that you were cursed by your own father, eh?" Weasley tried again, but this time Draco could tell that he was genuinely interested in his answer. Actually, it might have been just the reason why he had started the conversation at all.

"That's right," Draco said, throat suddenly dry. He did not get nauseated or develop a headache every time his father's handiwork came up, thank Merlin, but it still caused a bit of discomfort – particularly when Potter was not around and the ready supply of energy got a bit sluggish – even though, theoretically, distance should not have had an effect on the link.

"And how is your memory?" was the next question.

"Getting better, thank you." Draco shrugged. Why was Weasley making an effort to be nice to him? "There are still holes, but according to Healer Podmore, I'm on the way to recovery."

"Well, that's good to hear, Malfoy." Weasley smiled at him, and then pursed his lips, as if he was thinking about whether he should or should not say what was on his mind. Then he might have decided in latter's favour. "How do you feel about Harry?" he asked finally.

Draco thought that that was exactly what he had been trying to figure out, and most likely would have already, had Potter given him an opportunity to talk with him about this whole marriage-business. Not to mention he was dying to know what that 'plan' had been, the one which Potter had felt so guilty about, talking in the veranda. Not that Potter would have answered his questions if he had actually asked. But perhaps Weasley had not been forewarned… perhaps with the right manoeuvring…

"Do you mean right now or before?" Draco asked. His question achieved the desired result: confusing Weasley. "Because right now I'm having trouble reconciling why you even deem it appropriate to talk to me in a civilised tone." Now it was Draco's turn to purse his lips, contemplating.

He was caught unawares when Weasley suddenly burst out into laughter. "I reckon you may not remember, but we have already been through that phase – even if it wasn't above you to occasionally call me 'Weasel', which in turn caused me to call you 'Ferret-face', and eventually led to the two of us yelling down the roof of Grimmauld Place until Harry came to separate us."

Draco grimaced at the mention of the deriding name, but Weasley was obviously relieving one of his fondest memories, if the sparkling of his eyes was any indication. Draco could only vaguely remember such an occasion, though he was positive that there must have been more than just the one.

"So, we got along, I guess," he mused, only half acting. It seemed strange when all he could remember clearly were his Hogwarts experiences of taunting the Gryffindors.

"Must have been the whole 'common enemy'-thing," Weasley commented, unexpectedly playing into Draco's hands.

"Mmm. I think we did not have much choice in the matter." Draco nodded. "We had to work together."

"Yeah. But we did work together, rather well, if I might say so."

"I bet. You and Potter are too action-oriented. You needed another one with brains on the team to be able to come up with some better plans," Draco commented, seemingly idly.

Weasley nodded absently, then he said in the same, relaxed manner, "You did not think I would fall for that, did you?"

There was a moment's silence until Draco got his wits together again after having been found out so effortlessly.

"For a moment there… yes, I did." He grinned unapologetically.

And after that, Draco spent an unexpectedly easy time with Weasley and Pinky, until they had to leave for the match – without Potter, who still had not arrived by that point. Too bad Draco could not go with them in his place. All he had was a book about pregnancy to content himself with.

This time, the scheduled mutual dinner was a very quiet one – most of the people were busy that particular night and had called off their participation. When it was finished, everyone went home, and Draco ended up alone in the living room, having decided to finish the book so he could give it back, as there were only a few chapters remaining from it.

He must have dropped off at some point, though, because he suddenly found himself in that particular living room in the Order Headquarters, waiting for Potter. The curious part was that he knew that he was dreaming and seeing something that had happened years before, but it still felt as if he was there and then – like it usually does when someone is dreaming.

He was alone, but he knew Potter would come in in a few minutes. They had arranged it so beforehand, and he remembered it having happened like that. He still jumped when a sudden creak signalled the little-used side door being opened and then closed after Potter had let himself in.

Draco did not wait for him to come where he was, so they met halfway in an embrace that felt familiar and excitingly new at the same time. The kiss that followed was neither gentle nor aggressive – it was somewhere between the two extremes, but if he had to describe it somehow, he would have used the word 'thorough'. Damn, either Potter had learnt from the best or he was a natural talent – perhaps neither of the two, and it was just his person that was so compelling to Draco. After the first kiss ended, it was followed by several others of the same calibre, spiked with generous amounts of groping – Draco would have dubbed it sex, if not for the fact that they both still had their clothes on.

"So, I'm here, Draco." Potter cleared his throat, giving him a crooked smile, after finally having been able to detach his lips from Draco's mouth. "What did you want to talk with me about?"

Draco gulped and breathed in deeply. He was not chickening out at the last minute!

"Harry," he started, but then he must have misplaced his tongue, because words just did not want to come. Potter smiled and helped him find it by sucking it gently into his own mouth and then releasing it.

"Yes? What is it, Draco?"

"Harry," he said, finally collecting his courage. "I am in love with you."

Potter just looked at him, eyes going suddenly glassy behind the thick lenses. He pulled Draco into a crushing embrace and buried his face in Draco's neck, breathing in deeply. Draco felt as if he had been waiting for an answer for ages before one came.

"No, you don't, Draco," Potter croaked into his shoulder.

"What? Why would you…" Draco started to protest weakly, but Potter did not leave him enough time to finish it.

"I said you do not love me, Draco." He finally came out of his hiding place, fixing Draco with his piercing green eyes, which now bore a hard look. "You don't have to say it; I know it's not true."

Draco tried to protest again, but Potter's finger on his mouth cut it off.

"Would you let me finish?" At Draco's frightened nod, Potter continued, his eyes softening somewhat. "It's okay, Draco. I won't hold it against you, that you tried it. But you don't have to pretend. I know exactly what this is," here he gestured between their chests, "and it's as far from love as it could get. And

you know what? That is okay, too. I can't be saddled with something like that right now."

"Of course," Draco answered just to say something, turning away his head so he wouldn't have to look at the disappointment being clearly displayed on Potter's expression. He knew whatever Potter was saying to him, it was only half of the truth. He might not have wanted love with his rational mind, but he wanted it – just like Draco, or every teenager their age – deep down, he wanted nothing else. Especially when either of them could die any time.

"No, really. I mean it, Draco." Potter's voice was soft, encouraging him to look back at his face. "I won't think any less of you if you don't. You don't have to make yourself important to me in order to gain my protection. You already have it. You are my friend. And you know I value my friends. Especially if they come with benefits." And then he gave him a seemingly nonchalant smile and smacked a playful kiss on his lips. Draco could not help but mimic that smile.

"Not to mention you own me your life, Potter," Draco said, imitating the cheerful tone. "You better not forget that!"

"I would never!" Potter cried, mock-offended, with his palm on his chest.

"So what do I get in exchange?"

"How about a shag?"

"How about two?"

"Deal."

TBC

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Chapter 35: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

16. July 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you got to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Vaughn and C. Dumbledore.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

"Thank you, Harry. You can't imagine how tired I am."

Draco was woken suddenly by voices whispering in the darkness. For a millisecond, he wondered how other people came to be in his room, but then everything came back in an instant, as if he had not been sleeping at all, and he remembered that he was not in his room. His eyes opened on their own accord,

and he was alert to every little noise.

"You can sleep in my room. You know where it is. I'm going to bunk on the couch," another voice whispered back. Since it was barely more than a strangled hiss, Draco would not have recognised it had he not heard the name spoken aloud.

"Good old trusty couch." The accompanying laugh sounded distinctly feminine, and Draco was on his feet before it had finished. He did not know why, but for some reason, he had expected to find himself face to face with Ginny Weasley. Instead, he was looking into Granger's eyes; they seemed entirely too large for her face, which Draco supposed was the combined result of the darkness and her shock.

Now he felt stupid and slightly confused, standing in the middle of the living room, ready for some confrontation that would never come, simply because he got the wrong person… but then Potter called to him, gaining his attention.

"Malfoy? What are you doing here?" he hissed.

Draco wanted to snarl at Potter that he had not been lurking in the darkness in order to attack them, though Merlin knew, he had wanted to get Potter alone to provide him with a satisfying explanation for a long time now. Natural healing process and all that crap be damned, his patience was nearing its end. But as soon as he spotted him standing there, barely more than an outline in the darkness, his body still obviously tensed for any kind of action, the image triggered a vague feeling of betrayal to surface, which was surprisingly intense, despite the fact that Draco couldn't recall how he had been betrayed. And then he suddenly remembered the dream he had just had been awakened from.

The reaction was instantaneous and instinctive. Before Potter could have even moved, Draco had pinned him to the door that closed with a bang from the force with which Potter's body had been shoved into it. It was not a small feat; actually, the only reason Draco had been able to do it was the element of surprise on his side and his (now) slightly larger body weight. Normally, neither the barely two inches he had on Potter nor his slight muscle structure would have been sufficient to best him under normal circumstances.

"What's the matter with you, Malfoy?" Draco would have found it amusing that Potter was still reluctant

to raise his voice and was whispering to him had his mind not been filled with anger: anger that was directed entirely towards the Gryffindor. But while, even a second before, he had been about to attack the other man, his impulsive aggression now transformed into the unemotional cunning that his father had worked so hard to beat into him, though Lucius, himself, had never managed to master it. Would Lucius have found it funny that a simple Calming Draught succeeded in doing the deed that he hadn't been able to!? But Draco's mind – unseemingly hyperactive for this early hour – was already on another track. Revenge was best served cold – as the saying went.

"I was thinking…" he started, his tone deceivingly light, "you don't have to sleep on the couch, Harry…"

He allowed his muscles to go slack, but he was still leaning on Potter's body, trapping him with his weight. Potter's eyes widened noticeably when suddenly there was a light fingertip running down his jaw and then caressing one of his cheeks. Draco found the surprise followed by distress warring with desire showing in those green irises satisfying enough to continue.

"I think if I'm going to get back my memory, we have to start re-enacting everything for real. You have put it off for long enough. I wasn't going to say anything, but… I guess the opportunity is here."

"What are you talking about?" Potter croaked, catching Draco's finger and removing it from his face, but Draco noticed that he was reluctant to let go of his hand. The move was most likely not even conscious, when Potter's hand slipped lower and got a hold on Draco's palm, drawing it down to his chest, where Draco was able to feel Potter's heart beating wildly. That, at least, was the proof that he still had that kind of effect on the dark-haired man – or he was simply nervous about the situation. Either way, it satisfied Draco – he was not choosy right at that moment.

"Don't pretend you have no clue," Draco purred into Potter's ear, leaning closer than he usually would have deemed appropriate in public. "What do you think I meant? You can sleep in my bed tonight – though I don't know whether you'll actually get to sleep. And you won't need your pyjamas, either…"

The excitement over getting his revenge, and then finally his answers, might have caused him to go a bit overboard with his act. But he didn't care right now, however it looked from Granger's point of view. And perhaps he was starting to enjoy it for other reasons as well. He was a healthy man in his prime, after all. Who would expect him not to react to the heat of another body beneath his own and all those pheromones Potter was exuding while he was sweating with the potent mix of arousal and alarm over

Draco's sudden appearance. It didn't really matter. It was only a role he was playing.

"Draco… you're not yourself right now…" Potter said, trying to push him away, but not trying very hard. In fact, when Draco obeyed the silent command and eased away from him, he could tell Potter was a bit disappointed by it.

"On the contrary," Draco said, his voice taking up a menacing lilt. The scowl he had almost forgotten about while savouring Potter's delicious uncertainty found its way onto his countenance again when he was reminded by Potter's words of his reasons for having accosted Potter like this. "I am very much myself. Much more than I have been in the past few months… or should I say years?"

His face hardened with resolution. After all, now he knew that the memories of 'love' that he had been falling asleep and waking up with for the last weeks – ever since having remembered them – were nothing more than an illusion. "And then, after you've had your way with me, perhaps you could start talking about the plan." The last word Draco spat out with unmasked disdain towards Potter, and he wrenched his hand out of Potter's grip at the same time.

Potter's throat worked as he swallowed. He slowly lowered his arm to let it hang next to his body.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, but his tone conveyed clearly that he knew – or at least had an inkling of – what Draco was talking about. He didn't even make a real effort to pretend, and that, if nothing else, made Draco's anger return full strength.

"Don't you try to play the innocent, Potter!" Draco hissed, not because he was considerate of those who were sleeping, but because his voice had fallen victim to his seething rage.

"Malfoy?" He heard Granger's hesitant voice, as if it came from a long distance. He had already forgotten that she was there as well. He didn't pay any attention to her.

"You have been lying to me all this time!" The sound coming out of his throat was now a strange mixture of hissing and growling. "You betrayed me!" He wondered why this one sentence elicited a reaction in

him so strong that he had to fight back the tears of anger and humiliation that were choking him.

Potter blinked, and it was strange that Draco was still able to see his eyes, even from this distance, since it was entirely too dark for him to be able to see through the round glasses whose surface had become like tiny mirrors reflecting the diffuse light in the darkness. Then Potter lifted his hands, presenting his open palms to Draco in a gesture of surrender.

Apparently, it was the right thing to do, because from one second to the next, Draco's temper vanished, leaving only the feeling of hurt and resentment behind. Potter seemed to know instinctively that it was now safe to move, because he slowly lowered his arms and took hold of Draco's shoulders as if trying to balance him.

"Draco… Malfoy? What happened just now?" Potter asked in a soft voice, with all his attention fixed on Draco's face.

Draco shrugged off the hands from his shoulders and took another step backward. Bloody hormones!

"I just remembered," he told Potter, bitterness clear in his voice, but now he had rein on his emotions.

"What did you remember?" This time, the question came from Granger, her voice strained and anxious.

"I…" Draco had a hard time putting it into words, but not because he was confused about what exactly his dream meant: the reality was glaringly obvious. "I know that the memory about the two of us confessing our undying love was fake," he murmured in a flat tone, if only to avoid the resentment that would have seeped into his voice otherwise. It was stupid. He had just established that those feelings hadn't been real. He had not really been in love, so it was irrational to feel hurt over the fact that Potter had not loved him either.

"Was that a part of 'the plan'?" he asked, but he didn't need confirmation, because even before the words were fully out of his mouth, he knew they were the truth. After all, according to Weasley, he had also had his part in devising it.

"How much do you remember?" Potter asked. Draco was a bit taken aback that he wasn't trying to deny anything about it, but he supposed it made sense, since he had remembered it on his own. In fact, Potter even looked a bit relieved instead of anxious about his secrets having been revealed as Draco had expected.

He tried to gather his memories, but aside from that one scene, they were still too jumbled and chaotic. It was as if the dam in his mind had been finally broken. The flood of memories swirling madly was too hectic for him to be able to make any sense of them. He only managed to catch glimpses from the individual remembrances that swam to the surface before they submerged into the torrents once again, and he had to concentrate hard if he wanted to keep one of them there long enough to be able to make out what it was about. He shook his head, but the movement made his vision blurry and he sank down to the floor like a pile of rags.

He felt Potter catch him. He was lowered into a sitting position. Then he heard Potter hissing urgently to Granger to go and fetch Podmore.

She turned abruptly and started up the stairs – only to collide with the Healer, who was tramping down hurriedly. They managed to avoid each other only by luck; Granger caught Podmore with some kind of charm Draco didn't recognise before the man landed on his nose as a result.

"What happened?" Podmore asked. But he didn't wait for an answer; he started with his usual spells as soon as he got close enough to Draco.

"It seems that some of his memories just returned," Potter offered while helping Draco to stand up again. When he saw that his legs wouldn't hold him, he deposited him on the divan that still had Mrs. Weasley's discarded book on it.

"Hm…" Podmore said, casting one more spell. "It seems that way, yes." Then he lowered his wand and turned towards Draco, who, now that the world had stopped spinning before his eyes – and after someone had thoughtfully lighted a few candles - could see him a lot better.

"How do you feel?" he asked. Draco was a bit taken aback by the question. Podmore had never before asked him about how he felt; he just used his spells to determine it.

"Better, I guess," Draco answered. That was not to say he felt well. Even that question reminded him of the sudden revelation, and he felt a twinge every time Potter touched his elbow or just moved beside him. That would go away in time, he supposed. "But, when I try to think about something that happened, all these flashbacks just… spring on me and I get dizzy. Do you think I have my memory back now?" he asked, groaning.

"Hard to tell," Podmore said, stroking his chin. "What you need now, I think, is a good long sleep to give your mind enough time to get used to the block being lifted."

"Does that mean that he is all right now? No more curse?" Potter asked. Draco had a hard time deciding whether the slight anxiety in his voice originated in him wanting or not wanting Draco to remember.

"I'd say chances are very good that it's broken completely. Unfortunately, all my spells are able to detect in Draco's mind right now is pandemonium. I am going to be able to tell more when he has processed the new information. I think you should escort him into his room and give him a Dreamless Sleep Potion. I suspect you might still have some in stock, Harry," the Healer said.

Potter nodded.

Draco knew he would not ever count the next fifteen minutes, during which he was practically carried up the wonky stairs by Potter and put into bed, among his best memories. He tried to protest that there was no need for Potter to change him into his nightdress, but he could have been talking to a stone wall for as much attention Potter paid his complaints. Still, he guessed it was better than having Mrs. Weasley or Granger do it.

After that, Potter covered him with the duvet and left, only to return a few minutes later with a potion bottle in his hand and dressed only in his pyjama bottoms. For a second, Draco did not know whether to be mortified or relieved. It seemed that Potter had actually accepted his invitation made in jest! But he really did not want to be left alone right now. On the other hand, Potter could have put on more clothes. Oh well, it was not as if he would wake and embarrass himself until the potion wore off some twelve

hours later. By that time, Potter would not be there anymore.

That was why he didn’t say anything when Potter lifted the covers and slipped beneath them, lifting Draco's head just enough to administer the potion so he wouldn’t choke on it, then making himself comfortable. At least, that was what Draco thought Potter was still in the middle of doing when the Dreamless Sleep Potion spread through his system and sleep claimed him.

Only, that was not what happened. Draco really should have known better; Potter had never been able to follow the rules, written or unwritten.

He woke up to the hushed sounds of a conversation between Potter and Granger – or was it the comforting feeling of fingers rhythmically brushing through his hair? He did not know, nor did he care. The only thing he knew was that it was quiet in his head: no memories trying to force their way into his thoughts, no vertigo, and no headache. His mind was comfortably numb. He was tucked away between soft, warm blankets and the best ever pillow in the world: something supple, laced with inner warmth, its magic charging Draco's skin with static energy, and smelling of sex. It felt strange: having an erection without feeling the urge to take care of it, and instead being content to just enjoy the complex sensations his arousal supplied him with. It could only have been better if someone gave his feet and lower back a thorough rubbing.

He inhaled the scent deeply, burrowing himself into the secure feeling surrounding him and wallowing in the half-awake half-asleep state he did not intend to abandon unless forced. He took in the spoken words, but his mind did not bother connecting their meaning with his situation or assigning any feelings to them.

"So… Ron told me about a certain bloke…" Granger's voice whispered.

"Oh, don't start, Hermione! Not you, too!" Potter whined in answer.

"But honestly, it's just sex. And it isn't as if you'd have betrayed him. Why didn't you just accept?"

The fingers combing through his tresses suddenly stopped, then resumed their continual movement.

"I… I just wasn't in the right mood…" But, even in this state, Draco could tell Potter was lying. "Besides, he's a lousy bottom."

"Well, then you could have let him top; you wouldn't have died from it…"

A slight shudder passed through his pillow following those words.

"Oh, shut up, Hermione. You don't know everything about me. For your information, I actually like bottoming. Don't laugh. Yes, the truth is out. I can see the headlines: "The Great Saviour of the Wizarding World Takes It Up the Arse!" They both dissolved in silent laughter.

"What?" Granger asked, gasping for air.

"Oh, I just would have never thought I'd have a conversation about the joys of gay sex with Miss Prim and Proper!" Potter's voice sounded like he was grinning. Draco was actually surprised and not surprised at the same time at how accurately his mind's eye was able to paint the picture of that grin for him.

"It's Mrs. Prim and Proper to you!" Draco heard a noise that sounded like Granger swatting Potter lightly on the arm.

"So, you've decided to go for it?" Potter's voice softened while Granger's took up a mock-insulted tone.

"Why? Did you think I'd go to all the trouble and then not take advantage of it for myself?"

Potter didn't answer, except for lifting his other palm that had been resting on Draco's back without him even having realised it before, most likely to hold her hand with it. Draco was just about to voice his

disappointment about its disappearance when it returned to its former position.

"I'm happy for you," Potter whispered after long silence.

"I am, too. I hope it'll turn out all right for you, too," Draco heard Granger's muffled voice.

"Yes, well, I'm working on it…" Potter said, his fingers beginning to massage the sensitive spot at Draco's nape, which made Draco curl around his pillow and purr with contentment. There was a light laughing noise coming from somewhere above, but the movement had been, apparently, too sluggish for them to suspect that he was not exactly sleeping.

"Harry Potter!" Granger laughed. "You're too sneaky for a Gryffindor! Tell me about it!"

Potter snorted softly. "Well, Mickey played a part in it – even though he didn't know it, and it wasn't even planned. But I don't kiss and tell. And besides, I just know he would somehow be alerted by his superhuman eavesdropping-sense, wake up and overhear it, and that is certainly not a part of the plan."

"Ooh! That means there is something to tell!" Granger said conspiratorially. Unfortunately, it was that moment that Draco felt a strong prickling of magic radiating from Potter and he dropped off again.

The next time he woke up – alone this time, to his great relief – there were two thoughts chasing each other in his mind. The first was that Potter must have cast a Sleeping Charm on him to secure that his little secret remained hidden from Draco's listening ears. He wondered whether Potter had been able to actually feel that he was awake, or if it had been just a precaution. The second was a much simpler thought, but brought with it feelings Draco was sure he wouldn't be able to reconcile himself with in the near future. Bloody hell! Was I really using Potter's lap as a pillow!?

Now, with a clear mind, he faintly remembered Podmore asking Potter to keep watch on him. That was probably why he had stayed, and not because he had taken his mock-invitation at face value, as Draco's muddled mind had interpreted the events last night. And then Granger must have come to talk to Potter before she had left – and that meant she had witnessed Draco disgracing himself by being draped around one of Potter's thighs… Draco certainly hoped that she had not noticed his stiffy curling upwards

under his belly, or that he had sniffled Potter's… Maybe he had not been as obvious about it as his over-active imagination painted it. He found himself both aroused and mortified by the remembrance.

As soon as his first shock of the morning was over, he realised that he actually felt considerably better – not only compared to last night, but to the last month as well. Everything seemed much clearer, even though he had not woken up a changed person – thank Merlin. At least the hole in his mind was gone… most of it. Still, he spent the rest of the morning and the better part of the forenoon trying to piece together his memories so they would make sense, instead of being a jumble in his mind.

It was strange, actually. He had expected – feared – that when he regained his memories, they would supply him with a different world view, or at least give him a reason why he had been attracted to Potter in the past – which would have explained his present attraction – but there was no such explanation ready. He had been just as clueless then as he was now, and had been acting the same: sweeping everything that could be dangerous under the carpet instead of trying to sort things out in his mind.

The only tangible difference had been that then he had accepted his attraction as something that just was there, instead of denying it and trying to fight it. But in that situation, he guessed, such behaviour made sense. Now, when there was no war and Dark Lord threatening his life, he had no valid excuse to continue on that track. But, since digging to the roots of his motivations for being attracted to a man seemed a rather huge undertaking, he reckoned that it could wait until he had other things, like establishing whether or not he would be allowed to marry Potter, for example, straightened out properly.

He was still surprised that, when he tried to remember things from his past, they came to him readily. There were some he still omitted reminiscing about when he was awake, thank you very much. Even if he had not been in love with Potter, he had still allowed him to shag him - and without being able to blame it on the convenient excuse of having been in love and therefore acting unreasonably… He could not even excuse it as a plan to get into Potter's good graces, because he distinctly remembered coming back for more even after they had that little talk. But then a small voice in his head he now recognised as his seventeen year old self asked: Why? Why should he be ashamed of it?

That was a question his feelings were still conflicted about. On one side, his pure-blood upbringing was embarrassed about his inability to handle the situation correctly. It was one thing to blame it on having been young and curious, and another to stoop to the same behavioural failure with an adult mind. On the other hand, he could not understand why a relationship with someone of the same sex should be considered wrong and unethical if the only thing against it was that some people frowned upon it.

It was not as if he had so much to lose in the eyes of public after having been outed as a sodomite, and he was not even in the position to deny it, seeing that he was carrying another man's child. The bridges he had to that part of society had been clearly and irrevocably burned behind him – partly by his own doing. Perhaps it was time to identify with a different segment of the wizarding world – the one consisting of witches and wizards who supported people like him. And if that decision required him to mingle with Mudbloods, half-bloods and blood traitors…

It was a well-known – even if, by his kind, not recognised – fact that a significant and ever growing part of the wizarding society now consisted of the above mentioned folk. Pure-blood families might still have the majority of the political power in the Ministry, but with the slow migration of economic influence to the other side, Draco did not see that power lasting for much longer. If anything, Granger's election as Minister of Magic had been a foreshadowing to take seriously.

Even the last Dark Lord had been a half-blood, for Merlin's sake. The change had begun decades earlier and there was no stopping it now. However much certain conservative, pure-blood families wished to return the world to old traditions, they simply lacked the power necessary to achieve it and with time's passing, their influence would dwindle further. It was not very Slytherin to stay devoted to a cause so clearly lost. It was high time for Draco to abandon the sinking ship and switch to another as well...

The only question remaining was whether or not he should give free reign to this apparently mutual interest with Potter, or try to rein it for modesty's sake, at least until they were married and not living under the same roof with other people. He decided that he would not feel guilty about taking what felt good for him, whether there were emotions involved or not. He was a Malfoy. Since when did Malfoys put a priority on such sentimental nuisances? His subconscious was still acting strangely and he could not really decide whether to like or be spooked by his body’s reactions to the other wizard, and what they might mean… He still had not entirely discarded his father's idea that a spell on Potter could have brought this about, but he also realised he did not really care either way.

Even if Potter did not have feelings for him, at least he was still attracted to him. That attraction should be enough so Draco would not have to be afraid of being disgraced by his… husband being caught in indiscreet dalliances. The fact that Draco's body and mind now did not seem that averse to the idea of granting Potter his needs would both make it easier to work out a living arrangement with Potter and provide him with… physical satisfaction. Surely, Potter would not reject him just because there were no tender feelings between them. Even in marriages that had once started as love, it was rare that the feelings lasted until death. The physical attraction was there and it would have to be enough. Certainly, it

was more than what Potter could have expected of him, had the curse not been broken…

His thoughts turned to the Pensieve and the conversation between his parents he had heard coming from the adjacent room. His father had partly blamed himself for Draco's predicament. Draco had been able to deduce from the fragments of his recollections even before last night that his fleeing with Potter and being ensconced by the Order had been at least partly pre-arranged by his father – and perhaps even the Dark Lord. Now, thinking back, he had either had damned good luck to have been able to pull that off, or… they had deliberately let them escape.

In a way, it made sense: it had looked like the Dark Lord had already won. Word had spread among the Dark Lord's servants that the Ministry had surrendered to him – even if not publicly – in exchange for the empty promise of his not hurting families not involved in the war. They really should have known that the Dark Lord had not intended to keep his word once he had obtained what he wanted. It must have not seemed a great sacrifice, from his perspective, to let Potter flee. Potter, after weeks of torture, had not revealed that he was in possession of some great power with which he could have killed the Dark Lord, and thus it had been assumed that there had been none. It had just been an obvious choice; instead of killing him, they would keep him alive and use him to lead them to the hiding place of the Order. It should have irked Draco that they had most likely only sent him with Potter so he would not die on the way home… and to divert suspicion from Potter who had been implanted with a Dark artefact similar to a tracking device, because clearly the Order had only suspected Draco carrying one…

And then it had already been too late, when they discovered the object that had been injected into Potter's body. The magic in it was not enough to allow other people to be transported to a location protected by the Fidelius Charm, but it was enough for the Death Eaters to determine exactly where said location had been – or to be more precise, where it had not been. And then they were there…

But wait! Wasn't there some other thing before? What about the plan Potter had talked about? The plan which required Draco's memory be modified – no, memories. There were more, not just the one about that fake love confession. Now that he thought about it some more and considered what exactly happened, he realised that the memory about the two of them hiding in the woods after their escape wasn't real either. But, as opposed to the other one, he could not dig out any remembrances to replace the false ones. Perhaps it was time to talk to Potter about that.

Draco dragged himself out of the dishevelled bed, wishing he did not have to go out in order to address his need for a hot shower. An en suite bathroom would have been nice. He realised that now it was time to consider buying his own house. With his memories back, he was not required to stay at The Burrow

any longer.

The house was unusually silent, compared to what Draco was used to enduring. He did not meet a single person on his way to the bathroom. He heard Mrs. Weasley listening to the WWN and singing the lines she knew while pots and pans added their clangs and clinks to the general racket. The noises coming from outside indicated that some sort of Quidditch game was going on, so perhaps that was why no one was inside. The clock on the living room wall told Draco that it was already four in the afternoon. No wonder he was feeling peckish.

He took his time in the bathroom until his stomach reminded him again and again that he had missed lunch. So he got out of the water – it had gone cold anyway – dressed and then released the Locking Charm on the door. He did not fancy repeating the stunt with Potter opening the door on him again when he was not dressed – let alone anyone else – so he had taken to using it while he was bathing. Podmore had told him, after setting up the magical link with Potter, that he was free to use magic from then on.

He found Potter outside – just as he had expected. But to his astonishment, he was not playing Quidditch with the gaggle of Weasleys flying high in the air, but – to all appearances – was trying to teach Pinky how to fly on a broom, supporting the girl's substantial girth with both hands while he talked to her animatedly. It was obvious at first sight that she was enjoying herself immensely, hovering in the air at a height of two feet with Potter's old Firebolt between her legs. Draco felt his heart suddenly in his throat and he broke out in a run as quickly as a belly the size of a Bludger allowed him to. Fortunately, he did not have to go a long way to reach them.

"Potter! What the hell are you doing!" he yelled after pulling Pinky off of the dangerous object – just a second before Potter would have let her go fly on her own.

Potter looked at him with a flabbergasted expression. "Teaching her to fly, obviously," he said. "What's wrong with that? I thought wizards taught their children to fly early."

"Yes, but not on a racing broom, for Merlin's sake! There are toy brooms for that," Draco told him with obvious disdain in his voice. Now that Pinky was off the broom and the danger was over, he was feeling a bit ashamed about his strong emotional reaction. "I hope you are going to be a bit more careful with your own child," he spat. He did not understand why that was a reason for Potter to break out in a smile

– he clearly did not mean it to be encouraging.

"I take it you are feeling better." Potter grinned at him.

Draco rolled his eyes, but before saying something along the lines that it was not Potter's doing, he remembered waking up snuggled into Potter's lap and felt his face flush with heat.

"You still owe me some explanations," he told Potter, turning around and looking, for all intents and purposes, as if he were admiring the still snowy countryside, trying to will away the unwelcome blush.

"Let's go inside." He heard Potter's voice. It suddenly sounded more serious than just a few seconds before.

Draco followed him on the short path of downtrodden snow leading to the house, while Pinky was running circles around them with a speed that was rather surprising, considering her physique. Draco guessed she was just fuelled by anticipation for the Pumpkin Pasty Potter had promised to get her from Mrs. Weasley. Personally, Draco thought Potter should not allow her to eat so much if he did not want her to turn out like Crabbe and Goyle, but when he had made a remark on that in the past, Potter had looked at him as if he were a sadistic child-abuser and had told him that he would never starve a child on purpose. Draco supposed that was just one of Potter's many quirks he would have to get used to, once they actually started to live together.

After depositing Pinky in the kitchen to 'help' Mrs. Weasley cook dinner (she was holding a fake wand and tried to mimic Mrs. Weasley's incantations, squealing delightedly at the sight of plates and pans swirling in the air above her head and various chopped ingredients jumping into one of the pots by magic) Potter went into the lounge. Just when Draco was about to ask him whether they could take this discussion to a more private place, he threw a handful of Floo powder into the crackling fire and put his head into the flames. Draco did not hear whom he had called, but a few seconds later, the fire flared green again and Granger stepped out of the fireplace, dusting soot off her robes.

"Your room or mine?" Potter asked, speaking to Draco for the first time since they had entered the house.

"Either," Draco said, shrugging. He was not that surprised when, on their way up the stairs, Potter walked past his door without any indication of stopping. Draco figured Potter's room was more isolated, being the only one on the top storey, and Draco had told him he did not care, after all. Granger conjured a chair and made herself at home without waiting for an invitation first. Draco supposed she had been in there enough beforehand to excuse her familiarity with the place. But, despite her relaxed manner, her expression was all business. Draco was not really surprised when, instead of Potter, it was she who finally spoke to him.

"So. I heard you succeeded in breaking the curse that had been affecting your memory and your attitude lately," she began. It figured that she would not fall into the trap of being slack about her definitions.

"That's what I was told," Draco answered after sitting down – also without being offered a seat first – on top of Potter's bed. He was a bit taken aback when Potter settled himself next to him without a word. "However," he continued, hoping he was masking his now slightly flustered state, "there are still holes in my memory. And I am sure it does not surprise anyone in this room when I say that all of those seem to focus around a certain… plan."

Granger nodded, her face serious. "What do you want to know?" she asked.

"I guess, since you're the ones with your memories intact, it would be more appropriate for you to be in charge of this conversation." Draco hit the Bludger back at the other two.

"Right," Potter said, but at the look Granger gave him, he promptly decided to keep his contribution to the conversation limited to answering the questions that were specifically asked of him and letting Granger handle it otherwise.

"I gather you know that there was some kind of plan," she started, still in the middle of gathering her thoughts, judging from her slightly unfocussed gaze. "Do you know what it was?"

Draco shook his head 'no'.

"All right then, I guess I better start at the beginning." And then she began with the tale of Draco's and Potter's escape from the Dark Lord's captivity. To say that the story was slightly different from what Draco had remembered would have been an understatement.

According to her words, after Draco had used his Portkey to transport them out of the place, Potter had suddenly come to himself and Apparated the both of them to the front of Order headquarters with Draco as his captive. It took some time until he had managed to change that status – and some fairly nasty sessions with Mad-Eye Moody and generous amounts of Veritaserum that, in retrospect, Draco was glad not to have memories about. Then, by the time other people had noticed, he and Potter had already been shagging – how it had come to that she didn't elaborate on, which Draco could understand and was actually thankful for. There would always be time to ask Potter the question once they were alone.

Then she spoke about the discovery of the device the Death Eaters had planted in Potter's body, and how the situation had required fast thinking. The adults around them had objected to anything that could have been even remotely risky for the 'children' involved, so they had no other choice but to take the situation into their own hands. Apparently, that kind of action had been a common occurrence in Potter's history, and they really should have known better by then. Draco wondered just why he had been stupid enough to co-operate with them instead of running as far away as he could, but from as much as he was able to deduce from Granger's explanation, it had had something to do with his parents. Apparently, he had thought he would be able to save them from the certain doom they would have inevitably faced when the Dark Lord was felled by Potter's hand.

The plan had been simple, even if its implementation had been nothing of the sort. They had known that the Death Eaters would arrive eventually. Actually, it had been Lucius Malfoy who had contacted Draco and told him to expect him while the other minions of the Dark Lord handled the Order. They had known that Draco's first trip would lead to the Dark Lord, who would use Legilimency to find out what Draco had learnt about the light side and Potter. It would have been a mistake – or so they had thought – if they did not use that to their benefit.

"That's why we decided to create the false memories and replace your own with them," Granger said, seemingly having finished her explanation.

"All right, I understand that. But one of the things I don't get is why you… or should I say, we, felt the

need to make the Dark Lord believe that Potter was in love with me?" Draco asked, leaving out the part about his alleged feelings for Potter.

"Two reasons." Granger launched into another explanation. "First, we wanted him to think he would be able to get Harry to go out and confront him if he thought that his 'love' was in mortal peril. You-Know-Who had no understanding of sentiments like love, so he tended to underestimate people's reactions concerning them. I think he preferred to think of it as a weakness, since Professor Dumbledore had told him that it would play a role in his downfall. We wanted him to come out of his hiding place, thinking that Harry would act irrationally and rush to his own demise without thinking in order to free the one he loved, thus presenting an easy target for him."

"And the second reason?"

"We thought he would want to keep you alive if he thought he could use you against Harry."

Draco nodded. That kind of made sense.

"But why did you modify my memories about our escape? Was it to make the… romantic involvement more believable?" he asked, frowning.

Granger looked at Potter and stayed silent. Potter pursed his lips before taking up the thread of the explanation.

"That was part of it, but mostly we didn't want Voldemort to learn from your memories how… strong I had become," Potter muttered, wincing when he got to the end.

"You had?" Draco asked, rolling his eyes. He remembered that when he had thought of Potter and the Dark Lord's final encounter, there had been no doubt in his mind about who would win in the end, and it had not been the Dark Lord. After all, he would not have agreed to the plan to save his parents from Azkaban by Potter making it seem as if they had been in on it from the beginning had he not been certain Potter would actually win..

Interesting that he would only remember that bit of information now. But it did not really make any sense otherwise. Why else would he have wanted to go back to a place where he had been in danger: back to Lord Voldemort who, without doubt, had been out for his hide ever since he had fled and had taken Potter with him? He could not even have expected understanding and forgiveness from his parents. Actually, he was surprised he had got away with only having his memories removed by his father, instead of his genitals, for having had an affair with Potter, but he supposed that they had been thought necessary for him to sire the next Malfoy heir. Before last night, he had only remembered that he had had to go back to be there for his parents, but that would not make sense, had he still believed in the Dark Lord's victory. While Malfoys were loyal to their family – like pure-bloods in general – this loyalty did not extend to the point of self-sacrifice. No Malfoy had ever been sorted into Hufflepuff, after all.

"Do you know the prophecy?" Potter asked, seemingly changing the topic, but Draco suspected there was more behind the question than a simple evasion attempt.

"In essence," he answered. Who would not know it, when the Prophet had printed it in its entirety or quoted fragments in almost every article that had only the slightest to do with Potter's defeat of the Dark Lord?

"Then you know about 'the power to defeat the Dark Lord', as well, I assume." Draco nodded for Potter to continue. "And how about the Horcruxes?"

"I only know what the Prophet wrote about them. They were powerful Dark artefacts somehow responsible for keeping the Dark Lord among the living," Draco said. He thought he was beginning to see a pattern there.

"There were six of them," Potter continued. "Three of them had already been destroyed by the time we started our sixth year at Hogwarts." That was something Draco did not know about, but he only indicated his surprise by raising a brow. He did not want to delay the explanation by asking questions. "One was destroyed when I was a baby – by a Death Eater, ironically. Actually, he was the younger brother of my godfather. See, there was a theory that it was destroyed exactly at the time Voldemort tried to murder me in my crib, but of course, that cannot be proven, seeing as it was never found." That seemed to irk him for some reason, judging from the grimace distorting his face.

"The second, I destroyed in my second year…" This time Draco barely refrained from voicing his shock. "And the third was neutralised by Professor Dumbledore in the summer before sixth year."

Potter paused and he looked like he had been caught by his own thoughts. But Draco was too impatient to wait until he emerged from them on his own.

"And this is important because…?" he asked. He actually jumped a bit when the response came from his side; he had forgotten – again – that Granger was there as well.

"Harry experienced a growth in power after the destruction of each Horcrux. He lived when he should have died from the Killing Curse. Then, in his third year, he was already a strong enough wizard to master the Patronus Charm, and in sixth year…" Potter hissed at her to stop, but she only gave him a disparaging glare and continued. "In our sixth year, I'm sure you remember that time in Myrtle's bathroom when Harry 'accidentally' cast a Dark spell on you that he had never before used, let alone knew what it did." It was clear from her tone that this was still a sore topic between them. On second thought, Draco didn't feel very lenient about it either, and he joined her with his own glare directed at the culprit, who looked like he would rather be somewhere else right at that moment.

"It was an accident, how many times do you want me to apologise for it, Hermione?"

"As many times as it takes for you to admit your irresponsibility in the matter," she hissed.

"Funny how I never heard you apologising to me," Draco added.

"Well, I have," Potter grumbled and gave him a dark look. "And then I listened to your apology about the Cruciatus Curse and we both decided to let bygones be bygones," he said.

"Oh. Right," Draco said, looking away. It was not his fault his memory was a bit chaotic and he still needed prompts to remember certain events.

There was a few seconds' silence after that, which Potter broke first.

"Okay, then, where was I?"

"Growth in power," Granger murmured distractedly.

"Thanks," Potter said to her and then turned back to Draco. "So, at first it wasn't obvious, you know. They thought…"

"That you were just that powerful?" Draco asked when he saw that the other was not about to continue. Potter shrugged. Draco could not really fault him there; he had thought the same, after all.

"…But later, after I destroyed the other Horcruxes, too, it became rather noticeable."

"And you got your final rise when you killed the Dark Lord." Draco could not resist voicing his conclusion. Potter nodded, but he made it clear that he was not going to talk about that one.

"You might or might not know that I was caught by the Death Eaters after I killed Nagini."

"I heard." Draco nodded. His father had told him about that part. "It's just like your luck, Potter, to stumble into a giant snake first upon entering the Dark Lord's dungeon."

"Actually, I went there to find her," Potter said, causing Draco to lift a brow. "She was the last Horcrux.

"You see, whenever a Horcrux was destroyed by someone else, the rise of power was gradual over a period of time, or at least I think it was with the first one. But when I destroyed it with my own hands, I got it all at once. No wonder I was caught; I was pretty out of it after that last one… though Voldemort

must have thought that his minions had already started without him, judging from the state I was in. It never even occurred to him until the end…"

Draco lifted a hand for Potter to stop.

"Are you saying that you had not been tortured when I found you in the dungeon but were recuperating from a power infusion?" he asked, baffled.

"I think they might have tried, but I was not of much use in that state. Not very responsive, you know… Not to mention, Voldemort was close and in a bad temper. I had a headache like I had been hit by a Bludger and fallen twenty feet from my broom. Yeah. Exactly like that." Potter grimaced, wincing at the memory.

"So… are you telling me that you altered my memory so the Dark Lord wouldn't know that you could defeat him?"

Potter nodded once. "And also, because we didn't want him to know that his Horcruxes had all been destroyed."

"But what does that have to do with the prophecy?" Draco asked, hoping to get some clarification.

"Some people thought that this was the power the prophecy spoke of – the one that could destroy You-Know-Who," Granger spoke again.

"And? Was it?" Draco was too tempted to know not to ask.

"Dumbledore said it was love," Potter muttered, looking at his hands.

"That means," Granger continued the explanation again, "no one really knows. Perhaps it was, perhaps it

was not. Perhaps they were both. Or something else entirely. That only shows Divination is not a very reliable branch of magic," she told him with conviction. Draco did not really care either way.

There was silence again, but even Potter must have known it was not the end of the explanations needed by far, only a pause to allow for thought.

"And why, pray tell, Granger, did you feel the need to make me believe I was sodding in love with Potter? And while we are on the topic, how the bloody hell did you manage to do that in the first place?" Draco asked, the anger flaring up suddenly palpable in his voice.

"Oh." She blinked a few times, but, to Draco's surprise, she withstood his glare without any indication of feeling guilty about it. Draco supposed that she was not the only one responsible, after all. "I didn't have much experience in creating memories. I knew the Dark Lord would be able to see through them, so I also added an emotional component and infused the whole with a spell to make the one who saw it want to believe in it…" That explained his father's reaction, Draco thought bitterly, while at the same time he was forced to acknowledge the sheer brilliance of that idea.

"Very clever. So how did you create those emotions? They were very… convincing…" he added. To his knowledge, no spell – save Dark magic – was capable of creating emotions out of nothing. Perhaps she just strengthened some of his latent desires about wanting to be with Potter, but he rather doubted it.

Granger began to answer his question without hesitating.

"I didn't exactly have time to research how to create emotions in a memory, you see… We asked someone to… donate."

Draco had a bad feeling about it, but he needed to know who exactly had been in his head.

"Who?"

"It was Ginny," Potter said softly. "We asked her to think of how she felt for me when we were still together and…" His voice trailed off.

Draco nodded, working hard to keep his calm when he wanted to yell or flinch with disgust. "Well, that rather explains why, at times, I had the impression I was a girl…" he commented in a tightly controlled voice devoid of any intonation. He still could not believe how easily he had let himself be deceived by that cleverly fabricated scene, but at least now that Granger explained about the compelling spell, it was easier to forgive himself for having fallen into its trap.

"Where are my original memories?" he asked, his jaw set.

"In a Pensieve," Potter told him. Draco could not tell from his expression whether or not he had noticed the bad mood Draco was in. Most likely, he did not. Stupid, stone-headed Gryffindor.

"And where the hell did you get a Pensieve?" he snapped, but then continued. "Never mind. Where is it now?"

"What do you want with it?" Granger asked, her tone cautious.

"Isn't that obvious? I want to get my memories back and get rid of the false ones. They have become rather… bothersome." Draco gritted his teeth.

"I…" Granger looked away when Draco directed his piercing glare at her.

"You have no clue, have you?" he hissed. He could not say he was particularly surprised. Why would it be important to a bunch of Gryffindors to keep something like that, after all? Before he could have exploded on her, though, Potter put a hand on one of his arms.

"We don't know because it was you who hid it somewhere. You wouldn't tell us where." And just like

that, Draco's anger suddenly deflated and gave way to depression.

"So, that means I won't be able to recover them," he growled. Potter's hand sneaked up his arm and crept around his shoulders, but he was feeling too miserable to even flinch away from the touch. And why should he, anyway?

"Well, technically, you should have regained that memory by now, too," Potter said in a light tone while rubbing his back encouragingly. Draco did not like the fact that he could not take the situation seriously. Most likely Potter was still having a field day with his earlier comment of having thought he was a girl. Gryffindors!

Wait a minute… field? Suddenly, he could see a large green oval field with three hoops on each end of it, and an old magical castle standing to its side in his mind's eye…

"Hogwarts!" he said, straightening his back, so Potter's hand fell down to the small of his back and stayed there, but Draco really couldn't care at that moment.

"Pardon?" Granger said, apparently also just jolted out of her thoughts by the unexpected exclamation.

"It's at Hogwarts," Draco repeated. "I have to go there now!"

TBC

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Chapter 36: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

16. July 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you get to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Vaughn Vance and C. Dumbledore.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

"Going out for a picnic?" Podmore accosted them while they were preparing to leave for Hogsmeade. Perhaps it had something to do with the plaited basket, padded with a chequered serviette, Potter had borrowed from Mrs. Weasley to transport the Pensieve in.

"We are going to get back my memories," Draco told him. Actually, it wasn’t a bad idea to take the Healer with them on the excursion.

"I thought you had them back already." Podmore frowned. Draco guessed he had not known about their stupid plan. No, actually, the plan had not been stupid; Draco had had a part in devising it, after all, but the implementation could have been better thought out.

"If you're going to come with us, you have exactly ten seconds to grab hold of this basket," Potter told him, counting down the last seconds with his eye on the second-hand of the wall clock. Podmore did not hesitate for a second to do as he had been told. There was no mistaking that he had once been a Gryffindor, Draco thought, but the ingrained grimace was whisked away from his face by the sudden pull behind his navel, which was nearly twice as strong than he had been used to experiencing during Portkey travels. He should have thought of inquiring about how a Portkey affected a pregnant person, but he was certain Podmore would have told him already if it were dangerous for him.

Upon landing, Draco let go of the basket, leaving it for Potter to hold, and then turned around. He expected to find himself in front of the Three Broomsticks or some other establishment, but seeing no recognisable feature in the landscape before him, he felt a bit disoriented. He couldn't see the wizard village at all. They were near the forest, so he guessed Potter had transported them somewhere with less traffic, perhaps the other side of Hogsmeade, and he began to turn around slowly and carefully, because the slightly sloping ground under his boots was spongy, and slick with water that had frozen into a dangerous icy surface under the snow and mud. Even being so careful, he almost fell, but Potter and Podmore grabbed his arms before the ground could slip from under his feet.

When he finally righted himself, his eyes fell on a sight they had not seen in several years. It took his breath away, and he realised that his memories had become woefully inadequate about the greatness of this place. The ancient castle with its hundreds of turrets and glowing windows stood proudly before him, so close that he had to lean backwards in order to get a glimpse of its highest tower.

"Hogwarts," he sighed. His heart was heavy with the remembrance of the bone-chilling dread that followed him throughout the last year he had spent inside these walls. He wished the memory had faded just a bit; alas, he could still recall how it felt all too well. Just remembering that helplessness was enough to make his throat go dry.

Apparently, the building, standing proud and timeless, had the same effect on the others as well, though most likely for different reasons, because all three stood still for a second to take in the sight and admire the beauty constructed of heavy stones.

"Hogwarts," Potter echoed Draco's earlier sigh with something akin to longing and fondness for the old castle that he had apparently been able to keep despite everything that had happened here. Draco

envied him that ability.

"Hogwarts," Granger said, too, as if that one word explained everything.

"It's only a model," Podmore added in a flippant tone, so he would not feel left out of the conversation.

Draco was jolted out of his musings, and the reverent mood all around him broke up at once. He gave the Healer a confused look. He heard Granger's uncharacteristic snort from behind his back before she started giggling, and Podmore's lips stretched into an unapologetic grin. Draco shook his head. At least he was not the only one who did not understand; judging from his perplexed expression, Potter was just as clueless as to what the other two found so amusing as Draco himself.

"Well, we shouldn’t just stand around here." Podmore spoke again and took the lead. They followed him through the main gate, which opened to them as if there were no wards to keep out those who came with the intent of harming the rightful inhabitants of the school. Well, at least they did not react to their little group passing through. Draco had been a little worried that they would not allow him inside, either because of his past deeds or because there was still some Dark Magic lingering within his blood from the Draught of Bestowed Life and the botched gender changing ritual.

The last time he had been here had been in the final month of the war, after the Dark Lord's demise, during the hunt for the remaining Death Eaters. The school had been barely more than a skeleton of itself, stripped of the majority of its magic and protections simply because there had been no wizards and witches living inside to sustain the flow. Not even the house-elves had remained. At least, the castle had still retained enough to keep the Death Eaters outside, because they would surely have laid claim on the place otherwise. It was perplexing as to why the only one of them Hogwarts had apparently allowed inside had been Draco Malfoy, but being on the flight from his former comrades and the winning side both, he had not stopped to ponder that question.

It had been curious, why he had chosen to make Hogwarts his sanctuary. There had been something calling him to the place, besides the fact that he had thought he had had a fair chance to hide himself away in the hidden recesses of the Slytherin dungeons, of which no one knew the true depth, perhaps not even Salazar Slytherin himself. At the time, he had thought that it had been the vague feeling of wanting closure, the need to achieve a mental balance between what he had done and what he had failed to do before fleeing the school in haste. He had seen it as a time to count his losses, to put closure

to that chapter of his life, and to mourn his parents' deaths alone and in peace.

Now though, he thought of it differently. There was a feeling inside him that he could not quite explain, and he just knew that the calling he had felt that time had been the subconscious recollection struggling to the surface - in vain, because his father's spell had prevented it from forming into a memory - to find that Pensieve. This time, however, there was nothing to hinder the recollection from forming a conscious thought, so it did. It told him that the Pensieve was hidden inside the castle and that he could feel his way to it through a Tracking Charm he had placed on it before transfiguring it into an innocuous object. It held memories that had been too important to him to just get rid of, even if, in order to survive the war (and for the plan to work) he had needed them out of his head.

They went through the corridors in the direction of the Headmaster's office. They couldn't just go and search through the school without getting permission to do it from Professor Flitwick first. It had been agreed that Granger would ask. Flitwick had no reason to refuse a little favour to the Minister of Magic, after all.

Once they were out of the Headmaster's office, Draco reactivated the charm and followed his wand with the other three in tow. Fortunately, lessons had already ended for the day, so he did not have to dodge students flooding the hallways. He was so used to the acceptance he had received from the various visitors at The Burrow during the last few weeks, the idea that others would probably stare at him or make snide remarks about his pregnancy only occurred to him now. It had, perhaps, not been the brightest idea to go on a Pensieve hunt immediately upon thinking of it. It probably would have been better to wait for dinnertime or the next morning, after classes had started. But now he was here, and there was no way he wanted to come back at a later time.

Surprisingly, the charm did not lead them into the dungeons, but straight away on the same floor on which the Headmaster's office was located, and to a door that had been far too familiar to Draco.

"Not here," Potter grumbled. Draco, acting as if he had not heard anything, waved his wand around a bit to make sure he was not mistaken, then he opened the creaky door to the room that looked just as rarely used as he remembered from when he had been here last time.

"What are you doing in my bathroom!" a shrill voice, echoing off the walls of a closed cubicle, asked. Then, in the next second, Moaning Myrtle appeared through the wooden door. "Oooh!" she cooed

almost instantly, taking in her visitors. "I know you, don't I?" Then she started pouting. "I thought you'd cheated me and passed on instead of coming back to me. Now, I see you're still alive!" It was troubling that Draco could not tell whether she had directed her words to him or Potter, as her eyes continued to flitter between the two of them. She did not even seem to notice the others.

"Er…" Potter said to the ghost, then obviously having decided that she was too much trouble to deal with, he turned to Draco. "Where is the Pensieve, Malfoy?" he asked.

Draco concentrated on the spell again and let his wand guide him to a washbasin that had no mirror above it, standing at the far side of the wall. He waved his wand above the off-white porcelain. Its shape distorted and shrunk down to the floor, and in the next moment, a Pensieve stood in its place, filled with clear liquid with an astonishing number of silky white threads swirling around in it. This was it, Draco thought, but his legs suddenly felt like lead and he couldn't move. He only came back to himself at Myrtle's disappointed cry.

"You aren't here to visit me? Right? You came for that… thing!" And with a last shriek and a splashing sound, she disappeared into her U-bend.

"At last," Potter murmured, then turned to him. "Well, aren't you going to retrieve your memories?"

Draco nodded stiffly, and took a step forward. He kneeled down next to the Pensieve and prepared himself to take the journey into the past. He heard the rustling of clothes and felt someone kneel down on the floor next to him. Potter must have realised that he was going to need support so he didn't hit his head falling into the Pensieve if the memories inside it proved too… captivating. Draco heaved a deep breath and took the plunge.

He found himself in a swirling mass of memories: there were too many of them to stay in one, and Draco had had a bit of practice at how to prevent being captured by a single memory when looking into a Pensieve. He managed to stay above the swirling mass and take them in as he chose – it was a bit like practicing Legilimency, except that there was no living mind behind the memories, no will that was directing the flow of thoughts or trying to wrestle him out.

He leafed through the threads one by one, not lingering too long in any of them, as to not to get

involved, but spending enough time to see what they were about and to decide whether or not he wanted them back in his head. Everything was there: the broken chips of reality mixed with images created by Granger and then either discarded in favour of a more developed one or because they didn't fit the whole. They had already fallen to pieces, revealing the chips and fissures, but it was clear that this had been the material they had used as a basis for the creation. Some of them still made Draco blush, thinking of how much Granger had seen of the physical aspects of his liaison with Harry.

The disembodied emotion contributed by Ginny Weasley was also there; it swam disjointedly from the other threads, and Draco was able to discern it easily from the others. It had a certain alien quality that not even the memories created by Granger's fantasy bore, which noticeably separated it from everything else in the Pensieve. Draco silently congratulated Granger for having managed to integrate it so well into his consciousness that he had not felt the difference, even after he had started suspecting that something wasn't right with it. He shoved the scrap as far from himself as he could – just being near it made him shiver with distaste.

He knew he should hurry up. This was not really the right time to be going through these memories. He should not take his time with them, only confirm they were his, and then get out, pack up the Pensieve, and take it home with him. It would be easier to study the contents in peace and in a more comfortable setting than kneeling on a cold, hard, and filthy bathroom floor. But he could not help acting on the sudden urgency that told him that he had to go through them - that he had to find something important that was in there. He grabbed the threads hurriedly, one by one, taking in what they contained and then discarding them almost instantly in rapid succession. He did not even know what he was searching for, but he was certain that he would know once he had found it.

Then came the part he had been dreading – the fabricated memory with him and Harry saying those three doomed words. It was impossible to stay out of the memory, even though he must have seen it a dozen times before. He slipped into it without noticing, and then he became so ensnared by it that he forgot everything about his initial reasons of why he should not stay. He knew exactly how everything happened. He could tell almost to the second when Harry would lift his hand, when his mouth would curl into a smile, or when he would say those words.

It gave him a strange emptiness inside: watching it without the compelling emotion – the illusion of love – attached to it. It felt as if time moved quicker – there was nothing, absolutely nothing inside Draco to force it to stop for an infinite second while the universe stood still to listen to Harry saying those words.

Without the emotion blurring his perception and make him see Harry as someone loving him back the

same way Draco had thought he had loved him, Draco was able to detect the imperfections in his performance. It was a sobering experience, and made Draco conscious of the fact that it had been all just an act even more.

Of course, Draco should have expected it to be like this; he still didn't know how his mind managed to forget about Potter's confession made under the influence of Veritaserum, when he had told Draco that he had not been in love with him. The Harry in this memory sounded forced. Potter had not been a very good actor, Draco realised; not when it concerned faking emotions, at least. Granger must have smoothed over the little nuances in his acting: the minute flickering of his expression, the slight catching of his tongue when he said 'love', and the grimace his face pulled into after a second of frozen silence. Draco realised that the original memory that he had seen had stopped before that part.

He was trying to quell the surging feeling of stark disappointment and the memory had been over for several seconds before Draco realised that he had already been spat out of the Pensieve and was staring into the empty space in front of him forlornly, while half-listening to the others' muted whispering behind his back about whether or not they should pull him out. He kept the sigh that wanted to break free of him inside and moved to stand up. His legs had grown numb from having sat on his heels for so long – he assumed it had been long, because the cold and the pain from kneeling on the hard stone floor felt like a permanent addition to his knees now.

They must have noticed the slight movement, because the two wizards were instantly there, their hands grabbing Draco around his shoulders and pulling him up, helping him to stand. Draco felt tired, worn out, though he didn't really do anything; he had just spent too much time in the same position. His joints cracked when he straightened out his legs, and the slow trickle of Potter's magic seeping into him startled him into a slight jump. He didn’t know why he had thought that the link would be severed as soon as he got his memories back…

"Are you all right, Draco?" Podmore asked, his brows furrowed into a scowl. Draco didn't answer, except for a small dismissing nod of his head, while he observed Potter bending down to collect the Pensieve with the help of Granger, who prepared the basket for him to put it in. First, they tried to lift it up, but it was too heavy and too full. Finally, Granger transfigured the stone basin into a corked wine bottle, muttering that it already had been transfigured once, so it wouldn't matter either way.

"Are you sure? You look shaken," Podmore said, waving that annoying wand over his head again, but Draco managed to smooth out the wrinkles of irritation on his face and stood rigidly under the scrutiny. He hoped that the Healer would understand that he was not in the mood to spill his soul now – or,

rather, not ever. Malfoys didn't get sentimental, and it was time for Draco to remember who he was and get a grip of himself, before he broke down in front of his adoring public because of something like this. Why was it even affecting him in the first place?

"We can go now," Granger said in a low voice, as if she had instinctively adjusted it to Draco's state of mind, though most likely she just didn't want to attract the attention of the meddling ghost again. She stood up and turned towards them with Potter behind her, holding the basket.

They made their way out of the castle in nearly oppressive silence, their steps echoing through the empty hallways. Draco didn't even look back after stepping out of the gates and grabbing Potter's Portkey-basket again.

The travel back wrung him out more than the first time; he felt as if the lump inside his belly was pulled out of him through the narrow path of his navel, and he was profoundly glad when they arrived, and it finally stopped. Even if he knew that the feeling had no base in reality, it was creepy and very unpleasant, bordering on painful. In addition to the physical tiredness, he was mentally aching from the experience with the Pensieve. Going through those memories systematically and concentrating on not allowing himself to be dragged into them took a lot out of him, which had only now begun to kick in. He only wanted to hole up in his room and take a much needed nap – even if he had already spent the majority of the day in his bed.

He allowed Potter to follow him into his room with the basket and place it next to the side table, since it was not large enough to hold it. With a silence punctuated by a stony expression on his face, he made it glaringly obvious that he did not want any company right now. He hoped he made it obvious, at least.

"Do you want me to transfigure it back for you?" Potter asked, lingering on the spot hesitantly after he had let go of the basket.

"I'm not an invalid or a Squib, so no, thank you," Draco filtered the words through his teeth, exerting an immense effort to stay calm and refrain from yelling at Potter to leave him alone. "I'd appreciate a little privacy now, if you don't mind," he told him instead, his tone distant and dismissive.

Potter nodded, still tentative about whether or not he should take Draco's words at face value, but then,

thank Merlin, he left the room.

Draco descended on top of his bed with a weary sigh and toed off his boots. His feet were throbbing and so was his spine – not to mention his head. The headache was nothing alike the one induced by the curse he had had to suffer on a regular basis, but that was not to say it was any better. In fact, the only thing worse than those headaches had been, was his current mood.

He groaned and settled his weight on top of the blankets, not bothering to undress. He did not plan on missing dinner completely, after all, he just needed some time to himself, to think things through. He lay on his side, facing his window, and stared at the small snowflakes that began to fall from the heavily laden skies, swirling in front of the glass pane. It was almost dark outside, making him conscious that he must have spent a lot of time inside the Pensieve, after all.

He could not explain the sudden compulsion that had taken him and forced him to go through those memories. Just what had he hoped to find? No, that question was unnecessary. Now he knew exactly what he had been searching for, even if it was hard for him to admit it. Briefly, he wondered whether it would be the same if his search had brought success. But mulling over that was a moot point, so he forced himself to stop. So what if he had not loved Potter? He was Draco Malfoy, and not some simpering Hufflepuff.

He did not understand what made him think that Granger hadn't been right in her assumption. Why had he thought there must have been something she had not been aware of? Knowing his own secretive nature, had there been some feelings involved on his part, Draco was sure he would not have let anyone in on it, save perhaps Potter. But no, on second thought, Potter would have been the last person to know. Draco's subconscious was right to assume that if he had felt something, no one save himself would have known about it, but he did not understand how that had translated into the unlikely conviction that he must have. And why had the realisation that that conviction had turned out to be false caused him such a shock?

He knew why. Deep down, even if he did not want to admit it to himself, he had hoped to find something… anything, just a small spark, a breathless second or a kiss to blow up the universe… to prove that it hadn't just been about teenage hormones and being afraid of dying before they had the opportunity to have a real relationship with someone… But there had been nothing. Nothing. There really had been no feelings between them besides perhaps a twisted kind of friendship and the novelty of a physical relationship. If there was nothing, why did it hurt like something?

He still remembered the agitation with which he had gone through the Pensieve's contents, as if he had to know immediately. He had been watching intently and searching. Searching for something, but there was nothing: not a sparkle of emotions within the swirling memories. Oh, there had been lust and attraction. But that was everything he had found – not that he should have been expecting more, he admonished himself, angry about the stupid expectation that had managed to blacken his mood, and turned to his other side.

His mind knew it, but his heart had still been convinced of the opposite. And how come even knowing there was a spell on that foolish fabrication to make him believe in it, or after learning that the feelings hadn't really been his, he still felt them to his core, felt a desire for them to have been true… Why couldn’t he resist the lure? he thought furiously.

He realised that it was because it gave him an obscure sense of security: belonging to someone and knowing that that wouldn't change if he found himself suddenly on the bottom of society, out of luck, prestige and money. A true Malfoy, like his father, would not have submitted himself to something as harmful and destructive as falling in love. But then again, a true Malfoy would never have experienced losing everything he had taken for granted. It was no wonder he was now clinging to the last straw available, and it was really poor judgement from his subconscious: the role of that last straw being given to Potter, but looking at it from that viewpoint, it seemed a bit more understandable if not comprehensible.

There was a knock on his door, and he jumped up into a sitting position, smoothing down his hair and his robes. Then the door opened and Ginny Weasley's face appeared in the gap.

"Malfoy, dinner is ready."

"Thank you. I'll be down in a minute," he said, trying to compose himself. Weasley nodded, and closed the door. Draco could hear her footsteps going down the rickety staircase.

When he entered the kitchen, he found himself in the middle of a small crowd he had not expected. He had assumed that there had been no dinner with the whole Order planned, but apparently, it was girls' night because the table was surrounded by the Weasley women and other female Order members their age, whom Draco only knew one by name: Katie Bell, because of her past as a professional Quidditch

player. All of them were either pregnant or with a small child on their laps. Draco did not like how well he fit into this little gathering, despite being the wrong gender. Actually, the only three who seemed to stick out were the three career-men and woman: Potter, Granger and Podmore.

The dinner passed in a tranquil atmosphere. Either no one wanted him involved in the conversation or they understood that he was not in a talkative mood – let's not kid, when had he ever been, surrounded by the current company? Only Potter could not refrain from giving him a few suspicious glances, and Draco could tell he was dying to ask something – most likely what his problem was. Draco was not about to ever let him know, though. The possibility of Potter finding out about his little emotional crisis and its cause was just too embarrassing to even think about, let alone consider making it happen voluntarily. Therefore, Draco avoided Potter's eyes, staring into his plate instead and listening to the conversation going on above his head. The main topics were small children and family affairs, and frankly, he was not in the mood to appreciate it.

After the dinner ended, everyone went to the lounge except Potter, who stayed behind to help Mrs. Weasley clean and put away the dishes. Draco wondered whether he did that every time, or if it was somehow for his benefit. Or, he realised, taking in Granger's annoyed expression, to stall some more before he had to submit himself to some kind of heart-to-heart with her he was apparently not looking forward to.

Draco sat down in a tattered but very comfortable armchair, which was conveniently in a secluded corner of the lounge, and occupied himself with a book randomly chosen from the nearby bookshelf. After reading the first three pages, he noticed that it was a tacky romance novel already read to tatters. He was about to replace it on the shelf when he heard his name spoken in a hushed tone coming from the group of young mothers, and after listening some more, he gathered that some of them wanted to invite him into their merry gathering. Oh no! Draco changed his mind abruptly and concentrated with every bit of his awareness on the story. Perhaps, if he looked busy, they wouldn’t bother him.

After a few minutes, he completely forgot about the company, and he was only jolted out of the book when he heard his name again some of an quarter hour later. He sharpened his ears, and was able to establish that this time they did not want him to join; they were just speaking about him. He did not understand why the incessant amount of giggling was necessary in doing that, though. He could vaguely make out the words 'cute' and 'sulking', and it was only with tremendous self-control that he refrained from standing up and telling them explicitly that he was neither, and to please stop talking about him as if he wasn’t there and couldn’t hear it. But then, he didn’t fancy knowing people talked about him behind his back, either, so he just let it be.

Another fifteen minutes later, Potter came in, balancing a tray of tea things and two others full of Mrs. Weasley's baking with his wand. She must have baked them fresh, because just one whiff of their sweet smell was enough for Draco's mouth to start watering and his stomach rumbling as if he had not just finished a rather large dinner. He held himself back from a rather undignified display of ill manners when his first instinct was to jump up and grab a few crumpets and biscuits for himself before they were all gone. Apparently, he didn't have to worry: the smaller tray containing a satisfying heap of sugary goodness and an already prepared cup of tea was for him alone; Potter levitated it onto the small coffee table next to Draco's elbow after depositing the other two in front of the circle of women.

He looked up, his eyes meeting Potter's for a second, but then he couldn’t stand that stare and wrenched away his gaze, looking back to his book and murmuring 'thank you' under his breath. For some reason he couldn’t explain, he felt shame and awkwardness welling up inside him whenever he sensed Potter's gaze being turned on him.

"Are you okay?" Potter asked in the same low voice.

Draco didn’t trust his own, so he just nodded and pretended to be immersed in his book once again. Potter went away, and soon, Draco could hear his grumbling voice interspersed with Granger's hushed questions. What they were talking about, he could not make out at all; their voices mingled into a low-keyed buzzing, which sounded relaxing, like the ambient background noises of the night. After a few seconds, Draco found that his effort to make sense of their words was in vain, because they slipped his mind soon after he took them in. He realised it must be the effect of a spell they were using – most likely for Draco's benefit, because the women were too absorbed in their own conversation to even notice Potter's presence.

But even if he couldn’t hear what they were speaking about, Draco could still see their body language, which they didn’t go out of their way to hide. Gryffindors! It looked like Potter was arguing with Granger, strongly disagreeing with something – if the fervent shaking of his head was any indication. But in the end, Granger seemed to have won Potter over, and he reluctantly agreed with her. There was a satisfied smile on Granger's face and she told Potter something encouraging, then she stood up and waved her wand. Draco felt as if a bubble had popped inside his ear, similar to the feeling of having had water in one's acoustic ducts. Interesting spell, he thought, but then he forgot it abruptly, when he realised that Granger was heading in his direction.

He shrank back in the armchair, but he knew he wouldn’t escape Granger; now he remembered her persistent nature from his time with the Order all too well to still have any delusions about that.

"Draco, could I speak with you? In private," she said, without mincing her words. What the hell? thought Draco. Since when had they been on a first name basis? But then he realised that Granger must have used it deliberately, either to remind him of their shared month or to indicate the personal nature of the conversation she had planned. Draco looked away from her eyes and around, searching for an excuse for him to allow to refuse, but he couldn’t come up with anything. In the end, he sighed, put the book aside (with its cover on the bottom, so he wouldn’t embarrass himself in front of Granger by what he was reading) and heaved his bulk up from the too soft and too low chair.

"Let's go to my room," he told her and started in that direction, expecting Granger to follow him. She did, without a word.

"All right, what is it about?" he asked after closing the door behind him. Granger stood in the middle of the room, then conjured herself the same chair she had in Potter's room, sat, and waited for Draco to settle down as well.

"Several things," she said, sounding less confident now than a few minutes earlier. "But let's start with the easy one." She straightened herself and bore her eyes into Draco's. Her expression did not leave any doubts that the topic would be something serious.

"First, I wanted to tell you about the marriage law. I promise you that it's going to change; you don't have to worry."

"I wasn’t worried," Draco said. His answer, implying that he trusted her abilities, had apparently surprised her pleasantly, because she gifted him with a contented smile.

"I'm glad to hear it. Does that mean you already set a date for the wedding?" she said in a lightly teasing tone, which in return took Draco by surprise. But only at first, before remembering her sounding the same on several occasions in the past. He realised with a start that despite their very different origins, there had been several situations in which they had indeed got along quite well with each other, and now, Draco had slipped back into that easy understanding as if the last five-or-so years had not

happened at all.

"Not yet," he drawled, assuming the same teasing mannerism, "what date do you recommend for the occasion?"

"In my opinion, the seventh of March would be just the perfect day for it," she replied.

Draco looked at her, trying to guess whether it had been a real recommendation or just something out of the air, and then he realised that the date was the day following the ominous voting. How very Gryffindor, he thought, to assume that her initiative would go through at the first try. Oh, why not? He made a show of thinking it over and then nodded slowly in agreement.

"The seventh it is, then."

She smiled again, but then her countenance became serious again.

"On another note," she started, "I wanted to ask you about what happened with the Pensieve."

"Nothing happened," Draco said, his first reaction being denial.

"Draco." She drew out his name, giving him an exasperated eye-roll that seemed a tad over-acted, in Draco's opinion. "It was rather obvious that you found something in it that upset you. You were in a foul mood afterwards ."

Draco shrugged, not prepared to divulge his most guarded secrets. "What did you expect? It was only yesterday that I remembered everything, and then today I was careless and flooded my head with more memories. It's confusing. I just needed some space, is all."

She heaved a short sigh. "I'm sorry."

Draco shook his head. "Let's not go into it, all right?" The disappointment was still too fresh. He knew if he started accepting apologies, he would end up shouting accusations she had not even thought of being sorry for, and then he would not be able to escape her scrutiny. She was too observant for Draco's taste as it was. He saw with dismay that, for some reason, she was hell bent on this topic, and his weak protest did not divert her from her aim at all.

In the next moment, there was a knock on the door, and Potter let himself inside without waiting for a response. Granger nodded to him, and from the brief exchange of glances between them, Draco saw that this was what they must have agreed on in advance. He could see that this turn of events didn't bode well, but he hoped he would be able to disband this little gathering quickly if he could refrain from rising to whatever they had planned to confront him with.

"Harry," Granger said, patting the empty space next to her on the now suddenly noticeably larger chair – actually, now it was a chaise lounge, and Draco had not even noticed when she had transfigured it – most likely because his attention had been on Potter.

Potter sat down, not bothering to act his role, perhaps because it was so transparent that this little scene was pre-arranged that he knew Draco would see through it, anyway. In the next instant, Draco found himself in the crosshairs of two pairs of eyes directed at him.

"What is this? Some kind of inquisition?" he asked with a short, forced laugh.

"No, Malfoy, we just…" Potter started, but he abruptly fell silent after the glare Granger directed at him, and bowed his head. Draco didn't know whether he should find this apparent subservience amusing, irking, or be happy that his future husband was apparently somewhat trainable.

"Draco," Granger began in a more deliberate tone – she sounded like she would on a press conference, Draco thought with disdain. "We understand that with keeping so many things secret from you, we perhaps caused you more anguish than we intended to…"

"You intended to cause me anguish? It's touching to know that…" Draco cut in impatiently; her act was becoming less and less tolerable.

"No, I didn't mean it like that!" she cried, suddenly worried that she had been misunderstood. "I meant that this whole ordeal must have cost you much more than was necessary…"

"Why, thank you for reminding me of that," Draco muttered with an arched brow. This finally made her stop. Draco sighed, deciding that he liked the silence much more. However, Granger looked now very cross with him for interrupting her most likely carefully planned speech.

"Malfoy, why are you doing this…? …deliberately misinterpreting what I'm saying?"

Draco breathed in deeply and counted to five before answering.

"Look, Granger… Hermione," he corrected, deciding that it would sound less hurtful that way. "I didn't want to bring up this topic for a reason…"

"But you must speak about it sometime, you cannot just… bottle it all up…"

"I didn't know you were qualified as a psychiatrist."

"I'm not, but…"

"All right, is this what you want? Yes, I am angry with you! Did you want to hear that?"

"Well…" She tried to answer, but Draco didn't let her.

"It was quite underhanded of you to let me take things at face value when you knew exactly what had really happened. Did you have a good laugh behind my back? Ooh, Malfoy fancies himself in love! That's too funny!" he spat, managing to work up himself by having to recite what he would have better forgotten: things that hurt him and made him feel helpless and ridiculous in the eyes of others. But now, he couldn't stop. "You should leave the secrecy for Slytherins because Gryffindors aren't any good at it. And besides, Gryffindors are supposed to be noble and all that..."

"Draco! Stop it!" Potter finally interrupted his pained tirade; thank Merlin, because he was on the verge of spilling everything and embarrassing himself beyond recovery. "No one thought anything like that," he said, suddenly on his knees; his hands found Draco's trembling fingers and held them in a protective cradle. Draco swallowed and wondered whether Potter was aware of what he was doing or was he just acting on instinct, but he did not pull away. He was in dire need of any comfort he could get now.

"Then why have you let me go on, thinking that…"

"Malfoy, your accusations are low," Granger's measured voice interrupted him, but while Draco expected her to sound righteously angered, her tone took up a soft, soothing quality. Perhaps she did have some knowledge about how to handle people in an instable emotional state, after all.

"For one, you were there and accepted the consequences. Secondly, the Compelling Spell I placed on the memories would have prevented you from believing us even if we had told you the truth. But you broke the curse of your father and apparently, also my spell, so now you know the truth and are also able to accept it."

Draco couldn’t argue with her reasoning, as much as he wanted to defend his own viewpoint. He looked down from her at Potter's hands holding his own.

"But now… now it's…" Too late.

Too late! That was it, what was so wrong with the whole situation. That was why he had been searching so desperately for some kind of emotions within his memories, and why it had hit him so hard when he had found nothing… And he only realised it now, barely stopping himself before uttering that absolutely pathetic justification for the small tantrum he had just thrown. Just what would Potter think of him if he

knew? Probably the same thing he had thought before Draco regained his memories, he thought with poorly concealed bitterness. He was just too tired to play any more games.

"You could have just told me about the spell," he said, too tired to mask the defeat in his tone. "That this… thing between me and Potter was just a plot to defeat the Dark Lord and I should never have expected it to become anything more…"

"Malfoy…" Granger started saying something, but she was cut off by Potter's sudden exclamation.

"But that's not true!"

"Harry, you're not helping!" She gave him a frown. "And get back here, for god's sake! Give Draco some space!" But just when she had prepared herself for another speech, Potter interrupted her again.

"But... it has… for me… It is more!" he muttered, looking down at their clasped hands. His voice trailed off after he had realised what he had just admitted, and with it, Draco's heart gave an unexpected strong lurch in the direction of his throat.

"Harry…?" Granger asked, confused. "I don't understand!" She frowned, concentrating her attention on Potter, so Draco had time to shake off the sudden light-headedness and listen, really listen to what Potter had to say. "You told us that it was just…"

"I lied, okay?" Potter sounded frustrated and exasperated and a bit like Draco had just before Potter jumped to his rescue and bravely… held his hand. Now a small part of Draco, which he wondered why he should suppress at all, wanted to return the favour.

"But why?" Granger asked from Potter, her tone incredulous.

"Because you wouldn't have dropped it otherwise!"

To Draco's surprise - and most likely Potter's as well, Granger seemed to have run out of words. Then she nodded slowly, looking up from her thoughts and fixing her bemused eyes on Potter once again. She was opening her mouth to say something, but Potter placed a hand on her knee and spoke to her on a soft tone.

"Hermione, would you please leave us alone? This really isn't the time for that conversation."

She looked from him to Draco and then back, then nodded again silently, and said, "All right," with a sombre expression. Draco followed her departure with his eyes until the door clicked shut softly behind her.

Now it was just the two of them remaining in the nearly dark room, and Draco suddenly felt mortified by what he had revealed about himself. It was a small boost of confidence when he realised Potter must have been feeling the same from the way he was stalling and avoiding looking at Draco. But as the silence continued, it became more and more oppressive. Of course, Potter being a Gryffindor, Draco did not have to wait much longer for him to break it.

"So…" Potter began on a suddenly raspy voice, "were you perhaps trying to say, in your own peculiar way, that you… like me?"

Draco couldn't help snorting with amusement at the hesitant tone, which abruptly broke the ice.

"Stupid Gryffindor, do you need everything to be told twice to comprehend?" he exclaimed, but the fake arrogance in his tone was so exaggerated that even Weasley would have been able to recognise it as acting.

Potter echoed his earlier snort. "Not everything," he said, turning back to face Draco, his eyes becoming suddenly all too serious, indicating that he did expect a straight answer to the question. Draco had to swallow down his anxiousness, but his throat felt too dry to be able to form words.

On an impulse, which he blamed entirely on the Gryffindor's unhealthy influence, he leaned forward. But he caught Potter by surprise, which resulted in their noses bumping together, hard. Draco was mortified by his own clumsiness, and froze in the middle of the movement, trying to decide whether to retreat or continue, despite the blunder. Thank Snitches and broomsticks, Potter was just as quick on the uptake as Draco remembered him to be, shifting a bit to the side to realign their positions, and pressing his mouth fully against Draco's in a glorious act of necessity.

Harry's lips were soft and hard at the same time. They tasted like tea, biscuits and nervousness, the same his own must taste, Draco thought. This was it, the realisation stunned him: the feeling he had been searching inside the Pensieve memories in vain. In the way Harry's lips were pressed to his own, he had found the force to tilt the universe at an angle that showed everything from a different perspective, and even though from this new point of view, the world seemed strange at first, Draco had a feeling that things would start making more sense very soon…

The kiss started out tentative, but it didn't stay that way for very long. Harry clearly knew what he wanted and wasn't too shy in getting it. The two hands formerly gripping Draco's came up to cradle his face from both sides, pulling him in more, while Harry's tongue pried his lips apart and pushed past them. Draco went with the flow, even though the position was quickly becoming uncomfortable for him because his belly was in the way. He tried to match the rhythm with his lips and his tongue, but it didn't matter if he did not quite succeed as long as Harry was still there. He began to feel light-headed and thought that perhaps, just perhaps, it was time for him to catch his breath, but he was reluctant to end this intoxicating sensation…

A sudden, stinging pain blossomed near Draco's lower back, and he wrenched himself away, sucking in the air sharply as he plastered both arms around his abdomen, leaning forward, panting. He must have cried out in pain, because Potter was there instantly, straightening him out from the foetal position his body had instinctively assumed, and helping him lay back on the bed gently.

"Draco, are you all right?" Draco could see the worry on Harry's face, even though it was partly hidden behind the black dots that obscured his sight. His facial muscles pulled into a playful grimace on their own.

"The brat is yours, all right," Draco croaked, the corners of his lips twitching. "…already started kicking me," he managed to hiss through the ache that was now slowly receding. In the next moment, he was treated the sight of green eyes growing large with wonder and Potter himself melting into a puddle in

front of him.

TBC

A/N: "It's only a model." is taken out of Monty Python And The Holy Grail.

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Chapter 37: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

13. Aug 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you get to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Vaughn and C. Dumbledore.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Draco sighed with content, waking up to the unfamiliar feeling that was quickly becoming habitual: being surrounded by a familiar warmth that wasn't part of his blankets. But it couldn't be Potter, because as much as Draco had wanted to ask him to stay, he had not got up the guts to do that. Potter, damn his Gryffindor honour, must have assumed Draco hadn't wanted him there and had not pushed the matter. So why was he in his bed now?

Draco blinked until the blurred image in front of his eyes became sharp with the morning light, and then he noticed that Potter wasn't in his bed. Draco was in Potter's. As if to confirm that assertion, the ghoul in the attic gave out a growl and then started playing with his chains. The noise of heavy iron being dragged around coming through the ceiling, as expected, woke up Potter. There was a grumble, echoing the noise that the ghoul had given out a few minutes ago, coming from beneath the pillows and blankets. They were drawn up so that the only part of Potter visible was the unruly mop on top of his head. Then the bed-clothes moved aside, and Potter's face emerged from between the white linen; he was blinking in the morning light, and his skin was lined with creases from his pillow.

He looked terribly unsophisticated, horribly rumpled and… completely adorable. Draco's stomach gave a sudden mortified lurch as he revised his previous thought and his pure-blood upbringing found the glaring errors in his thinking. But then, he shoved his ingrained way of judging people aside with a snort of disgust. If he wanted to find Potter's looks first thing in the morning adorable, despite the poor state of his hair and unwashed face, it was his privilege to do so, and no ancestor or etiquette book had the power to force him into thinking otherwise because it wasn't becoming.

"Hi," Potter said, not very surprised to find Draco there.

"Good morning." Draco returned the greeting, his body frozen into indecision, as he was suddenly at a loss of what he was supposed to do in a situation like this. No, that wasn't entirely true. He knew he should excuse himself and retreat as soon with as few social blunders as possible – he just didn't want to.

Potter had no qualms originating in his upbringing about expressing an identical wish, though, and Draco was suddenly glad for that fact, instead of feeling uncomfortable about having to tie his life to someone clearly not from his social class. At the urging of Potter's arm around his torso, he silently leaned back

into the welcoming warmth of the bedclothes and settled comfortably into the cradle of another body pressed full length against his back. Potter gave a contented sigh and rewarded him with a sudden press of his mouth to the sensitive skin of Draco's nape, causing him to shudder with unexpected delight. He allowed the small smile tugging on the corners of his lips to flourish into a full-fledged grin.

"Did I mix up our rooms again last night?" Draco asked after a few minutes of relaxed silence. At first he had been reluctant to break it, but this was only small talk, nothing serious that could have spoiled the easy atmosphere. And he was curious, since he didn't remember waking up and getting out of his bed. He didn't fancy the notion of having become a sleepwalker.

"No, I think you Apparated in your sleep," Potter told him with a hint of amusement in his tone. Draco groaned and tried not to think about what all that revealed about him.

He was suddenly started out of his half-asleep musings when Potter's arm travelled downwards and his palm slid over his distended belly. The fingers splayed out and started rubbing the stretched out muscles. That reminded Draco of something else that had been nagging him for some time now. He had been too embarrassed to even think of bringing it up with Potter. But now, he was feeling comfortable and at peace with the world enough so that it did not seem such a big issue anymore. Based upon his earlier findings about Potter, he suspected he already knew the answer, so it would be all right to ask directly. But even though his memory told him he should not have anything to worry about, there was a small tremor of apprehension in his voice.

"Do you think my body is… disgusting?"

The movements of the palm on his belly froze for a second or two as the question issued rang in the silence of the room. Draco's heart skipped a beat, and suddenly, he had doubts about his earlier judgment being right. But then the arm moved again; in an easy move, it slid southwards until it reached the bare skin of Draco's leg, where the nightshirt had ridden up. Then, all of a sudden, it slipped beneath the fabric and made its way back on the same route, until it was resting again on the same spot it had been before – only that now, it was skin against skin. Draco held his breath while the fingers began questing lightly on the taut skin of his abdomen, drawing circles around his protruding navel and causing a tickling sensation. Then Potter flattened his palm against his belly again. His hand moved down until the edge of it sank into the beginnings of Draco's pubic hair and then stayed there.

"No, not… disgusting," Potter said slowly, as if he was exerting a great effort, searching for the right words. That alone reaffirmed Draco in his belief, that he had assessed him correctly. "It's definitely odd, though," he then continued with a small, apologetic kiss on Draco's nape again. Draco shuddered, this time not from fear but from a slowly building arousal caused equally by the kiss and Potter's warm hand being so close to his groin and touching bare skin so naturally, as if it were an every-day thing to do. But perhaps it was – between lovers… Draco thought, and that last word only served to fuel his arousal.

He was both horrified and excited when, a few heartbeats later, he felt the head of his hardening cock touch lightly to Potter's hand. For a second, there was silence, then he felt the tremors of Potter laughing through his back, but it was not intended to sound hurtful or disparaging, more like… delighted.

"Eager much?" he asked in a lightly teasing tone, but he didn't leave Draco time to answer, because in the next instant, he was already taking action.

The hand on his front didn't move an inch while Potter managed to change their positions so that Draco was now lying on his back and Potter was still on his side but leaning above him, moving to align their mouths. There was an ardent sparkle of visible arousal in his eyes, now unobscured by his glasses, answering Draco's own. It was mesmerising and frightening both. Draco knew exactly what was about to happen and couldn't move – didn't want to move, as he wanted it to happen just as badly as he was afraid of it. His heavy erection was now, thanks to gravity, lying fully on top of Potter's hand, small tingles of pleasure running along the nerve endings where they touched. Then Potter's face began to descend, and Draco barely had time to instinctually cast a Breath-Freshening Charm on his mouth.

Potter was momentarily startled, most likely by the sudden gush of menthol hitting his face through Draco's exhalation, but then, after a short snicker, he continued his descent and fitted their lips together. This time, the fact that Draco's mouth was already open prevented the kiss from starting out dry. Potter's tongue slipped past Draco's teeth as soon as their lips touched, and began a game of hide-and-seek with his own in the wet cavern of Draco's mouth. Draco was eager to follow suit, and their kissing progressed into a deliciously playful tussle of sensitive muscles, punctuated by short breaths and the smacking sounds of their lips parting and coming together again from time to time. It didn't even matter that Potter himself had, obviously, foregone the courtesy of getting rid of his morning breath, as Draco's taste buds had been temporarily numbed by the sharp tang of menthol.

Some earth-shattering minutes later, Draco's mouth was still occupied when the hand on his abdomen moved and, crawling down, nimble fingers tangled into his pubes. In the next second, Potter surprised Draco by cupping his balls and squeezing them lightly; but before he could have got used to the rich

sensation, the fingers moved again to curl around his erection.

In an excruciatingly slow movement, Potter's grip firmed around his cock. Then he began to stroke him up and down leisurely, with a twisting movement at the end of each upward stroke to cradle the head and smear the slippery fluids around his shaft. Draco felt an agonised moan rising in his throat and being swallowed by Potter's insistent mouth. His arms came up almost on their own to curl around Potter's neck, one of his hands tangling into the thick mass of unkempt hair, while the other one slid down the bare skin Potter's back and, in a bold move, gripped a muscled buttock. Draco's hips began to move in synch with the movements of that hand and his legs spread out wantonly. The one on Potter's side became almost instantly trapped by a heavy thigh, Potter's knee coming up and pressing gently into Draco's sensitive sac. He pushed back down and was rewarded by that hand releasing his cock minutely to roll around his balls, wetting them slightly with his own pre-come. But before Draco could have felt cheated, it was back again, palming his shaft and pressing its head into the swell of his belly.

The dual sensations of Potter's tongue licking the insides of his mouth until his ears began to tingle, and his fingers moving around his cock, proved too much too soon to Draco, and after an embarrassingly short time, he couldn't hold back his orgasm anymore. His come came spilling out of the engorged slit of his erection, divided between Potter's hand and the downside of his belly. The unrestrained moan echoing in the closed space between their lips punctuated the end that had come altogether too quickly.

Potter slowly eased out of the snog, pressing small kisses to Draco's face and the corner of his mouth, while his hand was gently milking the last spurts of semen out of Draco's sensitive shaft. The feeling was a bit on the uncomfortable side with its increased intensity, but Draco was definitely not about to complain when Potter did not release him immediately after the last tremors of his orgasm had subsided. His hand on Draco's softening prick was comforting and affectionate at the same time – even if it started to become sticky between their skins.

Draco's thigh, which was trapped beneath Potter's, gave notice of having gone numb with little pinpricks of pain running up and down it. He flexed it gently to get the itchy sensation out of his muscles, and then he felt Potter's erection being pressed to his side. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to reciprocate the gesture and have that promising hardness in his palm. But before he moved to take action, he felt an unexplainable impulse to get permission.

"Can I…?" he asked, surprising Potter with the tentative question even more than he had been just a few seconds ago. Then Potter's mouth stretched into a delighted smile, alleviating Draco's starting

mortification about having asked.

"Why would I refuse something like that?" Potter asked, his voice thick with anticipation and unrelieved arousal.

"Lean back," Draco told him, feeling his face turning red with a different kind of heat than the one he had been experiencing earlier. He might have had memories about doing the same with Potter and with a lot less awkwardness, but this situation was so different from that time. It felt even more novel and frightening than when he had been a teenager together with Potter and desperate for any kind of sex, his body riddled with hormones that didn't let him think about what he was doing.

Potter obeyed, reversing their positions, chucking off his pants with the same movement. The new angle did not allow for his hand to touch Draco's groin, so it came free with the slightly repulsive squelch of half-dried semen, for which Potter gave an apologetic grimace, and wiped it away with the bed sheets. Draco was not entirely comfortable with this new degree of hygiene, but he was more eager to be finally able to get his hand on Potter than to remedy the situation. He would have to shower after getting out of bed, anyhow. So, with a shrug, he propped up himself on one elbow – the same as Potter had before. Only that Draco's belly made it impossible to align their bodies like before, so Potter solved the problem by scooting up and settling into a half-sitting position with the pillows supporting his back, which consequently brought his cock closer to Draco's mouth.

For a second, Draco hesitated, not knowing whether Potter expected him to… but then he decided that that would be for another time. Though he could not contest the fact that the thought of tasting that seemingly perfect column of flesh with its musky scent made his mouth water in anticipation.

Potter gave out a hiss of pleasure when Draco reached for his erection and gave it a few experimental tugs. It fit into his palm differently than his own; it was a bit thicker and devoid of the familiar slight curve his hand was expecting to be there, but all things considered, touching it was indefinably more satisfying than what he had ever experienced while he had to touch Pansy… or any other female's bits… He shuddered with the remembrance and hurried to banish those images from his mind before they put a sour taste in his mouth. Remembering his earlier fantasies about having Potter's cock there, though, made the task easier than expected.

Apparently, Potter did not harbour any reservations about making noise when he felt good, like Draco.

Probably because he had a permanent Silencing Charm on his room, or he just did not care who heard him. It was a very encouraging experience to get a response like that after every little hand movement Draco experimented with. But in the end, all experiments ended, and he fell into a steady rhythm, stroking Potter. Remembering how good that additional swipe around the head of his own cock had felt, he mimicked Potter's earlier actions as well as he was able to.

Potter took more time than Draco had, but he still did not last longer than ten minutes, either – for which Draco was grateful, because as heady as the sensation of wanking Potter and witnessing the abandon with which he had thrown himself into the pleasure felt, his arm was getting tired, as he wasn't used to doing this at this angle.

Potter threw his head backwards, panting, while the last drops of his come dribbled onto Draco's fingers. Draco tested its texture by rubbing his finger against the full head and smearing it around the flared slit. Potter hissed from the overstimulation of nerve endings and his body shuddered with another bout of his yet not-quite-receded orgasm. His eyes were squeezed shut and drops of sweat were slowly gathering in the hollow of his throat. Draco inhaled the smell of come and suddenly, the urge to make his earlier fantasies true hit him with a force he was not able to resist. Knowing that Potter was not looking at him, he got up the nerve and leaned closer to the inviting flesh, sticking out his tongue and poking the tip into the moist opening on the top.

Potter went rigid with surprise, but he did not issue a protest. In fact, a second later, he took painstaking care in relaxing his muscles and keeping his eyes shut in a way that would reassure Draco that he was allowed to continue his experimenting. Seeing that and interpreting it correctly, Draco's lips curved into a small, teasing smile, and he went back to his earlier objective. He didn't go very far; he only made a few tentative swipes with his tongue around the slippery glans, tasting semen and feeling out the contours of the mushroom-shaped head, then sucked a bit of the loosening foreskin gently between his lips, learning its texture with his tongue, and sensitivity through Potter's breathy sighs. Then he retreated, unconsciously licking his lips in the process and giving Potter an embarrassed grin when he noticed that he had opened one of his eyes to a crack and was silently scrutinizing him.

Potter grinned back and then used the corner of the sheet again to wipe off the sticky fluids, earning himself a scowl from Draco.

"Honestly, Potter, one would assume you never heard of a Cleaning Charm," he grumbled, but there was no real bite in his tone.

"It's 'Harry', not 'Potter'," the annoying ex-Gryffindor answered. "And no, I haven't heard of one that wouldn't take off my skin in the process…"

Draco was momentarily stunned by the casual reminder of Potter's magical strength and the fact that he had difficulty controlling it, as that was not something one would just announce to the world. It was a heady realisation, that Potter considered him close enough to not only trust him with that information, but also not to be embarrassed about it in front of Draco, either. To mask his momentary confusion, while his mind regarded that fact and then carefully asserted it into this new world view that had come with accepting Potter in his life… bed, whatever, Draco grabbed his wand and murmured the charm on Potter, then after a second of contemplation, he repeated the action on himself, though it was woefully overdue and therefore mostly ineffective by then. He knew that a bath would be the right solution, but he was feeling too decadent to break this moment and get out of Potter's bed just for that.

Apparently, Potter was thinking the same, because after he took his time to scoot down and settle on top of the rumpled sheets and blankets, he pulled Draco into an embrace and was content to continue cuddling with him atop the mess. Draco thought he should reprimand him for not taking the trouble to right the bedding, but it gave him a strangely liberating feeling: to lie naked as the day he had been born in the arms of another man – his lover, he thought with a tingle of excitement – showing everything he had, instead of hiding his feelings, his associations and his misshapen body from the world. He hoped his father was seeing him now and rolling in his grave.

"Draco, do you think this happened too fast?" Potter-- Harry asked tentatively, but after the slight distraction of having to swallow down the lump of unexpected happiness welling up in his throat caused by the casual utterance of his name, Draco didn't think he sounded like he regretted it.

"Perhaps," he answered in the same light tone while playing with the sparse black hairs growing around a dusky nipple that looked and felt so different from his own. "But I would like to see the one brave enough to tell us," he added, grinning at the imagery.

"Mmm," Harry agreed lazily, his fingertips beginning their own exploration of Draco's skin, and quite amazingly, he had yet to feel any tinge of embarrassment when those hands occasionally smoothed over the mound of his belly during the activity.

Later, Draco had to reassert his notions about the amusing quality of that statement when, at the urging of his stomach, he finally re-emerged from Harry's room around noon - and found himself face to face with an unassuming Mrs. Weasley. A few minutes of strained silence ticked by and Draco felt his face go up in flames of mortification while he contemplated what Mrs. Weasley was going to say. But then, he experienced another surprise when she only gave him an indulgent chuckle and patted one of his flushed cheeks as if he was one of her grandchildren caught doing some mischief – a far cry from the dressing down that Fred and George still got from her occasionally. Then she turned her back and continued with her agenda, which had been interrupted by Draco's sudden appearance.

Draco let go of the breath he had been holding while a curious warmth began to spread within his chest after having witnessed the easy acceptance he and his relationship with Harry had been gifted with from Mrs. Weasley. He stole down the creaking stairs, hoping he would not meet anyone else before he had the opportunity to wash off the telltale signs of what he had been doing and dress appropriately for the time of the day.

An hour later, fresh and dressed in comfortable robes, he heard the call for lunch just when he had finished the torture of pulling on his socks. He slid his feet into the slipper-like shoes he had Transfigured from one of his old pair of boots because he had found bending troublesome and couldn't be arsed to use a spell to fasten his footwear. Then he went to join the others at the table.

During the meal, he studiously tried ignoring the odd glances he got, but in the end, he had to surmise that obviously everyone knew that his relationship with Harry had changed overnight by then. He gave Potter a few reproving glares, but they were answered with a glowing smile every time, and Draco realised that Harry had not let his mouth run, as he had assumed; a fleeting glance at his countenance and the sparkle in his eyes was enough to tell that something had changed. He looked… happy and content, Draco realised with and odd thump inside his chest. He felt mortification wash over him and suddenly he wished for a mirror to check that he did not have the same stupid besotted expression on his face.

Apparently, Potter had no appreciation for keeping up appearances. He had not been sitting beside Draco during lunch, but when it ended, he stood up and just stepped close to Draco, casually flinging an arm around his waist in front of their audience. Draco stiffened and felt his face grow hot with embarrassment, but to his amazement, no one even gave them a second glance. Draco found this obviously exaggerated acceptance combined with Harry's continued embarrassing displays of chivalry uncomfortable, to say the least.

He expected frowns directed at him, not understanding, and the occasional giggles coming from the circle of young women who gathered for another tea party later in the afternoon. (Actually, Draco had the disturbing suspicion that the tea party had been called together in haste for the sake of getting to see Harry and him together, acting all couple-y.) Not that he would have liked resistance more (though he straight out refused to contemplate the topic of conversation that would elicit those kind of giggles), but he did not want to get too complacent.

He realised that his worrying was rather pointless, so instead of that, he decided to start planning the wedding – the seventh of March was not that far away.

He did not want to make a big issue out of the ceremony, but he had no illusions that with his recent scandals in the Prophet, not to mention that the name of his groom was Harry Potter, he would not be able to avoid media attention. He did not expect much interest from his own family members, but he knew that Potter's numerous entourage would want to be present, without a doubt.

His other objective was to start searching for a house. He was fed up with the cramped space and the knowing looks he was certain he had only got a small taste of earlier. He had been used to having his own space, and even if he was now indebted to the Weasleys, there was no way he would want to stay any longer in The Burrow than strictly necessary. In fact, he imagined that the conditions were not exactly comfortable for anyone involved. Now that he was healed, he would perhaps do the biggest favour to them if he moved out with Potter and Podmore in tow. His only concern was how he was going to find a cook of the quality of Mrs. Weasley.

Of course, now he would have to take the state of his remaining vaults into consideration. It almost seemed like sacrilege for a Malfoy to be restricted in his purchases by trivial things like money. Now, he realised, he couldn't keep putting off finding out how miserable his financial state had become, so he wrote a letter to Gringotts and began to prepare himself for the shock he would undoubtedly get once the response arrived.

"Potter!" he hissed when Harry passed by him, hoping that the low tone wouldn't attract the attention of anyone else in the room. Harry stopped and looked down, and then he directed a smile at Draco that abruptly rendered him light-headed.

"What is it?" Harry asked, and Draco, his mind still reeling from that smile, had to think about why he

stopped him.

"I need to send a post. Can I borrow your owl?"

"Sure." Harry's brows lifted; it seemed he had expected a different answer. Draco handed him the parchment.

"Gringotts?"

"Yes, I want to get an account from my vaults," Draco told him conversationally.

Only after the words were out of his mouth did he remember that he was not required to tell Potter about things like that. It was uncanny how natural it had suddenly become to him to disclose personal information without thinking twice about it, when Harry only asked. But then he shrugged mentally. It wasn't as if he really needed to keep secrets from him, and, thinking about it some more, he realised that this response was eerily similar to Harry's unconscious behaviour of touching Draco so casually, even in front of people, whenever he just felt like it. It meant that, after not even a day's time, Draco already considered the two of them a couple… that was a realisation that both frightened him and induced a delicious tingle of expectations of another nature in him.

"Why do you need an account?" Harry asked with a slight trepidation in his voice that Draco couldn't place, jolting him out of his musings.

"I want to buy a house and I need to know how much money I am allowed to spend on it," Draco told him; the irritation in his voice was not addressed at Harry for asking the question, but at the reminder of his pitiful financial state.

"Draco…" Harry crouched down next to him, the parchment still in his hand and getting a bit crumpled. "You don't need to buy a house, I can buy one. I would have to, anyhow, as I cannot go back into that flat. And frankly, I don't even want to. It's not a place to raise a child in."

"Potter." Draco shook his head with a sympathetic smile on his face. "I know you have inherited a little money from your parents, but I hardly think it would be enough to satisfy my standards. You are lucky my hand comes with a generous 'dowry', because you'd have to work off your arse to keep up with me otherwise," he told him with a wink.

It was sweet of Harry to offer to buy a house (and Draco couldn't believe he just thought the word 'sweet' in connection with Potter), but there was no way Draco would allow it to happen. He might be the 'woman' in this relationship now, but if he intended to change that, he couldn't let himself be kept. He needed to have something of his own – if only to get back his pride and settle into his new life. A house was exactly the right thing to start with.

"I have made some investments," was Harry's next feeble attempt at convincing him, and Draco was starting to wonder why he insisted on it so strongly. Could it be that he felt left out of Draco's life, that he was afraid once he had his own house, he would take off without him? Or that Harry actually felt inadequate because he didn't possess a fortune, compared to Draco? Perhaps he was the one who did not want to become kept…

"Don't worry about the money," Draco told him, and lifted a hand to cradle Harry's face, brushing his thumb along his cheekbone before remembering that there were other people present, and he snatched away his hand, blushing. He had to clear his throat before he could continue in a more sober tone. "Once we are married, our vaults are going to be merged, and only the goblins will be able to tell which one originally belonged to whom."

"It's not that…" Harry started protesting, but then his voice trailed off and he bit his lip, nodding. "All right, but if that's how it's going to happen anyhow, then you can use my money to buy a house, too." Then, to Draco's deepest mortification, Harry pressed a quick, soft kiss onto his mouth and went up to the attic with the scroll in search of his owl. Draco pretended that he did not notice the giggles and the curious looks coming from the circle of young mothers.

It was like redemption when Mrs. Weasley finally called everyone to dinner. Draco kept down his gaze and concentrated on the contents of his plate, which wasn't very hard, since the food was, as always, delicious – not in the refined way that the meals the Malfoy house-elves managed to produce was, nor in the hearty and sometimes curious food that the Hogwarts tables served, but in an old home-cooked

English way that Draco had had no trouble attuning his taste buds to.

After dinner, Draco decided to go up to his room. He was tired from having stayed up late the previous night. His glance strayed incidentally to Harry when he excused himself, and he saw an answering twitch of those long black eyelashes to the question he had not even thought of voicing or indicating any other way. Then, supplying Draco with another opportunity for ample mortification and without even an attempt at subtlety, Potter jumped up from his seat and circled the table, saying good night to the others. He put his arm around Draco's middle and directed him towards the staircase. Draco wouldn't have been surprised if he saw him winking at them over his shoulder, but he was too preoccupied with hiding his blush to look.

Once the door of Draco's room had closed, he spun around, face flaming with indignity, and wrenched himself out of Potter's supporting grip.

"Was humiliating me in front of those people necessary?" he seethed in rage. Potter's face only showed surprise.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"What do I mean? Are you deliberately obtuse or is it your Gryffindor nature? I mean that after that display, all of them are going to think that we are sleeping together!"

"Aren't we?" Harry blinked at him. Draco suddenly felt tired; he slumped down onto his bed.

Potter heaved a sigh, as if to say that Draco was unnecessarily complicating things. Perhaps he really was, Draco thought. He felt the mattress dip at his side with the additional weight and then the heat of Harry's body being snuggled against his side.

"Sorry," they both said at the same time, which caused Harry to grin and Draco to tentatively return it with a weak twitch of his lips.

"I can go back to my room if you don't want me here," Harry told him, his voice turning serious but still retaining the comforting warmth that had been a new addition to it ever since the previous night. "I wanted to talk to you, but if you are feeling tired…" He left the sentence unfinished, waiting for Draco's answer.

Draco blinked, trying to assess whether he was up to a conversation. His eyelids drooped, but now that he thought about it, there were a few questions he wanted to ask Harry as well. That abruptly awoke his mind. Now he had no other choice but to unwind a bit, if he wanted to get any sleep during the night, and Harry's company seemed just perfect for that purpose. Not to mention, perhaps he would be able to talk Harry into something to tire him out properly, so he could have a good night's sleep afterwards… He doubted he would need to use much persuasion.

"What is it you want to talk about?" he asked, and then abruptly yawned.

"How about you make yourself ready for bed and get tucked in before we start?" Harry asked, already sitting up and pulling up Draco by his hand. "Because I don't think I'd be able to lift you to get you under the covers if you fell asleep like this…" he said, grinning, then he nimbly ducked out of the way of the slap Draco was about to give him for his comment.

Draco went grumbling to the bathroom and took care of himself, only to find upon his return that Harry had already made the bed and fluffed up his pillows. Draco's nightshirt was waiting for him on top of the covers. Draco hesitated a second before he started undressing with a shrug, and even gave Harry's back a suggestive grin when he suddenly whirled around, embarrassed, while Draco changed.

"You can turn around now," Draco said, crawling under the covers, then, when he saw Harry nearing, he suddenly decided that he did not want him to go after their talk. "Oh, no, you aren't coming in here without having cleaned your teeth first. And pyjamas wouldn't be amiss either, unless you prefer sleeping in the buff…" he told him in a superior tone, but he couldn't exactly hide the eager anticipation in it.

Harry stopped, taken aback for a second, but he couldn't be accused of having let his quick reflexes go soft. "Be right back. Don't go to sleep without me!" He spoke in a rush, then he was out of the door before Draco had enough time to blink. He snuggled into his fluffy pillows with a satisfied expression on

his face and sighed, his heart throbbing with anticipation.

Despite that, he was almost asleep when, only five seconds later, the door to his room opened and closed with barely a noise. After the rustling of clothes, his covers lifted to admit a warm body that snuggled close to his own. Draco's arm, which was lying at his side, registered instantly that the heated skin pressed to it was not covered in any kind of fabric, and the surprise filling his mind with exhilaration was enough to wake him up instantly.

"I didn't think you'd take my words at face value," he muttered, trying to wiggle said arm under the delirious expanse of bare skin until Harry lifted himself a bit and Draco was able to reach under him and curl it around his hips, open palm resting boldly on the swell of an exquisitely shaped bottom.

"The only one you can blame is yourself," came the heated whisper, and if Draco wouldn't have been able to tell from that that Harry's mind was not exactly on talking, he would have still had trouble ignoring the hard length of an erection pressing into his side through the thin fabric of his nightshirt as Harry moved closer to him. Truthfully, the only sound resembling any kind of talk during that night was Draco grumbling about why Harry had insisted on putting on his nightshirt if it was to be removed anyhow.

It was almost too easy to fall into a pattern that was both convenient for Draco and Harry and approved of by everyone else. Thus, Harry continued to sleep in Draco's room and no one even batted an eyelash about it. Well, except perhaps Ginny Weasley, but Draco couldn't exactly be angry with her about it anymore.

With the supporting security of Harry's firm presence behind his back and in his life, he was surprised by how much easier it was to accept other people's feelings. He even started getting friendly with the woman he had mistaken for his biggest rival, while in reality, she was only a sad example of someone not being able to let go of the past – just like he had been, he realised with a minute shock. This realisation, and the solid belief of Harry's allegiances, made it easier to sympathise with her and want to help her instead of what he would have done just a day earlier: turn his back and regard her with mistrust embedded into dislike.

"So what was this business with this Mickey bloke? And what does Ginny have to do with the whole thing?" he found himself asking Harry at one time, because their talk had not gone entirely forgotten

that night, only postponed for later. They found they had a lot to talk about, but that didn't mean that their topics were always serious.

"Well," Harry gave him a grimace, "to be honest, I don't really understand myself why she thinks we would be good for each other. It's not that I didn't try it with him when she first introduced us – or re-introduced, more the like. It just didn't work. Mostly because Mickey is a bit of a wimp. I like men, not bloody girls with dicks. That part of him seems to be rather perfunctory, you know?" Draco snickered with mock mortification written on his face.

"Ugh, Potter! No, I don't know and I didn't need to, thank you very much."

Harry gave him an unapologetic shrug. "You were asking."

"But not about that. I was asking about Weasley," Draco tried to clarify. "Why is she still fixated on you if she knows you prefer blokes?"

"Draco, if I understood how exactly women's minds work… I don't know. It's…" Then his words were drowned into mumbling.

"What was that?" Draco asked, frowning.

"I try not to think about it. I mean, she is going to get over it. She just really didn't have luck with her relationships. Just take me and Mickey – we both turned out to be gay, and Dean…"

Draco nodded. He didn't need Potter to finish the sentence to know what he wanted to say. Thomas had been in St. Mungo's for a long time after the war. When he had been released, it turned out that he had lost most of his magic, and decided to let himself be Obliviated and return to the Muggle world for good. Draco remembered the Prophet having been full with the tearful story, seeing that Thomas was also a highly decorated war hero.

"But you won't turn now into a girl entirely and try to couple her with blokes, will you?" Harry asked, trying to lift up the mood again. Draco refrained from giving him a not-very-masculine arm-slap for his troubles.

"Why did you agree to marry me?" Draco started a conversation another time. The question had been there in the undercurrent of his thoughts since that time, because he knew, even if Harry wanted to have a part in raising his child, he could have gone around it another way as well. It bothered him that he had given into Draco's wishes seemingly without any arguing.

Harry had obviously not been expecting the question; he sat up halfway from his reclining position next to Draco.

"Was the last hour not explanation enough?" he asked smugly. Draco flushed red and wiggled under the scrutiny, licking his lips unconsciously, finding that a small taste of Harry still lingered in the corner of his mouth.

"But I told you not to expect things like this from me… and that time, I meant it, too. So why?"

"Hope dies last?" Harry shrugged. Draco thought he used this method to get rid of unwanted attention a little too excessively.

"Harry…!"

"Okay, so I… sort of felt guilty, okay?"

"Guilty? What for?"

"For… you know."

"Potter, if I knew, I wouldn't have asked."

"All right, if you need it spelled out for you… I felt guilty for meddling with your memory and… your feelings, and I thought that was the cause of you not remembering…"

"Oh. I guess, that makes sense," Draco said some time later, in a small voice. Harry moved around a bit and cupped his face with his hand.

"And, of course, because I was positive that you wouldn't be able to resist my charms for very long once we were living together…" he added playfully, and then pressed their lips together, preventing an answer.

It was not like they had a lot to do with their time. The response from Gringotts arrived two days after Draco had sent the letter, but to his dismay, it only contained a short excuse: that the goblins needed time to determinate which parts of which vaults exactly did belong to Draco, after the chaotic cut with his family. They told him to expect their detailed report within three weeks' time. And in three weeks, they sent another one along the same lines.

Draco decided that he still could look around for a house, and he also had a wedding to plan, in which Mrs. Weasley proved to be a tremendous help for him. She even offered for them to hold the ceremony and the reception at The Burrow if Draco didn't find a house by then.

Draco was happy to let her manage the details, though he was decidedly not pleased about such an arrangement. He was beginning to share his late mother's opinion about the shiftiness of goblins and decided to hire a lawyer – someone who had no previous connection with the Malfoy name – to move the matter along with the wizarding bank. He really shouldn't have been surprised that when he asked Mrs. Weasley for advice, she was instantly able to give him a name of a supposedly reliable and hard-working solicitor who, allegedly, didn't even charge that much for his services.

Naturally, the lawyer's last name was also Weasley, but as Draco found, he didn't share his father's viewpoints anymore on several things. Why should his judgements regarding the Weasley name be an exception at this point?

Time flew by, and soon, March came, and with it not only spring, but also the time of the voting Draco had been waiting for with much trepidation and anguish.

TBC

A/N: We are coming to the end of the story. Therefore, if you think there are any residual plot holes or things that demand an explanation, then tell me, so I can include it into the remaining chapters. Thank you.

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Chapter 38: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

2. September 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you get to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Vaughn and C. Dumbledore.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

Draco woke up to a knock on his door and realised, dismayed, that he was alone in his bed. At first he didn’t know what woke him, but then it repeated, and he sat up, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"Come in," he called without even getting up and putting on a dress robe. It wasn’t as if Podmore had not seen him in his nightdress before. At least if the Healer had come to conduct some examinations on him, which was very likely, he wouldn’t have to remove one more layer of clothing.

"Do you want me to undress?" he asked with his fingers in front of his eyes, which seemed particularly sensitive to sunlight right now.

He almost jumped out of his skin when he realised that the voice answering definitely did not belong to Podmore.

"Sure I do." Harry leered at him, then, seeing Draco's minute mortification, laughed and came to sit down on the bed next to Draco. "So? Do I get my show or did you think I was someone else?"

"Bugger off, Potter!" Draco groaned in mock-frustration and embarrassment, the latter being attributed more to the image his overactive mind conjured at the last suggestion than to the fact that he had just offered to get naked in front of Potter. It wasn't as if that were such an uncommon occurrence lately, anyhow.

"No can do." Harry grinned, clearly enjoying the situation.

"Then tell me what you want already!" Draco snapped. "And why the hell are you knocking?" he

muttered afterwards, but Harry didn’t let himself be influenced by his bark. Quite the contrary.

"Just that thing called common courtesy you like to accuse me of not having. I didn't know if you were still sleeping or in the middle of something…" Clearly, Harry had very much a one-track mind.

"All right, all right! You still didn't answer my question. What do you want this early?" Draco asked, resigned to the fact that he wouldn't be allowed to go back to bed. He was already waking up, so it would have been of no use now, anyhow.

"Do you really need to be told? I thought I was pretty clear on what I wanted from you," Harry said, his voice turning seductive, which just seemed plain wrong to Draco. Mostly because his body had reacted to it, and it was clear that Harry wasn't planning to remedy the situation. No wonder it had put Draco in a rather cranky mood.

"Potter, it's too bloody early for games," he groaned, trying to mask his arousal with grumpiness, which he didn't really have to feign. "Get to the point or get out."

"Okay, not a morning person, I see. I guess I'd do better to remember that." Harry paused while Draco huffed at the jab. It was true, but even if he were a morning person, how could Potter have expected him to be awake this early, when he had been up and waiting for him to return from the Ministry almost the whole night? Come to think of it, he would have liked to know how he had got into his bed, since he didn’t remember waking up and coming up there after he had dozed off in the lounge.

"I just came to wake you up and to see you before I go again. Breakfast is served."

"When did you get back? You never came to bed last night," Draco grumbled, acutely aware of the fact that he must have sounded awfully clingy to Harry's ears.

"No, I didn't. Sorry. It became late and I slept in my office. Did you miss me?" Harry asked as an afterthought, pulling Draco into an embrace and pressing a smacking kiss onto his cheek.

"Why the hell did the Wizengamot decide to order you to return to your job right now? They were fine without you for a month…"

Draco had managed to completely forget that Harry had a job, until the message to inform him that his leave was over had arrived, with the request that Harry return to work immediately. After the scandal printed in the Prophet concerning Draco carrying Harry's child had run, the Ministry had decided to send him on 'holiday' – forced leave would have been a better word for it. As a result, cases had accumulated during his long absence, and he then had to spend not only the required eight hours of his first day in his office, but also the following night. This rendered Draco extremely annoyed and made him eat three bowls of chocolate ice cream in a row.

"What did you expect? I can't exactly ask for a leave. If I told them why I needed the time off, not one day would go by before everyone would know about it. I don't really fancy the idea of an audience crashing the ceremony, nor reading our names in the Prophet featured in some highly exaggerated fairy-tale." Harry sighed.

They had already spoken about those issues and decided that it would be best to keep silent about their impending wedding until it had already happened. The 'ceremony' itself wasn't going to be anything like the one Draco had for his marriage with Pansy. It was going to be just a formality, going into the Ministry and signing some papers and exchanging rings. Hermione had told Draco she would make the new institution somewhat formal, but to be honest, neither Draco nor Harry felt the need for a grand wedding. Draco had sent out the required invitations to his family, but – not surprisingly – only a handful of them had been answered, so there was no need to come up with anything fancy. Both of them would have been the happiest if it was quick and to the point. That thought reminded Draco of something else.

"Did you see yesterday's Evening Prophet?" he asked, resting his head on Harry's shoulder sleepily and rubbing his face into the warm skin of his throat.

"Something interesting?" Harry's voice rumbled. He must not have slept much, because Draco already started feeling his body weighing down on him as his muscles became lax with fatigue. Draco had the feeling that, if he could, Harry would have liked nothing more than to crawl in with him for a short nap.

"Just Cyrus," Draco answered a couple of seconds later, his tone suggesting resignation. "He and Pansy

are now apparently married. And then he felt the need to give a statement about me. Not very flattering, mind you, but I didn't expect him to go out of his way." And if that was not the understatement of the century, then Draco didn't know what was. "He said a few things about you, too. Just wanted to warn you what to expect before you go into that madhouse you call a workplace."

"Thanks for the warning," Harry said, his voice assuming a pained undertone. "I am a big boy. I had to learn the hard way how to deal with the press… Come to think of it, you had your share in my 'education', as well." Draco felt Harry pushing him away a bit, and he looked up into his face, expecting the previous hurt to resurface; he really wasn't in the mood to deal with that. Fortunately, Harry's expression only reflected mock-seriousness about the offence. "Don't you feel you should compensate me for all that nastiness…"

"Oh, don't worry about that," Draco said with the same teasing air, "I was planning to. Just not right now."

Harry's lips turned into an exaggerated pout at that last sentence, and Draco had a hard time keeping his features straight.

"What, not even to make it easier to endure another day at work?" And then he turned the puppy-dog eyes on Draco, which he knew Draco wouldn't be able to resist. That was how Harry was late for work and consequently, had to pull another long day.

Harry being away the whole day meant that Draco soon ran out of things to do alone, and found himself stewing in his own juices. Then his attention was diverted to Cyrus, as his accusations did not stop after the first article. Draco hoped that the hate propaganda wouldn't influence the voting negatively. He even went so far as to firecall Granger and talk with her about his concerns, but she told him not to worry, and that she was doing everything in her power.

This didn't quell Draco's ire against Cyrus, which his cousin had successfully rekindled with his untimely reappearance. Draco was trying to think of an appropriate revenge for Cyrus' latest attempt to blacken his name. His first thought was hiring Rita Skeeter and making her write a similar article about his cousin, but when Ginny Weasley heard him muttering to himself about the plan, she suggested a different approach that, Draco had to admit, was a much more elegant solution. It still involved Rita Skeeter, though.

Only two days before the voting, Draco woke up with the frightening thought that he was forgetting something concerning the wedding. The sudden movement as he sat up in bed had jolted Harry, who looked like he was also waking up. Draco wanted to let Harry sleep in, since this was the first day since he had gone back to work when he didn't have to wake up early. He leaned back into the deceptive warmth of the bedding and the body draped over his side, and listened to Harry's breathing deepening again while he tried to list everything in his mind.

The ceremony was to be held in the Ministry's new Civil Marriage Office, which was on the same floor as the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, so they would have only to Floo into Harry's room, avoiding the public entries into the Ministry.

There would be little to no trouble with the guests, since out of his relatives only three families deemed to acquiesce to his invitations; that meant six people he didn't even know very well, but beggars can't be choosers, he supposed. Two of them were an older couple without children who had renounced the Dark Lord and fled the country even before Draco had been born. There was a cousin thrice removed who had married a Muggle and borne a son for him and, unfortunately, Luna Lovegood. Naturally, Harry couldn't get away with not inviting every single member of the Order of the Phoenix, but, on the positive side, the presence of so many veterans meant Draco didn't have to worry about getting rid of any unwanted guests.

The reception was going to be held in The Burrow, as previously planned, with Mrs. Weasley as the main organiser. Draco had already decided that he didn't need to know any more about that. Since neither he nor Harry wanted to attract attention, they decided to keep the festivities down, at least in the Ministry, and didn't feel the need to order specific wedding robes to be tailored. Not to mention that Draco had this hidden, nagging fear in his mind that from now on, he had to watch every Knut he was giving out, and he couldn't afford to buy clothing that he would only be able to wear once.

What else was there?

He was lying on his back, grimacing when the little fiend inside him suddenly kicked him in the guts again, and he couldn't prevent the tightening of his fingers, which had slipped into Harry's mane out of habit. Harry moaned sleepily and turned to his other side, pressing his bum to Draco and ducking out from under Draco's hand. As he did that, one of the dark curls got caught on Draco's finger and came loose slowly, like a small black snake uncurling from around his finger… and that was when realisation

hit him.

The rings! He had forgotten the rings! He and Pansy never had any, so Draco wasn't used to wearing a wedding band, but now they would need it as part of the magical contract that legalised their marriage, as was the case with civil marriages.

Draco jolted out of the bed in panic, opening closets and drawers in search for his reduced belongings. He knew there was a small case with some of his mother's family jewels, courtesy of Pansy. There must be at least two rings among them; it wouldn't even matter if they weren't identical. Finally, he found it. Sitting back onto the bed, he put it on his lap and resized it. At the noise of metal clinking inside the velvet-lined box, Harry woke up for real, as Draco had completely forgotten to be stealthy while he was searching franticly for something that would serve the purpose. He sat up and directed bleary eyes, offended by the light, on Draco's bowed frame.

"What are you doing?" he asked thickly, jolting Draco out of his trance.

"We don't have rings!" was Draco's desperate answer, but just then, his finger slipped into something that had the feel of a metal hoop and he pulled out his hand with a triumphant cry, presenting the band to Harry.

They stared at the gleaming metal with the large red stone for several seconds in silence. Finally, it was Harry who spoke.

"I think I recognise that ring…"

Draco gulped and felt his face fill with blood at the remembrance. He pressed the little trigger and the bolt over the hidden compartment engraved into the setting opened, a strong herbal smell drifting from it to their noses. Draco was able to tell Harry had just remembered where he could have seen that ring, as he lunged back on top of the bed and started laughing.

"I knew you took something," he said, his eyes full with mirth. "I could smell it on you."

"It was just something to protect against diseases," Draco muttered, embarrassed by the reminder of Snape's deceitful potion that had caused so much trouble for him after that night in Copenhagen.

"I guess it would be appropriate to wear that," Harry suggested, joking, but Draco didn't feel that jovial himself.

"There is no way," he grumbled. "It's a woman's ring, anyhow. You can't expect me to wear it."

"It was just an idea." Harry shrugged and gave an apologetic caress to Draco's shoulder. "Let me help you," he said then, and took the box from Draco's hand, emptying its contents into a pile on top of the sheet between them.

As he did this, Draco immediately spotted another ring that was now on top of the heap. He had seen identical pieces in most of the portraits in his mother's chamber. It was a variation of the Black signet-ring, designed in the brief period during the eighteenth century when the family gained a bad reputation for Muggle burnings. Instead of the entire family crest, there was only one of the five-pointed stars engraved into the face, so it wouldn't be obvious at the first glance whose seal it was. It looked familiar, but not because it was his mother's family heirloom. Draco had a feeling that he had seen the ring recently somewhere else.

"You have a similar one," he said to Harry, lifting out the ring from the pile with a finger. Harry nodded, and Draco's mind suddenly presented him with the memory of the ring he had found in Harry's flat during his first visit, when he was waiting for him to come back from delivering Pinky to her parents.

"It's in the second drawer from the top," Harry told him, and, after a short search, Draco sat back on the bed with two nearly identical rings sitting in his palm.

"How did you get it?" he asked Harry, who lifted out one of the rings and held it in front of his face to be able to examine it closely. But the answer he gave Draco was not what he had expected.

"This was the Portkey you used to transport us out of Voldemort's dungeons," he said, dropping it back carefully on top of the other in Draco's hand. Draco looked up sharply, then back at the rings in his palm, but even after ten seconds of examining them, his mind proved unwilling to supply him with the memory. He shook his head.

"And you kept it," he said or asked – even he couldn't have told which.

"It looked like the one Sirius had shown me in an old portrait of his brother. He said he had sold his own after leaving Hogwarts and bought a bottle of two-hundred year old Ogden's Old Firewhisky with the money… and his bike," Harry explained, grinning with the remembrance, but Draco didn't miss that the grin was not entirely genuine.

Draco lifted his gaze from the rings and looked into his eyes. For several seconds, they only gazed at each other, communicating without words, and then they both nodded.

"I don't mind if you don't," Harry told him. "It isn't as if we'll have to wear them every day," he added. Then he plucked the pieces of metal out of Draco's hand and deposited them on top of the dresser.

"And now, I think you owe me for waking me up when I could still be sleeping," he said with a glint in his eyes that left no doubts about what he considered an appropriate compensation. After weeks of time to get used to that sudden change, Draco still couldn't help the leaping sensation in his stomach as his blood ran southwards, and he found himself carelessly sweeping the pile of jewels off of the bed and climbing into awaiting arms, to lose himself in the exquisite pastime that was touching and being touched by Harry.

The next two days trudged along as if time had decided that it needed a breather, if only to make life hard for Draco. He wasn't even able to concentrate on Pinky's explanation about aliens and laser guns, and he seriously considered fleeing when Mrs. Weasley only mentioned cakes and frosting or sitting arrangements.

Then finally the sixth of March had come, and with it a nervous anticipation that seemed to affect not only Draco and Harry, but everyone else, too – even the little children who should not have understood what was going on at all. Draco was only glad that Pinky had gone home the previous day, because as

much as she had grown on him, he did not fancy the idea of having to trip over her while he was in that state of mind.

Harry stayed home with him, making a valiant effort to take Draco's mind off of brooding, but not even sex was able to distract him for long. He spent the day on the couch in front of the fireplace just staring into the crackling flames and imagining them turning green with Granger's bushy head popping up on top of them any moment. Harry sat with him for short intervals of time, but neither of them was particularly good company for the other, so Draco told him to just go and do what he needed to relieve tension. Thus, Harry spent the majority of the day either on his broom or helping Mrs. Weasley with little repairs in the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley made Draco's favourite for lunch to cheer him up, but Draco barely tasted it. He did not have an appetite. Seeing that he was only pushing around his food, Podmore warned him that he needed to take care of himself and his child. If he had not, Draco would have excused himself in order to go back to his brooding and fire-watching.

This repeated a few hours later at dinner, and they still did not have any news about the voting. The Evening Prophet came with no article whatsoever about the law change; they did not even deem what the Wizengamot was currently occupied with worth mentioning. Of course, Draco mused, the matter did not hold any importance for the majority of the wizarding population. Letting his mind run free, he pondered how many there were in his situation, and after weighing the odds, he reckoned very few. In fact, he would not have been surprised if it turned out that he and Harry were the only couple to benefit from the law change – if it ever took place, that is.

Draco was so into his thoughts, that at first, he had not noticed when the by then almost extinguished fire in the fireplace blazed up again and a very tired-looking woman's head started bobbing above the flames like an odd green beach ball on top of the ocean waves.

"You're still up!" Granger said instead of greeting.

Draco suddenly became aware of his surroundings again. He and Harry were alone in the lounge, with only the fireplace to light the room, and the house sounded empty. Everyone else had long gone to bed, Draco realised. He consulted the clock and saw that it was already past one in the morning.

He sat up quickly, pulling his feet out of Harry's lap, dislodging the grip that had slackened on them when Harry had fallen asleep.

The constant snoring, that Draco had not even noticed until then, stopped as Harry woke up too, and stared blearily into the flames until his mind comprehended what he was seeing there.

"Hermione!" he exclaimed then, and kneeled onto the rug in front of the fireplace, pushing his glasses, which had slipped down his nose, back up with a forefinger. "Has it gone through?" he asked excitedly, as if he were the one whose future depended on the end result and not Draco. Draco was secretly glad about it, because his own throat felt suddenly too dry to ask.

Granger gave them a huge smile that belied her exhausted countenance and nodded. Draco's breath caught in his throat when his mind comprehended what exactly that gesture meant, and he was only half aware of Harry pulling him into a crushing embrace and smacking an enthusiastic kiss on his mouth. He was so out of it from relief that he didn't even care when Harry slipped him the tongue in front of Granger!

"Listen, I managed to persuade the press not to print the news until the day after tomorrow, so we don't have to worry about unwanted attention at the wedding ceremony." Granger suddenly turned to him, smiling. "By the way, Draco, it was a very clever idea to give Skeeter the exclusive rights to the story."

For some reason, Draco was not surprised that she knew about that, and it reflected his true state of mind that he had half a mind to tell her that it was not exactly his idea, but he figured that he would have time for that later. Apparently, Granger had already updated Skeeter about the law and promised her additional chunks she could sink her fangs into if she promised to keep it a secret for now. Draco half-listened to the following short conversation about other small things that eluded his attention next to the immense relief he was feeling.

Some ten minutes later, Harry stood up from before the now empty fire and scooped Draco up, helping him up the stairs into their room. Draco barely even assisted Harry in pulling off his clothes, and slipped between the sheets obediently, allowing Harry's warmth to curl around his body. Then he fell asleep with his mind still absorbed by the overwhelming elation, and slept like the dead until Harry woke him up the

next day to get ready for their wedding.

Draco was physically still tired, but mentally he couldn't have been more awake. He was wide-eyed with anxiety, and every time he glanced at the mirror, he had to remind himself to school his expression into something neutral. Funny, it was not the fact that he was going to be married under these peculiar circumstances that caused his apprehension, but what went with it: having to appear in front of a larger audience in his current condition.

This was one of those very rare occurrences in Draco Malfoy's life, when he did not want to be seen and noticed – the only other time was during the last two months of his stay at Hogwarts. He was wearing a dark grey robe with a darker grey high-collared shirt underneath. The robe and the shirt itself were of course the highest quality material, but together they looked dreadfully mediocre. Draco shuddered at the sight and had to remind himself that this was exactly his intention: he was trying for something that would not draw attention to him and his belly.

There would be no photographers there, per Draco's request. He thought he would die from embarrassment if a picture of him were released in the Prophet, showing off the bulge on his front. He could barely stand to look into the mirror as it was and couldn't imagine how Harry was stomaching having to see Draco naked every night, but then, he tried not to think about that. Thankfully, Harry must have figured out by then that there was a reason why Draco insisted they didn't leave the lights on most of the time.

Draco hesitated briefly about whether or not to wear his Order of Merlin. The medal had been in the package Pansy had given him. It would surely draw the attention from his middle section, but then again, he knew Harry was not going to wear his own, and that would only make Draco more ridiculous standing next to him. He frowned at the ruffles of the bulbous material aligning itself at his feet and, turning around, he found the look highly irritating.

Just when he was about to try and search his lacking wardrobe once again for yet another robe, even though he had already gone through it at least ten times and chosen the least offensive one, the door to his room opened and Harry slipped through the gap swiftly, as if he were trying to sneak in undetected.

"What are you doing, Draco?" he asked, after he had closed the door behind his back.

"Trying to find a robe that doesn't make me look like a fat cow," Draco snarled back, elbow deep in the trunk laying on the bed he had not slept in since he had Apparated into Harry's that night.

"You don't look like a fat cow," was Harry's feeble attempt at placating him, but the hesitant tone of his voice told Draco that statement didn't stand on the most stable foundation.

"Shut up, Potter! I know what I look like," he grumbled, half-angry and half-resigned to the truth of that statement. He had to face it: there was nothing short of a Glamour Charm that would make him look his previous sleek self and not like a sod with a beer-belly. It was too bad that the barrier around the foetus prevented any kind of foreign magic from being cast on it.

"Whatever I wear I'll just look like an overweight drag queen!" Draco burst out, and he was only a hairbreadth away from bursting into bitter tears – bloody hormones!

"No, you don't…" Harry stepped up to him and touched his shoulder. Draco snapped his head to the side so quickly that if it hadn't been fastened there, it would have entered into an orbit around The Burrow. The look in his eyes was enough to bring Harry's failed attempt at consolation to an abrupt stop.

Harry stood there with his mouth open for several seconds, but then he just shrugged and a slow grin made its way to the corners of his mouth.

"All right, you do. But I kind of like it," he said with such an expression that Draco couldn't possibly stay angry with him and the universe anymore.

"Yes. You would," he told Harry, feeling his facial muscles wanting to pull into a smile and deciding to allow them to. Then he remembered just how true that statement was and felt his face being warmed by a ferocious blush.

"Before you get any ideas: I won't dress up like that ever again! Even for you," he exclaimed, still red as a

tomato, which the mirror was not above to comment on.

Harry had the nerve to laugh at him.

"We'll have to see," he said, giving Draco a kiss on the cheek. This time, Draco was willing to forgive him for his impudence because the interlude had taken his mind off of the nerve-wracking apprehension he had managed to work himself up to about such an unimportant issue as clothing. (And he hoped that his mother did not hear that last remark, wherever she was currently, or she would take to haunting him for sure.)

It was three in the afternoon when they stumbled out of the fireplace of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office in the Ministry – Draco, because it was impossible for him to get used to his constantly shifting centre of gravity, and Harry because he was perpetually clumsy arriving through the Floo. It was fortunate that Podmore and Weasley were already there to catch them.

"Why did we have to come this early?" Draco asked, grumbling. The ceremony was to start at four.

Harry looked at him and gave him a slow smile. Draco didn't like the glint in his eyes. It looked like he was hiding something from him. And after his answer, it became quite apparent that he was indeed. "We were invited to another wedding before ours," he said with an air as if he had just given Draco something he had wanted for his whole life as a present.

Draco returned his gaze, unblinking, for a long second, and then said, "No."

"What?" Harry looked confused. The smile had disappeared from his face and relinquished its place to confusion.

"I said: no," Draco repeated with a tone that brooked no opposition.

"But… why?" Harry wanted to know.

Draco rolled his eyes as if the answer was quite obvious. For him, it was. He didn't see how Harry could have missed the clue.

"It is quite enough that I have to go out there and parade myself in front of all those people and a reporter to boot. I'm not going to make a spectacle of myself for another audience, thank you very much. I'll just stay here and you can come back for me once it is time to go."

"But Draco… aren't you even interested in who the other couple is?" Harry tried to appeal to his curiosity.

The truth was that Draco would have been interested, if the remembrance of what he had seen in the mirror that morning and the mortification and degradation he felt at the sight had not pushed everything else out of his mind.

"No, I'm not." He was not looking forward to making an appearance at his own wedding in the first place. What made Harry think he would be happy to take his arm like a good little wife and march into someone else's?

In that moment, the door to the office opened and Draco was barely able to jump behind Harry and Podmore's bulks to get out of the sight of the newcomer.

"Oh. You're already here!" a familiar sounding feminine voice said.

Draco risked a glimpse from behind Podmore's black Muggle suit-clad back and saw that he was right: it was Katie Bell with her eight months old son sleeping on her shoulder and drooling on her elegant and expensive-looking cream-coloured robes. They complimented her skin tone and contrasted with her dark hair, which was swept up into an elaborate knot at the top of her head. Draco caught himself looking at her with envy for her slender figure. It was only a few months more until he, too, would go back to his old self, he reminded himself, but that knowledge offered very little consolation for his current

appearance.

"Are you coming?" she asked, when after a second silence no one had moved.

"Just a minute!" Harry said and turned around to face Draco. "There will be no other guests… well, not much more than at our own ceremony. Please, come." He tried to plead with Draco.

"Who?" Draco asked in a voice that radiated suspicion.

"Er… just a couple of Muggles. No one you should worry about…"

"Potter! Are you completely out of your mind?" Draco snapped at Harry. "There is no way I will parade myself in front of Muggles! They cannot even understand magic! How, do you suppose, are they going to react to this?" he asked with a sharp gesture towards his middle, where the robes were beginning to tent. "There is no way that I will come, and you'd do better to scurry off already," he added with his hand on Harry's back, and he pushed him in the direction of the door.

His resolve was not even to be moved by the disappointment on the other man's face.

"All right." Harry sighed in surrender.

Draco closed the door behind them and leaned tiredly against the woodwork. He heard them talking, their voices echoing in the empty corridor – Katie asked Harry to hold her son during the ceremony because apparently Harry was always able to calm him when he was crying. Draco wondered just when Harry had had an opportunity to establish that, but he felt too wrung out and depressed to care about finding out. He hobbled to the couch and slumped into it inelegantly, supporting his aching feet on the armrest and closing his eyes with his fingers entwined on top of his belly.

He woke up from a light slumber at a familiar hand caressing his cheeks and his name being murmured into his ear by Harry's voice. His eyelashes fluttered open, and his gaze met with a pair of green irises

staring intently at him from behind glass lenses that were a bit smudged near the corners.

"Wake up, sleepyhead." Harry gave him a smile and then rewarded him for his obedience with a kiss that was too warm and lasted too long to count as chaste, and too soft to be born of desire. Draco punched Harry in the stomach in order to make him move and let him get up in haste.

"Is it something with my hair?" he asked with sudden alarm and tried to smooth down the sleek tendrils with the help of his fingers.

"It looks fine," Harry told him, not even blinking at the aggressive treatment. "There is a mirror." He gestured to a cabinet with the distinct appearance of something that an old witch with a thousand cats would possess rather than a proper filing cabinet that belonged to an office. Draco had the sneaking suspicion that it must have been exactly that before Harry or his predecessor had acquired it. Why else would it have a mirror on it?

Draco combed a few strands into place and perfected his appearance by separating the hairs on the top of his head with his nails into a pleasing image, then turned to Harry.

"I take it it's time."

Harry nodded. "Are you ready?"

Draco wanted to tell him that no, he wasn't, but he realised that he wasn't going to be more ready for several months yet, so he went without a word.

Draco thought that the following half hour was the worst thirty minutes of his life – the endless seconds during which he had stood with his wand turned on Dumbledore included. He looked straight ahead, trying to concentrate on anything but the stares he could practically feel on his skin – as if they were trying to divest him of his robes or see into his flesh to discover whether or not there really was a baby inside.

Cold sweat was running down his back, and it was only thanks to Harry's guiding arm and the presence of Podmore looming behind him that he was able to retain his cool state of mind. It did not help at all that, from the corners of his eyes, he could see a few heads sporting hair as pale as his own standing out in the crowd. Certainly, he knew there were a few of his relatives in attendance, but he wasn't afraid of those – he was more wary of the ones who did not announce their presence. For example, he could not imagine that Cyrus would willingly bypass an opportunity like this to ridicule him.

His intuition was proved right in the next second, when he turned his head in the direction of another gleaming white crown and spotted the maliciously slitted eyes underneath with the colours that didn't match. He turned back his head slowly, pretending that he did not see anything unusual, and his grip on Harry's arm tightened instinctively.

"What is it?" Harry's barely audible question rang in his ears not a second later.

"Cyrus," Draco whispered back.

He felt Harry's hand coming up and descending onto his fingers reassuringly. "Don't worry," Harry filtered through barely moving lips. "I set a few of the Aurors on him. He won't be able to make a disturbance."

Draco's glance flicked in the direction of his cousin again. He saw three people surrounding him very closely: a tall dark-skinned man with his teeth and eye whites gleaming white and a silver hoop in one ear; an old woman with a hunched back whose head Draco would not have been able to spot among the crowd if her curled hair wasn't dyed fuchsia, of all colours; and none other than Luna Lovegood. Draco made a mental note to question Harry about the peculiar contingent after the freak show was over.

The woman who conducted the short ceremony was undoubtedly a Ministry employee. She was young and starry-eyed - she looked like someone who was just out of school – but her manner was professional and nearly painless. She started with a short introduction that Draco barely listened to, then she asked them the usual yes-no questions and told them to put on the rings. There was a brief confusion between Weasley and Podmore, both staring at each other, until Harry remembered that while he had to deal with Draco's moods, he had completely forgotten to give the rings to either of the best men, and fished them out of his robe pockets. Once the ring Draco was supposed to pull onto Harry's finger was thrust upon him, he was so nervous that he almost dropped it. Harry, though, seemed to be composure itself;

he made it look easy, as if he made a habit of marrying someone every day.

When the business with the rings was straightened out, the officiator pushed a heavily adorned parchment in front of them and presented them with a large, decadent peacock feather for a quill that had already been dipped into thick indigo ink and was most likely provided with a Self-Inking Charm.

Draco let Harry take it first, until he managed to stop the trembling of his hands so he would be able to sign his own name. They agreed upon it in advance, that both of them would keep their names. To be honest, Draco had just as hard a time imagining himself as a Potter as Harry being a Malfoy. There was no need to change what they had become used to: neither of them was a woman and it wasn't as if anyone in wizarding Britain needed a reminder like another surname after a hyphen to know who their respective spouses were.

Draco observed with trepidation as Harry drew the last line across the two 'T's and straightened up. He accepted the heavy quill and bent down above the table – the position made inconvenient by his belly. He put down his first name and was pleased to see that the usual elegant contours were not at all affected by the nervous tingling he could feel in his fingers. He lifted the quill after curling a small connecting line after the 'o' and started the 'M' with flourish… only to come to an abrupt stop just before he reached the transition to the 'a'. It felt like his own hand was a separate being who could not decide what it was supposed to do now. After a few seconds of hovering above the parchment impotently, the quill dropped out of his fingers as if it was knocked out of them by force, and Draco was left there blinking, still leaning onto the table.

There was a quick movement he could detect from the corners of his eyes and, not a second later, Harry was already up again and passing him the feather. Draco accepted it automatically, but he felt like his limbs were moving under water. The quill felt too heavy within his fingers. He positioned his hand with the tip of it over the blank space where the 'a' was supposed to come, but he was not able to move it. After a few seconds that must have looked like he was frozen to the spot, but in reality was him trying to move the quill down and draw the curved line, he gave up on it. He forced out a shaky breath to calm himself, then with a slow, calculated move, he put down the quill onto the table and straightened up with a face that must have been pale as a ghost's.

He could feel the questioning looks on him, most importantly Harry's, but he was still in too much shock to be able to answer them.

The static of the air was shredded to pieces in the next instant by a shrill, high-pitched laughter cutting into it. Draco didn't need to turn his head to be able to tell whose voice he was hearing. He realised that he wasn't even surprised by this turn of events – he should have expected it, really.

He was jolted out of his stupor by the sudden movement at his side. His arm shot out by reflex and he was able to stop Harry from strangling his cousin in time. Harry gave him a confused look and Draco could see in his expression that he did not comprehend the situation completely – the only realised that something had happened to hurt Draco and provide Cyrus with a seemingly unending supply of hilarity, but he didn't exactly know what. Draco shook his head to indicate that his cousin wasn't worth that much attention.

"I'm glad you've had your share of amusement, Cousin," he said in a low tone, but in the surrounding almost-silence, it was enough to draw everyone's attention to him. Even his cousin stopped the insane noise that was coming out of his throat.

"Well, Cousin, you surely do not live with the belief that you will be allowed to retain the family name after what you did," he said with a cruel sneer. Draco, though, only lifted a brow to show that he was not impressed.

"You're right, of course." He nodded. "Just don't forget it: I am going to laugh the same way when, twenty-five years to come, a Potter is going to take over the Malfoy fortune," he added, his facial muscles pulling into the mirror image of his cousin's goading smirk. In the background he could hear the scraping of a Quick-Quotes Quill on a parchment, and his smirk widened, while Cyrus was grabbed unceremoniously by his arms and dragged out of the hall without much ado.

"Don't think we are finished yet, Cousin!" he could hear Cyrus' voice echoing from outside before the thick wooden doors leading to the hall were closed with an audible thud, banning the improbable image of the old lady manhandling his cousin from his sight. For a second, Draco could see a vision of the small purple-haired lady beating Cyrus' head repeatedly with a floral-patterned handbag behind the closed door just too vividly, in his mind's eye.

"Draco? Are you all right?" Harry's concerned voice questioned, while Draco was enveloped into the warm and protective embrace of strong arms. He felt the breath he had held leaving his lungs in a gust,

and his body sagged minutely into the comforting warmth of his…

"Is it over? Are we married?" he asked, turning his head away from the rest of the room and connecting his gaze with Harry's. In the light of the many floating candles above their heads, his eyes looked hardened, almost like carved jade with a fascinating pattern.

Harry glanced at the Ministry officer, who answered the question with a smile, not so much pleased as comforting, and a nod. That was enough for Draco.

"Can we go then?" he asked. He was not even a little surprised when Harry just took a firmer hold of him and Apparated them straight into his office, from where they took the Floo to The Burrow and were ensconced in their room by the time everyone else arrived for the reception.

TBC

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Chapter 39: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

13. September 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you get to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies.

Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Vaughn and C. Dumbledore.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

Draco did not feel like coming down for the festivities at all. Harry and Podmore made excuses for him, using the shock he had received during the ceremony and his condition as explanations for his absence. The mention of his child's health was enough to stop even Mrs. Weasley from insisting that Draco come down and take part in the celebration. Listening to the noises coming from outside, Draco thought bitterly that she must have been about the only one to notice his absence, since the party went quite well without him being there. She sent him a plate of food from every course and a large slice of chocolate cake with enough frosting to cause an adolescent girl to break out in spots for years to come.

When Draco started feeling a bit better, he allowed Harry to let in a select few people who wanted to congratulate him or talk to him for another reason. The first one was Pinky, running around the house on a sugar-high, trying to cheer Draco up with a different type of cake every time she banged into the room. Next was Granger, who did not stay long, only until she caught Draco and Harry in a group hug and managed to squeeze the breath out of them. Seeing the red blotches on her cheeks and the smile reaching from one ear to the other, Draco wondered how much she had had already to drink, but Harry just laughed off the inquiry and accused Draco of being jealous because he wasn't permitted to have alcohol. To his credit, Harry had, too, only drank one bottle of Butterbeer, acting as if he was on a pub night and not his own wedding, saying that he wasn't in the mood to get drunk. Draco secretly appreciated his self-control and his willingness to show solidarity with him.

All of the Weasleys came to visit at some point in the evening. Lawrence (he insisted that Draco call him by his first name) brought a scroll with him from Gringotts: the long awaited account. Draco thanked him for his efforts, but he was in no condition to look at it at the moment, so he just put it down onto his nightstand and resolved to read it in the morning. The slowness with which the goblins were handling his request only served to remind him of exactly how low his standing had sunk as of late. As the proprietor of the Malfoy fortune, he had been used to being on top of their list of important clients, so every one of his requests had been treated with the utmost priority. Right now, with every day that had passed

without the promised account arriving, Draco had been forced to realise repeatedly just how much he had really lost.

Around eight in the evening, he got a visit from Rita Skeeter, who was so inebriated that her acid-green quill kept writing 'hiccup' and striking it out every odd second. She already had one and a half parchments full of hiccups. By the time she managed to catch the right one of Draco's many outstretched hands in her own robust grip, she had forgotten why she had come, except to offer her congratulations. Then she remembered something and insisted that Draco read a line from her notes.

Draco Malfoy should be remembered as the wizard who sacrificed his masculinity as his own contribution to our hope for a better future: to create the wizarding world's next generation, while Cyrus Malfoy is nothing more than a man who has stolen the prospect for a family from his own kin.

Draco did not deny that reading this made him feel marginally better. He still was not in the mood to go down and mingle with the guests – mostly because they must have all been drunk by then. Finally, when his head felt like it was going to split into two from the racket, he asked Podmore for a Sleeping Potion, and he was already half asleep when Harry came back and slipped in behind him, still wearing his clothes.

"You could have waited for me," he complained. "What about our wedding night?"

"Mmm'sorry," Draco mumbled. He really had forgotten about that. There was nothing he could do, though, because in the next instant, he was already knocked out and sound asleep.

He woke up to the delicious scent of bacon drifting through the rift under the door. Harry was tucked into the blankets and attached to his back so firmly that Draco was not even able to stretch his muscles or turn onto his back without jostling him a bit. In the end, Draco managed to disentangle himself without waking him up; his bladder was so full that he had almost not made it to the bathroom in time.

After he had finished his business, he didn't go back up, but went into the kitchen, and let his taste buds be seduced by the rich food Mrs. Weasley was cooking. Looking around and seeing the grimacing faces coloured various shades of green of the people around the table, he was glad that he had not drunk anything last night. The Weasel looked the worst off, but he was the only one whose hangover did not

prevent him from gobbling up a large plate of bacon with eggs and sausages while the others were staring at him with ill-concealed disgust and were most likely wondering how long he would be able to keep it all down.

To Draco's surprise, the assembly included a bleary looking Hermione Granger with Ginny Weasley and Katie Bell sitting on each side of her. The latter was occupied with feeding her son and finding his mouth with varied success due to the fact that her eyes were almost completely swollen shut - no doubt, thanks to previous night's drunken debauchery. Or she just was not a morning person either.

"Good morning," Draco greeted them with an exaggeratedly cheerful smile, mostly because it served to annoy the others present, providing him with the fleeting illusion that there were other people who had it worse than him. Having been reminded of the previous day's ordeal, though, he was not able to keep up the pretence for very long.

"Here you are, dear," he heard another cheerful voice – this time it was Mrs. Weasley – and a plate filled with mouth-watering food appeared in front of him. When he looked at her over his shoulder, he thought he saw her wink at him comradely, being the only other person who didn't seem to be struggling with a hangover.

Draco tucked in with gusto, suddenly realising how hungry he really was; not even the groans and nauseated expressions around him could detract from his appetite. Soon, he was left alone with his breakfast – the others being finished or just not being able to stomach the sight. Mrs. Weasley cleared the dirty plates and cutlery from the table and then left as well, possibly to get a good start on clearing away the ruins of last night's partying. From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Granger's arm briefly draped around the waist of one of the women. Draco shook his head disapprovingly. Honestly, as if they were Muggles! Never heard of a Sobering Charm, did they? They couldn't have been still as drunk that they needed to support each other like that, right?

When the dining table was, once again, clean of dirty kitchenware, Draco noticed that someone had left their newspaper behind. It was lying with the sports page on top, presumably because Weasley had been reading the Quidditch section. Draco put down his knife and dragged the paper close to him, turning it around in the process, only to be confronted with the headline on the front page. Actually, there were three headlines; curiously, all of them beginning the phrase 'Minister of Magic'. He remembered Hermione promising something along the lines that she would take care that Draco and Harry's names wouldn't get liberally splashed around the front page, but he had not expected the outcome to have such an overall effect. He scanned the articles for the letters forming the familiar

'Malfoy' word, until he remembered that he would not find it – at least not in connection to him.

He was no longer a Malfoy, after all.

It took nearly a full minute to come to terms with that realisation. Not that it was something new, of course – he had not spent the reception of his own marriage sulking in his room for nothing. It was just that this was the first time he was confronted directly with what that meant.

There: he found his name spelled as 'Draco M' next to Harry's carefully shortened in the same way – even though he wasn't the one whose surname would consist of only one letter from now on. Draco's eyes scrolled upwards to read the title of the article, and when he did, he found himself suddenly short of breath. He thought he was quite probably still asleep and dreaming, or there was something in his tea to make him hallucinate… He read the titles of the other three articles once again to make sure he wasn't misunderstanding anything. They read the same the second time, too.

He could practically feel the vein on his temple throbbing, which usually signalled his displeasure. He scrunched the Prophet into his fist, pushed back his chair without finishing his breakfast and stood up with the intention of confronting Harry about his findings. If Harry had known about these things, then he owed Draco some explanations, and he'd better make them damn quick!

Harry was woken up instantly by the loud bang of Draco slamming the door closed behind him.

"Draco?" he asked, working to blink away sleepiness and scowling against the light. For his sake, Draco sincerely hoped that Harry had not drunk much more the previous night after Draco had fallen asleep, because he sure as hell was not going to take a pounding head into consideration while screaming down the roof, demanding a credible explanation for the nasty trick Harry had played on him.

"What does this mean?" he spat, throwing the rolled up Prophet into Harry's face. Harry though, wasn't looking at the paper; instead he was blinking sleepily at Draco, looking like a disgruntled sloth just woken up from its digestive sleep.

"What?" was the intelligent answer to Draco's question. Draco didn't feel like clarifying, especially

because he was convinced that Harry had known about the whole set-up and was now only playing clueless for Draco's sake.

"This… thing in Skeeter's article. Why didn't you tell me about it?"

Harry groaned and turned to his back, closing his eyes again and pulling up the blanket to his chin.

"Which one?" he asked finally, sounding a lot less sleepy and more irritated now, as if it were he who had been wronged and not Draco. "And, for the record: you were the one who straight out refused to come with me yesterday and locked himself in my office to sulk instead. Then, after everything that had happened, I really didn't think it would be a good time for confessions, but of course you are allowed to voice your objections if you disagree with me on that point."

Draco breathed out harshly. He had demanded a plausible explanation, but the truth was that he had not expected Harry to give him one. He had expected him to stumble over his words and generally act contrite, not to take the wind out of Draco's sails with something he could not even argue with. Now he felt stupid, and suddenly, he felt like he had turned into a neurotic wife – the kind he had always accused Pansy of being.

"Don't beat up yourself over it," Harry told him, his eyes still closed, making Draco start and wonder how he had managed to get to know him over the short time they had been together to assess his silence that accurately – even without seeing him. "Come here," he patted the bed beside him, "and tell me what made you fly off the handle. What did Skeeter write in that damned article?"

Draco obeyed, shucking off his housecoat, which he had hastily donned before hurrying to the bathroom, and climbing onto the mattress. Then he opened his mouth to answer the question and realised that, actually, he had not even read the articles, only the headlines. He told Harry as much, and then Harry asked him to read them to him, while pulling him into an embrace that seemed to be designed only for situations like this. So Draco supported the Prophet on his belly and started reading aloud.

"The Minister Of Magic Brings Old Law Back Into Force," was the title of the topmost article, with the –

rather long-winded – subtitle: "Same-Sex Couples Are Allowed to Marry If They Produce Offspring."

The article was about the general history of the original law some eight-hundred years back, and how it had been changed over time to allow marriage if the couple promised to create children between them. The clause had later been completely disregarded and homosexual couples had started marrying right and left, the phenomenon later leading to a dangerous drop in the birth rate of the magical population – according to some 'historians', at least – Draco preferred to call them propagandists. Then it elaborated about how bringing back this institution – by keeping a close eye to the original condition being abided by – could only serve for the betterment of the wizarding world. Then it finished with the comments of several Wizengamot members stating mostly the same – only a lot more circuitously.

"It was very clever of Granger to utilize the word 'offspring' as the honey-trap to make those uptight pure-bloods with their ancient points of view accept her proposition," Draco commented appreciatively, after finishing the article. Harry mmm-ed, his voice still rough with drowsiness, but Draco could detect a slight hint of amusement hiding within it – no doubt due to the fact that, only a few months previously, Draco himself had not been much different from the ones he was criticising now.

"Can I go back to sleep?" Harry mumbled the question into the crook of Draco's neck, which caused delicious shivers to run down his back. "Or, better than that, can I get you naked?"

Draco nodded absently, revelling in the warmth he was enveloped in.

"We are definitely coming back to the 'getting naked'-part, but there is still more here. I want to read the rest first and perhaps it will also wake you up, as I don't appreciate the prospect of you falling back asleep in the middle of pleasuring me," he said then, eliciting a small chuckle from Harry and a minute tightening of his arms around Draco's middle.

"Go on then," Harry consented charitably, burrowing his face in Draco's throat and placing small kisses onto the warmed skin, which proved damn distracting, so Draco had no other choice but to wave away those generous lips with a regretful sigh.

His eyes drifted back to the paper and his attention was immediately drawn to the next article – the one that had made him drop his fork and rush up with the intent of questioning Harry about why he had

needed to keep this secret from him.

"The Minister of Magic Marries Her Long-Time Life-Partner," Draco read the title. He immediately proceeded reading the rest, his interest piqued, forgetting completely that he was supposed to read it aloud. But Harry did not complain, whether he was reading it over his shoulder or not. According to the article, he had known this already, since he had been not only one of the guests at the wedding, but also one of the best men.

The passing of the new law yesterday led to a consequence unexpected by most: Minister of Magic Hermione Granger came out as someone who has been romantically involved with another woman for almost four years. Not only that, but they have also been living together and, with the help of magic, have created a mutual child. This is the biggest secret that has been revealed about a person in such a high political position for some years. But, as opposed to the previous scandal of this magnitude, that of Cornelius Fudge having kept the return of He Who Must Not Be Named under wraps for nearly a year, this secret professes no danger to wizarding society.

In fact, learned warlocks would say the situation is the exact opposite: the long-kept secret relationship was essential in the proposition for bringing back the old marriage law, and thus opening a path for other people in her shoes (like the also newly wed couple Draco M and Harry J. P.) to legalise their relationship, and thus ease the acceptance of society for children conceived this way. Until now, the young mothers and fathers of these children had no other choice but to either marry someone of a different gender to give their children legitimacy or choose to raise them with the taint of being the product of a socially unacknowledged relationship, even though they are no less important members of the wizarding world than the boy next door who has a mother and a father to hold up.

The phenomenon is not such an isolated case, as most of us may think! The Ministry expects an increasing number of young parents or parents-to-be to come out of their hiding, appear before the public, and embrace this new opportunity for them to air the skeletons in their closets. As another favourable aspect of the new law, other same-sex couples may consider having children now that they can legally bind their lives together if they do.

But, to get back to the marriage being discussed, this reporter is sure that the readers are waiting impatiently for the (other) bride's name to be revealed. This reporter considers it her pleasure to oblige; thus, let it be known that the newly wedded wife of Hermione Granger is none other than the onetime Chaser of the professional team Pride of Portree, the deservedly celebrated Quidditch player Katie Bell. About her history, readers of the Prophet may remember that approximately three years ago, Bell was

rumoured to have had an affair with Puddlemere United's Keeper, Oliver Wood, and unjustly accused of throwing matches for his sake. She retired from her professional career shortly thereafter, but, as now appears, the cause had not – or not exclusively – been the scandal that had ruined her professional reputation, but the plans of her and her partner to try conceiving…

Draco put down the paper with a rustle that had jolted Harry out of his position – the snort in Draco's ear indicated that he had, indeed, dozed off on his shoulder.

Now that he knew and thought about it – replayed some past events, fragments of conversations that he had not been able to find an explanation for before – it made perfect sense. Not because Granger and Bell (Hell! Draco had no idea whether their names were still the same!) had been obvious about it, but Draco was observant enough to be able to remember and place all those small hints together, now he had come into this knowledge.

"Bloody hell!" he muttered, not quite believing it yet. Obviously, Harry had known about it. The Weasleys must have, too, and quite possibly, a lot of former Order members as well. The only one who had been kept in the dark was Draco… and Snape, too, until recently, Draco realised, remembering the veiled not-quite-explanation filled with half-uttered truths he had been given as a reason for Snape's intended non-attendance of Draco's wedding when he had asked him to stand by his side. And Draco had thought it was because he was angry with him for his association with Harry… though in all sincerity, probably that was a reason just as important as the other.

Draco's train of thought was diverted by the sudden tingling warmth of Harry's tongue tracing a path up his throat to his ear.

"Are you done yet?" he heard Harry’s steamy voice whispering into his ear. He sounded a lot more awake than when Draco had started reading, and as Draco wiggled a bit to make himself comfortable, he felt more awake as well. Draco felt heat rising from under his collar, and breathing in deeply, he savoured the slow build of arousal. Suddenly, Harry's hands resting on his thighs (when had they moved there?) felt a lot heavier and warmer…

"Just a bit more," he threw back over his shoulder, his voice breathy from anticipation. He just loved those moments before they got to the actual sex part, when Harry let his hands wander and discover the most interesting places on Draco's body without the hurry of pressing arousal. So he lifted his paper back

and started reading the last article while waiting with bated breath for those fingers to begin their questing.

The Minister Of Magic Resigns Her Post!

Following recent events (see above), the Minister of Magic announced her resignation yesterday. Many would accuse Hermione Granger that her decision of reinstating the law to allow the marriage of same-sex couples originated in self-interest, and the issue with the D.M-H.P. couple was only a cover up which permitted her to act in her own benefit. Hermione Granger herself does not pretend that her motivation was completely altruistic. She had this bill in her mind for years, she admits, and the only thing keeping her from proposing it to the Wizengamot was the exact same reason as mentioned above. The fact that another couple needed the law to be changed gave her a "reason to act to her own selfish ends," as she says, but it does not justify the fact that she is also a benefactor of her own initiative. For this reason, she feels that she is unfit to further act as the political leader of the British wizarding nation and therefore she thinks it is only appropriate to hand in her resignation as Minister of Magic. Until the early election, the position of the Minister of Magic is going to be filled by the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Algernon Longbottom.

Just when Draco reached the last syllable of 'Longbottom', he felt Harry's hand unceremoniously lifting the hem of his nightshirt and sneaking under the fabric to cradle Draco's privates in a warm palm. Draco jumped a bit and couldn't help but moan at the forthright gesture, although it really should not have caught him unprepared. If there was something to say for all that blunt Gryffindorness, it was that Harry had never been hesitant or ambiguous about his designs on Draco's body – well, at least not after he had declared it his own playground.

"Are you done yet? You still owe me for last night," Harry said while his fingers proceeded to tease Draco's prick to full hardness. He did not have to do much to get the desired result, as Draco had been halfway there since he had first felt Harry's erection pressing against his bottom through the thin material of his nightshirt.

"I already said I was sorry," Draco couldn't refrain from objecting, even though he also thought that Harry had been sort of right. "It's not as if it would have been our first time." No, Draco verified, looking down at his bulging stomach, definitely not their first time.

"Yes, but I had planned something special," Harry said in a tone that suggested that he was sad about the lost opportunity to make last night something special. Stupid sappy Gryffindor. "Had I known that you'd sleep through our wedding night, I sure as hell would not have needed to muster up some liquid courage and ask the doc whether it would be safe for you to…" He did not continue, but the slip of one finger below Draco's balls, which made his stomach lurch with an unexpected realisation, spoke louder than words.

Draco swallowed. While it was true – technically – that this wouldn't be their first time, it was also a fact that that time in Copenhagen was the only occasion they had actually gone all the way.

When they had been teenagers, both of them had been a bit squeamish about bottoming. Their teenage desires and hormones had been satisfied just as easily by quick hand-jobs and the occasional blow-job when they had enough time and privacy. Neither of them had ever talked about wanting to go any further, or it had just ended between them before it could have come to that point.

Since they had started sleeping together a few weeks previously, Harry had showed great self-restraint, letting Draco "call the shots", as he had said, "pun intended", which caused Draco's face to heat up minutely. When Draco had asked him about it, he had said he was willing to wait for Draco to become comfortable with the idea. Fortunately, he also possessed a warehouse of knowledge of sexual activities that they could perform without penetration.

Naturally, Draco had known he would not be able to stall infinitely – not that he had wanted to, either. He was just a bit shocked about the abrupt declaration and didn't really feel ready to try yet. This was when the meaning of the second part of Harry's declaration reached his mind.

"You did not do what you just insinuated. Tell me you didn't!" Draco rasped out, feeling light-headed from the way that finger was slowly creeping lower and lower, leaving a tingling sensation in its wake and causing perspiration to dampen his skin. His head was spinning with desire in an infusion of trepidation, and a good measure of embarrassment about how he was supposed to ever look into Podmore's eyes again added to it – although that last thought was the least of his concerns and slipped from his mind almost as quickly as it had formed, next to what Harry's hands were doing to his body.

"I did." Potter sounded far too cheerful for Draco's taste. "But I doubt he is going to remember much of it, being drunk and all…" Draco nodded absently, while he was desperately thinking of a way to spread

his legs wider to make way for that finger, without dislodging the heated solidity of Potter's prick resting in the cleft of his arse.

"But… what makes you think I'd want to…" he asked as a last resort to keep face against the overwhelming desire to abandon all pretence and decorum, and pounce clumsily on Harry like an overfed Cocker Spaniel in heat (pun intended, he heard Harry's declaration inside his head).

"I don't know." Harry chuckled, his voice darkening with repressed desire - he seemed to enjoy the banter like a hunter would the last minutes of hunting, knowing his prey has already lost any chance to get away.

"Perhaps because every time I suck you off you practically beg me to put my fingers into you? I bet I wouldn't even need to touch you; I could make you come with just my cock inside you." That last sentence was an admission as breathy as it could get. The continuation, however, turned into a growl, so primal that Draco had a hard time understanding the words. "You are the greediest bottom I have ever had the luck to meet. Don't expect me not to exploit that to the fullest."

Draco thought his heart was going to punch a hole through his chest any time now, both due to performance anxiety and the mounting arousal Harry was so skilled in eliciting from his body.

"But what if I want to be in you?" He tried to save at least a bit of his self-esteem. And yes, he needed to know the answer before he would be entirely comfortable with giving that last part of himself to Harry.

That question apparently brought the other man to a stop in his seduction and Draco felt his heart skip a beat in alarm. But then, after a second of thinking, Harry only gave him a kiss to his cheek – so anticlimactic in its chastity – and said, "I think we could make it work. Just need to figure out the mechanics… don't think you'd be able to endure the tempo for very long." He grinned unrepentantly, for which Draco almost swatted him, but had to concede that it was true. Nowadays, he wasn't even able to come up the stairs without becoming short of breath.

Draco was about to tell Harry that it really didn't matter as long as he did just anything to quell the suffocating heat of desire he had managed to ignite in his body, when Harry suddenly slipped out of the bed and started rummaging in one of the drawers. Draco thought with disappointment: there, he had

done it , the moment was lost – but then Harry turned back and gave him a look that was pure need and appreciation, and Draco's breath caught in his throat from its intensity and the way it seemed to be focused only on him.

"What are you waiting for?" Harry asked with a flash of desire in his eyes, and then he was already loosening the drawstrings of his pyjama pants.

In the next moment, he let the fabric slide down, and then he stood in front of Draco in all of his naked glory. The erect cock Draco had become so familiar with during the course of the previous weeks jutted forward proudly from the closely cropped thatch of black curls. Draco imagined it burrowing its way single-mindedly into him, and scrambled to hastily pull off his nightshirt…

Harry stepped out of his trousers and reached for the little bottle he had previously removed from the drawer. He wrestled with the cork until he managed to loosen it, then he spilled a bit of the liquid into his palm. Draco's flailing limbs froze in the air, trapped inside the half-divested shirt, and he felt his eyes widen, when in the next instant, Harry reached behind his back and unceremoniously began to prepare himself. Draco felt his mouth drop open at the sight, and his cock hardened impossibly more.

"Don't!" he managed to rasp out, which made Harry stop mid-motion.

"What?" the other man asked, puzzled by the unexpected reaction.

"I…" Draco started, but then gave up speaking altogether. He inhaled deeply and shrugged off the annoying fabric, standing up and closing in on Harry.

Harry's eyes followed his movement, first confused, but then, as he realised what Draco's intention was, the devious glint came back into them. He gave Draco a smile and then carefully, so that Draco would be able to observe everything in the finest detail, he kneeled onto the bed, bending over slowly and spreading his legs, displaying the smooth, firm flesh of his buttocks and everything there was between them – for Draco's viewing pleasure.

Draco inhaled sharply when he spotted the oil glinting slickly along the exposed valley between those

delicious globes, drops of it running down to the downy sac of Harry's balls even as he watched, threatening to drip onto the pristine sheets. Draco had the urge to lick them off, if only so he would be able to get a taste of Harry there.

His glance drifted to the oiled finger disappearing within a shadowed ring of darker skin. It was slowly moving in and out of Harry's body, its movements a bit jerky and unsteady, smearing the excess oil messily onto his cheeks - and for several seconds, Draco wasn't able to wrench his gaze from the sight.

"You think… you can… hold up the pace… if we do it like this?" Harry asked breathily, punctuating every cluster of words with a little hiss or a groan. Draco was sure Harry was embellishing it for his benefit at least a bit, but who the hell cared?

Draco was only jolted out of his blatant drooling when Harry stopped, removing his fingers and turning around. He carefully avoided sitting on the bed, favouring his heels instead, and Draco realised that he had never answered his question.

"Come here," Harry said, his voice having turned intriguingly soft. Draco took a step nearer to the bed – that was all that had distanced him from Harry – and then jumped a bit when an oily hand grabbed the base of his erection, pulling back the foreskin. Harry placed a small, affectionate kiss onto Draco's belly button before pressing his cheek to his abdomen and, turning his head to the side, he followed the line of Draco's stomach down until he reached his destination. Draco moaned as a hot mouth engulfed the tip of his cock and a pointy tongue poked into the slit before it slithered further down to wedge itself into the sensitive crease between glans and shaft.

Harry gave a few suckling bobs while his oiled hand mirrored the motion on the lower part of Draco's cock, making him moan first with pleasure, then with disappointment when it ended far too quickly. Draco wasn't permitted to enjoy the exquisite sensation that was Harry Potter giving a blow-job, until Harry deemed him appropriately hard again. Then he pulled off and ran an oiled hand along the rest of Draco's shaft.

"Lie down to the bed," Harry commanded after letting go of him, and Draco was too far gone to object to the bossy tone. He just obeyed, feeling clumsy and ignorant. Harry somehow always managed to make him forget about the huge rift in previous experience between them, and it only came back at odd moments like this. Draco hoped that the feeling would go away entirely someday.

He observed avidly as Harry kneeled up again, hauled a leg around Draco's waist and straddled him as close to his middle as his stomach allowed. Draco thought this would not work, but before he could say anything, he realised that Harry was not yet done aligning them. First he grabbed Draco's slippery cock with an equally slippery hand and positioned the tip at his entrance. Then he slowly lowered himself a few inches.

Draco felt the head of his cock suddenly being encased into liquid heat and gripped by soft tissue. It did not feel that different from being inside a woman – except that it was incredibly tighter – and the fact that it was Harry whom he was doing it with made his head swim.

He realised that the position was almost the same as the one Harry had insisted on the first time in Copenhagen – except that their places were reversed. But then Harry shifted a bit backwards and – with Draco's cock still firmly lodged in his body – he extracted his legs from under him one by one, and planted his soles next to Draco's sides.

It took a bit of trial and error until he found the most comfortable position. Draco felt he was going to go mad if Harry subjected him to more torture as that tight heat pressed down on the head of his cock. He desperately wanted to thrust his hips upwards to bury himself inside Harry, but he was forced to hold back.

Finally, Harry signalled his successfully finding the optimal position with a smouldering smile, which made Draco's heard skip a beat. Then he supported his upper body on his hands level with Draco's knees and started lowering himself.

Draco felt his cock being sheathed more and more into that tight heat until it couldn't go any further because Harry was sitting on his thighs.

Harry shuddered with pent up desire. He leaned back with a graceful, sensuous arch of his spine, his head dipping to the side and exposing the glistening column of his throat. Draco could feel his straining cock give a lurch inside him. Just the mere sight of it was almost enough to make him come.

And then Harry started moving, slowly, up and down, his balls and cock just brushing the mound of Draco's stomach. His mouth was pressed into a thin line of concentration and his nostrils flared in an attempt to compensate for the shortness of his breath. Instinctively, Draco began moving his hips, mirroring Harry's downward movements, and imperceptibly upping their pace.

It felt like just a short moment and eternity wrapped into one package, with Harry's eyes directed at him from under drooping eyelids and his body in constant fluent movement in a mission for pleasure and completion. Their panting breaths came almost in synch. There was an audible slap every time Harry's hips slammed down onto Draco's cock in a pace growing more and more frantic. Then one of his hands lifted up from the bed, leaving the other one to support his weight, and started tugging on his own erection…

Draco had always thought that this was a tale told by others, that it never happened in reality – coming at the same time. But apparently, either he was completely off the mark, or Harry was just that skilled to time his own pleasure, because it happened exactly like that. Draco had only enough time to warn him that he was on the brink of orgasm, which Harry acknowledged with a growl, clamping down his inner muscles on Draco's cock and quickening the stroking movements on his own cock.

Draco had to close his eyes while his prick spurted liquid fire into the hot channel rhythmically tightening around him, and then he felt the wet drops of Harry's come land on his stomach, heard Harry's sobbing cry as they rode through their individual orgasms together.

For a time, Draco was only able to hear his own harsh breathing over the ringing in his ears and then Harry's groan as he lifted his body, allowing Draco's cock to slip out of him, followed by drops of semen. As Draco opened one of his eyes, he saw Harry turn his head in every direction, undoubtedly searching for some kind of towel.

Draco, being in an uncharacteristically generous mood, reached for his wand, spelling both of them as clean as possible in his current state. He was only able to give a groan in acknowledgement for the breathy 'thank you' before he closed his eyes again. For a while, he listened to the sounds Harry was making while he arranged his body next to Draco's - close enough to touch but not so close as to become uncomfortable, with both of them needing to cool down and dry off the sweat from their skin. Then both of them slipped into a sated sleep.

Draco woke up at the rumbling of his own stomach an hour later. Harry was still sleeping; meanwhile, he had managed to somehow pull the blanket around him and make a tight cocoon of it, which reminded Draco that he was also cold. It did not look as if he would have been able to extricate the covers from Harry's tight grip without waking him up, so he sighed and decided to dress. It was almost time for lunch, anyhow.

With nothing else to do than watch Harry in his sleep or think about things he rather would not, Draco looked lazily around in the room for something to occupy him until meal time.

His eyes drifted onto a rolled up parchment sitting on his counter top. He instantly remembered what it was: the account of his vaults that Lawrence had delivered to him the previous night. Not that it was accurate anymore, since now that he was married to Harry, they'd have to include his vault to the list as well, but Draco didn't think it would matter much in the bottom line. He reached for the parchment absently, figuring that it would make for a bit light reading, better than the steamy romance novels Mrs. Weasley had on her bookshelf.

TBC

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Chapter 40: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

23. October 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you get to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this

is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: C. Dumbledore and Vaughn Vance.

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Chapter Forty

Right after the mind-blowing sex in the morning and just before lunch, Harry and Draco started off their new marriage with a capital fight. The Weasleys generally just shook their heads or shrugged and, Draco was sure, behind his back, they were saying that it was only to be expected. With two strong-willed people like Draco and Harry, it was almost a law of nature that their fights would shake the earth around them – which was a quite a bit more literal in Harry's case than Draco would have liked. He had been afraid that The Burrow was going to collapse on their heads.

It all had started with that slip of parchment from Gringotts, of course. After reading it, Draco had first thought that there must have been a mix up, and some stupid third rate goblin, who had Draco's case shoved down to him now that he wasn't that wealthy anymore, sent him the wrong account. There was no way these figures could be true!

Except that they were, as Draco had discovered, during a long hour of overstraining his knees in front of the Weasleys' fireplace shouting at some creature named Greenear. Still, he had not believed anything he had been told until they showed him the documents relating to some unnamed successor of Sirius Black inheriting the majority of what Draco considered to be his mother's share from the Black fortune. Draco had threatened them with a range of punishments beginning with going there personally and cursing all of them with hexes especially developed for goblins to withdrawing all his money from the bank, but it had been all in vain.

Harry had come down when he heard the yelling and had tried to pacify Draco. Draco was having none of it: he wanted Harry to immediately dress and Apparate with him to the wizarding bank to use his name and his influence to straighten out the matter. At first, Harry just said that Draco needed to relax for the baby's sake and let him handle things, but Draco insisted on accompanying him – even after Harry

had, in a very sneaky way, tried to appeal to the fact that Draco didn't like to be seen by strangers these days. Then he just plain refused to go anywhere, with or without Draco, and declined to give an explanation. Soon, their argument turned into a screaming match that created a small earthquake around the region of Ottery St. Catchpole. It only ended when Mrs. Weasley, having had enough, came up to them and joined in their shouting.

It was scary, how well her voice carried, easily drowning out Harry's and Draco's.

Finally, after having been put in his place by her, Harry went up to the fireplace, firecalled Gringotts again and, after not even a minute, returned with a freshly signed and stamped parchment, handing it Draco without a word.

Draco thought his heart would stop at what was written there: the parchment was Gringotts' confirmation of the identity of Sirius Black's unnamed successor: his godson, Harry Potter.

Draco was livid with rage, and the only things holding him back from beginning another screaming match were the fact that he was still rather winded from the earlier round, and that Mrs. Weasley was standing over them with her arms folded across her chest and her eyes blazing sternly. Draco was glad she wasn't his mother.

She ordered Harry to make tea and escorted Draco into the kitchen, supporting him by the elbow and studiously disregarding Draco's protests about how he was able to walk on his own. The tea was good for his nerves, nonetheless. He suspected that Harry made the herbal sort on the back shelf, because he recognised the taste of melilot in it, but he thought better of adding that to the list of his offences.

"Draco, it is not Harry's fault," Mrs. Weasley started talking after taking a sip from her own cup. "We all agreed that it would be best if you did not learn about it until you were married. We didn't want you to worry unnecessarily." Instantly, there was a sharp retort ready on Draco's tongue about how the Weasleys should worry about their own money instead of meddling with his, but he managed to restrain himself.

His eyes darted between her and Harry, who was still hiding at the back of the kitchen. Draco had the urge to tell him to stop making him more nervous than he already was and come and sit at the table. He

did not get the opportunity to do so, though, because Harry either practiced Legilimency or he had also realised how annoying his shuffling around was, as he dropped down obediently next to Draco. Draco took his attempt to hold his hand as an unvoiced apology.

"I wanted to tell you about it," Harry pleaded. "I was planning to do it when the baby was born."

"Sturgis said it would be best if we waited to tell you, that's all," Mrs. Weasley took over almost instantly.

Draco shook his head, but actually, his ire had – surprisingly – already subsided. Must have been the influence of Harry's magic, he thought, because he had noticed that, despite the anxiety over the change of law and his marriage, he had felt more contented and less prone to feeling miserable for no reason since the magical link had been established.

Thus ended their first fight, but Draco could already see that it would not be their last.

The funny thing was that he didn't mind it. He had come out of this fight feeling vastly different than he had usually felt after having fought with Pansy. Those had always been about something egotistic: she wanted something Draco was unwilling to do or the other way round. Harry, on the other hand… Draco knew why Harry wanted to wait to tell him about having inherited what Draco considered to be his by right until after their marriage: because, by then, it would have been transferred into their mutual account. He had been only protecting Draco by omitting the truth. Wasn't that sweet of him? Actually, now they were married, which meant that it had already been transferred…

The other reason was that with Pansy, their fights always ended with a grudge on either (or more frequently both) sides, and this… Harry was already looking at him as if only Mrs. Weasley's presence was holding him back from smothering Draco with apologetic kisses and lavishing him with the most exquisite sexual pleasures just to make him understand how sorry he was about having lied to him. Draco was barely able to bear waiting until she left them alone.

However, no afternoon-long gratifying make-up sex was enough to make Draco forget about Podmore's role. His leniency towards Harry did not mean Draco would not have told Podmore exactly what he thought about his idea to keep this secret – had he been there.

Podmore had been away more frequently since Draco’s recovery from his father’s curse, most likely to further violate the International Statute of Secrecy by practicing magical healing on worthless Muggles. Draco did not understand why since, in Draco, he now had a perfectly suitable patient for the sake of satisfying his Hippocratic Oath. Draco was smart enough, though, not to voice this opinion to Harry or the Weasleys. The other reason for his absence could have been that he was still searching for magical methods to deliver a child to someone who did not have a birth canal.

The tried and tested method of the wizarding world's ancestors who had practiced this kind of male pregnancy, to simply cut it out and leave the bearer to bleed to death, did not appeal to Draco much. Not even after Granger had informed him that there was a similar Muggle method called a Caesarean section, which was fairly common and safe. Draco was not about to place his life in the hands of a mad Muggle butcher, even if the Muggles had a less conspicuous name for it and called them surgeons.

Considering the efforts Podmore was making for Draco, he had no other choice than to forgive him as well. Draco was Podmore's paying patient; still, he had no reason to expect the Healer to risk his freedom by openly searching for medical spells in wizarding libraries or visiting Knockturn Alley to do the same, even though he had been forbidden to practice healing, and that should be worth his forgiveness.

Draco had also managed to bribe Harry into using his influence to get a full account of their joined vaults from Gringotts that same afternoon. (It wasn't really hard to do: all it took was a massage and a subsequent blow job.) With Harry still pulling long hours at the Ministry, Draco realised he would only have the Weasleys' company to content himself with, which made him conscious that it was time to start searching for a house he and Harry could call their own. He decided to embark on his mission the next day.

He did not expect to find a prospective home this soon, but apparently, Harry's inborn luck had extended to Draco by marriage. Lawrence Weasley, knowing that Draco and Harry were looking for a new home, had decided to play estate agent for one of his Muggle clients. The man had the misfortune of inheriting an old house from his late great aunt – the last magical descendant of an old pure-blood family whose last two generations had only produced Squibs. Therefore, the house was not only a big old mansion, but also full of protective magic of pure-blood origin that reacted adversely to the presence of a Muggle, thus preventing its current owner from even entering the property.

Draco didn't think it would be highly probable that he would find this house to his liking, but after having

had to listen to Mrs. Weasley expressing her sympathy for Draco's situation with his family the whole morning, he felt that if he had to spend another day locked in The Burrow, he would go mad. He needed fresh air, and at that point, he would have even agreed if Mickey had suddenly turned up and invited him to go out and take a tour around Muggle sex shops… perhaps it was fortunate for him that it was his lawyer who had unexpectedly paid him a firecall.

Apart from Lawrence, he was accompanied by Ginny Weasley, who imposed her company on them with the excuse that she wanted to catch up a bit with her favourite uncle. Draco didn't mind it much, since the inane chatter between the two served as a nice distraction and an opportunity to practice one of his favourite hobbies: eavesdropping on conversations. He was surprised that it didn't annoy the hell out of him, but apparently, listening to other people's every-day worries was taking away some of the weight from his own. Surprisingly, Podmore was also tagging along with them, contributing to the conversation in his usual confusing manner. Still, the excursion seemed to promise a much needed change of environment.

At first sight, the house was nothing special. It was an old manor standing on the outskirts of a small town near London, as the last house in its row. Ivy was climbing up the walls to the roof, hiding red bricks and crumbling mortar, but Draco had a distinct impression that it was not the mortar that was keeping the house together, but magic. For all he knew, this look could have been nothing more than a huge illusion designed to deceive Muggles.

It did not even resemble Draco's family home, with its cold elegance and solid build. It was, in a way, much cosier, reminding Draco of The Burrow, except that it was four times as big and did not have funny appendages where new rooms had been added to the building. It had a peculiar atmosphere, imputable to the wizards and witches who had occupied the halls and rooms for centuries. It also had a large garden with big trees, whose thick foliage ensconced the roof in a perpetual half-shadow, making it seem as if it were protecting the house from the heat of summer and the rains in autumn. The plants had grown wild from years of neglect, and Draco could see that even if he employed a gardener, it would not become as manicured as Malfoy Manor's gardens for years.

That all should have repulsed him – would have repulsed him if he had happened upon the house only a few months previously - but now it was as if he saw everything in a different light. He thought that he didn't want to live in a house in which he could go without meeting anyone for days if he chose to leave his chambers without sending out an invitation. He saw the garden as something that would protect them from the outside world – while it was still big enough to play Quidditch with the right wards in place.

The furniture that came with the house was antique and undoubtedly expensive under the layers of dust and disrepair. But it seemed that nearly every piece came from different eras and in differing styles, colours and materials. Their only common feature was their age. Perhaps they were old family heirlooms, or perhaps whoever had chosen them selected them merely based on their own charm and did not coordinate the single pieces with each other. Thus, in some of the rooms, the house evoked the atmosphere of a fairy-tale world. But instead of being revolted by the crime that was trying to pass itself off as interior design, Draco's first thought was that this was a house for children. This was how the picture books portrayed the homes of the little wizards and witches in the tales his mother had read to him when he himself had been little. He fell in love with the house at first sight.

He wanted to start moving in as soon as possible. He even completely forgot that perhaps he should ask Harry's opinion about it first. The remembrance came when he next realised that he would probably have to ask Harry to sign the cheque. But even that thought was not able to put a sour taste in his mouth for long. Harry had practically given Draco permission to buy whatever house he wanted to – even if he did it only so that Draco would finally stop obsessing about his name and the blow that his cousin had managed to land on him.

As expected, Harry had no objections to buying the house, saying that he trusted Draco's 'refined tastes'. He listened to Draco's animated account about the building and the interior and the gardens and the trip itself – it seemed as if Draco wasn't going to run out of words and would have continued to talk about what he planned to do about the furniture and where everything would go till their eyelids drooped if Mrs. Weasley hadn't called them for dinner. Harry wasn't saying much, just making little mouth noises at the right places; he looked tired and a bit overwhelmed by the sudden outpouring of words, Draco realised. But he had not managed to turn Draco into a Gryffindor to the point where he would have felt guilty for exploiting Harry's state to make him agree with everything he wanted. He was certain about being right in his decision, even if it seemed a bit sudden.

After dinner, Lawrence left with a blank cheque for Gringotts with Draco and Harry's signatures on it, and the instructions to deposit an advance payment for the house and arrange the usual inspections before they bought it. If everything went well, they could start moving in a few days. The necessary restorations would not take more than a week – if Draco could commission the same craftswizards who worked on the Manor a few years before. He would have to rearrange the furniture as soon as the pieces had been restored, but it was fortunate that they were there, since they wouldn't have to buy new ones. The only piece of furniture that had remained unscathed from Harry's flat was the red couch, and Draco refused to even consider the thought of allowing it into his new house.

For some unfathomable reason, when at the dinner table, he told Harry his opinion about the couch in a rather more vehement manner than what the situation required, he earned a beaming smile from Mrs. Weasley and an embarrassed blush from Ginny as a reaction. In addition, Harry received a couple of heartening pats onto his shoulder from Ron followed by the exclamation, "Way to go, mate!"

Much later, Draco was sitting in a bathtub filled with gloriously hot water that did wonders for his aching back. He was absently replaying the scene in his mind, trying to make sense of it. His thoughts suddenly skipped to Harry's explanation that morning at Snape's house, about how he had got used to sleeping on that couch, and he suddenly understood.

Apparently, Draco's objection to the red eyesore had somehow translated into a not-so-veiled declaration of his willingness to maintain a peaceful family life. Judging from the Weasel's reaction, for the male audience, it most likely also meant something like a promise not to deprive Harry of his marital rights due to a grudge... Draco could only hope that when Harry saw the redness still lingering on his face when he arrived back in the room they now shared, he would write it off as the result of hot water.

Not quite a fortnight later, the house was officially theirs, all the furniture having been taken away to be restored. The first batch was scheduled to be transported back after a week, and Draco decided that he would immediately start arranging it in order to make the house habitable as soon as possible.

First he had to find an expert who was able to assess the collection. He found an antique dealer who asked a reasonable price for his services through Lawrence, and soon, Draco had an exact inventory of all the items. The description contained the approximate value, style, age, materials it was made of, the odd enchantments laid on it and even the colour of each separate piece.

Draco went through the list with a new energy and joyful anticipation of how he imagined the end result would look. In his head, he had carefully woven plans to find the right set of furniture for each little (and not so little) room. He thought Harry would appreciate his efforts, and he could show him that he was able to function in a household with a far smaller budget than what he had been used to when managing the Malfoy assets. Draco was positive that he would be able to work out a tasteful arrangement with the original furniture without buying new.

However, by the time he was through half of the list, his eagerness started turning into confusion

because of the many styles and colours and materials. At three quarters, it turned into slight desperation, and when he finally finished with the inventory and leafed through the parchments once again, he verified that there were no two objects even superficially identical on it. Oh no! He must have jinxed himself when he had compared the house to The Burrow! he thought, mortified.

"Harry! Why did you let me buy this house?" Draco complained at dinner after a stressful day of trying to think of a way to arrange the furniture so it wouldn't look frightfully diverse and tasteless.

"You wanted it?" Harry looked at him with confusion. "What's wrong with it?" he asked, looking around to get an explanation from someone else when Draco stayed silent, but the Weasleys just shrugged, equally clueless.

"All right." Harry turned back to Draco when no answer came. "Tomorrow is Saturday. Why don't we go over there and you can explain me why you don't like the house all of a sudden."

The next morning, Draco insisted that only the two of them go. He had no desire for others to witness his failure. Harry didn't see why Ginny couldn't come with them, but they eventually yielded to Draco's insistence.

The furniture was already there, and in its restored state, the diversity of colours was only more glaring than when they had all been slightly worn down and covered by a grey layer of dust. Draco made a half circle with his arm, indicating to Harry what he had meant earlier.

Harry frowned and looked around, seemingly a bit intimidated. Then he gulped and turned to Draco.

"Well, you did say that this house is perfect for a child to grow up in…" He tried to alleviate the direness of the situation, but Draco could tell he was just trying to be polite about it.

"I didn't intend to turn the entire house into a huge play room, though," Draco fumed.

"No?" Harry managed to wrench his gaze away from the catastrophe around them, and Draco noticed that he was looking a bit relieved. Was he trying to insult his taste, Draco wondered with a frown, or had he really thought Draco wanted their house to look like the inside of a wandering circus tent?

"So what if we just did this?" Harry asked and then waved his wand towards the nearest divan. A few seconds later, its colour changed to match that of the chair standing next to it.

Draco was appalled.

"Stop! Stop it, Potter!" he yelled, grabbing Harry's wand hand and keeping it forcefully away from pointing his wand on the furniture. "What do you think you're doing?" he snapped at him. "These are antique pieces. You cannot just go on and ruin them with… with amateur Colouring Charms!"

"I didn't ruin it!" Harry protested, and then he sat down on the divan in question, bouncing around on it to prove his point. "It doesn't feel ruined."

Fortunately, Harry was right. The furniture wasn't ruined by the spell; it was just a temporary one, and the divan's colour had already begun to change back to its original, thanks to the advanced Preserving Charms on it. Draco rolled his eyes, but he couldn't stay angry with Harry.

"You are just the biggest child of all!" he mumbled, attempting to stop his lips from twitching into a smile as he observed the other man bouncing around like a five-year-old.

"But I grow fast," Harry leered at him, breaking the illusion of childish innocence at once, and then he beckoned Draco to sit with him.

Draco shook his head but, as he became aware of the pain in his legs and back, he accepted the invitation and sat with a relieved sigh.

"You can buy new furniture, you know?" Harry told him while he was obediently rubbing Draco's lower

back, as Draco had indicated for him to do.

"But that's a waste of money!" Draco complained, though he was aware that he sounded slightly ridiculous. It was true that the Black estates didn't compare to the Malfoy fortune, but they still had more than enough at their disposal. "And what do I do with these?" He waved in the direction of the assembled objects.

"How about you sell the ones you don't like and use the money to buy new ones that match those you do like?" Harry suggested.

"Sell? To use the money?" Draco was baffled for a second. That was an entirely new concept to him. His father had only ever sold Dark Artifacts, and even those, only if he had thought they would have been dangerous to possess. But to sell something for money…?

Harry seemed a bit taken aback when Draco suddenly turned around and flung his arms around his neck with renewed exuberance, yelling, "You're a genius!" before he latched his lips onto Harry's. Harry looked nothing if not pleased.

Draco became aware of the fact that they had got a bit carried away only when he felt Harry's hand searching under his robes and then curling around his erection, but propriety seemed the least important thing right in that moment of triumph. In the next second, Harry was already turning him around to face the armrest of the couch, hiking up Draco's robes, and tugging off his underwear. Draco's breath hitched when the cool air hit his bare arse, but Harry's palms running up and down his cheeks and the underside of his thighs were enough to make him forget ever having felt cold.

He heard the zipper on Harry's jeans being pulled down. Then, a few swift swishing sounds followed, and Draco just knew that Harry was touching himself. He thrust his backside into Harry's thighs, feeling the coldness of the little metallic teeth and the roughness of the thick material of Harry's trousers against his bottom, but he only cared for the hard, silky column of flesh sliding along his skin and smearing it with precome.

Draco tried to get more contact, but Harry's palm against his arse stopped the movement. Draco was about to groan with disappointment, but then, suddenly, there was this tingling, slippery feeling of

something blunt and wet being rubbed against his sphincter, causing fiery tongues of desire to dart up along his spine and down the inside of his thighs, and Draco couldn’t help rolling his hips and pushing back.

"Draco…" Harry moaned his name, and Draco took satisfaction in the fact that it sounded exactly as breathless and desperate as he himself was feeling, with Harry so close but still not close enough.

"Can I?"

"What do you think?" Draco hissed back urgently, circling his waist and rubbing his bottom on Harry's groin, feeling the prickling of rough hairs on his sensitised skin. Harry groaned and leaned into him, while he yanked down his trousers and underwear, until his bare thighs were pressing against Draco. His thumb was already massaging Draco's entrance and probing occasionally.

Draco had taken to the feeling of Harry's fingers inside him with a quickness that made Harry comment on it every time they were together like this. They hadn't gone any further yet, because Harry had been afraid he would hurt the child, his doubts not alleviated by Draco's joking that he wasn't that large, nor Podmore' reassurance that they didn't have to worry if they were careful.

Drowning in the sensations of Harry touching him that intimately, Draco missed the murmured words breaking into the melody of throaty noises echoing throughout the room. It became clear, though, that Harry hadn't been talking to him, when he felt slippery gel coating his skin at once, and the thumb sliding into him without much resistance.

The next minutes were filled with the haze of Draco begging Harry to hurry up and put 'something else' into him, mixed with Harry's breathy protests that he needed to prepare him properly and that he didn't want to hurt him. At this point, Draco didn't much care if he got hurt a bit in the process. He might have said that aloud, because in the next moment, he felt a blunt pain flare in his backside.

"Ouch!" Draco yelped. "Did you just bite me?"

But then, the sound mutated into a moan, as Harry resumed working his fingers in and out of his arse,

while sucking on the spot, drawing the blood near the surface and making the skin especially responsive to the rough caresses of his tongue. Draco thought, frustrated, that Harry was surely punishing him for his impatience, not just with the bite, but also by studiously avoiding touching his spot with his fingertips, and Draco had no other choice but to accept that he was completely at Harry's mercy.

By the time Harry finally decided that Draco was ready, Draco wasn't able to voice his approval with more than a hitching groan. And then finally, finally, he felt the head of Harry's cock pressing slowly against his entrance and gaining admission, slipping inside with a torturous sluggishness. It was like the worst torture combined with the best drug.

Harry's abdomen touched Draco's skin and pressed still a little more, until Draco could feel him plastered to every square millimetre of his backside. He exhaled the breath he had been holding and clenched down possessively on the thick length, making Harry groan and twitch. Then he pushed back, above caring if Harry felt the need to punish him for his impatience again, desperate to feel it all.

Harry started moving, apparently keeping Podmore's warnings in mind because his pace was anything but hard and fast. Not that Draco would have cared for hard and fast. The feeling of having Harry inside him was still new and incredibly enormous, as if his body would split into two if Harry made a sudden move. This slow, gradual build up of sensations, though, was nothing if not mind-shattering on its own.

Draco felt one of Harry's hands leave his hip and sneak around his waist to grab his cock. The other one was holding onto him, as if Harry needed it to keep himself anchored in reality so he wouldn't forget all about restraint. His thumb was drawing shaky circles around the sensitised spot on Draco's bottom where he had given him the love bite, which would probably bruise later, but right now, it was just the perfect sensation to compliment the feeling of Harry moving in and out of him.

And the pace never changed.

Draco didn't know whether he loved Harry to death or would never forgive him for keeping him hovering on the edge for so long. His breathing had become so harsh it hurt his own ears, and he was trembling throughout his whole body. The ache in his spine was drowned out by the prickling feeling that seemed to overtake his entire lower half and concentrated on that delicious teasing-burning that was Harry thrusting languidly into his arse. Draco's inner muscles had been forced to clench and unclench to heighten the sensation so many times that he couldn't do it consciously anymore, but it didn't matter

because his body seemed to have taken charge over his muscles and nerves anyhow. Harry's hand moved in synch with his languid thrusts, but Harry hadn't let him come – every time Draco was near, those fingers tightened around the base of his cock and denied him his release.

Draco was mindless from the intensity of several near-orgasms, his body singing with pent up desire and his balls drawn up and aching. He thought if Harry hadn't used lube on his cock, he would have wanked him raw by now. It was no wonder he hadn't noticed when Harry's movements minutely quickened and became jerkier. He only knew that suddenly Harry's hips were slapping into his own with a force that drove him forward onto his elbows. He recognised the familiar grunt of Harry coming, and the stroking on his cock became erratic and purposeful.

Draco was almost taken by surprise by his own orgasm, which was ripped out of him with enough force to extinguish a forest fire, flooding his senses with liquid energy and short-circuiting his mind.

Harry extracted himself from Draco and slumped down on the divan, pulling Draco's pliant body with him. They were still breathing hard, their skin warm and flushed, and were in need of a thorough Cleaning Charm, just like the furniture itself, but Draco could care less right at that moment.

"I think I like this couch," Harry told him, patting the cushion next to his thigh. "You can do what you want with the rest, but let's keep this one."

"Mm-hm," Draco said, not in the right mindset to protest to anything right then. He closed his eyes and rested his head on Harry's shoulder with the intent of getting back his breath.

Sometime later, Draco was awakened by Harry murmuring into his ear and pressing kisses along his jaw, and he found himself wishing he hadn't been. His body was rudely protesting to moving his limbs and his back was killing him. One of his arms had gone numb and there was an uncomfortable stickiness on the cushion where he was sitting, his underwear around his ankles. The smell of sex and stale sweat was permeating the clean air of the house, and Draco suddenly became aware of what they had been doing and how utterly undignified and embarrassing it would be if anyone would happen onto them right at that moment.

Fortunately, one of the reasons they had decided to buy the house was the extensive system of wards

practically integrated into its very foundations. Thus, it would have been impossible for that situation to ever happen, as no one could get inside the grounds without their approval.

By the end of April, the house was ready for them to move in. Draco had had to sell approximately two thirds of the old furniture and replace it with other pieces. The ones that didn't fit anywhere, but he liked too much to get rid of, he either placed into one of the guest rooms on the third floor or kept reduced for later, when his son was old enough that his room could be furnished with them.

By then, Draco was feeling his extra weight in every one of his bones, almost from waking up in the morning with a stabbing pain in the small of his back to his legs feeling weak and his ankles swollen by lunchtime. Harry tried to come home for meals to eat with Draco, but he couldn't always get away. That was why, at Draco's insistence, he finally gave in and, with Granger's help, found and hired a house-elf from the small throng of creatures the Ministry was still saddled with.

Draco threw a glance at it and demanded it be replaced, but Granger, who, now that being Minister wasn't filling her time anymore, had apparently become the patron saint of all creatures in need, wouldn't shut up until Draco grudgingly agreed to keep the damned elf. Allegedly, it had been very hard to find a new home for it, because it wanted to get paid with Muggle currency, transferred to an electronic account it had in a Muggle bank – no, it certainly had nothing to do with the bizarre dress code it insisted on, Draco thought, mentally rolling his eyes.

When he asked the creature about the reason for his odd conditions, he got the answer that it needed an account to buy clothes from Internet catalogues. Draco's first guess was that 'Internet' must be some Muggle company that manufactured fishnet stockings, but he didn't really fancy the idea of asking Granger about it. Not after the chewing out he got from her for not knowing the creature's gender at first sight and kept referring to it… him by a neutral pronoun. At least, its… his cooking was above reproach, he knew how to make a relaxing mineral bath and he had experience taking care of small children. In exchange, Draco thought, he could overlook the strange fascination with the feather duster.

In the weeks after moving into the house, Draco felt less and less inclined to leave his comfortable home. He didn't really need to, considering that Podmore was practically living there in the guest room with the mixed furniture – the terrible revenge of Draco's for having kept the truth of his vaults from him. He had a Weasley visiting him almost every day, and Pinky was a frequent addition to the house as well. She was getting along with the house-elf remarkably well (though she still insisted calling him 'Stitch', but at least she didn't want to shoot at him anymore). She had her own room, stuffed full with magical toys. Draco felt it was the least he could do to make up for her ghastly Muggle upbringing. She liked her toy broom

the best, but Draco only allowed her on it when there was at least one more person in the house with him to catch her if she fell off.

Draco had the Prophet delivered every morning, but he had no real inclination to read the rubbish they printed about his and Harry's home life. Thus, he completely missed the fever about the Ministerial election; in fact, he managed to forget about it to the point that he hadn't even gone to vote. That was the reason that when, one morning, Ginny appeared through the Floo chattering excitedly and waving the centrefold of a magazine with the picture of an extremely badly dressed wizard with a beard which rivalled Albus Dumbledore's, he didn't want to believe that the article was about the new Minister and not another nostalgia concert tour of the Weird Sisters. Actually, he wasn't completely off the mark: it was both, featuring "Myron Wagtail, the Singing Minister".

There was a small number of people who wanted Granger back into Minister's seat again, but she had politely declined. When she was asked about what her intentions were, she declared that she wanted to dedicate her life to the three things that were most important to her: her family, some kind of house-elf protection society (which had no name yet because, as Harry explained to Draco, her preferred abbreviation was already used to promote a Muggle sport Granger did not have a very good opinion about), and research – as the research partner of Severus Snape, of all people. Though Draco had the suspicion that the latter was only an attempt at reconciliation with the Potions master rather than real interest in his Potions work.

Snape came to visit only once, and for a very short time. He belatedly congratulated Draco on his marriage but told him not to mistake the gesture for anything more; he still didn't approve of his choice of spouse. Draco resisted the urge to tell him that he hadn't really had a choice, if only because Snape brought him a potion against stretch marks as a wedding present. The visit was cut short by the arrival of Harry, whom Snape exchanged a few routine insults with and then left through the Floo after a curt goodbye.

As Draco later concluded from the small card attached to the present, the real reason of Snape's visit had been to warn them about Cyrus. Not that it was necessary. If there was something Draco knew with hundred percent confidence, it was that Cyrus must have devised a plan against him and his child. His silence was too unusual for him not to have.

That warning must have set off the alarm bells in Harry's head, though, because he insisted Draco didn't leave the house anymore. He even went as far as to borrow books from Granger and set up several additional wards that detected anything magical being transported into the house that hadn't been

already there. Later, he had to add some exceptions to it for Pinky's toy broom and Podmore and the Weasleys' wands, showing Draco how to do it, so he would be able to repeat the procedure if needed. Harry set up instant connections between the two of them, buying a set of arcane mirrors, which Draco mistook for cosmetic mirrors at first, and almost died of a heart attack when Harry's grimacing face appeared in front of him while he was trying to pop a pimple. He had to promise never to do that again.

Last but not least, Harry brought two old portraits of Gilderoy Lockhart, and insisted that Draco hang one of them up somewhere in the house, while the other one was placed in Harry's office in the Ministry. Harry explained to Draco that he intended to use them as an additional warning system and connection between the house and Harry's office. After two days of constant quarrelling with the portrait about the importance of curling one's hair and using aloe-based skin lotions versus cocoa butter-based ones, which really didn't do anything good for Draco's nerves, Draco compromised and hung it up in Pinky's room. If for nothing else, Lockhart was really useful in getting her to fall asleep in a reasonable time at night, usually by telling her about one of his vastly heroic deeds.

Long story short, the house soon became even more tightly secured than Malfoy Manor, and Draco was able to sleep peacefully at night. Not even a singing birthday cake could get into the house unnoticed, nor one of those appalling Weasley joke products Harry liked to buy for Pinky and give to her behind Draco's back because he knew Draco disapproved of them.

One more month ended with no real trouble, and Draco was beginning to hope that the last weeks of his pregnancy would also follow the same pattern. He was positive that Cyrus couldn't get to him as long as he stayed in the house, and he didn't plan to change that habit, at least until his son was born.

Perhaps he and Harry had become too complacent. The trouble came, though, from a direction they hadn't expected Cyrus to attack: Hit Wizards raided the Muggle street in which Podmore ran his half-transparent Muggle tattoo saloon. They had no problems detecting the magic being used in the hidden back room, and arrested Podmore for practicing unsolicited healing magic and breaching the International Statute of Secrecy on top of it. Draco wasn't really surprised to hear from one of Harry's unnamed sources that the Hit Wizards had got the tip from an Auror with a funny German accent.

TBC

A/N: Not kidding about S.P.E.W. Look it up in Google if you don't believe me. Though you might have to

turn off parental controls first.

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Chapter 41: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

21. November 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you get to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: C. Dumbledore and Vaughn

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Chapter Forty-One

"I want to come with you!" Draco demanded, clutching Harry's arm so he couldn't Apparate without him. He was aware that he sounded slightly hysterical, but he felt he had every right to be. "If I come with you, they'll see that I don't have six months to wait until they release Podmore. I need him now."

"Sssh! Draco, it will be all right." Harry tried to pry Draco's fingers off his arm, without much success. "You cannot risk leaving the house. For all we know, your idiot of a cousin is waiting for exactly that."

Harry rolled his eyes, annoyed. He simply couldn't understand why anyone sane would go as far as to try and get rid of his heir's competition. But when Draco married him, he accepted him with all his faults, so he had no room for complaints. Anyhow, Harry's naiveté was charming most of the time – rather than annoying – so Draco didn't fight very hard to jolt him out of his delusions of a world in which people were inherently good.

"Don't worry, I'm going to take care of everything." And when Harry said that, eyes shining with determination and the air around him crackling with energy, Draco believed him fully. There were not many people who could say 'no' to him or his name when Harry was radiating this much personality.

So, in the end, Draco let Harry go, watching him step into the warded fireplace. The flames flared up with a greenish colour for a second, then seemed to devour him and settle down to a polite level again.

Draco slumped down tiredly onto a divan – not the divan, that one he had put in the library – and closed his eyes. Two weeks had already passed since Podmore had been arrested, and the Ministry hadn't shown much inclination to yield to Harry's petitioning. Cyrus must have bribed them with enough money to not care about the wrath of the hero of the wizarding world. At least not until Draco still had two weeks' time until he was due.

The Ministry promised Harry to send a midwife as soon as the labour started, but even if Draco trusted her, what guarantee was there that she even knew how to deliver the child of a wizard? St. Mungo's handled the whole affair with remarkable disinterest, as if it was a routine intervention. They had informed Draco that whomever they were going to send, she or he would be proficient with a scalpel and spells to heal deep cuts and to prevent blood loss. This didn't really ease Draco's mind, thank you very much. Just the thought of getting butchered like a Muggle caused Draco's middle to clench with a ghost pain almost physical in its intensity.

His hands flew to his stomach, and for a second, he was blinded by pain. His eyes strayed to a funny Muggle bottle standing on the coffee table, filled with thick, pink-ish goo. Draco was not at all happy with the thought that it was apparently for him to drink.

It was the bottle Harry had been sent to fetch from Podmore's practice the day after the Healer had been arrested, and been told that Draco should take it as soon as he felt a periodic clenching of his abdominal muscles. Draco had inwardly rolled his eyes at the wording – had Podmore really thought he

had no idea about childbirth? Draco had researched everything before he had taken the step of getting himself pregnant. But even if he hadn't, during his stay in the Burrow, Mrs Weasley had thought he should be well prepared, so he had to sit through the detailed recountings of each one of her pregnancies.

So Draco was quite familiar with the concept of a contraction, thank you very much. He had been told what kind of pain to expect. But was this that kind of pain? Or was he just imagining things?

He fervently wished it wasn't time yet, but an hour later, the clenching and the pain returned with renewed force, and with the passing of time, the pink Muggle potion seemed less and less repulsive. When the third contraction came – by then, Draco was fairly sure he was in labour – as soon as the pain receded enough for him to get up from the divan, he clambered up and reached for the bottle, wrestled open the metal "cork" and gulped down its contents. It was only a few mouthfuls, and it tasted just like it looked: revolting. It was like Pinky's favourite sweet, which Draco had once tried.

Draco sat back on the divan and hoped it worked, because he didn't feel much of anything even several minutes after drinking it. He hoped that was what he was supposed to feel, because the labour was postponed until a more convenient time when Podmore was by his side again. The only indication that it was some kind of real potion was that it had left a metallic aftertaste in his mouth and a pink shine in the bottle.

Suddenly there was an insistent noise coming from somewhere in the house, like the tolling of a bell, only a lot more symmetric and eerie sounding. Draco turned his head left and right, peering at the ceiling and trying to figure out where it was coming from, his wand already in his hand and ready to throw off anything that could cause this irritating and a bit terrifying sound.

In the next moment, Draco started at a banging noise, but it was just the damned house-elf popping into the room.

"Missus has guests waiting outside," the creature simpered in his really high, annoying voice. Draco was sure he was taking lessons from Lockhart just to irritate him more. By now, he had learned that there was no use objecting to that form of address, which the elf seemed to have deemed appropriate for him.

"Then what are you waiting for? Let them inside," Draco snapped, wondering who it could be.

No one had come to visit through the front door since they had moved in. The Weasleys and Podmore always used the Floo, but Harry must have closed it off behind him. Belatedly, it occurred to Draco that it might be someone who wouldn't have access to their Floo, even if it weren't warded, so he pushed himself up with difficulty, because he wasn't willing to let go of his wand, and hobbled to stand behind the front door.

Looking out the window, he saw the house-elf standing inside the wrought iron gate, looking like a shining black beetle with little white antennas, in his preposterous clothing – today it was a French maid costume with the appropriate headpiece – except that the whole thing was made of black, shiny Muggle material. At least this time he had forsaken the chains.

The elf seemed to have deemed the guests harmless, because he opened the gate to let them inside. Draco only saw a huge man in Muggle formal robes (a suit, his memory supplied in the voice of their new house-elf). Soon, it became apparent that there had been other people covered by his huge shadow: a woman of almost similar proportions and a smaller, exotic looking man wearing an American football t-shirt that looked eerily like one of Pinky's…

In the next moment, a human torpedo shot out from between the large man's legs, through the barely open gate, and started running towards the house at breakneck speed, yelling for "Uncle Harry" and "Uncle Draco" the whole time.

Draco smiled and stepped out from behind the door, but he wasn't careless enough to let go of his perfectly good handhold, allowing Pinky to slam into his shins and wrap around him like a low-flying broom's rider around an unexpected lightning rod. Her natural padding cushioned most of the impact, anyhow.

By the time Draco had extricated himself from her enthusiastic greeting, the other people reached the door, the two big ones keeping a cautious eye on the house-elf the whole time, while the third one just looked highly fascinated with everything. If he had a camera around his neck, he would have passed for a tourist. Oh no, he did have a camera, Draco realised just before the flash of magnesium rendered him minutely blind.

This temporary disorientation caused Draco to react a little slower to the presence of the 'guests', and before he could have asked what they wanted, the man that looked like the human-sized replica of the football that the little man was wearing on his shirt beat him to it.

"I'm looking for that freak cousin of mine," he told Draco gruffly.

Draco recognised that voice at once. Of course, these were the people he had seen from Harry's window that time he had visited him in his old flat: Pinky's parents. How he could have managed to ever forget them, he had no idea. They were certainly distinctive enough. But the fact was that he had never before actually stood face to face with them, as Harry had always gone to their house to personally retrieve or to deliver Pinky. Draco still had no idea who the third one was, though.

"Are you deaf? Oh, you must be a freak, too. Do. You. Understand. The. Language. I'm. Speaking? I. Am. Looking. For. Potter!" Dursley articulated into Draco's face, which startled Draco so badly that he couldn't even manage to sputter in answer.

"How rude," his wife remarked, grimacing. "You could at least let us inside."

Draco inwardly agreed with her, even if he resented the tone she had used with him. They didn't have many wizarding neighbours, but the few they had were able to see through the Notice-Me-Not Charms put up against Muggles, and Draco didn't want them to start gossiping about what kind of people were visiting the household. So he looked around furtively, then stepped back from the door.

"Hurry up and come in," he said. "I don't want the neighbours talking."

He was mildly satisfied that he had apparently managed to insult them with that remark.

Once the house-elf closed the door and vanished – to the immense amusement of Draco because it caused his overweight guests to jump with poorly concealed fright – Draco showed them inside and led them to the lounge. Pinky was already there, occupying herself with running circles around the furniture

and annoying the house-elf with requests for sweets.

"Agador!" Draco snapped at the creature – not because the elf had done anything wrong in particular, but because his back had started hurting again, and this time his whole lower body tingled with the aftershock of the sudden, stabbing pain. "Bring some tea for our guests and cocoa for Pinky," he said, trying to mask the panic in his voice. There was no reason to think that the potion hadn't worked, he told himself. It could have a delayed effect, like many potions, and this contraction seemed to be milder than the previous ones.

"As you wish, Deary, you know I'd do anything for you and this sweet child!" the creature lisped, adjusting the black, chin length wig he usually wore on Tuesdays, and popped out of the room, only to return not a half minute later with everything Draco had asked for, together with assorted biscuits arranged neatly on a small plate. This characteristic of the creature – seemingly being able to read Draco's mind and bring him what he wanted without him having to ask for it – was the greatest force in persuading Draco to turn a blind eye to his oddities.

"So, what do you want from Harry?" Draco asked, trying to be polite to these… Muggles in an attempt to distract himself from the pain.

"Who are you?" Dursley asked instead of answering his question, which Draco thought was incredibly rude. But he refrained from commenting on it because the way his and Mrs Dursley's eyes were darting around the room, as if they were expecting something to attack them every second mildly amused him. He had heard from Harry that these people considered everything that had to do with magic unnatural and were deadly afraid of them, so he decided to kill time until Harry was back with entertaining himself at their cost.

"I'm Harry's spouse and the mother of his future child," Draco answered with an amicable smile on his face, patting his bulging stomach and reaching for a cup.

"Potter's…" Harry's cousin was sputtering; his eyes, wide and fearful, were now glued to Draco's belly. His wife was clutching the armrests of the chair she had flopped down into, muttering something under her breath.

"That's right," Draco said, his smile widening. "So, what can I do for you?"

At Draco's indication, his guests picked up one cup each as well, but it was apparent that the Dursleys only did so as to not offend him, and had no intention of actually drinking it. His third guest had no such reservations.

Draco briefly assessed the man. He didn't seem to be the sort to make a fuss like the two lumbering idiots in front of him, but he didn't seem to be following the conversation either. His eyes were inspecting the room with polite interest, as if he were on a museum tour, or following Pinky around. Draco would have dismissed him as someone who obviously didn't understand the language – judging from his appearance, he must have been new in this country – if not for the mild amusement in his eyes whenever the Dursleys did or said something particularly stupid.

"Well… you fr… erm… Potter!" Somewhat flustered, Dursley seemed to have finally settled on an address for Draco, who wasn't about to correct him. Then he lowered his voice and leaned closer. "I didn't want to come here, but I had no choice. See, that one there?" he said, pointing at the man they had brought with them, then he quickly averted his gaze as if he had seen something inappropriate. Draco's eyes followed the stuck out thumb and saw that the stranger was doing tricks with one of Pinky's fake wands and making her giggle.

"He is just as barmy as my cousin," Dursley whispered conspiratorially before he remembered who he was talking to and recoiled. Personally, Draco thought that the man in question was the only sane one out of the three adults. "He is a freak! But I needed to entertain him because he is the godson of my father's very important business associate from the Philippines. I'm sure you understand my position since you are, too..."

Draco pursed his lips against the urge to grimace – not because of what the ignorant Muggle had said, but because his back was slowly but painfully killing him.

"In short, you don't know what to do with him, so you brought him here for Harry to deal with," he concluded, not understanding why he was so calm about the situation in the first place.

"Exactly," Dursley agreed quickly, nodding his head and sighing in relief as if Draco had said, 'sure, just

use my house as a freak entertainment centre'.

Draco was about to tell Dursley exactly where he could shove his attitude and his assumptions and then make Agador beat his fat arse with his trusty feather duster until he had run five laps around the garden, but he was cut short by his third guest, who had come up to him and was now standing at Draco's side. He was offering his hand, which Draco took without thinking, and allowed to be shaken enthusiastically.

"I want to apologise for the rudeness of these people, Mr Potter. Let me introduce myself. I'm Pat Bayawan. You have a nice house, Mr Potter," the man said in one breath.

"Thank you," Draco said while the Dursleys were gaping in horror, apparently not having expected that their charge was capable of understanding English. "You can call me Draco," he added, with a smug grin on his face.

"In that case," the other man – Draco was now positive that it was no Muggle – said, "I insist you call me Pat."

That was the beginning of a wonderful… well, if not friendship, then partnership in crime. Draco soon found himself in the middle of a comfortable exchange of views about the main differences between Philippine and British wizarding culture, which involved a friendly competition of who could make the Dursleys cringe more by describing the most outlandish magical procedures and wizarding customs.

Draco talked at length about interesting and lesser known potions and their effects, then listened intently to the explanation about spiritual healing and the fine art of fooling Muggles with the application of bird and rodent entrails, until the Dursleys were as pale as the cream-coloured sofa Draco was reclining on and jumped every time Agador appeared with another batch of tea and biscuits.

Draco was able to forget his worries for the short time he listened to Pat's enthusiastic account of the magical roots of Chinese philosophy – his hobby, apparently. He wanted to invite the man to stay for lunch, hoping his presence, along with the amusement the Dursleys were providing, would distract him from his abdominal aches.

But just when he opened his mouth, his breath caught in his throat, and a pain – not much different from the Cruciatus Curse in its intensity – shot through his sides. His yelp caused the house-elf and Pinky to gather around him while the Dursleys were trying to disappear between the cushions of their seats, gaping at him with alarm in their eyes. The intense burning of his nerve endings along his spine demanded all of his attention, so Draco hadn't noticed the gentle hands feeling cautiously along the sides of his stomach until he heard Pat's voice calling his name.

"How far along are you, Draco?" There was a slight frown on his face Draco didn't like.

"I still have two weeks to go," he answered, his voice small with fright as he understood what was happening.

"Where is your doctor?" came the next question in a voice that was deliberately calm and soothing.

"Right now, Harry is trying to bail him out of Azkaban," Draco said, gasping as the aftermath of the previous contraction ran through his body.

"I see. No other choice, then," Pat said, but his voice didn't sound worried, which, for now, quelled Draco's starting panic. "It is very lucky I'm here. At the right place in the right time… was always my job description."

"Are you a Healer?" Draco asked, not daring to hope yet. But right at that moment, he would have gladly accepted the help of Macnair with his axe.

"Not a Healer. I'm a Psychic Surgeon. And I think I'm exactly the right one for the job," the man said, his eyes gleaming with pride.

"What the bleeding hell are you talking about?" Dursley cut into their conversation, his eyes mad with confusion.

"Gentlemen, Ladies," here, he turned to Pinky and deliberately ignored her mother, "we are going to deliver a baby." Then he turned back to Draco and asked, "Do you happen to have a living chicken around?"

They needed to hurry, and so, it was decided that Pinky should be supervised by her mother while Draco sent Agador to get a chicken – apparently, that one wasn't a joke like Draco had hoped – from Mrs. Weasley.

Draco took out the mirrors to contact Harry, but Harry's side remained dark, and Draco remembered that there were Shielding Charms to prevent any kind of magical communication where he was – Azkaban. So he barged in on Lockhart and told him to go and tell his 'other half' to search for Harry in the Ministry on the odd chance that he had gone back already, but he had no luck there, either.

When the house-elf returned, Draco tried to alleviate the panic that was threatening to flush over him by trying to stay in control of the situation. He let one of the guest rooms be opened and asked Agador to put fresh bed-linen on the bed, then bring towels and warm water – everything Pat wanted. Unfortunately, he also wanted Dursley to be present.

"Why do we need him?" Draco asked, trying to regain his breath, after one of those awful shots of pain made his muscles cramp and convulse while he was yowling at the top of his lungs. "Oh, Merlin! Potter, where are you when you're needed?!" he whined, his eyes blurred with tears of pain and despair. He was trying to trust the Filipino wizard, but how could he if he had only known him for less than two hours?

"Someone will have to restrain you while I'm operating," Pat told him in a no-nonsense tone, which made Draco nod and try to swallow down his anxiety. He was only glad there would be no magical restraints.

He watched Pat dress up in a white toga, some headwear and a mask, most likely made of the shredded remains of a sheet, and felt all blood drain from his face. The steadily returning bouts of pain did not help him in that matter at all.

Within an hour, Draco found himself lying naked on the guest room's bed with only a thin sheet to cover him up to his groin. He was shivering, but not from cold; his body felt as if it was burning up. Dursley's

bulk was casting a shadow on him, as he was standing at his head, apparently at a loss of what to do, until Draco had another contraction, which made him yell out a string of obscenities his father would have been proud of.

"Potter! I'm going… to hex your bits off… and pin them to the highest… goal hoop of the Falmouth stadium!"

His flailing limbs were caught by a pair of strong hands and pushed back to his sides, while a booming voice answered his call.

"That's right! Let it all out!"

Draco looked up, surprised. Dursley was apparently taking his duties seriously. He nodded to Draco, approvingly, then his eyes glazed over as if he was calling forth a mental image of Harry to concentrate on. "Whatever 'hex off your bits' means… you're going to hurt, Potter! You freak!"

Draco was confronted with the sight Harry's cousin standing proud with a righteous anger on his face, his fist held in front of himself in a classic provocateur-pose, his blonde hair gleaming like a halo in the sunlight coming from behind his back. In short, he looked like Draco's avenging angel, and who was he to refuse divine support in a moment of need?

When the next contraction came, Dursley was sitting on the bed, his beefy arms holding down Draco's shoulders at Pat's indication, and his enthusiastic voice joined Draco's in cursing Potter's pants off of with vengeance. It made Draco feel a strange camaraderie and the security that, were he to die today, there would be still someone to continue the fine tradition of hating Potter's guts.

"Now, we are going to make the incision," Pat told him from behind his mask when Draco's body stopped convulsing with the last bout of pain. "Don't worry, it won't hurt."

"It won't?" Draco asked, not believing it for a second.

"Not at all."

Pat smoothed a hand on top of Draco's bulging belly, stopping just above his navel. Then he reached there with his other hand and Draco felt a pinching sensation on his skin. It did hurt, but no more than if he had pricked his arm. The next second, though, to Draco's horror, a thick rivulet of red fluid appeared where he had been 'pinched' and began to dribble down the side of his belly.

"Is that blood?" Dursley asked, momentarily jolted out of his anti-Potter-propaganda.

"Of course it is," Pat assured him with a glint in his eyes.

"I'm bleeding?" Draco asked, his voice two octaves higher than usual and trembling with panic.

That was the last drop in the glass that marked the stress level Draco's mind was prepared to bear. After that, there was only darkness.

"…What, this? You big pansy! It's just some chicken guts in my hand… Oh, never mind…"

He didn't know if he had only dreamed it, but he fancied he had heard Pat's voice talking fondly about flowers and animal entrails, but by then, he was too far gone for it to properly register in his mind.

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He woke up to someone gently patting his cheek, and his first thought was of how empty he felt inside. Then he opened his eyes and found himself face to face with a beaming expression directed at him.

"Congratulations, it's a boy."

Draco closed his eyes, whimpering. He wanted to say he had already known it would be, and that Pat didn't have to wake him up just to tell him that. Never mind that just the previous night he had barely been able to fall asleep because he had a feeling it would be a girl and then got into a fight with Harry about not wanting to tell him what was bothering him.

His past worries all seemed like a bad joke now. Nothing was important except rest; he was so, so tired.

He opened his mouth to tell Pat to go away and let him sleep, but he only found strings of cotton in the place of his vocal cords, so he didn't say anything. Someone lifted up his head and there was a glass of water held to his lips, which he sipped from gratefully.

"You can rest right away, Draco. No, not yet. First, you give me a name for your son."

Draco groaned. Why did this have to happen now? They had talked about names with Harry – well, more like yelled – but couldn't settle for one that pleased both of them. Draco insisted on old pure-blood names that would suit the successor of the Malfoy line and Harry had come up with nasty common names like Alan, Gary, David or Ralph, so that Draco was wondering whether he had been reading them off of the credits of one of those Muggle talking photograph-things in that portable window-like contraption Potter had had in his old flat. (On occasion, Pinky had talked about it non-stop, and Draco was glad that the magic in the house prevented Muggle things from working.) Right now, Draco's mind was too foggy to remember any of the right names, and frankly, why should he do all the work here?

He was too confused to think of something halfway decent and he thought Harry should pull his weight as well. So he tried to tell that to Pat – the key word was 'tried'. Draco was aware that his mouth was moving and he heard his own voice, but it was awfully hard to decipher what he was saying, so he gave up eventually and closed his eyes with a huff.

He was sure he had fallen asleep that instant and was now dreaming about Pat gushing about his favourite Chinese philosophers again, commending Draco's choice, whatever it was he had chosen.

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"Draco!" The next time he was awoken with his name whispered into his ear while soft lips were pressing butterfly kisses to his cheek, jaw, nose, eyebrow and mouth.

It was too familiar a way to wake up to not recognise who it was.

"Harry?" he sighed, his slur now less pronounced than before. He wondered if he had been drugged after he had fainted, and decided that that was the most plausible explanation for his state of mind. Pat must have decided to make his own work easier by giving him something. Since he couldn't deliver his child like a woman, the contractions had only been hurting the baby and making it harder for Draco to relax his muscles, not to mention the inordinate amount of pain they had caused.

"I'm here, Draco," came the answer to his question, punctuated by another press of lips to his dried out mouth. Then his head was lifted again – much like the first time – and he was made to drink again.

"Draco, why didn't you call over Mrs Weasley?" he heard Harry asking, his voice shaking a little, which indicated that he was either angry or getting over some kind of fright, perhaps both. After his mind deciphered his words, Draco couldn't blame him either. The sudden fright was enough to wake him up in a second.

"I… I didn't even think of it…" he answered. Merlin! He could have asked help from the Weasleys, and his son…

"Well, at least Felix did a decent job of it," Harry murmured under his breath, calming Draco's racing heart. Apparently, everything was all right.

"His name is Pat," Draco corrected Harry, who then looked at him and lifted a brow.

"No, I meant the potion the Doc left you," he said. Draco should have become suspicious by then, but he

was busy complaining about how useless that thing proved to be in the end.

"What kind of effect was that stupid potion supposed to have on me? It didn’t work at all," he said, angry at the Healer who not only had let himself be captured by the Magical Law Enforcement, but had left behind a perfectly useless potion for Draco to boot.

"It wasn’t useless," Harry said, surprised. "After all, it brought you Dudley with the Filipino – just what you needed at the time." That was when Draco mentally replayed what Harry had said in the last minutes and realised what he was speaking about.

"What? You mean Felix Felicis was in the bottle?" Draco shook his head. "To my knowledge, that potion is not pink."

Harry shrugged it off.

"Well, the Doc gives it to Muggles. He needs to mask the colour, so he adds it to a Muggle expectorant that's pretty useless on its own and doesn’t change the potion's qualities," he explained. Draco felt his stomach drop. If he hadn’t known that Podmore was missing a couple of his marbles before – he was treating Muggles, for Merlin's sake! – he had the proof now. Insane… What if he had made mistakes in Draco's treatment all along? What about his child…?

"My…?" he asked, frightened again, feeling like the air was being pressed out of his lungs by a boulder that had been dropped on his torso. His throat was still sore and his voice broke mid sentence, but he didn't really need to spell it out.

"He is healthy and beautiful," Harry told him, calming, and Draco felt like the heavy weight had been lifted from his chest. Though he heard something in Harry's voice he was not telling. "Do you want to hold him?"

Draco nodded, impatient, and soon, he found his arms full of a warm, fragile weight wrapped in a blanket and snuffling on his collar bone. He didn't dare look down at first, but when he did, his breath

caught in his throat and his head felt light again.

"Draco," Harry whispered to him, his lips pulled into a forced-looking smile. "Meet your son… Confucius Harry Potter."

"What?" Draco's head snapped up, momentarily forgetting the awe he had begun to feel just a second before while looking at the tiny wonder in his arms. "Did you give him that idiotic name?!"

"You did," Harry ground out. Draco thought that smile on his face must be painful. "Care to enlighten me as to why you did that? Did I offend you with something? But even if I did, why would that be a cause to harm our child?"

"But I didn't name him!" Draco said once again, his eyes drawn with anger. "And I'm going to strangle the one who gave him that idiotic name!" he exclaimed.

"Well, the Filipino with the drawn fowl outside told me otherwise," Harry said, his voice still scratchy but warming up.

Draco looked up at him, surprised, and noted that Harry's gaze was directed at the squirming bundle in his arms. Draco understood the sentiment the second he looked down at his son. Who could hold onto their anger when confronted with a sight like that? He was beautiful, and he was his. Draco had almost forgotten what they had been arguing about.

"It wasn't his fault, Potter!" Suddenly, a third voice cut into the, by then, peaceful silence, causing Draco to wrench away his gaze from his son, and reminding him of the issue at hand.

"What are you doing here, Dudley?" he heard Harry ask after he had finished gaping. Draco wondered how the hell Harry's cousin had got into the room as well. Then he remembered his own "saving grace" and gulped. Was it possible that he had never left?

"Uhm…" The fat man's pink face was now turning a decidedly reddish hue. "That freak must have hocus-pocused me unconscious. Hypnotised me, I say! He took out this… amulet-thing and waved it all around…"

Draco had the urge to roll his eyes, knowing that he had been the target of that charm, not Dursley. And while he was not proud of having fainted at the first sight of blood, he had a perfectly good excuse for having done so, namely that he was in pain and under stress and was worried for both his own and his baby's lives. But passing out from witnessing the use of magic… just how pathetic was that?

"Were you here with him during the delivery?" Harry asked, his feelings seemingly warring between gratefulness and being dismayed.

"You don't have to look at me like that, Potter!" Dursley exclaimed. "I was there when Pinky was born, too. You should be grateful instead. Who knows what that freak would have done, had I not been here?" he sneered.

Harry looked a bit bemused, not having expected his cousin to defend Draco. Draco hadn't either.

"I thought you hated freaks," Harry said with a frown.

"I'll tell you something, Potter," Dursley's voice boomed the same way he was standing over Draco in his labour and cursing Harry's name with vengeance. "He might be a freak, but he hates you, so he cannot be that bad."

"Er… right," Harry agreed after a second pause. "So… what happened exactly?" Dursley answered him without missing a beat, looking patronising, which almost made Draco laugh, except that he also wanted to know.

"He said something like 'confussssh' and 'Harry'. He didn't say it was to be his name, the freak just assumed it was." Dursley shrugged.

"Yes!" Draco said quickly, vaguely remembering the circumstances. "I just said I was confused! And that you should be the one doing the naming!"

Harry blinked, then sighed, seemingly accepting the explanation, and turned back to Dursley.

"Well, I think you'd better leave now. If I'm not mistaken, you still have someone to entertain. Outside." That was a not very subtle hint that his presence wasn’t wanted.

Dursley's voice abruptly changed from confident to pleading.

"Please, please, Harry, don't be like this! Can't I leave him here? You might still need his help." He sounded hopeful, but Draco could tell Harry wouldn't change his mind.

Draco approved of the notion wholeheartedly. He was tired; he just wished everyone would let the three of them alone already. Three… there were now three of them, right? He knew there was a giddy smile stretching his face until it hurt, but he just couldn't help how he felt.

"You don't have to worry, Dudley." There was a sarcastic quality to Harry's tone. "We will be all right until tomorrow when our family Healer is going to be released from prison."

The prison-thing must have been an inside joke between the two of them because Draco heard Dursley's sputtering about it before he was escorted out of the room by Harry.

Draco almost hadn't noticed the time slipping away between Harry departing to get rid of their guests and his coming back to him. His wondering gaze was fixed on the tiny, sleeping face in front of him and he just couldn't stop looking and observing.

His son was so very tiny in every aspect. He had tiny lips that opened and closed while he slept, and a

little knob nose between tightly closed eyes. His eyelashes were reddish and very short and scarce, just like his hair, the colour somewhere between dirty blond and brown. Draco was wondering whom he could have got that from and whether it would stay like that or fall out – like his own when he had been a baby – and regrow in a different hue.

At one time, Agador appeared beside his bed – Draco was momentarily taken aback because he hadn't heard the usual loud sound that went with every house-elf teleportation – offering him a bottle that had a charm to keep the milk inside warm on it. Then Harry sat down on the side of his bed, distracting Draco from his reverie and making him aware of his own body again.

"I need to pee," he told Harry, unthinking, then blushed, realising what he had said. Harry looked at him for a second, baffled, but then he grinned and Draco's muscles mirrored the expression without him having to think about it consciously.

"Do you need help?" Harry asked finally, tucking a stray lock of matted blond hair behind Draco's ear; the touch – together with Harry's inordinately proud look – made Draco shiver with pleasure. Not sexual pleasure, though Draco suspected that under other circumstances, it could have been easily transformed into that. He wondered whether his own father had felt the same after he had been born.

"Uhm… I think I can go to the bathroom by myself, thanks," Draco said, putting his son down – which proved surprisingly hard to do – and trying to stand up on his own. After nearly falling on his face because the bulk he had been used to was, at once, not there, he had to accept Harry's help after all, and tried hard to fight off a blush while standing in front of the toilet with Harry's arms wrapped around his middle as he was peeing into the bowl. If he hadn't needed to go that much, he was sure he wouldn't have managed to start with someone else being there.

But Harry had been right. Draco hadn't even realised how much strain his muscles had taken during the labour. His body was tired, and without the steady supply of Harry's magic that he had lost when his son had been out of his body, he continued to feel tired for several days, no matter how much he rested.

Podmore, contrary to Harry's earlier statements, was not released until a few days later, but his first visit was with Draco, who was still a bit mistrustful of him but had, by then, seen the sense in making him take Felix Felicis. Podmore lifted the Charm that had made a connection between Harry and their son, as it would have been damaging to his magical development had they left it there for much longer, and

recast it on Draco to help his body with its recovery.

"Well, I'm glad everything went well," Podmore said while packing up his possessions, moving out now that his services weren't needed anymore. Draco couldn't say he was 'glad', though.

"It would have made more sense if you had given Harry some of that Felix, so he could have got you out of prison, instead of leaving my fate to the whims of fortune, which couldn't drag out a more appropriate replacement than an extravagant Filipino," he told Podmore, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Actually, it wouldn't have, since I had – and still have – no idea how to deliver your child without a Caesarean. Additionally, I have forbidden Harry to imbibe any more Felix."

Draco looked at him, aghast. Not just because of Podmore's first statement, but because he was puzzled about the second one as well.

"Why?" he asked, looking from Podmore to Harry – who dropped his head and acted as if he had not heard the question – then back to the Healer. "Why the hell not?"

"Because he fell into the cauldron when he was a baby," Podmore answered primly. "So no more Felix for him, except in dire circumstances."

"I see." Draco blinked, suddenly recalling every encounter he had with Harry, which somehow always ended with Harry coming out victorious. The Quidditch matches. Voldemort's attacks. Actually, forget it all, he had survived the Killing Curse. Right. Slytherins had always said he had more luck than brains, Draco just didn't expect that statement to be proven true this way.

Draco had never before thought that such a 'small' matter like the birth of his son would cause him this much joy. He had always thought he would feel accomplishment and a sense of calm as he had secured his inheritance; then he would be able to direct his attention to more important things, like managing the estates and furthering his political career, leaving the issues of raising his heir to the mother, until the time came to start his son in his own footsteps… It gave him a nasty shock when, one week after the

birth, he realised that he hadn't even thought of his son as his heir.

No, he was his heir – his and Harry's and the Malfoy estate's – but he was so much more than just a title. He was a piece of him and Harry, something Draco had created, nourished and brought into this world… he wondered whether he would have ever realised that, had his son been born to Pansy, had he not been the one to carry this burden for almost nine months… but it didn't bear any fruit to ponder about it. It had not happened that way, and Draco found himself being oddly thankful for it.

The only thing that soured his mood was the way Harry looked at him every time Draco told the name of their son to someone, like the Weasleys and even the Grangers, who came visiting after Draco had declared himself fit to receive them.

"Can't we do anything about that name?" Harry asked, pleading, after Ginny and Mickey were gone – Mickey sniggering the whole time like an idiot. "We could file a petition to the Ministry to change it…"Granger had already explained to Harry that in the wizarding world it didn't work quite the same way as with Muggles, but apparently, her explanation had lacked the most important points.

"Harry, you don't understand." Draco shook his head tiredly, because it rankled him just as much as Harry that there was nothing they could do about this stupid mistake for years, at least. "The name of a wizard or witch cannot be changed at will, only in a magical contract. When little Harry was born, his name was put down on several magical books, which is going to secure a couple of things, like his education for example. If we changed the name, there is a chance that he wouldn't get his Hogwarts letter because his name wasn't on the list."

Harry looked horrified at once. "What? Are you sure?"

"No." Draco shrugged, a little uncomfortable at the thought of his son being deprived of anything like that. "I'm not sure. Until this time, there has been no one who dared to test whether it's true or not, and believe me, there have been more valid reasons to change a child's name than that their parents didn't like it."

"Oh." Harry looked pensive for a second, then, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, his expression brightened. "You gave him my name," he said, looking at Draco as if he had given him the best present of

his life, and after he had been looking at him the same way when he had first held his son in his arms, that was quite an achievement.

Draco looked back at him, bemused.

"Of course I did. I don't have a name anymore."

"Nonsense. You are still Draco Malfoy." Harry frowned a little.

"No, I'm not," Draco sighed. He had almost forgotten it, and now Harry had to remind him. "Don't you understand? This is the same. My name is Draco Mmm, now. Frankly, even being a Potter would be better than that."

"Thank you," Harry said, scowling at him.

"You know I didn't mean it like that." Draco backed away.

"Yes, you did."

"All right, I did."

There was an uncomfortable silence between them for several minutes. Draco tried to distract himself with observing his sleeping son – with success.

"Is it because of what you said to Cyrus?"

"What did I say?" Draco asked, looking back at Harry.

"That you were going to name the Malfoy heir Potter."

"Well, I could hardly name him Mmm. Of course he was going to be a Potter."

"Thank you," Harry said with a smile on his face to which Draco didn't have the heart to confess that Harry did not have anything to do with that decision. But, thinking about it some more, Draco realised that he quite possibly knew that just as well as Draco.

"But that wasn't what I actually meant before. You named him Harry," Harry said suddenly.

"Yes, I did," Draco said, a gentle smile tugging on the corners of his mouth. He realised that even if the crazy Filipino hadn't taken the decision out of his hands, he would have. Harry was a good name these days – even though he hadn't always thought that.

That night was the first since the baby's birth they had gone to bed with the need of intimacy hanging in the air. Until then, Draco had been always too tired for anything more than a bit of snogging and petting, which Harry was always ready to provide, but Draco could feel he wanted something more tonight. And Draco was glad to oblige.

Thus, he took special care in bathing and grooming before he came to bed, where Harry was waiting for him. Baby Harry had eaten a half hour before, so they would have a couple of hours until he would need them – he was a very polite baby and didn't bother his parents much. After the first night, he had developed a schedule, always waking up twice during the night: at eleven and at four in the morning, like clockwork. Harry had charmed the wall of their bedroom, which was connected to Baby Harry's room, transparent from their side, so they could always see him. But even if they didn't watch him, Agador was always there with him, so that they could sleep, secure in the knowledge that their son was safe. Well, tonight sleeping wasn't what was on their agenda.

When Draco entered their bedroom, he was instantly caught in the crossfire of Harry's eyes. They were burning with a fire that caused Draco's body to burst into flames, as if lighted by a torch. Harry sat on the bed, his feet planted at the side, and Draco hurried into his arms with a thumping heart. He felt excited

and a bit anxious, as if it were going to be his first time all over again. Harry would see him without his clothes for the first time since their son had been born, and Draco wondered whether he would think he had become podgy around the middle. So it was with a little trepidation that he shrugged off his bathrobe, not the sexy slink he had practiced in front of the mirror for five whole minutes before braving his bedroom.

For Harry, a little extra padding didn't seem to matter, though. He caught him in his arms, face nuzzled to Draco's stomach. Draco was glad that no scar remained from the "surgery". He still didn't know what kind of magic Pat had employed – he refused to tell even Podmore, saying it was a secret of his profession he couldn't divulge. Draco didn't mind it as much until he and his son were both healthy.

Apparently, what Harry liked best was that now he could push his tongue inside Draco's navel, which he did several times until Draco, breathless, told him to stop. Harry obeyed, but then he tickled Draco's sides until he squealed and accidentally kneed into Harry's thigh.

"Ouch! What was that for? Trying to castrate me already?" Harry complained, his face flushed, but the pain, apparently, wasn't enough to dampen his arousal, Draco noticed.

"Don't be a baby; one of those is more than enough in this house. Besides, I keep you for a different purpose," Draco told him, standing next to the bed and looking down on him, contemplating.

His hand strayed – not entirely unplanned - on his cock, which was filling with blood, and he gave himself a few strokes. Merlin! Did he enjoy that his belly wasn't in the way anymore! And of course, he enjoyed the way Harry's growling stopped at once and his gaze fixed on Draco's hand, observing him with lustful eyes.

"That's mine," he said, and then pounced on Draco, catching him in a strong embrace. He practically lifted him off the ground and threw him onto the bed. He turned them over immediately and stretched out over Draco greedily.

The feeling of having Harry's bare skin against his whole body was grand and overwhelming at the same time. Soon, Draco found himself lost in the multitude of sensations Harry lavished on his body. He thought he had never felt anything this good – not even the short-lived, blissful releases of the times his

pregnancy had made him randy as hell.

Soon, he found himself being prepared – Harry took care of stretching and slicking him properly, even though Draco complained the whole time, and if it had been up to him, he would have just put some lube on Harry and then impaled himself on the stiff length he so desired. As it was, Harry had not only prepared him more than adequately, but also managed to tease him until he couldn't see straight – stroking that spot inside him and licking Draco's erection but never taking it into his mouth.

"Draco." The warm weight pinning down his body was suddenly gone, and Draco blinked blearily, trying to find Harry's face in the half-darkness.

"Wha…? Harry?"

"Draco," Harry said his name again, this time from closer, his voice a low, soft growl that would have caused the small hairs on Draco's nape to stand on end even under normal circumstances. "I want you like our first time," he added and licked Draco's slightly puffed up lips. Draco opened his mouth obligingly, but after a few seconds, he pulled away and clambered onto all fours. Harry could have him any way he wanted, as long as he also had Harry.

The light but firm touch on his hip made him look back, though, and saw that Harry wasn't lined up behind him as he had expected.

"Something wrong?" He asked, puzzled and impatient.

"Not wrong, just… I meant our real first time," Harry told him, a bit sheepishly, as if he expected Draco to refuse or get angry. "Remember… in that Muggle hotel…?"

Draco turned around, taken aback, and sat down on top of the rumpled covers, his desire momentarily pushed into the background by the reminder.

"I thought you didn't remember…" he started. "You said you were drunk."

"Draco." Harry looked into his eyes and lifted a hand to tangle his fingers in Draco's hair, smoothing over the shell of his ear and finally leaning closer to place a chaste kiss on his cheek. "I could never be drunk enough to forget you," he said, and Draco's heart jumped up his throat at the promise.

"That was the cheesiest thing you've ever said to me," he answered, a teasing smile tugging on the corner of his lips, which in return made Harry laugh out loud and tackle him, until he managed to reverse their position again. Draco found himself straddling Harry – like the first time. Harry stroked some extra lube on his own cock, until it regained its earlier firmness, then helped Draco lift his hips into position.

Draco followed the silent instructions of Harry's hands and arms, while in his mind, he was battling with his memories about that night. At that time, he had thought it was the worst experience of his life, and until now, he didn't have an opportunity to revise that judgement, so there was a little trepidation in him while he slowly lowered his body and let himself be filled with Harry's erection.

It was the same – and not the same at all. His body was sensitised to the extreme, but his feelings were not fear and trepidation; there was no shame now, except what revisited his mind as part of that memory. Instead, there was the feeling of being desired and cherished and needed.

The rhythm with which his body moved around Harry was not the rapid heartbeat over something he had to do but wanted to get over as quickly as he could, but the calm of being where he should be and with the person he wanted. Finally, he ceased to feel like a victim of his own fate, drifting where the current was the strongest. He had arrived in his haven, where there was Harry and his son, their house, their friends – and yes, even the kinky house-elf belonged to the picture…

A few hours later, Draco woke up, his mind still lost somewhere in the haze lingering from his afterglow, sticky, naked, his arse feeling well-used, and not caring about any of those things. He needed a few seconds to work out what had woken him – until he heard Harry talking with the elf in a low voice, presumably as to not wake him up. His blurred gaze followed Harry, wrapped in Draco's discarded bathrobe, going out of the room and then reappearing in his sight through the transparent wall inside the other room. Soon, he settled in the rocking chair, Baby Harry in his arms and a bottle in one hand, holding it carefully and lovingly so that his son could drink as much as he needed.

Draco's eyes slowly closed, and he was drifting off to sleep again with the image of his two Harrys in front of his mind, when a sudden displacement of air alerted him of Agador's presence in the room. The house-elf had apparently been told to change the sheets, which he did without Draco even feeling anything – like those Muggle magicians who succeeded in yanking the tablecloth off a dinner table without disturbing the dinner-service, except that he had also put the new one back the same way. House-elf magic – Draco had never before witnessed how it worked.

The little jerk of his shoulders upon the clean sheet suddenly stealing into the nonexistent space between the bed and his body alerted Agador that he was awake, and Draco was rewarded with a beaming smile, which he was even able to make out in the half-darkness.

Agador crumpled the soiled sheet under his armpit and gave Draco's carelessly displayed body a quick once-over, then – to Draco's deepest mortification – the creature slapped his naked bum on his way out of the room and called back over his shoulder.

"Missus would look good in latex panties. I'm sure Master Harry would appreciate that."

TBC: Epilogue

A/N: "Agador" was the cleaning boy's name in the movie Birdcage. In the original French play La Cage aux Folles (1973) and the film with the same title (1978) the character's name was Jacob (Thanks C. Dumbledore for the info) but I just liked the name 'Agador' better.

A/N2: Psychic Surgery

A/N3: "He fell into the cauldron when he was a baby" is from a comic series from my childhood: Asterix (It's referring to Obelix.). I always wanted to make someone say that line about Harry. :D

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Chapter 42: The Basket Case

The Basket Case

by Stray

31. December 2006

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or its characters and make no money off of it. I'm not sure I would even if I owned them.

Warnings: This is my first HP fanfic that you get to see. I'm not a native English speaker, but I try. And this is going to contain SLASH! If you don't like it, you can still read it if you harbour masochistic tendencies. Flames are used to warm my cold little heart. Constructive criticism is appreciated.

Beta-ed by: Kestrelsparhawk, Vaughn and C. Dumbledore.

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Epilogue

It was decidedly disturbing to wake up with a wand pointed at his middle, especially because it was Harry who was holding that wand. He looked a bit desperate and more annoyed by the second when the spell he tried to cast didn't seem to work, and Draco was so engrossed in that peculiar expression that he needed several seconds for what was happening to register in his mind.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" he yelled at Harry, which apparently surprised the other wizard so much that he dropped his wand.

"Draco!" Harry's expression now changed to frightened, and Draco would be damned if he knew the reason for this odd behaviour. He doubted it was part of the standard morning after etiquette, especially because they had already had more than just a couple of morning afters and Harry had never before felt the need to act like this.

"What was that spell you tried to cast on me?" Draco demanded, sitting up in bed.

"I…" Harry looked down guiltily and then back at Draco. "I just wanted to know… we forgot the Contraceptive Charms last night…"

Draco's chin dropped and stayed that way for a second, then he blinked and a startled laugh forced itself through his mouth.

"You were afraid you got me pregnant again?"

Harry nodded, looking guilty. Draco let out a sharp gush of air, which drew Harry's attention to him, and he promptly started apologising.

"It's not because I don't want more, I do! It's just because it would be too soon…"

Harry's flood of words died when Draco's expression changed into a frown. It had never even crossed his mind that they could have more than one child. What for? But he was in no mood to start an argument with Harry right then, so he chose to skip over the topic. And, anyhow, it was time to clear some apparent misunderstandings.

"Harry, that potion didn't turn me into a woman. It gave me the possibility of magically creating one child and carrying it to term. That was all it was supposed to do."

"Then you can have children now, the normal way?" Draco was surprised at the small hint of insecurity in Harry's voice. Did Harry think that after he had regained his virility he would leave him to marry a

woman? Not bloody likely. However, Draco didn't feel like sharing his sentiments. Especially because a little voice in his head strongly resembling his father's insisted that wanting to reassure Harry about his intentions was a glaring weakness. Thus, he settled for a partial truth.

"No, I cannot. I've hoped I would be able to – Snape's book didn't say anything about it, since wizards who had been administered that potion usually died after giving birth. But I asked Podmore to examine me and he said the change would be irrevocable."

"So… does that mean you cannot have any more children – either way?" Harry asked, his voice low and somehow sad. Draco had a sudden urge to draw him close and kiss the sadness out of him, which he managed to restrain. He was glad the excess hormones were now gone from his system.

"Not without another potion," he condescended, and then admonished himself when – seeing the little spark of hope lighting in Harry's eyes – he felt an answering joy leaping in his throat. So Harry did want to have more children.

Draco needed time to think about that revelation, thus he had no other choice but to distract Harry from the conversation by a cleverly executed seduction manoeuvre, which resulted in spending the forenoon in bed – only occasionally broken by short interludes of feeding a baby and watching him fall asleep in his cot. Draco sighed and mourned the day in the future when baby Harry would be old enough that they had to start getting dressed in his presence.

Two weeks and three days after their child's birth, Draco received a reminder that the outside world hadn't stopped going on its way just to give them time to get accustomed to the arrival of the new member of their family. He received an owl from Cyrus' lawyer. The letter contained a magical contract signed by Cyrus, which incorporated his vow that, once little Harry reached the age of twenty-five and was qualified to take over the position of the head of the Malfoy house, all the possessions and vaults now belonging to the Malfoy family were going to be officially transferred under his control.

On the bottom of the parchment, upside down, there was an additional clause – with different handwriting that looked like a schoolgirl's, complete with little hearts and flowers substituting the dots on the 'i's and small stylised horned pigs adorning the margins. It stated that Cyrus wasn't to hurt or otherwise incapacitate the transferee with any action that would prevent him being qualified for the role - under penalty of death by Wrackspurt, and his line losing every right to ever succeed the position of the

Malfoy family head. The whole document was concluded with his cousin's signature.

Draco didn't trust the document to keep Cyrus away from his family, but the letter Pansy had written him not a day later, in which she warned him to stay home because her husband was very agitated by the 'Lovegood bitch' breaking into the manor and forcing him to sign that contract, served to prove that it wasn't only a fluke. Draco suspected that it had not really been Lovegood who had forced his cousin's hand but the promise he had stupidly made during Draco's hearing, for which he felt no remorse towards Cyrus whatsoever.

The Prophet generated a grand public issue out of the birth of Cyrus and Pansy's son. The only suspicious thing was that the photographs taken of the infant had been black and white, oddly. The somewhat smaller article written by Skeeter about the rumour that the Malfoys had asked Severus Snape to be the godfather of the child – despite the fact that he already was Cyrus' own godfather – reinforced Draco's suspicion that the mysterious defect which the parents wanted to hide would be able to be cured by a skilled Potions master.

Alas, Snape ignored the request in order to be able to concentrate on some potions experiments of his, which were such a highly kept secret that not one person in the entire wizarding world was let in on the mystery until Snape had run out of the money he had extorted from Harry in exchange for his potion. (Draco only learnt years later that he had also made Harry pay for keeping Draco in his house, which led to a row that lasted two weeks and was only resolved because Draco got thoroughly fed up with all those bruises born of angry sex.)

Even years later, following the birth of the new Malfoy heir, there was a suspicious silence sitting in and around Malfoy Manor. There were rumours of more childbirths during the course of the subsequent years, but nothing concrete passed beyond the gates of the property. The only fact Draco could tell with certainty was that Cyrus had completely withdrawn from politics.

On the other hand, when Draco felt that his son was old enough to be left alone for a couple of hours a day, he began to expand his feelers inside the Ministry machinery again. He had never really withdrawn them, after all. The change in his associations and public view of things had – as expected – lost him quite a few of his old acquaintances but also gained him new associates. Especially after the Prophet came out with the article about the ex-Minister of Magic and her wife being the godmothers of his and Harry's son. It took precise timing and a couple of small favours to co-ordinate 'leaking out' that little titbit exactly when the time was right for the revelation to propel Draco's career forward.

The only thing that frustrated Draco to no end was the fact that Harry refused to pay any interest to politics, even to office politics. Draco wanted him to show more aspiration towards advancing within the Ministry ranks, but Potter stubbornly insisted that he was happy with being the head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office and did not need more attention than he was already receiving. Thus, Draco's latest ambition to get Harry to occupy the Minister of Magic's seat fell flat because it turned out that Potter wasn't the attention seeking bastard Draco had always thought him to be after all. It was a grave disappointment for Draco. Not that there was much chance to realise his goal at the time. The new Minister, Myron Wagtail, proved surprisingly capable – especially famous for his unique technique of ending pointless squabbles within the governing body by playing the bagpipe – mostly because he didn't know how to play it.

Once Draco's body and magic was proclaimed intact again, Podmore ended the bond transferring Harry's superfluous magic to Draco. In the beginning, feeling in a creative mood, Draco tried to recreate the potion Snape had improved on for Harry's use, but he only succeeded in giving him constipation for two weeks. Draco was a bit down, but his lack of success proved what he had been suspecting since he had left school: that he might have an above average focus and the ability to follow brewing techniques precisely, but he didn't possess Snape's genius for creating new brews. And the admission didn't even sting as much as he had expected it to.

However, the wrong had already been done.

Thanks to the struggle with the insufficient Containing Potions, Harry's state of health was revealed to the wizarding world. Harry and Draco started searching for alternative methods to drain the overflowing powers, which inevitably resulted in another revelational article in the Prophet about Harry's magic. Draco managed to bribe Skeeter enough to smooth over the embarrassing parts, but unfortunately, Draco had not planned that people would insist that Harry had the obligation to use his greater power for the betterment of the wizarding society.

The number of requests that Harry spend his magic into upholding active wards around magical creature reserves or Quidditch stadiums, schools, even private estates – naturally, in exchange for a generous amount of Galleons – grew day by day. But all of those requests were topped by the almost-demand of the Ministry that Harry resume his place in the Auror force and relinquish his powers for the exclusive use of restraining dangerous criminals and upholding the Azkaban wards. Even if this were the only way to advance Harry's career to which Harry seemed willing to agree to, Draco would have said a categorical 'no'.

Draco was scared to death. He had barely been able to restrain Harry from accepting the 'offer' out of a sense of obligation until he managed to drag Granger into their house to explain the dangers of tying one's own magic to inanimate magical objects such as wards, especially wards of these proportions. Not because Draco couldn't have told Harry that he could well pay with his life for his generosity, but because he knew Harry would believe his friend's logical explanations more than him – and Granger knew enough Latin expressions to stun Harry speechless with them. The fact was that empowering wards with a wizard's own magic was not only stupid – since wards also could be kept up with different sources of power – but dangerous as well. Wards had this annoying characteristic of not only accepting what one had to give but, in the case of being attacked, drawing power from the source and not caring whether the subject would live or die as a result.

In the end, it was Granger who came up with the solution. To say that Draco didn't like it at first would have been a grave understatement – he found it highly annoying, to be perfectly honest. Apparently, Granger found a way to transform magic into some kind of electricity that allowed Muggle instalments to work in a magical place. She even managed to transfigure some primitive containers for storing it – batteries, she called them – so that Harry could watch the telly even when he was tired and depleted. After that day, Draco watched, appalled, as Harry gradually filled their house with Muggle gadgets, kitchen appliances, a PlayStation for Pinky and even a thing that was called a notebook but didn't even look similar, with some kind of cable connection, for Agador.

Draco was constantly angry and felt displaced in the presence of so many Muggle things. He was this close to demanding that Harry remove them from his house and do something different about his leaking – he was even ready to go crawling to Snape and hand over the key of his Gringotts vault if Snape promised to brew that damned potion for Harry again. But then, in an unexpected and wholly uncharacteristic manifestation of insight, one night Harry came home bearing a present for Draco and – using the opportunity that little Harry was currently over at The Burrow for the birthday of one of the Weasley brats – introduced Draco to the joys of a vibrator and all was forgiven. Even the fact that Draco managed to embarrass himself by bragging about the 'ingenious little device' to Granger the next time they were over for tea did not change that.

After her resignation from the Minister's office, Granger continued with her eternal pursuit of knowledge, which she had only temporarily given up for the sake of serving the wizarding world. She made quite a reputation as an independent researcher – even though she had given up on her doomed attempt of being Snape's research partner after the first month. They might be both geniuses in their own right, but they never worked well as a team. And since she had more free time now, Granger also started her dream of a house-elf training centre, which offered courses in 'how to be a free elf'. Harry even introduced Draco to a creature named Dobby who taught elven fashion, whom Draco apparently

should have known, though he had not the slightest idea from where. In Draco's opinion, the subject would have been much more successful if it had been taught by Agador, but he was not mad enough to relinquish him into the hands of Granger – even though he was angry at the elf at the time because one of his Muggle-born neighbours told him that his wife had seen pictures of a young man with strong resemblance to Draco wearing different models of latex women's underwear and not much else on an Internet shopping site.

But to get back to the topic of Severus Snape, Draco didn't hear from the man for several years. And when he did, it was from a suspicious-looking full-page advertisement in The Daily Prophet announcing a revolutionary new product: a potion that was supposed to transform a person's nose into an aesthetic shape – guaranteed to work – with the fancy Latin name Nasus Rectus, which – owing to a misspelling in said advertisement – was shortened to the much easier to remember Nose-Cute Potion in the public mind.

The potion became a great success within a very short time and Snape was rumoured to have earned mountains of Galleons from selling the license to overseas potion manufacturers. The potion proved so successful that Snape became the newest celebrity of Witch Weekly, and with his new status, money and shapely nose, he didn’t lack in relationships anymore. Even Rita Skeeter wrote a praising article about him. Snape later committed the mistake of publicly ridiculing Skeeter's over-enthusiastic fangirling, but even the subsequent bad publicity couldn't chip at his fame.

Putting his newly gained reputation to good use, he went back to teach in Hogwarts, as there was a sudden vacancy in the Potions master position. According to a certain seasoned scandalmonger, his reasons for accepting a teaching job again had been less than altruistic. Someone started the nasty rumour that, as Snape had never had much money, he hadn't known the first thing about investing and he had blown the whole amount within three years, buying pricey ingredients for his new projects, so now he needed the job to keep him above water.

True to the Nose-Cute Potion's publicity, when Draco next met Snape sauntering down Diagon Alley, he didn't recognise him at first. When he asked about the potion out of curiosity – and because indulging Snape's ego was always a good approach for getting on good terms with him – Snape explained that the potion worked with the mental image of the nose one wished the strongest to see on his or her own face. Draco wondered whether he should tell Snape that his new nose strongly resembled Harry's own and – as Draco had seen in old pictures among Harry's belongings – James Potter's, but he decided against that revelation in favour of retaining the possibility of using it as blackmail material in case he needed something from Snape in the future.

Snape, on the other hand, didn't show this much respect for Draco because he told him to his face that he had expected his marriage to go up in flames even before the first year was over. Apparently, at the time, he had considered it divine retribution for the Granger-affair, not that Snape had much to do with the fact that Draco had to marry Potter. However, their marriage seemed to persist and Snape was now disappointed that his revenge had given him less than the expected amount of satisfaction.

After their chance meeting, the next time Draco heard about Snape was in another article in The Daily Prophet. Apparently, after having missed the boat with Granger, Snape's midlife crisis continued with undiminished energy, proof of which was that soon, he married one of his ex-students freshly out of Hogwarts: Jessica Worthworm. She bore him a son six months later. They only lived together for two years. After that, she left with a sizeable amount of the newly acquired money and Snape got the worse half of the arrangement: he was saddled with sole custody of their mutual child, Maximilian. This experience taught him to value his privacy once more, and keep his sexual prowess away from the public eye.

It was no great surprise when – just before her eleventh birthday – Pinky got her Hogwarts letter. The Dursleys received the news with limited enthusiasm; mostly, they were just glad that Pinky was now someone else's responsibility. She had been practically living with Harry and Draco by that time, having only short visits with her parents. After she went off to school, Dursley divorced his wife and they relinquished custody of her to Harry. As expected, Pinky was Sorted into Gryffindor and got selected for the position of the Seeker on the House Team in her second year.

Unexpectedly, that was also the time when one of Draco's countless manipulations for advancing Harry into a more socially respected position finally succeeded: Harry accepted the offered position on the Board of Governors in Hogwarts. His first deed was to get Snape sacked and bring back the previous Potions Professor, Eloise Midgen, who might not have been able to devise ingenious potions to cure her pock-marked skin but, as Harry pointed out, at least didn't get her kick from humiliating her students. Draco didn't know what Harry meant by that remark, but the stack of letters sent by parents expressing their gratitude seemed to justify the measure.

It was rumoured that Snape bought himself a three-storey cottage in a quiet farmland somewhere in Wales and married again in utmost secrecy, but the identity of his latest wife was not made public, so Draco only found out from Harry the year Snape's son, Maximilian, entered Hogwarts. He thought it was like divine justice, just like Snape had about Draco's marriage.

Soon – Draco didn't even notice as the time flew by – Little Harry turned eleven and was accepted in Hogwarts as well. Harry had an unexpected call that day, so Draco had to escort their son and Pinky to King's Cross alone. That was the day when, after almost twelve years, he met Pansy again.

He saw her at Platform Nine and Three-quarters, waving after the red express which carried away their precious sons to Hogwarts, clutching the hands of a flock of ill-behaved red-headed children. Draco didn't want to believe his eyes at first. He thought a Time Turner had accidentally carried him back in time and he was seeing Molly Weasley biding farewell to her eldest. The image, though, was broken by the sight of Cyrus, waiting somewhat unenthusiastically and tapping his foot on the pavement while Pansy and the children had squealed themselves out and decided it was time to go.

Draco looked him up and down with interest born of so many years' secrecy. His cousin seemed somewhat ragged; his hair was now entirely white and he had dark circles under his eyes. His expression was pinched and he visibly flinched when his gaze strayed at Pansy's bulging front. The next thing Draco saw was Cyrus getting swarmed by his children and begged for ice cream. Then one of the small red-heads brought up the topic of penguins and pumas and soon all of them started on it – Draco had managed a head count by that time and came up with seven, not counting the one (or more?) who had just left on the train and the next addition to the happy family growing in his wife's stomach.

"Yes, darling, you promised to take them to the zoo this afternoon so I could rest at home," Pansy dropped the bomb shell on Cyrus' head casually. Cyrus slumped under the weight of all his children suddenly wanting to climb on top of him, his face darkening. However, it seemed he didn't dare object.

Observing his cousin leaving the station with his lively brood, Draco suddenly understood the years of waiting and waiting in vain for Cyrus' revenge to descend on them and why it had never come. Apparently, his cousin was now too preoccupied to have time for Draco with having been forced into the role of a family man. After witnessing this, the image of himself in Cyrus' stead on Pansy's side came to Draco unbidden, giving him the fright of his life and causing his grudging respect for his ex-wife's Slytherinness to go up several notches.

"Well, well, who do we have here?" The voice coming from too close to his ear made Draco jolt out of his thoughts. He turned around and saw Pansy smiling at him knowingly. "Did you think I wouldn't notice you standing there?"

Draco couldn't conjure up an appropriate answer so, beyond a short greeting, he remained silent. She didn't seem to mind, though, as she smiled at him again, and then said she would accept his invitation to the nearby station coffee for the sake of catching up.

"I couldn't help but notice; you're enjoying motherhood," Draco interjected right after their teas had been served.

"You did notice, didn't you?" Pansy laughed and swished a lock of her long hair behind her back. "Be glad I do. The children keep Cyrus occupied enough to distract him from his plans for you and your brood," she added.

"How many do you have?" Draco asked to avoid having to express his gratitude, though he suspected that her reasons for doing so had not been entirely altruistic. She didn't seem to expect any thanks from Draco – whether or not Draco's suspicion was true. She obviously still knew him well enough, and on the other hand, she seemed a lot more relaxed now than when she had been Draco's wife.

"There will be ten of them, come December." She patted her bulging belly fondly. "This little sprog here will be my last one, though."

Draco whistled. "Are you competing with the Weasleys?" he asked. To his surprise, Pansy laughed again.

"It's not a bad tactic, you must admit. The times have changed and the Weasley name is rather more respected nowadays than it was when we were kids." Draco had to agree with her. The Weasleys were the heroes of the last big war and they were much better off – what with the twins' blossoming ventures and two of the family being famous Quidditch stars, even though Ginny's career had started unexpectedly and had initially been devised for her as some kind of occupational therapy so she wouldn't focus all her energies on her past boyfriends' lives. "Besides," Pansy continued, "where do you think all that red hair is from?"

"You mean it's natural?" Draco asked, rather taken aback. "Please tell me it was your grand-grand-grand-grand-grand-something!"

"Sorry to disappoint, but actually, it is my mother." She didn't seem to be very self-conscious about that, and Draco's feelings were warring between the two sides of the spectrum: feeling horrified that his son had been this close to having Weasley blood in him and relieved that the situation had been averted at the last moment.

Not because he didn't like the Weasleys, not at all! But…

"All that red hair…" Draco moaned, scowling with distaste. Pansy only laughed at what she considered his 'antics'.

"I'm not like our fathers' generation of pure-bloods," she quipped. "I wouldn't use magic on my children just to maintain the 'Malfoy appearance'. They can do what they want when they grow up."

Draco didn't ask Cyrus' opinion about this. It seemed as if it had not much mattered in the final standing of things. On the other hand, he wanted to refute her assertion, but fact was that he didn't know whether his parents had used any charms on him to change his colouration or not. So instead he redirected the topic to Pansy's children again.

That proved to have been a mistake. He discovered that Pansy could talk and talk incessantly about her children, making Draco miss his own after only just seeing him off to Hogwarts. That was when Draco decided that he wanted another one. He didn't say anything to Harry yet, though. He thought he could wait another year and see how he could fit another pregnancy into his own up and rising political career while trying to decipher his son's letters from Hogwarts and coming to terms with the fact that he had been Sorted into Gryffindor and was best friends with Primus Malfoy. Soon, the golden trio of the next generation was completed with Copernicus Granger-Bell (aptly nicknamed "Puck"). They were rumoured to be worse than the Marauders or even the Weasley twins in their time.

After Little Harry had left for his second year at Hogwarts, Draco decided that his career could withstand a two-year pause for the sake of bringing another child to the world, and he paid a visit to Healer Podmore.

Shortly after he had served his sentence, Podmore was reinstated as a Healer in St. Mungo's. The Ministry declared his criminal record for injustice done by the defeated party of the last war based on false accusations and deleted it. He was acknowledged for his revolutionary healing technique of successfully applying Felix Felicis in emergency situations and on otherwise incurable patients. Not that he was the first Healer to think of it, but every one of his predecessors in the past had administered the potion to the Healer in charge to guide their hands, which usually resulted in the medical personnel becoming addicted to Felix, and its effect diminishing with every use. No wonder they had stopped the practice.

Harry was more than happy with Draco's idea, and their son was all for a little brother or sister. Draco brewed the Draught of Bestowed Life again – Podmore advised him he should do everything the exact same way, so as to not confuse the magic in his body. Draco was not entirely convinced that Harry had not had something to do with that advice. Secretly, he was rather proud that he had finally managed to teach him some of his own Slytherin ways and he reckoned that visiting Copenhagen and that same establishment again was like a second honeymoon. He didn't mind wearing a dress that much, even if he had insinuated the opposite, so he could coax some creature comforts out of Harry in exchange. The only thing Draco insisted on doing himself was arranging the hotel reservations, which meant a week of uninterrupted wedded bliss in Denmark's finest penthouse suite.

Since Draco's opinion about the Caesarean section remained unchanged, he was adamant to get the same treatment from Podmore as during his previous birth. And since the effect of Felix Felicis was rather incalculable, he prepared for a worst case scenario months ahead. He made a card that he always carried with him, which stated that in case of an unexpected delivery, the child's name should be enquired about by his husband.

Thus, the name of their second son became Jesus Draco Potter – but at least Draco could blame it on Harry this time. He figured it could have been worse. His son could have ended up being christened 'Merlin', had Harry not taken a liking to watching stupid American sitcoms recently.

And really, the name of his son wasn't the most important thing to concern himself with at the time. Felix had arranged for some half-wit intern to muck up a batch of Gender Change Potion two floors down, and the aggressive fumes seeping upwards through the cracks in the floors and walls of the old building caused six wards worth of male patients to suddenly grow vaginas. After sixteen hours of labour and giving birth to his son the natural way, Draco decided that, perhaps, he shouldn't have been that squeamish about that little cut on his belly.

The following morning, the Healers proclaimed him healthy, but they still decided not to change his sex back until his body had had time to overcome the stress of the birthing. Thus, Draco was also deprived of sex and the amusement he managed to get from freaking out Harry every night for two solid weeks was not nearly a satisfying enough substitution.

A good thing came out of the whole name-debacle, though. Thanks to Harry being afraid to come to sleep, he got into the habit of going on nightly walks. On one of these walks, he wandered into a Muggle antiquary and found the portrait of Narcissa Malfoy there. Draco was so delighted that he forgave Harry on the spot and hung it in Jez's room, so he would be able to flaunt his progeny. He was happy that he finally had the opportunity to ask his mother all those important questions about his childhood, his father and how to make spots on his bottom disappear without leaving a scar. Unfortunately, whenever he decided to do just that, he found his mother's portrait empty.

Two weeks later, Harry removed Narcissa from there and put it into a less frequented room because it turned out that she started a rather passionate love affair with Lockhart's portrait and they didn't have any scruples about using the chaise lounge on her own canvas to do the deed in the middle of the night. After two weeks of sulking, Narcissa promised to end the affaire, so that Draco could hang her back in Jez's room, but in exchange, she demanded that he buy a portrait of a young, rosy-cheeked shepherd boy painted with a haystack.

Jez's godmother became none other than Pinky Dursley, who left Hogwarts the year he was born. By that time, she had become just as much of a Seeker-legend as Harry had been in his own time. She acquired the nickname 'the Human Bludger' because she was quick, to the point and lethal, (and because despite her lifestyle centring on the sport, her figure had not changed a smidgen, Draco thought with fondness). Upon leaving school, she was immediately hired by the Wilburne Wasps, and within a year, she became the captain of the team. She held the position until, after a difference of opinions with the Wasps' manager, the Togayashi Tengu won her over. According to Shuukan Kuidicchi, Japanese men were loving their Hyuuman Burajyaa and she had a suitor for each of her fingers.

Following in her wake, Little Harry became a great Quidditch fan. He didn't play himself, choosing to concentrate on doing mischief instead, but after the Beijing Quidditch team had become World Champions during his third year, he insisted they call him Confucius and that name stayed with him from then on.

In retrospect, Draco should have paid more attention to confiscating those comic books Pinky regularly sent to his sons – let it be said in his defence that, at first, he had no idea that the word 'Doujinshi'

wasn't the Japanese name for comics about Quidditch. Alas, he only realised his mistake when one day, nineteen-year old Confucius, who had by then obtained a respectable position in the Ministry of Magic in the Magical Games and Sports Department, came home with the proclamation that he was going to introduce his intended.

At first, Draco was ecstatic and thought it was bad timing that Harry should have chosen that same afternoon to go to Diagon Alley with their younger one to buy his Hogwarts supplies. One sentence and a good look later, he blessed his good fortune that he would have time to talk some sense into his son before Harry learnt about the whole thing.

"Dad, Let me introduce you." Not-so-little-anymore Harry turned towards Draco and gestured in the direction of the living room. "My Princess: Maxie."

Everyone had said Maximilian Snape took after his mother and was nothing like his father. Draco had the dubious fortune of discovering just how true this was, when the person in question entered his house.

Draco gazed out into the hall where Maxie was still standing, looking somewhat shy but very prim in his corduroy skirt and light peach-coloured blouse. His straight, blond hair – the colour not unlike Draco's own, which his older son had failed to inherit – brushed his shoulders where it wasn't held in place by Muggle hair-clips decorated with white kittens. The picture was completed by fine Italian shoes with low heels and the hint of make-up making his lips shine in a rosy colour and his eyelashes seem impossibly long.

At first, Draco didn't know what to say. He only knew that he couldn't let it happen; that his son, his heir, marry like he had. Though the wizarding world had become much more tolerant of same-sex relationships, they still didn't have the same standing as marriages between a witch and a wizard.

"Confucius," he said, having resolved to remain categorical about this whole debacle, "you cannot seriously think you're going to marry this person."

"Aww, Daddy, but why not?" Confucius asked, looking not at all as troubled as Draco would have expected him to, and that worried him a bit.

"He is a boy." Draco had no qualms about stating his opinion.

"Kind of obvious, right?"

"Are those tits real or stuffing?"

"Daaaad!"

"And he is wearing stockings."

"At least they're not fishnets." Confucius winked at Draco, causing him to blush. Damn, he thought he had packed away those things in a drawer where his children couldn't find them.

"And he isn't pure-blood," Draco said as what should have been his final argument.

"No, he is my little Three-Quarters-Blood Princess. For the record: his blood status is the same as mine." Obviously, his son had not been raised to have the same hang-ups as Draco when he had been his age.

"Son, have you thought this through? What can he offer you: the heir of the Malfoy and Potter fortune?"

"I thought you were over this aristocratic nonsense, Dad." Confucius rolled his eyes. "But if you insist, I can list you a couple of things he can offer me. Besides the obvious, I mean," he leered, making Draco blush again. Then he started counting on his fingers. "He is good looking, intelligent, he has been made Head Boy, you know? Well, Head Girl, actually… He has perfect manners, his family is rich as well as respected..."

"And what about his magic?" Draco asked, hoping to find something to criticise there.

"Well, he has talent in Potions and Dark Arts, just like his father. And he learned to be an Animagus from his stepmother. You wouldn't believe the cute little ladybug he can turn into...!"

"Enough!" Draco put out a hand, defeated, when his son had run out of fingers to count on. It was clear his son was completely besotted. "Let's see what your father is going to say about the matter."

"One more thing." Confucius didn't bother to lift a finger now.

"Yes?"

"He also knows the recipe of the Improved Continence Potion."

"On second thought, let's not say anything to your father yet. We are going to surprise him with the engagement. Have you been to Diagon Alley to look for a ring?"

Later, while waiting for Harry to return and advising Agador on what to cook for a festive dinner, Draco overheard a conversation between his son and his intended, which explained some of the unspoken attraction Confucius felt for Maxie but, at the same time, caused Draco to feel mortified and wish he had not heard it.

"Did you notice your house-elf speaks funny? He refers to himself in the first person."

"Don't worry, pet, he just likes role-playing. If you understand what I mean."

"Oh, Maxie is understanding just fine, Master Confucius. Maxie, too, likes role-playing..."

Needless to say, Agador and Maxie got on splendidly.

The betrothal was very short: they only waited with the wedding until Jez's Christmas holiday. Draco didn't let them be married in the same unimaginative Ministry room in which his own wedding had been held. By then he was the head of the Wizarding Family Affairs Office, and he decided to build a little 'chapel' at his own cost, dedicated to the sole purpose of making these weddings more festive. Of course, the fact that this deed furthered him on the way towards promotion didn't hurt either. Harry was happy that his son was happy, the wedding party was in awe of Draco's generosity once again, Snape was content to have found a shadowed corner to hide in from the paparazzi and Rita Skeeter wrote a spectacular article about the event in the Prophet – although that was only to be expected of her, seeing that the bride was her own stepson.

Belying Draco's initial fears about the short-livedness of his son's marriage, Confucius and Maxie set up a happy little house for themselves, presenting Draco and Harry with the first granddaughter in three years and the first grandson five years later. By the time Confucius was old enough to take over the position of the Head of the Malfoy family, there was nothing standing in his way, least of all Cyrus.

Pansy had her own theory concerning his son's marriage, which she shared with Draco when he next met her at a Hogwarts Christmas banquet. (In Jez's sixth year, the freshly appointed Headmistress Lovegood, who was just as barmy as her great predecessor Dumbledore, announced that they were going to hold another Triwizard Tournament in Durmstrang.)

"Well, it's not unexpected: Gryffindor and Slytherin, both boys, both good-looking, and bitter rivals from the very beginning. Why, do you think, I told my son to befriend yours instead of becoming his adversary, as he could have, considering family history?" She shook her violently red hair, which Draco still hadn't got used to seeing on her.

He refrained from uttering his doubts about her assertion, seeing that Confucius and Maxie hadn't even been in the same year. Instead he chose to observe Pansy by chasing away the flock of fairies that thought Cyrus' wheelchair would be a convenient place to rest their tired wings - considerably less prickly than the large pine trees they were stationed to flutter around. Draco saw there was a child no older than two sitting in his unresponsive father's lap, and he was certain that – though Pansy had last time told him she didn't want more than ten – by that time she had overdone the plan.

"Tell me one thing," Draco asked, still not being able to get over the state his cousin had obviously let himself be worked into. "How did you get him to procreate with you at this rate?"

"Easily." Pansy took out a handkerchief to wipe away the drool from both her child's and her husband's faces. "I told him you planned to have five with me. He wanted to double the stake. It's not really my fault if he over-exerted himself. All those performance-enhancing spells and potions…" She shrugged and gave a couple of knocks to Cyrus' skull, as if to prove that there really was no one in there anymore.

"I notice he is still not out of the mill," Draco couldn't resist remarking, watching Pansy's son trying to stand up, using his father's necktie as a handhold.

"Well, you know how it is with you men," Pansy said, smirking. "Your brains and that thing down there don't have much of a connection to begin with."

To everyone's surprise (except perhaps Draco's) Jez became the Triwizard Champion of Hogwarts. He placed second in the last task, though in Draco's opinion, he should have won. He employed true Slytherin cunning: they were supposed to survive three days in a dark cave that was sealed away from the outside world with only a small split in the rocks through which they were given food. Jez used that split to summon a vial of the Draught of Living Death to him and took it, thus escaping the attention of the blood-sucking bats the cave was populated with. The jury insisted that he had help from a house-elf, and Draco had to make a hasty departure with Podmore, Agador and Dobby, whom he had borrowed from Granger for a very special task.

They were still stopped at the Durmstrang gates by two frost-covered supervisors. Thankfully, Podmore, whose beard had by then turned snow white, but his penchant for jokes no one understood remained unchanged, knew just the trick for the situation. He slowly waved his open palm in front of the faces of the two wizards and told them:

"You don't need to test our wands. These aren't the house-elves you're looking for."

By then, Draco should have learned to trust the old man; he was still surprised when the trick worked.

Thus, Jez was pronounced second after the Beauxbatons girl, but that didn't count because she was a full Veela and had obviously charmed the jury into giving her the first place, despite having turned into a bird and eating all the bats in the cave when one of the contest's conditions had been that the competitors weren't to harm the native fauna.

By the time Jez also finished his wizarding education Harry relinquished his job in the Ministry and dedicated his time fully to his work on the Board of Governors. Draco knew he wouldn't want to take on a more prominent position ever – Harry considered his contributions more important than pushing parchments in an office – but Draco was already resigned to it. On the other hand, his own career advanced splendidly and he was certain he would be able to make his old dream come true and become Minister of Magic one day – and what was even better: he would become that on his own merit. He had already devised his own slogan for the election posters and badges: "M stands for 'Minister'."

And as a significant difference from his father's life, his own marriage hadn't suffered the price of his ambitions. Harry was happily puttering away at his side with his own little things, supporting him in his career (though sometimes he drew him to the side and asked whether Draco had really thought 'this thing' through), and once in a while, when Draco spent too much time in his office meeting important persons, Harry didn't hesitate to drag him home and into his bed.

"Up for a little action today?" he asked sometimes, just after having Apparated both of them straight into their bedroom, wiggling his eyebrows, which resulted in little red sparks flaring up at the two ends of the ever bushier black lines shading his eyes. It was nothing new: as he grew older and became more and more powerful, his Magical Incontinency became worse, even though now he took the Containing Potion Draco brewed him from Snape's recipe thrice a day. That reminded him....

"Did you take your dose this afternoon?" Draco asked suspiciously but not overly annoyed. He could feel the minute tingles of raw power tickling along his nerve endings and knew they were becoming stronger as they were talking.

"Nope," Harry answered, the sparks having transferred to his eyes by then. Their shine caused the little crow's feet in the corners of Harry's eyes to deepen, but they had not detracted one smidgen from his attractiveness.

Draco's mouth pulled into a slow, sly smile, observing Harry taking off his clothes and automatically

mirroring his motions. Soon, they stood naked opposite to each other. The currents of magic in the air had almost become visible between their bodies.

"Agador?" Draco asked, gasping from the sensation of Harry's magic washing over him.

"I sent him away to visit this new leather shop…" Harry growled.

Draco gave him a toothy grin and almost purred with anticipation as he stepped closer – close enough that the hairs along his arms and thighs stood on end by the almost liquid static thick between their bodies like the two ends of a huge magical capacitor. He watched as Harry's hand came up and drew a sparkling line on his chest, the discharge catching one of his nipples and causing it to firm up at once.

"Oooh, we are feeling very kinky today, isn't that right, Mister Potter?" Draco asked, his head thrown back in the guilty pleasure of being able to enjoy games like this.

"That's right, husband," Harry hissed, and Draco could feel that he was at the end of his resistance. He could barely contain his power and it had already started seeping from him in jets, trickling down the sensitive flesh of Draco's belly and hardening cock. He could smell the familiar ozone-stench that signalled that the dam was about to break and Harry was about to shower him with everything he had in him.

"Well then, what are you waiting for?" Draco asked, licking his lips and covering that last half step that had distanced them, moulding his body to Harry's.

"I'm here. Leak away!"

THE END

A/N: Yes, that was Star Wars – plagiarising again. :)

A/N2: Shuukan Kuidicchi: Weekly Quidditch – from wikipedia. (Sorry, can't find the page anymore. If someone comes upon it, please drop me a link!) Hyuuman Burajyaa = Human Bludger (Thanks to alphamatrix for the translation.)

A/N3: I tried to include the answer to every question issued about the fic into this epilogue, but there were just parts that didn't need to be included. That's why I've decided to put up a Question/Answer post on my LiveJournal [no link available yet].