

# Brewing in Pairs

*by Bambu*

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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Disclaimer and Author's Notes: Only the order of the words is mine, all the characters and this universe belong to JKR and her assignees. As this is the second DM/HG I've written since DH, I'm afraid I'm still working out the post-canon rationale. Written for Bunney at HP Con Envy celebration on Live Journal.

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"Some of you will recognize this." Horace Slughorn held a miniscule bottle between his fingers, the liquid within it golden, glowing in the shaft of light catching the glass at just the right angle.

Hermione heard Draco Malfoy murmur, "Felix Felicis," and jerked her head around only to see intent gray eyes focused on her. She had been staring fixedly at the potion recipe on the chalkboard, and neither she nor Malfoy offered the answer to their professor's implied question.

The newly revamped ministry had made arrangements for a year seven-point-five at Hogwarts after an intense summer of reconstruction wrought on the battle-scarred castle. Hermione, Ron and Harry had all returned for the five months of core curriculum classes leading to the NEWTs held in May.

Harry and Ron were seated in front, under Slughorn's fawning approval, and to Hermione's disgust, Ron's head seemed to swell with each grandiose compliment. When she had first arrived in the remarkably unchanged dungeon classroom, she had taken her customary place at her usual potions' bench. She missed Neville's sturdy presence at her side, but he had taken his advanced exams the past summer while she was in Australia searching fruitlessly for her parents. Other than Ron, Harry, Malfoy, and her, the rest of the class were Muggle-born, and aside from her and Malfoy, all the students were paired up.

Suddenly, Hermione realized she was still staring at Malfoy, and she blushed. He averted his eyes, yet color painted his cheeks as a broad stroke against pale canvas.

Her attention was diverted when Slughorn paused by her bench, dangling the scintillating potion in front of her. "Well, Miss Granger, I expect you'll be competing with Harry for little Felix here. How blessed I am to have two such exemplary students in the same class."

He beamed fatuously at her before his gaze moved past, pausing on Malfoy in the row behind her. As far as Hermione knew, no one had spoken to the blond since their arrival three days after New Year's; his ostracism was so complete he was isolated at one end of the Slytherin table for meals and had a dorm room entirely to himself.

Slughorn said not a word before turning his back on Malfoy and once more addressing her. "I'm sure a student of your caliber won't be handicapped by working alone on

today's assignment. Traditionally, it takes two to brew perfectly, but if anyone can manage the Elixir of Peace, it will be you. Of course, dear Harry already has a partner." He nodded genially, and oiled his way across the class to his position hovering over Harry's shoulder.

Hermione grimaced, gritted her teeth and made a decision. She turned fully to face Malfoy, asking quietly, "Will you partner me?"

His head snapped up, gray eyes wide, mouth hanging open. He blinked and Hermione blushed again. It was all well and good to talk, or argue, as she and Ron had done *ad nauseum, ad infinitum*, about offering an open hand to those who had avoided Azkaban after their war trials, but the doing was much harder, and she regretted laying herself open to scorn.

And yet, Draco Malfoy was different now.

He was impeccably groomed as usual, but he was gaunt and haunted.

"All right." He accepted her offer in a voice carefully leeching of overtones.

Hermione's smile was so bright with relief that his steps faltered. "You were always good at Potions, Malfoy. Even when Pro..." it was her turn to stumble and her smile vanished, "...Professor Snape wasn't teaching."

Her gaffe hurried him along. In moments, their potions paraphernalia was neatly ordered on the worktop, and a smile hid at the back of his eyes when Malfoy looked at the identically laid out equipment. Yet he said nothing, merely dropped two moonstones in his marble mortar before Hermione handed him the matching pestle.

"I'll just get the Hellebore syrup from the cupboard, shall I?"

"All right, Granger. We'll need that after we add the shredded valerian."

"Shredded?" she asked, her eyes flicking to the chalkboard, to a contrary list of directions in Step Four, before they returned to look at her partner.

"It's how Sev..." His expression went flat and waxy. He swallowed hard and cleared his throat before speaking again. "Professor Snape taught me this way."

"All- all right." She thought of Snape, familiar guilt rising in her chest, and then she glanced at Harry, thinking of his year-long reverence for the Half-Blood Prince's book and its innovations and improvements. At their table, Harry shredded valerian leaves while Ron hammered moonstones with great vigor; pieces of white stone scattered, some dotting his red hair. She bit her lip and then made her decision. "I'll shred the leaves when I return."

"Fine." Draco pounded the pestle into the pale stone, grinding at the end of his stroke so that none of the moonstone escaped his technique.

In the background, Slughorn made his way around the front half of the class, peering into cauldrons, offering advice here and an encouraging word there, but his circuit never seemed to pass beyond Harry. Hermione could see her friend's jaw clench as the professor hovered at his savior's elbow.

Hermione ducked behind the cupboard door to retrieve one of the prepared bottles of Hellebore syrup, three drams' worth. She checked the corks, choosing the bottle whose seal was tightest as the syrup lost its efficacy when it oxidized, not to mention that contact with skin had toxic side-effects.

From the classroom, Slughorn said sharply, "Mr. Malfoy, what are you doing? Return to your work station at once."

"I am at my work station, Professor."

"I'll not have you compromising Miss Granger's "

"Sir..." Hermione stepped from the cupboard, Hellebore syrup in hand, "...I asked Malfoy to be my partner." Every eye in the class swiveled in her direction. Predictably, Harry glowered and Ron's ears turned bright red, but Hermione ignored them.

"Miss Granger?" Slughorn asked. "Your marks could suffer from this ... er ... unnecessary gesture of goodwill."

Hermione didn't even look at him, her entire being focused on Draco Malfoy, the boy who had hurt her, hated her, and ineffectively tried to protect her the night she'd been tortured and he'd been powerless. His head dropped and his hand shook as he began to gather his things.

"No!" she all but shouted. "Wait. Malfoy stay there." She stepped in front of the corpulent form of her least-liked teacher. "I'll take my chances, Professor. Malfoy has always been good at potions. I think we'd work well together."

Ron's stool toppled as he leapt to his feet, and Harry's restraining hand on his friend's arm halted an irate outburst. Whispers between partners echoed off the cold walls, but Malfoy replaced his glass stirring rod next to hers on the tabletop before he resumed his seat.

"As you wish, Miss Granger." Slughorn turned away, dismissing her as if she had been tainted beyond repair by her choice.

Harry gave her one last look, and then muttered, "C'mon, Ron, we have work to do."

Ron's glare was vitriolic, but then he, too, turned his back on Hermione. She sighed and passed down the aisle, ignoring the furtive looks and whispers in her wake, her footsteps loud on the flagstones.

"I don't need your charity," Malfoy whispered angrily when she reached their potions' bench.

Hermione gritted her teeth and took a deep breath. "It isn't charity. You're a good student, and this is a difficult potion. I want to win the Felix Felicis." She looked at him. "Don't you?"

"Yes!" He said it fast and too fervently, compelling her to stare before comprehension flooded her. His father was already serving a life sentence in Azkaban, and his mother's trial was in a week. While Narcissa Malfoy wouldn't be allowed to take the potion for luck, those same Wizengamot regulations did not apply to her son.

Hermione swallowed, empathizing with his need. Hesitantly, she touched the sleeve of his black student's robes. He froze. Other than when she had slapped him during their third year, they had never touched. "If our potion's perfect and we win the Felix Felicis, you can have it first," she offered.

He didn't look at her, but nodded and continued grinding the moonstone into a uniform fine-grained powder.

She took up the next step, shredding valerian before adding the leaves to three gills of simmering, filtered water waiting in their number four cauldron. She conjured her signature bluebell flames. At that, Malfoy turned to her, his expression dark and accusing. She preempted him by saying, "I have more control over the temperature if I do it this way."

"Do you?"

"I've been able to do this since I was five."

"Impressive, Granger, even..."

"Don't say it," she hissed. "Don't use that word. Never. Never, never, never use that word." She clamped her mouth shut, uneasy to have shown him a weakness. She

*hated* the word Mudblood.

He said mildly, "I was going to say that even I couldn't conjure fire when I was five. I was seven."

Their eyes met, and for the first time, there might have been a glimpse of the future, one different than either had ever expected.

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