

Truth Of The Matter

by Darkrivertempest

Draco Malfoy has just been released from Azkaban, and needs to report to Hermione Granger for approval on all his work. But things are not as they appear. Fed up with all the secrets, he devises a way to divine the truth from a certain Gryffindor.

One

Chapter 1 of 2

Draco Malfoy has just been released from Azkaban, and needs to report to Hermione Granger for approval on all his work. But things are not as they appear. Fed up with all the secrets, he devises a way to divine the truth from a certain Gryffindor.

Written for the LJ community, hp_porninthesun.

"It is the preliminary decision of this Wizengamot that you, Draco Lucius Malfoy, be sentenced to a term no less than twenty years in Azkaban prison, for crimes committed by your person during the Second Wizarding War."

Kingsley Shacklebolt's strong baritone echoed throughout the cavernous chamber which was filled to capacity by every judicial and legislative member currently holding a position, to include laypersons directly involved in Draco's sentence.

The young man in question stood silently upon the dais, a single shaft of bluish-white light shining on him from above and casting his scarred face in shadows. He showed no sign that the sentence affected him in the least, merely staring at the podium in front of Shacklebolt.

"However, your redemptive deeds have been brought to this court's attention, as well as the resulting actions which led to the downfall of Voldemort," Kingsley intoned, not unkindly. "Furthermore, you are the sole heir and owner of the Malfoy name and estates, since your parents' untimely demise. With these events in mind, the court has favored a commute of your sentence."

Draco continued to stare ahead with no visible response to the Minister's pronouncement.

"Mister Malfoy, do you comprehend what I am telling you?"

Once again, there was no reply, just a vacant expression.

"Minister, if I may?" Luna Lovegood inquired as she stood.

With a nod from Shacklebolt, Luna made her way down to stand in front of Draco who didn't register her presence until he felt her cool fingertips prying his tightly gripped hands apart.

Slowly he lowered his gaze and blinked. "Lovegood?"

She smiled enigmatically and held his hand. "Have hope, Draco... the truth will set you free."

He frowned fiercely, watching her pat his hand affectionately then return to her seat. *Chit's still off her rocker*, he mused, daring a glance to the dark man perched high above the crowd.

"Do we have your attention now, Mister Malfoy?"

Draco's eyes widened somewhat, realizing the daft blonde had stirred him from what would've been a disastrous chain of events. "Yes, Minister." He bowed from the waist. "My apologies."

Kingsley cleared his throat. "As I was saying, a light has been shed on your activities before the war came to an end, and being that you are now the only living Malfoy, it is this court's decision to commute your sentence."

"Yes, sir... Thank you."

After several moments of silence, Shackbolt chuckled in spite of himself. "Do you not wish to know the revised judgment, son?"

Draco bit the inside of his cheek to keep from reacting to Kingsley's assumption that he could call him 'son'. "I will, of course, abide by whatever the high court deems necessary."

"It is good to see the fire still resides within you," the Minister observed with a smirk, noting the young man's defiant eyes. "You've mastered several magical abilities and skills, have you not?"

"You would have to be more specific," the blond drawled. "I have so many."

The older man arched an eyebrow in amusement. "It seems a stint in Azkaban has not robbed you of your cheek."

"It is the only thing I can call my own...*sir*."

Ignoring the young man's jibe, Kingsley moved forward. "You are to work in the Development Department, Mister Malfoy, and any creation or invention that is noteworthy will become intellectual and physical property of the Ministry. All others will be marketed and dispensed, the proceeds to be donated to charities that support victims of the war. You will receive a stipend as payment, but the Malfoy assets will be liquidated for reparation to those most affected by the war, namely the Weasley family."

Blood seeped onto Draco's tongue as he finally bit through a section of his cheek in order to control his emotions. Why was his family's hard earned ... well, no, it was all old pure-blood money, but still it was *their* money, nonetheless ... going to pay for Fred and Ron Weasley's deaths when he'd had nothing to do with them? He hadn't caused the explosion that had sent Fred to his external joke shop in the sky. He hadn't been the perpetrator of the killing curse flung Ron's way that fateful night, just before Voldemort had fallen. So why should he be made responsible for...

"... and you will report to the Head of Magical Law Enforcement ... Miss Granger. Do you understand and comply with this sentence?"

Damn, he'd missed half of the requirements he was supposed to fulfill. "Yes, Minister."

"Good. As a matter of note, you will be able to retain Malfoy Manor, seeing that it is a family estate and has been so for hundreds of generations," Kingsley told him, closing a rather large tome on the podium.

Unadulterated relief swept through Draco's thin frame at this news. The family mansion would remain his; the antique furniture, his mother's things, his father's trappings all to stay safe from thieving hands.

"Thank you, Minister," Draco said sincerely.

"You are free on your own recognizance, but you are being monitored, have no doubt," the Minister warned.

He'd expected no less. "Understood."

Having been dismissed, he stepped down from the dais as the manacles and chains that surrounded his ankles and wrists disappeared, leaving raised welts in their place and causing him to rub his skin to regain feeling in them.

"Are you ready to go?"

Startled, Draco turned and peered at the platinum blonde girl once more. "Go where? And what makes you think you'd be going with me?"

Luna was unfazed by his gruff demeanor. "Back to the mansion, of course. Since I'm your court-appointed observation officer for the next few days, I need to set up the wards and safeguards on the property, so you may move about freely."

"Malfoy Manor already has wards and..."

She shook her head. "They were removed by Bill Weasley after your parents died. It was the only way the Ministry could approach the house without being burnt to a crisp like a vampire on a sunny day."

The frail man crossed his arms to keep his anger from escaping, his lip curled into a sneer. "What makes you think I can't break through anything you conjure, Lovegood? You're not a genius with fail-safes."

"I have no doubt you'd be able to break through them... in time," she countered with a smirk. "But with the longevity component of the wards, it would take you three-hundred and twenty-two years to do so... and I don't think you'll live that long."

"Am I allowed to swear at you?"

"If it makes you feel better, by all means."

For the next five minutes, Draco Malfoy let loose a string of blue curses the world, Muggle and Wizard alike, had never heard before. Such epitaphs included, 'I hope Centaurs gnaw on your limbs and leave the bones to bleach in the scorching sun,' and 'If my father were alive today he'd be drinking himself into a stupor with that stench-filled, pus-blossom of a caretaker, Hagrid'.

"Pus-blossoms are actually quite nice smelling," Luna corrected during his tirade.

He stared at her incredulously. "I smell like pus-blossoms, you barmy bint!" he hissed, pointing at himself. "And I can't stand it!"

"It's an acquired scent, I must admit."

Realizing the certifiably insane woman would never rise to his baiting, he heaved a heavy sigh and muttered, "Can we just go, then?"

"Oh! Are you done? I thought you had a few more left."

He snorted. "I do, but I'm saving them for a more appropriate time."

She smiled serenely and wrapped her arms around him, paying no attention to the stiffening of his body. "Okay, let's get you tucked in!"

As they Apparated to the Manor, Shackbolt broke down with laughter, turning to the woman sitting right behind him and out of view. "Miss Granger, you definitely have your work cut out for you."

Rich, brown eyes met the Minister's and Hermione smiled thinly. "I do, indeed."

~*~

Five hours later, Luna sat across from Hermione Granger in the darkened office, a single luminary casting a soft and comforting glow around the two women.

"Is it done?" Hermione asked.

Luna tilted her head and contemplated her friend. "Yes. Are you going to tell him that it was your testimony that persuaded the court to revise his sentence?"

The brunette narrowed her eyes. "Stay out of my head, Luna."

"That's not where my focus was directed." Leaning forward, the blonde crossed her arms on the edge of the desk separating them and laid her chin atop her forearm. "I was aiming more towards your heart. Besides, I think he deserves to know."

"Well I don't want him to know," she replied petulantly. "Then all I'll hear is how he doesn't want pity or some other nonexistent emotion from a Mudblood, and he'd rather be shipped back to Azkaban."

"Perhaps," was all Luna would say.

"I just..." She groaned in frustration. "Sometimes I curse the fact that Professor Snape survived and Ron didn't, that Snape chose *me* to see his interactions with Draco through the Pensieve, that Draco refused to identify us to his parents and deranged aunt, that Draco gave Harry the Elder Wand, and..."

"That's a lot of cursing," Luna mused. "Did you know Draco can curse like a Muggle sailor?"

Even though she'd known Luna for years, Hermione could still be taken aback by her offbeat comments. "Uh, no... I didn't."

"Yes, he was rather fond of the word 'fuck'."

Hermione snorted with laughter. "Somehow that doesn't surprise me."

Luna smiled slyly, knowing she diverted her friend away from a possible stress meltdown. "His scar still pains him, though. I don't think they allowed for proper treatment in prison."

"The one on his face, from the chandelier?"

She nodded. "It's quite a long gash, running from the middle of his eyebrow to the underside of his chin. It looked very angry today."

"But that was over a year ago!" Hermione huffed. "Surely they mended it with..."

"From what I gathered, he was refused treatment because one of the guards was a distant relation to Katie Bell, and he took great exception to the necklace incident," Luna explained. "I can tell you, though, even if you healed it now, it would still leave a mark because it's been left for too long without proper care."

"Do you think..." She paused for a moment as she thought of something. "Do you think he'd allow me to look at it, see if there is something that can be done?"

Luna shrugged. "I could ask tomorrow."

"No!" Hermione nearly yelled. "I mean, no, don't ask him... he'll just see it as some way to bring down his defenses, say he'd rather have Harry touching him than a Mudbl..."

"Through all of his cursing today, he never once used the slur of Mudblood, Hermione," Luna stated with a bit of force.

Her eyes widened. "Not once?"

"Not even a hint."

"So do you think..."

Rolling her eyes, Luna smiled. "I'll ask him."

Hermione smiled tentatively for the first time since the whole mess started. "Yes, please, ask him."

~*~

One week later, a black-cloaked figure stood in her doorway, the cowl so far over his face Hermione couldn't tell at first who darkened the entrance to her office.

"Can I help you?" she asked politely, figuring someone got lost on their way to a different department, which happened often.

Instead of answering, the stranger stepped over the threshold and shut the door, moving around the spacious room slowly as he perused the photographs adorning her walls. The lanky frame stopped before one particular picture, the one of Hermione, Ron, and Harry standing together before the Hogwarts Express. He studied it intently with his hands behind his back, then moved away, only to halt his steps in front of her desk.

"I don't know. Can you?" the voice rasped.

She leaned forward in an effort to see under his hood, but he retreated. "Draco?" she asked hesitantly.

The dark figure bowed his head. "You wanted to see me?"

"Luna spoke with you?"

"It's why I'm here, isn't it?" he drawled.

She huffed in irritation. "Do you answer every question with a question?"

"No, do you?" he chuckled lightly.

"Prat," she muttered, indicating he was to sit, though he ignored her.

"At least you don't have some idealized notion that my personality has changed because of my incarceration."

"I have no grand illusions on that part, no." She sighed, rising from her chair and coming around to lean against her desk, since he refused to take a seat.

"Then why am I here? Lovegood spins me a nice little ditty that within a week's time I'm to report to you for a check-up," he grouched. "Why? Is my work not satisfactory?"

When she saw Luna the next time, she was going to have a serious discussion on what information to pass on to their charge. Looking over her shoulder at the latest potion's formula coming from his lab gracing her desk, she shook her head in amazement.

"Your work is exemplary, especially this particular chemical compound," she explained, pointing to the paperwork. "Luna was supposed to offer you the chance to heal your wound, not report for a check-up."

Moving quickly, he stood directly in front her, the tip of the black hood touching her forehead, yet still she couldn't see his face. "You think you can heal this?" He gradually pulled the cowl down to reveal his damaged face.

Unable to help herself, Hermione gasped at the inflamed, red, and puckered wound that ran the length of his face, from eyebrow to chin. He glimpsed the revulsion in her eyes and backed away.

"I've tried to heal it myself, but I have a limited use of magic allotted to me," he enlightened her. "I can't even conjure a simple sleeping draught with what I've been given," he growled, threading his fingers through his hair in frustration. "I have to do practically everything by non-magical means."

Her jaw dropped slightly. "Even your calculations for the formulas?"

"What part of *they restrained my magic* did you not understand, Granger?"

Grabbing the documentation, she flipped through the parchments, her brows drawn in confusion. "Draco, these equations are beyond most experienced professors. I wouldn't even dream of attempting them without magic."

"So?"

She narrowed her eyes, exasperated. "You mean to tell me you configured all these calculations by hand?"

He leaned into her face, his nose touching hers. "Let's go over this slowly, Granger: I did... *everything*... by... bloody... hand."

Licking her lips, she dared to return his stare. His gray eyes were belying the hurt and confusion swirling inside him as he watched her tongue in fascination. "I can help you," she whispered.

His eyes darted back to hers. "Sod off," he growled and turned away.

"But I can help ease the pain from..."

"I don't want your fucking pity!" he roared. "You have no idea of my pain!" He was seething with anger now, clutching his chest, hinting at something altogether different.

"You deserve a chance to..."

"Spare me your deluded notions of my part in the war... *Granger*," he spat, struggling not to use the old insult. "I was a coward ... end of story."

"It's a constant, unanswerable question whether any behavior based on fear of punishment can be regarded as cowardly," she insisted fervently, trying to contradict his opinion of himself.

He laughed mirthlessly. "And what tome did you regurgitate that from?"

"None," she ground out. "It's a simple observation."

"Dear Merlin's balls," he huffed. "I'm not some hero like Potter; why are you being so bloody persistent in this?"

"Because I can help." She came to stand in front of him and cupped his cheeks, wincing as he did when she touched the edge of the irritated welt. "And just for the record, you *are* a hero, Draco Malfoy."

Rolling his eyes, he tried to remove his face from her hands, but she held on fast. "Leave off, woman!"

"Quit being such a bloody git," she murmured absentmindedly, studying the wound.

Closing his eyes, he gave up the struggle and allowed her to do as she pleased. A sense of peace washed gently into him as her soft fingertips probed the painful area, infusing him with relief and comfort, the pain lessening significantly. Opening his eyes in astonishment, he caught a spark of something brilliant in her gaze, as she smiled shyly and continued her work.

"What are you doing?" he whispered, puffs of his breath causing strands of her hair to sway.

"Helping you," she answered softly.

"Why?"

"Because I see something different in you. Plus, you saved my life. I'm only repaying the debt."

His eyes shuttered as he withdrew into himself. "I'm not a fucking hero!" he hissed.

She stopped his recoil by gripping the strands of hair at the nape of his neck. "A hero is no braver than an ordinary person, Draco," she assured him. "It's just that a hero is braver five minutes longer."

Waiting until she relaxed her grip, he removed himself from her grasp. "Spare me your endearing platitudes, Granger." He pulled the cowl over his head. "I need to get back and finish my current formula. Since I'm resorted to doing everything by hand it takes much longer than normal."

The slam of her office door startled her, even though she knew it was coming. Slumping onto the overstuffed sofa, she wiped her eyes free of the scant tears that gathered whenever she delved deep into someone's psyche, wishing desperately the blond Slytherin would trust her.

Just in case, she wouldn't hold her breath.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 2

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Hermione panted, waving a file folder in front of her face. "Will this heat never end?"

Looking wilted, Luna cast *Intrecciatura* on her hair, which plaited the blonde strands into multiple braids, then spelled them to be continuously lifted from her neck. After she was done, she had the appearance of a severely deranged, multi-braided Pippi Longstocking, *sans* the red hair.

"Much better," she sighed in relief. "Father once wrote an article about something called 'global warming' and blamed the increase in the Earth's temperatures on cow farts."

Hermione stopped her fanning and stared at her co-worker. "That's utterly absurd, there's no scientific proof for that."

"There's no reason, magical or otherwise, as to why it's so hot in the Ministry today... yet here we are, sweltering as if we were in the Sahara." She arched a brow as a thought came to her. "Unless..."

The brunette's eyes narrowed and her lips thinned. "George Weasley is mucking about with the ventilation system."

As if on cue, George walked into their office and shut the door. "Ladies." He acknowledged them with a nod. "How goes it with my two favorite, non-familial women?"

"You scoundrel," Hermione ground out. "What have you done? I'm melting here!"

"Such slurs, Granger," he teased, tweaking her nose. "I think I'll take back my new and improved, soon to be patented, Daydream Charm."

"Why new and improved?" Luna asked. "You can't have something be *new and* improved, it's either one or the other... but on the off chance, do you have one where I could imagine myself on a polar ice cap?"

Digging around in his pocket, the redhead looked at the handful of circular pills in his hand before plucking a blue one from the bunch. "Just for you, love."

"Remind me to hex you when I wake up," Luna sighed, putting the flat disc under her tongue. "See you in a half-hour," she murmured then promptly passed out on the couch.

"More like an hour," George told Hermione. "That's the *improved* part."

She sifted through the remaining charms. "What else is different?"

"Got rid of that nasty drooling side effect."

"That's a relief," she muttered. "You know, I had to burn those robes after the last charm because I couldn't remove the saliva stains."

He winked at her. "You're just a messy dreamer, is all."

Holding one of the charms up, she glanced between him and the possible daydream. "An hour, right?"

Taking the charm pill from her hand, he tapped her bottom lip for her to open her mouth. "Sweet dreams, Granger." Popping it under her tongue, he grinned wickedly. "Remember to thank me later."

~*~

He stood in the doorway to her office again, except this time the cowl was removed from his platinum head. Three months had done nothing to diminish her ache for him.

"Draco?"

He said nothing as he closed the door and warded the room with silencing spells, ensuring they wouldn't be heard. How was that possible with his magic restrained to almost nothing?

"I've brought you the next formula," he drawled with a seductive smirk, sparing an interested glance at the unconscious form of Luna Lovegood sprawled out on the sofa.

Hermione was beginning to feel claustrophobic with his presence in the room, something she'd never suffered from before, so she rose from her swivel chair and met him in the middle, preventing him from approaching any further.

"Thank you. I'll look them over later," she said in a hopefully forceful tone as she held out her hand for the report.

Draco shook his head, his stormy eyes piercing her with their intense study. "I want you to look them over... now." He held the parchments away from her grasping hand.

Lips pursed, she made a small leap to grab the paper from his outstretched hand, but he was taller than her by several inches, and instead, she landed against his chest. Preparing to apologize for accidentally hitting him, she felt strong, lean arms circle around her shoulders, trapping her against his body.

"If you wanted to touch me, Granger, all you had to do was ask," Draco purred in her ear as he nuzzled her hairline, flinging the parchment to land on Luna's face.

"Let go of me, Malfoy," she gritted through clenched teeth, struggling within his embrace.

"So it's back to Malfoy, is it?" he hissed, tightening his arms. "What happened to Draco, the piteous, fallen and scarred war hero you wanted to save? Have you changed your tune so quickly?"

Waiting until he was once again looking her in the eye, she softened her gaze. "I never pitied you, Draco."

Fiery anger leapt into his stare as he forced her to move back until her bum rested against the edge of the desk. "Then what, in the name of Circe, do you want with me?" he spat out, clenching his long fingers around her slender shoulders hard enough for her to gasp in pain.

"You're hurting me," she whimpered. "Please let me go or I'll have to report..."

"Answer the bloody question!" he roared, shaking her a bit.

"Because you deserve a chance!" she screamed back at him, tears slowly making their way down her cheeks. "I want you to have possibilities, opportunities that are fair and allow room for mistakes."

Placing both hands on the desktop on either side of her hips, Draco leaned in until their lips were a hairsbreadth away. "Why?"

She bit her lower lip to keep from blurting out her real reason. "I'm in a position to..."

"Why?"

"Some in the Wizarding world are still biased against the Malfoy name and I thought..."

"Why?"

Closing her eyes in defeat, she leaned her forehead against his. "Because I care."

It clearly wasn't what he wanted to hear from the look he was giving her, but it was the closest he was going to get to the truth without physically beating it out of her...which she supposed was still an option. Parting the front of her robes, he splayed his wide hands on either side of her hips, rubbing soothing circles on her abdomen with his thumbs. She idly wondered if he knew she was well and truly on her way to feeling something more than just caring when he felt her breathy pants on his face.

"Hermione," he whispered, then closed the gap between their lips.

A maelstrom of emotion flooded them both as they devoured the taste of one another, one dark, the other light, together creating a world where shades of gray were acceptable.

Reaching behind her, Draco swept everything except the potted ivy plant off her desk and laid her back over it, her legs dangling off the edge. Sliding his hands up her thighs, he spread them and flipped the hem of her skirt up, revealing lacey purple knickers. He smiled at her, quirking an eyebrow in question at the obvious blend of safety with a hint of daring underclothing. She wondered if in the future he could persuade her to wear nothing at all.

Kneeling down, he nipped at the inner flesh, savoring her skin until he reached the juncture of her thighs. He inhaled deeply, his senses filling with her musky scent and the soap she'd used to cleanse her body. When she trembled at his close proximity to her core, he paused for a moment to straighten up, looking at her flushed face as she leaned back on her elbows.

"Has no one ever done this before?"

Her flush deepened, becoming a bright crimson. "I've only ever snogged Viktor and Ron."

He sighed, laying his forehead against her knee. "Let me guess... you were saving yourself for the redheaded git, right?"

She huffed a stray curl off her face. "Not that it's any of your business, but I don't know if he would have ever gotten around to it."

Biting down gently on the cord of muscle near her apex, he glared ferociously at her. "Well, this is mine now." He ran a finger along the dampness of her knickers, applying pressure near her clit. "No one else's, are we clear?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

Tucking his tongue behind his teeth, he leered at her as he began stroking the material harder, making her squirm. "Say it, Hermione."

"Yours, only yours," she gasped.

"Good girl." Shifting the sodden cotton to one side, he delved two fingers into her wet pussy, his thumb lightly tapping on her rigid button as he slowly pumped in and out of her warmth.

He smirked when he heard her sob as he removed his hand before replacing it with his mouth, lapping at her essence. Tonguing her folds, he began humming when her fingers threaded through his blond locks, massaging his scalp.

"Draco," she whispered, "I-I can't... something..."

"Let it happen, love," he rasped, sucking her clit between his lips.

She screamed his name in bliss, her shout earsplitting in its intensity, and Draco figured she'd never had an actual orgasm before, only phantom feelings as she matured from teen to woman. While she tried to buck from the spasms in her womb, he held her pelvis steady, continuing to lick her until she was shaking from overstimulation.

"You scream loud enough to wake the dead, Hermione," Luna said from far away.

"What?" she coughed, trying to sit up from her position on the desk, only to discover she was still in her chair, hair plastered to the side of her face.

Rubbing her gritty eyes, the dreamy set of her gaze unfocused, she stared at her friend and co-worker, who sported a totally satisfied grin. "Are you real?" Hermione asked hesitantly, trying to determine if she was still daydreaming.

Luna giggled and sighed. "Harry has the biggest..."

"Don't finish that sentence!" Hermione squealed, clapping her hands over her ears.

The other girl frowned. "Nose?"

Pushing her damp hair away from her cheek, the brunette chuckled hesitantly. "Oh! I thought you were going to say..."

"Penis?"

Hermione gaped at her.

"What? Harry's got a perfectly adequate penis, but his nose... Merlin, what that man can do with it."

So many obscene images flashed through Hermione's brain at that moment, she became ill. "I-I-I don't want to know."

"You look thoroughly happy, I must say," Luna observed.

Getting to her shaky feet, Hermione grabbed her dress robe and sprinted to the door. "Isn't it lunchtime? I hear the canteen has baked spaghetti today."

"Mmm, noodles," Luna cooed. Preceding her friend out the door, she mused, "I do hope they have pudding, too."

Smiling in spite of herself, Hermione shut the door and took a deep, fortifying breath, hoping against hope that she'd be able to look Draco in the eye the next time she met with him.

~*~

"The elves worked long and hard to make that," Luna pointed out, watching her friend shove the food around on her plate. "I don't think they'd understand if you brutalized that poor meatball again."

Dropping her fork with a clang, Hermione buried her face in her hands. "Have you seen his latest formula, Luna? He's found the cure for Muggle cancer! This just isn't right," she groaned.

Slurping a noodle, the blonde shrugged. "Which part? The fact that he can't use magic or that the Ministry is using him?"

A rough cough, as if someone was choking, sounded behind the women then subsided.

"Both. It's disgusting really. I talked to Kingsley the other day, and I told him that Draco had consistently produced excellent work. I insisted he'd more than paid his debt to society with three months worth of important discoveries, and you know what Kingsley said to me?"

"You're going to tell me, aren't you?"

"He said, 'Miss Granger, it was damn near impossible to gain a commute on that spoiled brat's sentence because of your testimony; what makes you think the Wizengamot would consider granting him a lighter pardon?'"

Another round of spluttering issued from the cloaked figure behind the women.

"I hope that person sees the Mediwitch; it sounds like they have a nasty case of Loser's Lurgy," Luna observed casually. "I hope they stop the spread before it reaches their..."

Violent retching echoed in the cafeteria, followed by a grunt and a snort.

"I think they just need a good slap on the back," Hermione muttered, still in a foul mood.

Luna narrowed her eyes as she stared at the convex image that could be seen on her spoon through the wooden partition at her back. Angling her silverware, she caught a glimmer of white hair beneath a black hood. Glancing at Hermione, who was still knee-deep in complaining, she studied the shadowy man as a thought took hold.

"So, you still won't tell Draco that you were the one responsible for his release?" Luna asked innocently, a lopsided grin on her lips.

"No!" Hermione hissed. "Especially not now."

"Why not now?" she asked in confusion.

"Not after that charm..." the brunette trailed off, knowing she'd revealed too much to her friend.

The former Ravenclaw grinned madly at her. "So, George Weasley's Daydream Charm was a success, huh?" She darted her eyes to the spoon and noticed the dark figure was listening raptly. "I take it your fantasy was about Draco?"

"Luna Starshine Lovegood! Don't you dare breathe a word of that to anyone, do you hear?"

"What would I breathe? You haven't told me anything yet."

"And I won't either."

Since Hermione wasn't going to discuss her daydream, Luna decided to do it for her. "I bet he was tall, dark and forbidden, dashing handsome..."

Hermione closed her eyes and sighed heavily. "Merlin's bones, Luna, he was all that and more."

"And? What did he do?"

"That," she started, turning very pink, "is none of your business."

"So that's why you screamed his name." Luna giggled as she continued watching the spoon image, noticing him smile wickedly.

"Shhh! Do you want the whole Ministry to hear?"

Luna looked around the eating area. "Hermione, there's only Perceval Huntley over by the exit and John Doe looking at the advertisements; I doubt they heard me."

"John Doe isn't his real name," Hermione corrected. "He's just incognito."

"Well, I don't think his undercover persona heard me either."

Hermione sighed sadly. "It doesn't matter, though... not really."

Taking her friend's hand, Luna held it tightly. "The truth will set you free."

Her friend stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"You say that Draco deserves a chance to prove himself, right?" At Hermione's nod, she continued. "I happen to agree. But he also deserves to know the truth."

She snorted mirthlessly. "If I were a successful, high-ranking pure-blood, yes." She clenched her fists in frustration. "But I'm not. I'm just a Muggle-born witch who wanted to right an injustice and got in way over her head."

"I think you meant to say heart," Luna teased lightly.

"That too. I just don't know what to do, or how to solve this problem."

"What does your head tell you to do?"

"To hold a hunger strike until Kingsley relents and grants him his full powers, thus allowing him a greater chance to recover."

Laughing softly, Luna figured that solution was totally Hermione Granger. Darting a glance to the cloudy image, she noticed the man was leaning against the wooden slats, as if in pain. Returning her attention to her friend, she prompted, "And what does your heart tell you?"

"That's so easy it's frightening, Luna. To help him, to heal him, to... touch him, learn more of his secrets, no matter how dark. To help him rebuild his life."

"Why?" the blonde woman asked, unaware that it was *that* question Malfoy had repeated so many times in Hermione's daydream.

"Because I care," she whispered.

"You'll never tell him, will you?" Luna said sadly, the question rhetorical.

Hermione scooted her chair back and stood. "Some things are better left unsaid." With that, she left the cafeteria and headed back to her office.

Luna remained seated until she watched Draco Malfoy shift out of the booth behind her and head down the stairs to the chambers well below the Ministry to complete his work, never looking back to see if she'd spotted him.

~*~

Draco stood as far back as he could within the spacious elevator, noting the people embarking and departing, totally ignoring his presence. That was until *she* stepped into the car.

She startled somewhat, but recovered promptly, moving to stand in front of him and slightly to the left in the crowded lift. She never turned to acknowledge him, nor did she speak, remaining silent through most of the stops.

At the Department of Internal Affairs, an office created after the fall of Voldemort, Hermione was roughly pushed backwards as several people bustled into the already full car. Without thought, Draco wrapped his hands around her waist to steady her and keep her from falling, retaining his grip on her hips even though she was safe. Daringly, he pulled her rigid frame closer to his own as he fully encompassed her middle with his large palms, breathing out slowly when she finally relaxed against him.

"Thank you," she said quietly as she tried to pry his hands from her waist.

Instead of removing them, he twined his fingers with hers and held her captive. "You're welcome."

Someone in a bowler hat glanced at the pair, recognized Draco, and sneered before turning away. Malfoy groaned internally and leaned his head against the wall of the lift, wishing he could hex the interloper into the next century.

It came as a great shock when, in response to the nosey man, Hermione stopped struggling within the Slytherin's grasp and instead squeezed his hand in support. "It's okay, Draco; most of these people wouldn't know intelligence if it bit them on the arse."

Several gasps issued forth from the affronted passengers, and all of them departed from the car at the next stop, leaving the two alone. Draco let her go and pressed the STOP button before the lift could move to another floor.

"Where are you going?" he asked in a low voice, his face very close to hers, his hands returning to her hips.

She swallowed audibly. "To see Shackbolt."

He glanced at the control panel. Two more floors to go. "Why?"

Frowning, she began to struggle once more. "None of your..."

"Business, yes... I know that. But I'm asking you why... please." Removing one hand from her hip, Draco cupped her jaw, his thumb caressing her cheek. "Did I do something to displease you?"

Becoming very still at his touch, she slowly raised her eyes to his. "No." She sighed, noticing the once inflamed wound was now a silver streak running the length of his face. "Your scar... it's..."

Taking one of her soft hands in his, he laid it against the savaged half of his countenance. "You healed me."

Sadness tinged her gaze. "I did nothing."

Gripping her chin, he lowered his lips until they lay just over hers. "You cared." He closed the remaining distance and indulged in one of the sweetest kisses he'd ever known.

He no longer needed to trap her palm as she threaded her fingers through his now lengthy locks, tugging him closer, her other arm wrapping around his back when he deepened the kiss. Gods, but this woman was responsive and tasted of honey, her curls smelling of night-blooming jasmine, seductive and spicy.

Hermione whimpered when Draco buried one hand in her wild mane and pulled, arching her head so that her throat was bared to his questing mouth for him to pepper it with loving nips. This was by far better than her daydream, exceeding all her fantasies.

Draco arched his hips until her heated core rested against the bulge in his trousers, her legs splayed on either side, her back against the wall of the lift. Hooking one knee on his arm, he pulled it around his waist, widening her stance further, causing her to tremble as she had in her daydream.

Sensing her nervous hesitation, he slowly ended the kiss, sucking on her bottom lip and biting it gently. He then lowered the leg he'd placed around his middle, allowing her to gain her footing before stepping away.

"I want to see you," he informed her, taking in her glassy-eyed look.

Her mind still clearly in a fog, she answered, "You are seeing me."

Chuckling lightly, he tugged on one of her curls. "Have dinner with me," he implored.

She blinked owlishly. "You want to go out on a date?"

Did she need to make it sound so distasteful? "Is that a problem?"

"I-I just didn't think you'd want to be seen..."

"I can't do anything more about my face, Granger," he growled, hitting the STOP button once again and allowing the lift to resume its path.

"You know, I'm tired of everyone interrupting me, thinking they know what I'm going to say before I do!"

"What are you on about?"

"I was about to say that I didn't think you'd want to be seen with the likes of *me*, Draco Malfoy," she snapped. "And your face has nothing to do with it."

The lift stopped, announcing its destination, and Hermione made her way out of the car but turned before it left. "I happen to think you're quite handsome, and I'd be honoured to go to dinner with you," she huffed and marched into the Minister of Magic's main chambers, slamming the door in her wake.

Draco smirked mischievously. "Oh, Granger," he sniggered. "You have no idea whom you're dealing with." He pressed the button that would take him to his work area, forgetting the reason he was on the lift in the first place, as well as Hermione's reason for visiting Kingsley.

With a plan forming in his mind, he made a mental note to contact his godfather, Snape, and arrange a visit. After all... if one was to trap a Gryffindor, one had to use Slytherin tactics.