

The Space Between

by kalina_blue

A Halloween costume has some rather unexpected consequences.

These Twisted Games We're Playing

Chapter 1 of 4

A Halloween costume has some rather unexpected consequences.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter and I don't make any money with this.

Warnings: Post-DH, EWE, some swearing (hence the rating)

A/N: Written for Idymusyc's request for the Halloween Trick or Treat Fest at the lj community luvlikerocketz. The prompt was *hallowe'en means costumes, but those wings aren't fake*. This is officially the longest *ficlet* ever.

Titles and lyrics are from the song *The Space Between* by The Dave Mathews Band.

A huge thank you goes to my lovely betas, londonlupin and tiggertam. *hugs*

Look at us spinning out in

The madness of a roller coaster

You know you went off like a devil

In a church in the middle of a crowded room

All we can do, my love

Is hope we don't take this ship down

The Space Between

Chapter 1 - These Twisted Games We're Playing

Having a private audience with the Minister of Magic, Hermione was forced to discover, felt very much like being called to the headmaster's office when she was still attending Hogwarts and had done something that wasn't entirely conforming to the rules. She had a fairly good idea what the meeting was going to be about, too, and she was sure Minister Shacklebolt wasn't planning on giving her a promotion or pay raise. It would be quite the opposite.

Hermione sighed and tried to keep her body from fidgeting. She mentally repeated to herself that she was a grown woman and that she had to keep up a professional

demeanour, but that little pep talk did little to alleviate her nervousness.

"The Minister is ready to see you," the secretary suddenly announced, startling Hermione out of her trance. Reluctantly, she got to her feet and walked towards the door. She really hoped she wouldn't get fired.

Kingsley Shacklebolt looked up when Hermione entered and gestured to the seats in front of his desk. "Take a seat, Hermione. I'm sure you already know why I've asked you to come."

Yes, Hermione could muster a fairly accurate guess. If one had a full blown duel with one's co-worker in front of several other employees as well as a couple of diplomatic representatives from abroad, it was inevitable that the boss wanted to talk to you.

"I want you to know that I already had the same conversation with Mr. Malfoy, and that I told him exactly what I will tell you now," Shacklebolt continued. Hermione nodded, trying to swallow through the lump that seemed to be permanently lodged in her throat. She really liked her job.

"You and Mr. Malfoy are two of the Ministry's most promising young employees, and we would be loath to lose you."

Hermione's heart sank further.

"I understand that the two of you have a difficult past. We all have to deal with the consequences of the second war against Voldemort. But, there comes the time when the past needs to be in the past and one has to learn to let go of old grudges and move on."

Hermione nodded again. On principle she whole-heartedly agreed with the Minister, but only in theory. It was the practical application she had some difficulties with. Letting go of her hatred towards Malfoy and making nice with him seemed to be completely out of the realm of possibilities. Despite her best intentions to avoid any and all confrontations, whenever they met he got under her skin, and before Hermione knew what was happening, they were screaming at each other or...if one wanted to take their most recent run-in into account...duelling in front of French diplomats.

"I'm really sorry about the incident."

"I'm sure you are," Minister Shacklebolt said good-naturedly. "Mr. Malfoy apologised to me as well."

"He did?" Hermione sounded incredulous, and blushed when she caught herself. Shacklebolt raised an eyebrow. "I mean... of course he did," Hermione mumbled, embarrassed.

"Hermione, I need the two of you to be able to work together."

"Yes, Minister."

"I have given the matter some serious thought. The way I see it, you and Mr. Malfoy need to work past your differences, otherwise I don't think employment with the Ministry of Magic is suitable for either one of you."

"I understand," Hermione said, crushed.

"The Ministry's Annual Halloween Ball this weekend might be a good opportunity to spend some time with each other," Kingsley hinted not so subtly. "Maybe if you get to know each other on a more personal level, it will help you work together peacefully in the future."

Hermione nodded. There was nothing else she could say, although the mere thought of spending time with Malfoy at the ball was making her feel sick to her stomach. She couldn't stand...

The Minister gave her another stern look, interrupting Hermione's thoughts, and then he gave her a nod that clearly told Hermione she was dismissed. She fled the office with as much dignity as she could gather.

Her cheeks were burning red when she made her escape past the secretary, whose knowing look clearly revealed that she knew why Hermione had just gone to see the Minister.

And Hermione knew just who to blame for the humiliation.

On her way down to the second level, where the offices of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement were situated, only one thought repeated itself in her head over and over again.

None of this would have happened if Malfoy was in Azkaban where he belonged.

Merlin's pants, her dream job was in jeopardy because he was being an insufferable git.

Despite the fact that she knew better, the fool-hardy and impulsive Gryffindor part of her character prevailed, and Hermione passed her own office door, continuing until she reached the door with the sign that read D. Malfoy. She pushed the door open without knocking.

"Are you trying to sabotage me?" she asked as soon as she had entered.

Draco looked up from the papers he had been working on.

"Excuse me?"

"I've just come from the Minister. He said if you don't start working with me, we are both fired," Hermione elaborated, conveniently twisting Kingsley's words without even realising she did so in her anger.

"Me? That's rich. *You* are the one who is unable to work with *me*." Draco was just as angry as she was.

"Can you blame me?" Hermione spat back.

"Of course I can. It's time for you to grow up and forget what has happened in the past."

"Excuse me?" Hermione's voice skipped an entire octave. "You tormented me for seven years! You called me foul names, made fun of me in front of the whole school and let's not forget that you joined the Death Eaters and wanted me *dead*. I'm not just going to forgive and forget."

By the time she was finished Draco had risen from his chair and his face was as red as Hermione's.

"Actually, it was only for six years. Seventh year at Hogwarts you weren't even at school, so I couldn't really make fun of you, and I was mostly concerned with staying alive at that time anyway. Actually, if I recall correctly, I even tried to save you from my crazy aunt."

"And that's supposed to make it all better?" Hermione balled her fists to keep herself from reaching for her wand. In the back of her mind a more rational part of her brain insisted that she was being childish. Unfortunately, the rest of Hermione's brain told that part to shut up.

"No, but maybe you should stop seeing everything in black and white," Draco was shouting.

"What's that's supposed to mean?" Hermione asked, just as loudly.

"It means that while I have made a lot of mistakes in the past...mistakes I've answered for in front of the Wizengamot and was found not guilty due to my youth, I might add...I also didn't have much of a choice. It's not like I enjoyed being sent on a suicide mission or fearing for my life for two years straight," Draco continued, still shouting.

They were lucky that it was lunchtime and the department was practically deserted. Otherwise the noise they were making would have already attracted a crowd, just like several of their previous shouting matches had done.

"Don't even try to make me feel sorry for you. It's not going to work," Hermione replied stubbornly.

"That's not what I'm trying to do," Draco almost growled. "Merlin, Granger, quit being so damn stubborn. All I ask is that you put whatever hatred you feel for me aside while we have to work together."

"You know, even if I could understand that you had to join Voldemort, that you had no choice there, you still tortured me at school. I don't think that Voldemort personally requested you to become a bully your first year of Hogwarts. And don't even try saying you were just raised that way. One always has a choice."

"So you are going to jeopardize both our jobs because I was mean to you as a kid?"

The small part of Hermione's brain that was still making sense was speaking up again and pointing out that Draco was actually being more rational about this than she was, but years and years of being laughed at as a kid had left more scars than maybe even the war.

"Do you even know what it's like to be mocked day in and day out? For your teeth, your hair, your brain, your blood...for everything that makes you who you are? Can you even imagine how that made me feel?" Hermione asked. Tears of anger were burning in her eyes, but she blinked them back furiously. She would never give Draco the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

"What do you want me to do about it, Granger? I can't take it all back. I can't change who I used to be, even if I wanted to."

"Used to...?" Hermione snorted in disbelief.

"Oh, come on, give me some credit. I have grown up since we've attended Hogwarts together. I might not have grown into a person you can respect...which you might be shocked to hear is a fact I'm not really losing any sleep over...but I have changed from the way I used to be as a kid," Draco spat, wielding sarcasm like a weapon.

"If you say so... I have yet to see any evidence of it."

"I don't have to prove anything to you. Who do you think you are?"

"Who do you..." The rational part of Hermione's brain temporarily prevailed. "This isn't getting us anywhere."

"You were the one who came storming into my office, in case you forgot," Draco replied, but he lowered his voice.

Hermione remained quiet, desperately trying to reign in her temper. *Gods*, the mere sight of him was enough to make her furious.

"I assume the Minister told you the same he told me. We either work together or get fired," Draco summarised.

"I won't ever work with you," Hermione hissed. The rational part of her brain, the one that had always suggested to Ron and Harry that they should try for a little more inter-house unity, was rapidly losing the battle again.

Draco sighed. He appeared to have calmed down completely, and for a second Hermione was stumped about his uncharacteristic behaviour.

"Granger, what's it going to take?"

"What?" she asked, trying to figure out where he was going with this, how he was going to attack next.

"I don't want to lose my job," Draco said, speaking as if she was five years old or mentally impaired. "What do you want me to do, so you will forget about the stuff I said when we were children and we can work together somewhat civilly?"

Inside Hermione a savage battle was taking place. The hurt little teenager demanded she throw every curse she could think of in Malfoy's direction. The more logical twenty-four-year-old part insisted that she liked her job and had worked too hard to lose it to get petty revenge.

In the end the two sides called a truce and Hermione compromised.

"You really would do anything I ask to make up for being a bully?" she asked carefully.

"Within reason, yes," Draco replied grudgingly.

"Why?"

"As I said, I want to keep my job. Have to, actually."

An awkward pause stretched between them.

"The Minister suggested we attend the Halloween Ball together to work on our differences..." Hermione finally said.

"I know."

"I get to choose your costume."

"What?"

"You wear whatever I pick out for you, and I promise I will forget everything you put me through at school."

Draco eyed her like she had lost her marbles, and at that moment Hermione wasn't quite positive her mental health wasn't compromised. She was just about to change her mind when Draco suddenly agreed.

"Fine," he spat.

"Fine."

Hermione turned on her heel and left, slamming the door behind her to the utmost satisfaction of her inner teenager.

She was still angry several hours later when she left the Ministry for the day. However, she was convinced that Draco would never follow through with their agreement. And

at the off-chance that he did, well, she had the perfect costume for him in mind.

Friday evening at seven thirty sharp, Draco appeared on Hermione's doorstep. He was wearing black slacks and a dress shirt, but had little hope he would be keeping the clothes on for long. Whatever costume Granger might chose for him, Draco was sure it was going to be embarrassing. He guessed she'd make him dress as a house-elf or a goblin or maybe she'd chose something Muggle. Either way, Draco was probably the only wizard not looking forward to the otherwise highly anticipated Ministry of Magic Halloween Ball. He was just hoping the night would be over quickly, and he would escape with at least a shred of dignity intact.

For the millionth time, he doubted his own decision to give Granger carte blanche to humiliate him in front of the entire Ministry. But Draco liked his job, couldn't afford to lose it actually, and he knew that they needed to get past all the animosity if he and Granger were to ever stand a chance of working together. And working with Granger was the only way he would keep his job; the Minister had made that abundantly clear.

Unless he could come up with one truly devious plan to manipulate Granger to do his bidding, a plan that did not include the use of an Unforgivable because regrettably the Minister insisted his employees abide by the law, he really didn't have a choice other than to honour their agreement.

Draco sighed. Time was up. Who needed dignity anyway?

Nevertheless, his firm knock on Hermione's door did not portray any of Draco's trepidation. Neither did the curt nod with which he greeted Hermione when she opened the door.

"I didn't think you would show," Hermione commented by way of greeting.

Draco didn't deem this worthy of an answer and stepped around her and into her flat. Granger was wearing dark, very old fashioned robes, rimmed glasses and her impossible hair was forced into a silver hairnet at the base of her neck.

"What's your costume supposed to be anyway?"

"I'm Elfrida Clagg. She was Chieftainess of the Warlock's Council in the seventeenth century. She was also an environmental activist. Thanks to her the Modesty Rabnott Snidget Reservation in Somerset..."

"How very boring," Draco interrupted.

"Well, let's see if you are going to find your own costume boring as well," Hermione replied, handing him a vial filled with a sickly looking, green potion. "Drink up."

Draco eyed the vial apprehensively. "Can't you just Transfigure my clothes? You're not trying to poison me, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Malfoy. If I remember correctly, poison is more your style."

"Cheap shot, Granger, and you know it," Draco spat, but nonetheless he uncorked the vial. "Cheers," he mock-toasted her and then downed the potion in one gulp before he lost his nerve. He immediately tasted the bitterness on his tongue and had to work to keep his facial expression even. Then the aftertaste developed in his mouth, a surprisingly sweet flavour that bore little resemblance to the earlier bitterness.

Draco waited apprehensively for the potion to take effect. At first nothing happened, and he looked at Hermione questioningly.

"Just give it some time," Hermione said almost gleefully when she noticed his look.

Draco was about to comment when suddenly his intestines seemed to contract. For a few seconds he felt like his internal organs were being turned inside out, and he couldn't help but double over. Then he felt a strange movement on his back. His spine seemed to be moving, slithering like a snake along his back.

Mentally counting from ten backwards to keep from calling out, Draco tried to focus on something else other than the bizarre sensation on his back. Then, all of a sudden, his spine seemed to become rigid again and his intestines decided to remain within his torso after all.

Draco carefully took a couple of deep breaths to steady himself and straightened up. He regretted the movement instantaneously. There was a weird weight on his back, pulling him backwards, and the muscles in his shoulders rippled strangely. His shirt appeared to be torn and was hanging on him in shreds.

Draco looked up and saw Hermione staring at him open-mouthed.

"What did you do?" he asked slowly. There was a strange swishing sound behind him which he couldn't place.

A rather disturbing grin spread over Granger's face. "Look for yourself," she crooned, motioning towards the mirror next to her coat rack. Reluctantly, Draco turned towards the mirror, scared of what he would see.

The sight almost made him lose his balance.

Well, the giant wings attached to his back may have also been a contributing factor to the sudden disturbance of his equilibrium.

"This better not be permanent."

"Don't be ridiculous, Malfoy. The potion should wear off around midnight."

Hermione didn't give Draco much time to adjust to the disconcerting sight in the mirror. She whipped out her wand, and with a grin Draco could only describe as sadistic, Transfigured his clothes. In the next instance Draco couldn't quite decide which sight was more appalling: the giant wings he was sprouting or the frilly white robes he wore, which had an uncanny resemblance to what he knew to be a Muggle woman's nightgown.

"Do you know what an angel is?" Hermione asked sweetly.

"I'm not an imbecile."

"I just wanted to make sure you fully understand the significance of your costume," Hermione chirped. Her good mood seemed to be increasing exponentially to his discomfort.

"Granger, you do realise that it is customary to dress up as something scary on Halloween?" Draco asked weakly.

"Really? You don't say," Hermione said, now sounding positively gleeful. Then she handed him a golden harp, the size of a Quaffle. "Here, hold that."

Draco looked at the harp like it was something particularly nasty that he had found attached to the bottom of his shoe. "You're unbelievable," he muttered.

"Thank you," Hermione said, smiling brightly, even though someone deaf and blind would have had little trouble detecting Draco's sarcasm.

"Now... I wonder if I should curl your hair?"

Draco drew his wand in a blink of an eye. "I'm telling you now Granger, I might let you mess with my clothes, make me carry this ridiculous harp and grow these over-dimensional wings, but I will be damned if I let you mess with my hair."

"Oh, fine then," Hermione pouted. Apparently though she was in too good a mood to let him spoil her fun, and graciously refrained from any further cosmetic alterations. She did, however, draw a circle with her wand until a sparkling, golden hoop appeared in front of her. With a practiced flick of her wrist she sent the hoop to hover above Draco's head.

"Here, every proper angel needs a halo."

"Are you done?" Draco asked, sighing.

"Yes, let's go. Don't forget your harp." Hermione practically skipped towards the door.

They left Hermione's flat together, Draco muttering curses under his breath, thoroughly regretting he ever agreed to this, and Hermione grinning widely.

When they Apparated to the Ministry, the Halloween Ball was already well underway. Witches and wizards in all kind of costumes...the majority of them on the scary side, Draco had been right about that...were mingling around the newly restored Fountain of Brethren in the Atrium.

If Draco had hoped he would be able to blend into the crowd, he was thoroughly disappointed. His huge white wings made blending in an impossible feat, not that the white robes that looked like a damn dress or the golden halo on his head were any less conspicuous.

The urge to club the witch at his side over the head with her own stupid harp became overwhelming, but Draco managed to suppress it. The minister was already watching them; the minister and all the other employees of the Ministry of Magic that is.

Fabulous.

"Want some punch?" Granger asked brightly. To say that she was enjoying his embarrassment was putting it mildly. She was downright revelling in it.

"Is it spiked?" Draco asked hopefully, following Granger to the table with refreshments.

They filled their glasses with punch and Draco took an experimental sip, immediately deciding that the punch contained too many fruits and too little alcohol. His hopes of getting drunk, thereby missing out on most of the laughter of his fellow employees, were shattered. Stone-cold sober as he was, he unfortunately had no difficulties deciphering the thinly veiled ridicule at his expense. Not that he was blaming his co-workers. He would have made fun of them too if they'd attend the ball in a dress and fluffy wings.

Speaking of the wings, the constant movement on his back was thoroughly disconcerting. Whatever he did, the wings couldn't seem to stay still. While he had some measure of control over them, they didn't obey all the commands his central nervous system was sending their way. Like he had just discovered an extra pair of limbs and now needed to learn how to use them.

He was only glad that his reputation as a former Death Eater and bully prevented people from actually approaching him. Being laughed at from afar he could deal with, but the mere thought of someone touching his wings was too weird to even contemplate it.

Draco secretly began plotting Granger's untimely demise, while the witch in question prattled along merrily at his side. For someone who wasn't able to stand his sight, she sure was enjoying herself a lot in his company.

"Never would have taken you for the vindictive type," Draco spat when she took a much needed breather.

"Never would have thought you like your job at the Ministry that much," she deflected.

Draco glared at her. "Just remember that come next Monday, we will be working together. I swear you will truly regret it if you go back on your word."

"Let's not forget that between the two of us, I am the trustworthy one," Hermione replied. He really wished he could punch that damn smile right off her face.

They kept the charade going for a good hour, until Hermione eventually began to tire of gloating and they both agreed that the Minister had seen them 'bonding' long enough. Hermione merrily left in search of Harry and Ron, and Draco turned towards the fireplaces, intent on suffering through the rest of the night in the privacy of his own flat.

He had made it within ten feet of the nearest fireplace when Blaise and Pansy, dressed as an Inferi and a medieval bar wench respectively, reached his side.

"Why hello there, Draco," Blaise greeted him cheerfully. "What an interesting choice of costume."

Pansy only raised one carefully plucked eyebrow.

"Out of the way Zabini," Draco growled, but his lifelong friend didn't seem inclined to let him pass and spare him the humiliation. That was the disadvantage of befriending Slytherins. You could always count on your *friends* to give you a friendly kick in the nuts when you were down. It really sucked when you were the one lying on the ground.

"Personally, I considered dressing up in a woman's nightgown as well, but then decided on a more masculine costume," Blaise continued. "What do you think, Pans?"

Resigned to his fate, Draco turned towards Pansy to accept the next kick. She didn't disappoint.

"Well, I really have to say that you have the hips to pull this err... robe off. I'm downright jealous." She eyes his body suggestively and whistled.

"I hope you two realise that I will get you back for this," Draco said, doing his best to appear bored, although he feared that Blaise and Pansy knew him far too well to believe it.

"Say, who helped you pick out your costume?" Pansy asked curiously. "I noticed you were awfully chummy with Granger all evening."

Another disadvantage of being friends with Slytherins was that they were too damn perceptive. Draco felt his wings twitch uncomfortably, something he was sure didn't escape his friends' attention either.

"We were just talking about work," he stated as ambiguously as possible. "Now if you'll excuse me, as much as I enjoy the two of you making fun of me, I need to leave."

Without waiting for Pansy and Blaise to say anything else, Draco walked around them and headed towards the fireplaces. Once he reached them, however, he realised that fitting his wings inside the chimney was bound to be uncomfortable at best. Since the poor excuse of punch had sadly been inadequate of giving him any real buzz, Draco decided that Apparating was the better choice of transportation given his current condition and with a soft pop, he disappeared.

As soon as he was home, he took great pleasure in burning the ridiculous harp. Then he changed out of the robes Transfigured into a nightgown and burned them as well. He vanished the halo next and charmed two holes into the back of one of his sweaters so he could wear it despite the wings.

The rest of the night was spent pacing in his living room, imagining the most painful ways to kill a certain frizzy-haired witch and generally waiting for the potion to wear off and return his back to its previous and gloriously wingless state.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

tbc

A/N: Reviews are love.

You Cannot Quit Me So Quickly

Chapter 2 of 4

A Halloween costume has some rather unexpected consequences.

Chapter 2 - You Cannot Quit Me So Quickly

The morning following the Halloween ball Hermione was woken at 7:00 am by angry pounding on her door. Wondering who could be visiting her that early, she hastily threw on a robe and went to answer the door.

To her surprise Draco was standing outside, looking like he hadn't slept at all. He had ditched the frilly white robes she had forced him to wear the other night, and the halo was gone as well.

But the wings were still there, white and fluffy and just as big as the night before.

Hermione stared at him, dumbfounded. She absently wondered how Malfoy had even managed to put on the sweater he was currently wearing, but then surmised that he had probably used magic, just like she had done the night before. But that wasn't the issue at hand.

"You've still got your wings," Hermione finally managed to say.

"Excellent observation, Granger," Draco drawled dangerously. He stepped past Hermione and into the flat without invitation. "Now you have thirty seconds to reverse whatever magic you used on me, or by Merlin, I will make you regret you ever considered fucking with me."

As he spoke, Hermione noticed his wings partially unfolding, making him appear even taller and more threatening. Only Draco, Hermione mused, could make fluffy, white wings look menacing. The way he was filling up the space in the hallway of her flat made Hermione instantly regret that she had left her wand in her bedroom.

"I don't know why you still have the wings," she said, completely puzzled. "The potion should have worn off hours ago."

"Then figure it out," Draco bellowed, the wings stretching out as far as the confined space of Hermione's flat would allow, which wasn't much. Once more, Hermione realised how huge Draco's wings really were. Fully extended, he must have had a wingspan of more than thirty feet.

Realising that she was staring and that Draco was quickly losing what little patience he had left, Hermione gathered her wits and turned towards her study.

"I have to look at my notes to try and figure out what went wrong," she explained.

Draco followed her wordlessly into the room, where he awkwardly sat down in one of the straight-backed chairs in front of Hermione's desk. His wings were folded tightly at his sides, but Hermione had to admit, it was still an astonishing sight.

She sat down in her chair behind the desk and tried to concentrate on the task at hand, pouring over her notes and trying to work out why Draco hadn't returned to his former self.

"The potion I created was modelled after the Polyjuice Potion," she explained to Draco absently. "I added Hellebore to stretch the effect over more than one hour, but it should have never been able to last this long."

Draco made a sound that was very close to a growl, and his wings were twitching agitatedly. Hermione hurriedly refocused on her notes.

"Every experiment I did beforehand suggested the potion would last five to six hours at the most," she mumbled.

"I'm glad to hear you didn't let me drink a completely untested potion," Draco remarked sarcastically.

"Well, you were the first wizard to drink it," Hermione admitted. "But every simulation was successful."

"Unbelievable! Did you at least test the potion on a house-elf before you gave it to me?"

Hermione looked at Draco scandalized. "I would never abuse house-elves like that!"

"Yet you have no problem making me your guinea-pig," Draco shouted.

"Well..."

"Do you or do you not know how to reverse this mess, Granger?" Draco asked, at the end of his rope. He got up from his chair and started pacing in front of Hermione's desk, his wings partially unfolded again.

Hermione looked at her notes helplessly.

"I don't know," she finally admitted. "I mean the results are far more complex than I predicted. It's not just the duration of the change, but also the extent of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look at you. You're moving the wings all the time, like they are part of your natural limbs, almost like a second set of arms."

"I can't exactly control that, Granger."

"Exactly. The wing movement is clearly connected to your emotions. They've already become part of your body language."

"As fascinating as that is, I want them *gone*."

"I..." Hermione broke off.

"You have no idea how to reverse it, do you?"

Hermione could only shrug. "It's probably best we get you to St. Mungo's."

Getting Malfoy into the study's fireplace in order to Floo to the hospital turned out to be more difficult than expected, but Hermione insisted that in his agitated state it wasn't wise to Apparate. In the end, Draco folded his wings as close to his body as possible before he stepped into the fireplace, but still it was a tight fit.

As soon as he vanished into the emerald flames, Hermione ran to her bedroom to retrieve her wand. Transfiguring her robe into more appropriate clothing on the way back to her study, she stepped into the fireplace and followed after Draco.

She arrived at St. Mungo's only a minute later, just in time to see Draco shake out his wings in order to get rid of the soot. Even in a waiting room filled with witches and wizards with all kinds of magical maladies, Draco's extended wings were an impressive sight. The entire room was staring at him.

Hermione cleared her throat. "We should probably check in with the front desk."

She walked over to the reception area, where a red-haired witch in her late forties was on duty. She appeared to be absolutely enthralled by Draco's appearance.

Hermione went to explain the problem to the witch while Draco stood behind her, scowling at everyone who dared to stare at him for too long. Not that it discouraged anyone from looking.

"You see, we need to speak to a Healer right away," Hermione ended her report. The whole time she had spoken, the red-haired reception witch had gazed dreamily at Draco, but now that Hermione was finished and obviously expected a reply, the other witch reluctantly dragged her eyes away from Draco and made eye contact with her.

"Well, the waiting room is quite full at the moment, as you can see. You will have to wait until..."

Draco growled low in his throat and the reception witch broke off, startled. St. Mungo's allowed for a lot more space than Hermione's flat, and within a split second Draco had unfolded his wings to their full potential. The reception witch instinctively stumbled backwards and the entire waiting room fell quiet.

"You are going to let us see a Healer. Right. Now." Draco hissed, stepping forward until he was leaning over the reception desk.

The poor witch in front of him swallowed nervously. She fumbled for her wand and sent a parchment flying after she quickly jotted down a few notes.

"Healer Moore will be expecting you," she croaked. "Room 28, third floor."

Draco turned on his heel and stalked towards the elevators, wings flapping furiously behind him. Hermione mumbled a quick thank you to the disturbed reception witch and followed.

"You really shouldn't have scared the poor witch like that," she admonished once she reached Draco's side. "She's only doing her job."

"You really don't want to argue with me today, Granger," Draco spat back, flattening his wings tightly to his back when the doors of the elevator in front of them opened. Hermione swallowed her reply and followed once more.

Thanks to Draco's wings and the enormous space they were occupying, they were the only two people in the elevator. They rode to the third floor in silence. Once they reached Room 28, Draco barely knocked, walking inside right away before the Healer had so much as a chance to invite them in.

The middle-aged wizard looked up from the parchment in his hand when they entered. Evidently, the note from the reception witch had just beaten them there.

"Ah, yes," the Healer said, seemingly unperturbed by Draco's rude entrance. "The potion mishap. How fascinating."

Hermione noticed how Draco's wings began to twitch again and thought it prudent to step in.

"Yes, I modified the Polyjuice Potion to achieve this result for a Halloween costume. I added Hellebore to maximise the duration; however, this seems to have had a rather permanent effect."

"Hellebore, hmmm," the Healer mused. He was wearing thick, horn-rimmed glasses, which he took off in order to nibble at the earpiece. "The potion still should have worn off after about five to six hours."

"It obviously didn't," Draco hissed.

"Obviously," the Healer replied joyfully. "I think a few more tests are in order. My team will be delighted to study you, Mr. Malfoy."

Hermione noticed bemusedly that Healer Moore seemed to be the only one who couldn't be intimidated by Draco's wings. Then again, he was still chewing on his glasses rather than wearing them, so he might not have been able to see how Draco extended them threateningly when he heard he was about to be studied like a rare species at a zoo.

Healer Moore eventually put his glasses back on and stood up to lead them into the adjoining room where a team of young Healers was already assembled. Unlike their supervisor, they seemed to be suitably impressed and frightened by Draco's wingspan and overall angry demeanour.

Healer Moore explained the problem to them, and then half the team went to work on Draco while the other half poured over Hermione's notes, trying to understand the potion Hermione had created. Hermione tried her best to assist the second group, explaining the rather complex calculations she had used.

At the same time, Hermione kept a close eye on Draco and the other Healers. After all, the entire incident was her fault, so she felt it was her responsibility to ascertain that Draco wouldn't snap and actually hurt anyone.

While everyone worked, Healer Moore wandered from one group to the other, 'supervising,' as he called it. As far as Hermione could determine though, he wasn't contributing much. Everyone else worked diligently for the next couple of hours.

Hermione was just beginning to think that coming to St. Mungo's was the right decision when she saw out of the corner of her eye how one of the Healers stretched his hands towards Malfoy's right wing. So far, the Healers had restricted themselves to diagnostic spells, which were bothersome but none-invasive, and Malfoy had more or less graciously suffered through the ordeal.

This particular Healer, however, seemed to have decided that a more aggressive approach was called for. Before Hermione could shout a warning or had even decided

whom she wanted to warn, Draco or the Healer, the Healer had grabbed hold of one of Draco's feathers and pulled.

Draco reacted instantly.

His wings unfolded in a sudden and violent swirl of feathers, filling up the entire examination room. Draco had taken off his sweater earlier at the request of one of the Healers, and now Hermione could see the muscles on his back straining under the angry flapping of the wings.

The unfortunate Healer, who was still clutching the feather in his shaking fist, was backed against the far wall, Draco right in his face and his wand pointed at the Healer's throat.

"Malfoy, let him go!" Hermione shouted.

The other Healers were desperately trying to get out of the way of the wings, a feat that wasn't easily accomplished in the small room. Hermione saw more than one Healer getting hit and going down.

"Malfoy!"

Hermione ducked underneath the wings and crawled towards Draco. Once she reached his feet, she straightened up again, gripping his wand hand tightly.

"Stop it."

The trapped Healer looked at her hopefully, shaking in fear, but Draco was still ignoring her, and his wand remained pointed at the Healer's throat. His eyes were trained on the Healer, blazing in cold fury. Hermione had to use her entire body weight just in order to pull his wand hand down and to get his attention. For a second she thought Draco would turn on her next, but then Draco took a step back and released the Healer. His wings stopped moving.

Once free, the Healer let the feather fall to the ground and fled the room.

"He pulled one of my feathers out," Draco said, breathing hard. Hermione had the distinct impression that he was shocked by the forcefulness of his own reaction.

"I saw," Hermione said quietly, waiting to give Draco time to calm down completely.

After a while she asked, "Do you want me to check if he did any damage?"

Draco looked at her uncertainly.

"I won't hurt you, I promise."

Reluctantly, Draco nodded. He turned around so that his back was to Hermione and extended his right wing to allow Hermione a closer look.

Hermione took one calming breath, then started to examine the area from which the Healer had pulled out the feather. Obviously one of the other Healers would have been more qualified to check for injuries, but the few Healers that were still standing and had not fled the room were standing at the opposite wall, looking at Draco and Hermione with a mixture of horror and sick curiosity. Hermione knew better than to ask any one of them for help. Healer Moore was nowhere to be seen.

"Okay then..." Hermione mumbled nervously.

She carefully searched through the feathers, trying to determine the exact location where the Healer had pulled out the feather. The white feathers were surprisingly soft, and Hermione could feel the entire wing quiver underneath her touch.

"Can you feel me touching the wing?" she asked.

"Yes," Draco replied, sounding somewhat forced.

"Oh." Hermione continued her examination.

"I don't think he did any damage," she finally said. "The wings just seem a bit sensitive. Probably because you aren't used to them yet."

"I don't have any intentions of getting used to them, Granger," Draco snapped, folding his wing again and turning around.

"Of course not. I'm sure we're going to find a cure soon."

Slowly, the Healers that had fled returned to the room and the testing continued, although everyone was especially careful not to touch the wings they were examining without permission. Only the Healer who had caused all the uproar in the first place remained absent, and Healer Moore preferred to supervise the remainder of the examination from the safety of his office.

"This is hopeless," Draco finally spat after he had endured even more probing and testing. Unfortunately, Hermione could only agree. It had taken her hours just to explain the potions she had created to the resident Healers, and she still wasn't sure if they entirely understood the process.

"I don't know what else to do, Malfoy," she admitted, gnawing on her bottom lip. Guilt was already sitting heavily in the pit of her stomach. She had never meant for things to get this far out of hand. All she had wanted to do was make Draco see what it was like to be made fun of, give him a dose of his own medicine, so to speak. She had never wanted to cause him long-term harm. But it was looking more and more like the change the potion had generated might be permanent.

Draco sighed. He got up from the stretcher he had been sitting on and grabbed his sweater. Hermione watched as he used magic to put the sweater back on despite his wings.

"We have to go see my godfather," Draco announced when he was dressed.

"Why?" Hermione asked dumbly.

"Do you know any other brilliant Potions masters?" Draco asked dryly. He left the room without so much as a goodbye to the Healers. Hermione followed. She hated to admit it, but at this point Draco's godfather probably was the only person who could help.

She hadn't found out until the end of sixth year, after Snape had killed Dumbledore for him, that Draco was Snape's godson. In retrospect, it had been quite obvious. Snape had always favoured Draco, even more than the other Slytherins.

During the Battle of Hogwarts, Snape had been severely wounded by Voldemort, and he had risked even more damage by giving Harry his memories instead of saving his strength. But Harry had returned to the Shrieking Shack as soon as he had defeated Voldemort, and against all odds, the once-hated Potions master had still been alive...unconscious, but alive. It had taken months at St. Mungo's, but eventually Snape had been restored to health.

Of course, the Wizengamot had tried to convict him for murder and treason. He had killed Dumbledore after all, and it was no secret that Severus Snape had been a Death Eater. But thanks to Harry's testimony, Snape had been acquitted of all charges. Last Hermione had heard of him, he had retired and was living somewhere in a secluded

area in Cornwall. Several reporters, the infamous Rita Skeeter amongst them, had tried to locate him for an exclusive interview. However, few had returned from that particular quest unscathed, and eventually the Wizarding press had given up any hope of receiving an inside scoop of the life and trials of a Death Eater spy.

"I assume you know where he lives," Hermione commented when Draco punched the elevator button with slightly more force than necessary.

"Of course I do."

They returned to the waiting room, where Hermione veered towards the fireplaces.

"Severus isn't connected to the Floo Network," Draco said shortly and grabbed her arm. Before Hermione knew what was happening, Draco Disapparated, taking her with him.

They reappeared outside a small cottage, situated near a cliff. Taking a deep breath, Hermione could taste the salty sea air on her tongue. Draco let go of her arm and stepped towards the door. He knocked.

Hermione hadn't yet regained her equilibrium when the door was opened, and Severus Snape looked at them critically.

"Really, Draco, must you follow every fashion trend?" he commented when he saw the wings.

Hermione blamed the unexpected Apparition, but she could have sworn Severus Snape had just made a joke. Harry and Ron would never believe her if she told them. She didn't believe it either.

She was even more surprised when Draco barely reacted to his godfather's mocking remark. He merely said, "Good to see you, too, Severus," and followed Snape's inviting gesture into the cottage. Hermione had no choice but to follow as well.

Snape led them into his living room, which was furnished with a recliner, a dark leather couch, and many, many bookshelves. It was the male version of Hermione's own living room, actually. She looked around surreptitiously while Draco explained the situation to his godfather.

"And what in Merlin's name possessed you to actually drink this potion?" Snape asked, sounding decidedly bored. Hermione returned her attention to the two wizards. She had wondered the same thing ever since Draco had showed up on her doorstep on Halloween. He had hinted that he couldn't lose his job, but as far as she knew the Wizengamot had acquitted him of all charges against him without provisions. Therefore, his attachment to his job and his willingness to do everything in order to keep it must have had private reasons.

"What else was I supposed to do?" Draco spat. "Let the stupid bint get us both fired and return to working for my dad? No thanks."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise, but Snape merely nodded. There was the private reason she had been looking for. Apparently though, it wasn't news to Snape that Draco didn't get along with his father. Hermione, on the other hand, couldn't help but wonder what had happened. Last she knew, Draco had always idolised Lucius. But she was hardly in the position to ask Draco about his private life, and she really wasn't his favourite person at the moment, so she clamped down on her curiosity.

"And you created a potion to give him the wings?" Snape suddenly asked Hermione. He sounded mildly interested now.

"Yes. It's a variation of the Polyjuice Potion," Hermione explained what must have been for the tenth time that day. "I added Hellebore to draw out the effect."

"Even with the Hellebore, the effect should have worn off after five or six hours," Snape said immediately.

SMASH! Hermione jumped when Draco grabbed a vase from one of the bookshelves and threw it against the wall. The glass shattered into a million pieces.

"Obviously it did not *bloody* wear off after five or six hours!" Draco shouted.

"Really, Draco," Snape admonished, sounding bored again. "If you want me to help you, I strongly suggest you refrain from demolishing my property." He flicked his wand lazily and the shards flew back up on the shelf. Within seconds, the vase was restored to its earlier form.

Draco stomped out of the living room without another word, slamming the door behind him.

"We've been at St. Mungo's the whole day," Hermione explained, although she wondered why she was making excuses for Malfoy's behaviour.

"I take it they were unsuccessful in finding a cure," Snape stated calmly. He didn't seem the least bit disturbed by his godson's outburst.

"No." Hermione shook her head. "To be honest, I'm not even sure they fully understood the calculations I made to create the potion in the first place. They did lots of tests, but couldn't come up with a single approach for a cure."

"Who was the leading Healer?" Snape asked. He sounded like he was quizzing one of his students.

"Healer Moore."

Snape snorted when he heard the name.

"He was in my year at Hogwarts. Hufflepuff. Never seen a more hopeless case, and that includes Longbottom. The only thing Marvin Moore is accomplished at is cheating on exams."

Hermione stared at her former professor scandalised, but Snape seemed to have lost interest in the subject already.

"I hope you brought your notes," he said. When Hermione nodded, he led her out of the living room and into the basement. Hermione was puzzled at first and more than a little apprehensive, until she realised they were going into Snape's lab.

Relaying her notes to Snape felt like she was back in the dungeons at Hogwarts and Snape was her professor again. She half-expected Snape to take points from Gryffindor for causing a fellow classmate permanent damage, but of course he didn't. Instead, he listened carefully while she explained the potion and calculations she had used.

"This is a fairly complex potion," Snape said surlily, after Hermione had finished. Coming from him that was almost a compliment.

They continued their work by going through the test results the Healers had accumulated throughout the day until late at night. By the time Hermione left Snape's cottage and Apparated home, Draco hadn't returned and Snape hadn't been able to think of a cure either.

tbc

A/N: Reviews are love.

We're Strange Allies

Chapter 3 of 4

A Halloween costume has some rather unexpected consequences.

Chapter 3 We're Strange Allies

After his outburst in Snape's living room, Draco headed outside to clear his head. He walked alongside the cliffs at a brisk pace, muttering under his breath the whole time. 'Stupid bint' and 'bloody Gryffindor' were the more flattering names he bestowed on Hermione during his soliloquy.

The fact that he was talking to himself didn't bother him nearly as much as it probably should have. What really bothered him, however, was how good it felt to be out in the open, to stretch the wings without having to worry about hitting any walls or people. He was gaining more and more control over them, and Draco secretly feared one day the wings would become second nature to him. Snape had to find him a cure. Soon.

Draco remained outside until darkness descended, because quite frankly, he couldn't guarantee that he would refrain from doing something that would earn him a life sentence at Azkaban if he were to face Granger again that day.

When he finally went back inside, Severus was waiting for him in his living room.

"Please tell me you've found a cure," Draco said. He sat down on the couch heavily, though his wings made it impossible for him to lean against the backrest.

"It is a surprisingly complex potion," Snape replied, pouring his godson a stiff drink. "The effect the Hellebore seems to have is quite astounding."

"I take that as a no." Draco accepted the offered drink and downed it in one gulp. He felt the Firewhisky burn down his throat and settle in a warm puddle in the pit of his stomach. It made him feel better, if only a little.

"No, I haven't found a cure. I have a few ideas that might work, but nothing concrete. Miss Granger is going to return tomorrow, and we will continue to work on the problem."

Draco snorted. "Problem, indeed."

There was a pause in their conversation while Draco nursed a second drink and Snape absently leaved through a Potions textbook.

"I assume I don't have to tell you that drinking untested potions is completely and utterly stupid," Snape finally said, although there was no accusation in his tone...it wasn't necessary. "A first-year Gryffindor probably would have known better."

"It was the only way to get her to agree to work with me," Draco defended himself.

"Not the most subtle plan."

Draco rolled his eyes. "I know that. But I couldn't risk losing the job. I won't go back to working for my father, and with my reputation, it wouldn't be easy to find another job. Nobody wants to hire an ex-Death Eater. It was hard enough to get the Ministry to hire me, and they only did it because I am highly qualified, and they could hardly have violated their own equal opportunity laws."

It was Snape's turn to sigh. "Draco, you have to deal with Lucius at some point. This might be a good opportunity to come clean with him."

"No, it isn't. It never will be," Draco replied stubbornly. He refilled his drink and remained silent for the rest of the evening.

The following morning Draco awoke late and with a pounding headache to boot. His first thought was that maybe his eighth glass of Firewhisky the previous night hadn't been the best idea he had ever had. Not that he had made a lot of good choices lately.

He was lying on his stomach on the couch in his godfather's living room. Considering the various aches in his back and his wings, he needed to add his selection of sleeping accommodations to the ever-growing list of things he should have done differently.

Groaning, Draco hoisted himself into a semi-upright position. He noticed a familiar vial on the floor next to the couch and drank the Hangover Potion gratefully. He would have to thank Severus for that later.

He correctly guessed that Severus was already in his basement, working to find him a cure, and in all likelihood, Granger had already returned to assist. Draco, for his part, chose to stay away from the lab. Partly because he still couldn't guarantee he would refrain from hexing Granger into oblivion, partly because he knew he wouldn't be of much use down there anyway. He had no illusions about the fact that he only passed Potions because his godfather had taught it.

Instead, Draco spent the day outside, trying to gain as much control over his wings as possible, even though the thought of getting used to his wings was still deeply unsettling. But Draco prided himself in the fact that his facial expression never gave away his thoughts or emotions...a much valued skill he had acquired during the Dark Lord's reign. It hadn't escaped Draco's attention that the uncontrolled movements of his wings were directly linked to his emotional state. Granger had already figured out that the wings were an easy method to gauge his mood, and it was only a matter of time until everyone else would catch on. Draco was determined to put a stop to that, just in case he would have to keep the wings for some time.

He stayed outside the whole day, training his wings to abide his will, until Snape and Granger finally appeared from the lab. They met in Severus' living room to discuss the matter at hand.

"Fact is, you won't get rid of the wings any time soon," Snape stated dispassionately after he had given Draco a short summary of their experiments that day. He had never been one to sugar-coat things. Draco remained quiet while the ugly truth settled in, and Granger restricted herself to twisting her hands in her lap and looking guilty.

"I suggest you find a way to live with them for now." Snape got up. "Oh, and Draco, I fear as the inventor of this potion, Miss Granger will be rather indispensable for finding a cure, so any plans for revenge you might have already devised would be best saved for later." With that last warning, Snape left Draco and Hermione alone.

The living room fell silent for a while. Draco stared moodily into the flickering flames of the fireplace, and Hermione gazed outside the window, continuing to twist her hands nervously in her lap. Draco noticed that her nails were bitten, something he would have commented on under any other circumstances. But he chose to remain silent. When Hermione couldn't seem to stand the quiet any longer, she broke her silence.

"I am truly sorry, Malfoy. I never meant for the wings to be permanent."

"Unless you think that apologizing enough will Vanish the damn wings, save it," Draco spat, in no mood to indulge her.

"Sorry."

Draco was inclined to continue brooding in silence, but Hermione obviously wasn't done talking.

"Are you going to go to work tomorrow?" she asked.

"Will you find a cure tomorrow?" Draco answered with a question of his own.

"Probably not."

"And the day after that?"

"You heard what Snape said..." Hermione said evasively. Guilt was plainly written all over her face.

"Then I don't see what use it will be to stay home from work. Everyone will find out that I still have the wings soon enough, even in the unlikely case that the people at St. Mungo's haven't already spread the word."

"What are you going to tell the Minister?" Hermione asked timidly. "He is bound to ask what happened."

"Worried about your job, Granger?" Draco asked, enjoying seeing her squirm uncomfortably. For a short moment Hermione looked like she very much would like to throw an insult at his head...or solid objects, perhaps...but she obviously thought better of it and remained quiet.

Draco let her suffer a few more minutes until he let her off the hook.

"As much as I would like to tell the Minister all about how you let me unknowingly drink an untested potion," he finally said, "there's no guarantee he isn't going to fire me right along with your sorry arse. Our agreement was probably not what the Minister had in mind when he had said we should work out our differences."

Hermione breathed an audible sigh of relief.

"So what are we going to tell him?"

Draco shrugged. "Just that we decided to follow his advice and that we spent some time together outside of work. Unfortunately, I experienced a slight costume malfunction."

"You think that's going to work?" Hermione asked sceptically. "He's never going to believe us."

"I don't see why he shouldn't," Draco stated confidently.

"Okay, then." Hermione sighed and got up. After saying goodbye and mumbling yet another apology, she went home. Draco remained where he was, staring into the flames and secretly dreading the following morning.

Monday morning Hermione and Draco met early at the Ministry of Magic. Since all attempts at reversing Draco's wings had proven to be unsuccessful, they had no choice other than to face the embarrassing task of having to explain to the Minister why one of his employees was currently sprouting giant wings.

For her part, Hermione was beyond embarrassed. For the second week in a row she needed to see the Minister because of her less than stellar behaviour. The fact that they had decided to go to Kingsley instead of waiting to be summoned did nothing to make her feel any less ashamed.

Hermione had spent most of the previous night alternating between trying to find a last-minute cure and fretting over her boss' reaction. It was entirely likely she would be fired. After all, she had administered an unauthorised and untested potion to one of her co-workers. Considering the Minister had just reprimanded her for not getting along with Malfoy, she couldn't blame him if he didn't believe the long-lasting effects were entirely accidental.

Malfoy, on the other, had strolled into the Ministry as if it were completely normal to have gigantic wings and he had absolutely no care in the world. He had greeted Hermione with a curt nod and a sneer, then proceeded towards the elevators without uttering a single syllable. Hermione supposed she should probably be thankful that he at least wasn't insulting her and followed wordlessly.

It was early in the morning, before the rush of the Ministry's employees coming to work filled the Atrium, but there were still some people around. Every single one of them was staring, pointing and whispering. Hermione knew that the news about Draco's wings would spread faster than Garrotting Gas. Only with difficulty did she suppress the urge to apologize to Malfoy again and again while they waited for the elevator doors to open, the curious stares of every witch and wizard in their vicinity burning holes into their backs.

Draco, meanwhile, hadn't lost any of his nonchalance. If he was concerned about being the subject of his co-workers curiosity, he was hiding it well. He might as well not have noticed any of the stares and whispers for all the indifference he was emitting.

The elevator ride to the top floor, where the Minister's office was located, was much too quick for Hermione's liking. Before she knew it, Draco and she were standing before the Minister's gaping secretary, explaining why they needed to see the Minister right away as if that wasn't painfully obvious. The secretary, who unfortunately seemed to have lost the ability to speak due to the fact that she had yet to pick up her jaw from the floor, only nodded and pointed towards the door. Hermione and Draco went inside.

The Minister was at his desk when they entered his office, bent over some paperwork.

"I'd like a cup of tea when you have the time, Alice," he said, clearly mistaking them for his secretary. Hermione cleared her throat uncomfortably, and Kingsley Shackbolt looked up. To his credit his mouth remained closed, though his eyebrows decided upon a quick visit with his hairline. Unlike his secretary though, the Minister succeeded in locating his voice.

"Mr. Malfoy, it seems you have mistaken the date. I assure you, Halloween is well and truly over."

"I am aware of that, actually," Draco replied dryly.

"May I then enquire why you decided to wear your costume today?" the Minister asked, all politeness.

Hermione suddenly wondered which house Kingsley had been in at Hogwarts. She had always assumed Gryffindor or Ravenclaw because he had been in the Order, but the sly smile around his lips and the sharp eyes with which he scrutinized them were screaming Slytherin.

Draco commenced with telling the Minister what had happened, the slightly revised version anyway, while Hermione stayed silent and tried to look *not* guilty. Judging by the disbelieving frown that took over the Minister's features whenever he looked at her, her acting skills left something to be desired.

"And you are absolutely sure you knew that this potion could be potentially harmful when you drank it, Mr. Malfoy?" the Minister asked when Draco ended his report.

"Absolutely." Draco sounded so convincing, even Hermione almost believed him.

"So this is nothing but an unfortunate magical accident between colleagues?" the Minister asked suspiciously.

"We just took your advice to heart and chose to spend some time together. Unfortunately, the potion had a slight malfunction," Draco assured the Minister calmly, and Kingsley finally nodded. He had the air of a man who knew that he was being lied to, but just couldn't prove it. Hermione's palms began to sweat.

"Well, then I hope Mr. Snape and Miss Granger will find you a cure quickly, Mr. Malfoy. In the meantime, I trust you will be careful to use Disillusion Charms whenever you are in contact with Muggles."

"Yes, Minister."

To Hermione's immense relief, they were dismissed. They left the office, walking past Alice, who was already penning a memo to her twenty closest girlfriends in the Ministry, informing them about the Minister's early morning visitors, and headed for the elevators. While they waited for the lift to arrive, Hermione breathed several sighs of relief and tried to surreptitiously dry her sweaty palms on her robes.

"You're an abysmal liar, Granger," Draco remarked. "And you didn't even have to say anything."

"I know," Hermione replied. "I just feel so bad about the entire mess."

Draco eyed her in disbelief. "Granger, just last week you wanted nothing more than to see me shipped off to Azkaban. You don't actually expect me to believe that you feel bad about causing all this?"

"Of course I feel bad, Malfoy," Hermione exclaimed. "True, I wanted to teach you a lesson about how it feels to be laughed at, but I never meant for it to be permanent. If I wanted you to go to Azkaban, it was only after you had been lawfully sentenced by the Wizengamot. I would have never taken matters into my own hands like that."

Draco was still shaking his head. "If I had had the perfect opportunity to get revenge on someone I hate, I would have never chosen to take the moral high ground."

"I would," Hermione replied simply. "Plus, if I had actually known the potion would harm you, you would have seen it in my face and refused to drink it in the first place. Abysmal liar, remember?"

Draco let out a barking laugh. "Yes, probably. You would have made a terrible Slytherin, Granger."

"I would have thought my parentage would be the reason why I'd have made a bad Slytherin, not my honesty."

"Nah. They let Riddle in, too, didn't they?" The lift finally reached their floor and Draco stepped inside. Hermione could have sworn he winked at her. Just two days ago, she had thought that Snape had made a joke and now this. Clearly she was misinterpreting some crucial signs. Who had ever heard of Slytherins having a decent sense of humour?

Hermione and Draco took the elevator to the second floor together, where they parted to go to their respective offices. Now that the threat of unemployment was temporarily averted, Hermione relished the opportunity to bury herself in paperwork. She would have worked well past lunchtime, too, if Harry and Ron hadn't waltzed into her office at noon.

"Is it true, 'Mione?" Ron asked first thing upon entering.

"Why hello to you, too, *Ronald*," Hermione replied sharply. She hated the nickname Ron had bestowed on her once it had occurred to him, during one of the many post-war celebrations that had left him decidedly inebriated, that Hermione was just too long a name and definitely too hard to pronounce when drunk. "Is what true?"

"The wings, of course. Does Malfoy still have the wings?" Ron sounded positively gleeful. Harry wisely chose to remain silent.

"Yes, the most awful thing has happened. The long-term effects of the potion were entirely unpredictable, and I'm afraid I didn't realise it before it was too late," Hermione said with a frown. The guilty feeling in her stomach, which she had been able to forget while immersed in her work, was already returning full force.

"Bloody awesome!" Ron cried, fist pumping into the air.

"Mind your language in my office," Hermione snapped immediately. "And there is nothing awesome about it."

"Are you bonkers, Hermione? This is the best prank ever. Not even Fred and George could have pulled it off," Ron praised, entirely oblivious to Harry's warning looks.

"PRANK!" Hermione's voice shrilled through the tiny office, making her two best friends wince at the assault on their eardrums. "I would NEVER do something like that. You ought to know that."

"Of course we do," Harry spoke up, raising his hands soothingly, trying his best to diffuse the situation. He might as well not have bothered.

"Well, but you did do it," Ron said, still grinning widely. "I mean the git has wings after all."

If Hermione would have failed in Slytherin because of her honesty, Ron's utter lack of self-preservation skills would have been the reason for his downfall. Obviously realising that his best friend's life was forfeit and that the only thing left to do was to try and save his own hide, Harry began to edge away from Ron in a desperate attempt to avoid Hermione's wrath.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley. I don't believe the nerve of you. You come into my office, accusing me of being some... some swindler!" By then Hermione's voice had reached the highest octave that could still be heard by human ears, and every one of her words was accompanied by a sharp poke to Ron's chest. Even Ron finally seemed to realise that a strategic retreat was advisable.

"Look, Hermione, I didn't mean... If you thought... Sorry!"

He was saved by a knock on the door. Draco poked his head in without waiting for an invitation, as usual.

"Granger, as much as I hate to interrupt while all sounds indicate you are about to slaughter the Weasel, the Minister just Owled me. He has a new assignment for us and wants us to start right away."

"Alright," Hermione nodded. Then she turned back to Ron. "We will continue this later. Goodbye, Harry." That said, Hermione gathered her papers from her desk and left her office without dignifying Ron with another look.

As it turned out, the Minister had indeed a new assignment for them, one so involved and complicated that Hermione knew right away she would be working with Draco closely for several weeks. While the assignment itself, which involved collaborating with Muggle and Wizarding authorities of several European countries in order to detect wayward supporters of Voldemort and other Anti-Muggle movements, highly appealed to Hermione, she obviously had several reservations about her partner. First and foremost she was worried that Malfoy wouldn't want to work with her. After all, she had just drastically altered his physique. To borrow Ron's words, he had *bloody wings*.

However, Malfoy seemed to be highly amused by the new assignment. "Shacklebolt wants to test us," he explained when he saw Hermione's confused look. "If our story

were to be true, we wouldn't have a problem working together since we supposedly bonded over costume-making. But if, as he suspects, we are lying, chances are we will start fighting sooner or later and give ourselves away."

"But we *are* lying, Malfoy."

"Maybe. But we're still not going to let him win," Draco replied, an amused spark dancing in his grey eyes.

Hermione mentally added her inability to understand the entertainment value of political scheming to the list of reasons why Slytherin would have been the wrong house for her and concentrated on their assignment. To her surprise, Malfoy and she worked rather well together when they desisted from hexing each other into oblivion.

The rest of the week, Hermione spent her days working with Malfoy at the Ministry and her evenings working with Snape on a cure for the wings. Both collaborations turned out to be more productive than she would have ever imagined, although the solution for a cure remained elusive.

Working with Draco was accompanied by a myriad of mixed feelings for Hermione. A lot of her former hatred for the youngest Death Eater in history seemed to have burned up in the fires of her own guilt. Despite everything, she truly hadn't meant to cause him any permanent damage. Delivering punishment was the job of the Wizengamot. Vigilantism was something Hermione thoroughly despised, and the mere thought that that was exactly what she had done, even though she hadn't intended for things to turn out the way they did, never failed to make her flush in shame.

At the very least, it seemed petty to still hold onto a grudge due to all of Malfoy's childhood torments. He might have mocked her for her buck teeth or her hair, but at least he hadn't actually charmed her hair to look the way it did, and while he once had hexed her teeth, Madam Pomfrey had easily remedied that. She, on the other hand, had gone and given him wings, and she would have had to be blind, deaf and stupid on top not to notice how their fellow employees at the Ministry teased him about that.

This is not to say that their collaboration on their latest project went smoothly. Even if she disregarded their rocky past, Malfoy was still an insufferable, arrogant prat, and more often than not Hermione wished she could hex the annoying smirk right off his face. But at least he knew his job well and was dedicated to his work, even if he used every opportunity to skive off the more menial tasks to her.

Therefore, to their own surprise, and no doubt to the Minister's disappointment, Draco and Hermione managed to work together for the entire week after Halloween without starting another duel or even so much as a shouting match, not to mention that they got a lot of work done.

Working with Snape also turned out to be nothing like Hermione had expected. In his classroom Snape had been a despot, deliberately abusing his privileges as a teacher and belittling his students every chance he got. In the privacy of his own lab, Snape didn't bother with petty viciousness. His people skills still needed a lot of work, in Hermione's opinion, but he more than made up for it with intelligence and competence in the field of Potions. Hermione learned more assisting him in trying to develop a cure than she could have ever learned if she had studied every Potions textbook in the library of Hogwarts; although, she would have rather chosen to bite off her own tongue than admit that to anyone.

Despite their combined efforts, however, it seemed to be more and more likely that there was simply no cure to the potion Hermione had brewed to make Draco sprout wings. Every theory they pursued, every potion they brewed, proved to be ineffective, and by Sunday evening, more than one week after the Halloween ball, Hermione was almost ready to admit defeat. There were still a few alleys that they hadn't explored, but essentially they were running out of ideas to counter the effect of the Hellebore.

"One of us should probably tell Draco that we can't seem to find a cure anytime soon," Hermione said gloomily when yet another one of their attempts went up in smoke. Literally.

Snape only shrugged, but didn't look up from the cauldron he was currently stirring. He was generally a man of few words, unless he was busy insulting what he deemed to be his inferiors, so Hermione interpreted his silence as confirmation. He was not going to volunteer and tell Draco about their ongoing lack of success, and Hermione couldn't blame him. She wasn't looking forward to that particular conversation either.

She cleaned up her work space and went upstairs to find Draco. He was generally around when they worked in the lab, just in case they required him for testing. When Hermione couldn't find him inside, she correctly surmised that he must have gone outside, despite the early November weather being frosty at best. Hermione bundled up in her winter cloak and tugged her scarf tightly around her throat before she stepped outside. She finally found Draco standing at the edge of the cliff, gazing down into the ocean below.

"I take it by your lack of enthusiasm that you still haven't found a solution," Draco said without taking his eyes away from the abyss in front of him.

"No. I'm sorry," Hermione said, staring absently at the huge wings on Draco's back. "Professor Snape is going to contact a colleague in Somalia next, who might be able to help, but it's only a long shot."

"So, I'm stuck with the wings for now? Maybe indefinitely?" Draco asked. He turned around to face Hermione, and she was surprised to notice he didn't seem angry at all. Resigned maybe, but his features were smooth. He didn't even sneer.

"I'm sorry," Hermione repeated.

"So you've said." Draco turned back to the cliff.

"You're not mad?" Hermione asked, trying to decipher his mood. But he still seemed uncharacteristically calm.

"Of course I am," Draco snorted. "But you and Severus seem to be my best bet for finding a cure, so causing you bodily harm would be detrimental to my cause, however gratifying it may be in the short term."

Hermione swallowed. "Glad to hear it."

"How good are you with Levitating Charms, Granger?" Draco suddenly asked.

Hermione just stared at him bewildered. "I was the first in our class to learn the *Wingardium Leviosa*, if you remember," she finally said.

"Good. I trust you won't let me fall to my death. The Minister is already less than impressed with you for making me have wings, I fear it will go on your permanent record if you actually manage to kill me off."

"What? Malfoy, what are you talking about?"

"What do you think?" He never looked back to check if Hermione had taken out her wand. With one strong move, he stretched his wings out to their fullest, and then he leaped off the cliff.

Hermione screamed when she saw him jump, desperately pulling her wand out of her pocket. But before she had the chance to cast a spell and safely levitate Draco back up the cliff, the wind caught underneath his wings and he soared through the air. Then he started to beat his wings and with every strong movement, he climbed higher up into the sky, until Hermione had to crane her neck back to keep him in her field of vision.

Draco flew a circle around Snape's house and then glided back towards the edge of the cliff where Hermione was still standing, her mouth wide open in surprise. Draco folded his wings and landed swiftly in front of her.

"You flew!" Hermione whispered astonished.

"Well, that's generally what wings are for. I thought I should give it a try," Draco drawled but his eyes betrayed his excitement. He was slightly out of breath and his hair was hopelessly dishevelled.

"Incredible," Hermione breathed.

"I still want you to find me a cure," Draco said sternly. However, he was already eying the edge of the cliff again.

"Of course," Hermione assured him immediately. "Again, I am so sorry..."

But Draco didn't listen. Once more he unfolded his wings and jumped off the cliff. Hermione watched him fly for a while, before she headed back inside, shaking her head. What was it with boys and flying anyway?

tbc

A/N: Reviews are love.

Thanks go to the lovely Withdrawnred, for the beta of this chapter.

Hope To Keep Safe From The Pain

Chapter 4 of 4

A Halloween costume has some rather unexpected consequences.

Chapter 4 Hope To Keep Safe From The Pain

By the end of November, Hermione and Snape were no closer to finding a way to reverse Draco's wings. They had gone as far as contemplating surgical removal, but the close proximity of the wings to Draco's spine proved to be too risky for this particular course of action.

On the upside, Draco played Seeker for the Magical Law Enforcement team in the Inter-Ministry Quidditch Fundraising Tournament. They defeated Potter's team of Aurors in the finale, and for the first time, Draco caught the Snitch before Harry. He didn't even need his broomstick.

That is not to say that he didn't wish to be rid of the wings every single day, but he found that they had at least some advantages; though the disadvantages certainly were in the majority. Draco especially despised all the attention he garnered due to the wings. Even a month after Halloween, all witches and wizards he met still stared at Draco's wings like he was a rare species in a zoo.

Most of his male colleagues at the Ministry had taken to mocking him. One of them, a stubby wizard from the Department of Magical Sports who had lost three brothers in the war against Voldemort, had even gone so far as to try and hex the wings pink. The poor wizard had to discover, though, that not only was he no match for Draco Malfoy in a wizarding duel, but also that Draco had already learned to use his wings in a fight. The stubby wizard was disarmed and knocked to the ground by one powerful surge of the wings long before the Coloration Charm ever reached Draco.

After that unfortunate incident, most wizards preferred not to mock Draco about his fluffy wings to his face. But, of course, they never stopped talking behind his back...or behind his wings, more accurately.

While Draco had anticipated the response of his male colleagues to his wings, the reaction of most witches caught him completely off guard. As it turned out, women quite liked his wings. Draco could never figure out why that was the case, but the amount of attention women were paying him was disconcerting...especially since he had discovered early on that he didn't like it when someone touched his wings without his consent.

There was an incident where one particularly forward witch in the elevator tried to take her flirting to the next level. Luckily, Granger had been around to prevent Draco from doing the other witch serious harm. The elevator, however, wasn't so fortunate. It took the maintenance crew of the Ministry several days of magical repairs to restore it to its previous form.

Draco couldn't quite describe it, but having someone touch his wings felt incredibly intimate. Somehow it felt even closer than when someone would run their hands over his bare back, making him feel very uncomfortable. In any case, he didn't appreciate being touched by random strangers, wings or no wings. To Draco's relief, most people seemed to decide to keep their distance after the incidents in the elevator and with the stubby wizard from the Magical Sports Department.

The only witch who was behaving relatively normal around him was Granger, who obviously was plagued too much by her guilt to appreciate his wings. Draco also discovered that working with her wasn't entirely bad. They complemented each other nicely. Where he was harsh and determined, she was polite and diplomatic. The combination of their respective talents resulted in a lot of progress. Had either one of them worked their task alone, they would have needed more than twice the amount of time.

Draco also discovered that he only needed to twitch with his wings and Granger would feel so guilty, she would volunteer to do whichever less appealing aspect of their job Draco was trying to avoid. Naturally, he had no qualms about exploiting that particular aspect of their working relationship.

Draco usually spent his evenings after work at Snape's house. Snape and Hermione met most days to work on finding a cure, and they needed him around for testing. Draco stayed outside on the cliffs for most of that time, stretching his wings. After spending the majority of his day inside the Ministry, Draco always appreciated the opportunity to unfold his wings.

From time to time, Draco liked sitting in the lab, watching his godfather and Hermione work. Seeing them bend over the cauldrons, stirring in a carefully calculated measure or chopping ingredients with deliberated precision gave Draco confidence that they would find him a cure, even if it might take a while.

To his amusement, he had noticed early on that Snape and Hermione had very similar styles of working. From the crooked bow in their backs when they poured over their notes, the tight organisation with which they conducted their experiments, to the obscene amount of concentration they both could utilize on a single task no matter how mental, their approach to potion-making was almost identical. If Hermione had had black hair and Snape were to start gnawing at his bottom lip, Draco would have insisted they have a paternity charm done.

Another talent they had in common was annoying Draco by talking about things that were better left unsaid. Hermione was constantly babbling about Merlin knows what,

though her favourite topic of conversation was how sorry she was to have caused this mess. Even though Draco agreed that she was solely responsible, he grew tired of her talking about it day in and day out. The wings on his back were already making it impossible for him to forget; he didn't need Hermione to constantly remind him as well.

Snape wasn't nearly as talkative as Hermione, completely the opposite in fact. However, he didn't shy away from speaking his mind when he thought that his godson had to hear something. If there was an issue that needed addressing, Draco could trust Snape to address it without consideration for Draco's opinion or, Merlin forbid, his feelings.

Like the issue with Draco's parents, a particularly sore subject for Draco. Snape had started with subtle hints about Draco's mother, but Draco remained stubborn and ignored his godfather. Finally, Snape chose a more direct approach. One day, as Draco was down in the basement watching Hermione and Severus work, Severus suddenly broke his customary silence in the lab and chose a more direct approach.

"Your mother owed me today. Again," he said calmly, without interrupting his work.

"So what?" Draco asked, feigning ignorance. "She owes me every week."

"Are you answering any of her letters?" Snape wasn't one to be fooled easily.

"Sometimes," Draco replied evasively. He was already eyeing the stairs, trying to figure out a way to escape the conversation.

"When is the last time you visited your parents?" Snape asked, relentless but calm. He still hadn't interrupted his work. Hermione, on the other hand, had put the knife she had used to chop ginger roots down and looked from Draco to Snape in alarm.

"Why is that any of your business?" Draco asked, his temper rising quickly.

"It is my business because your mother continues to ask about you."

"Then tell her to stop bothering you," Draco shouted. He got up and, with an angry flourish of his wings, left the basement.

"Very mature way of handling this, Draco," his godfather called after him, but Draco ignored him. He escaped outside, letting the frosty November air cool his anger.

When Snape had spoken up, Hermione had been surprised and not just a little bit curious. Snape usually didn't talk unless it was to discuss a potion. He never bothered with small talk, and he certainly didn't delve into any deep and personal subjects. It didn't get more personal than talking about Draco's parents, and Hermione was not only surprised that Snape had done it, but more so that he had done it in her presence.

Draco's reaction was yet another surprise. He had reacted like a spoiled little boy, and Hermione had half-expected him to stomp his foot or slam the door on his way out. Just one month ago she would have thought nothing of Draco Malfoy acting like a spoiled brat. But the past six weeks had clearly shown that he had grown up. He had reacted more maturely to the news that he would be stuck with the wings for the unforeseeable future than to Snape's mere mention of his mother, and Hermione was completely puzzled by it.

Once Draco had left, Snape continued to work as usual, pretending his godson's temper tantrum had never happen.

"Aren't you going to go after him?" Hermione asked.

"When he's in one of his moods? Certainly not," was all Snape had to say about the matter. He didn't even look up from his cauldron.

"But he seemed truly upset."

"Draco is always upset these days when he has to deal with his family." Snape shrugged. "If you are so worried about him, Miss Granger, feel free to go and talk to him. I wish you the best of luck." The last part was spoken with quite a bit of sarcasm in the Potions master's voice.

Hermione glanced at her knife, still resting on the table, but didn't pick it back up.

"I think I will," she announced, clearing away the ginger root.

Snape didn't comment.

Hermione left the basement and walked up the stairs. Draco wasn't in the house, but she hadn't expected him to be. In the last few weeks, Draco had either been down at the basement with them or outside. He rarely spent time inside the house if he didn't have to.

She put on her cloak and went out back, looking for Draco. She didn't have to go far. Draco was standing at the cliffs, right behind the cottage. His wings were spread wide, and he was looking down to the ocean below.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked when she was close enough.

Draco's only reaction was to fold his wings. He didn't turn around and he didn't answer.

"Draco?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Um, because you just stormed out of the lab like an upset six-year-old?"

"Mind your own business."

It appeared that Snape's prediction that it wouldn't be easy to talk to Draco was accurate. She should have figured. But giving up so soon seemed like admitting defeat, and Hermione could just imagine Snape's smirk when she went back into the lab without having had a proper conversation with Draco.

"Why haven't you written to your parents?" Hermione tried again. "Or visited them?"

"You really don't know when to shut up, do you?" Draco wheeled around and took a few threatening steps towards her. Hermione noticed that for once his wings were twitching agitatedly. It hadn't been like that for weeks. The first day after Halloween, judging Draco's mood had been easy. His wings had always given him away. But he had quickly learned to control them, and just like his face was an unreadable mask, his wings didn't portray emotions anymore either.

Except for today, it seemed.

"Did you have a fight with your parents?" Hermione asked, not one to be easily intimidated.

"No, Merlin forbid, why would I fight with them? They only got me almost killed."

"What?"

"They pledged themselves to the Dark Lord, then screwed it up, which is why their sixteen-year-old son...that's me, by the way...got sent on a suicide mission. Does that ring any bell for you?" Draco asked, sounding annoyed.

"Oh."

"Oh, indeed."

"But your mother helped Harry in order to save you."

"Sure, after I had had to endure being the youngest and weakest Death Eater for almost two years. Do you think that was easy? Besides, it's not my mother I'm mad at. It's my father who still doesn't get it."

"Doesn't get...?"

"Voldemort, Granger. His defeat," Draco shouted. "Make no mistake, if the old lunatic finds a way back from behind the veil for a second time, my father would be the first in line to serve him again."

Hermione gasped. "You can't be serious."

"You're so gullible. Believing everyone likes the new way things run now. But there will always be people like my dad, old school fanatics who won't accept progress and who won't accept defeat. What do you think we've been working on the whole time we were tracking down wayward Death Eaters?"

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "But your father was cleared of all charges. He denounced Voldemort."

"My father talked his way out of a life sentence at Azkaban, that's all. Cost him quite a lot of Galleons, too, I imagine," Draco spat.

"But... but if your father is doing..."

"Don't worry about it, Granger. Lucius is being a perfectly law-abiding wizard these days."

"But you just said..."

"I said, if the Dark Lord *were* to come back, Lucius would follow him. But don't think my father's going to risk any more of his money or his precious reputation before he knows for sure he's betting on the winning Hippogriff this time."

"That's awful."

Draco shrugged.

"Is that why you don't want to visit your father?"

Draco didn't say anything for a while, and Hermione already thought he wouldn't answer. Finally, Draco spoke, "He blames me for the defeat of the Dark Lord."

"What?"

"You heard me. Lucius hasn't said anything, but I know what he is thinking. If I had been able to take care of myself, my mother wouldn't have needed to betray the Dark Lord and come after me. Potter would have died out there in the Forbidden Forest."

"What about you? Do you regret that your mother lied for Harry?"

Again Draco didn't answer right away, and the longer the silence stretched between them, the more nervous Hermione got.

"No, I guess not," Draco finally said quietly.

Then he spread his wings, and with one giant leap, he jumped off the cliff. With mixed feelings, Hermione watched him fly for a while before she headed back to Snape's lab.

The following morning at work, Hermione was in for yet another surprise. When she opened the door to her office, she was shocked to find that all her things were gone. Even her desk and all her filing cabinets had vanished, and she was standing in an empty room.

Her first thought was that the Minister had found out that Draco hadn't known the potion she had given him was untested and that the wings were entirely her fault. But Hermione rather thought that even if the Minister decided to give her the boot, he would at least have the courtesy to inform her about her dismissal before clearing her office.

Hermione was at a loss, but the mystery was solved shortly afterwards when Malfoy stuck his head into her office.

"If you are looking for your things, they are in my office. Well, I guess it's *our* office now," he announced without preamble.

"Why?" Hermione asked bewildered.

"It appears our dear Minister is getting impatient and has decided to step up his game. Bloody good move, if you ask me," Draco said merrily, as if that would explain everything.

When Hermione still stared at him blankly, he elaborated further, "The Minister wants us to spill the beans about how I really got my wings. He is making us share an office in the hopes that if we have to spend the entire day in each others' presence, we will eventually crack and give ourselves away. The official reason for the merger is that it will be more convenient now that we work together so closely."

"You sound like you are absolutely delighted to share an office with me," Hermione remarked, surprised.

"Don't be stupid, Granger. You're probably going to be a real pain in the arse. But I appreciate a good manoeuvre when I see one," Draco replied. "You gotta hand it to the old chap. The manipulative bastard makes a bloody good Minister."

"Language, Draco!" Hermione immediately reprimanded. She closed the door to her now-deserted office and walked across the hallway to Draco's office...their office.

"Why bother?" Draco asked, following along. "It's not going to make it any less true if I say it nicely."

"Ever heard of something like etiquette or manners?" Hermione asked. She was glad to see that Draco's office had been magically expanded and that all her things seemed to be accounted for. Her desk stood facing Draco's, and her filing cabinets fitted nicely against the wall. She suppressed the urge to go and check if her colour-coded filing system was still in order and sat down in her chair.

"Sorry, I substituted etiquette lessons for 'How to kill Mudbloods 101.'" Draco slumped down in his own chair.

"So not funny, Malfoy," Hermione hissed. She had a feeling that sharing an office with Malfoy would try her patience to the maximum. Malfoy was right: the Minister was good.

Draco and Hermione managed to not kill each other until lunch, but as far as Hermione was concerned, the Minister must have been a medieval torturer in another lifetime. Draco continued to appreciate the political manoeuvring, and he positively delighted in annoying Hermione whenever she was trying to concentrate on paperwork. When he began throwing paper balls at her, she seriously considered giving him a beak to match his wings. She only desisted because she was afraid the Minister would probably not believe her if she told him another *accident* had happened.

She was saved from committing anything else the Wizengamot might have interpreted as illegal actions by Harry, who stuck his head into the office around noon.

"Hey, Hermione, there was a note on your office door saying you can now be found here," he said.

"Give the wizard a prize. He can read!" Draco shouted, throwing a paper ball at Harry.

Hermione got up before Harry could retaliate. "Let's have some lunch." She grabbed her purse in one hand and Harry's sleeve in the other and dragged her best friend from the office.

"You are sharing an office with Malfoy now?" Harry asked, brushing the paper ball from his robes with a frown.

"The Minister's idea. He's evil," Hermione hissed.

Harry laughed. "Kingsley knows you guys are lying to him, but he can't prove it. Probably drives him nuts."

"If you think this is funny, you can go right back to the office and have lunch with Malfoy," Hermione snapped.

"No, no. That is not necessary. I wanted to talk to you," Harry said quickly.

Hermione looked at him curiously, waiting until he would elaborate, but Harry didn't say anything else. They left the Ministry together and went to a little restaurant close by that was owned by a Squib and frequented by a lot of Ministry employees.

After they had ordered their food, Harry cast a *Muffliato* around their table. Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"What do you want to talk to me about that is so important you are scared of being overheard in a loud and crowded restaurant?"

Harry unfolded the napkin in front of him. Then he folded it again.

"Harry? What is it?" Hermione was beginning to get worried. Harry continued to fiddle with the napkin, avoiding eye contact.

"I need a favour," he finally mumbled.

"Of course," Hermione immediately agreed. "Do you need me to do some research for you?"

"Not exactly." Harry finally looked up from the napkin and into Hermione's eyes. "I need you to tell me where to find Snape."

"Okay, not what I was expecting," Hermione said, looking at Harry quizzically.

"I just need to talk to him, you know," Harry was back to folding the napkin. "He gave me all those memories, but he never explained... Well, I guess, they are sort of self-explanatory, but I still have some questions. And now that you know where he lives..."

"Oh, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "Are you going to help me?"

Before Hermione could answer, their food arrived. She waited until the waiter had put their plates down and left again.

"I don't know if Snape wants to talk to you or not, and I don't want to betray his trust by giving you his address without asking him first."

"I understand," Harry assured her. He seemed to be a lot calmer now that he had told Hermione what he needed help with and she hadn't laughed at him. "But you will ask him?"

"Sure," Hermione said, picking up her fork and beginning to eat.

Harry and Hermione spent the rest of their lunch talking about other things...mainly Ron, who Hermione still hadn't forgiven for accusing her of being a prankster. Harry was trying his best to reconcile his two best friends. In the end, Hermione agreed to visit the Burrow with him after work.

One hour later, Hermione returned to the office to find that Draco had not yet returned from his lunch break. She used the rare silence and immersed herself in her files. Draco got back half an hour later.

"Sometimes I think you are married to paperwork," Draco commented when he entered the office.

"One of us has to do it," Hermione said, without looking up.

"And thank Merlin that one isn't me," Draco said with utter conviction. He sat down with a flourish of his wings.

Hermione looked up. "So you'd think you owe me for doing all the paperwork you despise, don't you?" she asked.

"Actually, I think that you owe me the favours," Draco shot back, wiggling his wings. Hermione looked instantly guilty, but she couldn't be deterred that easily this time.

"It really would only be a small favour..."

"Just out of curiosity, what is it that you want me to do?"

"Ask Snape if Harry can come visit him," Hermione replied promptly.

Draco burst out laughing. "Are you out of your mind? The old man is going to hex me just for suggesting it."

"But he is far more likely going to listen to you than to me," Hermione said, ignoring Draco's obvious mirth.

"Forget it, Granger. I don't have a death wish."

Shaking his head, Draco grabbed a report about an anti-Muggle movement in Belgium and continued to work. Hermione was chewing her lip anxiously, but she returned to her papers as well.

They worked together silently for the better part of the afternoon. Draco seemed to have temporarily lost interest in trying to annoy Hermione to death and focused on his work. Hermione did the same. But she was not deterred for long.

"About that favour I asked you," she said when she was done filling out the last report for the day.

"Forget it, Granger. Snape will never agree to meet with him," Draco replied shortly. He put down the report he had been studying and stood up to stretch his wings. Although the office had been magically expanded to fit Hermione's things, he still could only partially unfold them.

"If you could just reconsider..." Hermione tried again, but a knock on the door cut her off.

Once again it was Harry. "Ready to visit the Burrow, Hermione?" he asked, ignoring Draco.

Hermione nodded. Draco looked from Harry to Hermione, a calculating look on his face. "What are the chances you're going to quit nagging me about this?" he asked Hermione.

Hermione smiled. "Slim to none."

"That's what I thought." Draco sighed. Without another word, he walked towards the door and grabbed Harry's arm.

"Malfoy, what are you..." Harry started, but before he could finish his sentence or draw his wand Draco Disapparated, taking Harry with him.

They reappeared on a familiar cliff outside a small cottage in Cornwall...at least Draco was familiar with his surroundings. Harry, on the other hand, had clearly no idea where he was. He whipped out his wand as soon as he had solid ground under his feet again and readied for an attack.

"Where are we?" he bellowed.

"I thought you wanted to see Severus," Draco said, entirely unimpressed by the presence of Harry's wand in his face.

Harry lowered his wand in surprise. "He lives here?"

"No, I just like the countryside. OF COURSE he lives here. Try to keep up, Potter."

Harry looked uncertainly towards the house. "He doesn't know I'm coming, does he?"

"No, and if he asks how you got here, keep my name out of it. Try telling him you stumbled onto his cottage by sheer dumb luck. If luck is proportionate to stupidity, you finding the place on your own is likely enough."

Still looking towards the cottage, Harry refused to rise to the barb.

"Thanks, Malfoy," he said absently.

Draco stared at him in disbelief. Potter was being polite. The world must truly be coming to an end. Draco suspected he should have seen the signs earlier. Know-it-all Granger had admitted that she didn't know everything after all (that the one thing she didn't know was the recipe to his cure was just his luck), and he was not only sprouting giant wings on his back, but also more or less willingly doing favours for a Muggle-born. Clearly, the apocalypse was nigh, or at the very least, Draco was slowly but steadily losing his marbles.

Maybe he should visit his parents after all. Considering the way things were going, Lucius probably had developed a liking to silk painting and started a Holiday Resort and Spa for abused house-elves. Perhaps the Dark Lord had taken up baking cookies in the afterlife.

Shaking his head in order to get rid of the disturbing image of Voldemort wearing an apron and oven mittens, Draco left Potter to his own devices and Apparated back to the Ministry. As soon as he entered his office, Hermione pounced.

"How did it go?" she asked eagerly.

"I deliberated, focused on my destination, gathered all the determination I could muster..."

"I don't care about Apparating," Hermione interrupted impatiently. "How did Harry's conversation with Snape go?"

"Do you really think I stuck around to watch? In all likelihood, Severus is going to hex the blundering idiot on the spot, and if he does, it's probably best if there are no witnesses around who will later have to testify in front of the Wizengamot."

"Oh, you're impossible."

"I'm doing you a favour and now I'm impossible? I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

Hermione rolled her eyes at his antics. "Thank you very much for helping out." She bent towards him and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "I need to check with Alice when the Minister wants to have our next report before I leave for the day," she announced, hurrying out of the office.

Draco could only shake his head. His only consolation was that even if he was going insane, Granger was obviously suffering the same fate.

tbc

A/N: Reviews are love.

I know it's taking me quite some time to finish. All I can say is that I have no intentions of abandoning this story and that I hope to post the next chapter a lot sooner than this one.

Thanks go to the lovely Withdrawnred, for beta'ing the chapter.