

Maffy the Grumpy House-Elf

by pokeystar

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Hermione straightened the parchment on her desk and looked up, repressing a sigh. "Pardon?"

The wizard standing in front of her possessed a distinct overbite, large ears and a reedy voice.

"I wish to register a complaint," he repeated.

He also had in his possession the grumpiest house-elf Hermione had ever seen. The scowling green creature was dangling from the wizard's hand by a fold of the homespun cloth that draped to barely cover its elfin bits.

"This elf is grumpy," said the wizard, gesturing at it with his free hand.

"That's your complaint?" she asked in disbelief.

"Yes. This elf is discontented. He is loutish and ill-mannered. He thinks only of himself. He is disrespectful and outright rude to Mother." He paused to draw in breath. "In short, this is not a happy elf."

Hermione eyed the little elf, who glowered right back.

She didn't suppress a sigh this time. "You are aware, sir, that elves are entitled to their feelings?"

"But he bit me! And set fire to my favourite argyle socks! His orneriness must be curtailed!" The wizard's very teeth shook with conviction.

"As the Deputy Chief Representative for the Council for House-Elf Welfare," she replied, sharpening her quill. "I must inform you that curtailing an elf's natural state is prohibited under current Ministry law."

The elf smirked up at his master.

"Sod the Ministry!" The buck-toothed man erupted. His enormous ears turned pink with rage.

"Mister..." Hermione trailed off, realising she had failed to get the wizard's name. Or the elf's name, for that matter. And neither seemed inclined to correct her oversight. "If you attempt to harm this elf in any way, I will be obliged to report you to the MLE."

"Obligated?" The wizard sputtered for an endless moment before releasing the still-smirking elf's collar. The elf dropped to the floor with a clunk. "Fine. Fine. That's superb news. I wash my hands of him. The little blighter is all yours now."

The wizard turned on his heel and marched out of her office in the blink of an eye.

"No! Wait!" she called, standing up and waving the parchment in her hand with futile zeal. "You need to fill these papers out first..." Hermione's voice trailed off again and she sighed heavily when she realised the odd wizard was not coming back.

The grumpy elf was staring up at her, his eyes bulging and his mouth drawn down in a frown. He wore a rumpled pillowcase with jagged armholes that smelt of smoke and damp wool. The fire, she supposed. *Lovely*.

She gestured at the elf-sized visitor's chair next to her desk and sat down again. The elf curled his lip at the wee piece of furniture, which was painted in cheerful stripes of jewel-toned colours, eschewing it in favour of a regular-sized chair opposite her desk. He took a largish yet dignified hop up onto the seat and turned to face her with a satisfied smirk.

Hermione merely smiled at him with patient calm and made a notation on the parchment in front of her.

Not good with authority.

"Hello," she said in a cheery tone. The elf glared at her and crossed his arms. "Did that wizard injure you in any way?"

The fact that he even exists is an affront to wizards everywhere! He still lives with his mother, for Merlin's sake.

"No, Miss," the elf croaked. His eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"I didn't mean to disparage your master," Hermione hastened to explain. "It's just that he seemed so angry with you."

Well, I did bite him. And set fire to those socks. Which were the ugliest things I've ever seen and practically begged to be destroyed.

"I is being fine, Miss," he replied, the tips of his ears turning red.

Hermione looked dismayed. "There's no need to be embarrassed! It's not your fault your Master abandoned you, or that you didn't get along."

It most certainly is NOT my fault!

The little elf's ears reddened even more and Hermione rushed on, "We just need to find a home that suits you, is all."

MY home suits me just fine. If only I were in it.

The little elf's cheeks puffed out and his reddish-greyish-green ears wriggled. "Home," he groaned at last.

Oh! The poor thing! Hermione thought. *They always have such a difficult time with abandonment.* This part never got easier to witness.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked, and then frowned. "What is your name, dear?"

The elf's eyes bulged until Hermione thought they would pop out of his head.

My name is NOT dear, you dolt! It's Malfoy! Draco Malfoy! Heir to the Malfoy fortune! Ring a bell? I insist you take me to St. Mungo's at once! I don't know what happened to me, but I'm sure THEY are far more capable of fixing this than you! You... you... IDIOT!

"Maffy!" the little elf shouted in anger, his ice blond eyebrows bristling.

"I'm sorry I called you dear," Hermione sputtered, somewhat taken aback. Maffy seemed to be as touchy as Kreacher. She'd try to be more sensitive to his feelings in the future. "Let's have some tea, and figure out where you would be happy, shall we?"

Maffy heaved a deep sigh and subsided into his chair, mouth set in a frown of discontent.

Brightest witch of our age, my lily-white arse.

"Would you like some tea, Auror Potter?" Pansy asked.

They sat in a pair of upholstered wingback chairs that comprised...together with her grandmother's antique walnut tea table...the lounge and dining area in her tiny flat near Diagon Alley.

"No thank you, Miss Parkinson," Harry replied affably. "Official business, you know."

Pansy smiled and fiddled with the handle of her teacup. "What official business brings you here?"

"I don't know if you've heard," Harry said, adjusting his glasses and consulting his notes. "But Draco Malfoy has gone missing. As best we can figure, five or six days ago."

"Oh no! I had no idea!" Pansy exclaimed in distress, her beautiful blue eyes widening appealingly. "I just saw him last week!"

Harry smiled, his demeanour reassuring. "That's why I'm here. You seem to be the last person to have seen him."

"We had dinner at the Leaky Cauldron," she offered, her fingers playing with the top button of her pale grey silk blouse. "And then he escorted me home before he Floo'd to the Manor."

Harry gestured at the small chimney nearby. "Did he use this fireplace?" At Pansy's nod, he waved his wand at the blackened hearth and muttered an incantation.

Keeping his eyes on the spell's sheen of magic as it changed colours, he made occasional notes in his report book with a phoenix feather quill. Pansy had just started to fidget in her seat when he made a noise of confirmation and looked up at her.

"That was his magical signature, as we expected." He canceled the spell with a flick of his wrist, and his bright green eyes turned serious. "We don't suspect foul play. Yet. But we do need to check out every lead, just in case."

"I'm sure he'll turn up safe and sound," Pansy replied, compelled to reassure the earnest young man regarding her with determined concern. "Draco told me at dinner that

he's asked Astoria Greengrass to marry him. He probably got cold feet or something and went haring off on a last hurrah."

"I thought you and Malfoy were involved," Harry said, looking surprised by her revelation.

Pansy's giggle was a bit forced. "No, Mr. Potter. We've always been friends, nothing more. Despite what I might have hoped for when I was a girl." She ducked her head, her eyes misty.

"More fool he," said Harry with clumsy gallantry. "Please, call me Harry."

Pansy offered her hand and felt a frisson of attraction when Harry lightly grasped it with his. He was gazing at her lush mouth. "Please, call me Pansy. And if you can, please let me know when you find Draco. I'll be worried about him until he turns up."

"I will," he replied. "In fact, I may need to come back soon, if any new information arises..."

"I'd like that," she said, letting go of his hand reluctantly, as she peered up at him through thick, black-as-coal eyelashes. "Maybe next time we can have tea."

He smiled at her in bemusement. "That would be nice."

They walked the short distance to her front door, and he ducked through the doorway and gave her a little wave.

"Thank you for coming, Harry," she said sweetly and pushed the door shut.

Hermione knocked on the open door a couple of times before entering the largest office in the Council for House-Elf Welfare. Largest was a relative term, of course. Her own office was the size of a standard broom closet. Adrian Pucey, as Chief Representative, had an office four times that size. It might be called luxurious if it weren't stuffed to the gills with antique furniture and Quidditch memorabilia.

"Hey, Chief," she said, keeping one foot in the hall, "I've got an abandoned elf in my office. He says his name is Maffy."

"So?" asked Adrian in a bored voice. He didn't look up from the *Prophet's* sports page. "Place him, like the good little swot you are."

Hermione counted to twenty in silence. She also sent a plea to Merlin that a position in Magical Games would become vacant soon.

"There's a problem," she replied as nicely as she could. "We have no record of an elf named Maffy. And the wizard who dropped him off didn't fill out the paperwork."

Adrian dropped the sports sheet to his desk and leaned back in his chair, smiling in a way that made her skin crawl. "Well, now. That's quite a pickle you've got yourself in."

Hermione fidgeted in place, but said nothing. She'd suggested a building-wide Holding Charm to keep all parties in the office until the paperwork, at least, had been filled out, but Adrian had denied the request as too intrusive. She'd stake her cherished copy of *Hogwarts: A History* on the hunch that he'd denied it for another reason altogether.

"What lovely robes you have on today, Hermione," Adrian continued with a salacious wink. "That shade of navy compliments your skin very well."

"Thank you," she replied and smiled tightly. *Oh, joy. What do I win?*

"Can you think of *anything* that might solve your little problem?" he asked, smirking at her.

"I suppose," she said, pretending to consider her alternatives, "that I could ask Harry to investigate. The MLE might have received a missing elf report."

Adrian straightened his chair in slow motion, frowning down at his paper. "No, let's not bother them yet. Just put him with Mrs. Butterweir."

Mrs. Butterweir was a kind old witch the Council placed foster elves with until their situations had been investigated and permanent placement was determined.

"Maffy seems to be a very prickly sort..." Hermione began.

"Butter. Weir," Adrian barked, picking up his paper again. "Go do your job, Granger. Properly, if you can manage it."

Bloody git, Hermione thought. *You wouldn't know a house-elf if it bit you in the arse.* Although she rather suspected he'd be the type to enjoy that sort of thing.

"I don't want to complain, dear," said Mrs. Butterweir. She sat in a visitor's chair opposite Hermione's desk. Maffy sat next to the kind, elderly lady, looking very put out. "But this elf seems rather tetchy."

Hermione sighed and pushed a mountain of paperwork to one side of her desk. "He didn't bite you, did he?"

"No, dear," replied Mrs. Butterweir, shaking her head.

"Or set fire to your socks?" Hermione asked, looking down at the scant file she'd compiled on Maffy. "Was he rude to you?"

"Well, dear," Mrs. Butterweir said, standing up and edging her way to the door. "He did try to kill Bootsie Wootsie. So he can't stay at mine anymore."

Hermione gasped in shock and turned to Maffy. The little elf's ear tips were bright red and his forehead was furrowed, but his lips were clamped shut in stubborn mutiny. He avoided her gaze, looking down at his feet as they wiggled on the edge of the oversized chair underneath him.

"I'll just let you know when I'm ready for another visitor, shall I, dear?" Mrs. Butterweir added before she slipped out of the office, shutting the door firmly behind her.

"What am I going to do with you, Maffy?" Hermione asked, frustrated. "Mrs. Butterweir is our nicest client."

Maffy just looked up at her, his lip curled in disgust.

"Oh. She does say dear a lot, doesn't she?" Hermione was mortified she'd forgotten the little elf's pet peeve. "Sorry about that."

Sorry about what?

Maffy almost looked... confused.

"But that doesn't give you the right to attack an innocent animal," she continued, remembering what Mrs. Butterweir had said.

Innocent animal? Ha! That beast from Voldemort's loins tried to carve my nose off when Butterweird made me brush it!

Maffy's eyes narrowed and he grumbled to himself.

Come to think of it, Butterweird's precious Bootsie resembled your feline abomination very closely... pernicious fangs included.

"Bad kitty," he croaked. He looked very satisfied with his pronouncement.

"Bootsie is *not* a bad kitty!" Hermione exclaimed, offended. "She's Crookshanks's granddaughter and he was the best kneazle that ever lived." She teared up and reached for a tissue.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Maffy jumped off the chair, waddled over to Hermione, and patted her awkwardly on the elbow.

"I is sorry kitty is gone, Missy," he grumbled.

She covered his hand with hers and squeezed it. A shock tingled up his arm and made his ears wiggle. He backed away from her, uneasy to the tips of his toes, and dropped onto the elf-sized chair.

"It's all right, Maffy," she answered, drying her eyes. "Crooks has been gone for two years now. I just really miss him sometimes." She sniffed a little and then sat up straight. "Now, then. Back to business. Maybe I should place you with Herbert Greenslow. He doesn't have pets and he's almost as cranky as you are." She smiled in encouragement at Maffy when he shrugged indifferently.

"Sorry to bother you again so soon," said Harry when Pansy opened her front door. She frowned a pointed rebuke at him. "Oh. Let me start over. Hello, Pansy."

She smiled and stood back to allow him into her flat. "Hello, Harry. Would you like some tea?"

An extra cup and saucer floated out of the kitchenette and landed with a soft click on the walnut table.

"This is mostly business, I'm afraid," Harry said as he sat down in the chair across from Pansy. He watched her pour the tea with demure grace.

"Mostly?" she asked, her wide blue eyes meeting his in innocent mischief. She gestured at the milk, lump sugar and thin-sliced lemon in the middle of the table.

"Er. Yes." He selected a slice of lemon and dunked it gingerly in his tea. "There's been a development in the Malfoy case."

She sucked in a hopeful breath. "You've found Draco?"

"Not yet," Harry replied with mild chagrin. "But we've interviewed the Malfoy house-elves and several of them reported seeing a strange elf race out of Draco's suite in a panic. It left the grounds before the other elves could react." Harry frowned in confusion, staring at his notes. "That's odd, isn't it? I thought the Malfoy wards kept any strange being from entering the premises. Or leaving, come to that."

She took a sip of tea and then set it down. The cup tinkled loudly as it settled onto the saucer. "Elf magic is strong," she offered, her voice thin.

"That's true," said Harry, thinking of Dobby. He looked up and noticed Pansy had paled. "Do you know if any house-elves have grudges against the Malfoys?"

"No," she answered in shaky sotto voce. "They treat their elves pretty well these days."

"We've finally reached Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy at their retreat in Switzerland. They're returning to England via Portkey this evening," he said. "The evidence crew scanned the Manor for inappropriate Transfiguration spells and found nothing."

Pansy jerked upright, rattling her cup in its saucer again, and Harry reached across the table to pat her hand in a reassuring manner.

"Murderers often Transfigure their victims to cover up the crime. It's one more indication there was no foul play involved in Draco's disappearance." He withdrew his hand with uncertain awkwardness and took a sip of his tea. "Now, if only we could find this strange elf." He sighed. "I've a feeling it's the key to this case."

"I hope you do find it," said Pansy with feeling. She flushed, colour blooming prettily in her cheeks. "I'm sure you're right about the elf. Your instincts are marvelous."

Harry ducked his head in pleased embarrassment. "I'm glad you think so, Pansy." He glanced at the pocket watch the Weasleys had given him at his majority. "I've got to run. There's a departmental meeting to organise all the evidence for Draco's parents. Hopefully, they will have additional information that will allow us to break the case."

"I'm sorry I couldn't help more," Pansy said, escorting him to the door.

He turned to face her, placing his hands tentatively on her shoulders. "The tea and company were a comfort, really," he murmured.

A flash of something sparked in his eyes and he ducked his head to press his lips against her still-blushing cheek. He was gone before she could gasp.

She closed the door to her flat and leaned against it, raising a hand to touch her cheek. It was still tingling.

Sorry was right. Pathetic was more apt. Totally buggered covered it beautifully.

Grand-mère had warned her that her fits of pique would land her on the fiddle sooner or later. She'd only wanted to teach Draco a lesson. A couple of weeks as a house-elf in his own home were meant to open his eyes a bit. He wasn't supposed to run off in a panic.

Right. Except. That was how Draco Malfoy always responded to a crisis.

Brilliant, Parkinson. Solid thinking all around.

And now, there was Harry. Who seemed to like her and treated her well. He'd be horrified to find out she was responsible for Draco's disappearance. Pansy paced her small lounge, wringing her hands. What could she do? She really liked Harry. He made her feel pretty and appreciated. He was nothing like the self-involved, inconsiderate Malfoy heir.

Where the fuck was he?

She could see now that her feelings for Draco were insubstantial as smoke, built up from family expectations and a childhood crush. She needed to find the prat and reverse the curse before Harry figured it out.

Merlin, I'm on my uppers now, Grand-mère.

Hermione chose a half-full container of green curry and scooped some out onto a pile of jasmine rice on her plate. She pushed the container back into the centre of the coffee table and grabbed the papadom in Harry's hand, breaking off half.

"Oi!" He grumbled in good-natured protest before using the other half to scrape some sauce off his plate. "Pucey still bothering you?" he asked, popping the bread into his mouth.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him as she ate a forkful of rice and curry. Swallowing, she replied, "Naturally. Once a sleazy git, always a sleazy git. But thanks to your suggestion, he's been rather less keen lately."

"Mentioning my name actually works?" Harry asked, surprised. "I was joking about that, Hermione."

"I know you were, Auror Potter," she said, regarding her longtime friend with affectionate amusement.

Harry took another bite of chicken korma and closed his eyes in bliss. Nothing beat the Indian takeaway round the corner from Hermione's flat. Except kissing Pansy's cheek. He blushed, a slight pink tinging his cheeks, and ducked his head.

"What's that blush about, then?" Hermione inquired, light as air, yet her gaze was sharp as a tack.

"I have a date tomorrow night."

"You what?" Hermione was surprised, but pleased. Harry hadn't dated anyone since Ginny had left him for Oliver Wood the year before. "With who?"

He met her gaze with a tinge of defiance. "Pansy Parkinson."

"Really?" She supposed people could change... "I thought she was seeing Draco Malfoy?"

"According to Pansy, they were just friends," Harry replied. "I asked her about it while investigating Malfoy's disappearance."

The *Daily Prophet* had broken the missing Malfoy story that morning.

"She's part of the investigation, Harry?" Hermione's voice climbed two decibels on his name alone.

"She was, but we've cleared her of involvement. He Floo'd to the Manor from her flat the night before he disappeared."

"Oh... well... But, Harry, doesn't that mean she was the last person to see him?" Hermione was nervous; Harry's countenance was growing stonier by the second, but she felt some things needed to be said. "And, um, she did try to turn you over to the Death Eaters once."

"I know. I remember that," he replied, his voice almost too quiet to hear, his eyes flashing with hurt and anger. "She was a frightened kid, just like us. And she's different now."

"I'm only..." Hermione began, but Harry cut her off.

"Concerned, I know. I appreciate it," he answered and stood up. "But I feel *live* around her, Mione. Sometimes, you need to take a chance on people."

He walked over to the door and turned to look at her. "I'm really hoping this works out. And I'm counting on your support, too. You're my best friend," he said, closing the door with a gentle snick behind himself.

Dammit, she thought, dabbing at her eyes with a crumpled napkin. *He had to play the support card.*

She'd Owl him in the morning.

And she'd forgotten to ask about missing elves, too.

Double damn and blast.

"I wish to register a complaint."

Hermione barely managed to suppress a groan. "Good afternoon, Mr. Greenslow. How may I help you?"

The middle-aged, balding wizard harrumphed at her and gestured to Maffy, seated in the visitor's chair opposite her desk.

"This, Missy, is a churlish elf," he announced, crossing his arms over his chest.

That's rich, coming from you, thought Hermione, but she merely nodded in attentive concern.

"He is hot-headed, surly, ill-mannered and peevish. And he lost me a job, he did!" Mr. Greenslow yelled, eyebrows bristling.

"What happened?" asked Hermione with mild interest.

She watched Maffy as the angry wizard spoke. The little elf's ears lay back against his skull and he sat on his hands, eyes downcast; he seemed subdued...almost melancholy.

"It took him a bit to train up. Green fingers didn't come naturally to this elf." Mr. Greenslow chuckled in shallow humour at his own pun. "Aside from a slight mishap with some Devil's Snare, he did all right. A tad grumpy, but otherwise hardworking." The burly wizard's bushy eyebrows drew together over snapping coal-black eyes. "Then the Malfoys hired me to plant a memory garden for their missing son."

Maffy drew himself up into a ball, rocking in place.

"He was good at first, following instructions and working quiet-like," said Mr. Greenslow, staring down at Maffy's diminished figure. "But then Mrs. Malfoy comes around to check our work, and Maffy won't leave her alone...shoving plants at her, one after another, or clinging to her knee. Once, he even spit on her shoe. And all the time, croaking his name out, loud as a banshee. I'd pull him off and calm him down. Apologise to the Missus. Then he'd be okay for a while, until she comes around again."

Maffy's ears wiggled and his body shivered as if he were enveloped in a bitter wind.

"After the spitting time, she sends the Master out instead," continued Mr. Greenslow, running his hand through what wiry, grey hair still resided on his head. "Maffy kept his nose down, and planted the rosemary while Mr. Malfoy looked everything over. Then Mr. Malfoy notices him and stands over Maffy with his lip curled. 'You, elf,' he says. And Maffy stands up straight and stares back at the Master, cold-like. The Master wrinkles his nose in disgust at Maffy and says 'Keep away from my wife or I'll kill you myself.'"

The little elf stopped rocking and whimpered once before covering his ears with his hands.

"Well, then Maffy throws himself on the ground, kicking up dust and shouting his name, flopping around like a dying fish, tearing up all the rosemary he can put his hands on. Mr. Malfoy just whips out his wand and Petrifies him, and then he fires me for 'not being able to control my help.'"

Mr. Greenslow squared his shoulders and pinned Hermione with his steady gaze. "You'll have to take him back, Missy. I didn't even get paid for the work that was done. I'll just hire Squibs next time, I think." He nodded with curt respect and stomped out of the office.

Hermione took a deep breath and released it in a long sigh, looking at the forlorn little elf slumped over in the wizard-sized visitor's chair.

"Would you like to talk about what happened, Maffy?" she asked in a tone of gentle encouragement.

He shook his head no, ears flopping in sad agreement.

"Mr. Greenslow was our last client willing to take an undocumented elf," Hermione said, waiting patiently for Maffy to meet her eyes. When he did, she continued, "I don't suppose you'd like to help with the filing and such?"

She smiled when Maffy shrugged, perking up a bit.

They held hands as they walked along Diagon Alley under twinkling lamp lights.

"I think Fortescue's is still open," commented Harry. "Would you like some ice cream?"

Pansy didn't answer him; she seemed very far away. Really, she'd been preoccupied all evening. It was only their third date. He wondered if he'd always bored witches this quickly.

"Pansy, is there something bothering you?" Harry stopped and squeezed her hand.

She looked up into his earnest green eyes and struggled to squelch the speck of guilt that had been haunting her all night. If she didn't find Draco soon, and change him back, that niggler would become a mountain. It had been nonexistent eleven days ago...the first time Harry asked her out...when she was sure locating an elf with ice blond eyebrows would be easy.

She snorted at herself. *Easy*.

"I'm sorry I've been such bad company tonight," she said, leaning her forehead against his broad chest.

So sorry about so many things.

"It's just... I like you very much, but Draco's been missing so long... It feels like I shouldn't be happy."

Harry tilted Pansy's chin up with a gentle touch and looked in her eyes. "One thing the War taught me was to seize happiness when it comes your way, even in the middle of doubt and pain and suffering. We all need something good to hang onto in the bad times." He stroked her back in a soothing motion, holding her close to him. "You deserve happiness, Pansy."

No, I don't.

"Even after I tried to turn you over to Voldemort?" she mumbled into his chest.

"You didn't really know what you were doing then," Harry replied in a whisper. "You were just reacting to the situation."

"Right," she choked out, half-laughing. Her eyes were full of tears when she looked up at him. "I tend to do that a lot."

Harry kissed her on the nose. "Good to know." He gathered her close in another hug and then released her. They resumed walking towards her flat in meditative silence.

When they arrived at her building, she placed her key in the lock of the entry door and looked up at Harry through her eyelashes. He chuckled and stepped back, putting his hands in his trouser pockets.

"I really want to go upstairs with you, Pans," he said, gazing at her with eyes that warmed her skin to a blush. "But I don't think you're ready for that yet."

She shook her head a little, in agreement or denial...she wasn't sure...and he swooped down to capture her lips with his, kissing her so thoroughly her knees weakened and she had to lean against the door frame.

The screech of a post Owl brought them back to reality with a rude thump. Harry reluctantly released her lips, and she giggled as he stepped back. His hair was standing on end where her fingers had disheveled it and his glasses were completely fogged over. The Owl screeched again and Harry turned to relieve the bird of its post as Pansy Charmed his glasses clear again.

He scanned the post and thrust it in a robe pocket, grunting to himself.

"Anything important?" Pansy inquired, turning to open the door. Her legs still felt like jelly.

"Not too," he said, running a hand through his hair to flatten it again. Somewhat. "Hermione's asking if the MLE has had any missing elf reports filed. She's got an undocumented fellow in her office she's been trying to place."

He fiddled with his robes, attempting to distract himself from following Pansy into her flat, and so he missed the moment she froze before plastering a smile on her face.

"Oh. Well, um... Goodnight, Harry. I had a wonderful time," she said, slipping inside the vestibule of her building.

"Night, Pansy," he replied, his eyes filled with promise. "I'll see you soon."

Maffy stretched, feeling it from his toes to the tips of his ears, and turned to face another stack of files on the low table to his left.

Working would be a lot simpler if he'd acquired elfin powers to go with this shape when he'd Transfigured, but no such luck. If anything, his magic was weaker, especially as he didn't have a wand at his disposal.

Still, he couldn't complain...much: filing was a long sight easier than planting Devil's Snare or brushing a rabid kneazle, even if it seemed never-ending at times. Working for Granger had been a revelation...she was fair and compassionate, never expecting more from a co-worker than she did herself. Indeed, she seemed to expect far less. Maffy grimaced, thinking of Adrian Pucey, the lazy, arrogant arsehole. And he didn't like the way Pucey looked at Granger one little bit.

The Council for House-Elf Welfare was a haven to Maffy, particularly after the devastating blow of having his parents not recognise him. Filing required very little

brainpower, so he'd had a fair amount of time to meditate on his situation.

He'd realised several things. First, it was clear now that he'd been cursed. He'd confirmed it every time he tried to tell someone who he was...nothing had worked. Not verbalisation. Not writing it down. Not semaphore or Morse Code or spelling it out with clipped newspaper lettering. He smirked, remembering how put out Granger had been with him that morning. Her copy of the *Prophet* had resembled a slice of Swiss cheese.

Second, he'd come to the conclusion that Pansy had been the one to curse him. It was just like her to be so impetuous. Not that he hadn't deserved it. He'd been a right bastard there, announcing his engagement and then blithely expecting her to continue their liaison as if nothing had changed. It was a piss-poor way to treat a loyal friend. And he'd always known, deep down, that Pansy hoped for more, misguided as that notion was.

Third was the most startling realisation of all. He was falling in love with Hermione Granger. Not only was she fair, compassionate and hardworking, but she was also honest to a fault, loyal and extremely protective. She hadn't pushed him to explain his bad behaviour at the Malfoy estate; instead, she was exploring every avenue and opportunity at her disposal to establish his identity.

Despite his surliness. Despite his short temper. Despite his failure to be deserving of her time or attention. It was both humbling and enthralling. He rather suspected she would work just as hard to restore his true form even if she knew that Maffy was really Draco Malfoy, evil ex-Slytherin.

He wondered if he could ever hope to be good enough for her.

Hermione signed off on the Hogwarts house-elf report next to Minerva McGonagall's signature, making a note in her diary to check up on Winky's progress later that week. She'd given up butterbeer after the Final Battle, but had fallen off the wagon a month prior, when Horace Slughorn had scolded her harshly for misdelivering his cherished crystallised pineapple to Sibyll Trelawney.

Hermione sighed, twirling her quill between two fingers as she considered Maffy's plight. None of her inquiries had yielded results thus far, and she was a mere heartbeat away from confronting Lucius Malfoy on his own turf, as reluctant as she was to visit the Manor. Ever again.

Even though the little elf refused to discuss it, she suspected Maffy's behaviour at the Manor meant he'd had some association with that... family. It was highly likely, in fact, that they were the ones to abandon Maffy in the first place. Their names were very similar, after all.

It was customary amongst wizarding families, especially purebloods, to give trusted servants a variation of the family's surname. Maffy seemed too young for such an honour; but it was possible that his father or grandfather had been accorded the favour and passed it down. If so, that trust had been well placed, since the feisty little elf hadn't betrayed the family despite being discarded in such a harsh manner.

A throat cleared, breaking her reverie, and Hermione looked up to see Adrian Pucey lounging in her doorway, eyes at half-mast and a sly smile upon his lips. He oozed further into her office, blocking one avenue of escape.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," he said, leaning his hands on her desk and peering down her robes. Hermione sat upright, regarding him warily, and he chuckled. "Did you hear the good news? The post of Deputy Chief of Magical Games has opened up, and I'm under consideration."

Hermione huffed in outrage but said nothing, keeping one eye on the doorway behind her boss. It was late, but maybe a co-worker or a client would stroll by.

"I've been such a good boy. I think I deserve a reward, don't you? *Accio* wand." She grabbed at it, but the thin rod slipped through her fingers into Adrian's hand. "You've been putting me off, Hermione. Hard to get may have captured my interest, but if you play your cards right, I'll recommend you for Chief Representative for the Council of House-Elf Welfare."

She stared up at him, completely gobsmacked, her hands curling into fists. He leaned further over the desk, his minty fresh breath washing across her face. It made her stomach flip over sourly.

"Give us a slap and tickle, then, Granger," Adrian whispered in a silky tone. "I bet a hoity-toity swot like you is just gagging for it."

She was raising her fists to box his ears even as his lips descended on hers. Just then she heard a deep, vicious growl and the scrabbling of tiny feet.

Adrian let out a high-pitched wail of pain and scrambled backwards off her desk, flailing his arms out behind him. She sat in astonished shock as Adrian danced about her small office, looking like a hippogriff with its head cut off. When he turned completely around, she spied the reason for his distress.

Maffy was hanging from Pucey's backside, teeth sunk in his skinny arse. The little elf's eyes were twinkling with unholy glee as he tightened his jaw, making Adrian wail like a banshee.

"Get it off, get it off!" Pucey howled, swatting at Maffy.

"I rather thought you'd like that sort of thing, you manky toe rag," Hermione drawled, sitting back in her chair. She put her feet up on her desk. *Accio* wands." She caught both with ease. "I guess I was wrong."

She waved her wand, freezing her boss in place. The angry little elf sank his teeth in deeper, and Adrian whimpered piteously.

"I think Maffy wants you to apologise," she commented, with apparent nonchalance. The elf's ears perked up and he nodded firmly, tightening his jaw for emphasis.

"I am very sorry. It won't happen again," Adrian said as sincerely as possible, his voice laced with pain.

"Thank you, Maffy, you may go now," said Hermione. Maffy let go and dropped in a graceful fall to the floor. Instead of leaving, however, he strolled to the visitor's chair he favoured and settled into it, crossing his arms. He frowned in belligerence when she rolled her eyes at him.

She unfroze Adrian and watched with cynical amusement as he beat a hasty retreat to his lair. "I devoutly hope he is looking for another position in case Magical Games falls through." Her expression promised that it would. Maffy smirked at her and she laughed a little. Then she started shaking.

Disillusioned, Pansy crept into the Council offices, searching for Draco. She knew in her bones that he was the undocumented elf Harry had mentioned. She was almost giddy with relief that the whole fiasco would be over with soon, even if Draco wanted to press charges. She couldn't bear to lie to Harry any more.

She glanced in the first office she came to and did a double take. Was that Adrian Pucey, rubbing his naked arse and muttering to himself? And were those *bite marks*? She knew he was a total sleaze, always trying to feel girls up in the dungeon hallways, but this was downright pervy. She shook her head in disgust and moved on, remembering her mission.

Passing several empty rooms in the evening gloom, she paused in Hermione's doorway next. The witch seemed rattled, with her head bowed and her hands shaking, staring blindly at her desktop. She looked like she could do with a cup of tea.

Where was Draco?

She turned a corner and glanced in a doorway as she continued walking, but then stopped suddenly and backtracked when she realised she'd seen an elf in the break room, making tea. And that the elf had ice blond eyebrows. She pointed her wand and murmured the counter-curse, frowning when nothing happened.

Shite. Un-buggering-believable. He'd surrendered to the curse.

"*Finite Incantatem*," she whispered without hope.

It didn't work, of course. Once the subject surrendered to the curse, the only way out was to fulfil the curse's objective.

She had a feeling Draco Malfoy was going to be an elf for a very long time.

Totally buggered wasn't an accurate description in the least.

"I know you're there, Pans," squeaked Maffy without turning around. "I can smell your perfume."

Double buggering arsehole shite, she thought, flicking her wand to remove the Disillusionment. *He is going to be fucking livid.*

"Can I borrow your wand?" he asked, reaching for the length of willow. She handed it over, gulping down an anxious breath. He cast a Warming Charm over the tray sitting on the low counter and handed the wand back to her.

"You don't want to kill me?" she asked, dazed, and slumped into a rickety wooden chair.

"Not today," he answered, standing in front of her. "We don't belong together, you and I."

"I realised that a while ago," Pansy whispered tearfully.

Draco patted her hand in a comforting way with his tiny green one. "I was a crap friend to you. I'll try to be a better one in the future."

"Have you told anyone who you are?" she asked.

"Can't," he said, smiling ruefully. "This is the first real conversation I've had in more than a month."

"Oh. Then you know I..." Pansy paused, biting her lip. "Why aren't you mad at me?"

"I was. Believe me, for a while there, I was ready to tear you apart, limb from limb." Pansy winced and Draco grinned at her. "But then I got to thinking, and I realised I needed to surrender to the curse," he said, patting her hand again. "So I did. You can't help me now, Pans, but thanks for trying. I need to learn my lesson."

Pansy picked him up and gave the surly elf a tight hug. "I hope you learn it soon," she whispered. "Should I tell your parents anything?"

Draco wrinkled his long nose. "No. Anything you say will just upset them, be it an excuse for my absence or the truth."

"I wish I could tell *you* the truth," she said, putting him down, gentle as a feather.

"I know you can't, Pans." He wriggled his ears, grinning. "As much fun as this has been, I really don't want to be stuck this way."

"Quite," she replied, relieved he knew the consequences without needing an explanation. An elf-sized Malfoy tantrum was an event she was happy to avoid.

Also, she didn't think Lucius and Narcissa would be pleased with a permanently elfin son, even if he was the perfect shade of Slytherin green.

Maffy carried the tinkling tea tray with care and set it on Hermione's desk, practically under her nose. He was still worried about her, but at least she'd stopped shaking so much. He watched her with hawk-like absorption, detecting a fine shiver that travelled up her spine every so often.

"Drink," he croaked, jumping up into his chair so that he could make sure she did as he ordered.

She dropped a sugar lump into her tea and dribbled a bit of milk in as well, stirring the brew before she looked up at him.

"Thank you for looking after me, Maffy," she said. "I'm so glad you were here...he took my wand...it could have been a disaster..." Her voice trembled and her hands were shaking again.

"Drink!" Maffy commanded, worried and uncomfortable. He'd simply done what anyone would do, given the circumstances. Although, anyone else might not have used their teeth.

What happened next was a complete shock to them both.

When Hermione's lips touched the teacup, a blinding light filled her office before winking out in a flash.

And in her visitor's chair sat a very naked, and very human, Draco Malfoy.

They sat in utter stillness, blinking their eyes several times, before Draco abruptly stood upright, covering his family jewels with both hands, and turned sharply on his heel, Disapparating with a loud pop.

"Maffy?" Hermione murmured in weak disbelief, staring at the now empty chair. *No wonder he'd been so grumpy.*

~Three months later~

"I wish to register a complaint."

Hermione palmed her wand, activating the Holding Charm with surreptitious grace; she'd put it into place as her first manoeuvre as Chief Representative for the Council for House-Elf Welfare.

"Oh, you do, do you?" she responded, and wrinkled her nose.

What kind of a comeback was that?

"Very smooth, Granger," Draco drawled, sprawling in the visitor's chair across from her desk, feet planted firmly on the floor. "Aren't you duty-bound to follow up on an elf's well-being?"

"Not if the elf in question is a cursed, very much *former* elf," she replied with prim conviction, straightening a pile of files.

"That's beside the point," he said, frowning at his manicure. "You did a very nice thing for Pansy, convincing Harry to hear her out."

"I could understand her position, having worked for a sleazy git," Hermione said, smiling sweetly. "Would you like some tea?"

He nodded warily, distrusting that smile on instinct. "Yes, please."

"Tea, please, Winky," she called out. A tray popped up on her desk, the squat china pot breathing steam. "It was stupid of me not to guess what you really were, given that you didn't possess any elfin powers."

He shrugged, watching her pour tea into the cups and float one over to him, plain.

She remembers.

"You tried to tell me in several ways, didn't you?" She remembered her *Prophet*, a la Swiss cheese.

He merely shrugged again, sipping his tea. "Pucey's moved on, then, has he?" He inquired with a glint in his eyes.

"As if you didn't know," she replied, meeting his gaze with frank amusement. "Percy told me Lucius met with Kingsley to arrange Adrian's transfer." She paused to select a biscuit from the plate on her desk. "To Siberia."

Draco snorted into his tea. *Bloody Know-It-All.*

"I have some questions, if you don't mind," Hermione continued, smiling again. Draco shifted in his seat. "What was the lesson imposed by the curse?"

He stopped shifting, caught by surprise. He hadn't expected that question so soon.

"I can get to the point relatively quickly," she explained. Her smile widened.

Saucy minx.

He shot her a look of mild rebuke and took a deep breath. "To commit an act of caring for another being without agenda, ulterior motive or possibility of gain."

It took Hermione a full five minutes to stop laughing. Just when Draco's patience was wearing thin, she recovered herself, and sipped some tea. "How diabolically clever," she murmured in appreciation.

"Quite," Draco muttered, unamused.

She offered him the plate of cookies, which he dismissed with an insouciant wave. "Why did you surrender to the curse?"

"Not important," he replied, and made a show of checking his antique pocket watch. "It's been grand catching up, but I really must be going now. Perhaps we can get together another time?" he added politely, standing up to leave.

He got as far as the doorway, where he hit an invisible barrier that gently bounced him back towards the centre of the room. He tried closing his eyes and turning on his heel, to no avail.

"Does it have anything to do with you calling off your engagement to Astoria Greengrass?" Hermione asked, pushing back her chair.

"Possibly," he said cagily, whirling to face her. "Let me go and I might tell you someday."

"Fine, Draco," she said in a calm, neutral tone, swishing her wand as she stood up. "Run away like you always have."

The tips of his ears turned red and he marched over to her, grasping her by the shoulders. "I surrendered to the curse," he growled, resisting the temptation to shake her. "Because I have feelings for you, dammit!"

She grinned in utter cheek and he growled again, deep in his chest, pulling her to him, intent only on kissing that saucy look right off her face.

He had a feeling it would take a lifetime to achieve such an impossible task.

~fin~

A/N:

"I wish to register a complaint." was borrowed from the incomparable Dead Parrot sketch, courtesy Monty Python's Flying Circus.

The premise was inspired by an old fairy tale entitled "The Frog Prince."

C.H.E.W. - get it? I crack myself up. I really do.

To the mods of dmhgficexchange (maplesugrrl, itsbeenvery, reetinkerbell and eucalyptus) for outstanding patience; to Manda and Alex, for listening to my bizarre plot ramblings; to Corianderpie, for beta skills beyond excellence, I give great big thank you hugs.

This story was written (oh so slowly, but with care and love) for Acerola21, who requested "post-Hogwarts, involv[ing] Hermione's quest to better house-elves' lives." Um, I bent it a little, but I think it's still recognisable. I hope you didn't mind the bonus pp/hp, and enjoyed the ride...This was a blast to write!