

Overcoming Parentage

by astopperindeath

Post-War, EWE. After the War is over, the Ministry decides to place the children of Death Eaters into rehabilitation. Draco Malfoy, living with Severus Snape, is forced into therapy with a former classmate. Eventual SS/HG.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 10

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Prologue

The Ministry today unveiled a new post-War social program: the Agency for the Rehabilitation of Death Eaters' Children.

Legislation, spearheaded by Percy Weasley, passed the Wizengamot last night by an overwhelming majority. Personally, I am outraged that of all individuals, Percy Weasley is the main proponent of this legislation, given no-one has ever been able to prove where his loyalties truly laid during the Second War.

The new act requires the children of all confirmed Death Eaters, regardless of their affiliation during the Second War, to register with ARDEC. Each child will be assigned a caseworker, who will work with them to overcome the prejudices instilled in them by virtue of their unfortunate parentage.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," states Muggle-born Hermione Granger, caseworker for ARDEC. "It will give Muggle-borns the opportunity to share their history in a way that was never allowed for or required by the Hogwarts curriculum."

Supporters of ARDEC believe this rehabilitation process will allow these children the opportunity to move past their anti-Muggle biases and integrate into Wizard society as well-rounded, open-minded adults.

"It's not fair," states Pansy Parkinson. "If we had wanted to learn about Muggles, we could have taken a class in school. I've never hurt a Muggle and I fail to understand how talking about my feelings will improve me."

Outraged? Relieved? Owl Rita and let her know what you think! The best responses will appear in next week's "Rita Writes"!

The young man slammed his fist into the tabletop, upsetting the sugar bowl and causing his coffee to slosh onto the older man's toast. The older man glared at him. However, upon seeing the look of rage and despair in the younger man's eyes, his look changed to that of concern. The younger man held out the newspaper, slightly crumpled under the stress of his flexing hands, to his older companion, and with a stabbing finger, indicated the offending article.

He took the paper and scanned the contents of the article in question. His lips thinned to an almost non-existent line, and he looked up at the younger man, who ran a hand through his shoulder-length blond hair.

"I'm fucked, aren't I?"

"Indeed," the older man sneered. "Indeed."

Return to Spinner's End

Chapter 2 of 10

Snape and Malfoy prepare for Granger's interview.

Chapter One: Return to Spinner's End.

He awoke that morning to the sound of an owl crashing into his bedroom window. He opened the letter, which contained a summons to the new ARDEC office in Diagon Alley. The missive, signed at the bottom in childish handwriting by Percy Weasley, the new Director of ARDEC, informed him that his meeting was in two hours.

Cursing loudly, he crumpled the parchment and threw it as hard as he could across the room. It sailed through the doorway of his bedroom and lay despondently in the hallway. Sleepily, he stumbled into the bathroom and stuck his head under the cold stream of the shower. He turned the water from cold to warm, removed his pajama bottoms, and entered the now-steamy shower.

A few minutes later, as he rinsed the last of the shampoo from his hair, he heard the bathroom door squeak open.

"Don't you ever knock?"

"Draco, I changed your diapers as a child. There's nothing in here I haven't seen before."

"Oh really? You've watched me wank before? You're a fucking pervert, Severus."

Draco almost heard his roommate's eyes roll.

"And what if I have, Draco?"

Definitely not the answer Draco expected.

Severus had chuckled when a bar of soap flew over the shower bar, nearly missing his head.

"Did you want something, Severus? Or did you come in just to ogle me?"

"I found your summons in the hallway."

There was a long pause before Draco responded. "And?"

Another pause. "And I was wondering if you would like me to escort you to Diagon Alley."

Draco was infuriated. He thrust open the shower curtain, oblivious to his nudity.

"Yes, Severus, why don't you go with me?" He sneered. "Better yet, you can hold my hand while we cross the street. I'm sure when I show up there with the pariah of the Order, they will immediately forgive me of my 'unfortunate parentage' and send us home!"

At the slightly deflated look on Severus' face, Draco had tried to calm down.

"Look, I understand that you feel like you have to take care of me, but honestly, Severus, you killed Dumbledore for me, you took me in when my father wanted nothing to do with me—I think you've done enough, so stop trying to fight my battles!"

He failed to calm down.

A breeze hit his wet, naked form, and Draco suddenly realized his awkward situation.

Severus smirked. "Oh, my, Draco, you certainly *do* blush all over. Just like your father..." Severus threw in one last leer before leaving the bathroom. "Breakfast is on the table; make sure you eat before you get to Diagon Alley."

Draco grinned. No, Severus wasn't gay, but between all those years spent with only Dumbledore as a comrade and attending the insipid parties the scion of the Malfoy family had thrown, it was no surprise that Severus' idea of appropriate jokes between men was slightly... skewed.

Draco made it downstairs minutes before he was required to be at the Ministry. What Severus believed to constitute breakfast was laid out on the table—burnt toast and coffee the consistency of motor oil. He had grabbed a piece of toast, and hurrying to the fireplace, tossed in some Floo powder and left the house.

Draco Malfoy looked around the small office, trying desperately not to let disdain register on his face. Severus had repeatedly told him to just "play along." The sooner they thought him compliant with their policies, the quicker they'd let him get back to his life.

And now he sat in an overly decorated office, littered with tchotchkes, sitting directly across from *her*. As if it wasn't bad enough that he had to be with her, did the room have to be oppressively... banal?

"So I suppose you know why you're here, Mr. Malfoy?"

Knowing he'd probably only have one shot at getting his trademark sneer in before he would have to "play nice," he affixed the smirk on his face. "Still spouting off phrases you read in books, Granger? Let me guess, the first page of the 'ARDEC Interrogation Manual'?"

Her face crumpled infinitesimally before she schooled her features into a blank mask. Draco filed the fact that he could still get under her skin in the back of his mind for future use.

"Mr. Malfoy, you clearly have no wish to be here, nor do I have any wish to be your counselor. However, ARDEC, in their infinite wisdom, believes that I am the most..."

appropriate staff member to deal with your particular case, given our similarities in age, our history together at Hogwarts, and..." she swallowed, "my blood status."

"So, what you're saying, Granger, is that if I can grow to be friends with you, that will prove to the Ministry that I love all Mud... ggleborns?" Draco's face turned a bit green at this thought.

Hermione snickered. "Something like that. Look, Malfoy, I know that you really never had a decent shot of hearing anything positive about Muggles, given your father's... proclivities. What I'd like to do, rather than belabor the point through ultimately useless therapy sessions, is just immerse you in the Muggle world for a while—movie theatres, takeaway, electricity."

She stopped explaining when he began chuckling. "What is it, Malfoy?"

"What if I told you I'd been doing that for a year or so..."

"Pardon me?"

"What if I told you I'd been living in Muggle Manchester for a year and know how to order takeaway, use the Internet, and even enjoyed watching *Fight Club* in theatre last week? Did you notice how much Marla looks like Aunt Bella used to..."

"What are you talking about, Malfoy? *Manchester*?" Hermione's voice had taken on that irritatingly shrill, swotty tone she usually reserved for Harry and Ron when they chose to talk about Quidditch over working on their Charms homework.

"Do you not read the papers, Granger? Didn't you hear that my father disowned me when he found out I tried to make reparations with St. Potter?"

She looked confused.

"You *do* know I have been conversing with Potter for months now, don't you?"

She began fidgeting uncomfortably.

"Cripes, Granger, where have you been?"

"We-ll, let's just say that when Ronald and I parted ways, I immersed myself in preparation for this job and haven't exactly kept in touch with Harry... or Ginny for that matter..."

"Are you telling me you're no longer the Golden Trio's third wheel?"

Hermione glared. "That's beside the point. Where have you been living, Malfoy, and why do you even care about learning about Muggle things?"

"Why, Spinner's End, of course. My godfather insisted I learn to blend in with the neighbors."

Hermione looked less-than-pleased by the rakish grin that now graced Malfoy's face.

AN: This story was written for the help_chile challenge on LJ. It was written for kerravonsen for her winning prompt: "I'd like something Severus/Hermione, with a side order of Draco redemption, if possible. It would probably have to be AU for all of that to work. I'd prefer it to be something where neither Severus nor Hermione had a secret crush for the other all along: I like to see the relationship develop from nothing."

Thanks to clairvoyant12 for the wonderful beta work and moral support!

Her Cloying Perfume

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione visits Spinner's End. An unforeseen dinner date is made.

Chapter Two Her Cloying Perfume

The Next Day

"And *then*, she turned this amazing shade of puce, when she realized her plan to 'acculturate' me had already been successfully achieved by The Greasy Git!" Draco dissolved in peals of laughter under Snape's irritated frown.

"Did she actually call me that, Draco? I always thought she was above such epithets..."

"No, but you could see it in her face." Snape could tell that Draco was trying desperately to quit laughing, yet he quickly broke into sniggers once again.

"So if that's the case, then what is her plan, Draco? Hypnosis where you discover that you secretly loved Muggles this entire time and that your father never loved you?"

"Not quite. Ever hear of a caseworker? For like, foster kids?"

Snape glared murderously. "Do you mean to tell me she will be observing us to make sure I am a sufficient role model?"

"I do, Severus. She'll be here today at teatime."

Snape uttered a string of curses that would have made any former student quail in fear. Any student except Draco, apparently, who was curled on the end of the settee clutching his stomach in pain caused by his giggle fit. Snape stormed upstairs to his bathroom, slamming the door.

"I haven't heard you slam a door like that since you subbed for Lupin in Defense third year, Sev!" Draco called after him.

Approximately twenty minutes later, there was a sharp rap on the door.

Snape stomped down the stairs. Draco stared at him, his eyebrows arched and his mouth hanging open like a guppy.

"What?" Snape snapped.

"It's just that I've never seen your hair so short. And you're still in jeans and a t-shirt! I half expected you to come down the stairs in your old teaching togs..."

Snape gave Draco a look that efficiently implied he was not impressed with Draco's astonishment.

"Trying to impress the lady, Severus?" Draco drawled, affecting a caricature of every regency-era actor's accent and posture.

"Trying to give her absolutely nothing to gossip about, Arse."

Draco grinned; Snape threw the door open.

She stood before Snape, hair in a messy bun, clad in a simple, tailored button-down shirt, a knee-length pencil skirt, stockings, and black high-heeled pumps. In her hands she carried a Muggle pad of paper and a ballpoint pen; a purse was slung over her shoulder.

"Master Snape, how lovely to see you again."

Snape was impressed. Granger clearly had done her homework if she knew not to refer to him as "Professor" or "Headmaster."

"Miss Granger. Here to spy I presume?"

She looked at him, amusement crinkling the corners of her eyes.

"Do come in. Sorry for the clutter, but Draco only saw fit to warn me of your arrival twenty minutes ago."

She entered the living room and quickly took stock of the immaculate space. The smirk on her face spoke volumes. "Clutter, indeed" it seemed to say. She took a seat on the couch and looked up at him expectantly.

"Let's jump right in, shall we? ARDEC has asked me to investigate Mr. Malfoy's assertions that he's been living as a Muggle some twelve months. Should this prove true, we will be much more inclined to expedite this process." The pen in her hand shook slightly as she struggled to maintain eye contact.

Snape pitied the girl. She was trying so hard to be professional in a place she was clearly uncomfortable entering.

"Well, Miss Granger, I'm sure you'll find that both my home and Malfoy's training will pass your inspection. You will find our fuse box is in order. I've left some bread on the counter so Draco can prove he knows how to use the toaster. And after that, we can move on to pilot lights and the Hoover."

Well, he didn't pity her enough to be nice. If he were actually nice, he might have to deal with an unconscious witch sprawled on his couch, and that was simply not on his agenda for the day.

"There's no need to be snippy with me, Snape. I'm sure you've done an admirable job exposing Draco to Muggle culture. You were never one I pegged as a Muggle-hater."

Her eyes wandered as she said this, slowing over some of the objects in the room. Part of him began to feel defensive. Oh, how he wished he could remove that piece with a dull, rusty knife. Nothing in the room, save the coffee table and the lamp, could at any time have been considered high-class. It was all in relatively decent shape, but nearly every piece of furniture screamed low-class utilitarianism. During his teaching years, he couldn't have cared less how the house looked. Since moving back last year, his income had been spotty at best and downright embarrassing at worst. This is why he hated having guests...it always forced him to look at his environs through a critical lens, and he always found his home wanting.

Snape bristled. "Listening to Potter's stories about his mother, Granger? I thought you were above listening to idle gossip."

Hermione raised her head to look at him squarely. "I was going to say it's because you never treated Muggle-borns in your charge any worse than you did Harry, and given he's a half-blood such as yourself, I simply thought that implied you were above such silly concerns as blood status."

She couldn't have simpered better than Umbridge if she'd tried.

Draco sniggered again.

As she brushed passed him, her cloying perfume one of his own creations wafted over him. He wasn't thoroughly pleased with that portion of his product line sold in Hogsmeade, but it paid for the roof over his head. He still hadn't forgiven his father for taking out that second mortgage on the place just before he died. Thank goodness no one knew the line of products were his. He wondered if she always wore it.

He wondered why he even cared.

She sat on the settee next to a still-sprawled roommate. "Draco, if you would, I have prepared a questionnaire for you. It will help to ascertain just how accustomed to Muggle culture you've become."

Snape watched as Draco scanned the typed sheet.

"What films have you seen in the last year? How many pence are in a quid? What is the proper side of the road to drive on? Seriously, Granger? Couldn't think of something more difficult?"

"Could you honestly have answered these questions a year ago, Draco?"

He closed his mouth, and taking the pen she gestured towards him, began filling out the paperwork.

With Draco sufficiently suppressed, she turned to Snape, who was still lurking in the foyer.

"And you, Master Snape. I'll need to meet with you at your earliest convenience."

"For what purpose, Miss Granger?"

"To discuss your relationship with Mr. Malfoy in the hopes of ascertaining whether Malfoy's assertions that he has been living as a Muggle some twelve months are valid."

"I believe you've said that already, Miss Granger. Nervous?"

She ignored his question. "When would be most convenient for us to meet?"

Snape had to keep himself from grinning. This was just so easy. "I'll ignore the fact that your statement is rather foolish given it shall never be convenient for me to meet with you and instead suggest that we leave now to give Draco some time to work on his paperwork."

"And allow him to look up answers on his computer? No, I think I'll wait." Draco snorted in annoyance, then gave her a look that all but admitted to all those convened that that was exactly what he would have done.

"Tea would be lovely, though, Master Snape." She gave him a thoroughly annoyed look, which he assumed was meant to imply he was a bad host for not offering.

"Kitchen's through that far door, Miss Granger. Being a Muggle, I'm sure you can figure it out." Snape slid from the room, smiling in response to the decidedly feminine hissy-fit noises emanating from his living room. The subsequent banging he heard in his kitchen let him know she'd found the proper utensils.

"God damnit!"

Snape was pretty sure Granger's latest ejaculation indicated that she had just realized that he hadn't actually agreed to meet with her.

He listened carefully for any other disturbances. A whistle indicating the teakettle was ready; a thud as the tea service hit his grandmother's antique coffee table; the squeak of his couch springs as she flumped back into the cushions; the clatter of spoon against cup as she stirred God knows what into her tea. Snape abhorred anyone who desecrated the taste of tea with sugars and creams. Several annoyed huffs emanating from both parties. A slurp here and there, before finally...

"Done, Granger. When do I find out if I've passed?"

The rustle of paper as it was transferred from Draco's hand to hers.

"Tomorrow evening, after *Severus* and I have had dinner. Tell him I'll meet him at the restaurant on the corner at seven to discuss your case. I'm sure, given his self-employed status, that he won't have any problems meeting me then?"

The click of high heels. The slam of the front door.

Did she really have to drive that last comment home?

AN: Thanks again to the wonderful clairvoyant for the beta work. And thanks to kerravonsen for the prompt. Check the other chapters for the explanation.

I'll Have The Usual

Chapter 4 of 10

He's always hated this restaurant. His dinner tonight won't change that opinion.

Chapter 3 I'll Have the Usual

He hated this place. It was the only restaurant on the corner, or hell, within walking distance of his house. Sure, there were seedy bars with their typical pub fare on every corner of his dreary end of Manchester, but this was the only *restaurant*.

He hated the Formica tabletops and the vinyl seat covers. He hated the chipped coffee cups and the waitresses' dingy uniforms.

He hated that this was the only restaurant he'd ever been to prior to graduating Hogwarts. Family dinners were nothing special, nothing he wanted to remember.

He hated that Granger, without knowing it, had a slight advantage on him by bringing him here.

He'd done everything in preparing for her entrance to ensure he would quickly regain the upper hand. He'd arrived an hour early to make sure he was there before her. He'd chosen his clothing carefully to ensure he looked his best.

He regretted his decision to cut his hair. It had become scraggly in the year since his pardon, and he'd been rather overzealous with his wand. Parted on the left, the back only just touched his collar. The front kept slipping in front his eyes, and he had to stop himself from pushing his hair out of his face. He'd spent several moments throughout the day staring at the grey streaking his hair, all the more visible now that he couldn't tie his hair back.

He hated that he couldn't read these days without a pair of silver-framed glasses perched on his nose. They reminded him of Dumbledore far too much for comfort. Why did he not choose a different colored frame, you may ask? Because they reminded him daily of what he'd done to Dumbledore and why he needed to help Draco now.

He hated that the ridiculous perfume he'd concocted to pay the rent had just wafted towards him from the doorway... and that it had taken that for him to even notice her entrance. He was slipping if he'd missed her walking up the sidewalk in front of the glass windows at the head of the shop from his vantage point at the opposite end of the restaurant.

There was Granger, yet again looking for all the world a young professional. Today, she wore a smart, navy blue suit, again with a pencil skirt. Her hair was down, the front pulled back from her face with a clip. That plastic clip was the only part of her ensemble that detracted from her adult appearance. He almost pitied her, remembering what it was like to enter Hogwarts as a professor having just left as a student. Most of his Hogwarts persona had been born of incredible insecurity about teaching his former peers, so he definitely understood hiding behind a wall of clothing, so to speak.

After a few hushed words to the hostess, Granger looked up, smiled at him, and made her way across the restaurant, her damnable heels clicking the entire way.

She extended her hand to him as she stood next to the table. "Thank you for meeting me at such short notice, Master Snape." As he clasped her hand, he watched her take inventory of his appearance: the untucked button-down shirt, the slim fitting jeans (something he had very much missed from his childhood and the one thing he did not regret from his reintegration into Muggle society), the square-toed black shoes. She quickly averted her eyes, almost as if she had just realized what she was doing.

It gave him the edge he needed.

"I highly doubt you invited me here to assess my person, Miss Granger. Perhaps you better sit down and begin your inquisition."

She flushed the deep puce that Draco had mentioned the day before, and he smirked. She clumsily dropped her briefcase on the chair next to her and began rifling through its contents. Upon finding a large packet of papers, she sat in the chair opposite him.

"Since you're not going to treat me with any respect, sir, I guess we better dispense with pleasantries and just begin." He tried to cut her off, but she continued. "First, why did you take Mr. Malfoy into your home? Is there a familial relationship that I am not aware of?"

"I know that you are in fact aware that Draco is my godson, given he told you that during his interview in your office. Other than that? Let's just say that I feel a certain... responsibility towards the boy."

"Because of Dumbledore?" she blurted out with all the grace of an elephant.

"For fuck's sake, Granger, you sure don't pull your punches, do you?" he said, grimacing. "Because of Dumbledore, I suppose, and how was it Skeeter put it...? His 'unfortunate parentage.' Sounds a bit like the verbiage used to describe Muggle-borns, doesn't it?"

"The Ministry and ARDEC does not condone the statement put out by Ms. Skeeter," Hermione all but spat in response. "Back to Malfoy. Why did you insist he... go native?"

"When was the last time you saw someone walking down the street in serpent-embroidered dress robes, Granger? That might go over in London, but up here, he wouldn't last more than a day in that get-up. We like our privacy, and I did everything to ensure he would blend in. Last thing I needed was a constable lurking around the house to see what a pair of mismatched poofers were getting up to."

"Oh? I'm sorry, sir, I never knew you were gay... Draco too?"

The fork he'd been fiddling with clanged against the Formica. "That's not at all what I meant, and I think you knew that." She definitely knew that, judging from the grin on her face. *Cheeky bint.* "But, as a Muggle, what would *you* think about two men living together, one of which dresses in embroidered robes? I didn't need the gossip. There's been enough about me my entire life."

The waitress finally acknowledged them. "Io, Sev. Same as usual?"

"Please."

"And for your lovely lady?"

Snape growled. "She's not my lovely lady! And she'll have the same."

She opened her mouth, gaping like a fish. He glared her into acquiescence.

The waitress walked away, a look of mock annoyance on her face.

Hermione immediately began harping. "I'll have you know I am *fully* capable of ordering for myself, Master Snape."

"Oh give over, Granger, I'm well aware of that. I've been coming to this restaurant for nearly forty years, and I've had every single thing on the menu. Trust me, what I've ordered is in actuality the *only* palatable menu item. I was merely saving your stomach from unnecessary distress."

"And why would you care about my possible distress?"

"Because, if you decide to give Draco the news of his passing grade in person tonight, I'd hate to have the carpets cleaned *when* you become ill."

Granger turned a surprisingly vivid shade of chartreuse at his words. The waitress came back, plunking a pitcher of stout and two glasses on the table, before turning on her heel and leaving them alone once again.

Before Snape could continue his gentlemanly behavior, she grabbed the pitcher and poured each of them a glass. After taking a sip, she continued.

"And how genuine, would you say, are his feelings of goodwill towards Muggles at this time?"

Snape nearly spit out his beer. "Genuine? Miss Granger, surely you do not think Draco is a Muggle *lover*. He understands the necessity of learning certain... behaviors. But he'll never see the benefit of doing things the Muggle way over doing them magically."

"Well, honestly, we don't wish for him to *become* Muggle. We just want to know that he doesn't... well... hate them... racially..." Her statement wandered off almost like a question, almost as if she hated herself for saying it so poorly.

"If you're asking if he would knowingly harm a Muggle, Miss Granger, no, he wouldn't. And before you ask me if it's because he's changed so much... It's more a fact that he realizes that his family has been completely scarred by the actions of his father, and he does not wish to bring more shame to them. He won't be hurting *anyone* anymore. Muggles are just lucky to be a part of a bigger life decision."

Granger started looking irritated, and Snape immediately realized his error.

"So what you're saying, Snape, is that Draco is merely integrating and living amongst Muggles to help increase his status amongst purebloods? Bring glory and honor back to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black by being an upright citizen?"

Snape searched for words, desperately trying to keep from losing control of the situation.

"Regardless of the motivations, you surely can see that this is a positive step for Draco."

"What I *surely* see is Slytherin tactics being used to try to circumvent the law!"

"Here you go, two Specials!"

Granger glared at him unblinkingly as the waitress placed two steaming plates on the table.

"Can I get you two anything else?"

"NO!" they barked at her.

Smiling yet again as if she fully expected this sort of behavior out of Snape, the waitress left to tend to her other customers.

"Miss Granger..."

"Stuff it, Snape. This interview is *over*."

Quickly grabbing up all her papers, she crammed them in her bag, blew a stray tendril of hair out of her face, and stormed from the restaurant.

God, he hated this place...

Thanks once again to the lovely clairvoyant for keeping me going on this one! Prompt from kerravonsen for the help_chile community on LJ.

What Did You Do?

Chapter 5 of 10

Snape is drunk, then hungover. Hermione's home visit goes nothing like one would expect. Draco earns a nickname.

Chapter 4 What Did You Do?

"What did you do, Severus?"

He had been sitting on the stoop for the last three hours, waiting for Snape to wander home. He had a clear view of the restaurant from the stoop, but Snape had not emerged.

"Had dinner. 'Sgreat. Drinks at McLarens. Should've called you to join..." Snape tripped.

Draco, already annoyed, was not amused. He moved to catch Snape, but the older wizard had righted himself and now stood looming over him, swaying to music only he could hear.

"What in God's name did you say to her, Severus?"

"Very proud Puggle, you are. Make your mother proud. Honor. Family."

Draco couldn't keep a straight face. "Puggle? I'm a dog?"

"Y'know, pure-blood born. Like a Muggle with a 'P'." Snape abruptly sank to the stoop next to him, long legs stretched out, and head resting against the door frame.

"Look, I'm not going to get any information out of you drunk. I'll go and get a Sobering Draught for you."

Snape giggled. "Had a lotta draughts tonight already." He began counting off on his fingers. "Guinness draughts. Harp draughts. Draughty winds." The protuberance he called a nose didn't allow for him get away with laughing while drunk, and he snorted quite loudly. Draco rolled his eyes.

"Sides, if you open the door, I'll fall over. Ask your questions, Draco." Snape sat bolt upright, looking as if he was trying with all his might to remain straight and focused. A slight wobbling betrayed his efforts to appear sober.

"Severus, what happened?"

"Why d'you ask?" To Draco, Snape sounded guilty and defensive. "She say something to you?"

Draco dug in his pocket before bringing forth what looked to be a hastily scribbled note, which he handed to his drunken godfather. Snape fumbled for his reading glasses for several moments before Draco took pity on him and enlarged the parchment.

Dear Master Malfoy,

You scored a 68/100 on your Muggle Aptitude Test (MAT), falling two points below the required score to exempt yourself from ARDEC's program. In certain instances when the score is close to 70, an interview with a close friend will enable ARDEC to overlook this deficiency. My interview with Master Snape did little to convince me to push you through the program in spite of your score. In fact, the assessment of your character given by Master Snape concerned me greatly, and in light of his comments, I will be extending the initial period of counseling from four weeks to six. I apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you. Please send me your current schedule, and I will do my utmost to accommodate your needs. ARDEC wishes for this process to be meaningful for you, and I look forward to meeting with you as soon as possible.

Regards,

H. Granger, OM, 2nd Class.

Snape looked at him with what Draco supposed was a weird mix of guilt and pity. It ended up coming across as constipated. "Bollocks..." Snape finally mumbled.

Draco couldn't wait until Snape sobered up to learn what went on and pressed forward with his questions. "So, as I asked, Severus. What. The. Hell. Happened?"

"Granger came in. Pretty. Stupid hair thingy, but pretty. Ordered the usually...usual. Pissed her off. She asked me questions. Told her you wouldn't hurt nobody, including Muggles. Shoulda said 'specially Muggles. Said you wanted to make your family image better. Took that bad, she did. Stormed out. Had to finish the beer m'self..."

Snape swayed once again and returned to leaning against the door frame.

Draco sighed. It was just as he thought; Snape had tried to make him sound noble, but the Gryffindor in Hermione couldn't translate "Slytherin" and was just too stubborn to look at the world in any way but her own.

"Wouldn't hurt her to have to learn a bit about pure-blood culture..." Draco mused aloud.

"D'ya mean?"

"Well... I mean, I know my father all but removed me from the family, but my heritage is still mine. It may be laced with racism and anti-Muggle sentiment, but there is some good to it. My parents taught me to be proud of who I am and to strive to be my best. If my struggles to bring something positive back to my family name means not continuing the bigoted behavior I learned from my father... then I really don't understand why that's not a good enough reason for my respect of Muggles now."

"Bloody... bushy-haired, buck-toothed know-it-all..." Snape attempted to clap him on the back in a movement of solidarity but missed and instead scraped his palms as he caught himself on the concrete of the stairs.

Draco grinned. "And just a moment ago, you were telling me she was pretty..."

Snape looked up at him, attempting to pull a sober face. "Pretty know-it-all. I'll tell her so, I will, and I'll tell her she should be nice to you. First sleep, then defend. Stupid pretty wench..." Snape slumped towards him, snoring before Draco caught him against his shoulder. Making sure no one was watching, he cast a Levitation Charm on Snape before taking him back into their house.

Depositing Snape into his bed, Draco went downstairs and searched for a piece of parchment. Not finding one right away, he dug in his computer desk for a sticky note and a permanent marker, scrawled Granger a note, stuck it to his owl, and sent her on her way.

Draco awoke the next morning to an incredibly loud pounding sound. Assuming it was Severus searching for a Hangover Potion, he rolled over and ignored it, hoping it would pass. When the knocking somehow became louder, followed by a shrill, "Draco Malfoy, you better get your arse down here or I swear to God I'm making you move in with me until you learn to use a bloody alarm clock!"

Darkness still cloaked the skies and Draco heard a low roar from the other bedroom.

"Shut the fuck up, you fucking bint!" moaned his roommate.

The brutal kick at the front door let him know Granger heard Snape. Sometimes, thin walls were completely worth it.

Draco paused long enough at the mirror to make his hair even messier before trudging down the stairs.

He opened the door and surveyed her, red-faced and frazzled. "Can I help you, Granger?"

Hermione snorted, taking in his appearance. The spots of pink that graced her cheeks surprised him.

"Boxers, Malfoy? And I thought pure-bloods wore nothing under their robes..."

"I thought I'd dress up just for you, Granger." He wagged his eyebrows, trying to throw her off guard. A supercilious sniff was the only response he received.

"You said you'd be ready any time today; I'm available now."

He glanced at her wristwatch to see what time it was. "It's five o'clock in the morning, Granger!"

"Yes, and I have work at nine, so this gives us plenty of time, doesn't it?"

"Am I not your work? Shouldn't you have plenty of time after nine, too?"

"Of course," she simpered, "but I have much better things I could be doing at work today. And besides, I wouldn't want to keep you from the rest of your day."

"Oh yes, Granger. I'm sure McLarens will be missing their bar back terribly if I have to call in because of my "therapy."

"Bar back? You're working behind a Muggle bar?"

Draco stiffened; he hadn't meant to tell her that. "Please do come in," he barked, a little louder than was necessary. He was pretty sure he heard a "Go 'way" wailed from the floor above, followed by the sound of retching.

"If you would excuse me for a moment?" He motioned for her to sit before climbing the stairs to put on some more appropriate clothing. Seeing the look on her face when he opened the door half naked was worth the trip back up the rickety stairs. Throwing on a t-shirt and jeans, he stopped by Snape's room just long enough to Vanish the sick on the floor and conjure him a bucket.

"There's Hangover Potion in the bathroom closet, Sev."

"Thanks, Puggle." Snape responded.

Draco sighed. Clearly, Snape remembered last night, and he wasn't going to let that one go any time soon. Returning downstairs, Draco sat on the couch opposite her.

She sat primly, straightening the seams of her ever-present skirt.

"So what's the assignment today, Granger? Are we going to watch a soap opera? Learn to make homemade pasta fagiolo? Talk about my *feelings*?"

She grimaced. "No, we're going to do a research assignment." Her eyes gleamed with excitement. Draco groaned. Only she would be this excited about making him read. Well, except for maybe Severus.

"And what is the nature of this assignment?"

"Boot up your computer. I want you to research your history."

Draco bristled. "I'll have you know my grades in History of Magic were second only to yours, Granger."

She smiled. "Not your magical history, Malfoy. Your British history."

He groaned, realizing she wasn't here early to get on with her day... she just wanted more time in the day to do research.

Flashing him a beatific smile, she walked towards the kitchen.

"We're going to need tea, Malfoy. Lots and lots of tea."

After hours of research and endless pots of tea and less than adequate sandwiches, Draco cracked.

"This is pointless, Granger! Yes, I get it; England used to rule the world, England has a wicked royal history, England birthed Shakespeare. How does this help me?" He broke off, exasperated beyond all measure.

"It's your history, Draco! It should make you proud!"

"No, Granger, this is *your* history. Muggle kings haven't had control over us since the Dark Ages! Yes, they may be legally attached to the country I call home, but this is not *my* history."

"How dare you, Malfoy! You should be proud to call this country yours. Why, the kings and queens of England have been shining examples to all of mankind of nobility and civility and..."

"Inbreeding?" Draco smirked. He loved taking the wind out of her sails.

She sputtered, trying to find any sort of retort.

"You know I'm right, Granger. Mary and Philip. Victoria and Albert. Elizabeth and Philip. Shall I continue?"

She glared.

"But they are the nobility of England and should be admired and respected, yes? Better than everyone else because of their breeding and civility? The very attitudes you condemn me for because I was born pure..."

"You know very well that's different, Malfoy."

"How so? I fully recognize that pure-bloods aren't any better at magic or learning; your grades alone made me learn that the hard way. And clearly, the most powerful wizards of my life...namely Severus, Harry, and the Dark Lord...half-bloods, all of them. Yet, in your *ignorance*, you force this learning upon me; you tell me that I should be proud of this history I have no connection to and respect it far more than my own. No, Granger, I will not. My family has done some incredibly horrific things throughout history, both the Malfoys and the Blacks, but they taught me to be proud of myself and who I am. My lineage is a part of me and a source of pride that I will pass along to my children. And you, *madam*, with your love of your own history and your disdain for mine, will not take that away from me."

Draco hadn't realized he was pontificating until he finished. He'd gone from seated to standing and now looked down at her. Hermione's face turned pale, and her eyes darted around the room. She looked as if she were for the first time realizing she may be wrong about the way she viewed the wizarding world. He pitied her at that moment, knowing how hard it must be for such a know-it-all to admit she could be wrong about something so important. Before he could say anything to her, the other resident know-it-all killed the moment.

"Well, well, well," said Snape, punctuating his words with slow clapping. He winced, hangover written all over his face, and stopped his mock applause. "Fine words, Draco. I suppose from the look on Miss Granger's face that today's session is over?"

Hermione averted her eyes from both of them, and Draco couldn't be more torn between amusement at her expense and compassion towards her. He didn't like it.

"Splendid. Now then, Miss Granger, kindly remove yourself from my home. I have Hangover Potion to brew, and it would not do for one of your ubiquitous hairs to fall into the cauldron at an inopportune moment."

She scuttled through the room, picking up her belongings without reply.

The front door clicked shut, and Snape chuckled. "Sorry it took so long for me to kick her out, Draco."

Draco waved him off. "No, it's good that you stayed away. I think Granger and I shall be able to work together now. If nothing else, we've come to an understanding. Maybe this process will be over sooner than we envisioned."

He fell silent, pondering what had just happened and what it would mean for the future of his "therapy." Would she come back? Would he be assigned a new case worker? Would they send him to Azkaban for failure to comply with the wishes of an officer of the Ministry?

Snape looked at him, searching Draco's face with his eyes. He seemed about to offer some comfort, but Draco cut him off.

"Now then, where's that potion you need?" With a flick of his wrist, a bottle zoomed through the house.

Snape grinned. "Yes, I thought that was a nice touch. As if I wouldn't have Hangover Potion in my home. I am a Potions master after all."

The men sat in quiet camaraderie on the couch, Snape sipping his amber potion while Draco sipped his tea, both finding comfort in the action.

Eventually, the silence became awkward. Draco, not as forgiving of last night as he probably should have been, broke the tension.

"So, pretty know-it-all, Severus? Sounds like someone's got a crush on my therapist..."

Snape affixed him with a look usually reserved for cauldron-melters. "Shut your face... Puggle."

AN: I love clairvoyant...she beats my words into submission!

Hold the Mayo

Chapter 6 of 10

When Draco is incredibly late for his next meeting, Severus and Hermione have a second dinner together.

Chapter 5 Hold the Mayo

He loved the early shift. Get to work just after lunch, open at 3:00 p.m. Out in enough time to enjoy his evening. Sure, there weren't that many people in the pub that early, but he wasn't much for Muggle small talk anyways.

It allowed him to think about where he was and what he was doing with his life. Which, obviously, wasn't much of anything these days. But still, he was happy. He didn't have the worries of his childhood...how to act in public, how to sneer properly at those who were "below" him. Hell, he was below just about everyone here. They may be the poor of Manchester, but *he* was the one serving them and cleaning their glasses.

Granger had contacted him that morning via owl post, waking him up yet again. He had only skimmed her note...blustering apologies laced with shame. Everything he expected. Obviously, it wouldn't do for the Golden Third Wheel to get in trouble with her first case. He didn't buy her sincerity one bit, but he did understand why she attempted to continue working with him.

She was coming to his home tonight. On a Sunday. Didn't she ever take a day off? No different than Hogwarts, he supposed, where she would spend days on end in the library until a project was complete. And guess what...he was her newest project.

Yes, he would make dinner, proving to her he knew how to use the stove and the blender. And he would make it all while she was there, without the use of his wand.

So, when his manager demanded he take over a coworker's closing shift, he had been less than pleased. He had asked for a moment to phone home, but his manager denied him even that.

Somehow he didn't think a Patronus rushing through the bar would go over well.

Besides, Severus knew his plan, namely to make Granger dinner and to play nice. Hopefully, he would know to start dinner for him.

He grabbed another glass and began viciously wiping off the water spots. The glass exploded in his hands. He wasn't sure if he'd done it with magic or brawn, but it really didn't matter; it would still come out of his pay.

Snape was fuming. Granger was due to show up at half eight, and Draco was cutting it very close. Knowing Draco would probably want to shower after work and that there was no way the boy could do that and start dinner before Granger showed up, he began chopping vegetables for a salad.

The lettuce he ripped with his hands. Even the Potions master knew it was a bit ridiculous to cut lettuce into perfectly matched squares. If she didn't like it, well, that's what her knife was for.

The other vegetables he took more care with. Presentation was important, after all. He started pulling vegetables out of the fridge, tossing a few that were about twelve hours past edible.

He cut the tip off one of the cucumbers and brought the end to his nose, inhaling deeply. His mother had always told him never to use a cucumber that didn't smell like a cucumber; it passed the test. He lay the cucumber down and quartered it lengthwise before cutting it into pie-shaped wedges and tossing the pieces on top of the lettuce. He cut the tomatoes into large cubes before adding them as well. Mushrooms were sliced paper thin, kalamata olives halved and pitted. Sensing the salad needed something else, he rummaged in the refrigerator for some shredded cheese but came up empty. Oh, well, not the best salad, but he didn't have a lot to work with.

8:25... she would be here any minute. Where was Draco! Grumbling, he threw open the refrigerator door. Of course, no bloody salad dressing. Why hadn't he checked that first? He started looking for ingredients...anything he could use to make a dressing. Great, balsamic vinaigrette, but no olive oil... Digging through the door for anything remotely resembling dressing, he started throwing condiments behind him onto the counter. Ketchup, mayonnaise, relish, lemon juice... Russian it is, then.

He added mayonnaise and ketchup to a bowl before adding relish and lemon juice. He had helped his mother cook for years before he made his first potion. Instead of measuring perfect amounts as he would with his potions, he cooked in very much a "it looks done" style. As long as it was palatable by the end of the day, who cared if it tasted the same each time?

He removed a whisk from the drawer and mixed the ingredients, adding bits of each ingredient until "it looked done." Dipping his index finger into the dressing, he tasted it...perfect.

There was a knock at the door. He swore loudly, threatening to kill the boy upon entry before he realized that the boy had a key.

It was she. And all he'd made was a bloody salad.

He walked towards the front door, pausing to take in his appearance in the hallway mirror. Hair mussed from the nap he'd taken earlier, his grey t-shirt was damp on the front from the dishes he had done before he made the salad. Lounge pants and bare feet completed the wholly unimpressive ensemble. Sliding his glasses off, he deposited them on an end table before opening the door.

He took in her appearance as always. Gone was the smart business attire. Her hair was drawn up at the back of her hair in a messy knot. In trainers, a jumper, and denim pants, she looked like a seventh-year ready for a Hogsmeade weekend.

She wasn't wearing his perfume today. The lack of its presence disturbed him, and he didn't know why.

"Hello, Mr. Snape. I'm here to speak with Draco if that would be possible."

Her manner was far more subdued than normal, yet her eyes were wide and darting about, as if she was terrified of saying the wrong thing.

"I am sorry, Miss Granger, but he's still at work. Would you care to wait for him?"

She sighed. "Is this a normal thing? That he works late?"

Only when it puts me in an awful situation." Sometimes. Draco never loses a chance to bring in some extra mortgage money. My making potions and perfumes on the side doesn't always cover everything."

"Perfumes? I had no idea you made perfumes! Is perfumery similar to potion making? Is that something you would have learned in your masters classes?"

It was just like the old days...her with a hundred questions, him wanting to sneer at her and bite out an answer.

Except he really didn't want to be vicious. He wanted to talk to someone actually interested in his work. Draco didn't care about the how of his projects, as long as they put food in the pantry. Other than Draco, his main friends were Muggles with whom he could not discuss magical perfumery. After half a lifetime in academia, not being able to discuss his work was stifling.

She was still standing on his stoop. His stupid hair was in his face again, and he brushed it back, sighing loudly.

"You better come in, Miss Granger. I do hope you like salad..."

They walked into the kitchen, and she observed his half-made dinner. With all the focus of the Weasley matriarch, she began scouring his cupboards, looking for dinner fixings. He stood aside, mesmerized by her graceful movements between cupboards, pantry, and stove. He attempted to fill a pot with water for some pasta, but she swatted at his hands. Giving up, he sat at the breakfast bar and simply watched her.

Now, they were seated at his mother's dining room table, eating a feast of spaghetti topped with canned marinara, a side of early peas, and of course, his salad.

Definitely not the best meal he could have made. Certainly not his favorite meal. But she seemed to be pleased with herself. Hell, she even mixed her peas into her spaghetti like his mum used to.

They talked about his potions projects. Though in a non-academic job at the Ministry, she had kept up with some of the biggest trends in potions, and where her knowledge was lacking, her intelligence filled in the gaps. In recent memory, he had not had such an engaging conversation.

"And your perfumes, Mr. Snape. Tell me about those!" Loading up her fork with pasta, she shoved a forkful in her mouth with gusto as she watched him inquisitively.

"Oh, they're nothing much. I needed a hobby during the first war. They came in handy sometimes; I was able to create perfumes for some of the higher Death Eater's wives and use them as bargaining tools for privileges...namely not having to attend certain parties... If nothing else, perfumery was a welcome diversion. After the end of the war, I continued studying the art. I even went to France over one of the summer holidays to learn from the masters of the craft."

"So, would you consider yourself a master at this point?"

He snorted. "Hardly. Before going to France, I had only worked on instinct, not even realizing there were thousands of years of research behind me. Did you know, for instance, that perfumes contain three chords...the head, the heart, and the base...all of which work together to keep the perfume active throughout an entire day?"

She shook her head.

"I didn't either. I'd just been haphazardly throwing things together hoping at the end of the day they didn't smell like a back alley."

She smirked. He looked at her enquiringly.

"It's just... for someone as meticulous as you are over a cauldron, it's hard to think of you just throwing oils together pell mell."

In spite of himself, he felt his mouth trying to twitch itself into a grin. Quickly stifling himself, he leaned towards her infinitesimally and pulled a very serious face. Her eyes widened...clearly he'd gotten himself very close to his old "ten points from Gryffindor" glare.

"Ironical, Miss Granger, given that's exactly how I made this salad dressing."

The look of confusion on her face was quickly replaced by a short burst of giggles. Snape sat back, slouching slightly in his chair and crossing his arms, hoping not to lose control of himself and smile.

Composing herself, she finally responded. "Why, Mr. Snape, I do believe that was a joke!"

Knowing it was a bad idea, he smiled.

The warm sensation that spread through his body in response to the look of unadulterated surprise and joy on her face let him know that he was in grave trouble indeed.

It got worse; after a few glasses of wine, he knew he was a goner. She had stopped looking towards the door every ten minutes for Draco and truly didn't seem to mind being with him. The wine relaxed them both, and their conversation came easily.

"I'm surprised I haven't seen your perfumes at any of the shops! Have you been selling them strictly to Muggles?"

Snape raised an eyebrow...she didn't know. She had no idea that she walked around with a bit of him nearly every day. The fact that she had chosen something of his, albeit unknowingly, pushed him over the edge. What had merely started as drunken musings was an out-and-out crush. Damn the girl!

"Actually, you may find all of my products in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. I believe you've been wearing my "Desert Flower" off and on the last few days..."

She blinked. "*Ambergris* is your company? I had no idea! Well, I should have. With all those vile jars in your office, only you would name something so sweet after something so foul!"

Snape nodded. "Indeed."

She began to giggle yet again, swaying slightly in her seat from too much wine.

Snape's eyebrows tightened. "And just what do you find so amusing, Miss Granger?"

She attempted to compose herself. 'I just find it funny that someone who once mocked my looks is now a critical part of my beauty regimen.' She flashed him another smile, front teeth decidedly not expanding. In fact, her teeth were perfect. She smiled openly, her top teeth digging oh so slightly into her bottom lip. He resisted the urge to take over nibbling it himself... He had to change the subject.

"Hermione, I must ask you... do you enjoy ice cream?" He cringed, knowing how absolutely ridiculous he sounded.

Her smile managed to become that much more beatific. "Absolutely... Severus. And if it's not a flavor I like, I'm sure I can conjure up something." Giggling at her own bad joke, she stood and followed him back into the kitchen.

~~&~~

Draco began yelling out apologies before he even finished unlatching the door. Four hours late for his meeting, he was sure that Severus and Granger had killed each other, if she had actually stayed, and that he would probably end up in Azkaban when he was caught attempting to bury the pieces of their bodies in a magical swamp. It

couldn't hurt to announce his presence.

Instead, he walked into his kitchen to find Severus Snape and Hermione Granger sharing a bottle of red wine and eating chocolate chip ice cream directly from the pint, and daydreams of Azkaban turned to nightmares of the Janus Thickety Ward.

Thanks so much to clairvoyant for beating me up and making me a better writer!

I Should Have Known

Chapter 7 of 10

Hermione writes in her diary.

AN: If you don't want to have any insight into Hermione's side of this story, go ahead and skip to the last journal entry.

Chapter Six: I Should Have Known

Wednesday, 20 October 1999, 9:08 p.m.

When I decided to accept the position with ARDEC, I knew it would be challenging. After a childhood spent running from Death Eaters and dealing with their children's slurs on my birth, I knew that there would be moments in my job when my past would come back to haunt me.

I definitely didn't expect Percy Weasley to march into my office and give me five minutes warning of my first client arrival... and that he would be Draco Malfoy.

I knew I looked horrid. I hadn't bothered to even brush my hair this morning...just shook it out from the shower. My clothes were decidedly not brand-label, and given this was Malfoy, I knew that he would use anything to get to me.

Probably why Percy didn't given me any lead-time.

Malfoy came in as high-and-mighty as ever, spouting off Muggleisms as if he'd grown up in my world.

Fight Club... please.

He crossed the line, however, when he pointed out that he was closer to Harry than I am at this point.

I would like to point out that I've been quite busy. And yes, while I know my job may not be the academic career everyone expected from me, I like to think I could do some good for my peers. It's not their fault they weren't given the same advantages of loving, accepting parents that I was.

Anyways, ARDEC requires a home-visit as part of its "therapy." I suppose there is no point in putting that off. I'll contact Malfoy after finishing this entry.

I'll admit I was surprised to hear that Malfoy was living in Spinner's End. With Severus Snape. His godfather.

Professor Snape has been an enigma since the end of the War, and more rumors have spread about him since his "death" than ever were spread during his life...amazing given he was only second to Phineas Nigellus Black as the least popular Headmaster. All of his popularity post-War hasn't made up for the terrorizing he did for the rest of his career as a teacher, no matter how touching his story of love and survival has been.

I'll admit I know less about that last year of his tenure at Hogwarts than most...wandering around a forest fighting for your life daily doesn't give you a lot of time to catch up on the goings-on at Hogwarts. And since the War, very few have wanted to discuss that year...

I think I'll drop by during teatime. It will be interesting to see Malfoy prepare tea and sandwiches Muggle-style. It will be even more fascinating to see Professor Snape outside of his teaching persona...assuming, I guess, that it was a persona.

~~&~~

Thursday, 21 October 1999, 7:12 p.m.

Well that was interesting. Professor Snape (yes, I know he's no longer my professor, but Severus is just too... familiar) answered the door in jeans. JEANS. And not black jeans...denim blues! His hair is short too and streaked with grey. He attempted to be snarky with me, but I'd like to think I held my own. He tried to imply I was spreading Lily-related gossip, but I shot him down. Draco even laughed...that was surprising!

Speaking of Draco, he didn't do as well on as his quiz as he thinks. Not surprising...one does not simply become Mugglized overnight. Though some of his answers were rather inventive. He actually equated the Internet with a "series of tubes"...much like the London Underground. While wrong, I was sufficiently impressed.

I shall be meeting with Professor Snape tomorrow for dinner. Hopefully he will give me some insights into Draco's changed personality, should there actually be a change from our student days. If nothing else, I haven't had the urge to punch Draco in the nose yet. I'll admit, I did enjoy my repartee with Professor Snape today, though I may have been a bit cruel at the end.

~~&~~

Friday, 22 October 1999, 8:30 p.m.

Why I thought spending one of my few Friday nights out with Severus bloody Snape would be anything but awful, I have no idea! I even dressed up! Don't know why I bothered... Honestly, I don't!

He ordered for me. Didn't ask first. Didn't actually tell *mewhy* he felt the need to do so until after the fact.

The look on his face when I accused him of being gay was priceless! Especially when he's clearly not. That man sat there, oozing appeal tonight...as if he didn't care. Men

are so infuriating!

And all he told me about Draco is that this Muggle-loving is a ruse. I should have known.

Did I mention I hate stout? Because I do.

Malfoy received a 68/100 on his test. He needed a 70 to pass. I almost was going to let it slide, not because I wanted to be rid of this assignment, but because I thought he might actually be... well... less Malfoy now. Oh, no, we *will* continue this pantomime of therapy through to the bloody end.

Bugger, writing this out isn't helping at all. Must go yell at someone in person. Harry better not be busy. He also better give me some answers about why he's been talking to Malfoy. But first, must send Malfoy his results.

~~&~~

Saturday, 23 October 1999, 12:08 a.m.

I suppose Harry thought I felt left out of his antics sixth year, as his first suggestion after hearing my story was "D'ya wanna spy on Snape and Malfoy with my Cloak?" Some friendship, Malfoy. Harry likes me better.

I had an interesting night, though. It wasn't often in school that Hermione Granger is in charge of espionage. I Apparated to Spinner's End planning to cast ~~homenum~~ *Revelio* over Professor Snape's house. Instead, I found Malfoy sitting on the stoop outside the house, my missive containing his results crumpled in his hand. Malfoy stood abruptly, entering the empty street pacing. Finally, he stuffed the parchment back in his pocket before flopping down on the stoop.

I had to stifle a laugh at what came next. From far down the street, I heard off-key singing. Professor Snape came into view, listing as he walked, stumbling, clearly having imbibed far more than the pitcher I had left him with.

I sneaked close enough to listen to their conversation. I'll not lie...I took some satisfaction in seeing Snape... vulnerable. Oh, hell, drunk off his ass. After all that spying he did on us for years at Hogwarts (which, I know, was in our best interest and is quite possibly the only reason we're all alive, i.e. third year Shrieking Shack), it felt quite empowering to be outspying him.

Malfoy kept asking him what had gone wrong, and that's when it happened. Professor Snape... complimented me.

I know!

It was strange. Professor Snape went from trying to get out of trouble with Draco for completely bollixing our dinner to actually complementing me. He even called me pretty! Of course, he was right about my hair. Have since transfigured that clip into something less... plastic.

It startled me, I won't lie. I sneaked down the street away from them to collect my thoughts. Before I could walk back, Professor Snape slumped against Draco, having clearly succumbed to his cups. I watched Draco carefully Levitate Snape back into their home. That was odd...the Malfoy I knew in school would have Levitated Snape to the roof and stolen his wand.

I Apparated home, planning to immediately go to bed with my thoughts. A tell-tale scratching came from my window. I opened it and took a sticky note (!) stuck on the owl, which looked none-too-pleased by the situation.

Granger,

Come over in the morning, and we'll work on your so-called therapy.

D.M.

Alright, Malfoy, we'll see you in the morning.

~~&~~

Saturday, 23 October 1999, 5:32 p.m.

Embarrassed. So embarrassed. This is S.P.E.W. all over again.

I went into that house thinking I knew better than any Malfoy what his life was like. I'd planned out the perfect research project to prove that I was right, that his pure-blood heritage was inferior to my own.

And then Malfoy had to poke holes in my logic. With truth. And he's right. My parents raised me to respect my history but also to respect the history and traditions of others. And honestly, I've never done that, at least not in the Wizarding world. I've always clung to my Muggle-born status, as both it and my intelligence made me unique in this world. And all I've done by that is alienate myself even further.

I honestly don't know how to proceed. Having skimmed back through my ARDEC training materials, it seems I've gone completely against most of their suggestions on how to approach the children of Death Eaters. Should Malfoy lodge a complaint, it is entirely possible I may lose my job.

Anyways, in other news, Professor Snape didn't seem to think I was anything special today. In fact, he was back to mocking my personal appearance like the old days. Still, he gave me the perfect opportunity to excuse myself...

Though if he really thinks I believed his "I have Hangover potion to brew" excuse, he really does underestimate my intelligence.

~~&~~

Sunday, 24 October 1999, 11:48 p.m.

Huh?

~~&~~

Monday, 25 October 1999, 7:35 a.m.

Not much time this morning; must be to work soon.

Dinner didn't go at all as planned. Draco was late from work, and Profes... well, Severus made me dinner. Well, technically he made me salad and I made us dinner, but anyways, we had dinner.

An entire dinner. Which didn't end when one of us left in a snit.

We hadn't necessarily ended on amazing terms the last we had seen each other. But I'll admit, I was intrigued by the man I had seen on Friday night.

I had a good night with Severus Snape, Diary. I really don't understand it either. But we had a lovely conversation. I haven't had a close friend in the Wizarding world that I could ever talk to about my interests. And while of course we talked mostly about Potions, it was still fascinating.

I do feel pretty awful about my comment about his being unemployed. I had no idea he was behind Amberggris! Of course he is though...he is the most talented potioneer in England, why wouldn't he also be the best perfumer?

And after how intensely he was viewing me, I'm embarrassed to acknowledge that it is quite a turn-on to know he created my favorite perfume.

What is wrong with me? Hell, I'll even admit I drank far more than I normally would to see if he would loosen up again.

He did.

We ended up eating ice cream directly out of the pint in the kitchen, me sitting on the counter and he lazily leaning against it next to me. Even seated on the counter, I am still a few inches shorter than he.

There was a moment last night, Diary, where I swear he was going to kiss me. We were talking and laughing over the ice cream, and he indicated I had some ice cream on my cheek. Mortified, I moved to wipe it off, but he stayed my hand. He started to lean towards me, when...

Draco bloody Malfoy burst in the front door. Severus quickly stood back from me, his mask of indifference we were all so used to from school falling into place. I quickly rubbed my cheek with my sleeve to remove the offending bit of ice cream.

But I swear, the look on Malfoy's face was worth it.

AN: Thanks so much to clairvoyant!

A Temptation of His Own Creation

Chapter 8 of 10

Snape gets ready for his date; Draco gets some therapy.

AN: Here there be limes... or lemons? Limonade?

Wednesday, 27 October 1999

Dear Ms. Granger,

I am surprised to admit that I very much enjoyed our dinner on Sunday. I am under the impression that in such situations the accepted social convention is to invite said person "out."

Please consider this missive a fulfillment of that requirement.

Regards,

S.S.

He couldn't believe he'd sent her such a badly worded note. He'd been shaken since Sunday...partly by Draco's inopportune timing and partly due to how... nice it had been to have someone actually listen to what he thought. He'd given what felt like thousands of reports of Death Eater activity during the war. And to be sure, the Order listened intently to those statements.

But, once he was done delivering the information, the listening stopped. Because, *clearly*, listening to a former Death Eater who regularly attended their meetings for ideas on how to defeat the Dark Lord made *no* sense? Certainly not to Mad-Eye and rarely to the other Order members. He would often give his opinions, but he could always see that look of derision on so many faces. Never from Arthur or Albus, but from so many others. And with Albus gone... and no real reason to talk to Arthur much these days, there were very few people in his life that he talked to. Draco put up with him, but he never was engaged in conversations about his work or his ideas.

But Granger had listened. Intently. And it had felt damned good.

It was just these sort of feelings that were quickly making him insane.

He could at least take solace in knowing there was no way she would say yes. Between their history as teacher and student and their abysmal first dinner together, there was no way that Sunday's fluke would be enough to convince her to see him again. That's all it was: a fluke.

When she responded the next day in the affirmative, it turned his mood from bad to worse. He had no idea what he was supposed to do next. He began doing the only thing that ever gave him peace when he was upset.

He hid from the problem. By cleaning.

Well, not exactly cleaning...more like stomping throughout the house and moving things for no reason. He straightened, to be sure. But no dust mops accompanied his trudging.

Draco tried to make him talk, but he only snarled. He'd taken to muttering under his breath as he slammed around stacks of books and moved chairs; however, the house was not all that large, and this only kept him occupied for most of Thursday.

By Friday morning, his nerves were shot. He wrestled clothes from his closet, hoping something appropriate for the night's festivities would magically put itself together. When that clearly didn't happen, he conjured hooks on his bedroom wall and floated clothes from hook to hook. Does the blue shirt look better with the black blazer? Or, with another flick of his wand, with this navy suit...

"Some foolish wandwaving, I see."

Severus whipped around to see Draco leaning lazily against his door frame.

"I'd go with the blue and the navy suit, Sev."

He shot Draco the dirtiest look he could muster.

"I'm just saying, now that you've actually introduced color into your clothing, you should go with it! Swooping in, wearing your quintessential bat-suit might not garner the response you're hoping for."

With a swish of his wand, the door to his bedroom slammed shut.

"Dammit, Severus! You almost got my fingers!"

Severus smirked before grabbing his towel and heading for the shower.

The hot spray from the shower made him realize just how tense his shoulders were. He rotated them a few times before tipping his head from side to side. He made a mental note to take a Tension Potion before too much longer.

He reached forward and grabbed the shampoo of the ledge at the back end of the shower, hating the way cold air drafted in from the window. Who puts a window in a shower?

He squeezed shampoo into his palm and brought it to his scalp before he realized yet again he'd apportioned too much for the job. He still wasn't used to his short hair. He didn't think he would ever like it short. But Hermione had given him a few appraising looks over her pasta and had even once remarked that he looked different when she could see his eyes.

The soft water made it difficult to remove all the excess suds from his hair. But at least his shoulders were less tense.

He palmed the soap and passed the bar between his hands, noting the fragrance as the suds formed. The soap was a tester...a new blend he had made a few days prior in an obsessive-compulsive need to control *something* in his life. Between Draco needing to pass this ARDEC therapy and Granger causing him such confusion, he felt like the life he had made for himself over the past year was spiraling out of control. And he'd run out of furniture to move about.

He placed the soap back down on the ledge. As he lathered his body, he tried to relax...tried to push the impending failure that he expected would be dinner from his mind.

He failed. He couldn't get her out of her mind. His hands moved over the planes of his chest, his fingers working the soap through the hair. The draftiness from the window whispered over his body, causing his nipples to pucker; for once, he didn't curse the architect who placed the window in the shower. His hands ghosted over his

stomach before moving downward.

Lathering up his hands one last time, he grasped his cock in his left hand, drawing his foreskin back from his glans. He tightened his grip, moving his fist over his shaft with increased urgency. The movement of his hand was quickly releasing the essential oils in the soap. He quickened the pace, both in response to the sensation and in the hopes of surrounding himself more with that scent... there was something, something captivating about it... that reminded him of...

He leaned his head against the cool porcelain tiles, savoring the trickle of condensation down the bridge of his nose. He envisioned Granger in her skirt, so taut over the curves of her arse. He hated the way she had walked out of the restaurant, but loved watching her hips sway as she did.

The tension that had wracked his body was lessening with every stroke. His other hand moved up to cradle his balls. As gently as she had cradled her wine glass between her hands...

A few more thrusts and the last of the tension left him as his orgasm ripped through his body. He slumped against the wall of the shower and slid to sit on the floor, water flowing over his frame.

Hermione.

That's what the soap called to mind. Of course it fucking did. Yes, the head and heart chords were different, more masculine, more earthy.

But the base chord was the same as that damnable perfume she tortured him with...a temptation of his own creation.

He stood, shaking his head to try to clear his thoughts. Summoning a bar of Palmolive from the cabinet, he scrubbed the evidence of his release from his body, trying to mask the scent of the soap he had created clearly with her in mind on some level.

It didn't help. She was ubiquitous. He prayed she didn't notice.

Nearly a week had passed since Draco had seen what had been giving him nightmares every evening. Severus and Granger... He still couldn't quite fathom it. But it was clear he had walked in on something that night, based on the glare on Severus' face and the quick way Granger had grabbed up her belongs and mumbled, "Send you a note tomorrow," as she hurried out the door.

He had tried talking to Snape about it in the days since, but he just growled and grumbled something that sounded like "too much wine" and "peas in her pasta." Draco had spent much of the week either picking up shifts at work or hiding in his room, Silencing Charms in place. Severus' stomping through the house at all hours did not lend itself to sleep.

And now, he sat once again in Granger's office, staring at her even dustier tchotchkes. They were seated in front of the fire in wing-back chairs, her bag propped up against the leg of her chair, and he could see his test poking out of it. She stared anywhere but directly at him, looking more uncomfortable than ever.

"Look... *Hermione*, I know you're itching to apologize to me *again*, so you might as well spit it out."

She had the decency to look guilty, but actually managed to make eye contact.

"Well, you had a point about your parents, and I'm sorry for what happened, and I know you probably think even worse of me, and then I was in your kitchen and..."

He groaned. "Please. You're no worse than I was...believing what you were raised to think without questioning it. The only difference between us is that I started realizing the problem with self-imposed ignorance before you did." He paused. "So, no, I don't think any worse of you; if anything, on some level I'm impressed that you are apologizing. That definitely wouldn't have happened when we were at Hogwarts." He rubbed his slightly crooked nose for emphasis.

"I suppose not... *Draco*." She smiled and scooted her chair a little closer to his. "Come now, let's go over your test and see where you can improve, shall we?" Reaching down, she pulled the test from her bag.

~~&~~

"So, Draco, do you have any questions?"

He thought for a moment. "Yes. Why are Muggles so fond of acronyms? Everything in this department that you've created is known by an acronym. ARDEC? MAT? Why can't you just call things what they are?"

"It's just a way of shortening things. They're popular in the military both here and abroad. Sometimes acronyms become words themselves...scuba, snafu..."

"Snafu is an acronym?"

"Yes, it's an American Army acronym meaning 'Situation Normal: All... Fucked Up.'" She blushed at her own cursing.

"You know, it's too bad Severus didn't know that during the war..."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"I just think he would amend it... 'Situation Normal: Albus Fucked Up.'"

She giggled before becoming somber. "Any other questions?"

"I don't believe so."

She stood and glanced at her watch before walking to a bookshelf. She began removing some volumes on Muggle economics and politics.

"Before our session next week, I want you to read these books." She walked across the room and dumped them in his lap.

"Seven books, Granger? Are you mad?"

"One for each day of the week. Nothing you can't handle, Malfoy."

He glared. They may be getting along better, but he still wasn't a fan of her inability to understand that some people were just not like her in the reading and studying department.

She checked her watch again as she sat down. "And Malfoy, if you would, read them in that order. They build upon each other."

He shifted the books from his lap to the floor. "Yes,*ma'am*." He smirked as she twitched slightly...yes, that wound was still fresh. Not one to ever pass up an opportunity, he continued. "I actually do have one more question, Granger."

"Yes?"

"What time is your date with him tonight?"

She turned that same shade of puce from their first interview. "Mr. Malfoy, I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, 'Mr. Malfoy' now, is it? Let me see, first, I catch you two sharing the same carton of ice cream. Next thing I know, Snape's banging around the house as badly as he did my common room sixth year...he's cursing about everything, I might add. This morning, I actually caught him putting together *outfits*. You keep checking your watch, and I must say, Granger, I've never seen you show this much cleavage."

Her hand jerked to the scoop neck of her sweater and gave it a tug.

He never broke eye contact. "So, if the two of you *aren't* fraternizing... then I can only assume you and Percy must have a special arrangement of which I am unaware."

She grimaced. "Absolutely not! I can't believe you would insinuate something as foul as...*relations* with my superior!"

"Nice attempt at deflecting. Where's he taking you?"

She made a noise somewhere between a squeak and a growl. It almost made her adorable. "He hasn't told me. He's meeting me here shortly, in fact." She stood and moved towards the door, placing her hand on the doorknob. "Now if you would excuse me?"

She opened the door and was nearly hit by Snape's fist as he made to knock on the door.

Draco stretched out in his chair, crossing his arms and ankles, as amused as a spectator at any circus. "'Lo, Severus! I see you went with the blue shirt and the navy suit. Well done!"

He looked at Granger, who seemed to be noticing as well... He shifted his gaze to Severus, whose jaw was clenched so tightly it was a wonder he didn't give himself an immediate migraine.

"Draco. Leave. *Now*."

"I wouldn't want to be rude. Granger, same time next week?"

She looked so embarrassed and nervous. He loved it. "Absolutely, Malfoy."

He scooped up his books and stood, walking as slowly as he dared toward the doorway. "Oh, Granger. Do you mind if I take my last test home to study?"

She made to answer but was cut off by Severus. "Leave us!"

Draco flashed him a cheeky grin before exiting.

AN: Thanks to clairvoyant. She knows how hard this was for me to write...

Easy, Miss. I've Got You.

Chapter 9 of 10

Will their date go as planned? Oh, wait...

Chapter Eight - Easy, Miss. I've Got You.

She looked lovely in a low cut, deep burgundy jumper and a tight skirt that flared just slightly at the ends, stopping just at her knees. Her black knee boots hugged her shapely calves, the high heels bringing her in height to his shoulder. Her hair was pulled up in a loose twist. Before he could check to see that Draco had indeed made it down the hall, she pulled him into a quick hug. He loved the way her head tucked perfectly under his chin.

As quickly as she had come into his arms, she had already pulled away, grinning up at him shyly.

"So, Severus. Where are we going tonight?"

He felt the blood rush from his face. Going? He'd spent so much time hiding from the fact that she had actually said yes and stressing over what he was going to wear that he had forgotten the very important task of actually *planning* said date.

"Severus... what's wrong?"

Apparently his face had gone as pale as he suspected. "Nothing at all. As to plans... I thought I would let you decide, as you are far more familiar with London than I."

Nice recovery.

"You forgot to make plans, didn't you?"

He balked, hoping to cover his *faux pas*. "No, certainly not! I just thought that you..."

"Don't worry, Severus. I have a plan." Retrieving her wand, she Summoned her coat and bag, and upon donning them, pulled him in close. Before he could ask what her plan was, she spun them, her office blurring around them.

They appeared in a dark bricked-in alcove. She stumbled as they landed, and he pulled her closer to keep her from falling.

She looked up at him and smirked. "Sorry, I've only done that once before."

"Indeed." He took in his bearings...they seemed to be in an Underground station. "And where have you brought us, then?"

"Come along and see." She extricated herself from his embrace and, grabbing his hand, led him towards the street exit.

As they walked down the street, they approached the main entrance to the Royal Botanical Garden, Kew. He smiled...this would be the perfect place for a long, slow walk. And, should the temperature dip even slightly, an excuse for him to put his arm about her shoulder and pull her close.

As they approached the attendant, she began rummaging in her purse. He reached out and staid her hand, and she looked up confused.

"I may be allowing you to call the shots, Hermione. But there is no way in hell I'm letting you pay for tonight."

She looked like she wanted desperately to protest but held her tongue.

Taking care of their entrance fees, they entered the gardens. He exhaled sharply when her hand slid up his forearm and slipped into the crook of his elbow. Irritated that he hadn't thought to offer her his arm, especially in those shoes, he bent his arm and brought his hand up to awkwardly pat her hand. He smiled inwardly as her head came to rest against his shoulder briefly.

They continued their meandering a few minutes before she broke the amiable silence.

"I love this garden. My parents always brought me here at Christmastime for the horse and carriage rides. My father always smuggled a thermos of hot cocoa in his coat, and the three of us would ride as long as they would allow us."

He grimaced. He hated conversations that got personal like this. He didn't have many happy memories of childhood, especially at Christmas. He searched for anything he could use in response.

"I still wear the Slytherin scarf my mother knitted for me for Christmas to all of the matches. During school, my mates mocked it for being homemade. By the time your classmates were attending games, they thought it was a novel antique." He cringed, realizing he'd just thrown their massive age difference out there for scrutiny.

"I remember the scarf. I always thought it looked warmer than ours."

Possible awkward conversation avoided. He had to be more careful.

"Do you know why I brought you here, Severus?"

He honestly had no clue. "No."

"I thought it might give you some ideas on perfume ingredients."

He was floored by her gesture of kindness and support. She could have brought him to any generic place in London, but even in the short time she'd had to choose the venue, she'd still been kind enough to really think about something he'd like.

She led him towards a bright white bloom, a gardenia, and brought it to her nose. "Would this be useful, for instance? It smells lovely."

Of course you like it. Its oils are all over your skin.

"I've used it in the past."

He saw a bloom he did not recognize, deep red in hue. Leaning over, he inhaled its aroma...lovely. Taking a quick look around, he slipped his wand from his sleeve holster and cast a quick Severing Charm.

"Severus! You're not supposed to take any of the flowers!"

"Quiet, Hermione, or someone might find out."

"But why would you do that?" She seemed exasperated.

"Because," he leaned towards her, flower in hand, "I failed to bring you a flower. And this one does match your sweater so becomingly."

He held the flower up before her, tapping it with his wand. "No one will be able to see it, save those who already know of its existence." And before she could ruin the moment by protesting, he slipped the bloom into her hair, where it nestled in the twist of her curls.

"Lovely." He took the opportunity to stroke her cheek as his hand passed her face.

Emotions played over her face. Irritation, gratitude, nervousness.

Acceptance.

Oh God, she's going to kiss me.

Right as he was sure her lips were going to touch his, she deflected to the left, kissing his cheek just by his ear.

"Thank you," she whispered into his ear before leaning back and winking.

She walked towards the next exhibit, leaving him in stunned silence.

It took everything in his power not to cross the distance between them, spin her around and kiss her soundly.

Instead he caught up with her and stood behind her, his hands firmly in his pockets.

Her stomach grumbled. She looked embarrassed. "Had you given any thought to what you might be in the mood for dinner-wise?"

You. "Food."

She rolled her eyes. "Any particular type of food?"

"Surprise me."

She slipped her hand in his and led him behind a tree. Between the hand holding, the random touches, and the hug, he'd been touched more in the last few hours than in the last year. She was in his arms again, the bloom he had chosen for her wafting its perfume over him. Reeling from the spiciness of the scent and the spinning of Apparation, he clung to her far more than he should.

Instead of a Tube station they appeared in a dark alley.

"Where are we now?"

"London."

He raised an eyebrow. "Where in London?"

"Covent Garden."

They walked down the alley and slipped between the buildings to the main street. As they walked down the lane, they approached a pub.

"The Maple Leaf?"

She shrugged. "I know it's not very romantic, but I figured pub fare and low lights might at least be enjoyable."

He took in the Canadian flag over the doorway. "*Canadian* pub fare?"

She took his hand once again. "Trust me."

~~&~~

They sat in a corner booth, a plate of steaming poutine between them and a pint of Molson each. He hated admitting that the beer wasn't terrible. But he wasn't sure about this pile of chips, gravy, and cheese in front of them.

It certainly didn't lead him to any gastrointestinal conclusions that would be conducive to what his body was yearning for tonight.

Getting ahead of yourself, old man.

He made to pick up his fork, and she smacked at his hand. "That's not how it's done."

She demonstrated, picking up a few of the chips in her hand, dipping them in the gravy and cheese before popping them in her mouth.

She licked the remnants from each finger, looking at him daring him to try.

He was ashamed by how turned on he was by her licking ~~gravy~~ from her fingers.

Not to be outdone, he picked up a particularly cheesy chip, and blowing on it gently, popped it in his mouth. He delicately wiped the residual grease from his fingers with his napkin.

She giggled. "I was just teasing. You're more than welcome to use your fork, Severus."

He quelled the overwhelming urge to stick his tongue out at her and instead took a large gulp of his beer.

The overwhelming silence that comes when food has been served descended upon their table. And in spite of his earlier misgivings, the food was good.

~~&~~

Seemingly sated, Hermione put down her fork, withdrew her napkin from her lap, and placed it refolded on the table.

"Severus, I just though... I just thought you should know, well, my session with Draco went very well today."

His jaw tightened...the boy was the last thing he wanted to talk about tonight. "Please, Hermione. I would prefer to focus on you this evening and not discuss Draco."

"I understand." She looked disappointed.

He sighed. She probably wouldn't be happy until she finished whatever she had to say. Before he could tell her to continue, she continued.

"I'm sorry, I just have to say this. I was unfair to you at the restaurant last week. Draco has changed so much since we were students, and it can't possibly just be because of the war. It has to be because of living with you, at least on some level.

"You're just so different than you were when we were students, and I guess... I guess my prejudices got in the way of me seeing that, at first. Not that I was prejudiced towards you. More just convinced that you would never treat me like a friend. Malfoy, I'll admit, I had strong feelings about. When your parents raise you to reject those who judge you based on things you can't control... like blood status... well, it's hard to change your opinion about that person. Even when it means you're judging them in the same way ultimately."

She paused to take a sip of her drink. He didn't dare interrupt her now.

"I guess what I'm saying is... if someone had told me even a year ago that today I would have a relatively nice chat with Draco Malfoy in my office followed by a lovely evening with you... well, my response would not have been kind. And I'm sorry for that." She shrugged, casting her eyes downward as if afraid of what his response might be.

He hadn't expected an apology from her...hell, he hadn't even wanted one. All he wanted was to make it through this date tonight with his dignity intact and with another date a distinct possibility.

Frankly, he didn't know what to say.

He slid his hand across the table and slipped his over hers. Rubbing her hand with his thumb in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture, he waited till she looked up at him and smiled.

"No need to apologize, Hermione. You're here now. And I, too, am having a 'lovely evening.'"

She turned her hand in his until their palms were touching and squeezed. "I'm glad, Severus."

~~&~~

They sat at the table, munching on maple biscuits and sipping coffee. They'd talked about everything and nothing since her little soliloquy. It felt... right. There was no other word for it.

He'd never been out with a woman and had such a good time just talking. Hell, he hadn't had a good time *etalking* to someone about himself since he was a child, prattling on to Lily about a "potion" he had just concocted, which more often than not was just a jar of mud, sticks, and an unfortunate centipede mixed together.

"Ok, Severus. Your turn to ask me a question."

He hesitated. There was one question he'd been dying to ask since Draco came home from his first visit with her, but he had thought it inappropriate. It was probably still inappropriate, but now he at least felt comfortable asking.

"Why are you working for the Ministry? We all expected... well, a more *academic* route for you. Not that I'm criticizing... I just..." He trailed off, feeling stupid for even having asked.

She cradled her cup between her hands, staring into the dark liquid like one might gaze into a crystal ball. "Well, after the war, Harry, Ron and I were given the option of studying for and taking our NEWTs or having NEWT scores issued based on our sixth year work. Harry and Ron obviously opted for the latter. They knew they'd never be able to pass NEWT-level Potions, for instance." She looked up to see his response.

He smirked. "Indeed, especially had I come back to teach as everyone expected."

"Exactly." She kept eye contact with him as she continued. "Anyways, I actually wanted to learn the material, so I entered into private tutoring and eventually sat my NEWTs. By the time I finished that process, it was too late to apply to any apprenticing programs for that academic year, and honestly, I was just tired from all the studying. I hadn't really had a break... That year on the run, and the Final Battle...through the funerals and celebrations, I'd gone straight into studying. A break seemed like a lovely idea."

"More coffee?" Neither had noticed the server approach.

"No thank you, sir." Severus responded. "Just the bill, if you please."

The server nodded before leaving them.

Severus picked up where she had left off. "Why do you think I quit teaching? Going back into any situation with a schedule, and a boss...hell, anyone telling me what to do or expecting anything from me...well, it seemed like the worst idea in the world. I didn't want to be responsible for anyone save myself."

"So you moved back home? When did Draco move in with you? I suppose that changed things quite a lot for you."

"Not long after the end of the war. He and his father had problems from the outset of the end of the war. Draco got it in his head that he had to fix his family's image. Unfortunately, Lucius disagreed with Draco's use of his money for reparations projects and promptly threw him out."

"That's awful!" she interjected. "Surely Mr. Malfoy could understand Draco's actions?"

Severus let out a bark of amusement. "Far from it! Malfoys may always play to those in power, but they don't do 'nice' in public. Draco was giving money to war orphans and talking with Potter. Lucius has always been behind the scenes: secret deals with the Ministry, anonymous donations to the Minister's favorite pet project, and the like. The last time he did anything public was donate those brooms to Slytherin, and even then the only reason the entire school knew was because Draco couldn't keep his mouth shut about it. Your lot never heard the Howler Lucius sent him for that one."

Hermione smiled. "No, but we would have loved to have heard it..."

"Remind me to show you the memory sometime." He took a bit of biscuit, washing it down with some coffee.

"Draco shows up on my stoop last year, with everything he could magically cram into a duffel bag, and demands 'sanctuary' so to speak. I let him stay on the condition that he earn his keep."

"And how did he end up at the bar?"

"He started as a patron at nights after looking for employment during the days. He grumbled about his unemployed status one night, and the owner offered him a job."

"And does he like it?"

"He likes the mundane quality of it, to be sure. He remarked once about how nice it was to not have *think* about every single action."

She nodded. "I can imagine that being the scion of the Malfoy and the Black families would carry a lot of perceived responsibilities." A look of pity crossed her features.

"No more so than being part of the Golden Trio, I'd imagine."

"True. When everyone began to find out I was working for Percy Weasley of all people, well, they weren't as supportive as I'd hoped. But I felt like I had something I could offer ARDEC... a Muggle perspective. I never imagined I'd end up with Draco as my first assignment!"

"I suppose not. How is working for Percy?"

"About what you would expect...I spent the first several months compiling reports and crunching numbers. But Percy really does care about the Agency. I think he feels the need to make... reparations after his lack of involvement in the war itself."

The server brought their cheque, sliding it as unobtrusively on the table as he could. She gave Severus an amused look as he quickly snatched up the bill, reviewing it before removing some notes from his billfold.

The server had interrupted the flow of conversation. She looked at him nervously, and the same feelings lodged themselves deep within his core.

He coughed, trying to break the tense silence. It didn't have the effect he hoped for.

"So, shall we go then Severus?"

"I suppose. May I escort you home? It is rather late."

"Absolutely."

He stood and retrieved her coat from the hook next to the booth, helping her to put it on. Her arm slipped around his waist and without thinking, his arm went around her shoulder, pulling her into his side. As they walked out, an older couple smiled at them, confirming what he was thinking: *we fit together perfectly*.

They walked to the same alleyway. She once again pulled him close and spun. As they Apparated, he could have sworn he heard her whisper, "You smell amazing..."

They appeared by a streetlight in Diagon Alley, in front of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes.

He was confused. "You live here?"

She took his hand in hers and walked to a red door next to the entrance of the shop. "Actually, I live in the third floor flat above the store. George leased it to me when I got the job with Percy."

"But I thought you were no longer associating with the Weasleys?"

"I see Draco tells you everything. That's not quite true. Relations with Ron and Harry, and by correlation Ginny, have been rather strained as of late. But George and I are quite close. We both were emotionally... lost after the war, and becoming friends has helped that a great deal."

They had reached her door. The end of the date was closing in on him. The next minutes could mean... well... everything.

She reached a hand up and plucked her flower from her hair. "Thank you for my flower, Severus." She brought the flower to her nose and inhaled its scent deeply. She lifted her hand and, taking his left lapel in hand, slipped the bloom through the buttonhole.

When Draco would ask him later tonight if he kissed her or if she had kissed him, the answer then and forevermore would be, "I don't know." It all happened so... perfectly.

Her hands slid from his lapel up his chest before taking his cheeks between her hands. He thanked God that his hands seemed to know what to do, as one wrapped around her waist, pulling her flush to his body and the other cupping the back of her neck. Even in those heels, he still had to bend to kiss her. Her hands led his mouth towards hers, and his hands spasmed in response to knowing what was coming.

As their lips met, his eyes slammed shut. He didn't want to lose this moment...he just wanted to feel her. She slanted her mouth over his and tugged at his bottom lip. He parted his lips slightly to allow her better access, and she took the opportunity to deepen the kiss, her tongue twining with his own.

Her hands slid up into his hair, anchoring him to her. He bent his knees slightly and tightened his grip around her waist to lift her to his height. The kiss became even more intimate this way. No woman was ever tall enough to kiss him levelly, except in bed. As if responding to the lascivious turn his thoughts had taken, she moaned.

She broke the kiss, her breasts pressing into his chest with every breath. He opened his eyes and looked into her blush-tinged face. He felt her kicking her feet, the point of a boot striking him in the shin. She giggled and brushed a lock of hair from his eyes.

"Could you put me down, Severus? I don't know if you've heard... but I'm not a big fan of heights." She smiled cheekily.

"I hadn't heard that, actually. I suppose that means you won't appreciate this." Shifting her higher, he secured his arms around her upper thighs, her arse resting on his forearms. She squeaked in surprise.

Her tits were close enough to his face that he could do unspeakable things to them with his mouth. Luckily she hadn't noticed. He took the opportunity to lose himself in feel of her in his arms, her scent surrounding him, the feel of cashmere against his cheek.

"What are you doing, Severus!"

He tipped her head back and looked up at her. "You live on the third floor, correct?"

"Yes, Severus, but I fail to see how that's importAAAAA!" She squealed as they began levitating.

"Severus Snape, I swear to everything that is holy if you don't land us this instant or if you drop me, I will end you!"

"Easy, miss. I've got you."

"I somehow doubt this is the time for Superman references, Severus!"

He continued his slow ascent. Without warning, he shifted her suddenly, swinging her so she was cradled in his arm, one arm behind her shoulder, the other under her knees.

Her arms came up around his neck, holding on for dear life.

"Please, miss, call me Clark."

"I will not, you asshole! Put me down!"

"You mean right now?" He descended rapidly, only an inch or two. It was enough to make her scream.

"Do shut up, woman. You know you're secretly enjoying the hell out of this." Using the fact that she was in his arms once again, he kissed her again, using the distraction to ascend closer and closer to her window. He rose above the railing and landed them gently on her small balcony.

Breaking the kiss, he lowered her to her feet. She shakily clung to him.

"Hate you. So much."

"No, you don't."

She smacked his chest feebly in an attempt to prove her point, which caused him to laugh. It was enough to make her smile.

He leaned down one last time, dragging his lips lightly over her neck. "Goodnight... Lois," he growled into her ear, nuzzling her earlobe before taking it between his lips and sucking lightly. He could feel her body sway towards his, and he knew if he didn't leave now, he wouldn't.

Without warning, he took off into the night sky.

~~&~~

Hermione opened the doors to her balcony and walked into her flat. A hand came up and touched her kiss-swollen lips.

She walked into her living room and sat on the sofa. Removing her wand from her pocket, she flicked it towards the fire, which erupted in flame. Nearly an instant later, the fire glowed green, and a letter spat forth from the flames.

Hermione,

What the flying fuck (like the pun?) was that??

Love and hugs,

George

Tomorrow. She would deal with George tomorrow.

AN: Any references the RBG, Kew and to Covent Garden were gleaned from Google searches. None of this stuff may have been in place in 1999, and there may not be alleyways near any of it, but I did my best. Let me write a fic about Atlanta or Boston, and I could make it more accurate. Just take it in the spirit it was intended.

This was my absolute favorite chapter to write. I hope y'all enjoyed it!

Epilogue, or I'm Draco Bloody Malfoy

Chapter 10 of 10

Things are not always what they seem... but thankfully, not this time.

AN: **The last chapter posted incorrectly**, mostly due to my inability to code HTML. The entire second half of the chapter was missing. If you read this chapter having not read the end of the last one, you will be so lost. I am so sorry!

Epilogue, or I'm Draco Bloody Malfoy

Three months later

He'd noticed the changes in her. She had seemed happy before, but now she just radiated joy. If possible, she was more beautiful than ever. She whistled and hummed whenever she thought no one was listening and often smiled for seemingly no reason at all.

He saw her nearly every day, depending on her work schedule. On the days she was busy with a case, he missed her. He still was thankful that she had shown up in his life again all those months ago and that this time he was able to treat her as an equal and not as Harry and Ron's know-it-all friend.

Every morning, he awoke, intending to tell her how he really felt about her. Surely, she must know...he held the door for her whenever he could, brought her coffee and lunch to work when she was too busy to leave the building, and made a point to tell her when she looked particularly lovely. But today, he would say the words he'd been longing to say...how every day he saw her was amazing and every day he was away from her was painful. That he couldn't imagine a life without her.

He didn't mean to fall for her so quickly, especially given how tenuous their relationship had been in the beginning. It had simply happened, and he was powerless to fight it. He wondered what Ronald would think... No, it wouldn't do to dwell on that. Hermione had just begun rectifying her relationship with him, and he felt enough guilt about how this might affect that progress. But he couldn't help himself...he was in love, for the first time since he was a student.

He awoke that morning, showered, and shaved, taking the time to make sure his hair lay the way he wished. He picked his clothes with care, hoping she would notice how much effort he'd put into impressing her.

He nibbled on some toast to try to settle his nerves. It wasn't working. Taking a deep breath, he Apparated to ARDEC. It was time.

Appearing in the lobby, he stormed past the receptionist's desk and straight towards Hermione's office.

"Sir, Miss Granger is with someone! She said she wasn't to be disturbed!"

But he failed to hear. He was a man on a mission, and he would be damned if anyone would stop him today.

He threw her door open with no regard for who was inside the office. "Hermione Granger, I love you!"

A sharp gasp of air was not what he expected to hear. He actually looked up and couldn't believe his eyes.

Hermione, *his* Hermione, was on her desk... draped over another man, her hair piled on top of her head and her shirt hanging from a lamp across the room.

No. Nononononononono.

She screeched and grabbed the man's shirt from under his head and attempted to cover herself with it.

"How dare you! How dare you barge into my office and interrupt me! I could have been with a client!"

The man under her smirked. "I certainly hope you do not give all of your clients such personal attention."

He was dumbfounded. He knew it was possible that if he waited too long, he might lose her. But ~~thim~~?

George had mentioned this to him in passing the other day, but he thought his brother had been joking! "You better watch her at work," George had said. "There's a relationship there you couldn't even begin to imagine."

Well, he didn't have to imagine now. He now knew exactly what Hermione Granger in a relationship looked like—*ans* shirt, knees on either side of a man's waist, her lips nipping and sucking across his collarbone, the man's head tipped back in pleasure.

Three months of lunches and coffees and doors. Three months trying to show her she was the center of his world.

His heart felt crushed. Literally. Like someone had thrust it between the clamps of one of the vises he had seen in his father's Muggle toolbox and twisted the screw as far as it would go.

"Honestly, Percival. I know your mother was incredibly busy raising you and all of your siblings, but I'm sure the good woman taught you to knock before entering a room." Snape sneered in his most professorial tones. The phrase was just missing a "ten points from Gryffindor" at the end.

Percy opened and closed his mouth, but words eluded him.

"Get out, Percy. Now. I will speak with you in a moment!"

Percy spun on the heel of his wingtips as he slammed the door shut.

~~&~~

She crumpled against his chest, mortified. He put his arms around her, his hands rubbing soothing circles across her back. He was desperately trying not to laugh.

"He loves me? He *loves* me? How? Why? What!" Her angry, confused words were muffled as she spoke them directly into his chest.

"Of course he loves you. Every man who knows you loves you." He knew such drivel annoyed her, but he couldn't resist.

She groaned and turned her head to the side. "How am I going to be able to keep working with him? Why did he have to come *inow*? Oh God, George is never going to let me live this down..."

He kept running his hands up and down her back. Each time, his thumbs caught on her bra. His fingers glanced over the clasp. Maybe if he could just distract her...

"Severus Snape, this is *not the time*. She scrambled off the desk and crossed the room to retrieve her shirt, which she made sure was buttoned before she turned back to him.

He didn't give her the same courtesy. He sat with his arse at the edge of the desk, his arms spread, his palms flat and his fingers curled over the edge. His shirt was on the floor where she had dropped it. He arched an eyebrow, beckoning her to return to the desk.

She angrily tucked her shirt in before releasing her hair and shaking it out.

"You better put your shirt back on, Severus. It's quite cold outside."

She stormed past him and toward the door, her heels clicking across the hardwood floor.

Quick as a cat, he stalked behind her. As her hand reached the knob, he pounced, leaning his body against her back and locking her between his arms, his hands slamming into the door.

"Not so fast, Hermione."

She struggled to turn around and face him. She tipped her head back trying to look at him squarely. "What?"

He tipped his pelvis forward, pinning her to the door.

"What!"

"You didn't say goodbye." He crushed his lips to hers, bringing his hands from the door to entwine in her hair.

She growled at him, trying to push away from his mouth. He used the opportunity to slip his tongue between her lips, sliding it across her teeth and coaxing her into returning the kiss.

When he felt her hands grasp his arse and pull him in closer, he knew he'd won.

He pulled away. "Well, darling, do you have anything you wish to say?"

"Go to hell, Severus."

He smiled and kissed her cheek. Standing back, he brushed his hands over her hair, arranging it so she could leave the office.

"Love you too. I'll see you when you come home."

He walked towards the desk to retrieve his shirt. As she opened the door, she called over her shoulder. "Draco's final exam is in my top right desk drawer. Could you take it to him for me?"

He slid the shirt on, but left it unbuttoned. Sitting at her desk, he opened the drawer and removed the test. 93/100.

Well done, Draco. Well done, indeed.

He made to button the shirt, amused to note that two of the buttons were missing. Not bothering to button it, he grabbed the test and stood, Apparating back to Spinner's End.

Draco was in the kitchen, making a late breakfast.

"Cripes, Severus! Can't you Apparate to your bedroom! I hate that popping noise in the morning! Good God, man, what happened to your shirt?"

He smirked. "Hermione."

"I see. At work again, I presume? You know, the Ministry isn't paying her to snog you all day long."

Severus rolled his eyes and thrust the test toward Draco. "You 'graduated,' by the way."

Draco quickly scanned the test, grinning. "Of course I passed. I'm Draco bloody Malfoy."

"Oh, really? Then why did you fail so abysmally the first time?"

"Well, I figured if you were willing to cut your hair and dress in those sexy denims and t-shirt for Granger, it was clearly my responsibility to let that play out..."

Draco never saw the Stinging Hex coming.

"Bloody hell! What was that for?"

"Whenever your father was around me while I was in my sexy trousers, that's how I avoided his advances. Of course, those pants were leather..."

Draco's nose crinkled as dramatically as his mother's. "Disgusting, Severus."

"I'm going to go wash up. Try to make sure you're home on time tonight for the party. Wouldn't want you to miss the opportunity to show off your newly certified Muggle-loving skills."

"I can't believe you're allowing us to have your belated birthday party here. And that you invited her parents."

"It was time. Especially with what I'm planning for this evening."

"You're really going through with this, Severus? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I wouldn't have had Mum's ring resized otherwise."

"Well, good luck. You're going to need it." And out of nowhere, in an unusual display of affection, Draco hugged him.

"Now go get in the effin' shower, Snape. You reek of Hermione's perfume. I doubt her parents will appreciate that."

Draco grabbed the slices of toast he had made and, grabbing his keys, left the house.

Severus climbed the stairs and headed toward the bathroom. As he let the tub fill, he cleaned up the bathroom, throwing all of their clothes in the hamper. He passed a washrag over the sink, removing the bits of makeup and beard from the counter.

The tub was full. He removed his clothes and placed them in the hamper before sinking in the warm water. He was a tightly wound bundle of nerves. So many things had to go right tonight. If nothing else, by the end of the day, he will have hopefully overcome his fear of meeting her parents. And, should that go well, he would be one step closer to making Hermione his.

Assuming, of course, that Hermione didn't succumb to Percy's bumbling advances.

He snorted. *Please*. He had nothing to worry about in that regard.

AN1: Please see the note at the top of this chapter if you're confused.

AN2: Well, we're done. The original prompt from kerravonsen was: "I'd like something Severus/Hermione, with a side order of Draco redemption, if possible. It would probably have to be AU for all of that to work. I'd prefer it to be something where neither Severus nor Hermione had a secret crush for the other all along: I like to see the relationship develop from nothing."

I think I've done that. For the help_chile auction on LJ, I originally offered a 1500 word story. The prompt clearly wouldn't let me stay within those parameters, so now you have my first true multi-chap clocking in just over 20,000 words. And while it may seem like I kind of just quit after getting these crazy kids together, I honestly planned it this way the entire time. We have a relationship developed from nothing. I hope you enjoyed it...this is definitely not what I expected out of my first multi-chap. In fact, I was actually in the middle of another story all those months ago when I started this, and now that I have a long story under my belt, I feel like I may actually be able to tackle that project.

Thank you so much to all the ladies who held my hand on LJ, Buzz, and IM who forced me to see this through in spite of all my misgivings. Special thanks must be extended to clairvoyant, my beta, my cheerleader, and one of my best online friends ever. Without her, it's doubtful this story would have ever turned out as well as I hope it has.