

The Mysterious (Non-Ticking) Box

by pokeystar

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Chapter 1 of 1

Their big project was Unspeakably vexing.

"Your assignment is to open this box." Arthur beamed at them.

Malfoy looked at Granger. Granger looked at Malfoy.

"That's all, sir?" Malfoy asked. Just for clarification.

Arthur Weasley nodded, pleased that his new team was quick on the uptake.

Malfoy looked at the box. Granger looked at the box.

"I don't suppose it comes with instructions?" asked Granger.

"No." Arthur shook his head, still smiling.

It was a plain box. A cube, really. Smooth edges. Made of wood. No seams. No knots. Perhaps fifteen centimetres squared.

"How old is it?" Granger asked, examining the box closely.

"Good question, Hermione," said Arthur. He was beaming again. "No one knows. It's been here as long as anyone can remember."

"Has it been opened before?" asked Malfoy.

"Another excellent question," replied Arthur. "Not in our recorded history...that we know of."

"What kind of wood..." Granger started to ask.

Arthur cut her off. "I'm afraid I have another meeting." He shrugged in apology. "I'll leave you to it, then."

Arthur left their office, shutting the door behind him.

It was a square room, echoing the shape of the mysterious box. The entry door was centred on one wall, with another door on the wall opposite it. The perpendicular walls

were lined with empty shelves. Two desks were situated a comfortable distance in front of the shelves, facing each other. The mysterious box sat by itself on a rectangular pedestal in the centre of the room.

"*Alohomora!*" said Granger, waving her wand at it.

Nothing happened.

"Seriously, Granger?" Draco smirked. "Don't you think someone would have tried that by now?"

"Yes, but..." Hermione bit her lip. "What if it was meant to be opened by someone specific?"

"A prophetic cube?" He sneered. "Destined to be opened by you? Don't make me laugh."

"Fine," Hermione gritted out. "You try it, then."

"Ridiculous." Draco snorted. "It's a cheap plot device. These things are never that easy."

Hermione just looked at him.

He sighed and waved his wand over the mysterious box. "*Alohomora!*"

Nothing happened.

"Maybe if we touched it?" Hermione suggested.

Draco picked up the box and tossed it to her. Hermione scrambled to catch it one-handed. "Come on, it's not a Snitch."

"Better not kiss it, then," she muttered, tapping it with her wand. It seemed solid.

"What?" Draco asked distractedly. He crossed to the desk near the left wall and set his briefcase on it.

"Hey!" Hermione set the mysterious box on the pedestal and put her hands on her hips.

"What?" Draco repeated, emptying his briefcase onto the desk and into its drawers.

"What if I wanted that desk, Malfoy?"

Draco rolled his eyes at her. "It's the exact same as the desk that's *closer* to you."

"Oh." She bit her lip again. "Well."

Hermione started unpacking her messenger bag.

Draco tried out his chair and wondered if Granger's was more comfortable. He'd be sure to check when she nipped out for tea. Hermione was still unpacking. Her bag probably had an Extendable Charm on it. If so, it would take forever to unload. He wondered where the other door went. He got up and opened it. There was nothing there. Not a closet. Not the loo. It was an utter void. *Boring*. He shut the door.

"What's in there?" Hermione asked, taking a gooseneck lamp out of the bag at her elbow. She placed it precisely on the left corner of her desk, lighting it with a non-verbal spell.

He leaned against the door frame. "Nothing."

She huffed out a breath that blew back her fringe.

"Malfoy, we have to work together now. That's what being partners means." She shot him an exasperated look. "It would help if you would be more cooperative."

Draco opened the door wide, revealing the void beyond.

"Oh. Well." She fiddled with her bag, extracting more items. "How odd."

He closed the door and sat on the edge of his desk, swinging a leg back and forth while watching Hermione unpack several framed photos. Potter frowned at him from one of them.

"Will you be finished unpacking soon?"

"Erm..." She bit her lip, putting the frames in a pile on an empty shelf. "I suppose I could finish later."

"I was thinking of doing some research."

Hermione's eyes lit up like it was Christmas and her birthday rolled into one.

Books appeared on Draco's shelves. Parchment, quills and ink pots appeared on his desk. He plucked one volume off a shelf and leafed through it in a haphazard manner.

"Urgh." He made a sour face. "It's the Department employee manual."

Hermione held out a hand and wiggled her fingers. "Gimmee."

He handed it over readily.

A bell chimed and the door to the hall opened.

Arthur stuck his head in. "Any luck yet?"

Draco and Hermione shook their heads in the negative.

"Ah, well," said Arthur, crossing to the other door. "At least you figured out a key word."

"Research is a key word?" Hermione asked.

Several books appeared on her shelves.

"Brightest witch of our age," Draco muttered to himself.

Arthur put his hand on the doorknob. "It's lunch time. Shall I show you the cafeteria?"

He opened the door. There was a hallway where none had been before. And delicious smells were emanating from the large room across from theirs.

[][]**DM***HG**[]**[]**

When Draco trudged in the next morning clutching a cup of coffee, Hermione was already at her desk with her nose buried in the employee manual.

"Morning," he muttered and drank deeply from his mug. He opened the copy of the *Prophet* lying on his desk.

"Good morning," Hermione chirped brightly, putting down her book. She watched Draco read the paper and drink his coffee, fidgeting in silence.

After a few minutes, he looked up. "You have something to share?"

She pointed out the door that Arthur had used the day before. "That's a Door of Requirement."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Really?"

She nodded, wiggling in her chair.

He crossed to the door and put a hand on the doorknob. "I need the W.C." He opened the Door to reveal a small half-bath.

"Doubting me?"

"I need the Ministry archives," he said ignoring Hermione's question.

And there they were.

"La bibliothèque de Paris?"

Et voilà.

"The Playboy Mansion."

Utter void.

"Fort Knox."

Endless nothingness.

"You broke it, Malfoy."

He turned to her, a protest on his lips. Her eyes were twinkling.

"There are safeguards built in, of course," she explained. "The Department Head has location limiters in place. And the Door can read intent."

Draco pouted. "No sneaking off for a latte six times a day?" She shook her head. "No Playboy bunnies?"

"How do you know about Playboy bunnies?"

"My father has a Muggle porn collection."

Hermione's jaw dropped open. "Really?"

Draco nodded.

"That seems a tad hypocritical."

"More so than the Dark Lord having a Muggle father?"

"Perhaps not," she conceded. "Are you ready to work now?"

"Sure," he said, giving a shrug. "Where do we start?"

"Um..." she said, mimicking his shrug.

They look at the cube. It seemed the same as yesterday, unaffected by the attention it was being subjected to.

"Maybe we should make a list?" Draco said, shifting his gaze to his co-worker.

Her jaw had dropped again.

"What?" He asked, his brows drawing downward in defensive frown.

In Hermione's experience, people with Y-chromosomes did not make lists. She would have been horrified to find out that Lord Voldemort had been a huge fan. It was where Draco picked up the habit. Many a colour-coded list had saved him from being *Crucioed* back in the day.

She snapped her mouth shut. "Nothing," she muttered. "That's a good idea."

Draco fished parchment and ink from a drawer. They started with a list of methods to try.

At the end of the day, they had a sheaf of colour-coded, cross-referenced parchment lists...things to research, people to consult, methods to try, ways to measure results...and a game plan for the next few weeks.

[][]**DM***HG**[]**[]**

Draco trudged in the next morning, clutching two cups to his chest and a paper bag in his mouth. He set the bag and one cup on his desk, floating the second cup to Hermione.

She looked up from her book, an expression of surprised curiosity on her face.

"Earl Grey," he said, emptying the bag onto his desk. "Sugar? Lemon? Milk?" He held up little packets of each.

"Sugar, please. And lemon," she replied. "Thank you."

He grunted and stuck his nose in the *Prophet*.

Hermione sipped her tea, watching Draco read the paper and drink his coffee.

After a few minutes, he looked up, arching an eyebrow in invitation.

"When were you recruited?"

"Two years ago, out of International Relations. I still have an office there."

"Magical Creatures. Four years." Her smile was tinged with smugness.

"You were a menace with that house-elf crusade of yours. Unusually expedient of them, I must say."

The smug smile gave way to a thoughtful frown. "That's diabolical."

He grinned and wagged a finger at her. "That's politics."

"Were you as surprised as I was to be approached by Arthur?" She asked.

He gave her a wry look. "More, I expect."

"Misuse is a great cover," she remarked. "Why haven't I seen you around before?"

"I was training in France," he replied. "After four years, I thought you'd have the manual memorised."

"I was on loan to Gringotts since I speak Gobbledegook." She took a sip of tea. "This is my first assignment in the Department proper."

"We're even, then."

She smiled at him and raised her cup in a toast. "Cheers."

They got to work in companionable silence.

[][]**DM****HG**[]**[]**

During the next weeks, they developed a routine: chatting in the morning over tea, then dividing tasks according to each person's respective strengths. Occasionally, they worked together on the tough bits or when they needed to compare results.

One day, they discovered they'd reached the end of their colour-coded, cross-referenced, struck-through lists.

"What now?" Draco asked, running a hand through his hair in frustration.

"If you keep doing that, you'll be bald by thirty," she said kindly. He glared at her anyway. "You've already thinned a bit in the front."

"I have not!" he protested, leaping up. A mirror appeared on the Door of Requirement. He stared at it, fussing with his fringe. "Shite!"

He raced over to the pedestal. "It's all your fault, you bugging lump of wood!" He shouted, pointing at the root of his anxiety. "Twelve weeks and all you do is sit there!"

Hermione's lips quirked in amusement. "We've already determined it's not sentient, Malfoy."

He shot her a disgruntled look. Then, he resumed yelling at the cube. "Do something! Levitate or shift a fucking millimetre! Open, damn it! It's not much to ask! It's what boxes usually do, you useless briquette!"

He stood there, chest heaving.

The mysterious box was not impressed or motivated. It remained inert.

"ARRRRRRRGH!" Draco cried in frustration, crossing to the Door. He wrenched it open and drew out an axe and a blowtorch. "I'm going to chop you into splinters and use you to pick disgusting things from my teeth!"

"Toothpicks," supplied Hermione in a helpful tone.

Draco ignored her, knocking the cube to the floor. He raised the axe overhead and let fly. It bounced harmlessly off the wood and the cube skittered across the floor a metre or two. He whacked at it several more times, chasing it around the room in a higgledy-piggledy fashion.

"Whoa!" Hermione yelled after he chopped the pedestal in two.

Draco dropped the axe in surrender and picked up the blowtorch. "How does this thing work?"

"I don't know," said Hermione looking at the device uneasily. "Ask the Door for instructions."

"Some Muggle-born genius you are," he snarled as he fetched a diagram from the utter void.

"I am very sorry my primary education did not include the operation of incendiary devices, Malfoy," Hermione shot back sweetly. "Please forgive me?"

He lit the torch with a spark from his wand and winked at her. "You're forgiven."

She stood by, wand at the ready with an *Aguamenti* on her lips, as Draco engulfed the cube with flames, charring the floor in the process.

A few minutes later he switched off the flame to reveal the unaffected cube.

"Merlin's hairy nut sack!" Draco yelled. He flicked his wand, lining the soles of his dragon hide loafers with metal and stomped on the cube.

Hermione suppressed a fit of giggles, trying to decide whether he looked like a *Tarantallegra* curse victim or an odd interpretive tap dancer illustrating the death of an uncoordinated pygmy hippo.

She was leaning toward hippo and close to peeing her pants.

Knickers.

Whatever.

A snicker escaped despite her best efforts to remain silent and Draco stilled instantly.

"It's NOT funny!"

"Hippo!" She gasped and fell to her knees, laughing helplessly.

He stood watching her, arms crossed and glaring.

"If you are quite finished," he said, an iceberg floating about his tone.

She wiped the tears from her eyes. "I think so."

He repaired the column and placed the cube on it with great dignity. "It's time to go home."

[][]**DM***HG**[]**[]**

As amusing as Draco's little temper tantrum had been, it was also utterly ineffectual, except that it inspired Hermione to ask the Door for a Muggle science lab.

The Door did her proud, supplying an engineering lab full of implements of destruction. Draco was overjoyed, once he got over handling Muggle objects.

"Tea?"

"Yes, please. I'm parched," Hermione tossed the latest seismic results...nothing again...to the counter and greedily sipped from her cup. "You're a god."

"Can you say that louder?" He asked, holding up a digital recorder.

She stuck her tongue out at him. "What's new in the world?"

He glanced at the *Prophet's* front page. "Little Charlie Thomas got a Muggle traffic cone stuck on his head," he said. Hermione giggled. "The Obliviator Squad had to be called in when his magic blew it off so hard, it landed three streets over."

"Oh, dear." Hermione bit her lip. "I hope he wasn't injured."

He showed her the front page picture. In it, Charlie Thomas, minus two front teeth, grinned while sucking on a bright blue sugar quill.

"Right as rain, the little hooligan," he said. "You're too soft, Granger."

He floated the arts section of the paper her way.

She poked at her tummy. "It's all that starch they call food in the cafeteria. I need to start bringing salads for lunch."

"There's nothing wrong with your figure," said Draco frowning.

"Astoria Greengrass is very sleek," she said, looking at the society column.

"Astoria Greengrass is a stick insect. Your body is fine the way it is."

"Thank you, Malfoy." She beamed at him.

"Your head is another matter altogether," he replied. "Do scissors break on that Devil's Snare?"

"Jealous, much?" She parried, eyeing his thinning hair.

"No. Just sussing out a possible donor for my future toupée."

[][]**DM***HG**[]**[]**

They pondered the evil little cube in fulminating silence.

"Is it *supposed* to be opened?" Draco asked.

"Yes, according to all the documentation we've found." Hermione bit her lip.

"But we've tried everything!"

"Not everything," Hermione confessed in a small voice.

Draco eyed her with annoyed suspicion. "Have you been holding out on me, Granger?"

"I didn't think it would work," she replied avoiding his gaze. "It's a bit extreme for a simple wooden box."

"Simple?" he spluttered. "Extreme? How is anything more extreme than a blowtorch?"

"Fiendfyre," she whispered.

Draco's face drained of colour so completely, he appeared almost translucent.

He cleared his throat. "That's extreme."

She stood up and crossed the office, putting her hand on the Door.

"Wait!" Draco said, his voice leaking panic. "Shouldn't we think about this?"

"I have another idea first," she said. "I'm going to Hogwarts."

Reassured by her calm demeanour, Draco followed her through the Door into the hallway near the Headmistress's office.

"Oh, shoot!" Hermione exclaimed, making Draco jump. "Sorry. I think we should have sent an Owl first."

"That won't be necessary, Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall, standing behind them. Draco jumped again. The professor pursed her lips to prevent a smirk and gestured to the gargoyles. "Loch Leven." The statue leapt aside. "Shall we?"

Once they were settled in front of the fire with tea, Professor McGonagall looked them over closely.

"Not that I don't appreciate the visit," she said. "But why are you here, Mr Malfoy, Miss Granger?"

Draco looked at Hermione. He was just along for the ride.

"Since it is summer and the students are gone, Draco and I were wondering if we could conduct a few simple experiments on the castle grounds," Hermione explained.

"I wasn't aware that Magical Creatures and International Relations worked on anything collectively," said Professor McGonagall with her eyes narrowed.

Draco returned her look with a perfectly blank expression.

Hermione winced. "They don't, as such."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "Very well."

Draco's eyebrows scaled his forehead in surprise.

"Oh please, Mr Malfoy. Professor Snape and I were colleagues for twenty years. I know you cannot speak of your work and I trust Miss Granger will not blow up the castle. You may start in the morning."

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall," Hermione said. "I have one more request."

"Yes, dear?"

"When we come tomorrow, may we borrow the Sword?" Hermione pointed to the occupied case behind the Headmistress's desk.

Professor McGonagall twinkled at her. "You know the rules, Miss Granger. If you require the Sword, it will come to you."

"Bother," Hermione muttered under her breath.

"I have no doubt it will heed your call, my dear," Professor McGonagall replied, still twinkling. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have paperwork to attend to."

They saw themselves out.

[][]**DM***HG**[]**[]**

First thing the next morning, Hermione and Draco used the Door to enter the second floor girls' bathroom, still clutching their morning beverages. Hermione carried the cube in her messenger bag.

"What are we doing in here?" Draco asked looking around in curiosity.

"Back in wartime," Hermione replied softly, "we had to destroy some objects using magically-cursed things."

"By 'we', you mean Weasley and Potter?"

Hermione nodded

"By 'objects', you mean Horcruxes?"

Hermione looked disturbed. "We never talked about that in public."

"My father found out what the diary was, long after second-year." Draco grimaced. "It was one of the things he was punished for, after Azkaban. A prolonged bout of Cruciatus does make an impression. It was a mistake he didn't care to repeat."

Hermione grimaced in sympathy.

"Much too soft," Draco murmured to himself. "By cursed things, you mean Fiendfyre?"

Hermione nodded. "And basilisk fangs."

"I have a question," he said. She gestured for him to continue. "We want to open the box. Not destroy it, correct?"

She shrugged. "It might get mangled a bit, but needs must."

He grinned at her.

"You don't happen to know Parseltongue, do you?" She asked.

"Not evil, just misguided, thanks."

"Harry can. Could."

"Oh, yeah!" Draco smacked his forehead. "The duel. I forgot about that." He smirked a little. "Good times."

"Git."

His smirk turned into a grin.

"Well, if Ron could do it," Hermione said with a sigh. "So can I."

Several hours and a throat raw from hissing later, Hermione was ready to give up.

"We could find a Parseltongue and record him using that digital thingie," said Draco.

Hermione sighed. "It's no good. Hogwarts would jam up the recorder before we could use it."

"Hello Draco," simpered Moaning Myrtle. She floated through the door of her bathroom stall, ignoring Hermione completely. "I thought I heard you in my drainpipe."

"Oh, hello Myrtle," said Draco. He seemed embarrassed. "I was wondering if I'd see you."

"You didn't forget me?" Myrtle's eyes were moist, but she seemed pleased.

"How could anyone forget you?" Hermione muttered.

Myrtle shaped her hands into claw and held them up, swiping at the air. "Meeeeeee. Ooooooow."

Hermione winced and kept her mouth shut.

Myrtle turned back to Draco. "You look too old to be a student. Is your hair thinning at the front?"

Draco grimaced. Hermione made a small noise and Myrtle hissed at her, arching her back like a cat.

"It's been eight years since I was a student, Myrtle," he said.

The ghost waved a translucent hand in airy dismissal. Then, she frowned. "Why are you here, then?"

"We need a basilisk fang," Draco explained softly.

Myrtle shuddered. "Horrible thing. It killed me, you know." Draco nodded in sympathy, reaching out a hand as if to pat her shoulder. "I thought kitty girl and the redheaded moron took them all."

"No, we didn't," Hermione said in a sour voice. "There's still a few down there."

"But neither of us can speak Parseltongue," said Draco.

"That snakey, hissy stuff Harry does?" asked Myrtle. She fluttered her eyelashes. "How is Harry?"

"Wonderful," said Hermione. "His wife just had a baby boy."

Myrtle moaned in disappointment and Hermione repressed a tiny smile.

Kitty girl, indeed.

Myrtle's eyes narrowed and she cuddled closer to Draco, purring loudly.

The ghost batted her eyelashes at him. "The Bloody Baron knows Parseltongue," she said with a sly smile.

Draco shivered as Myrtle's shoulder melted into his.

"Do you think he'd come in here?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"Look behind you," trilled Myrtle.

The grotesque ghost was hovering over Hermione's shoulder. She nearly screamed, but managed to cut it off at a squeak. Nonetheless, the Baron looked highly amused.

"Thanks for coming, old chap," said Draco, as if they were having high tea in a well-appointed drawing room. "Would you mind opening the Chamber?"

The Baron nodded, floating over to the sink with snakes for handles. He hissed a phrase, and the sinks separated, revealing a hole in the floor.

"We are much obliged," said Draco and the Baron nodded again. "Shall I send the usual?"

The Baron grinned, showing his bloodied teeth. Hermione averted her eyes, trying not to gag. When her stomach settled, she looked back. The ghosts were gone.

Draco peered into the abyss. "How did you get out?"

"We levitated."

"And *Scourgified*?"

"It wasn't that bad."

"You still have the cube?"

She checked her bag. "Yep."

A short while later, they stood over the undisturbed cube. A pile of basilisk fang splinters lay nearby.

"So much for that," said Draco, dusting his hands off. They were covered in fragments.

Hermione closed her eyes and scrunched up her nose. "I need you," she breathed.

Draco tilted his head to the side. "Pardon?"

A sword appeared at her feet with a clang.

"It worked!" She punched a fist in the air.

Draco bent over to pick the sword up for her.

"No!" Hermione gasped, waving her hands at him. "Don't touch..."

"Son of a bitch!" yelled Draco, dropping the sword. "That freaking hunk of metal just stung me!" He put his fingers in his mouth.

"You're Slytherin," said Hermione, picking the sword up and looking it over. It wasn't damaged in the fall.

"Well spotted, Queen of the Obvious," Draco muttered, shaking his hand.

Hermione glanced up from the blade in her hands. "Oh, dear. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said. "What does my House have to do with that...can opener?"

Hermione cradled the sword to her bosom. "This is the Sword of Gryffindor."

"Ah." Draco was not impressed.

"Only Gryffindors can touch it," she explained. "It's imbued with basilisk venom," she added.

"So were those," Draco said, gesturing at the pile of splinters.

Hermione bit her lip. "I hadn't thought of that," she said, let down.

Draco crossed to stand next to her, nudging her arm with his elbow. "Oh, go on, try it. Maybe the venom leaked out of all those crappy old teeth."

She brightened up. "That's a good point." She raised the sword overhead, Draco bracing her arms when she wobbled, and brought the blade down onto the cube in a strong blow. The reverberations travelled up the blade and into Hermione's arms, through her body.

Draco hugged her shaking form from behind as best he could. "Let it go, Hermione!" He barked.

"Noooooooooo," she moaned. "This is a priceless artifact!"

He squeezed her tightly. "Drop it."

Hermione let the sword go with a sob and he massaged her arms until she stopped shaking.

They looked at the mysterious box. Not even a scratch. The sword was fine, too.

Draco released Hermione as soon as she tried to step away.

"You know what this means?" She asked, her eyes on the floor.

Draco nodded. "Fiendfyre."

The sword disappeared.

[][]**DM***HG**[]**[]**

After a long lunch break and a short discussion, they adjourned to the Room of Requirement. It was their best bet for containment, having survived the cursed fire before.

Hermione held her wand at the ready. Draco's skin acquired a green tinge.

"You can leave if you need to," she said, looking at him with concern.

Draco grimaced at her. "Not until you do."

They both looked behind them, making sure the door was still open for a quick escape.

Hermione took a deep breath and conjured a small but menacing flame.

Poof. It was gone.

"That's odd," she said, giving her wand a little shake.

Draco was puzzled, too. "Not strong enough?"

"Maybe," she conceded, conjuring another, larger flame that snapped and crackled, reaching for the cube on the pedestal.

Poof. It was suddenly gone.

"What on earth?" Hermione was both puzzled and aggravated beyond belief.

Her wand sparked and Draco couldn't help edging closer to the door.

"I'm getting my wand serviced as soon as we get back to the office," Hermione said.

She conjured up the largest, most ravenous flame yet. It roared, engulfing the cube and licking at the pedestal.

A terrible wind blew from nowhere, snuffing the voracious flame out. It pushed Draco and Hermione out into the hallway, shutting the door with a bang after them. They tripped over the cube, Draco falling on his back and Hermione ending up on top of him.

She tried to ease off him, wiggling her body to the side. He grabbed her hips to still her and tried to catch his breath.

"Stop," he groaned, panting slightly.

She blushed. "But..."

"Okay. Move your elbow, you're bruising my ribs."

"I'll just..." she said, shifting a leg to his side, "move over here now..." Her other leg slipped between his. "Oh!"

He stared hard at the ceiling. She crawled off him gingerly and scooped up the same-as-ever cube.

Their Door appeared on the hallway wall. Hermione glanced at her watch and put her hand on the knob. "Oh my. It's quitting time! I'll see you tomorrow, Malfoy." She was gone in a flash.

"Goodnight," muttered Draco, covering his eyes with a forearm.

[][]**DM***HG**[]**[]**

The next morning, Draco trudged into the office, clutching the usual cups to his chest. He floated one cup of the usual Earl Grey to Hermione's desk, in the usual manner, and sat down to read the *Prophet*, as usual.

What was not usual was the silence in which they conducted their usual tasks that day. No chit chat, no consulting, no arguments over which chair was whose.

Hermione didn't notice the quiet, per se. She was too busy pondering. She thought about the mysterious box and everything they had tried to open it. She thought about Draco and how well they got along together. He'd even started going to The Burrow for Sunday brunch. Occasionally. Ginny teased her about how often his name was mentioned in passing. She contemplated the adorable way his thinning fringe fell over his eyes as he read the newspaper. And how his body heat had warmed her while he was bracing her arms to hold the Sword.

Eventually, an epiphany struck. She ruminated about it for a while and decided to kill two birds with one stone.

Then, she ate lunch.

Draco had done all his thinking the night before, lying on his back on the stone floor outside the Room of Requirement, with a forearm over his eyes. He wanted her. He would have her.

He went home and made a list. It was colour-coded. The first step was: lull her into complacency.

It was a great deal easier than he'd expected.

After lunch, they returned to the office.

"I've been thinking," Hermione said, her voice a tad rusty from lack of use.

Draco looked up from a tome on ancient wood. "Yes?"

"What if we've been going about this all wrong?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, frowning in thought.

"Every approach we've tried, save *Alohomora*, has been either violent, invasive, or both."

His expression bordered on incredulous. "You think it just wants a hug?"

"Something like that," she said. She crossed to the pedestal and leaned over it, pressing her lips against the top side of the mysterious box. It vibrated ever so slightly. Hermione wasn't sure if she'd imagined it or really felt the vibrations. "Now, you try."

"I am not kissing that thing," Draco said with disgust. "I don't know where it has been."

"Please?" she asked in a plaintive tone.

"Oh, all right," he said, crossing to the pedestal. "But you'd better not tell *anyone* I did this."

She smiled at him. "I promise."

He bent over and kissed the box. "I think... I felt... something."

"Tiny vibrations?"

He looked at her in amazement. "Yes."

They stood next to each other, closely watching the mysterious box for any sign of movement. There was none.

It became boring very quickly.

"Nice try, Granger," said Draco. "Back to the drawing board, I suppose."

"What if..." Hermione bit her lip.

He turned to look at her. They were standing so close. He could see flecks of gold in her irises. "Yes?"

"What if..." Hermione's gaze dropped to Draco's mouth. She leaned in closer to his body. "It wants us to kiss?"

"I'd bake it chocolate biscuits," Draco said, and pressed his lips to hers.

The box started vibrating, almost humming with power.

Draco kept his lips pressed to Hermione's.

Then, the box cracked open with a massive pop, and they jumped apart to watch a beaming pulse of lavender light shoot out of its top, up through the ceiling.

"What in the hell is that?" Draco whispered in awe.

Hermione couldn't look away. "I have no idea."

The light beam cut off as suddenly as it started. The box was closed, looking as if it had never opened.

"Let's try that again," murmured Draco, sweeping Hermione into another enthusiastic kiss. This time, he employed his tongue.

Eventually, they had to come up for air.

The mysterious box remained inert.

"Nothing." Hermione sounded more breathless than disappointed.

Draco quirked an eyebrow at her. "I hope that's not a review of my abilities."

She turned to face him again and snogged him senseless.

|**|**DMHG**|**|**

The next morning, Draco floated to Hermione's desk, clutching two cups to his chest. "Your tea, milady," he said and set her cup down, giving her a kiss.

"Thank you, kind sir," she said, watching his arse as he walked to the desk across from hers.

He sat down and opened his copy of the *Prophet*.

After a few minutes, he looked up. "Listen to this."

Something in his tone made Hermione put her book down.

"Descendants of Godric Gryffindor have discovered letters that were written to him by Salazar Slytherin. In them, Salazar confirmed his love for Godric and assured Godric

that he would return to Hogwarts soon. He confided that he was wrong to deny Muggle-borns access to education. He believed, finally, that ignorance and fear were their true enemies, as Rowena Ravenclaw had argued."

"That's... amazing."

"And here's something else. You remember those tense negotiations with the Persians about safety features for flying rugs?"

"The negotiations that ended last week with Persia nearly declaring war?"

Draco nodded. "They've been resolved. Persia conceded to Ministry demands this morning. They said it was the right thing to do."

"Wow," Hermione said. "I never thought that would happen."

He looked at the society page. "Pansy and Ron are engaged."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Say what again?"

"They saw each other at some Quidditch party for the Cannons last night, and boom."

"And boom? When Ron was wearing bright orange?" asked Hermione. She shook her head. "It must be love. Pansy can't stand colours clashing."

Draco snorted. And then gasped in disbelief.

"What now?" Hermione asked.

"There's picture in here of Severus Snape and Sybil Trelawney. Hugging." He looked dazed.

"You must be joking." She rushed over to his desk. "Oh, my god. You aren't."

He crossed to the Door and put his hand on the knob.

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked, still looking at the smile on Severus Snape's face as he repeatedly hugged Sybil Trelawney at her birthday party.

"Nowhere," he replied. "But I have a theory."

He opened the Door and retrieved the stack of Muggle newspapers sitting there. He went back to his desk and sat down, pulling Hermione into his lap. "Help me look."

"What am I looking for?" she asked, opening the *London Times*.

"Anything odd."

Many hours later, newspapers were strewn all over the office, opened to various reports of kindness and harmony in locations far and wide. Skinheads delivering flowers to sick children of all nationalities in New York. Long-feuding neighbours declaring peace in India. There were even pictures of a hugging cat and dog from Ottawa.

Hermione looked at the box. Draco looked at the box.

"Do you think?" she asked.

Draco shrugged. "The box works in mysterious ways."

[][]**DM***HG**[]**[]**

Author's Note(s):

Title derived from a Potter Puppet Pals video entitled "The Mysterious Ticking Noise" - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tx1Xlm6q4r4>

The idea of Lucius owning a Muggle porn collection was borrowed from pyjama pants' awesome story (<http://sshg-exchange.livejournal.com/270115.html>) Behind the Dungeon Door (ss/hg; nc-17).

Tarantallegra - "Forces the victim's legs to do a crazy dance." Via HP Lexicon. (http://www.hp-lexicon.org/magic/spells/spells_t.html#tarantallegra)

Little Charlie Thomas real kid, true story (http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=1d9_1193261221) The Obliviator Squad did a great job, didn't they?

Loch Leven is the prison castle where Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots stayed briefly in 1567. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary,_Queen_of_Scots#Abdication_and_imprisonment_in_Scotland)

Super special thanks and huge hugs to my beta, dormiensa.

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