

My Wildest Dreamings Could Not Foresee

by SlashisSilly

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Dear Old Grimmauld Place

Chapter 1 of 12

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"Lift your masks," he hissed at them through his teeth. "NOW!"

The Death Eaters each lifted their mask for their Dark Lord and remained still, anxious and uncertain of what was going to happen next.

Taking an uneasy step forward, Lucius spoke up. He knew very well why Voldemort had summoned them all.

"My Lord..."

It was early August and Harry, Hermione, Ron, Molly, Arthur, Fred, George, and Ginny were just arriving at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. It was exactly how they had left it last summer. Tugging their large, heavy trunks behind them, they were welcomed by an array of familiar faces.

Dumbledore, Lupin, Tonks, and Professor McGonagall were all in the foyer greeting them. With Death Eater attacks becoming more frequent, they found it much safer to stay at the Unplottable number twelve, Grimmauld Place until the start of term.

Everyone began unpacking except, of course, Hermione who headed straight to the library after dumping her trunk next to her bed. She was only a little surprised to find Professor Snape sitting comfortably in an armchair and reading. He hardly acknowledged her entrance except for a short sigh that said he was annoyed by her presence.

Hermione ignored him and began looking over shelves for something she had not already read in her last two summers there. She found a rather old book on the history of jinxes and counter-jinxes and sat down with it. She was across the room from Snape, but he was still obviously irritated by her presence there, and he left the room.

She was hardly into the first chapter when Harry and Ron entered the room and plopped down on either side of her. When she ignored them, they began sighing loudly. Slightly annoyed and slightly amused, Hermione snapped the book shut.

"Oh, what is it, you two?"

"Hermione, we're bored," Harry complained.

"Already? We haven't been here an hour yet, and you're already bored?"

"Well, there's nothing to do," Harry continued to whine.

"And we can't go outside to play Quidditch," Ron added. "Come on, Hermione, entertain us!"

"Well, what do you expect me to do? Dance a little jig!?"

Harry and Ron both leaned forward and gave each other a "that might be good" look. Hermione laughed at that and suggested they find a book to read. Now it was their turn to laugh.

"Good one, 'Mione!" Ron said between snorts of laughter. Getting up then, he said, "I'm thirsty; anybody want anything from the kitchen?"

Harry and Hermione shook their heads, and Ron headed for the kitchen.

Hermione turned to Harry, "So what is it you two are really after?"

He tried to play innocent, but it wasn't going to work with Hermione. "Well, we really want into those Order meetings, but they keep refusing to let us attend. Dumbledore and McGonagall are saying that we need to pay attention to school, not the war. We were hoping you would help us think of something to convince them to let us attend."

"Well, Harry, as much as I want to attend those meetings too, they're right. The war is not what we should be focusing on right now. It is our last year at Hogwarts, after all."

Typical Hermione answer, Harry thought to himself. "Hermione, we need to know what's going on. We need to be prepared too."

Hermione thought about this for a moment. She knew he was right, and she did want to attend the Order of the Phoenix meetings. Besides, the term had not even started yet, so there was no school to be focused on at the moment.

"Alright, but we need to be....," Hermione was cut off by Ron shouting in the foyer.

"BLOODY HELL! What are you doing here!?"

Harry and Hermione could hear scuffling and ran to see what had happened. Running down the hallway, they were greeted by the pointed, pale face of Draco Malfoy. He was against the wall, glaring at them, and Ron had his wand pointed in his face. Both Harry and Hermione immediately pulled out their own wands and held them up to his eye level.

The wrestling and shouting in the entry hall woke up the portrait of Mrs. Black, who began screaming and screeching at the group.

"I would appreciate it if the three of you gits would get your bloody wands out of my face," he spat at them.

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" Harry's teeth were clenched, and he was shaking with anger.

"It just so happens, Mr. Potter, he was invited," came Snape's solemn voice from behind them.

They turned their heads to see Snape waiting for them to lower their wands. Dumbledore had also followed the noises from the commotion and was now crossing the room to close the curtains in front of the portrait of Mrs. Black. Hermione turned her head back to see Malfoy now sneering at them. The three of them reluctantly lowered their wands.

"The three of you know better than to use magic outside of school," Dumbledore said, eyeing them over the top of his glasses. "Come with me."

Shooting Malfoy one last glare, they followed Dumbledore to the library.

"My Lord... she was a traitor," Lucius Malfoy groaned. He rolled onto his back, clutching at the gash in his stomach.

"Very well," Voldemort said stiffly, lowering his wand and turning away. "I believe you, Malfoy, for you are one of my most loyal followers, but you are also very much aware of the way we deal with traitors."

"I am."

"THEN WHY DID YOU NOT BRING HER TO ME!?"

"He's spying for them!" Harry said with urgency ringing in his voice.

"With all due respect, Professor, his father *is* a Death Eater, and he is most likely in line to be marked next summer," Hermione argued.

"If he hasn't been marked already," Ron mumbled under his breath.

Dumbledore held up one hand. "Please, Professor Snape and I trust him, and we have our reasons to. Draco has been paying frequent visits to us here over the summer, and he will continue to do so. And now, I have business to attend to." With that, he nodded slightly and left the room.

The trio sat in shocked silence for a moment until Ron brought them back to reality.

"BLOODY HELL!" he yelled, kicking the side of the couch. "Dumbledore is basically handing all of us over to Lucius Malfoy on a silver platter!"

Hermione stood up. She was confused and angry but remained calm. "Ron, there must be a reason behind Dumbledore's decision. I don't see what possible reason he would have for trusting a Malfoy," she admitted, "but there must be a good one. Dumbledore is no fool."

Hermione was alone in the room she was sharing with Ginny Weasley. Ginny was downstairs helping Molly prepare the household's early dinner, and Hermione decided to finally unpack her things. She had all of her clothes spread out on her bed, sorting through them and deciding what would go in which drawer.

She turned to the sound of knocking at the door and walked over to answer it. Ron pushed his way into the room and threw himself onto the center of Hermione's bed, messing up the clothes that had been neatly folded and organized only a moment before. Harry walked in behind him and took a seat in her desk chair.

"Did you guys want to start discussing ideas of how to get in on those meetings... or are you here looking for more entertainment?" she asked, sighing and snatching a bra

away from Ron, who had been holding it by the strap between his thumb and index finger.

"Little of both," Ron said, giving her the most innocent smile he could muster up.

"We wanted to discuss any ideas you had come up with yet," Harry replied.

"Well," Hermione began, stuffing the bra in a dresser drawer, "what options do we have? I really don't think we should ask, especially after this afternoon. They aren't going to even consider any excuse we come up with."

"What about Harry's cloak?" Ron offered, sitting up on the bed.

"You two have gotten too tall. The three of us can't fit under it at the same time anymore," Hermione explained.

"And even if only one of us went and reported back to the other two, Dumbledore would sense our presence there in an instant," added Harry.

"Extendable Ears?" Ron shrugged. "I'm sure I could get some from Fred and George."

They could hear Molly calling from downstairs, "Dinner!"

"We ran out of luck with those two years ago, remember?" Harry said. Tired of the twins listening in on meetings two years ago, Moody jinxed the Extendable Ears to only "hear" loud mariachi music playing whenever the extendable ears were within hearing range of the drawing room where the meetings were held.

Ron shrugged again.

Hermione looked at them. "Whatever we decide to do, we need to do it fast. With every meeting we don't go to, we miss important information."

"And I want to know what's going on with Malfoy," Harry said, crossing the room to the door.

After dinner, the trio continued their conversation. They discussed a number of cloaking charms and potions, but none that they knew of were full-proof. They went down to the library so Hermione could look through some books for ideas and Harry and Ron sat down to a game of wizard's chess.

Hermione found herself flipping through old textbooks looking for some kind of potion or charm she hadn't already thought of. She searched *Magical Drafts and Potions* by Arsenius Jigger, *Advanced Potion-Making* by Libatius Borage, and *The Standard Book of Spells Grades 4, 5, and 6* by Miranda Goshawk.

From the Black library she searched through *Powers You Never Knew You Had and What To Do With Them Now You've Wised Up*, *Saucy Tricks for Tricky Sorts*, *Weird Wizarding Dilemmas and Their Solutions*; *Where There's a Wand, There's a Way*, *Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes*, and *Achievements in Charming*. She was surprised to come across an old copy of *Moste Potente Potions*, the book she had used in her second year to make a Polyjuice Potion. Unfortunately, after tearing apart the whole library, her exhausting search ended with no avail.

By the time she had finished, Harry and Ron were bored with wizard's chess and were kicked back on the couch, eyes closed, claiming to be "thinking up some ideas." Hermione brushed some of the dust off of her clothes and sat down next to them. She was about to doze off when the three of them were jolted out of their snooze by the sound of Draco Malfoy's voice in the hallway. He was saying goodbye to Snape.

"He's just now leaving!?" Ron exclaimed.

Before the three of them could work themselves up into another angry frenzy, Remus Lupin walked in the room.

"What have you lot been doing in here all this time?" he questioned, looking around at the stacks of books Hermione had sorted out all over the place. The desk at one end of the room was covered in scattered parchment from Hermione's useless note-taking and crumpled bits were thrown about the room from her frustration.

"Erm... just a bit of research," answered Harry.

Lupin raised one eyebrow at that. He would have understood that from Hermione, but why were Harry and Ron in here? "Well, Sirius had more books packed away in those cupboards down there if you need some more research material," he suggested, pointing to the wooden paneling at the bottom of a few book cases. He decided not to question them further about their odd behavior and left the room, closing the door behind him.

After the door clicked shut, Harry, Ron, and Hermione jumped out of their seats and darted toward the wooden panels. They dropped to their knees and began looking at the seams in the wood carefully.

"If he hadn't said anything," Harry stated, "I would have never known these cupboards were here."

"Well, they're rather well hidden. I wonder why that is..." Hermione's voice trailed off once Ron pushed on one panel frame, and it popped open.

After Ron refused to take a look on account of any lurking spiders, Harry stuck his head inside and looked around the small, dark, dusty area. Lupin had been right; it was filled with books.

Hermione crawled over to the next panel and pushed on it the same way Ron had. She found that it popped open quite easily and was also filled with dust-covered books. Ron moved around the room, but found that those were the only two cupboards. Harry and Hermione began pulling the books out, but were extremely disappointed when they realized what they were.

"Well, it's no wonder Sirius packed these away, they're all about Dark Arts," Harry said, picking up a tattered, leather bound book and tossing it aside.

"They're pretty old. They must have belonged to his father," Hermione added.

"I guess this whole search has been bloody pointless then," Ron said, sounding irritated. "We aren't going to find anything useful in a load of Dark Arts books."

"He's right," Harry said, beginning to put the books back in the dark cupboard.

Hermione, frustrated, began doing the same. The first book she attempted to return to its spot was a very large one. It was at least a few inches thick and bound in heavy, brown leather. She picked it up with both hands and had to heave it into the cupboard before she dropped it. The book hit the floor of the cupboard and slid to the back. It hit the back paneling with enough force that it splintered some of the wood with a loud crack.

"Easy Hermione!" Ron said, kneeling down beside her. "Calm down. I'm sure we'll come up with something."

"No," Hermione began to explain, "it was just that the book was heavy, and I lost my grip on it..."

Hermione lost her train of thought as she pulled at a bit of the splintered panel. It broke away easily, and she noticed that there was empty space behind it. The cupboards were easily the same depth as the bookcases so the cupboards should have been up against the wall. But somehow, there was a large empty space behind this one.

Pulling out her wand, Hermione moved a bit farther inside the cupboard. *Lumos.* Her wand lit up the small area and she tried to peer inside the small hole. She saw what she thought looked like a small hallway. It was all wooden paneling, matching that in the library, but was tiny and would have to be crawled through.

"*Nox.*" She pointed her wand at the back of the cupboard and hoped for the best. *Reducto!* The wooden panel in the back blasted in toward the crawl-space. Hermione could now see several feet in.

"BLOODY HELL, HERMIONE!" Ron stumbled a few feet back, startled by the sudden noise.

"What was that!?" Harry questioned, just as startled.

"Come here, take a look!" Hermione pulled them over to where she was sitting and let them take a look inside. "When I dropped that book, it slid in and broke a piece of the back panel. I was able to see the empty area behind it."

"Well, I hope nobody else in the house heard," Ron said accusingly.

Hermione now bit her bottom lip. She hadn't thought of someone hearing her before she blasted her way through the thin wall.

The three of them were frozen for a few beats, waiting for someone to come rushing into the library. When nothing happened, they all relaxed a bit and curiosity took over.

"Well, it is my house after all. I guess I can tear out wood paneling if I want to." Harry shrugged.

"Where do you think it leads to?" Hermione asked excitedly, her voice a bit higher than usual.

"Dunno," Harry answered, peering inside the dark tunnel. "But I think we ought to find out." A mischievous grin formed on his face, he turned to Ron.

Ron, however, wasn't thinking that it was a very good idea. His face was twisted into a worried, contemplative look as he looked down the dark passageway.

Harry sighed audibly and rolled his eyes. "Don't worry, Ron. I'll kill any scawwy wittle spiders for you."

Ron's face turned into a scowl, and he chose his pride over his phobia. "Fine," he said crossing to the library door to lock it, "but I am not going in first."

Lumos. Harry lit up his wand and began crawling down the small corridor.

Ron began to follow until he realized Hermione was still standing outside of the cupboard, not making a move to follow. "Aren't you coming, 'Mione?" Ron asked, sticking his head back in the library.

Hermione continued to chew on her bottom lip. "I'm not so sure about this. Maybe we should tell Dumbledore about it and let him check it out first. I mean it's not like we ever come across Narnia while snooping around. It's always three-headed dogs or a group of Death Eaters."

Harry now stuck his head out too. "Come on, Hermione. Even Dumbledore said this house is the safest place for us to be right now."

"Yeah," Ron added, "what could we come across that could be that bad?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Fine," she said, crawling back down to the cupboard, "but if we find anything like Fluffy in here, I'm not hesitating to feed the two of you prats to it."

TBC

The Mirror Illusion

Chapter 2 of 12

The trio solve one of their two current problems, but another quickly arises to take its place.

The trio shuffled along the small passageway on their knees. The hallway had turned slightly, and they could no longer see any light coming from the opening leading back to the library. Suddenly, Harry, who was leading the way, stopped, causing Ron to run face-first into him.

"Ugh! A little warning please, Harry?" Ron implored.

"Ron! Get your arse out of my face!" Hermione was in the back and had gotten a face-full of Ron-arse from the abrupt stop.

"Well, Hermione, if you hadn't been enjoying the view in front of you so much, you would have noticed that we stopped," Ron quipped.

Hermione just rolled her eyes at his accusations of her ogling him.

"Shhh... I don't know how well insulated these walls are. We don't want anyone hearing us," Harry warned in a loud whisper. "But look, it opens up here, and we can walk. Just watch out for the step down."

Harry sat back and out of his crawling position and slid off the step. Ron and Hermione followed and found that the passageway now allowed plenty of room to stand up. They found themselves in what appeared to be a small room, and up ahead the tunnel continued. They would be able to walk, but would have to follow it in single-file.

The room wasn't much bigger than the broom shed at the Burrow. There was a small table that stood up against one wall and held an old candelabrum, which obviously hadn't been used in ages. It was holding three candle stumps and was covered in dust and cobwebs.

"I wonder how long it's been since anyone has been down here," Hermione whispered.

"Dunno. We should continue though," Harry suggested. "Nothing interesting to see here."

They continued on, single-file. All three of them had their wands lit up now, and the sight of the cobwebs clinging to the walls was giving Ron the creeps. They only walked

a short while before they noticed a bit of light coming from up ahead. They entered another small room, like the one before. But this one was lit up by a small window.

The three of them gathered around the window and peered inside. To their surprise, they were looking inside the drawing room.

"What is this?" Ron asked.

"Isn't there a mirror here? I mean on the other side of the wall in the room?" Even Hermione wasn't sure what it was.

"Wait, a two-way mirror? What would a two-way mirror be doing in the Black house?" Harry questioned.

"What's a two-way mirror?" Ron was confused.

"Well, obviously to spy. But if you're asking why someone here would have used a Muggle spying device, you've got me." Hermione was only slightly less confused than Ron.

"What's a two-way mirror?" Ron repeated.

Hermione began to explain the use of a two-way mirror and how it worked. Harry continued to watch the inside of the drawing room and noticed that members of the Order had begun filing inside. They were taking seats around the fireplace.

He hushed Hermione, who was now getting frustrated with Ron's lack of understanding, and gestured toward the room.

"Apparently, we found what we were looking for."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione huddled closer to the window. They were surprised by how well they could hear what was going on in the room and were now a lot more conscious of the noise they were making too.

Each of them nearly holding their breath, they listened intently to the meeting. Dumbledore was going over the newest bit of information he had on the Horcruxes. None of that was news to Harry, who had also been sharing all of his information with Ron and Hermione.

They sat through the rest of the meeting, which proved to be uneventful, and then slowly made their way back to the library. They agreed to keep their discovery between just the three of them and quickly began cleaning up the mess Hermione had made, making sure the trap door was as invisible as it had been before they found it.

Over the next few weeks, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were constantly paying attention to what was going on in the Order of the Phoenix's headquarters. Not only was Draco visiting much too often for their comfort, but they had to be aware every time a meeting was starting up. When members began arriving at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and those who were already there began filing into the drawing room, the trio would stop what they were doing to meet up in the library.

Unfortunately, there was never any mention of Draco's constant presence at the headquarters, but they did retain some other valuable information. Along with learning from Snape that Lucius' presence at recent Death Eater meetings had been scant, Voldemort had developed a new communication system for his followers. Each Death Eater had been given an identical necklace that they could use to communicate with one another. Voldemort could also use his own to find the location of any one of his followers whenever he wished. Unfortunately for the Order, this meant that Snape would have to spend much less time at Grimmauld Place and more time communicating with the Order through Floo from his own home at Spinner's End.

Of course, number twelve, Grimmauld Place was Unplottable, but spending large amounts of his time in Unplottable areas would look suspicious. He did show up for meetings when he could, like now, when he was sharing the news about the necklaces. He had brought his own for the members to see, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione were able to get a good look at it too. The necklace consisted of an elegant, silver chain with an intricate, silver-framed emerald amulet hanging from it. Hermione had to admire the lovely piece of jewelry, but wondered who had picked it out. Surely Voldemort wouldn't choose something as feminine as an emerald necklace for his Death Eaters to carry about. She also seriously doubted that Voldemort had been the one to charm the amulets or even come up with the idea in the first place.

Two days before the start of the new term, Dumbledore visited the returning students who were currently residing at Grimmauld Place to give them their booklists personally. Harry and Ron were in their shared room, packing, when he arrived. After giving them each their envelopes, Dumbledore asked where he could find Hermione. Both the boys shrugged and suggested the library.

"I wonder if Mum will actually let us leave the house to buy our own books. She's been so obsessively protective lately."

"Well, she is your mother, Ron," Harry pointed out. "Isn't it her job to protect you?"

"Yeah, but it's starting to be a real pain in the..."

Ron's voice broke off when they heard a loud scream come from somewhere in the house. They both recognized it immediately. "Hermione!"

Wands at the ready, Harry and Ron dashed down to the library to find a squealing Hermione hopping up and down on the couch in a very un-Hermione-like fashion. Dumbledore was smiling at her and chuckling with amusement.

"It seems Miss Granger is very happy with my news." Dumbledore nodded at Harry and Ron and exited the library.

Hermione leaped off the couch and ran to her friends. "I got it! I'm the new Head Girl!"

Harry and Ron blinked at her. They were still a bit bewildered by her extreme display of excitement and weren't sure what to say.

"So did you make Head Boy, Ron?"

Coming out of his daze, Ron began fumbling at his unopened envelope. "Dunno. I haven't opened it yet."

"Well, come on," urged Harry.

Ron suddenly became nervous and excited about the idea of being Head Boy. He hadn't thought about it all summer and forgot that, as a prefect, he was in the ranking to be the next Head Boy.

"Wouldn't that be great? We would get to share a common room, and Harry could come over all the time!" Hermione mused.

But Ron's shoulders visibly sank as he pulled the parchment from the envelope. Harry and Hermione peered over his shoulders. All that the envelope contained was the customary introductory letter from Dumbledore and the list of new books he would need to pick up.

Harry clapped a hand on his back. "Sorry, Ron."

"I don't understand why Dumbledore wouldn't have made you Head Boy," Hermione said, obviously disappointed. "You were the best candidate."

The three left the library and saw Dumbledore greeting Malfoy in the entry hall. The headmaster was grinning while Malfoy opened his own envelope and pulled out a green and silver Head Boy badge.

Ron, Harry, and Hermione gaped at the scene before them. How could Dumbledore have chosen Malfoy over Ron for Head Boy? Ron turned on his heel and strode away furiously. Harry followed him, and Hermione remained where she was. After a moment, Dumbledore shook Malfoy's hand and walked away into the house, winking at Hermione as he moved past her.

Malfoy was still looking down at his badge when Hermione walked towards him. "Congratulations on making Head Boy." She held out her hand stiffly.

Malfoy glared at her hand and then at her. Tucking his envelope into his robes, he replied coolly, "Yes, it seems Dumbledore isn't quite as senile as my father likes to believe. I just hope the Head Girl is tolerable enough to share living space with."

Hermione's hand dropped to her side. "I regret to inform you, Malfoy, that you will be sharing a common room with me this year," she said through gritted teeth. "I hope this doesn't offend you," she added sarcastically.

"Just try not to shed on the couches, Granger." He flicked at a piece of her curly hair and pushed past her.

"If you're looking for Snape, you won't find him here, Malfoy," Hermione called to his back.

He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. "So I've heard. I've just come to retrieve something I left here yesterday. So if you'll excuse me..."

Hermione clenched her fists and strode towards him. "So you've heard!? You don't mean to tell me that he has been informing you on matters to do with the Order!?"

"On a need-to-know basis, yes." His tone was surly and cold.

"Reporting everything back to your Death Eater father, Malfoy!?"

Malfoy charged at her. He was bristling with anger, and Hermione immediately grabbed her wand.

"Mind your own business, Mud..." Malfoy's voice faltered and hesitancy flickered in his gray eyes. He knew Hermione noticed this, and so he pushed past her and out the front door.

TBC

An Interesting Start to Term

Chapter 3 of 12

"Hermione clenched her fists. She had to use every bit of her will power not to punch him in the jaw. But the next two words she heard made her mind spin."

Hermione stared at the closed door in shock. *What just happened?* she thought, her mind reeling. *Did Draco Malfoy really just hesitate to insult me? To call me a Mudblood; the term he has spat at me in disgust hundreds of times before?* She wasn't sure whether to be suspicious or just think of it as odd.

Remembering what had happened before with Ron, Hermione made her way up to the boys' room and knocked gently on the door. Harry answered and let her in. Ron was sitting on the edge of his bed. His cheeks were still flushed with anger, but he had obviously calmed down. She sat down next to him on the bed and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Ron." She hesitated for a moment; unsure of how Ron would take the next thing she had to say. "But if this is what Dumbledore chose then it must be for the best."

Ron rubbed his closed eyes with the palms of his hands. "I'm really starting to think the man's going senile."

"Ron! Bite your tongue!" Hermione couldn't believe that Ron just insulted Dumbledore.

"Think about it! He's been letting Malfoy in here all summer, and now he's put him in charge of a countless number of students? This is ridiculous! He's the son of Voldemort's most faithful follower."

"Oh, Ron, don't be bitter about the Headmaster's decision. You know Dumbledore must have a perfectly good explanation for all this."

"Bitter!? I'm not being bitter! I'm sorry if I'm the only person here who realizes..."

Harry interrupted him. The last thing he wanted to listen to right now was their bickering. "You guys! Not now." He paused before changing the subject, "You know what I just realized, Hermione? You're going to have to share a common room with him."

"Bloody hell. She'll drive him nutty!" Ron finally relaxed and laughed a bit.

Hermione didn't appreciate the insult, but was glad to have the conversation going in another direction.

"Maybe that's why Malfoy was picked," Harry said. "Dumbledore knew, stuck with him long enough, Hermione would eventually bare her claws and attack."

All three of them laughed at this. They were remembering Hermione hitting Malfoy in their third year and were imagining her outright attacking him in their shared common room.

"Maybe you can scare him into obedience," Ron said, adding a whipping noise afterward.

"You know, I almost feel bad for him." Hermione paused for a moment. "Never mind. It passed."

They all laughed, but Hermione quickly sobered when she remembered what happened in the entry hall.

"I can't believe I almost forgot to tell you! Just after you two left, I waited for Dumbledore to leave, and I walked up to Malfoy. I informed him that I was made Head Girl. Of course we threw some insults back and forth, but the strangest thing happened." Harry and Ron were both looking at her with wide eyes. "Well, he started to call me a Mudbl... well, you know, but he actually stopped himself. Then he just stormed out of the house."

"What?" Harry couldn't believe it. "He actually resisted the urge to say that to you?"

Hermione nodded. "I don't know what to make of it."

Each of them became lost in their own thoughts. None of them knew what to make of it.

The train ride to Hogwarts was surprisingly peaceful for Hermione. The Head Boy and Girl were supposed to share a compartment, but Malfoy didn't speak a word the entire trip. She read and he just sat in silence the whole way there, looking out the window. At first, she was tense, just waiting for his first verbal attack. Oddly enough, it never came, and eventually, she was able to relax. They were to patrol the aisles every half hour, but even when passing a group of sneering Slytherins, he said nothing.

Later, after the last first year was sorted, Hermione met up with Harry, Ron, and Ginny at the Gryffindor table for the feast.

Ron peered over at Malfoy across the Great Hall. "Well, he looks like he came back in one piece. How did you resist the urge to strangle him?"

"Shockingly, I didn't have to. He didn't utter one word the entire trip," she answered.

They all looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"Surely, he must have said something," Harry said.

Hermione shook her head. "Nope. Not one thing."

"Well, did he spit on you?" Ron asked.

"Trip you?" Harry added.

"Hit you?"

"Kick you?"

"Throw something at you?"

"Poison you?"

"Pull your hair?"

"Shove you?"

"Strangle you?"

"Stab you?"

"Shoot you?"

The two were making themselves angrier and angrier as they listed all the ways Malfoy could have possibly harmed Hermione without saying anything. Ginny was the one who decided to break the tension. "Throw you up against the compartment wall and snog every last breath out of you!?"

Hermione snorted; trying to keep the pumpkin juice she had just taken a drink of in her mouth. Harry and Ron looked at her so fast, they must have gotten whiplash. Ginny just giggled.

Ron was about to reprimand his little sister for saying such a "disgusting and disturbing" thing when Professor McGonagall walked up behind Hermione and asked to speak with her.

Leading her out into the empty corridor, Professor McGonagall instructed Hermione on how to get to her new room. The entrance would be a portrait of a very old, tall, and thin wizard holding a walking stick. He would be hunched slightly and standing on a trail going through the forest. The password was "unity among houses." That was a rather obvious hint if Hermione had ever heard one.

"Now, dear, I'm sure you understand that the protection of the students is needed now more than ever."

Hermione nodded. "Of course, Professor."

"You and Mr. Malfoy will be given more duties than any of the past Head Students have had. I know this is a lot to ask of you, along with your regular studies and, I don't doubt, your large part in the upcoming war. But, of course, I would not have assigned this task to you if I did not have the utmost confidence that you could handle it."

Hermione beamed. "That is quite a compliment. Thank you, Professor."

"You deserve it, Hermione. Alright, back to the feast."

Hermione walked away smiling. On her way back to her seat, she passed Snape and Malfoy. Most likely receiving the same instructions she just had.

"What was that about?" Ginny asked.

"She was just telling me how to get to my new rooms."

"I really feel bad for you, Hermione," Ron stated, sympathetically. "I dunno how you're going to be able to stand living with him."

Ginny patted Hermione's hand. "If anyone has the strength to tolerate that git, it's our Hermione."

When Hermione arrived at her new common room, Malfoy was already there. His bedroom door was closed, but she could see light shining out from underneath his door.

The common room was decorated in reds, gold, greens, and silver. The sofas and chairs looked plush and cozy. A fire was burning low and Hermione could smell the wood burning.

She entered her room and almost squealed in delight. Two of the four walls were built-in bookcases, already filled. Windows lined the western wall; she would be able to watch the sunset every night. Her bed was against the northern wall, along with the bedroom door and bathroom door. The four-poster was twice the size of her old one

and made-up in Gryffindor colors. Crookshanks was already curled up in the center of it. In the middle of the southern wall, in between the rows of books, was a large fireplace. A sofa, recliner, and small table sat in front of it. Underneath one window sat a large desk, already fully stocked with quills, inkwells, and parchment.

Hermione walked into the bathroom and found a large tub that could fit at least four people. *Not that I would be inviting people into my tub,* she thought with a laugh. Four golden spouts lined one edge. One was for hot water, one for cold, one for lavender scented water, and one for bubble bath. She noticed the shelves held every hair-care product imaginable. Her eyes narrowed. *Somebody trying to suggest something?* she thought, bitterly. The closet was large enough to walk inside, and her uniforms, robes, and Muggle clothes were already hung up.

She quickly changed and crawled into her large new bed with Crookshanks. She knew Professor McGonagall was right. This year was going to be extremely busy and stressful for her, but Hermione had always been a girl who liked challenges.

Hermione was so distracted by her excitement to start her new classes that she completely forgot about sharing a common room with Draco Malfoy. She was about to head to the Great Hall for breakfast, but after closing her bedroom door behind her, Hermione turned around and screamed a little when she saw Malfoy kicked back on one of the sofas. Her scream startled him, and he stood up quickly, throwing down the book he was reading and pulling out his wand.

"You scared me half to death!"

Malfoy lowered his wand and rolled his eyes. "By sitting here reading?"

"I forgot you were here."

He shook his head and plopped back down on the couch. Hermione crossed the common room and exited through the portrait hole. She could feel his eyes on her back as she stepped through.

"What about my son, Severus?"

"Has the Dark Lord agreed to his marking?"

"Of course! He *is* a Malfoy, after all. Obviously, he'll have to prove his loyalty through an assigned task, like we all did, but I have no doubt in my mind that he will be able to rise to the occasion."

"Indeed. I have no reason to doubt him, Lucius, but is he ready?"

"Trust me, my friend, he is more than ready."

After her long day of classes, Hermione was ready to do her homework, and then relax with a book before dinner and making her nightly rounds. Unfortunately, just outside the portrait hole she could hear loud snorts of laughter. She sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Long day?" asked the elderly wizard in the painting before her.

"I have a feeling it's about to get even longer. Unity among houses."

The portrait swung open and she stepped inside. Crabbe and Goyle were grunting among themselves with laughter. Malfoy, however, looked distracted and stared into the fire. His face was solemn. Hermione cleared her throat to make her presence known. Malfoy blinked and looked up at her; then he went back to his thoughts. Crabbe and Goyle sneered at her as she walked to her bedroom.

She went straight to her new desk and began working on her homework. She was halfway through when she wasn't able to tolerate the imbecilic noises coming from the common room any longer.

Hermione flung open her bedroom door. "Could you *please* keep your voices down? I am trying to get my homework done."

Malfoy was, once again, reading on the sofa while the other two were still immersed in some idiotic conversation. Malfoy ignored her. Crabbe and Goyle looked up and glared at her.

"You might be Head Girl, but we don't take orders from a Gryffindor. Especially a disgusting Muggle-born one," Goyle spat in her direction.

Hermione was furious. She stomped across the room towards them. "Get out! Right now!" she yelled at them, pointing at the portrait hole.

Goyle stood up. He was at least a foot taller than her, but he leant down right into her face. "Make us, Mudblood."

Hermione clenched her fists. She had to use every bit of her will power not to punch him in the jaw. But the next two words she heard made her mind spin.

"Get out."

Goyle's eyes grew wide and his mouth sagged open. Malfoy still sat relaxed on the couch. His book resting in his lap, he was looking up at them. His two friends and Hermione stared at him in shock.

"W-w-what?" Crabbe stuttered over the word.

"I told you to get out." Malfoy paused a moment. "I have homework to do."

"But, Draco, did you hear what she just..."

"Yes, Goyle. Now leave," he sounded irritated.

The two mumbling idiots left, looking like they were in a daze. Hermione stayed where she was. She was unsure of what to say or even do. "I... um..."

"What?" he sounded just as irritated toward her as he just had to his friends. "Didn't you hear me? I have homework to do. Leave me alone so I can concentrate."

His tone of voice was the same rude one that he usually used towards her, but Hermione was too shocked to get angry at his impoliteness. She turned and went back to her room to finish her own homework.

He was not sticking up for me. He just had homework to do, like he said. That's why he told them to leave. Hermione spent the next half hour trying to convince herself of this, but when she peeked out into the common room later he was still sitting on the sofa reading, no homework in sight.

You've Changed, Draco

Chapter 4 of 12

"He was sitting on the edge of his bed looking distraught and tired. He didn't notice her until she gasped and pulled out her wand."

A/N: Thanks for the reviews, guys! I really appreciate it.

The next few weeks went by in a haze for Hermione. All of her new classes were enjoyable enough, but Dumbledore was forced to lay new restrictions for the students, which kept her and Malfoy busy during most of their free time. She would see Malfoy in their common room from time to time, but they rarely acknowledged each others' presence. Occasionally, Crabbe and Goyle would be with him, but they now ignored her. Hermione was surprised that Malfoy didn't spend much time actually talking to his friends when they were around, and when they were not around, and he had a free moment from school work or patrolling halls, she could usually find him reading in front of the fireplace.

Hermione mentioned all of his odd behavior to Harry and Ron. Ron immediately blew it off. "Maybe he's just tired from sneaking out every night to do the Dark Lord's bidding," he suggested. However, Harry seemed curious about Malfoy's sudden change of character. Not to say that he was a nice guy now, but Harry did notice that Malfoy no longer tried to provoke him or Ron with nasty remarks during classes. Also, if Hermione brought her friends back to her common room with her, Malfoy would simply get up and lock himself in his room.

One night, Hermione and Draco were walking down the corridor outside of their rooms, about to split up to do each of their normal nighttime rounds.

"Why did you quit the Slytherin Quidditch team?"

His head quickly snapped up to look in her direction. He seemed surprised that she had spoken. "What?"

"I thought you liked playing Quidditch," her voice trembled slightly. She was a bit nervous that he would just reply with some sardonic, irritated remark that would insult her intelligence. "Why would you quit the team?"

He looked down at his moving feet and sighed. "I don't want to talk about it, Granger." Surprisingly, he did not sound irritated. His answer came out flat and serious instead of snide and as if he was annoyed by her nosiness.

Then, the Head Boy and Head Girl turned in different directions to patrol different parts of the castle.

"You gonna eat those, Hermione?" Ron asked while pointing with his fork at the last two slices of bacon on her plate. But Hermione was staring off into space and not paying any attention. "Hermione," he said a bit more loudly than he needed to.

"Oh, what?" He pointed at her bacon again with his eyebrows raised. "Oh, sure, go ahead."

Ginny was concerned. It seemed her friend's mind was elsewhere lately. "Are you alright, Hermione? You seem so distracted lately."

Hermione smiled. "Of course, Ginny. I just think it's so strange..."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Malfoy?"

Ginny shot a mischievous look at Hermione. "So that's why you've been distracted? You can't stop thinking about Malfoy? I think Hermione's got a crush."

Ron choked on his toast. Ginny laughed at her brother's reaction. "I was only kidding, Ron."

Harry chuckled. "He is still acting odd though."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Haven't we already had this conversation?" he asked with a large bite of food in his mouth.

Hermione ignored him. "Don't you think it's strange that he quit the Quidditch team?"

Her question was meant for Harry, but Ron answered, "Who cares?"

"Know thy enemy, Ron," Ginny advised.

"Are we really sure he's still an enemy?" asked Hermione.

"What?" the other three asked her in unison. Ron sounded outraged while Harry and Ginny seemed interested at what she had to say.

"Think about it. Dumbledore—"

"What's there to think about, 'Mione? This is *Draco Malfoy* we're talking about."

"Ron, I was only suggesting it as a theory. There must be something behind Dumbledore's opinion that we aren't aware of. Now, I'm not saying I trust him or am completely convinced just yet, but maybe it's something we should be looking into."

"There's nothing to look into. A Malfoy is a Malfoy."

Hermione shrugged, unsure. The four finished their breakfasts and headed to their morning classes.

One afternoon, in mid-October, Hermione was sitting at her desk, finishing up the last of her Potions essay. She leaned back in her chair and stretched. Crookshanks leaped up into her lap. She smiled and stroked his orange fur. Suddenly, through her closed bedroom door, she heard angry shouting coming from the common room. Placing the cat on the ground, Hermione crossed to the door and put her ear against it. It was Draco and Crabbe arguing.

"Don't be daft, Crabbe."

"You've changed, Draco, and I'm not the only one who's noticed!"

"You don't even know what you're on about!"

"You quit the Quidditch team, you never join us when Goyle and I meet our fathers in Hogsmeade for updates, and you're constantly moping around like a bloody Hufflepuff!" The common room became silent. *What kind of updates?* Hermione wondered. "Your father would be disgusted if he knew this."

She heard some scuffling and Malfoy yell at his friend to get out. Hermione waited until she heard the portrait swing shut before she left her bedroom. Malfoy was squatting in front of the fire, staring into it.

Hermione approached him slowly and cautiously. "Those friends of yours can be quite thickheaded."

He looked quickly over his shoulder at her. Then he stood slowly and turned around to face her fully. "What would you know about it?" his voice was filled with malice.

"It doesn't take a genius to notice when something is wrong."

"Bloody Gryffindor." He pushed past her on his way to his own room. "Just leave me the hell alone."

At dinner, Hermione noticed that Malfoy never showed up. She was unaware of this, but Snape and Dumbledore noticed Draco's absence as well and were a little worried. Back in the common room, Hermione could hear a low mumbling coming from the Head Boy's room. Worried, Hermione took a deep breath and knocked on his door. When there was no answer, she slowly opened the door and peeked inside.

He was sitting on the edge of his bed looking distraught and tired. He didn't notice her until she gasped and pulled out her wand. Hermione suddenly felt angry for being worried about him. Ron had been right, a Malfoy is a Malfoy. Draco was holding a Death Eater communicator amulet. It looked identical to the one that Snape had showed the Order of the Phoenix. A silver framed emerald hanging from a silver chain.

"Granger, wh—"

"*Stupefy!*"

His knees buckled, and he fell stiffly to the floor. Although he was unconscious, Hermione kept her wand pointed at him. Then she noticed his face. Malfoy's eyes were rimmed in red and his cheeks were tear-stained. He hadn't been mumbling or talking to anyone. He had been crying.

Hermione rushed to the fireplace and immediately threw some Floo Powder in. She called for Dumbledore.

TBC

What Kind of Life Have You Known

Chapter 5 of 12

Hermione discovers the truth...

Character death is only minor

A/N: Thanks for the reviews! You guys raise my self esteem a considerable amount. lol

The Headmaster appeared in a brilliant uproar of flames and quickly stepped from the fireplace. Four quick strides brought Dumbledore halfway across the common room, where he glanced into Draco's bedchambers.

"Oh, dear," he mumbled to himself. He could see the pale boy, stiffly lying on the floor beside his bed. His hair was disheveled, and a look of horror was stamped on his face.

"Professor, I—"

She was silenced by the large flames that suddenly spit from the fireplace, caused by the Floo Powder Dumbledore had just tossed in. He called for Madam Pomfrey's immediate assistance and quickly threw another handful of powder into the flames. Pulling Hermione by the wrist, he brought them both straight to his office.

Stepping from the hearth, the anxious Headmaster headed straight for his Pensieve. Hermione followed, stopping beside him and glancing down into the swirling, silver liquid before her. Dumbledore took a deep breath and looked up at Hermione. She held her breath, waiting for Dumbledore to tell her that she had made a mistake.

"Miss Granger, I understand that your intentions were good, but you need to understand that Draco Malfoy is not a threat to the Order."

"But, Professor, I recognized the necklace in his hands! He might not have been talking with anyone just now, but that doesn't excuse the fact that he is keeping a Death Eater communicator!"

Dumbledore sighed deeply. "My dear, that necklace was not a communicator. I believe it's time you see what it was exactly that Draco went through this summer. Please

believe me, Miss Granger, when I say that this is not the same boy that left this school last June.

"I would also appreciate it if you would pass along to Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley that while the rest of the Order may not be aware of the real function of the mirror in the drawing room... I am." One corner of his mouth twitched up in a small, knowing smile.

He slowly strode across to the fireplace. Hermione stayed where she was and turned to watch Dumbledore rest one hand on the mantelpiece and gaze down into the flames. He sighed and slowly turned towards her.

"Miss Granger, you have had quite a good life so far, am I correct?" She nodded and he continued, "I would like you to try to imagine, one day, discovering that everything that your parents ever told or taught you was a lie..."

He allowed her to ponder this for a moment. A frown creased her forehead, and she pursed her lips slightly.

"Quite shocking, yes? Exactly how would you feel?"

She took a few steps forward, trying to choose her words carefully. "I would feel... betrayed. Gullible and stupid. I would feel as if everything I had ever done or believed in was a waste of time and energy." She waited a moment and then looked up at the wizard smiling sadly back at her. She knew what he was going to say next.

"That, my dear, is exactly how Draco has felt since June." He moved towards her and the Pensieve, stopping in front of it and again looked down into its liquid contents. "In an attempt to save her only son from the death or the lifetime in Azkaban that she knew she and her husband faced at the end of the war, Narcissa Malfoy tried to persuade Lucius into waiting a few years before marking Draco."

Dumbledore gestured to her to step closer. "Young Mr. Malfoy was kind enough to allow me to withdraw this memory from his mind. Please," he said while gesturing towards the swirling liquid, "take a look."

Hermione shyly took a few steps towards him. She cautiously bent forward, dipping the tip of her nose into the cool, swirling liquid. Then she broke the rest of the surface by plunging the rest of her face and head in. Suddenly, she was soaring through blackness, and then moments later, she was on her feet again, but no longer in Dumbledore's office.

She found herself in what appeared to be Draco Malfoy's bedroom. It was fairly large, and all the furniture was a rich mahogany. The fireplace mantel and hearth was a dark green marble, and a four-poster bed, much like those at school except much larger, was placed at the center of one wall. The curtains hanging around the window, the drapes around the bed, and the bed sheets were all the same shades of dark green and black. On a nightstand beside the bed was a picture of the three Malfoys. Lucius and Draco both sneered, as usual, back at Hermione. Draco's school trunk was on the floor, clothes strewn across the place like he had been unpacking. Hermione was surprised to see a very large bookcase in his bedroom. Before she was able to see what books were on the shelves, she was surprised by a small movement she could see out of the corner of her eye. Turning to see Draco Malfoy, with his back to her, leaning in the doorway, she suddenly remembered why she was there.

Hermione walked towards him. She was a little uneasy at first, but then was slightly surprised to find that Draco looked much more human when he was alone. It seemed he didn't have to uphold the Malfoy-family sneer for the moment. He could relax and be himself.

Finally realizing that she was staring, Hermione glanced around, looking for what it was that held Draco's attention. Then she heard it. Lucius Malfoy was yelling at his wife, who was screaming right back. But Narcissa's voice was not filled with anger like her husband's. Her voice was anxious, pleading.

Draco stepped closer to the loft railing across from his bedroom doorway. Hermione followed and could now see the pair arguing next to the staircase below them. Narcissa was down on her knees, tears streaming down her pale face, and Lucius stood over her, yelling, face flushed with anger.

"I should take you straight to Lord Voldemort right now, traitor," his voice was suddenly softer, but no less vicious.

His wife shook her head, looking up at him, and continued to beg her husband, "Please, he doesn't need to die for this useless cause—"

"Useless!?" He roared down at her, "What would our Dark Lord say if he heard you now? What do you think he would do to you? You're disgusting!"

"We are losing this war! You know we are! Don't let our son go down with the rest of us!"

Hermione heard a large crack and Narcissa's scream as her husband smacked her with the back of his hand. Draco shuddered beside her. She could see Narcissa's cheekbone was now sunken in slightly, and Lucius glared down at her as he toyed with the large ring on his finger. The ring was large and silver; it most likely shattered his wife's cheekbone.

Glancing down, Hermione noticed Draco's knuckles were white from gripping the mahogany railing. His eyes were filled with rage and sadness. She knew that he felt like a coward for not intervening, but Hermione also knew that there was nothing he could do.

"Narcissa, you have betrayed Lord Voldemort. You have betrayed me, and you have betrayed my son." Lucius spoke in almost a whisper, but the venom was still clear with every word, "You are my wife, and I will not allow anyone to torture you, but you must still know the repercussions that come from being a traitor."

Lucius withdrew his wand and pointed it menacingly down at his wife. Narcissa was trembling below him, hands covering her face. Hermione heard Draco's breath catch in his throat and watched him turn away from the scene. She turned back to watch.

"AVADA KED—" Lucius' voiced roared through the whole house, but he couldn't finish. Narcissa raised her head from her hands and looked into her husband's eyes. His body stiffened and his nostrils were flaring. Draco turned in surprise.

Lucius Malfoy hesitated to perform the curse on his wife. Although he believed her to be a traitor, he still loved her.

Rage filling him while looking into her pleading eyes, Lucius raised his wand again. *DIFFINDO!*

Hermione shuddered as the flash of light from Lucius' wand struck Narcissa's throat, creating a large gash. Blood instantly began gushing from the wound. Lucius looked down at his dying wife with disgust as she cried out in agony. Finally, her lifeless body slumped all the way to the floor.

Draco clutched at his stomach with one hand and held on to the railing with the other as he slowly slid down to the floor. He let out loud, raspy gasps of breath, and his eyes began welling up with tears.

Lucius began moving towards the stairs, and Draco quickly stood up and darted toward his bedroom. He hurriedly moved towards where his trunk was, wiping tears away from his eyes and pretended to be unpacking his things. His father sauntered in, a look of indifference and boredom plastered on his pale face.

"Draco, I would like to show you what happens to traitors when they are lucky." Lucius stepped out of the room, and Draco set down the school cloak he was pretending to put away and followed him.

With his son in tow, Lucius walked down the stairs and crossed towards his wife's lifeless body. Draco looked down at his mother. His jaw was clenched, and he resisted the urge to attack his father.

"Normally, I would take a traitor straight to our Dark Lord where they would be tortured to the brink of insanity." He said this nonchalantly and placed his hand on Draco's shoulder. "I'm sure you understand why I decided to kill her instead of turning her in." Lucius said this like he was almost proud of himself for showing such mercy.

Lucius suddenly hissed with pain and groped at his left forearm. His back became stiff, and he drew out his wand again.

"*Accio robes and mask!*" His Death Eater robes and mask flew down the stairs, and Draco had to move to avoid being hit by them. Lucius caught them in one hand and reduced them to fit in his pocket.

"He knows. He can sense it through her Dark Mark." Lucius moved towards the door, grabbing his traveling cloak and cane. "I want this," he waved his hand at his dead wife dispassionately, "mess cleaned up and gone by the time I am back. Do you understand?" Suddenly he was talking to Draco like it was his own fault his mother "betrayed" his father.

Draco nodded sullenly. He heard the door slam down the hall and finally sank to his knees. Eyes brimming with tears, he looked at the blurred vision of the only person that had ever shown any compassion towards him in his whole life. He stayed that way for a long while, stroking her hand and then her blonde hair.

Over Christmas break, his mother had lost an extremely valuable bracelet that her mother had given her as a present when she turned seventeen. Lucius dismissed it and immediately bought a new one for her. Unfortunately, the piece of jewelry held too much sentimental value for Narcissa to just replace it. She put an ad in the *Daily Prophet*, offering a reward to anyone who returned it. A week later, an elderly woman came to their door with the bracelet. She had been their neighbor for years, but they had rarely spoken because the woman was a Muggle-born witch. Lucius was not home, so when the woman refused to accept any kind of reward, Narcissa insisted that she at least join her for tea.

At the time, Draco had assumed that his mother was simply trying to maintain her social status, as he knew that it would be taking a heavy blow with the upcoming war. However, he was shocked when his mother later referred to the woman as "considerate" and "generous."

Draco was suddenly confused, he respected his mother's opinion much more than his father's, and was even more so when Narcissa happened to mention that his godfather, Severus Snape, whom he looked up to and idolized, was half-blood. He didn't resent this new information, but wasn't sure what to make of it either.

Looking down at his mother's bloody figure, he thought about the things she had told him recently and realized that maybe the war wasn't about blood, pure or dirty. It had never been about that. It was about power and any excuse Voldemort could create to get his hands on it. It wasn't pure versus dirty. It was good versus evil. Powerful versus weak.

Dipping his fingers into the slowly expanding red puddle, he lifted them to his face and was struck with the thought that if any Mudblood had been there too, their blood would look no different. The thickness and color would be nearly identical, and both puddles would have that same bitter, metallic smell.

Hermione slowly stepped down the stairs, stopping and sitting at one of the bottom steps. She watched his reactions and emotions play out on his face and knew exactly what was going through his mind. Suddenly Draco's heart was twisted every way, and he broke open and felt each shard of hatred that his father had ever set brewing in him come together. It was no longer directed at every Muggle, Muggle-born, or half-blood to have ever lived. It was now directed at the man who had created and encouraged this endless and pointless hate inside of him. Now the only hate he held was for his father and for the monster that encouraged the hate in his father the way that his father had encouraged the hate in him. Voldemort.

Hermione watched as he delicately followed the silver chain from his mother's open wound around to the back of her neck with his fingers. Draco unclasped it, and then held it up in front of his face. Hermione shook with realization when she recognized the necklace. It was a fairly large emerald held inside an intricately designed, silver frame. If it weren't on a chain, it would have looked more like a brooch than a necklace.

Given to Narcissa for their first wedding anniversary, the amulet hanging from the chain was the exact one that Lucius had copied the other communication amulets from. This had been a prized possession of the now dead wife and mother. Knowing that this one had never been turned into a communicator amulet, there was no risk of being tracked by having it in his possession. Draco slid it into his pocket, knowing that soon his father would remove all of the other items his mother had owned from the manor. Draco was attempting to hold on to a piece of the only person who ever really loved him.

No longer ignorant to the truth, Draco was scared and uncertain. He was still unaware that Snape was only a Death Eater again to spy for the Order, and not knowing who else to turn to, he decided to owl Dumbledore. Hermione followed him as he bustled out of the hallway and entered a rather impressive library. He ran to the desk that sat at one end of the room and scribbled something on a piece of parchment. He tied it to an owl who sat quietly in a cage in the library.

"Take this straight to Albus Dumbledore," Draco commanded the bird and opened the window to let him out.

Attempting to calm himself, Draco followed his father's orders and began casting cleaning charms. He fought to feel indifferent to whose blood it was he was cleaning up, and he anxiously awaited Dumbledore's reply.

The scene before Hermione began to fade, and she found herself, once again, in the Headmaster's office. She slowly stepped away from the Pensieve and towards the chair across from Dumbledore where he was now seated at the fire. She sat stiffly, somber from the realization of what had happened to this person whom she had despised for so long.

"I assume I don't need to explain to you what young Mr. Malfoy realized that day?"

She shook her head, sympathy for one of her best friend's enemies washing over her. "Poor Malf—," she could no longer think of him as Malfoy the git, "Draco. Brainwashed since birth by his father's beliefs; he never even had a chance to form his own opinions."

"Indeed, but he is maturing, much sooner than I had expected, and beginning to see the light. Unfortunately, this is still quite a struggle for him, as I am sure you can imagine. Continuing to mourn the loss of his mother, the only person to show him any kind of human compassion or love, he is now faced with the brutal reality that his father, a man he had trusted, spoon-fed him lies since the moment he was born. Plus, we need Lucius to believe that Draco is still faithful to him and Voldemort, so Draco has to hold up a constant masquerade and still be treated by his peers like he is still the same old Draco Malfoy.

"I'm quite sure you understand that being hexed in the middle of grieving his mother is one of the last things he needs right now." He chuckled slightly at this, but it sounded sad.

She looked up slightly at Dumbledore and cast a gloomy smile at him. She felt terrible. She had noticed the changes before, but even his newfound manners and softening of attitude towards her was all so painfully obvious to her now.

"But, sir, why can't people know? Wouldn't it be much easier on him not to have to carry on this charade?"

"Ah, my dear, if only it was that easy. Surely you understand that a man such as Lucius Malfoy will not give up his only son to our side without a fight."

Hermione silently chastised herself for not thinking of that before.

"No, Miss Granger, for now it is much easier this way. Plus, young Mr. Malfoy has been sending each letter that he receives from his father straight to me. Lucius Malfoy is a very paranoid man and doesn't reveal much in his letters, but every bit helps."

"Headmaster, what about this summer? At the end of term? Won't Lucius want Draco marked as soon as possible?"

"Yes, Professor Snape and I are still trying to find a way out of that little problem, but fortunately that is an issue we still have months to deal with, my dear."

Suddenly, the fire grew up into a giant blaze and as it died down again, the face of Madam Pomfrey appeared within the flames.

"Sorry to interrupt, Albus, but a certain Mr. Malfoy is awake and very eager to speak with you."

"I will be there in just a moment, Poppy. Thank you."

With that, the fire roared up again and then died back down to its usual flicker. The wizard slowly stood up from his chair. Gesturing to the Pensieve, "While you were still watching, Madam Pomfrey let me know that Draco received a slight concussion, but is doing just fine."

Hermione stood up quickly, suddenly feeling worse than she had before. "What!? But, Professor, I only *Stupefied* him! Surely, that wouldn't cause—"

Dumbledore held up his hand to stop her sudden, worried outburst. His eyes were twinkling slightly in the firelight. "Yes, but I believe someone didn't think to pillow his head during the fall."

Finishing her rounds of the corridors, Hermione made her way back to her room. She knew Draco would be back from the hospital wing by now, but hopefully he would be in his bedroom. She was embarrassed and felt terrible. She couldn't face him yet. What would she say?

Hermione stepped through the portrait hole. Even in the dim light of the fireplace, she could see the bruise that formed on his pale forehead. He was sitting on the couch in front of the fire. Leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, he was toying with his mother's necklace in his hands. Hermione could see the silver and emerald glittering in the firelight.

She stepped forward and slowly lowered herself on to a chair beside the couch. Her back was stiff, and she was unsure of what to say. He sighed and leaned over, handing her the necklace.

Hermione was confused. She took it from him, but had no idea what to do with it.

"Go ahead," he tapped it lightly with his wand.

She suddenly knew what he wanted her to do with it. Hermione pulled out her wand and pointed it at the amulet. She cleared her throat and said the charm *Specialis Revelio*.

"Nothing happened," she stated flatly. There were no charms on the amulet. She lowered her wand and leaned over to hand the necklace back to Draco.

He looked up quickly. His jaws were clenched, and he snatched the necklace from her hands. "Of course nothing happened! What the bloody hell did you expect to happen!?"

He stormed off to his bedroom and slammed the door shut. She wanted to apologize, but had no idea what to say. There was nothing she could say that would make him feel better. What she had done was unintentionally cruel.

TBC

Blood Bonds

Chapter 6 of 12

Harry and Ron have something they need to discuss with Hermione. Draco is getting library books from the restricted section.

Hermione went through each of her classes the next day dwelling on the night before. She had not seen Draco that morning while leaving her room or across the Great Hall at breakfast. She never thought that she would find herself worrying about the feelings of Draco Malfoy.

After her classes, Hermione entered her common room and shivered. The house-elves had kept the fire burning all day, but the room was still cold with emptiness. She tried to work on her homework, but found the silence of the room was too much to take at the moment. She gathered her things and headed down to the library.

On her way there, she ran into Ron.

"Oi, Hermione. Where you been? Harry and I haven't seen you all day."

"I've just been... distracted today," Hermione answered carefully. She brought one hand up to the back of her neck and massaged it lightly. Her muscles had been tense with guilt all day.

"Everything alright?" Ron had just noticed the dark circles under her eyes and her oddly stiff posture.

"Yeah. Just... homework," she said, holding up her satchel.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Hermione, you really need to take it easy on yourself. School isn't everything, especially right now. Which reminds me... Harry and I need to talk to you later. It's rather important. After dinner?"

She nodded and quickly ended the conversation. She didn't feel like worrying about the war at the moment, but she also knew that war wouldn't accommodate itself for her schedule.

Upon entering the library, Hermione glanced around for the best empty seat. The first thing that caught her attention was a bit of a surprise though. She saw the back of his familiar blond hair and immediately darted behind the nearest row of shelves.

Draco was standing at Madam Pince's desk. She was reading a note he had handed her. She looked up at him suspiciously, but walked him over to the restricted section anyways.

Hermione waited in her hiding place. She was desperately trying to think of something she could say to him, but her thoughts were interrupted by some giggling nearby. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil were huddled together over a magazine. Hermione had to laugh to herself when she noticed Viktor Krum's picture was on the cover, smiling at her. She rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to the entrance of the restricted section.

Draco was now leaving it and headed over to an empty table in the corner. Hermione noticed that something seemed different about his movements. She couldn't quite place what it was, but something was definitely different.

Brushing off the thought, Hermione looked at his table. She could tell he had already been there for a while. His satchel was sitting in the chair next to him, and he already had books and parchment spread out in front of him. He had a book with him now, but Hermione could not see what book it was from the distance she was at.

She took a deep breath and headed over to his table. She sat down lightly in the chair across from him and began removing books and parchment from her bag. He didn't show any sign that he had noticed her arrival at his table.

Draco was scribbling notes down on a piece of parchment. Hermione glanced over at the top of the page he was currently looking over. In the header, Hermione could read the title of the book; *Breaking Blood Bonds and Other Bothersome Bindings*.

Hermione took another deep breath. "I don't believe that's being covered in any of your current courses."

His quill stopped scratching away at the parchment, and his hand hovered over it for a moment. Hermione suddenly worried that her interruption was going to anger him.

"No." He continued to stare down at the book. "Personal interest." His quill found the parchment again, and he continued to take notes.

She relaxed slightly when he answered her. "I assume Snape gave you the note for that."

He gave an irritated sigh and looked up at her. "I didn't forge it, if that's what you're asking."

"Oh, no! That's not what I meant. I just..." She didn't know what she had meant. She had just been trying to make conversation.

Hermione quickly began flipping through one of her textbooks. She could sense him still looking at her. Settling on the correct page, she looked back up at him and met his quizzical stare.

"What?"

Draco shook his head and went back to his notes. Hermione buried her face in a book and began her homework. The two were silent for a while, working diligently on their work. Finally, Hermione's curiosity got the best of her.

"I don't mean to be nosey..."

"Yes, you do," he interrupted. "It's part of your character," he mocked, never looking away from his notes.

She rolled her eyes and chuckled a little. He was absolutely right. Of course, he didn't need to point it out, but he was right. "As I was saying... what, exactly, would you need that book for?"

Draco stared at his parchment for a moment before lightly setting down his quill and folding his hands together on the table.

"I'm going to assume Dumbledore showed you the memory..."

Hermione broke eye contact and nodded. She felt another large pang of remorse.

"Well then, since you *must* know, and seeing as how you already know so much," he said this offhandedly, "I might as well explain the rest."

She looked down at her hands resting in her lap, regretfully. His tone softened, "I can trust none of this is getting to Potter or Weasley?" He spat the names like venom.

Hermione shook her head emphatically. "Of course not." She wanted to tell him that he could trust her, but she felt that it would sound too forceful and eager.

He nodded slowly. "Currently, I am held in a blood bond to my father, and he can use it to my advantage or against me. With it, he can track me and control what places I can and cannot Apparate to."

"But if the two of you are bound, won't he know instantly when you break it?"

"Although, I am bound to both him and my mother, she was the one to perform the actual charm so she would have been the one to know. Unfortunately, when he tries to track me or uses it at all, he'll definitely know when it won't work."

"I'll assume that since it was your mother's idea, it was placed for protection rather than control."

He nodded solemnly, remembering the loving way his mother would be so protective of him.

"She seemed to have loved you very much."

"Isn't that what mothers are for?"

"Oh, of course. I just thought that since your father..."

He held up one hand. "I know. But she was nothing like my father."

In a comfortable silence, Hermione finished the rest of her homework, and Draco finished his notes. They walked back to their common room together. Neither said anything on the way there.

Once inside, she turned towards him. "I'm really sorry. There's not much else I can say. I was completely out of line, and I should have trusted Dumbledore's judgment." She felt uneasy saying it, but she knew that she needed to apologize.

He looked away, but nodded thoughtfully. "I understand. I'm a bloody git, not to mention the son of a Death Eater, and I don't exactly deserve anyone's trust or respect. Especially not yours."

He had accepted her apology, but she still felt terrible about what had happened. She looked down sadly, and chewed at her bottom lip.

"Besides, Granger, isn't jumping to conclusions a Gryffindor trait?" he mocked, feeling he needed to break some of the tension.

Hermione looked up, casting a small smile at him. She took a deep breath and stuck out her hand. "It's *Hermione*."

This time, he accepted the hand she offered. Hermione thought she saw a small smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. "Draco."

When she sat down for dinner that night, Hermione was already feeling much better. Draco had forgiven her. She wished she could tell Ron and Harry about everything. They would not take the news well, but if they saw the memory, they could at least begin to see Draco's new view on things. It would definitely take a long time for them to actually trust him, but if only they could see the memory, that process could begin. She highly doubted that they would ever come to like him, but people don't have to like each other to work on the same side.

Hermione turned and spotted Harry and Ron entering the Great Hall together. She waved them over to where she was seated and they hurried over.

"You look better, Hermione," Ron said while sitting down across from her.

"Yes, well, I finished my essay for Advanced Potions earlier," she replied. Well, it wasn't a complete lie. She ~~had~~ finished her Advanced Potions essay, but the essay was not the reason for her stressed state earlier that day.

"Oh," he said in an understanding tone. "If I had an essay for Snape, I would be stressed out too."

"*Professor* Snape," Hermione corrected him.

"Anyways, I'm just glad I don't have to take Potions anymore," Ron said, and Harry nodded in agreement. Then, they both began to shovel food greedily onto their plates.

Towards the end of the meal, Hermione began to get rather anxious. Neither Harry nor Ron had mentioned anything about what they needed to talk about, and she was terribly curious.

"So, what is it that we need to talk about?" she finally asked in a low voice.

Harry and Ron looked at each other. "How about we leave now so we can get back to your rooms before Ferret Face gets there?" Harry suggested, jutting a thumb over his shoulder in Draco's direction.

Hermione nodded. Ron looked a little disappointed because he hadn't finished with his third helping yet. He quickly grabbed three more rolls, and they headed out of the hall.

While leaving, Hermione glanced at Draco, but quickly turned away when she realized he had been looking at her. The three of them left the Great Hall and started towards Hermione and Draco's common room.

TBC

Hidden Information

Chapter 7 of 12

Harry turned from the door, and he had that familiar glint in his eyes. The glint when he already had a plan of action in mind.

A/N: I believe I cursed myself by telling someone that I was lucky enough to rarely get writers block. Not ten minutes after saying that, I was suddenly struck with a terrible case of writer's block! Of course!

Anyway, it passed so it's no big deal, but I apologize for being a little late with this update.

Once again, thanks for the reviews!

"So?" Hermione asked, sitting neatly on the edge of her bed.

Harry cast a silencing charm on the room after locking her door. Ron was currently gaping at the luxuriousness of everything in her room.

Harry turned from the door, and he had that familiar glint in his eyes. The glint when he already had a plan of action in mind. Of course, those plans were usually highly flawed if Hermione was not involved in the creation of it, so she was now ready to hear out everything they had to tell her. She wasn't about to let him go through with some half-brained scheme without her say in the matter.

"Come on, let's all sit over here," Harry said, nodding towards the couch and chairs around the fireplace.

Hermione crossed the room and took a seat. Ron was already there, having noticed the plush pillows and thick cushions of the sofa. Harry then sat on the edge of one chair, ready to talk.

"We needed to talk to you about Lucius Malfoy," Harry started off.

"Lucius Malfoy?"

"Yes. Now, remember how Snape had mentioned in August that his appearances at Death Eater meetings had been dwindling?"

Hermione nodded.

"Well..."

"Apparently, it's been continuing to do so," Ron finished.

She hesitated for a moment to see if they were going to continue, but they didn't. "Is that all?" She chuckled at their overreaction. "On the walk to my rooms, you two seemed so anxious that I would have thought you were about to say that Voldemort has been taking Polyjuice Potion to look like Lavender Brown, and then spending his

evenings snogging every Gryffindor boy he could find.”

Ron snickered at her remark, but Harry had more to add. “No, Hermione. There’s more. Apparently, Voldemort’s been explaining his absence with talks of a very important task.”

“Something that could help their side greatly,” Ron added.

“Dumbledore seemed really upset by the news.”

“How did you find all this out?” Hermione asked them.

“I... er... well, I accidentally overheard Snape telling Dumbledore,” Harry answered honestly.

“You mean ‘accidentally’ while you just happened to be wearing your invisibility cloak?” Hermione asked. She sounded disapproving, but the small smirk on her face gave her away.

“Well, yeah.” Harry shrugged.

“Honestly, you two,” Hermione said. “If Dumbledore knows about it, then it’s obviously under control. You don’t need to be snooping around and trying to find ways to get involved. Harry, you already play a big enough part in the war, you don’t need to be any more involved.”

Ron stood up. “Ah, but you see, Hermione, we’ve already got a plan.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Ron, you sound more like Fred and George everyday,” she said, laughing a little.

But Ron continued, “Dumbledore would never think to do what we’ve got planned.”

“Exactly! Because it’s probably some dumb idea that will get us all into trouble.”

“Come on, Hermione!” Ron whined.

“Alright, tell me what you two are scheming.”

“Well, we were thinking you could spy on Malfoy. Maybe intercept some of his owls, break into his room, look through some of his stuff. Lucius must have written to him and told him about something,” Harry explained.

“I can’t do that!”

“Why not?” Ron asked incredulously.

“Well, first of all, I—” but Hermione’s words broke off. She could tell her friends about Narcissa and Dumbledore’s reasons for trusting Draco. Not yet. “He receives his owls in the Great Hall just like everyone else, and he locks his bedroom door.”

Ron waved his wand around idiotically. “So do a little ‘allow-hammer-uh!’”

“It’s *alohomora*, Ronald.”

“Come on, Hermione! It can’t be that hard to get in there and snoop around a bit.”

“No,” Hermione said adamantly.

Ron paused for a moment and looked at Harry. “Well, I guess we’re going to have to Polyjuice ourselves into Crabbe and Goyle again.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I am definitely not looking forward *to that*.”

Don’t these two ever give up? Hermione thought to herself. “Okay, okay. Just... let me think about it,” she lied. She didn’t want them prying into Draco’s business, especially when she knew they weren’t going to get any information, and she didn’t need them attempting to Polyjuice other students on their own and getting into trouble.

“Okay,” Harry agreed. Ron was beaming.

“Alright, you two, I’ve got rounds to do. So if you don’t mind...”

They both stood up. “No problem, Hermione. We’ll talk more over breakfast tomorrow,” Harry said.

While lying in bed, Hermione thought about what they had said. *If Lucius is busy working on something for Voldemort, I bet he’d be too preoccupied to ever notice that his son broke a blood binding...*

“Bloody prats,” Draco muttered.

“Well, what do you expect? They don’t know the truth yet,” Hermione reminded him.

He scoffed and looked away. He knew she was right; they had every right to be suspicious. *But I’ll be damned if I’m going to admit that* he thought.

“So,” she ventured cautiously, “do you know where he is or maybe what he’s doing?”

“Don’t you think if I did I would have told Dumbledore already?” he snapped at her. He hadn’t meant to, but he was already so frustrated. He had been trying to find clues in his father’s letters and racking his brain for what he could possibly be doing.

Draco stood up and began to trudge toward his bedroom.

“Wha—”

“I’ll be right back.”

For a moment, Hermione worried that he was angry with her, but his voice now sounded much calmer. He walked slowly back into the common room looking over a piece of parchment he had in his hands.

“Here,” he said, handing the piece of parchment to Hermione. “I just received it this morning. I haven’t gotten a chance to take it to Dumbledore yet.”

She began to read it aloud, “Draco, I apologize for my lack of response to your owls. As you know, I am currently away on business, and my tasks are rather tedious. I do

hope you are showing that dreadful Mudblood her place. Lucius Malfoy.”

Draco scoffed at the formal tone his father had used. He acted as if he was writing a letter to the Minister of Magic instead of his own son.

“Post script,” Hermione continued. “I am truly sorry for not sending freshly ironed underwear with this owl. I do hope you have enough to last the rest of the week.”

“It doesn’t say that!” Draco snatched the letter away from her and quickly looked over it.

He looked up to find her smirking at him. “Ha-ha,” he said in an annoyed tone, but a small grin was forming on his face.

“So, he never mentions *where* he is?” she asked, bringing back her serious tone.

“No, he only ever says that he’s ‘away on business.’ All of his owls are as vague and pointless as this one.”

“How are you able to send him owls without knowledge of where he is?”

“I send them to Crabbe’s father in London, and he sends them on.”

“Why use Crabbe? Why can’t Professor Snape just forward the letters for you?”

“Professor Snape does not know where my father is.”

“Voldemort’s hiding information from him? That’s not a good sign, Draco.”

Father,

Things still haven’t changed. Draco is still acting wierd and Goyle and me are starting to wander where his loyalties are. He is never around us any more and all public humiliation of that awful mudblood and the dam Potter and Weasle have stoped. Maybe you should mention some thing to Mister Malfoy.

From,

Vincent

TBC

Suspicious Arise

Chapter 8 of 12

“It’s all really suspicious, Draco. Especially the way you’ve been treating that Mudblood.”

Crabbe,

I received your owl earlier this afternoon, and I must say that I am greatly disappointed in my son. I appreciate your warning, and you can be assured that I will be dealing with this problem as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the tasks that our Dark Lord assigned me have been rather time consuming. I truly hope his acting out of character has nothing to do with that nasty little Mudblood he has been forced to share a common room with. I seriously doubt it though; my son was raised better than that. I will, however, get to the bottom of this.

Lucius Malfoy

Hermione was finishing up her Charms homework when she heard a loud knocking on her bedroom door. She capped her inkwell and answered. Draco stood outside her room with his back slouched and his hands stuffed deep into his pockets.

“Yes?”

He was frowning and avoiding eye contact. His mouth twisted a bit in a grimace before he finally answered her. “CouldyouhelpmewithmyMuggleessay?”

Hermione didn’t understand a word he had said. It sounded like a question, but he had mumbled it all into one long word. “Pardon?”

He sighed, folded his arms, and looked at the ceiling. “I was wondering... if you could help me on my Muggle Studies essay...” His eyes darted in every direction except at her. He was obviously annoyed to have to ask someone, especially her, for help on homework. The fact that the topic of the essay was on something that he had taunted her for years for being born as only made the situation worse.

She folded her arms and leaned against the door frame. He glared at the sly smirk on her face. “Aw, is Mr. Pureblood having a bit of trouble? It must be pretty hard for you to sink low enough to ask a Muggle-born for help.” Months ago, there would have been nothing but venom in her voice. (Of course, months ago he would have never asked her for help in the first place.) But now she was only lightly mocking him.

He dropped his arms to his sides and sighed loudly. “Look, I’ve been doing research on this bloody paper for two weeks now to absolutely no avail, and I’ve got three feet of parchment due tomorrow morning. Are you going to help me or not?”

She laughed and stepped out into the common room, closing her door behind her. “Alright, alright.”

Draco led her to his bedroom, but she hesitated at the doorway. He continued to his desk and sat down. “I’ve got it all set up here.” He paused for a moment when he realized she hadn’t entered his room. “Is that okay?”

She relaxed a bit and walked in. “Of course.” The room was a replica of her own, except for the Slytherin colors and opposite positions of the door, bathroom, and

windows. She could smell the fire burning in the fireplace and the faintest scent of sandalwood and vanilla. She levitated a cushioned chair from the fireplace and placed it next to his desk where she sat down.

She folded her hands together on the desk, ready to work. "Okay. What's the topic?"

"English-Muggle superstitions, some of their Muggle origins, and how closely they are related to the truth." He looked pained.

"That is a rather challenging topic for someone who has never had any contact with the Muggle world." She furrowed her eyebrows in thought. "Hmmm. Let me think... Well, superstitions are irrational practices and beliefs started by Muggles due to their ignorance and fear of what they don't understand." Draco began scribbling down notes furiously. "The validity of their superstitions is based on their belief in... well, our world and their lack of understanding and physical proof of it. Burrhus Frederic Skinner once did an experiment on pigeons. He placed different pigeons, one at a time, in a cage attached to an automatic mechanism that delivered food to the pigeons at regular intervals. You see, the pigeons associated the delivery of the food with whatever they happened to be doing as it was delivered, and afterward, they continued to perform these same actions. Skinner suggested that the birds believed that they were influencing the delivery of the food with their little rituals. The results of his experiment can be related to human behavior and the Muggle belief in superstitions."

Hermione stopped talking when she realized Draco had stopped taking notes. When she looked at him, she realized that he was obviously lost. His eyebrows were furrowed, his eyes were wide, and his mouth hung open. "What the bloody hell is an 'autotamic menachism'?"

"Um... maybe that was a bit much."

Hermione continued with a much simpler explanation of Muggle superstitions and helped him get through a significant portion of his essay. She twisted her hair up into a bun and jabbed her wand through the unruly tresses to hold it in place. Leaning in to read over his work as he was scribbling it down, she noticed the scent of sandalwood and vanilla again, only it was now much stronger.

Draco tossed down his quill with an exhausted sigh. "Finally." He leaned back in his chair to stretch, and Hermione picked up the parchment to read over the essay one last time. Draco finished stretching and resumed his tired, slouched position. Then he noticed what Hermione had done with her hair. "Wow. That unmanageable beast you call hair isn't so bad when it's pulled up like that," he said while tugging on one curly strand that had fallen loose.

"Wrapping an insult in a compliment, Malfoy? How very Slytherin of you."

"You never know, it could be a compliment wrapped in an insult," he said leaning back in his chair, cockily, balancing on two of its four wooden legs.

"It's still very Slytherin," Hermione answered. She rolled her eyes and laughed a little. She then turned back to the essay.

He was still balancing in the chair, hands folded behind his head, with a smug grin on his face when he realized how long and slim her neck was. *Huh, Granger has a rather nice neck. Who would have thought she would under that massive, brown, bird's nest of hair?* he thought. He continued to study it a bit more. *It actually looks rather soft. Maybe even kissable—BLOODY HELL!*

His shock from the thought that had floated into his mind caused him to jerk into an upright sitting position. However, he had still been balancing on the back legs of his chair, and it immediately toppled over. Draco let out a loud yell and fell sideways away from Hermione.

She jumped to her feet. "What happened?"

"Nothing!" he answered all too quickly while blushing and picking himself and the chair up. "I just... fell over." He glared at her hair and neck for a moment before grabbing her wand and tugging it out of her misshapen bun. "Give me that!"

Hermione grasped at her hair, unsure of what was going on.

They just stood there for a moment before Draco realized how odd she must think he was acting. *I can't bloody well explain that I don't like thinking about her neck so I had to steal her wand so her hair would cover it back up.* He looked at the wand a moment. "Vine wood?" he asked innocently, feigning curiosity in the make of her wand.

"Er... yes," she answered, slowly taking the wand back. She shook off the "Are you positively mad?" look that was currently etched on her face and took her seat. She finished reading the last bit of the essay and handed it back to him. She leaned back in her chair to stretch before standing up. "I guess I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight," he replied.

She was almost out of the room when he called out to her, "Hermione?"

She stopped and turned around. "Hmm?"

"Thanks," he said grudgingly.

Hermione smiled and left his room, closing the door on her way out.

"Draco! Hey! Draco!"

Draco reluctantly stopped mixing his potion and turned around to see Crabbe at the table behind him.

"What, Crabbe?"

"Have you gotten an owl from your father yet?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I told my father about the way you've been acting. I'm sure he's warned Lucius by now. It's all really suspicious, Draco. Especially the way you've been treating that Mudblood." Crabbe said loudly, making Hermione turn from her potion to see what was going on. She made a mental note to ask Draco about it later and continued to listen to their conversation.

Draco glared at him and turned around to focus on his potion-making again.

Crabbe continued talking to him though, "You know, I hear your father isn't really on a mission right now. I hear he's out looking for a replacement mother for you."

Draco's hand flew to his wand, but the sound of Snape's voice stopped him, and he suddenly remembered that he was still in the classroom.

"Mister Malfoy. I need to see you after class."

Crabbe and Goyle snickered behind Draco for the rest of the class, but said nothing to him. Afterward, he stayed behind to talk to Snape even though he was still furious and wanted to return to his common room so he could yell and throw something against a wall.

"Draco, I read the most recent owl you received from Lucius. I wasn't aware that you have been sending him owls."

"Yes," he replied. "I'm aware that you don't know where he is so I wrote to Crabbe's father, and he has been forwarding the owls for me. I've just been writing short letters about my grades and making up stories about what I do with Crabbe and Goyle."

Professor Snape leaned back in his chair, arms folded. He said nothing for a few moments. "I was unaware that any of the Death Eaters knew of Lucius' whereabouts, and if Crabbe is able to send him owls, then he must know," Snape said, almost to himself.

"If other Death Eaters know, then why don't you?" Draco asked.

A look of worry suddenly came across Snape's face, but he composed himself and covered it up quickly. "They must be suspicious of me."

TBC

Comforting the Enemy

Chapter 9 of 12

Neither knew what could be done for Snape at the moment, but Hermione thought of something that could help Draco.
"You know, I've been thinking about your blood bond problem..."

A/N: Finally! I apologize for how long it took me to update this story. I was about two hundred words into this chapter when I got completely stuck. Anyways, here it is.

When Draco left the Potions classroom, he found Hermione pacing the hall.

"Draco—"

She stopped when they heard two male voices coming from around the corner.

"That must be Harry and Ron. We usually meet here for lunch. Let's go. We need to talk." She took his hand and they moved in the opposite direction of Harry and Ron. She didn't let go until they got through the portrait hole and inside their shared common room. She found it odd that holding his hand felt so natural to her.

"Are you all right, Draco? I um... I heard what Crabbe said..."

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine," he replied sarcastically. "I feel like sinking his face in with my fist, but I'll be okay."

She stepped forward to place her hand on his shoulder comfortingly, but he brushed it away. His jaw was clenched, and his knuckles were white from the tight fists he was holding at his sides.

Hermione stood aside as he paced around the common room angrily. She kept her eyes cast down towards the floor while he blew off some steam by screaming random insults throughout the room. She was surprised by his rather colorful vocabulary. Finally, frustrated with his unproductive vent of anger, he picked up the first thing in sight and threw it against the wall. It happened to be *Breaking Blood Bonds and Other Bothersome Bindings*, and as it hit the wall, several ancient pages burst out and fluttered down to the floor.

Now exhausted and slightly embarrassed from his outrage, Draco threw himself down on the sofa in front of the fireplace to calm down a bit. Hermione picked the book and its many scattered pages up from the floor and walked over to join him on the sofa. She realized that the book was probably extremely overdue by then, but knew better than to mention it at that moment.

"Dammit!" Draco picked up a pillow from the couch and threw it right into the fireplace, which caused sparks to rise and blow into the flue. "Those bloody wankers, blithering on like they know what..." His words dissolved into incoherent mutterings.

Hermione could see an angry fire in his eyes. His shoulder blades were tight, and he was clenching and unclenching his fists. His bottom lip began to tremble with a suppressed desire to cry for his mother. Hermione wanted to calm and comfort him, but wasn't sure how to go about doing so. Before she could think much about it, she pulled him into an awkward hug.

"It's okay, Draco."

The tension in his muscles began to dissipate as he realized the sincerity in her comforting gesture. He relaxed into her form and allowed himself to be comforted. Comfort was something that he hadn't been the recipient of since his mother's death.

After a moment, he slowly pulled away. He was a little startled by the fact that he had begun to enjoy the feel of her embrace before he ended it.

"Now." Hermione sighed audibly and asked, "Are you finished tossing pillows into the fire, or would you like to ruin the nice down ones next?"

He looked up at her with a halfhearted glare. "Yeah... I'm done." He rested his chin in the palm of his hand and leaned forward with his elbow on his knee.

"Good." She smiled warmly at him and relaxed back into the couch. "I was hoping you might have some news from Snape that you might want to share with me."

His head shot up, and he suddenly remembered what Snape had suggested earlier. "This isn't good, Granger," he said in a serious tone.

"What?" Her spine became ramrod straight. She hadn't expected there to be bad news, but his tone definitely indicated bad news.

"You were right about Voldemort hiding information from Snape. I'm afraid he may not trust him." He stood up and walked to the fireplace, resting one hand on the mantle. "What if he doesn't have a way out? The Dark Lord isn't the forgiving type. I know if my father hadn't killed her, my mother would have learned this firsthand." The last sentence was practically forced out through gritted teeth.

Hermione joined him at the fireplace and covered his hand with her own. "I'm sure Dumbledore has already realized all of this and already has some kind of plan

underway."

Draco stared at their hands. "Granger, I'm sure you're right, but I can't help but worry. Severus is more of a father to me than Lucius has ever been."

A silent moment passed between them. Neither knew what could be done for Snape at the moment, but Hermione thought of something that could help Draco. "You know, I've been thinking about your blood bond problem..."

With unfinished essays due the next day, Harry and Ron reluctantly joined Hermione in the library where they could finish their assignments.

Ron nibbled on the end of a Sugar Quill as he idly flipped through a book. Harry was finishing up his History of Magic essay, and Hermione was walking back to the table, carrying several more books. She had been looking through any book containing charms that required blood, hoping she might find the original charm Narcissa used. Finding the original charm would make the work of finding something to counter it much easier.

Tossing down his quill, Harry leaned back in his chair, stretching with a groan. Quidditch practice had been tedious that day, and sitting in a wooden chair for an hour and a half afterward made his muscles stiff.

Interrupting her work, Harry asked, "Hermione, where did you wander off to after Potions yesterday? You weren't in the hall to meet us for lunch."

Faking a yawn, Hermione quickly thought up an excuse. "Um... detention with Professor Snape after class..." She knew it was a terrible lie, but her brain was swimming with everything she had been reading, and nothing else came to mind.

Ron and Harry both raised their eyebrows at each other, and then frowned at her.

"Detention?" Ron questioned.

Hermione slumped her shoulders and faked a shamed and defeated look. "Yes. For being 'an insufferable know-it-all,'" she said, mimicking Snape's deep voice at the end.

The two boys nodded knowingly. Harry rolled his eyes. "That's Professor bloody Snape for you. Punishing someone for being intelligent."

Hermione smiled at the compliment, but it quickly faded. She hated lying to her friends. Even if she did have a good reason.

She flipped open *Potions for the Blood Captive*.

"Oi, Hermione." She looked up at Ron. "You been getting any... er... *investigating* done?" he asked, looking around cautiously.

Shite! Hermione thought. She hadn't expected them to bring it up so quickly. "Well, there was a letter, but not much to it." She told them what she could remember of the letter Draco had showed her from Lucius. At least it wasn't a complete lie, and she wasn't giving them any information Draco didn't want them to have just yet.

"Hard luck," Harry said. "I should have known he was too smart to reveal anything in an owl."

"Well, keep looking," Ron said. "You're bound to find something sooner or later, Hermione... Hermione?"

Ron was trying to get her attention, but Hermione's mind was already somewhere else entirely. She had come across something quite interesting and needed to look into it quickly.

"I've got to go." She gathered up her things and prepared to check out the book from Madame Pince.

"Where you off to in such a hurry?" Ron questioned her.

"The dungeons. I've got to talk to Professor Snape."

Harry and Ron gazed after her confusedly as she rushed from the library.

TBC

A Gryffindork and Brain Damaged

Chapter 10 of 12

It was the first day of December, and the house-elves had already set up decorations in the large room. Draco was currently glaring at a portrait of himself hung among the ornaments on the tall Christmas tree.

A/N: I really enjoyed writing the second half of this chapter so I hope you guys like it!

I apologize for not answering to individual reviews. I would love to, but I never know what to say! So here is a collective "thank you" to everyone who reviewed. I'm glad to know that people are enjoying the story. Thanks!

The soft knocking on his door stole his attention from the essays he had been correcting. Not that he was about to complain. He could definitely use a break from reading the ridiculous and repetitive garbage the dunderhead first years thought they should actually get a decent grade for. But he had wanted to be done correcting the assignments half an hour ago, and interruptions were not going to help.

"Enter!" he barked from his parchment-strewn desk.

The sight of the bushy-haired head that peered around the door made him roll his eyes.

"What do you need, Miss Granger?"

She stepped inside his office shyly. She closed the door behind her and cleared her throat before she began to speak. Snape noted the large tome in her arms. "I was wondering if I could possibly get your help on something that..."

He cut off her last words. "Miss Granger, you are doing just fine in my class, and I don't see what you could possibly need help with."

"Well, Professor, perhaps if you would not interrupt me, you would see what I need help with." Her cheeks reddened. She was embarrassed of her slightly disrespectful tone, but this was important, and he needed to listen. "There is a certain potion I have come across that I need to brew. Unfortunately, it's rather advanced, and, while I do not doubt my ability to make it, many of the necessary supplies are not exactly easy for a student to obtain on their own." Hermione set the book down on the edge of his desk with a hard *thud* and began flipping through the old, yellowing pages.

Snape was somewhat surprised by her boldness but did not show it. He remained quiet as she skimmed through the book. Finding the page, she turned the book so her professor could see it, and smiled triumphantly.

He leaned closer to skim over the page. He raised an eyebrow then looked back up at her. "Why, exactly, would you need to make yourself such a complex potion, Miss Granger?"

Her smile faded. "It's not actually for me, sir. It's for Draco Malfoy. For weeks now, he has been searching for a spell or potion that would break his blood bonds with his father."

"So you decided to stop liberating house-elves in exchange for helping Slytherins?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but stopped when the office door crashed open and Draco rushed across the small dungeon room. "Severus! I..." He stopped when he realized Hermione was standing beside him. "Hermione?"

"Can I help you, Draco?" Snape asked, impatiently.

Ignoring him, Draco looked at the book then back at Hermione. "You found something?" he asked hopefully.

A large grin broke out across her face. "Yes. It's exactly what you've been looking for. I was just here to ask Professor Snape to..."

Snape asked again, in a much louder voice, "Can I help you, Draco?" He was now standing, obviously irritated by the two interruptions standing before him.

Tearing his eyes from Hermione's triumphant smile, he looked to the annoyed Potions master. "Er... yes. I received an owl this morning." He pulled an envelope from the pocket of his cloak and handed it over to Snape.

Snape slipped the folded parchment out and quickly read over it. He looked up at Draco with a stern expression. "I need to take this to the Headmaster." He stepped around his large desk and ushered the two students out of his office. Before turning to leave he said, "Miss Granger, we'll speak tomorrow." And with a curt nod and a swirl of dark robes, he was hurrying down the corridor.

Hermione was surprised by his quick exit. "What was in that letter?" she asked Draco.

Draco scratched the back of his head. "My father... he's very angry. Someone has said something to him. What they told him, I don't know, but I'd guess it was either Crabbe or Goyle."

Hermione looked worried, but didn't say anything. Instead the two turned in different directions to do their nighttime rounds.

After classes the next day, Hermione found Draco back in their common room. It was the first day of December, and the house-elves had already set up decorations in the large room. Draco was currently glaring at a portrait of himself hung among the ornaments on the tall Christmas tree. The picture was glaring right back at him, and it was charmed to show Draco with a shiny red nose and reindeer antlers.

Besides the glaring, the real Draco looked comfortable. His shoes were off, and he had pulled his shirt from his trousers where the bottom had been tucked in.

Hermione stood beside him and studied the picture for a moment. "Disturbing, and yet it's somehow adorable." Both Dracos turned to glare at her. She smiled sweetly and turned to set her satchel down.

"You only have to wear a Father Christmas hat," he said, gesturing towards Hermione's smiling picture. Draco shot one more glare at his charmed image then sat down on one of the sofas. "Did you talk with Severus?"

She sat at the other end of the couch, arranging her uniform skirt neatly. "Yes." She sighed. "Unfortunately, it won't be ready until April."

Draco's shoulders slumped. "What? Why?"

"Greater Celandine is one of the main ingredients, and it must be picked between April and July," she replied. "Professor Snape contacted every place he knows of that sells it, but nobody keeps track of when they collect it."

He leaned back and sank into the cushions. "Well, waiting for the solution is better than not having a solution at all, I suppose."

Hermione leaned forward to dig through her satchel that was sitting on the floor. Pulling out her Potions textbook she asked, casually, "What did your father's letter say yesterday?"

"What d'you mean?" He knew she was going to bring it up, but he desperately did not want to answer.

"Professor Snape just seemed so perturbed. It must have had more than just some angry and suspicious remarks."

"It was nothing," he said with the best "don't overreact" tone he could muster. He didn't want to worry or upset her. The letter was mostly about Lucius being suspicious and angry towards Draco, but some of the letter had been about her. Lucius had mentioned that he might suggest to Voldemort that it would be wise to get rid of Hermione as soon as possible. "That disgusting Mudblood is almost as big of a threat as Potter," Lucius had written.

Hermione's expression conveyed disbelief. "Relax, Granger. It's not something you need to worry your frizzy little head over."

She hit him in the face with a pillow for his playful insult, but seemed to accept the answer. "Too bad you no longer wear that helmet of gel. It could have protected you from any further brain damage." She laughed.

"For your information, it wasn't gel; it was a hair-holding charm, *Gryffindork!*" And he smacked her square in the face with another pillow.

Pulling the pillow away, he saw that she looked stunned. She just stared at him for a moment.

"For once in your life, are you actually at a loss for words, Granger?" He smirked as she narrowed her eyes.

Hermione jumped up and pulled out her wand. Before Draco could even react, she had yelled, *Levicorpus!* And Draco was now dangling by one ankle in the air.

"Bloody hell! Granger! Put me down!" His wand fell from his pocket, landed on the floor, and rolled under the sofa.

She doubled-over laughing at him. One leg was stuck in the air while he kicked the other one around. His fingertips were three feet away from the sofa but still desperately trying to reach for his wand under it. The bottom of his shirt had fallen to his chest. She thought his revealed chest and stomach was a rather nice view and figured it would probably look even better right-side-up.

"Granger!" He looked absolutely ridiculous flailing about. "PUT...ME...DOWN!" After a moment of continued struggling, he relaxed. Hermione was still giggling, and hanging upside-down with his arms crossed, he asked, "Is this enjoyable for you?"

"Yes, it is rather funny."

"Will you put me down, Granger?"

"Aw, but you looked so cute with your face all flushed," she cooed at him.

Draco scowled at her.

"All right." She slowly lowered him down.

His feet were on the floor for less than a second when he jumped at her and tackled her down. She was sitting on her knees and bent forward. His chest against her back, he had his arms around her from behind, holding her to him and gently gripping her wrists. They were both laughing and yelling. He tried to reach his wand under the sofa, but they were too far away. Pulling her wand from her tight grip, he let her up, and she ran to duck behind a chair.

"Your turn, Granger!"

Hermione's eyes widened. He gave her an evil grin and she dove behind the sofa.

"I'm wearing a skirt, you pervert!" she screamed.

Draco chuckled at her and sat down on the sofa. "Fine, I won't do it." He looked at her over the back of the couch. She was lying on her back looking up at him, and her curls were a wild. "But only because I'm such a gentleman." He held out her wand.

Hermione took it back while smiling and rolling her eyes at him. She stood up and circled the sofa to sit beside him.

Draco leaned forward and grabbed his wand from under himself. "You're lucky I didn't know about that little trick when we were enemies. I would have been getting an eyeful of your knickers every chance I could get!" Hermione swallowed hard and blushed. Draco cleared his throat nervously when he realized what he had just said. "Oh... no. I didn't mean it like..."

"I know what you meant." She laughed which relaxed him, but he could still feel the heat in his cheeks. He chuckled along with her.

Since when am I 'Draco Malfoy the amazing blushing idiot'? he asked himself.

Picking up her Potions text again, Hermione sighed and said, "I guess it's time for my schoolwork."

"Let me get mine." Draco hopped up and headed to his room. "We can do Potions together," he called out to her.

Hermione smiled to herself. Harry and Ron were never fun like that. They always joked and laughed and had a good time, but they were never playful like that.

When Draco came back, they did their Potions work together and then worked in a comfortable silence for the next few hours. Hermione's work was only interrupted a few times when she looked up to study the way Draco's brows furrowed and lips pouted when he was concentrating.

Hermione came back into the common room after putting her finished work away. Draco looked up at her. "Hermione? Why exactly are you helping me? I mean, with the potion and everything."

She stared at him for a moment then smiled. "I don't know."

He chuckled at her uncharacteristic response, and they left the room to go to the Great Hall for dinner.

TBC

Will She Bleed Brown?

Chapter 11 of 12

Across the room was a small group of Slytherins including Crabbe, Goyle, Blaise Zabini, Theodore Nott, and a few other fifth and sixth year boys. The group looked up at Draco, who stood still in the doorway.

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. It had been a long day, and he didn't even want to finish his night patrol. He just wanted to Apparate straight into his bed.

It had only been an hour, and he had already found a third-year Ravenclaw in the Restricted Section, two fourth-year Gryffindors in the Astronomy Tower, and one very odd second-year girl conversing with Moaning Myrtle. He was now heading towards the Ravenclaw Tower.

Draco's strides were usually swift, but his tiredness forced him to drag his feet heavily on the floor. He paused when he came upon a door to an unused classroom. A faint light was flickering through the crack under the door. His head lolled back, and he stared at the ceiling, fully considering just ignoring the whispering students on the other

side of the door and finishing off his patrol.

Finishing my patrol would be pointless if I'm not even going to take care of my responsibilities while on that patrol he thought. Draco groaned, hating the logic of his conscience.

Pointing his wand at the door knob, he mumbled, *"Alohomora,"* and he pushed the door open. Across the room was a small group of Slytherins including Crabbe, Goyle, Blaise Zabini, Theodore Nott, and a few other fifth- and sixth-year boys. The group looked up at Draco, who stood still in the doorway.

"Ah, Malfoy, we thought you'd be patrolling tonight," said Blaise, smirking menacingly at him.

Draco slouched slightly, annoyed by his bit of bad luck. "You lot get back to the common room, or I'm going to have to assign detentions with Filch."

Blaise, Goyle, and Nott got up and crossed the room to him. "Come on, Draco. You've been so uptight since you became Head Boy. Why don't you relax a bit, eh?" Nott suggested. Goyle cracked his knuckles, and Blaise continued to smirk at him.

Draco clenched his fist around the end of his wand in his pocket. He did not want to deal with them tonight. "I'm already letting you off with a warning. Now, let's go."

Nott narrowed his eyes and stared him down. Draco thought for a moment that he was going to resist, but then Nott turned and waved the other boys over. "You heard what he said. Let's go."

Draco held the door open, and they began filing out. The last to exit the room was Blaise. Holding Draco's stare, he spoke to the rest of the group, "Yes, let's hurry. Wouldn't want to make our Head Boy late for meeting Miss Muddy in their common room."

Draco whipped out his wand and jabbed it right under Blaise's chin. As he did, one of the sixth years pulled his own out and leveled it at Draco's eyes. Blaise looked nearly as shocked as Draco felt. Sure, he had come to respect Granger. Hell, he may have even grown to like her a little. But the amount of anger that ran through him when Blaise insulted her was surprising.

"Come now, children. Wouldn't want to make a mess in the hallway," said Nott.

Draco gritted his teeth and glared at Blaise for a moment before he slowly lowered his wand. The other boy pulled his away from Draco and stuck it back in his pocket. The group stood in tense silence for a moment before Blaise shook his head slowly, a look of disgust on his face. "What the hell have you become?"

Draco glared at him. *I've become something better than you. I've stopped being such a blind, daft idiot and pulled myself out of the limits of my father's expectations. If the rest of you lot would just pull your bloody heads out of your arses, you might realize that,* Draco thought. But this wasn't something he was about to say to Blaise Zabini.

Blaise broke eye contact by turning toward the rest of the group. "Come on then. Let's get back to the common room and allow Draco to get back to darnin' elf socks with the Muddblood."

It took every ounce of his self-control to keep himself from cursing Blaise's bollocks off. Blaise took a few steps away, but then he paused and turned around to face Draco again.

"Oh, there's something I've wanted to ask you, Malfoy. If you cut her, will she bleed brown, or will her blood be just as red as your mum's was when she died?"

Draco suddenly saw red. Any anger that he was attempting to restrain was flowing freely now, and he balled up his fist and punched Blaise square in the jaw. He swung again and felt Blaise's nose crunch under the impact of his knuckles. Turning, he saw Goyle's fist coming at him and had only a moment to ready himself for the intense pain that burst through his face. Stars exploded behind his eyelids, and he felt another strike to his temple before everything faded to black.

"Malfoy?"

Draco could hear a distant, echoing voice calling his name. He wasn't sure if he was imagining it or if it was real, but the tone had a certain urgency ringing in it. His whole body was aching and heavy, and he was in too much pain to move. There was a bitter and coppery taste in his mouth.

"Malfoy!"

The voice was louder now, and the fog was clearing from his mind.

"Draco!"

The voice was feminine and somehow comforting. Draco wanted the voice to keep saying his name. Then he heard a sniffle.

"Please, Draco! Wake up!" the voice pleaded with urgency.

He tried to open his eyes. His right eye was throbbing and refusing to open, but through his left, he could just make out the outline of big, frizzy hair in the dim light.

"Frizzy hair..." he mumbled. "Granger?"

"Oh," she let out a small sob. "What happened? Are you alright?"

Draco gave her the best smirk he could manage. "Are you crying?"

He could barely see her frown. "No." She sniffled again. "Can you walk? We have to get you to the infirmary."

His strength was returning, and he could think clearly now. Swallowing down the bitter liquid that had been filling his mouth, he sat up as best as he could. He was hurting everywhere. Something was streaming from his nose, which he noticed was oddly bent to one side. He hoped it was blood. Blood would look at least somewhat respectable; snot would just be embarrassing. He wiped at the bottom of his nose, causing intense pain to shoot through his nose and to his forehead. He winced and looked at his hand. Blood.

"We can't go to the infirmary." Hermione gave him a puzzled look. "If word gets out that I was in the infirmary, Father will want to know what happened," he answered her silent question.

She furrowed her brow but nodded in understanding. "Can you walk back to the common room?"

"I'm not an invalid, Granger." *Although I bloody well feel like one.* He grimaced as he stood and forced his wobbly legs to hold him up.

"Yes, well, you looked like a bruised and bloodied rag doll when I found you." She swung his left arm over her shoulders and allowed him to lean into her. His right arm hung limply at his side. It felt as if it were broken in at least two places.

He groaned at the mental image of his weak form lying on the ground like a broken toy. She kept her arm around his waist as they hobbled down the hallway together, and he groaned in pain the whole way.

She left him on the sofa in front of the fireplace while she ran to her bathroom. She came back carrying a bowl of water, a couple of flannels, and two unlabeled bottles. She set it all down on the floor next to the couch and helped him carefully remove his shoes and cloak. After noticing the blood on her hands after setting down his cloak, she picked it back up to realize that the black fabric was wet.

Hermione turned back to face him and noticed the blood staining the front of his white shirt. It had been running down from his nose and dribbling a little from the corner of his mouth. She wet down a flannel and used it to clean up his face. Then she removed his tie and unbuttoned the front of his shirt to reveal multiple bruises marring the pale skin of his chest and ribs.

"Alright, we need to get this shirt off."

He helped her pull it off and gritted his teeth as she carefully peeled the sleeve over his right arm. They both grimaced while looking at his bare forearm. It was bent awkwardly in two places where joints definitely didn't belong.

"Okay, I can fix that," she assured him.

"You're not going to pull a 'Lockhart' are you?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. She pulled out her wand, and with a few complicated swirls and a mumbled spell, his arm began straightening itself out. He shut his one good eye and gritted his teeth as his bones began painfully pulling themselves back into place. It only took a moment, but the pain made him dizzy.

When she pointed her wand directly in his face, his left eye grew wide. His right eye twitched slightly but remained swollen shut.

"What're you doing?" His voice was shaky.

She gave him a sympathetic look. "Your nose looks broken too."

He closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and prepared himself for the pain. The sharp pain that burst through his face and the loud crunching sound were almost enough to make him pass out. But when he opened his eyes, he realized that his nose was back on the center of his face where it belonged.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

Draco nodded at her and laid back on the sofa.

Hermione wet another flannel and cleaned his face, chest, and neck of sweat and blood. She dried him off and carefully applied Murtlap Essence to his various cuts and scrapes. She was slow and gentle, casting *Scourgify* to clean each individual wound and then dabbing the potion in place.

"How did you come across me?"

Hermione paused and looked up at him. "When you didn't come back, I was wondering what was taking you so long," she answered while corking the bottle and picking up the other one. "I got worried," she added in a small voice.

She rubbed a generous supply of Bruise-Healing Paste into his skin, rubbing it over his shoulders and ribs. She could feel his heart beating under her hand, and she smiled to herself as he breathed a sigh of contentment. She couldn't believe how open he was being. How he was allowing her to take care of him while he was so physically and emotionally vulnerable. He had trusted her before because Dumbledore had asked it of him; he was trusting her now of his own accord.

His breathing was now heavy and even, and Hermione thought he was asleep. But when she touched a small bruise on his chin, he opened his left eye. She smiled at him, and he slowly lifted one corner of his mouth to smile back. She turned her attention back to the bruise on his chin, but his eyes never left her face.

As she worked on the bruises on his left cheekbone and temple, he continued to watch her face. She pursed her lips slightly and kept her brow furrowed the way she did when she was studying. He liked the idea that she was putting as much focus into healing him as she put into her studies.

Draco winced as she gently rubbed some of the paste around his right eye. He could feel her small breaths on the side of his face, warming his skin. When she finished, Hermione looked at him and held eye contact for a moment. She felt her heart ache for him; not just with sympathy, but with... something else. Her stomach flipped, and when she realized how close her face was to his, she blushed and turned away.

Hermione stood up from the edge of the sofa and turned toward him, still holding the open bottle of Bruise-Healing Paste. "You will have to, um," she paused a moment to clear her throat, "sit up so I can get your back."

"Oh, yes, of course." He sat up and slid to the edge of the sofa, facing forward. Hermione sat down next to him, further back so she could reach his back. She applied a liberal amount and began rubbing it in to his warm skin. One bruise on his side was shaped much like the bottom of a male's shoe. She shuddered at the thought of someone actually stomping their foot into his side and forced her attention back to the other bruises.

When she finished, she knelt beside the sofa to gather the things she had brought out. Draco laid back down on the couch and sighed.

"Do you feel like moving to your room, or would you like me to bring some blankets out here for you?"

"Blankets would be lovely."

"I'll be right back then." She took the potions, flannels, and the bowl of water back to her bathroom and went to his room. Entering, she deeply inhaled the scent of sandalwood and vanilla. She recognized the scent from the last time she had been in his room. Hermione had always thought of vanilla as a more feminine scent and not necessarily belonging in a boy's bedroom, but then she wondered if that is what Narcissa used to smell like. She wondered if he kept more of her belongings besides the necklace.

She gathered up his blankets and a pillow from his bed. Hermione couldn't resist lightly pressing her face into his comforter and inhaling. It smelled of Draco, all warm and rich. She carried the bundle out to the common room and carefully tucked Draco in. His left eyelid drooped and he snuggled into the warm blankets. With a wave of her wand, Hermione snuffed out all the candles in the room, and the only light left was coming from the fireplace.

"Goodnight." She turned to walk to her own room, but Draco quickly sat up, and she paused.

"Um... Hermione." He looked away from her, embarrassed of what he wanted to ask. He feared sounding like a toddler in need of his mother. "Would you mind staying out here tonight? With me?"

She nodded her head, finding his request endearing. "Of course." She changed in her room and brought out her own blankets and pillow. She spread them out on the floor and curled up, preparing for sleep. They smiled at each other one last time for the night before dozing off in front of the crackling fire.

TBC

Of Friendship, Nerves, and Ridiculous Imaginings

Chapter 12 of 12

Walking down the hall, Harry asked Ron, "Do you really think Malfoy has... changed?"

A/N: I apologize, once again, for the long amount of time between updates! When I had first begun writing this fic, I was hoping to work on it a little every day and get updates posted within a few days of each other. But, alas, RL has gotten hectic in several ways since I began writing this and has gotten in the way (along with some maniacal plot bunnies for other fics), and I had lost a lot of inspiration for this story. Fortunately, the inspiration is back, and I will be updating more frequently.

Also, I apologize for not responding to all the reviews. I do read them all, but sometimes I forget to reply. I'm kind of an idiot like that. :) But there was one I wanted to answer here just incase anyone else was wondering the same thing. I was asked why Draco is so OOC in that he can't fool the Slytherins. He *is* a Slytherin, but isn't using his cunning like one.

You're absolutely right. That is a big mistake of mine. When I began this fic, it was the second I had ever written, and I had planned from the beginning to have the Slytherins turn on Draco. When I think about it now, I have no idea why I originally planned on doing that to him. I suppose I was mostly thinking that he was just too upset over Narcissa's death to care about fooling them. Hopefully, you can forgive me for it, and some of the Hurt/Comfort aspect of the story that comes from it made up for it.

"But if I use the Wronski Feint too many times, aren't the other Seekers going to start figuring out that I'm *noteally* spotting the snitch?"

"Maybe the Ravenclaws, but the Hufflepuff and Slytherin teams are too bloody daft to catch on," Ron answered.

Harry thought about it for a moment before nodding in agreement. They paused in front of the portrait before giving the old man the password. He saluted them, and the painting swung open. Ron began talking about a move he had once seen Charlie do, but Harry wasn't hearing anything. He was too dumbfounded by the scene in front of him.

Noticing Harry's intense glare, Ron stopped talking and turned forward. In the common room, a shirtless and obviously content Draco Malfoy was laying back on the sofa while Hermione, kneeling on the floor in front of him, was rubbing his chest.

"WHAT THE BLEEDING HELL IS THIS?" Ron blurted out.

Draco's left eye popped open, and Hermione quickly turned around, dropping the bottle she had been holding. Her shoulders slumped when she saw the two of them standing in front of her.

"Oh, it's just you two. You startled me." Then, noticing the spilled bottle on the floor, she said, "And you made me drop the damn Bruise-Healing Paste!"

"Bruise-Heal... what are you doing, Hermione?" Harry demanded.

"Well, obviously, I *was*..." she trailed off as she realized how she and Draco must have looked. "Oh."

"Oh? That's all you have to say? 'Oh?'" Ron was completely livid and his face was a burning red.

Hermione held up her hands, palms outward, in defense. "I know this looks awful, but really it's not what it looks like."

"It *looks* like you're sitting here rubbing," Harry sputtered and waved his hand at the spilled potion, "Bruise-Healing Paste on Malfoy!"

"Oh... then I guess it *is* what it looks like," Hermione said sheepishly.

Harry and Ron gawked at her even more.

She folded her arms over her chest. "Well, if you can't tell, he's hurt!"

"So what?" Harry began.

"It's Malfoy!" Ron finished for him.

She bit her bottom lip and glanced at Draco. They were right, in a way. To them, it *was* Malfoy.

"Boys, could you please leave for a moment?"

"WHAT? Hermione..."

"Please," she pleaded. "I promise to explain later. But for now, could you please just leave?"

Ron and Harry rolled their eyes, shot death-threat glares at Draco, and stomped out of the room.

Hermione turned slowly to Draco. She had an odd look on her face.

Draco frowned. "What?"

She slowly sat down on the edge of the sofa. "I think... it's maybe time you told them."

"What? No way, Granger. No way. Didn't you just see that? They'd never believe me!"

"Then don't just tell them, *show* them. Like Professor Dumbledore showed me."

"Hermione." He sounded weary. "It's not as if they will ever like me or trust me, and I'll never like them. There would be no point."

"It isn't about that anymore." She cupped his right cheek with her hand, studying his swollen eye. He unconsciously leaned into her warm touch. "You're right. You will

probably never come to like each other, but with Dumbledore's say-so they'll have to learn to work with you. And I know you can learn to work with them. It can offer some sort of"...she gestured towards the bruises on his chest and ribs..."protection, and the four of us can work together. We can help the Order. You can help Harry."

Harry and Ron walked out of Dumbledore's office looking dazed and puzzled. A smiling Dumbledore closed the door behind them after shouting, "I'll see you boys later then," and waving goodbye.

Walking down the hall, Harry asked Ron, "Do you really think Malfoy has... changed?"

"I suppose seeing *that* could change a person... but... I'm so confused..."

Sitting between Ron and Harry, Hermione shot an apologetic look at Draco across the Great Hall. He sat at the end of his house's table alone, avoiding the blatant stares of the two Gryffindors gawking at him.

Their meal had been oddly silent, and the boys used their dinner time to stare at Draco with expressions of puzzlement and suspicion. After their meeting with Dumbledore, they met up with Hermione who could sense that they were still a little miffed at her. But they spent the rest of the day in silence, Harry and Ron attempting to straighten out their own thoughts and Hermione finishing up her Charms homework. On their walk to the Great Hall, Harry and Ron had walked on either side of her in an overbearingly protective fashion and remained in their defensive positions as they sat down, leaving Hermione squashed between the two tense boys.

She was almost relieved that they would both be leaving that Saturday for the Burrow for the Christmas holidays. It would give them time to get used to the idea of Draco being an ally. Hermione had decided to stay at Hogwarts for the holidays, planning to use the time for more NEWTs preparation.

Draco, having no one to return home to for the holidays, would be staying at Hogwarts for Christmas. He currently stared across the Hall at the two boys flanking Hermione. He held back a chuckle at the expressions on their faces. When they realized he was looking at them, they quickly narrowed their eyes at him and shoveled food even more quickly into their mouths.

His eyes drifted to the girl sitting between the two boys, and he noticed the apologetic look in her eyes. He sighed and thought about how much she had already done for him. *Not that she needed to help me at all*, he thought. *God knows I don't deserve her forgiveness, let alone her friendship*

The Slytherin frowned at his plate while he thought about how much she had already done for him. She had disregarded six years of cruelty and showed him compassion. Draco suddenly decided that he needed to do something for her. To show her his appreciation. Christmas was coming. He would do something for her for Christmas. And not because he felt obligated to, but because he *wanted* to.

It was Friday, and Hermione finally had some time to relax. The week had been busy with preparations for the holidays, and she felt as if she hadn't had a single moment to rest. She was curled up on her bed with Crookshanks reading and was well into the fourth chapter of her book when she heard Draco knocking on her door.

Draco had been pacing in the common room for nearly a half hour before he finally knocked on the Head Girl's bedroom door. He had realized that with most of the Slytherins gone for the holidays he could safely spend some time with Hermione outside of their common room. Tomorrow, while most of the students were going home, those staying behind were allowed to go into Hogsmeade. Draco decided he would ask Hermione to go Christmas shopping with him and then take her out for lunch. It would be nice to spend the extra time with her. They were friends now, after all. Plus, he could gauge her reaction to different items they spotted to give him some kind of idea of something to buy for her.

But what if she thinks it's a date? What if she thinks it's a date and she says no He ignored the fact that he felt slightly disappointed at that thought. *What if she thinks it's a date and says yes? Would that be so bad?* He shook his head and fiercely told himself, *Of course that would be bad! She's Granger. We may be friends now, but that doesn't mean I want to date the girl!*

He rubbed at his temples and continued his internal debate. His mind wandered and came up with dozens of different ways things could go wrong in Hogsmeade. He imagined Potter and Weasley swooping in on brooms to save her and hex him. He imagined running into Viktor Krum, and Hermione leaving him behind to have lunch with the Quidditch star. When his mind came up with a scenario including Snape in a Santa costume, he realized how ridiculous he was being and knocked on her door before his mind began to wander again.

When Hermione opened the door and smiled at him, he immediately felt his nervousness melt away.

"Um, hi. Tomorrow, I have some Christmas shopping to do. I was wondering if you wanted to join me... I mean, I know Potter and Weasley will be leaving so..."

He stopped talking when she nodded. "That would be great, Draco. Um, I told Harry and Ron that I would walk with them to the train, but we could meet up after that." She smiled again, and he couldn't help smiling back.

"Okay, and we could do lunch after the shopping?"

She nodded again. "That sounds good."

Draco couldn't stop smiling to himself as he got ready for bed.

Hermione had never been so nervous and excited about shopping before.

TBC