

New Leaves

by hp4freek

Dumbledore has decided that the trio need to be split up for their own good. But where does Hermione go; and with who?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 4

Dumbledore has decided that the trio need to be split up for their own good. But where does Hermione go; and with who?

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Summary: Dumbledore has decided that the trio need to be split up for their own good. But where will Hermione go; and with who?

Author's Notes: I want to thank my fantastic beta Raven Prowl, who also gave me this plot bunny!

New Leaves

"You do realise this is for your own good, don't you, Harry?" Remus asked, using gentle, hushed tones, as if speaking to a very dangerous creature. Dumbledore had just given them the news, allowing Remus the task of calming down an irate Harry Potter.

"I can understand splitting us up, yeah. I can even understand the lack of communication between us; but I can't, under any circumstances, understand why he's paired Hermione with *Malfoy*." He spoke the boy's name with the contempt of seven long, rivalled years. "I mean, honestly, if Ron is on his own, and I'm by myself, too, why does Hermione need a bodyguard?"

"She's Muggle-born, Harry, and she knows most of the Order's secrets. Draco can protect her; he's grown up a lot in the past few months. And at the same time, we want someone with Draco. He's young, and it's hard having to live a life of lies; spying is done at great personal risk." Remus had known Harry was going to react like this; he just hadn't been able to convince Dumbledore that this may not be the best solution. "And furthermore, you know that neither you, nor Ron, are actually on your own. You'll have me, and Tonks will be there when I can't. Ron will have Dedalus Diggle."

'Thank Merlin for small miracles,' thought Harry. Mr. Diggle always got too excited around Harry, dropping his violet bowler every time. Harry let out a frustrated sigh, defeated. "You realise she's going to be screaming about sexism when she finds out, don't you? She'll ignore the fact that we have escorts, too, just so she can make a point," Harry said, his face breaking into its first smile all afternoon. He hadn't trusted Malfoy anymore lately than he had when he had first shown up at headquarters, accompanied by Snape. He had apparently 'turned over a new leaf.' *Right.*

Here at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, Dumbledore's word was law. Harry knew he would accept this, he even knew that Hermione could take care of herself. Sometimes, however, it was good to rant about frustrations.

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Walking into headquarters, accompanied by Hestia Jones, Hermione realised something was wrong.

She had gone home to visit her family one last time before they went into hiding. They had decided to go to Italy, living amongst the steep hills of Todi, after Dumbledore had explained the precautions he feared they needed to take soon. She hated having to have a chaperon, but at least Hestia was kind and understood her need to be alone with her parents sometimes.

While she had only been gone for a week, she had at least expected Harry or Ron to greet her when she got back. As she ascended the stairs, she heard Hestia moving into the kitchen, probably to report to Dumbledore.

Everyone she encountered (and there didn't seem to be many) gave her a wide berth with which to pass, as though she was going to explode at any moment. *Is there an S.P.E.W. badge on my forehead or something?* she thought. No one had treated her this way since she had first began recruiting for that long given up on, but never forgotten, society.

She placed her bags on the floor next to her bed, beside Ginny's. But, of course, Ginny wasn't there. She and Harry were inseparable lately. She would be returning to Hogwarts for her final year soon, and so they had taken to spending every waking moment together. She supposed that time was bittersweet; knowing it was one of the last times you would hug, or kiss, or... for several months. But, honestly, they were acting as though one of them were terminally ill.

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She came back down, still wondering what was wrong. Upon entering the kitchen, she saw where most everyone was, however.

"Hi, everyone," she said cheerfully. Harry, Ron, and Ginny all got up to greet her, looking slightly green.

"Is everything alright? You guys look terrible," she said, then a thought occurred to her, causing her to cover her mouth with her hand. "Nothing's happened, has it? Everyone's alright, aren't they?"

Harry nodded, giving her a small smile (really more of a grimace), and said, "Dumbledore's waiting in the drawing room to talk to you, Hermione." He opened the door for her, letting her pass, giving Ron a significant look.

Everyone was acting so serious. This was war, and she understood the seriousness of it, but if no one had died, what gave? She mumbled to herself about blotched greetings all the way up to the drawing room.

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"Ah, Hermione. Please, come in. You look well. I've spoken to Hestia already about your trip; I am so glad that it went well." Dumbledore was beaming at her as he said this, his eye's twinkling like mad. "Please, close the door behind you, I had hoped to speak to you in private."

"Of course, sir," Hermione said as she moved back to the door.

"Now, dear, don't look so grave. It's a matter of great importance, but nothing whatsoever that should cause a frown like that." Dumbledore was moving to the plush chair by the fireplace, motioning for her to take a seat on the sofa just across from him.

"Now, down to business, I think. You should know that this is really for everyone's own good. It took me quite a while to work out all the details, and I've already spoken with everyone else about it. While most aren't thrilled, they can understand." Dumbledore seemed to be beating around the bush, being vague. It was usually how he acted when he knew exactly how a person would react. This couldn't be good.

"I'm sorry, sir, but what details, and who, exactly, is 'everyone else?'" Hermione had fallen for his senile act before and was therefore not keen on doing so again. Sometimes you could get him going if you asked directly for the facts.

"Well," Dumbledore started again, with a soft smile now, "I have decided, along with other members of the Order, to separate you, Harry, and Ronald. At least for the time being, that is. Please, let me finish," he said, holding up his hand when Hermione tried to interrupt. "Since I believe you three to be the main targets, you will each have a companion, a member of the Order, with you. You will be spread across the globe. Communication with anyone will be forbidden. The Order will send you updates, of course, but aside from that, it will just be you and your companion."

"But, sir, who is my companion?" Hermione asked, a feeling of dread spreading through her limbs.

Dumbledore smiled, he had known the lack of a name would not slip by her sharp mind. "Draco Malfoy."

"But, sir," she was on her feet in a flash, yelling, "that's outrageous! First, I don't need a 'companion;' I can take care of myself. And second, why Malfoy; why not Kingsley?"

He had wondered if she would play the 'I can take care of myself' card; each of them had now. "Kingsley is still working with the Muggle Prime Minister; he's needed there. I also want to move Draco away from most of the excitement, but I can't do so if he goes alone. With you, he has a 'cover story,' if you will."

"Cover story?" She was at least calmer now.

"Yes, I want Draco to pretend that you and he are 'together.' He will take you away from Harry and Ronald, presumably to both get information from you and weaken Harry's defences."

She felt used. While she honestly believed she could do just fine on her own, if she was going to be forced to have a 'companion,' she at least wanted someone who could protect her if need be.

She trusted Draco, yes, but still didn't like him much. She chewed her bottom lip in concentration, nearly puncturing the tender flesh.

"Where will we be going?" she asked, hoping at least that would provide an upside to this whole sordid ordeal.

Dumbledore knew he had her now. She had resigned herself to going and was probably hoping she would at least be going somewhere interesting.

"Tell me, have you ever been to Sweden?"

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I hate the bloody cold. I HATE the bloody COLD, Hermione thought to herself. In the last few days, it had become her personal mantra. Consequently, that same personal mantra reminded her constantly why she was in a bad mood. She was snapping at anyone within five feet.

The conversation with Dumbledore had not gone well. He had told her all about the quaint little village of Abisko, where they'd be staying. She couldn't think of a single thing she liked about this 'trip.'

Abisko, being in the northernmost of Sweden, was just plain cold. Since it was August, she would at least be missing the twenty-four hour sunshine that occurred in June and July. But that still meant that right now, they were only going to get about an hour or two of darkness. And if they ended up staying through winter (Dumbledore played the 'vague' game on how long they'd stay), then they would have to live with total darkness.

Mrs. Weasley had gone shopping with her that day after Dumbledore had spoken to her. She was fine on clothing for the summer, but if they did end up staying past October or so, she would freeze.

They had stuck mostly to Muggle fashions since Abisko is a Muggle village. They would be trying desperately not to stick out, which was probably easier said than done with a Malfoy.

Speaking of Malfoy; she hadn't seen or heard from him yet. The plan was for him to propose travelling with her as his own idea to Voldemort. Assuming he approved, Draco would pack up (he was still living at Malfoy Manor with his mother) and come to get her. They would then take turns Apparating to different places, going back and forth between places, until finally Apparating straight to Abisko.

She wasn't sure she was ready to go yet, but knew that he would come for her soon. Both Harry and Ron were leaving tomorrow; none knew where the others were going. The only communication they would have was through the updates from the Order.

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Draco came for her that night. He didn't say much, only asking if she was ready. He looked tense, and as though he hadn't slept for several days.

They left Grimmauld Place, taking the Knight Bus out of London first. They Apparated first to Hogsmeade, then to France; Hermione didn't see enough to know where exactly. Next stop was back to Hogsmeade, then on to Spain. Spain seemed to be it, though, as Draco took her arm one more time. The next stop was much colder and brighter.

"This is it," he said, contempt clearly audible in his tone. He was looking at the little cottage as though it were a nylon tent, barely worth anything.

Hermione tried not to cry. Leaving her family, then her friends, only to be stuck in a cold cottage with an angry Draco.

They walked inside, and upon seeing the already roaring fire, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't that cold outside right now, but after coming from Spain, she needed something to stave off the chill.

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An hour later found the pair unpacked (*'Thank Merlin there's at least two bedrooms!'*) and sitting in the living room, both staring into the fire. Hermione was trying desperately to think of something to say. Anything would be good for that matter.

"So, how's your mother, Draco?" Hermione asked, wondering why in the world that was the only thing she could come up with.

"Do me the favour of not pretending to care about my mother's well-being, Granger. I'm stuck here with you, that much is true, but chattering on and on will only get you a Silencing Charm." With that he got up, presumably going to bed. He was probably pretty lucky that he looked like he needed the rest; Hermione really looked like she had something to say about his previous statement.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 4

The first morning here couldn't be all that bad, could it?

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Author's Notes: As always, let's take a moment to thank our talented and wonderful betas. My talented beta, of course, was **VelvetMouse!**

She couldn't tell if she should get up or not. It was technically morning, but it still looked mid-day, just as it had when she had gone to bed. She had apparently missed the hour of darkness in the night. Now she knew why the thick, dark curtains were hung; she would be sure to draw them closed tonight.

Swinging her legs off the side of the mattress, her feet touched the stone floor, causing her to recoil. Looking around, she noticed the fuzz of her slippers just peeking out from under the nightstand. She scrambled for them.

She had hoped with all she had that when she woke up she would be back at Grimmauld Place, probably catching Harry sneaking into her and Ginny's room in the night. It was not to be. The freezing stone told the sad tale.

Coffee was the only fix she needed; nothing could warm her up quicker. So, after donning a warm bathrobe (pink, clearly Mrs. Weasley wanted to remind her she was supposed to be a girl), she slowly made her way into the kitchen. Her muscles protested against the morning chill, begging for the warmth of her sheets once more.

Draco was already enjoying breakfast. She couldn't imagine him making it himself, but didn't see a house-elf in sight.

"Where did you get breakfast?" she asked, eyeing the sausage link still steaming.

He ignored her, definitely not a morning person.

Fed up, she made her way to the refrigerator. She passed the sink on the way, seeing the dishes dirty; clearly no house-elves were involved in this meal. She was at least pleased to see the fridge well-stocked.

Choosing cold cereal, fortunately with fresh milk, Hermione sat at the table opposite Draco, attempting the silent treatment as best she could.

'This can't seriously go on,' she thought, knowing very well that it could. Breaking, after an astonishing minute and a half, she said, "Do we have any plans for being here, or are we just hanging around, waiting?"

He gave her a long suffering look, as if that was the absolute dumbest question ever asked. Then, finally, he said, "Did they not speak with you at all? Can you seriously say you don't know why you're here?"

"Well, obviously they spoke to me. I didn't look surprised to be leaving the country with you, did I?" She had to bite her tongue not to say anymore, but then continued more calmly saying, "Look, I don't want to be here, either. But aside from telling me I was coming here with you, under false reasons, they didn't tell me what to do with my time."

"Do what you always do, Granger: eat, sleep, read. There's a library at the end of the hallway. Clearly, Dumbledore didn't want you bored." With that, he went back to his breakfast, apparently hoping she would be gone soon.

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She had left Malfoy well enough alone after that. As if the prospect of a library wasn't enough to get her moving, getting away from a sour Malfoy certainly was.

The library wasn't anywhere near Hogwarts' standards, but it would fill her time. She looked around at the high shelves, mentally trying to figure out if she could read them all in the next few months.

A quick look around told her there was sufficient variety amongst the shelves, with a heavy emphasis on Defense Against the Dark Arts and Healing. That was practical, of course; this was still war.

Settling down under the lone window with her selection, she was instantly lost to the pages.

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The initial sound didn't register with Hermione, nor did the second or third. By the time she was aware of the intruder, he was already behind her. She whipped around, wand drawn, only to see Malfoy choosing his own book from the shelves.

"Jumpy, Granger?" he asked, smirk firmly in place.

Without a single word, she sheathed her wand back up her sleeve. She still looked wary, but her heart was beginning to calm down. She settled down again, retrieving her book from the floor.

She noticed Draco sitting in the other chair in the room. With a sidelong glance at him, she could just make out the title of the book he was reading: *Wandless Magic: More than just Tall Tales*. "What's he wanting to learn wandless magic for?" Hermione thought, trying to find the page she was on before.

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The rest of the morning was spent in silence, both of them reading their respective books. Hermione was pleased with this. With Harry or Ron, they were always trying to get her to go out and watch them play Quidditch or playing a very animated game of Exploding Snap right next to her. It was always annoying. But Draco seemed content just reading. With no terse remarks flying from his lips, she could actually imagine that a pleasant person was sitting there.

She felt and heard her stomach rumbling. Looking around to see if Draco had heard it too, she saw that he was gone. He had left the book he was reading on the cushion of the chair on his way out, apparently intending to return to it soon.

She assumed he had gone to the kitchen to eat lunch, and not wanting another episode with him, she decided to wait for him to return before she too ate.

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She couldn't wait any longer. She had just about finished her book and was decidedly beyond hungry. She was to the point that she was checking the door more often than reading her book.

Putting a bookmark in place, Hermione left the cozy library in search of food. But when she reached the kitchen, it was empty. She hadn't passed Draco on her way there, so assumed he must be in the living room or his bedroom. The bathroom door had been open when she passed, and she definitely hadn't seen him in it.

Making herself a cucumber sandwich a few minutes later, had Hermione thinking of her mother. Her mother always took afternoon tea; cucumber sandwiches were her favourite accompaniment to that tea. Hermione never actually took tea herself when she wasn't home, but still enjoyed cucumber sandwiches as a reminder. She suddenly missed her family.

She was glad they were safe, and that they would enjoy their 'vacation,' but still wished she could at least go and visit them. They also had Crookshanks with them, since traveling was never easy with a pet cat. She missed him as well. She thought of the way he used to curl up in her lap as she read and decided to get back into the library to finish her book.

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Hermione detoured through the living room on her way, still not seeing Draco. The bathroom door was still open, and he wasn't there, either. Finally making it to the library, she opened the door. Not seeing the blonde head sticking above the chair's back, she went back down the hall to the bedrooms.

His door was directly across from hers and was the only door not open. Knocking, she called, "Malfoy, are you in there?"

She normally wouldn't bother him, but she didn't want him to be alone up here if he was sick. He was probably just sulking, though.

He didn't answer, and after her third attempt at knocking, she tried the door knob. It was locked, but a simple *Alohomora* worked wonders.

His bedroom looked very much like hers. A simple double bed sat in the middle; he had actually made his this morning. There were two nightstands flanking the bed, and a wardrobe in the corner. A small writing desk was on the wall opposite the lone window. And also like hers, it was empty.

She couldn't imagine him leaving the cottage without telling her, but he definitely wasn't in the house. She walked to the front door to see if maybe he was simply sitting on the porch.

It was chilly when she stepped outside, and she almost turned back around to grab a jacket, but spotted Draco first. He was sitting on a bench a few meters from the house; his back was facing away from her. She closed the door behind her, but didn't move, afraid to approach him, knowing he probably didn't want her company.

When she couldn't take it any longer, she pushed off from the door, walking slowly, quietly. Her feet crunched on the ground lightly, but it still didn't seem to disturb him. He hadn't moved since she first saw him.

"Draco?" she called, using his first name for reasons unknown to her. It seemed more intimate this way, too intimate.

He started slightly at the sound of her voice, but didn't move beyond a simple jerk. He also didn't look at her.

She was confused; normally that would have at least gotten one snide comment, maybe even a "What, Mudblood?" But now, nothing.

She sat down as far away from him as possible; she wanted to help him, not incur his wrath. He didn't even seem to notice. He was just looking off, clearly not seeing anything around him.

"You can talk to me if you want. I have no one up here to tell anyway," she said. She didn't know if she really wanted to help the ferret, but he seemed so small right now.

He looked at her for a long moment. It was the first time he had looked at her at all. He seemed to register her presence, but still looked lost.

She saw the first spark of life, and it was quickly followed by a much colder look.

"Look, Granger, this 'save the world' bit doesn't work with house-elves, and it won't work with me. I don't need a keeper, nor do I want one." With that, he got up, strode swiftly into the cottage and slammed the door in his wake.

She sat there for a very long time, looking out the same way he had. She didn't know what to do and was really confused that she wanted to do anything at all.

# Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 4

So what is Malfoy up to anyway?

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**Author's Notes:** My hardworking beta, **VelvetMouse**, deserves a nice, hearty round of applause.

Two weeks had passed, and not much had changed. Hermione would get up to find Draco already eating breakfast. After three more days of him snapping at her, she had learned not to say much to him. In fact, she couldn't remember the last thing she said to him, or when it had been, for that matter.

She didn't know where he had gone when he had seemed so lost on the bench that day. She'd never asked, and he didn't seem to go anywhere after that.

She finished her breakfast before him today, so she went to her room to take a shower and get ready for the day. She always liked eating breakfast before her morning routine.

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She was dressed, with her hair in a bun to dry, when she heard the owl. It was the first correspondence she had heard, and so she immediately rushed into the kitchen.

Draco had two letters, one already opened. Without looking up, he placed one finger on the other letter, sliding it across the table with a flick of his wrist. There was only a single letter on the front: "H."

She was excited to receive any news at all and opened it right away. It was written in Professor McGonagall's scrawl, the same as any Hogwarts letter.

Draco had now finished reading his apparently, for he got up and left her to hers. She turned back to it and read:

'H,

*I sincerely hope this finds you well. I know that it has been
entirely too long since you last heard from us, but not much
has happened here.*

*Red and Black are fine. They each arrived at their respective
destinations and are settling in, much as I expect you are.*

*Bumble Bee has spoken to the other birds, and we all agree
that the strike should happen soon. We have not decided on
whether or not to take the offense.*

*The next correspondence should have more information
for you.*

Yours,

Tabby'

Hermione would have laughed if she weren't so close to tears. She would have appreciated more information, but was happy she had gotten any kind of word at all. She supposed the nicknames weren't actually supposed to be funny, but sometimes you have to reach out for a laugh. With Harry and Ron being called by their hair color, she could only guess that her nickname was "Brown." She didn't think McGonagall would be cruel enough to call her "Bushy," no matter how appropriate the name might be.

She made her way back to the living room, hoping to hold a civilised conversation with Draco for once. He was sitting there next to the fire, watching his letter burn. She figured she should probably burn hers as well, at least to stay on the safe side.

When she moved to do just that, Draco looked up at her. She never really looked at him anymore, but now that she had, he looked as though he had aged decades since that day on the bench.

"Do you think they'll move into the offense?" she asked, knowing he would probably know better than she, and hoping he would actually tell her if he did.

"I don't know." He didn't sound mad, but more perplexed than she would have liked. "I have to go somewhere this evening; don't leave the house unless you have to."

She would have argued if it weren't the first sentence he had spoken to her without an attitude. She decided to leave him to whatever thoughts could make him more civil, and ventured into her bedroom.

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She didn't know if she should keep a journal or not, but had brought one nonetheless. She hadn't written a single thing in it up until now, but believed it might keep her from going mad if she did. She decided to keep it vague, writing:

*'I can't honestly say that I hate it here. It's cozy, with a good library. I've become accustomed to the cold now, but still dread the winter. I sincerely hope we won't be here that long.*

*The most I can say is that the company is the worst aspect. He seems lost and confused sometimes, but his tongue is as sharp as ever. He has no tolerance for anything at all.*

*I still haven't ventured into town yet, and I don't think he has either. I'd like to, but will probably wait a few more days since he's going out tonight. We will need groceries very soon, and seeing as I only have enough money on me for one or two trips to the store, and no local money at all, I hope he has some.*

*I wish he would keep me informed about the things he does. I know he's not going to headquarters, and as far as I know, he's not going to his home either. That really only leaves the dark club to seek. I don't believe those meetings are scheduled on a calendar somewhere, and haven't seen him grabbing his arm at any given time before he leaves, so how is he meeting them?*

*I'm moving through the books fairly quickly now. There are so many here, and I haven't found a single one that I've read before. I'm keeping to the ones that I believe will be useful soon, assuming we go on the offense.*

*I was glad to hear news that my friends were well. I've been so worried lately; about my family, too. There was no mention of them, but I assumed we wouldn't have contact for several months when they left.'*

She left it at that, not knowing what else to write, and not wanting to disclose too many details.

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After a morning of lazing in her room, staring out the window, which overlooked the town, Hermione grabbed a quick ham sandwich for lunch. She went into the library, seeing Draco already there. She had finished a book on Healing the day before and wanted to try a particularly good Potions book she had seen on the shelf over.

She couldn't find that particular book, however. She looked on the shelf it had been, as well as the shelves to the top and bottom.

"Looking for this, Granger?" Draco asked, waving a book around, his finger holding the page. It was indeed the book.

She wanted to keep the peace, so simply replied, "That's alright, Malfoy. I'll just chose another and read that when you're done."

"Oh? And if I keep it the duration that we're here?" He didn't have the usual cold sneer on his face, but more of a playful smirk.

She could only guess the feeling of utter confusion showed on her face because Draco was now laughing so hard it looked like it hurt. Still chuckling, he dropped the book in her chair and walked out. She had no idea what was wrong with him.

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*'Damn.'* She couldn't read anymore. She had read the same paragraph five times now, without understanding a single word. She wanted to know what in the world had gotten into Draco earlier.

It had been several hours since then, but she was still thinking about it. Giving reading up as a bad job, Hermione walked back into the living room. Draco wasn't there, but she had heard him rummaging around in his room as she passed. She would just wait him out.

It wasn't a long wait, however. He came out less than ten minutes later, dressed in black robes and a black traveling cloak. Wherever he was going, Wizarding dress seemed appropriate.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the look on his face made her pause. She distinctly heard the clink of metal in his pocket as he turned a sharp corner out the door.

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 4*

While Draco's away, Hermione worries.

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Hermione sat in that same position, long after Draco had left the cottage. Her feet were curled under her and were the only indication of time she had. They kept falling asleep, about every twenty minutes, she guessed, so that she was constantly making minimal adjustments to stay comfortable.

Finally, after what felt like her millionth move, she got up and began pacing. She didn't know why she was nervous.

'No,' she thought to herself, *'I do.'* She couldn't get the image of Draco, bloodied, bruised, and possibly dead, out of her mind. The same scenario kept playing over and over, like some morbid movie at a drive-in theatre.

There was Draco, dressed in the same black cloak, kneeling before a monster with bright red eyes. He apologised profusely, saying that things beyond his control were taking too long. But the Dark Lord didn't believe him.

One Cruciatus was bad enough, but she was picturing him receiving several. Over and over the screams filled her mind until she was sure they were real. She could feel the sweat pouring off her face and into her hair, but knew that that couldn't be right. Her sweat should have ran down her face, not back, as though she were laying down.

All of a sudden, though, the screams were real, and they were coming from her. She sat up instantly, colliding painfully with something above her, but she couldn't see what; her eyes were still screwed tightly shut.

"Granger!" a voice called, so close to her ear. She shook her head violently, her whole body joining it, but then hands closed on her shoulders and she couldn't move at all.

"Hermione," another voice, no, the same voice, said. It was softer, more soothing, and calmed her down instantly. She hadn't heard her own first name said aloud in several weeks.

She sat there breathing, feeling each beat of her heart as though it were her whole body jumping. Large, warm hands were still holding her shoulders tightly, but she wasn't moving out of them anyway. She realised now that she had been dreaming, and that it was Draco above her, but knew that it only became real when she opened her eyes. Her head had dropped, too, between his arms, as he had taken a seated position next to her knees. Trying to orient herself, she was sure she was on the couch. There was something pooled around her middle, though, like a blanket.

Taking one more deep breath, she finally opened her eyes. It wasn't a blanket she saw, though, but the cloak Draco had left in several hours before. He had apparently moved her from her chair to the sofa, and draped it across her.

"What time is it?" she asked softly. Only she would think of that, and only that, as her first question after a nightmare.

She felt his hands drop away, as she had been sure they would, but he didn't move from his seated position, surprising her a little. He sighed, too, now, apparently relieved that the ordeal was over. She secretly hoped he was relieved that she was alright, too, and that thought really surprised her.

"Near six in the morning," he answered her, sounding tired. She looked to see large, purple bags beneath his eyes and was sure he hadn't gotten a wink of sleep.

Moving just enough to move her hands behind her for support on the cushion, she closed her eyes briefly. This would normally be the time in the morning that he would get up and make himself breakfast, her following a little while later, neither saying a word to the other. She didn't want that to happen right now, though, and resigned herself to the worst by speaking.

"Thank you," she said simply and in the same tone as before. With Harry or Ron she would have elaborated on what she meant and probably given them a hug. Draco, however, was a whole other ballgame.

He was her great-great-great grandmother's china that currently resided in the antique hutch in the dining room of her parents: "You can look, but you should never touch," her mother would always tell her. She would spend hours just looking when she got the chance, and once, when she was eight, she had taken the tiniest of feels, just to see if it was possible. She didn't dare hold one, though.

So here she was, years later, still trying her hardest to get the tiniest of feels, not get caught, and definitely not break it.

When he didn't respond, she thought to push her luck just a little further, by asking, "What time did you get back?"

First, he shrugged, then he looked away. "Not long ago," he said, after apparently finding a particularly interesting spot on the mantle to stare at. She took the opportunity now to stare at him. She watched his hair sway slightly as he breathed, no longer the neat, straight strands he normally kept. His eyes were almost sad from what she could tell, the grey just a little paler.

Her observations were interrupted as he sighed heavily again and pushed off from the couch. He looked at her for a long moment, seemingly weighing his options.

"I make some great pancakes," he said, suddenly finding the nail on his right thumb interesting; he just stood there running his other thumb's nail over it again and again. When it was clear he didn't intend to say anymore, Hermione opened her mouth.

"Was that an invitation, or were you just letting me know what I'll be missing?" she asked with a slight smile on her lips. She was definitely pushing her luck now.

A short, breathy laugh escaped his mouth, and she was sure she heard a gasp from her own. "An invitation," he said, looking back to her and extending a hand to help her up. "You do like pancakes, don't you?" he asked after a slight hesitation on her part.

A quick nod and a tug on her arm had her scrambling to the kitchen after him.