

Collide

by Soul Bound

Draco and Hermione are back at Hogwarts for their seventh year, Head Boy and Girl. They are happy to go on hating each other until something unexpected forces them together. Where will their journey take them?

Not Enough Room

Chapter 1 of 11

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Disclaimer: I make no money from anything I write, and since writing is all I do with my time, it would be pointless to sue me. I'm poor.

Author's Fore-word: This is the first HP story I ever wrote. It's not even close to anything that could be considered HBP-compliant, and Voldemort is conveniently absent... It's close to complete and has twenty-two chapters so far, so you can expect quick updates. I primarily ship SS/HG these days, but I still have a soft spot for DM/HG. This story was written when those two consumed my life, so you can expect to feel the love. My writing has come a long way since this was originally posted on FF.net. It's still up over there but is in abysmal shape. The version you find here has been revised, rewritten, and added to. I hope you enjoy it!

Hermione had been ecstatic when her letter from Hogwarts had come, informing her that she would be Head Girl. She had spent the last month of the summer happily wondering who would be made Head Boy. She'd rolled over the possibilities in her mind, considering Tony Goldstein, Harry Potter, and even Ron Weasley, before finally deciding that Ernie Macmillan had the best chance.

And now, here she was. She stood on the platform in front of the Hogwarts Express and took a deep breath. This was it. She'd been told to meet the new Head Boy and the Deputy Headmistress in the last room of the train—a room informally dubbed the Head Compartment—where she would receive instructions about her duties. After that, she was supposed to check in at the Prefects' Compartment, but that was at the back of her mind. At the moment, she was focused on who the other Head would be, fairly certain she had guessed right. Who else would it be?

She strolled to the Head Compartment of the train, expecting to open the door and find Ernie grinning at her, ready to congratulate her on getting the Head Girl position. Instead, she opened the door to find none other than Draco Malfoy, pompous git and snob extraordinaire, sneering at her. She instantly froze and glared back at him, wondering briefly if she was in the wrong compartment. She looked around covertly... No, this was definitely it—the sign on the door that said 'Head Boy and Girl' was a dead giveaway.

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" Hermione snarled. She slid the door closed behind her forcefully. The thought that he might be the other Head didn't even cross her mind. She was too busy glaring at him, wishing him nothing but ill.

The feeling was mutual. Malfoy leaned back comfortably in his chair and continued to sneer at her. He stretched his legs out and rested his feet on the soft bench across from him.

Hermione's eyes narrowed angrily as his feet usurped her seat.

"Move your feet, and tell me what the hell you're doing in the Head Compartment, Malfoy."

"Language, Granger," Malfoy taunted. "I don't believe I will move my feet. I'm quite comfortable where I am, even withstanding your foul Mudblood stench assaulting my nostrils."

Hermione's eyes flared as her jaw tightened. She pushed his feet aside roughly and sat down across from him. The Draco Malfoy she'd known for six years surfaced in full, malicious strength, as she had known he would.

"Get your filthy hands off me, Mudblood!" he spat, his body stiffening.

Hermione had never been afraid of him; she'd never let herself be intimidated by him, and she wasn't about to start now. She glared evenly at him and ignored his last insult.

"Are you going to tell me what you are doing here, or am I going to have to hex you?" she asked coldly.

"You wouldn't dare," he growled.

"Try me!" she escalated loudly.

"Well, children," a voice said from bedside them.

Both students froze. Neither had noticed Professor McGonagall enter the room.

She heaved a frustrated sigh and closed the door behind her. She didn't know what Albus was thinking, sticking these two together... Ah, well. Best to give it a try, she supposed.

"Please tell me that Professor Dumbledore hasn't made the wrong decision in choosing the two of you as Heads. I'd hate to think of reassigning the positions because you two couldn't control your tempers."

Hermione looked at her, her cheeks slightly red, chagrined by the disappointed tone of her professor's voice. It took her a moment before the woman's words actually registered. When they did... *Heads? As in plural?*

Realization dawning, she turned her wide-eyed stare toward Draco, who was smirking. She felt her jaw drop in what had to be an unflattering manner, but the way she looked just then was the last thing on her mind.

"He's Head Boy?" she hissed in disbelief.

"That's right, Granger," Draco said smoothly, icy as ever. "Took you long enough."

"But, Professor" Hermione began, trying to think of something to say to Professor McGonagall that would convey the sheer horror she felt.

"Miss Granger," said her teacher in firm tone, "Mr. Malfoy has been given the position of Head Boy, just as you have been given the position of Head Girl. You have both earned it. Please display the maturity that the Headmaster trusts you to possess."

Malfoy smirked unkindly at this, and McGonagall turned sharply to him. "The same goes for you, Mr. Malfoy. You have both been given the assignment fairly. We are trusting you to put your differences aside long enough to do your duties this year. Professor Dumbledore has faith that you will succeed at this, making this a wonderful and worthwhile year for yourselves and your fellow students."

McGonagall's skeptical tone left no question that she wasn't so sure about this.

Hermione resisted the urge to tell McGonagall that she was insane, the qualities that had earned her Head Girl pulling rank on her anger. With great effort she stuffed down her pride and smiled. "I'll do my best, Professor."

"I'm sure you will, Miss Granger," McGonagall answered succinctly. She handed them both a small packet of papers and spoke again. "I've just given you your patrolling schedules, list of duties, rules you will adhere to, and the names of this year's Prefects. I had hoped you both would stop by the Prefects' Compartment before you return to your friends, but... I think that time would be better spent talking to one another. You will agree on a time to meet with the Prefects to assign them their duties. Everything you will need is in your hands. I suggest you study it."

Hermione looked down and thumbed through the papers in her hands, eager to read through them, and then looked back at her teacher.

"Again," continued McGonagall, "I am registering my deepest hope that the two of you will be able to put your childish differences behind you and work as a team."

Hermione smiled up at McGonagall. She returned it and left them alone. Hermione, of course, wasted no time in opening the packet she'd been given, eager to get started. She almost forgot someone was still sharing her compartment until she heard Malfoy's voice again, jolting her up from her reading.

"Brownnoser," he sneered.

Hermione sighed in exasperation. "Were you even listening, Malfoy? I don't like this any better than you do, but if we're going to spend the year in close proximity to each other, maybe we should listen to her."

At this Malfoy scoffed. "No fucking way, Granger. We may be stuck in this, but there is no chance you will ever be anything but a brownnosing Mudblood to me."

This pushed Hermione over the edge. Here she was, trying to make a go of it, and Malfoy was only interested in mudslinging. Well, two could play at this game... Noble thoughts of teamwork and being the bigger person were forgotten as she narrowed her eyes.

"You make me sick, Malfoy," fumed Hermione. "You are arrogant, snobby, bigoted and... and... ugly! You stay away from me. Don't look at me, talk to me, or touch me unless it's necessary for our duties."

"Like I'd ever want to make myself filthy by touching you," Malfoy said sarcastically. "You, on the other hand, I'm sure, will have a hard time keeping your hands off me." With this, he gave a wickedly suggestive smirk that made Hermione's blood boil. "You know," he continued, "this means we'll be sharing a dormitory. You'll lie awake at night wishing I would come to you and do... *things* to your body, and I'll lie awake wishing you were any other girl in the school so that I'd want to. It hardly seems fair, does it?"

Hermione snorted in disgust as Malfoy tilted his head confidently. "In your dreams, Malfoy," she said defiantly, grinding her teeth. As if she'd ever be even slightly attracted to that... that ferret!

"On the contrary, Granger, in *your* dreams."

Malfoy stood up quickly and after giving Hermione a final arrogant sneer one for the road walked out of the compartment, no doubt headed to join his pack of piggish Slytherin friends, leaving her livid in her seat.

She left shortly thereafter to join her own friends. When she reached their compartment, Ron who was apparently already finished with the other Prefects Harry, Ginny, Luna, and Neville greeted her, all wanting to know who her counterpart was.

"You are *not* going to believe this," Hermione said darkly, plopping down next to Luna and Neville.

"Who is it, Hermione?" asked Harry.

"Yeah, tell us!" echoed Ginny.

"Is it Ernie?" asked Neville eagerly.

Hermione looked around for a moment before dropping the bomb. "It's Malfoy."

There was a horrified silence until Ron broke it. *What?*" he gasped.

"You heard me, Ron," muttered Hermione irritably. "Malfoy. Draco Malfoy."

"*Fuck!*"

"*Ron!*" shouted three upset female voices simultaneously.

"What?" he asked with an exasperated shrug. "Don't even try to tell me I'm the only one who has a problem with that bastard as the Head Boy!"

"No, you're not, but he's not worth it, Ron. Don't lower yourself to his level," chided Ginny.

Hermione and Luna nodded their concurrence.

Ron rolled his eyes at them. Honestly, it was only a word...

"He's going to make our life a living hell," groaned Neville.

"No, he won't," said Hermione firmly. "I'm still Head Girl. I have the same power he has."

"Yeah," said Harry, "but you're not an obnoxious arse. And you're going to be hard put to keep up with the points he docks from us all."

Ron and Neville nodded in agreement.

Hermione chuckled darkly. "Oh, don't worry. I'll keep an eye on him. A *very* close eye on him. I'm not about to let him ruin this year for any of us."

This topic of conversation went on until everyone grew tired of abusing Malfoy. Granted, this took rather a long while, but by the time they were done discussing it and everything else they could think of and Hermione had read through her Head packet several times, it was dark outside and time for everyone to change into their school robes.

When the students finally reached the castle, there was an excitement buzzing that was typical of the first night back. Everyone arrived at the feast starving and eager. The Sorting went by quickly, and before long, the feast was over and everyone was filing off toward his or her dormitory, peacefully stuffed with food.

Hermione had already received instructions on where to go to find her new quarters. She found her new rooms easily and gave the password to enter *Cooperation*.

Nice try, Dumbledore.

The Head Suites were impressive. Hermione thought it just might be worth suffering the annoyance of sharing them with Malfoy if it meant she could spend her evenings *here*. This place had everything but a kitchen. A medium-sized study/lounge made up the common room. On the opposite wall from where Hermione stood surveying, there were two beautiful, mahogany desks set a few feet apart. A large couch, two comfortable looking armchairs, two partially filled bookshelves which Hermione would have overflowing in no time and a circular, glass-top table with two posh-looking wooden chairs on opposite sides furnished the room wonderfully. It was obvious that whoever had designed this room wanted its two occupants to be comfortable and to spend a lot of time together in it. Hermione snorted. *Fat chance of that.*

There were three plain wooden doors on the right wall. The first, she surmised from the placard with her title, led to Hermione's new bedroom. The next door was partially open, and Hermione could see cream-colored marble that had to be the loo. That meant the last door led to Malfoy's room. She walked into her room and looked around. It was a lot bigger than her room in Gryffindor Tower. Actually, it wasn't, she realized as she looked more closely; it just looked that way because it only had one large bed, as opposed to the three that had been in her previous dorm. That meant there was a lot more space. Hermione glanced out the window and saw the lake glittering darkly, reflecting the light of the castle. She knew it would be a lovely view in the daytime when she'd be able to see the grounds and the forest too. She looked around her new room again and smiled. It was a charming room, sparsely furnished but elegant and tasteful. It had definite potential. She was looking forward to decorating it the way she wanted.

She strolled back out to inspect the common room more closely, and at that moment Malfoy burst through the portrait hole imperiously. His sudden entrance startled her from her exploration, and she glowered at him.

Draco spared only a moment to glance around the room, to take it in, before he advanced on Hermione. "You will stay out of my room and away from my things. Is that clear?" he asked commandingly.

She narrowed her eyes, folded her arms, and spat, "The same goes for you, Malfoy."

Malfoy chuckled meanly. "You have nothing I want."

"Likewise!" she snapped.

"You just keep telling yourself that."

Hermione rolled her eyes and began to walk to her room. There was no winning with him. She gave up. "You really do disgust me," she said coldly.

"Get out of my way, Granger!" growled Malfoy.

She stumbled sideways as he pushed past her and walked into his bedroom. The door slammed loudly and Hermione just shook her head. She clenched her jaw and looked at the ceiling as though begging for its help.

The common room was a decent size, especially for two people, but Hermione knew it wasn't going to be big enough not nearly. Feeling completely done in every way, she crossed the room and flung herself down on the large, flower-printed sofa in the middle of the room. She let out a deep sigh and closed her eyes.

This was going to be hell.

SB's Notes: Thanks go to the multi-talented Southern_Witch_69 for her wonderful beta reading skills and her help in teaching me. Thank you, Sun. I'd still be staring at the screen blankly, wondering what in God's name a compound predicate was if it wasn't for you. ;-)

I love reviews! Every single one makes it all worth while for me.

The Dragon's Lair

Chapter 2 of 11

Draco and Hermione make an attempt to share their common room and get more than they bargained for.

"I still don't think this is a good idea, Albus," muttered Minerva McGonagall crossly. "You should have seen them in that compartment. I thought they were going to rip each other apart!"

The two elderly magicians sat in Dumbledore's office as the first night back at Hogwarts died away. Dumbledore chuckled.

"You think this is funny?" asked McGonagall sharply.

"Our two Head students do seem to have rather a... passion for each other, don't they?" he commented, smiling pleasantly.

McGonagall snorted. "Is that what you call it, Albus? Honestly, I'll be surprised if one of them doesn't die at the hands of the other by the end of September!"

"I think we'll all be surprised, Minerva," Dumbledore said. "But they both have good hearts." At this, McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "I believe the time they spend together will be good for both of them." Noticing the look on his Deputy Headmistress' face, Dumbledore chuckled again. "Yes, Draco has a good heart, deep down. And now, with Lucius gone, I think we have a chance here to help him find it. That's partly why I've put him with Miss Granger."

"But he hates Hermione!" said McGonagall, shaking her head confusedly.

"I suppose we'll have to see about that," Dumbledore replied softly, his eyes twinkling.

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This was unbelievable.

Draco brooded angrily to himself once alone in his new room. He finally had it all. He'd wanted the Head position ever since he had first arrived at Hogwarts. He deserved it. After everything he'd been through, after every time he had been shown up by *Potter*, he deserved to come out on top at least once. He'd wanted, for years, to look in the mirror and see the badge pinned to his robe. He'd wanted to have the power to tell all the other students to do whatever he wanted he'd had that to an extent as a Prefect, but this was better. He'd wanted to have the most he could have as a student, and now he had it.

It should have been a moment of triumph, but once again, one of the Golden Trio stood in his way, ruining it. They seemed to love nothing as much as stealing his thunder. It just figured that Hermione Granger would be made Head Girl. Draco glared at the wall that separated his room from the common room, knowing Hermione was still out there, as though glaring could make her shrivel up.

He sighed bitterly and fell back onto his bed. This was, at least, a bonus. It was nothing compared to his room at home in the Manor, but it was a far cry better than the dorm he'd shared in the Slytherin dungeon. There was more room, the bed was larger and nicer, and he could do whatever he wanted without being interrupted.

As much as it bothered him to admit it, it felt good to be back at school. It felt like coming home. His father was dead now, so the Manor belonged to him, but this place, Hogwarts, was more of a home to him than the Manor had been in the last few years. He'd thought it would have caused him much more pain when his father was killed, but in an odd way it was freeing. He didn't have to worry about Lucius pushing him into the open arms of the Dark Lord anymore. That had never truly been the life he'd wanted. What pained him most was watching his mother suffer. She had truly loved his father, but his father had never loved her spoiled him, yes, taken selfish pride in his accomplishments, yes, but loved her in the way his mother had, given of himself and put Draco's needs before his own, never. Narcissa Malfoy was a wreck these days, and Draco knew it. She had taken her husband's death hard, blaming herself for no explainable reason.

Draco lay in bed now and tried to focus on the present. He looked around the room and thought of things he'd like to fill it with. He'd made a marvelous discovery, when he'd been on his own over the summer, in the form of a 'VCR.' This was another reason he was glad to have a room to himself; he would sooner eat his own fist than let anyone see him with Muggle entertainment set-up in his room. The more he learned about the Muggle world, the more annoyed he grew with himself, for he couldn't help but be impressed by their originality. Who'd have thought that staring at a screen for close to two hours could be enjoyable?

He hoped he could figure a way to get around his newly acquired electronics malfunctioning in the castle.

His mind was again drawn back to the matter of his counterpart, Hermione Granger. He couldn't honestly tell himself that he was surprised that she had obtained the position. She had the marks and, as much as he despised admitting it, the brains for the job. There was really nobody else for it. This annoyed him very much. He couldn't stand Granger and her little sidekicks. Everyone thought that Potter was the ringleader of the Trio, but Draco knew better. Hermione was the brains behind the outfit, Harry the brawn, and Ron the useless idiot who had somehow managed to keep a place between the other two.

Draco stewed in his room for several minutes before deciding to take a bath. If he'd ever needed to relax, now was the time. He opened the other door in his room, which led into the joint bathroom, and walked in. Nice. A large standing shower with a sliding door jutted out from the opposite wall, and an impressive Jacuzzi-tub sat against the wall beside him. There was a large mirror hanging on the left wall of the room. Two washbasins sunken into a marble countertop, two wooden cabinets with empty shelves, two towel racks one draped in green towels the other in scarlet, and a toilet completed the room's amenities.

He fiddled with a few of faucets in the tub, taking in the different aromas offered before settling on a spicy, woody scent and ran his fingers underneath the flow, testing the temperature. When it was just right, he pulled the plug up and began to undress. He looked over at Hermione's door and stopped himself. He was glad to see that he could lock her door from inside this room. He walked over and did just that. The last thing he needed was the Mudblood walking in on him while he was trying to relax. He stripped all the way down and stepped into the bath. The water was comfortably warm, and as he relaxed into it, he felt his frustrations melt away.

The rest of the evening was spent unpacking his trunk and making several failed attempts to charm his television and VCR to work. He'd figure something out...

In the morning, his body woke itself up reluctantly as the light of dawn poured through the window and onto his closed eyelids. He stayed in bed for a while, adjusting

himself into consciousness. After what was probably half an hour, he rose and went to the window, yawning.

This was an odd year. The first of September had fallen on a Monday, and classes wouldn't be starting until the following Monday. It was a week wasted, but Draco didn't mind. The longer he could spend trying to figure out a charm to get his electronics to work before he had to spend all his time on homework and Head duties, the better. He could do whatever he wanted today.

He grabbed a simple, grey undershirt out of his drawer and pulled it on. He walked out of his room and into the study to find Hermione already there. He groaned inwardly, but he wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of knowing she was already ruining his day.

Hermione barely glanced up before continuing to read the paper. Apparently, she was a subscriber to the early-morning *Prophet*. She held a half-eaten piece of toast in one hand and the paper in the other. She was leaning back in one of the wooden chairs, her legs scrunched up against her, resting her feet lightly on the edge of the glass.

"Get your feet off the table, Granger," he said irritably. She didn't look at him, but obeyed, taking another bite.

As she moved her legs, he couldn't help but notice what she was wearing very high-cut, cotton sleep shorts in a plaid pattern and a slinky, blue camisole. Her legs were toned and evenly tanned. Her shorts rode low on her hips, and he could see a small expanse of her sides and back as she bent forward to resituate herself. Draco couldn't deny that the summer had been good to her.

As she leaned back again, straightening the paper to continue reading, Draco couldn't stop himself from looking at her upper body he was a teenage male after all. It was easy to forget who he was and who she was with his hormones insistently whispering *girl...* Her breasts weren't particularly large, but they weren't tiny either. They fit her curves, and he could see their outline through her top. He wondered if she had always looked like this under her robes or if this was a new thing. Draco realized he was staring and jerked his eyes away. He shouldn't have been looking at her at all, let alone looking at her and being impressed. He put his face right again, then crossed the room and sat down across from her, feeling the need to remind both of them who was in control here.

"All right, Granger," he said commandingly, "let's get a few things straight."

He fully intended to tell her exactly how it was going to be around here that she would stay out of the study in the mornings until he has gone, that she would wait for her turn in the loo, and that under no circumstances would she have either of her *pals* over for a visit, but when she looked up at him, the words died on his tongue. Instead, his eyes were drawn to hers and then to her hair, pulled up into a messy bun on the crown of her head. How long had she had soft curls instead of bushy frizz?

She rolled her eyes at him, and her head moved slightly; a few small strands of curly, russet-colored hair fell over her eyes. For a tiny instant, he felt an urge to reach forward and tuck one behind her ear, but it was gone before he could examine it. He also couldn't help noticing just how brown her eyes were and how bright they looked in the morning light. It was then that Draco realized how out of place his thoughts were. Was it possible? Was he actually *attracted to Granger*?

"Not now, Malfoy. I'm getting in the shower," she said in a bored tone.

He remained speechless, not knowing what to think, let alone say. She got up and walked toward the bathroom door, and Draco's eyes followed her. Her hips swayed ever so slightly as she went. She raised her arms above her head in a stretch, and her top hitched up a bit, giving him a glimpse of the gently indented small of her back. She disappeared behind the door, and Draco was left to stare blankly ahead, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened to him.

This was certainly unexpected.

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About half an hour later, Hermione emerged from her own room, fully clothed in casual attire with her hair in a simple braid that fell to the middle of her back. She wanted to peruse the books in the study before she started her day. She walked by Draco, who was curiously staring hard at the floor instead of taking advantage of this obvious opportunity to verbally abuse her. This was odd, but if he was going to ignore her, Hermione had no problem with it. It would be a vast improvement from having to sit through his usual arrogant diatribe.

She walked over to the bookcase by the window closest to her bedroom and noticed that it was quite a bit fuller than it had been when she'd arrived the night before. She ran her fingers over bindings, looking closely at the titles. She grinned as she realized that this bookcase was filled with of her favorites. Someone knew exactly what she loved and had done this for her. Austen, Shakespeare, Crichton, Bronte, Frost, Tolkien, Herbert... they were all here, as well as many of her favorite wizard texts. She pulled out her favorite novel and went over to her armchair. She curled up and immediately opened it to chapter one.

She didn't even notice when Draco left the room.

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After quite a bit longer than the half hour it had taken Hermione, Draco emerged from his room, dressed in his usual robes. It had only taken him a few minutes to shower, but he had spent several before and several after trying to drive from his brain the faint, sweet scent of raspberries he'd breathed in when Hermione had walked by after her shower.

After some reflection, he'd come to the conclusion that as a guy, he could admit she was physically attractive enough, but that it didn't mean anything deeper than that. It was a completely normal reaction for any male who was faced with a female wearing less than modest clothing. Any attraction he felt to her would be ignored. It was as simple as that.

He didn't immediately see Hermione, as her body was mostly hidden behind the chair she was sitting in. In his hand were the papers McGonagall had given him on the train. He walked over to sit in his armchair to peruse them and was surprised to find Hermione already in hers, curled up with a rather thick book.

"Merlin, Granger!" he breathed loudly. "You can't startle me like that!"

Hermione looked up at him incredulously as the ridiculousness of his statement struck her, then rolled her eyes and went back to her book, ignoring him. He sat down in his chair, which was tilted toward hers, and began to examine his papers. Several minutes passed, Draco reading his 'Rules of Conduct' and Hermione quickly devouring her favorite novel. Neither noticed the other until Draco's eyes were drawn to Hermione as she shifted in her chair, showing a bit of her side when her shirt moved before it was covered again. He stared ahead blankly, the events of the morning rolling back into his thoughts. He was annoyed with her for putting them there and angry with himself for allowing them to be there.

"Granger!" he snapped.

Hermione jumped and glared at him. That was more like it, he thought. He shouldn't be the only one agitated.

He smirked and held up the papers in his hand. "McGonagall said we should look these over."

"I already did," she muttered before going back to her book, clearly not interested in arguing or even talking to him.

He scowled. He wanted her to get angry, fight back, and take his bait so that he could snarl at her in peace without thinking of what she smelled like or what color her hair was in the light, but she didn't seem willing or interested in doing anything of the sort.

Draco scowled even harder. He was irritated that anything could be more important than arguing with him. His eyes flew resentfully to the culprit Hermione's book. He read the title and was reluctantly intrigued. He'd never heard of it.

"What the hell is that thing anyway?" he muttered, nodding his head at her challengingly.

She didn't even look up. "It's called a book, Malfoy," she replied coolly.

He'd set himself up for that one...

"You don't say," he said sarcastically. "Let me see that thing." He reached forward and snatched the book out of her hands.

"Hey!" she yelled in protest, rising out of her chair.

That did it... Draco thought to himself with a smug smile.

"*Dune* by Frank Herbert," he said, holding it out of her reach.

"It's a Muggle book," she snapped angrily. "You wouldn't understand."

"Don't tell me what I would and wouldn't understand, Granger!" he snarled, still holding it out of her reach.

She stood with her hands on her hips, fuming. Draco thought she looked... cute that way. He dismissed that idea as quickly as he could.

"Give it back," she demanded.

"No," he replied smugly.

"Give it back," she repeated, her voice icy.

"Make me," he taunted.

After a pause, Hermione took him at his word and lunged for him. He barely had time to feel surprised before he toppled back into his chair and she was on top of him, snatching wildly at his hands.

He smelled raspberries again.

They wrestled around for a moment until Draco started laughing. He meant it to be a mean, taunting laugh, but it sounded more like what it really meant that he was enjoying himself, having fun playing with her.

He hoped his laughter would goad Hermione even further, but instead, he looked at her face and saw that she was grinning. Their eyes met, and they both slowed their movements, realizing at the same time what an intimate position they were in. Neither of them blinked, and Draco was suddenly very aware of his breathing, of his whole body, really. Hermione had stopped grabbing for her book and was now resting her hands on his shoulders, kneeling on his lap.

She licked her lips nervously, and Draco's eyes were drawn to the movement. She was so close...

He stopped thinking. He was staring into her eyes avidly and noticing the beginnings of a tightening in his groin when she put a stop to it.

Hermione hastily slipped herself off his lap and straightened her clothes, looking flustered. She cleared her throat quickly and said, "Keep it."

She turned away and hurried out of their common room, no doubt to spend the day with her friends.

Draco was left, once again, to wonder what the hell had just happened... and to berate himself.

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Hermione hurried down the hall, not even noticing which direction she was headed in. She just had to get away from the scene that had just taken place.

What the hell had just happened?

One minute she had been irate with Draco for stealing her book, and the next, she had practically tackled him. What was even more confusing was that he had let her do it, no, encouraged her to do it! When she'd sat there on his lap, he hadn't called her filthy, or a Mudblood, or any other foul word. He hadn't pushed her off roughly, insisting that he would catch whatever disease she inherently carried. She was trying to make sense of the look he'd had in his eyes and just exactly why she'd found herself speechless when Harry and Ron came around the corner, obviously headed to the Great Hall for an early lunch.

"Hermione!" Ron greeted her enthusiastically. "How was your first night in the Dragon's Lair?"

"Shut up, Ron," she snapped. The last thing she needed right now was to be reminded that she shared living quarters with Draco Malfoy, especially after she'd practically just...

"Hey, Hermione," said Ginny brightly, joining them as they reached the doors to the Great Hall.

Hermione smiled back at Ginny, glad of the excuse to push Malfoy's fierce, grey eyes from her mind. The four of them took seats next to Neville at the table and dug into their food.

SB's Notes: Okay! First off, thanks go to my awesome friend and beta, Southern_Witch_69. :-D

Was there some fluff in this chapter? Yes. Will it happen again? Yes. Soon? *shakes head*

Read it twice if you need it to tide you over. Things are about to get crazy. lol

Reviews are cherished.

Walls and Bars

Ron seems to have the worst possible timing, Hermione is depressed, and Draco is confused.

Disclaimer: Not mine ... I wish.

Draco Malfoy strutted down the corridor moodily, brooding about the fact that he was feeling. He didn't know what he was feeling, exactly, but something... The last week with Granger constantly *there* had stirred him up more than he cared to admit. The thoughts running through his head couldn't have been more unwelcome. Here he was, wanting nothing more than to go on as he'd always been, believing people like Hermione Granger were members of another species, and one glance at that Mudblood witch in her sleeping attire threatened to rip him away from all of that. He wanted to hate her in peace, but all he could think about was the way his heart had sped up when Hermione had tackled him. He didn't know what it was with her... She was nothing special, he told himself.

Over the last week he'd found himself watching her way more than was strictly necessary. He kept telling himself that it was just a physical attraction that wasn't an idea he was particularly happy about, but it was better than considering what else his thoughts could mean... Still and he couldn't ignore this thought, much as he wanted to if it was only a physical attraction, why did he think about her when she and her *body* weren't around to attract him?

Classes would start today in about an hour. He could only hope that his work and duties would keep his traitorous brain occupied.

He pushed open the doors to the Great Hall almost violently and stalked over to the Slytherin table, not even glancing around. He plopped down next to Vincent Crabbe and stared straight ahead, his eyes narrowed.

"Hey, Draco," said Vince through a mouthful of toast.

Draco grunted in acknowledgement and continued staring. His mind was uncomfortably crowded.

"Hello, lover..." said a flirty voice from his other side.

He turned, scowling in annoyance, to find Pansy Parkinson's dark features staring avidly at him.

"I've told you not to call me that, Pansy..." Draco grumbled irritably. "Especially not in public." Honestly, talk about little girls playing dress up... Pansy couldn't pull off a seductive tone if someone was speaking *for* her.

"No one heard me," she whispered, grabbing hold of his arm. Gods, she was so obvious. Who would find that sexy?

Draco rolled his eyes and looked around the room out of desperation, anything to give him an excuse to ignore the twit who was manhandling him. His eyes fell upon the Gryffindor table, specifically on Granger and the morons she called friends. He scowled again, shaking Pansy's arm loose.

"We haven't seen you much this week, Drakie. How's your new dorm?" Pansy asked, her voice dripping with sugar. "I can't believe that Mudblood slag got Head Girl." She took on a vicious tone as she continued. "It must be torture to know she's that close to you all the time, huh?"

"Tell me about it..." Draco muttered grumpily.

"I know what you need," whispered Pansy, a little too close to Draco's ear for comfort. She slipped her fingers up his thigh, and just then, something happened that distracted him from whatever Pansy had planned.

abababababab

Hermione had been quite busy over the last six days. Though school hadn't officially started until today, there had been lot to do. She'd spent some time each evening making up patrol schedules and planning meetings for the Prefects as well as spending as much time as she could with her friends. She wasn't living in Gryffindor tower anymore, so she knew that once classes began, it would be harder to find a moment with them.

She hadn't even bothered to include Malfoy in her planning partly because she assumed he wouldn't be interested *in helping* her and partly because the looks he'd been giving her all week. The staring he'd been doing was rather unsettling. She'd opted to steer clear of him as much as possible, though she couldn't really avoid seeing him in the mornings... or in the evenings... or any time she stopped back by their quarters for something.

She didn't know what to think about what had happened on Tuesday. The whole experience had been, in a word, alarming. She thought it was best if she just pretended it hadn't happened since she didn't know how to explain it.

In all honesty, as busy as she'd been keeping herself, she hadn't really had much room to stew over the matter anyway. Her friends always had quite a bit to say about the Head Boy, though...

"Seriously, Hermione," Ron said that morning at breakfast, "is it okay up there?"

Hermione looked patiently at Ron. She didn't really want to talk to him about it, but she didn't want to be rude.

"Yeah, Ron. It's not a big deal. I can handle him."

"Yeah..." Ron muttered darkly. "Or he'll handle you. I don't like the way he's been staring at you. I think he has something planned." He shot a glare in the direction of the Slytherin table.

Hermione rolled her eyes, feeling uncomfortable. "Ron, really, I'm fine. We haven't even said more than a few words to each other all week. We're staying out of each other's way. I really don't want to talk about Malfoy anymore, all right?"

"I just I want you to be careful, okay?" Ron said tentatively.

Hermione sighed and decided to ignore him. Honestly, she knew he was probably right. Draco Malfoy was no one to be trifled with, but she didn't want to discuss it with Ron, especially considering how weird she was feeling about the whole subject at the moment.

"Hermione, are you listening to me?"

"Yes, I'm listening, Ron," she snapped.

Ron reached across the table and took hold of her hand.

Hermione jumped, startled. She looked at her hand almost perplexedly and wondered why it was in Ron's. Before she had time to think, Ron was leaning across the table and then...

She didn't even have time to react. Ron's lips were on hers, almost smothering her. She hadn't even closed her eyes. She was acutely aware of the dreadful silence that

had fallen around her.

A crash from the other side of the dining hall made her jump about a foot. She wondered vaguely what had caused the noise, but she was currently more concerned with what was going on in front of her. What the hell had just happened...?

Ron just kissed me. Why did Ron just kiss me? In front of everyone... Bugger.

Hermione's mouth fell open as she looked at Ron, wide eyed. Her face flushed red as supreme embarrassment warred with shock. She glanced around for a moment, feeling cornered, and found Harry and Ginny looking dumbfounded. Ginny recovered first.

"Ron!" she snapped.

Hermione found her voice and said, "Why did you do that?"

Ron looked just as surprised as the rest of them. "I don't know..." he breathed. "I just wanted to."

His explanation, or lack thereof, as it were, sent a thousand thoughts spinning through Hermione's mind, and for once, she couldn't think fast enough to sort them all out.

Ron kissed me... Why now?

Why not a year ago when I really wanted to?

Why in front of everyone?

I wish they would stop staring.

Please, stop staring.

Just... talk amongst yourselves.

Oh, God... this is a nightmare.

Hermione cleared her throat and quickly grabbed Ron's hand, pulling him up.

"Come on..." she muttered, not daring to look around.

Ron obeyed her, and the two of them left the Hall promptly, Hermione feeling like she couldn't breathe and couldn't move fast enough.

She walked swiftly down the hall and out the front doors to the grounds, then turned to Ron. Her first instinct was to be angry. She wanted to yell *What the hell was that?* but she controlled herself.

"Explain," she said in a succinct voice, surprisingly calmly.

Ron gaped at her for a moment, then said, "Hermione... I don't know why I did that."

Wrong answer.

If he was going to kiss her, *embarrass* her in front of the whole school, it had better be for a damned good reason. Not knowing was not good enough.

"You don't get to do that, Ron," she spat.

The truth was if the kiss hadn't been so rushed and surprising... and *public*, it might have been nice. A year ago she might not have cared where their first kiss was. Now, she wasn't even sure there should have been a kiss at all.

She'd spent a long time wondering what kissing Ron would be like several years, in fact but never in any of her daydreams had she pictured that he would just... come at her out of nowhere. It was all wrong. He'd ruined it by being... Ron.

"Do you know how long I've been waiting for that?" she said, glaring at him. "And you just blow it in the middle of the Great Hall with everyone staring."

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I didn't mean to... I just..." He came closer and said, "Let me try again."

She wanted to tell him to sod off, but part of her was curious. She wanted to know once and for all if there could ever be anything between her and Ron.

"Okay," she said after a long silence.

Ron didn't need to be told twice. He moved in and put his arms around her waist. She just stood there, waiting. He put his lips gently on hers, lightly testing her. When she didn't push him away, he tentatively probed her lips with the tip of his tongue. She opened her mouth, and he slipped his tongue inside and commenced exploring.

This was more like what she'd pictured gentle, not smothering like the first had been.

"I've wanted you for so long, Hermione," Ron whispered, then continued to kiss her, his hands moving up to her hair.

She'd wanted him for a long time, too, but did she want him now? She focused on the kiss, determined to find out.

It wasn't uncomfortable. In fact, it was the opposite. It was... comfortable. It felt normal, like anything else felt. She had expected to feel something different, something... more. She focused on her stomach and realized she didn't feel it flipping. She focused on her head and realized that she couldn't hear blood rushing in her ears. Her heart wasn't racing; she didn't feel short of breath; she didn't feel any tingling these were all things she thought she'd feel.

As it was, she felt... nothing... at all.

She pulled away and looked into Ron's eyes.

"So?" he asked breathlessly.

"Ron..." She looked at him and knew she couldn't lie. She didn't want to hurt him, but it would be worse to lead him on when she didn't return his feelings, as much as she would have liked to. "It just not... there."

Ron looked away quickly, his jaw clenching, and then he looked back at her with a plea in his eyes.

"Don't say that, Hermione. It is there," he insisted.

"Not for me," she said, knowing and hating that she was causing him pain. "I'm sorry. You're the best friend I've ever had. I don't want to hurt you."

Ron flinched as she said 'friend' and glared at the ground.

"Too late, Hermione."

He turned and walked away, and she resisted going after him. She wanted to comfort him, but she knew she was the wrong person to do it. Still, that didn't make hurting him or realizing that she would never again have romantic feelings for him any easier. She felt her eyes stinging and stared at the ground, her vision blurred.

Ron disappeared behind the doors, and Hermione walked slowly to the front steps of the school. She sank down heavily and began to cry.

I just lost my best friend.

abababababab

What the bloody fuck!

Draco stood up violently, knocking several dishes off the table in front of him. They crashed loudly to the floor, but Draco didn't notice. Pansy jumped aside in shock. No doubt she figured he was reacting to the hand she had been sliding up his thigh.

She moved to touch him again, but he shrugged her off. His attention was entirely on what was going on about twenty feet away at the Gryffindor table.

The Weasel had his foul lips on Granger.

Draco didn't even have time to berate himself for the inappropriate anger welling up inside of him. If he had been thinking clearly, he would have told himself to look away and stop thinking about the stupid Mudblood, that what she did was none of his business and shouldn't interest him, and that she wasn't worthy of his thoughts any more than Weasley was worthy of her lips... But, no such admonition found him; he was too busy gritting his teeth and glowering.

Push him off... Slap his ugly face! he silently commanded, no, begged.

Granger pulled away, looking shocked, and a triumphant smile formed on Draco's face. It all happened so fast... Just as he felt a little calm returning to him, he saw Granger take the Weasel's hand. His face tightened at this and quickly turned into a scowl as Granger stood up and walked out of the hall, pulling Weasley after her.

Draco couldn't stop himself he followed. He walked out the doors of the Great Hall and saw Weasley disappear out the front doors of the school. He felt his feet moving and wondered what in hell had control over him.

He stopped in front of the window next to the door and watched as Weasley and Granger argued. Draco was pleased to see that she was telling him off. Then, very suddenly, Weasley kissed her again, and she didn't push him away this time... or slap him, as Draco would have preferred. He felt blood rush to his face in inexplicable fury.

His eyes narrowed contemptuously, but then he turned and walked away, wringing his hands in disgust at himself and the situation.

What the hell was wrong with him? Following a Mudblood? *Wanting* a Mudblood, if that was what you could call it? Being *jealous* of someone else for kissing her? And not just *any* Mudblood. *Granger. Hermione fucking Granger.*

He *hated* Hermione Granger.

He hated everything about her from her bushy hair to the way her hand automatically shot into the air like a fucking roman candle every time she was asked a question. He hated the way she walked. He hated that she wasn't afraid of him. He hated her sidekicks, and he hated himself for forgetting all those things.

And, on top of all that, she was snogging Ron Weasley.

Weasley! In public!

Well, they deserved each other. The Mudblood and Blood Traitor. Draco scoffed loudly, shaking his head.

As he strode down the hall and toward his first class, the walls that had surrounded Draco Malfoy for seventeen years rebuilt themselves, stronger than ever. The bars that he had situated to protect himself snapped back into place. He was a stone wall. He always had been, and he always would be.

No Mudblood girl was going to change that, no matter how much her eyes sparkled when she laughed. In that instant, he despised Hermione Granger for making him forget it and himself for letting her, even for a moment.

SB's Notes: Okay! Here we are again. You know, of course, that a healthy dose of angst is coming up. I hope you liked this chapter (as much as it's possible to *like* Ron kissing Hermione), and I hope you enjoy the angsty goodness to come!

Thanks to SW69 for her betaing skills. SW has mad game! ;)

Reviews are appreciated!

The Weight of One Word

Chapter 4 of 11

Draco and Hermione are paired together in Transfiguration, and Draco takes the opportunity to pick a fight. Hermione isn't having it.

Disclaimer: I'm afraid I don't own Harry Potter. This is pity since I'd love to take his Potions master for a weekend... or more.

Thanks go to Southern_Witch_69 for beta reading this for me.

Hermione sat on the front steps of the castle and cried for several minutes before finally realizing she needed to get to class. In perfect Hermione form, she straightened up and forced herself to gain control of her emotions. It wouldn't do for anyone to see the Head Girl crying. She wiped tears from her face and put on a solid expression. She took a few deep breaths. The only signs left that might give her away were her puffy eyes and scratchy voice. She hoped no one would look closely.

She walked back into the Great Hall and grabbed her book bag, which was still sitting on the bench where she'd left it. A few minutes later, she arrived at the door to her first class of the year, Advanced Transfiguration, and went to her seat. She plopped down next to Harry and sighed quietly, staring straight ahead in the hopes that nobody would notice her. Harry shifted next to her with a worried expression on his face, but she pretended not to notice. She could tell, just from her peripheral vision and how well she knew him, that he wanted her to tell him what was wrong, but knew better than to ask while she was so obviously ignoring him. After a few minutes of this, Harry gave up and began staring at the door. Ron still hadn't shown up.

As it turned out, Ron didn't show up at all. Hermione didn't know what to do about him. Part of her wanted to scream at him and tell him how stupid he was for making such a mess of things, and part of her wanted to run to him and cry in his arms until he understood. It was such a disaster...

Hermione stared at her hands and felt tears welling up in her eyes again. It stung horribly, and the more she tried to fight them, the harder it became. Her face remained expressionless as tears spilled over her lower lids and down her face. She kept her breathing even and quiet nobody had to see this.

"Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall's stern voice as she looked at Hermione and noticed that her head was down. The Transfiguration teacher knew that Hermione would normally already have been copying the instructions on the board.

Hermione looked up, startled.

When McGonagall saw Hermione's tear-streaked face, a look of concern swept over her.

"Are you all right, Miss Granger?"

Gods, how awful. This was all she needed attention drawn to her.

"I'm fine," she answered tonelessly. She heard a rasp in her voice and hoped nobody else had. She reached up and wiped as many tears from her face as she could in one motion and stared straight ahead. For the second time in the last hour, she felt a silence around her and wished someone would fill it.

Harry came to her rescue.

"So, Professor, what's in store for us this year?"

McGonagall followed his lead and said, "This year is going to be very difficult, Mr. Potter. I can only hope that all of you are up to it." McGonagall looked the room over, as though appraising the group. "I'll be pairing you up this year. Most of your assignments will involve human transfiguration, and obviously, it's safer to have a partner."

At this, the rest of the class began to talk amongst themselves quietly, no doubt discussing why exactly having a partner would be 'safer.'

Hermione was glad the silence was broken. She let out a shaky sigh that was only noticed by Harry.

"That will be quite enough talking," said Professor McGonagall shortly.

The class fell silent.

"This year the partnerships will be as follows" She began to read names in pairs off a parchment.

"Weasley Parkinson."

An indignant female scoff was heard from the back of the classroom, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Thomas Goyle." More scoffing.

"Finnegan Bullstrode"

"Patil Longbottom"

"Brown Crabbe"

"Zabini Potter"

That left...

"Granger Malfoy."

Hermione froze.

Oh, God... Continuing to avoid the Head Boy would probably prove difficult with him as her partner. This was all she needed...

She turned around and fixed her eyes on Malfoy, who looked absolutely poisonous. He gave a look that said 'Drop dead,' and she returned it.

She faced forward again and slumped in her seat. Harry patted her on the back and took this opportunity to ask her where Ron was.

She told him what had happened, leaving out the finer details and finished by saying, "Will you talk to him, Harry? He's really upset, and I don't know what to do."

"Don't worry about it, Hermione. He'll get over it."

Hermione glared at him. "Yeah, Harry, he'll get over it eventually. I'm worried about him *now*. Way to be sensitive."

Harry looked affronted and opened his mouth to defend himself but was cut off by McGonagall before he could get anything out.

"Right then," barked Professor McGonagall, "pair up!"

Hermione didn't think there was anything in world she'd rather *do*ess.

She sighed again and stood up. Her affronting words forgotten, Harry gave her another sympathetic look and said, "Good luck."

"You too..." she mumbled as she walked to the back of the room towards Malfoy, resigned to the worst.

abababababab

Draco settled himself down in the back of the room with his arms crossed and his face set in a scowl.

"What's with you?" Zabini asked in a blank tone.

"Piss off, Blaise," he muttered irritably.

He stared straight ahead for several long minutes, waiting for the bell to ring and class to begin. His mind kept replaying the image of Granger and Weasley kissing over and over, and he couldn't stop it. After a while, the door opened, and Granger walked in. Draco looked away quickly and examined his fingernails.

Stupid Mudblood and her precious *friends*... She was probably up there daydreaming about Weasley's tongue in her mouth. Now that was a disgusting thought...

"Miss Granger."

Draco's head snapped up at the sound of their professor's stern voice. He noticed Hermione's did the same, then quickly looked away again.

"Are you all right?"

Why the hell was McGonagall asking that? Of course she was all right; she and her dear Weasel had just been snogging!

"I'm fine," he heard Hermione answer, the slight hitch in her voice giving her away.

His body stiffened. She'd been crying. He could hear it. Why had she been crying? Had he heard right? Pansy sniggered next to him; she'd obviously noticed, too.

Several minutes went by. Draco listened halfheartedly to what McGonagall was saying about pairs, trying hard not to think about Granger or what reason she could have for crying, especially after that lovely little *scene* he'd just been witness to. He forced the thoughts away, making himself focus on his teacher instead. He wondered vaguely who his partner would be, and then she began to read off the names.

He listened as Pansy's snigger turned into an outraged scoff when it was announced that she would be the Weasel's partner. Draco couldn't blame her.

More names...

More names.

And then...

"Granger Malfoy." *Of course.*

He felt loathing well up inside him, and then her eyes met his. He did his very best not to notice how red and puffy they were as he shot daggers at her.

She turned away, and he bit hard on his lip.

"I'm sorry, Draco," purred Pansy. "I thought having Weasley for a partner was bad, but you have it much worse. I'll make it better later."

"Shut up, Parkinson," he said, irritated. Merlin, would the bitch ever let it go? One shag the year before to prove a point, and suddenly she was his personal sexual sycophant...

"Pair up."

He looked up and saw Hermione walking towards him. Good. At least she had the sense to know he wasn't going to budge an inch to get any closer to her. At least she knew who was in control here.

Pansy got up and headed towards the teacher's desk. Draco could only assume this was to complain about Weasley's truancy... and Weasley in general.

Hermione sunk down heavily next to him into Pansy's vacated seat, glowering at nothing in particular and looking distracted. She looked how he felt, but all be damned if he would let her know he could relate; she was the cause of his current problems after all.

"Looks like this is your lucky day, Granger," Draco jeered. "It's not every day you have a legitimate excuse to get that filthy skin this close to mine."

She turned and glared at him. "You didn't seem to mind my skin so much when I was kneeling on top of you last week."

That was below the belt.

"Fuck you, Granger. You don't know anything," he spat nastily. "You are nothing but an ugly, Mudblood slag, and if you ever touch me like that again, I will hurt you."

"Is that supposed to scare me, Ferret Boy?" she shot back, not at all in the mood to put up with him. "You keep your hands off me and my possessions, or you'll see just how ugly I can get."

Damn her. Why wouldn't she just cower?

But she did nothing of the sort. Instead, she continued her verbal assault.

"... Though, I'm quite at a loss as to why you would want my book at all. Aside from it being written by a 'filthy Muggle' and belonging to an 'ugly, Mudblood slag,' I didn't know you knew how to read," she ridiculed.

"Ooh, that was clever, Granger. Should I give you an award for wittiest quip of the hour? Get off your high horse," he scoffed. "You think you're better than me? The blood in my veins is worth a thousand times more than yours."

He glared at her, and she had the audacity to laugh at him. It was infuriating.

"Oh, Lord. Here we go with the pureblood thing again," she said, throwing her hands into the air exasperatedly. "Get over yourself, Malfoy. You may have noticed that your 'pure' blood didn't earn you better marks than mine. Your new bedroom is not bigger than mine. There is nothing special about you. The only thing you have that I don't is a crush on yourself."

Draco scoffed again. "I have no doubt that I could fit twelve of your parents' house into my Manor, Granger."

"I don't even know how you fit your *ego* into your 'Manor,'" she said, laughing derisively.

Merlin, he hated her.

"As much as I hate to break up this display of tender comradeship, I would appreciate it if the two of you would get on with today's assignment," McGonagall said tartly from

above them.

"Sorry, Professor..." mumbled Granger.

Draco kept his mouth shut until she was gone and then turned again on Hermione, expecting her to be glaring back fiercely, ready to pick up where they'd left off.

She wasn't. She was staring at the blackboard at the front of the class, copying down their assignment.

"Okay..." she mumbled to herself, tracing the wand movements she would need to make in the air.

Draco just stared at her. How dare she ignore him when he wanted to wring her annoying neck?

After a moment, he turned and read the instructions, too. Fine. If she wanted to play the good girl...

Not to be left behind and made to look like a slacker, Draco read the board, skimming quickly; it said they were to practice on each other. Draco grinned evilly. He was going to have an excuse to point his wand at Granger... and if something went wrong, he could call it an accident.

He stood and turned to face her. She looked up, almost daring him to make a move toward her.

"Well, if we're practicing on each other..." he said wickedly, smirking, "I'll go first." He reached for his wand.

"Don't," she snapped menacingly.

There was an astounding amount of weight in that one word when she said it. She stood and faced him, looking fiercely into his eyes.

"I don't have the time or energy to waste on any more games with you. If you think I'm going to stand here and let you hex me, you have another thing coming. I've said it twice now, and I'm going to say it one more time. You stay the *fuck* away from me, Draco Malfoy."

Draco's mouth snapped shut as he watched her turn her back on him. She cast the assigned spell on herself, and in one try, it was perfect. McGonagall had seen her do it and gave her a proud smile.

Draco felt physically sick.

As for Hermione, class wasn't over, but she'd had enough.

"Professor, I'd like to go get a potion for my headache. May I go to the hospital wing?"

"I don't see why not, Miss Granger, since you've completed the assignment."

"Thank you, Professor."

McGonagall gave her a worried, sympathetic look as she slung her bag over her shoulder and walked out of the classroom without so much as a backward glance.

Draco was left with a feeling of turmoil that he didn't even know how to begin to sort out.

SB's Notes: So that was four. I hope it lived up to the promised angst, but if not, there is more to come!

Thanks for reading. :-)

Losing Control

Chapter 5 of 11

Hermione's having a hard day all around, and Draco has more than a few problems with her attitude.

Disclaimer: I am not J.K.R. and do not make any sort of profit from playing with her characters other than the enjoyment it brings me...and the reviews.

Thanks go to Southern_Witch_69 for beta reading.

The rest of the day passed by uneventfully for Draco. Every time he saw Hermione, she looked like she had a fire burning inside her. She stormed about the castle with an attitude that plainly dared someone to get in her way. Draco had a feeling there was more going on with her than just the hatred she obviously felt towards him...not that he cared.

"So, where did you disappear to during breakfast?" asked Blaise casually over dinner.

"That's none of your business, Zabini," Draco replied conversationally.

"You just sort of... jumped out of your seat. It looked like you'd been bitten by something."

"Sod off," Draco said, scowling.

"God, Draco, what's with you? I'm was just asking..." Blaise muttered, obviously offended. Even Draco wasn't usually this rude.

"Well, don't," he said.

"Fine..." Blaise said with a sigh. "Well, at any rate, when are you going to call a Prefects' meeting? We all figured we'd meet at least once before classes started, but you never said anything."

Draco groaned. He'd completely forgotten. It annoyed him very much that the fact that he was Head Boy could slip his mind even for a second. It was all Granger's fault, he thought furiously. If she hadn't been... If she hadn't...wasn't... He sighed. Despising her was taking a lot of energy. He needed to think about his duties...but, like everything else, that led back to Granger. Calling a meeting with the Prefects was mandatory, but it would mean he had to speak to her, *work* with her.

"Oh," Blaise said...he had just been handed a slip of paper by a hurried-looking fourth year..."looks like Granger beat you to it."

"*What?*" Draco hissed, yanking the paper out of Blaise's hands.

The first Prefects' meeting of this year will be held in classroom twenty-four tomorrow at 8:30 P.M.

Hermione J. Granger

Head Girl

She'd even signed her bloody middle initial. Who the fuck did she think she was?

That is it.

Draco shoved the bench back violently and marched over to the Gryffindor table, fuming.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking," Hermione was saying to Ginny Weasley. "I just don't know how to put it into wor"

"Granger!" growled Draco.

"Sod off, Malfoy," she said coldly, not even looking up. She pressed on with her conversation, ignoring him completely. "Into words. I don't even know how to sort it all"

This was going to end...*now*.

"Get up, Granger," Draco ordered maliciously, rolling his eyes, barely stopping himself from reaching forward a yanking her up by the collar.

He didn't have to. Hermione pursed her lips and got up from the table silently. Without a word, she walked out into the corridor. He followed her, and she turned to face him when they were out of earshot from the rest of the school's population.

"What do you want, Ferret Boy?" she said, her tone frosty and her arms crossed.

"Clever," he said with a sneer. "That's two for you today. Should I be writing them down?" He glowered snidely at her and went on. "You called a Prefects' meeting...without consulting me."

"So?" she said. "What's the problem?"

"The problem, Granger," he said through gritted teeth, "is that I'm Head Boy."

"Yes, that is a problem, isn't it?" she said with a smirk.

"Listen, you"

"Oh, come on, Malfoy. What's the big deal? I would have thought it would be a load off your shoulders." There was an annoying smile playing around her mouth.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" he spat.

She tapped her foot impatiently. "It means you don't have to worry your little head about it. It means that you get to go off and play with your friends. Don't worry, Malfoy. I wasn't going to actually make you do any *work*. Truth be told, I wasn't expecting much from you at all. Really, all you have to do is show up and look pretty." Her tone was so condescending it was making him actually see red.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Fuck you, Granger." She was mocking him, treating him like a child. He wanted to choke her with her own bushy hair. "I can handle ten times what you can."

"Uh huh, that'll be the pureblood in you, I suppose," she said dryly. "It must give you strength the likes of which the rest of us can only dream. Tell me; what's it like to be superhuman, Malfoy? Do you think if I had blood like yours, I could get my head to blow up as big as yours has? Such power..." she said in mock awe, "I can only imagine."

He breathed in through his nose, more livid than ever.

"Listen, you bitch. If you think I'm going to just 'sit this one out,' you are sorely mistaken. I've been waiting for this for a long time, and there is no way in hell I'm going to let you elbow me out."

Hermione sighed. "Fine. You do whatever you want," she said, humoring him. "You can do as much as you like. But, Malfoy, if it gets to be too much for you to handle or, Merlin forbid, your superhuman, pureblood strength fails you, you be sure to let me know, and I'll take care of it." Her voice was dripping in mock concern. He wanted to choke her.

She gave him one final condescending smirk before turning and walking back into the Great Hall, leaving him, once again, to glare at her head and wish her a most painful death.

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She hated him. She hated him so much it made her blood boil to look at him. He opened his mouth, and she wanted to shove the largest, most foul tasting object she could think of down his throat to shut him up. Although, she had to admit, making fun of him and watching his face contort in fury was amazingly satisfying.

A part of her felt slightly guilty. As much as she detested him, she knew she was taking her frustration of her situation with Ron out on Malfoy. That was not something she felt good about doing. It was immature and mean, but it was easy. And he did deserve it. He was an arrogant, bigoted prick.

Any confusion she had felt about her feelings toward him had been erased this morning when he'd called her an ugly, Mudblood slag. It was typical Malfoy; she should have expected it. She hadn't been happy about partnering with him in Transfiguration simply because she hadn't wanted to deal with him on top of what was happening with Ron, but when he'd opened his mouth and verbally attacked her for no other reason than to get her angry, she'd had enough. Draco Malfoy was never going to change, and she wasn't go to waste any time or energy holding her breath.

She slid back into her seat and began to pick up where she had left off in her conversation with Ginny, as though nothing had happened.

"Er, what was that about?" Ginny asked.

"Nothing. Just Malfoy being Malfoy. I took care of it."

"Oh, okay," Ginny said, shrugging her shoulders. "So, anyway..."

Hermione had expected Ginny to be angry with her when she told her about what had happened with Ron, but surprisingly she had been very understanding. It felt good to know she had at least one friend in the Weasley family.

"Where is he anyway?" she asked. "I haven't seen him since... you know. Have you talked to him?"

"Not really. I saw him after classes in the common room. He was just sort of sitting there staring at nothing. I asked him what was wrong, and he said he didn't want to talk about it. I asked Harry if he knew, and he said I should just ask you. So I figured something must have happened."

Hermione sighed. "I've really hurt him, Ginny," she said sadly. "I don't know how we'll be friends after this. At least, not the way we always have been."

"Hermione," Ginny said, shaking her head patiently, "Ron loves you."

Hermione dropped her eyes, feeling guilty.

"No. I mean...what Ron feels for you goes deeper than all this. It's not just romance. His romantic feelings for you come and go. They probably always will. But underneath all that, he loves you like he loves me...as a friend and as a sister. He knows you. He'd do anything for you just because you're you," Ginny explained. "This could never be the end of your friendship. You guys, the three of you, have been through everything together. Nothing will change that. Ron just needs time to realize it."

Hermione sighed again and nodded her head. "I know. You're right, and you know I love him, too...just... not the way he wants me to."

"He doesn't know what he wants," Ginny said. "Just give him time. This will blow over."

"I hope you're right..." Hermione muttered.

"She is right," said Harry from beside her. "We're family, Hermione." Hermione turned to him, startled. She hadn't even been aware he was listening.

Hermione smiled at him in a sad but hopeful way. He scooted closer to her in an attempt to put a comforting arm around her, and she let him, wrapping her arms around him in a friendly hug. He was right. They were both right. They were family. Maybe that was why it was hurting so much. She felt herself begin to cry again. She felt stupid and began to pull away from Harry, but he put his arms around her and pulled her tighter against him, letting her cry. She just let it all out...right there in the middle of the Great Hall, not noticing or caring who was watching. A few minutes later, Harry's shirt was soaked, but she felt a lot better.

"I'm sorry, Harry..." she muttered sheepishly.

"Don't be," he said. "I'll always be here for you, you know."

"I will, too," said Ginny. "We both will, and I know Ron will, too."

Hermione smiled warmly, wiping her eyes and sniffing. "Thanks," she whispered.

She was lucky to have such friends, and she knew it.

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Draco stood there in the hall, brooding for a while, then finally decided that he was hungry and that the bitch they had the nerve to call "Head Girl" wasn't going to stop him from finishing his meal. He could picture it now... Granger, sitting at her table, having a good laugh at his expense with her wonderful posse. She was probably recounting each little thing she'd said to him, entertaining the whole Gryffindor table.

Well, no matter. She could say whatever she wanted. She'd get hers eventually. He strode forward and pushed open the doors swiftly, glancing, to confirm his suspicions, at the Gryffindor table.

Oh, for Fuck's sake!

Granger was sitting there all right, but she wasn't regaling her House with her cleverness; she was sobbing on Harry-goddamned-Potter's shoulder. They had their arms wrapped around each other like they were holding on for dear life. Ginny Weasley was watching them and *smiling*. What was wrong with her? What kind of moron would be smiling at their boyfriend winding himself like a spider monkey around another girl? What the hell was wrong with *all* of them? And where was Weasley? Shouldn't he be here to join in on the love? Something about the way she and Potter were holding each other was making his blood boil.

First Weasley, now Potter?

Draco felt absolutely sick now. Any appetite he'd had was gone. He turned and walked in the other direction as quickly as possible. Before long, he was back in his common room, pacing back and forth, fuming.

What business did Granger have blubbing all over the place like that, showing weakness? As much as he hated to admit it, he couldn't say the things he wanted to say to her while she was crying.

He couldn't stop it from playing in his head, over and over again: her eyes shut tightly in pain, her face soaked in tears, her body shaking against Potter's body... She trusted Potter. Nobody had ever trusted Draco that way, and he'd never trusted anyone else. If he'd ever tried to hug his father like that, he would have gotten backhanded and called a ponce. The kind of trust it would take for a person to literally put their self in someone's arms... Nobody deserved that kind of trust, he thought, not even Saint Potter.

Draco wondered bitterly what it would be like to have someone trust him with his or her life...to have someone trust him enough to sob on his shoulder, to lay himself bare before him. It would never happen, and he didn't want it to, he thought. Too much baggage involved.

He sat down in the winged-back chair he'd used throughout the week and rubbed his temples.

He'd learned a long time ago that showing his pain to another person only brought more pain, that people will use whatever weapon another person gives them. He didn't like feeling. He didn't like to feel raw. It meant he was weak and that he was opening himself up for an attack from someone who would use his weakness against him. He hated feeling out of control, and that was what showing emotion was...giving up control, giving it to someone else.

He hated Hermione for being able to show emotion and still be in control, for having friends who didn't use her feelings against her, didn't think about what way they could be used to their best advantage. It was something he'd never learned or had for himself...friends like that. He hated her for being whole while he was broken and empty. He hated her for trusting other people, something he just couldn't do.

Draco finally sat down and stared ahead. The light in the room was dimming as the sun went down, but he didn't move. He just looked ahead, remembering things he didn't want to remember, lessons he'd learned the hard way. After some time, his thoughts cleared enough for him to notice how dark the room had become. He reached over and flipped on the lamp. He watched as the flame grew until the room was glowing again.

He looked to the side and saw Hermione's book, *Dune*. He stared at it for a long time, having a silent battle with it.

He was about to give into temptation when the portrait swung open and Granger climbed through. He looked at her, and it was still obvious she'd been crying, though she no longer was.

"What's the matter, Granger?" he taunted. "Wrong time of the month?"

Her nostrils flared as she stalked by him to go to her room, but she didn't answer.

"It must be," he went on, rising out of his chair. "Why else would Little Miss Perfect break down in front of the whole school?"

Her hand was on the doorknob when he reached her, looming above her and holding her door closed with a strong arm.

"Leave me alone, Malfoy," she said. "I believe I told you to stay out of my way."

"I'm talking to you," he said with a mocking sneer. "Didn't your filthy mother teach you any manners?"

She turned around and pushed hard against his chest to get him out of her way. "Is that supposed to be an insult, Malfoy? You don't know anything about me, so calling my mother filthy and assuming things about my upbringing only shows you to be bigoted and ignorant."

"Oh, but I know plenty about you," he said, leaning back against the wall as though she'd never pushed him.

"No, you don't."

"Yes, and do you know I'm beginning to think you're mental as well as filthy?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'd ask how you came to that conclusion, but I really don't care." She made to open her door again, but he interrupted her once more.

"I think you do care, and it's quite simple. This morning, the entire school saw you sucking face with Weasley, and then half an hour later, you walk into Transfiguration in tears. Oh, yes, I saw that. You sniveling all over the place is hard to miss. Then, at dinner, you leave me in the hall, and I walk back in two minutes later to see you sobbing all over Potter's shoulder...with no Weasel in sight... except for Potter's girlfriend, who apparently doesn't have a problem with sharing her boyfriend with you.

"They have potions for people like you, Granger."

"Are you quite finished?" she asked, her eyes narrowed in distaste.

He gave her a nasty smirk in return.

"Good. I've got work to do, and then I'm going to bed. Why I was crying is none of your business, and even if it were, I wouldn't expect you to understand. And for your information, Ginny Weasley is a very good friend to me, as is Harry, and no, she doesn't have a problem with Harry giving me his support. Why would she? That's what friends are for. If we need a potion for being crazy, so be it. I wouldn't give up my friends for anything."

Her tone was firm and unyielding as she finished. "Goodnight, Malfoy. I sincerely hope I don't have to put a hex on my door to keep you out. And if you are as *capable* of pulling your weight as you claim to be, you'd better be ready for the Prefects' meeting tomorrow night."

Without further ado, she entered her bedroom and closed the door softly behind her. Draco was left to stare at the floor and to try, in vain, not to think about what she'd said.

That's what friends are for.

Not his friends. If he cried in front of them...not that he ever really cried...they would never let him forget it, let alone lend any sort of support...

Granger had something very rare, and Draco wondered if she even knew it.

Hours later, he left the study in favor of getting some sleep, only to lie there restlessly for more hours and finally fall into fitful dreams of things he would have been happy to forget forever.

SB's Notes: This chapter took a lot more revising than the last ones; that's why it took so long. Thanks for being patient, and I'll have the next up in a few days!

The Man In Charge

Chapter 6 of 11

A meeting occurs. How will Draco handle his responsibility? Has he really stepped up, or is it all for show?

Disclaimer: I acknowledge that these characters and this world do not belong to me, and I assure that I am making no profit by their use.

Huge thanks go to my beta and buddy, Southern_Witch_69, for her mad beta skills.

Draco, wanting there to be no mistakes about who was in charge and how prepared he was, showed up in classroom twenty-four for the Prefects' meeting half an hour early. He recalled with clarity the condescending tone of Granger's voice in the entrance hall the previous night. The bitch thought she could elbow him out? Well, he'd show her.

He'd spent hours after lessons today catching himself up on his duties and writing up orders for the Prefects. He had perfectly organized schedules and rulebooks for each Prefect, and he was damned proud of them. He'd eat his own hat if Granger had put half as much work into anything she had cooked up for this meeting.

The first thing he did after he'd stepped inside the empty classroom was cast a spell to prop the door open. He glanced at the clock on the wall and noted that it was 8:02. That left him plenty of time. Looking around room, he counted the small tables and mentally calculated how many he would need to use to transfigure a table big enough for all the Prefects plus himself and the harpy to sit around. Twenty-four Prefects (two from each house, each year) plus a Head Boy and Girl... He pushed sixteen desks

together and transfigured them into one long table, which left more than enough space for thirteen chairs on each long side and one at each end. He levitated twenty-six chairs into place and Vanished the unneeded furniture. Perfect.

Next, he set the place tags he'd made up at pre-determined intervals around the table. He had already decided who would sit next to whom, making sure that nobody sat next to another person from his or her own house. After that, he sat himself down at his end of the table (that was another benefit to his seating system; he had assigned his own chair as far away from Granger's as was possible) and divided his schedules and rulebooks into two piles.

McGonagall's instruction-slash-rulebook had actually proven useful once he'd read it thoroughly. She had put an emphasis on inter-house unity, instructing him and Granger to ensure that Prefects of different houses intermingled, so Draco had done exactly that. He thought it was rather pointless, but at least no one...least of all Granger...could accuse him of not doing his job right.

When he had his papers organized, he glanced at the clock again...8:16. Excellent. He doubted that Granger would take much longer to arrive. After all, the know-it-all would want to be there early...in enough time to establish authority. Too bad for her that he had beat her to it, Draco thought with malicious smile.

Sure enough, at 8:17, the Head Girl appeared in the doorway, carrying an armful of papers. He watched with a spiteful sort of pleasure as her eyes widened when she took in the state of the room. Her gaze finally came to rest on him, and he smirked, satisfied at her look of disbelief.

"Evening, Granger. Nice of you to finally show up."

"I'm early, Malfoy," she snapped. "And what have you done to this room?"

"Oh, nothing much," he said. "Just prepared it for the meeting."

She gave him a snide non-smile. "Assigned seating? Isn't that a little much?"

"Not at all. It was no trouble. I'm sure it would have been a bit much for you, but don't worry, Granger. I've handled everything."

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Just that you won't have to do much of anything tonight." His lips twisted into a wicked smirk. "No need to worry your bushy little head about it. In fact, I wasn't actually expecting much from you at all," he said, throwing her earlier words back at her. "I'd say that all you have to do is show up and look pretty, but we both know that's beyond your abilities."

Granger's mouth dropped open for a moment before she closed it and glared at him. She marched over to her seat and sat down stiffly, her body facing him, head down, as she began to sort her own stacks of paper. After a few minutes, he could tell that she was no longer doing any organizing and was just shifting her hands around to avoid having to pay any attention to him. That suited him just fine.

He leaned back in his chair, his arms behind his head, and waited. Minutes later, the first of the Prefects arrived and looked around only for a moment before finding their places and sitting down. The rest follow suit, and at precisely 8:29, every seat was filled, and Draco stood, took out his wand, and closed the door with a spell.

He heard Granger draw in a breath to speak, but he wasn't going to allow that.

"Welcome, everyone, to our first meeting of the year. In case any of you don't know me, unlikely as that may be, I'm Draco Malfoy, Head Boy this year." He paused, giving Granger enough time to introduce herself, but a glance at her showed her gaping at him in disbelief again, so he rolled his eyes and did it for her. "At the other end of the table is Hermione Granger, Head Girl." He didn't bother to keep the dislike out of his tone, and it was enough to make Granger close her mouth and glare at him again.

"I'll start off by saying that I take my position seriously and expect the same from all of you. Any deviance from the rules I set will be dealt with by me personally."

"Just hold on, Mal..."

"Those rules are as follows."

"You don't have any right to set rules without tal..."

"First, there will be no fighting amongst yourselves. The Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress have made it clear that they wish to see inter-house cooperation this year." Draco had his own thoughts about that, but he kept them to himself. "You as Prefects will be examples to the whole school of this. Any disagreements are to be handled privately or brought to me to be settled. If this rule is not followed, I will take points from the both of the houses in question and report both Prefects to Professor McGonagall to be given detention. With how seriously she is pushing this inter-house unity, I doubt any punishment she would give would be light. Keep that in mind before you're caught fighting."

He gazed coolly around the room for a moment to let that rule sink in, and not even Granger had anything to say about it.

"Rule number two: You will all show up for your assigned patrols on time and dressed properly in your uniform robes and with your Prefect badges showing. If you are ill or have a legitimate excuse to be absent from your duties, it will be noted. Any unexplained absence will result in loss of points and a referral to McGonagall for further action. I will explain the patrol schedule in a moment, but first, rule number three.

"What I say goes. The Headmaster has given me this position, and I have authority to do as I see fit in regards to you Prefects. Within reason," he added with a smirk. "That means my rules apply, and it is my prerogative to make more rules if I think they are needed. If any of you have a problem with that, I'm happy to discuss it."

He looked at the faces around the room and noticed that several people did in fact have a problem with it...Ron Weasley was looking absolutely murderous...but nobody spoke up, so Draco considered it done with.

"Any questions?"

He didn't actually expect anyone to have the courage to say anything, so when a small girl...she had to be a fifth-year...said, "Yes, I have a question. I know we are allowed to take points from other students, but is there a limit to how many we can take?"

It was a reasonable question, so Draco answered it. "Yes," he glanced at her name tag, "Miss Averette, there is a limit of ten points per student, per offense. That means you may take no more than ten points from a student per infraction. It also means that if two Prefects catch a student out after hours, the student in question can lose a maximum of ten points, not ten points taken by each Prefect who catches him, but ten points total. Also, the points you each take and for what reason are automatically recorded and will be reviewed at the end of each month by myself. If I deem any reason to be invalid, it is within my rights to restore the points. Clear?"

There were nods around the table.

"Actually," he said, "that policy, and all others that you will need to know, is listed in this rulebook. I have a copy for all of you." The 'rulebooks' were actually several sheets of paper held together by a clasp. He'd written one copy and used a duplication spell to make the others. He passed a stack down each side of the table, and soon everyone, including the Head Girl, had one in their hands.

"I'll give you all about ten minutes to read through your books, and then I'll assign schedules and other duties."

There was a rustling of papers, and Draco was immensely pleased that his authority was being taken seriously. He couldn't help smiling as he looked around and saw that with two exceptions...Weasley, who was clenching his jaw and giving Draco a death glare, and Granger, who looked troubled as she bit her lip...everyone was reading their

rulebook. It was incredibly vindicating after the way Granger had treated him.

He ignored both of them, and he especially ignored Weasley's glare, reminding himself that the git would be held responsible for the information in the book whether he read it or not, so it was actually better for Draco if he didn't read it since that would give him something to use against Weasley later on. He was just settling in to wait for ten minutes when Granger cleared her throat and said, "A word, Malfoy."

He raised a superior eyebrow to her, but said nothing. If she had something to say, she could say it.

"In the corridor, now," she said through clenched teeth. He appeared to consider for a moment and then rolled his eyes and stood. He walked around the table and out the door without looking back to see if she was following. He knew she was.

In the corridor, he turned around as Granger closed the door behind her.

"Yes?" he said.

She pursed her lips and tapped her foot as she appeared to struggle with what to say.

Inwardly, he was more pleased than he could have said to have turned the tables on her, but outwardly, he didn't show anything but practiced supremacy.

There was a long silence as neither said anything, and Granger appeared to become more and more annoyed. Finally, she capitulated with a theatric sigh. "All right. You've made your point. Are you happy?"

Draco smirked. "What point would that be?"

She sighed again. He could tell what it was costing her to play his game, and he couldn't have been happier about it.

"I get it, all right? I shouldn't have tried to push you out. I can't say I want to work with you...you're a complete prat," Draco frowned at this, "but I don't exactly have a choice. And neither do you. You can't get rid of me any more than I can get rid of you."

"Are you so sure about that?" he asked. It seemed to him that he'd done a pretty good job on his own so far. He saw no reason for that to change.

"This is supposed to be a two-person job, Malfoy."

"Oh, so *now* it's a two-person job, now that *you* are the one being elbowed out... I see."

"I get it. I shouldn't have tried to elbow you out. I already said that. What more do you want?"

"I want you to stay out of my way. I did everything on my own today, and it's turning out splendidly. I don't need you, and since we want nothing to do with each other, I see no reason why things shouldn't stay this way."

There was a long silence as Granger digested his words.

"I'll go to McGonagall," she finally said flatly.

"Not above squealing, I see."

"Not in the least."

He gave a sigh of his own. "Fine. We can take turns making up the Prefect schedules."

"What else?"

"What do you mean 'what else'?"

"I can think of several things. You made that high and mighty speech in there about your authority without mentioning me. I think I should have some say in the rules."

"You don't need to have a say," he asserted.

"Mal..."

"You don't. I didn't make any rules that are unreasonable, and if you can think of more to add, you're welcome to do so, but I have everything covered. You'd know that if you had read my rulebook."

"I will read your rulebook, but if I think anything needs to be changed or added, I should be able to do so."

"Not without talking to me first."

"I...fine. Same goes for you. What I say goes, too, and if you have any problems with it, you can't do anything without talking to me."

The solution was obvious to him...that they just discuss everything together before any more decisions were made...but he wasn't going to say it. He didn't want to spend any more time with her than was absolutely necessary.

"Fine, are we done, then?"

"Not quite. What do you have planned for the rest of the meeting?"

"I've made up patrolling schedules for the rest of the month, and there are also a few reminders for everyone."

She nodded. "All right. But remember, I get to plan and head the next meeting, and from now on, no more one-man shows."

He didn't respond, but moved past her and re-entered the classroom. After another five minutes or so, he stood and cleared his throat again. "All right, now that we're all on the same page, are there any more questions?" When nobody spoke, he went on. "The school must have a curfew patrol every night. As you all know, curfew is 9:00 for years one through four and 10:00 for years five through seven, 11:00 and 12:00 on weekends...with exceptions for those with a teacher's note, those in a late detention, or those returning from Astronomy class, but that isn't until after 1 A.M., and none of you will be patrolling that late. The professors take turns on the late patrol.

"Therefore, there are two patrolling times every weeknight, and the professors do a single patrol on the weekends. Our 9:15 patrol is the shorter one since the 10:15 patrol includes checking all the bathrooms to make sure they're empty. We will all take our turns at both patrols so that nobody can accuse anyone else of having it easier.

"I've made up a schedule for the rest of the month for each of you. There are seventeen patrol nights for the rest of this month. That's thirty-four patrols total. We'll have groups of two, so that means that some of you will have two patrols this month, and some will have three. It will be more even next month, and those that have to do three this month won't have to next month."

Draco passed around copies of the schedule and said, "I've paired you each with someone different for every patrol. If you have a problem with any of your partners, too bad. It's only for half an hour or so. You'll live. On the back of each schedule is a map of the areas that need to be checked every night. This is not advanced Arithmancy, people. Just don't lose your schedules, and we shouldn't have any problems. Right, then. Any questions?"

There weren't any since everyone was too busy looking for their names on the schedule to see who they were paired with. He gave them a few minutes, during which he noticed Granger looking grudgingly impressed, and then he spoke again. "As you can see, tonight, Lucas Whittier and Marissa Featherstone have the 9:15 patrol, and Chelsea Bleckhart and Chris Corbett have the 10:15. For the 9:15 patrol, and this goes for everyone else as well, if you find a first-, second-, third-, or fourth-year student where they shouldn't be, it's ten points from their house, and make sure to write down their name to give to their Head of House. For the 10:15, same thing applies to the older students. Oh, also, if your partner isn't in your house, it would behoove you to find that person tonight and arrange a place to meet. And that covers everything about patrols.

"A few other reminders. If there is rule-breaking going on in any of the houses, it is the Prefects' job to report it. It's your job to set an example for the students of your house and the whole school, so take it seriously. If a younger student needs help with something, give it. Take charge when charge needs to be taken. Remember that the Prefect system exists because teachers can't be everywhere at once.

"And that's all for tonight. Feel free to stay or go, whatever you prefer. If there are any questions, I'll be here for another fifteen minutes, and I'm sure Granger won't leave until she's forced to." And with that, and another smirk at the glaring Head Girl, he sat down and placed his fingers together in a steeple on the table.

Chatter quickly broke out, some people opting to stay and a few leaving, Weasley among them. Draco, ever the observer, couldn't help but notice the glare he gave Granger before he left and the way her face reddened as she quickly looked down. Well, that was interesting.

Draco was asked a few questions, the intelligent of which he answered and the inane of which he responded to by staring blankly at the asker until he or she flushed and looked away.

Surprisingly, or maybe not so surprisingly, at the end of the fifteen minutes, there were only a few people other than himself and Granger, and they left shortly after. Before Granger could give him any more grief, he gathered the remainder of his papers and made short work of restoring the room to its natural state. He left as soon as it was done and found Blaise waiting for him in the corridor.

"Nicely done, Draco. That Mudblood bitch was practically steaming from the ears. I thought her head was going to explode for a bit there."

"Well, not all dreams can come true," Draco said, smirking.

Blaise laughed, then said, "So, tell me you weren't serious about all the 'inter-house unity' shite."

Draco snorted. "Hardly."

"And the thing about reporting things that go on in the houses, does that apply to Slytherin?"

"Of course not. Slytherin will go on as it always has. We deal with our own."

Blaise nodded. "Good. Well, anyway, as amusing as it was to see you tormenting Granger, I'm glad the meeting is over. I don't know how much longer I could have sat that close to a Weasley and kept my dinner down."

"Oh, please, Blaise. If I can share a whole dormitory with Granger, you can sit through half an hour in the same room as Weasley."

"Tough luck on that, mate," Blaise replied, shaking his head. "Are you sure you wouldn't be happier if you came back to Slytherin? Or at least Pansy and I could come visit you so you wouldn't have to be alone there with her."

"I'd be *happier* if Granger would go down herself in the lake, but I don't have a choice. I have to sleep in the Head Rooms, and honestly, it's not so bad as long as Granger keeps aw..."

Draco was cut off by a body rushing past him, whom he identified quickly as Granger, and he couldn't help but notice the wet tracks on her cheeks. And then she was gone around a corner, headed for their rooms, he could only assume. He immediately felt an uncomfortable twinge in his stomach. He had forgotten that she was walking behind them... He knew he probably shouldn't have said that bit about her drowning herself, but she was just so...

Blaise interrupted his thoughts. "Looks like Granger's going to be sniveling for the rest of the night. Serves her right. Just make sure she stays in her room, mate. You shouldn't have to be bothered with it."

Draco felt a small stab of annoyance at his friend, but aloud, he gave a short, insincere laugh and agreed, "Yeah..."

He hated feeling guilty, and it just figured that Granger would be the source of yet another uncomfortable emotion for him. He sighed aloud. He was going to have to smooth it over. Hopefully she wouldn't be too unreasonable...

He parted with Blaise, not really remembering what was said, and made his way back his rooms slowly, not looking forward to the inevitable confrontation and not sure what he was going to say. His feelings toward Granger had just been so mixed up this year. He felt like he didn't know which way was up and which was down with her. She was so unpredictable. One minute she was almost flirting with him, and the next she was pretending he didn't exist, and yet the next she was back to being her normal bitchy self. Well, normal before this year. He didn't really know what was normal for her now that he was around her more often. Granger was an unknown, and he hated it when something he was sure about turned out different than he expected.

His shoulders were tense as he gave the password to his common room. He looked around, expecting to see Granger sitting in one of the chairs, but she wasn't. His eyes went to her door, and he noticed it was closed. He swallowed a nervous lump. Having to go out of his way to smooth this over would just make it that much more difficult for him. But he knew he had to. His life would be even more miserable if she was any more hostile toward him than she was now. They needed to establish some sort of truce.

He took a deep breath and crossed the room to knock on her door. There was no answer. After a pause, he knocked again, then said, "Granger?"

Still there was no response. Great, so she was going to make it even more difficult. Typical. Irritation crept into his tone as he said, "Come on, Granger. Open the door. Stop being a bitch."

He'd been asking for it, but it still caught him off guard when the door flew open and he was met with a more furious Granger than he'd ever seen, though he was pleased to see she was no longer crying.

"What did you say?" she hissed, stepping menacingly toward him. He took a step back, but she pursued him.

"Granger..."

"You bastard," she said icily. "You say horrible things about me, knowing I'm right behind you, and then you demand that I open my door to you, and *I'm* a bitch for refusing? You disgust me. You are the worst person I've ever had the misfortune to know. You have no compassion, no sense of how to treat others. You believe the world and the people in it exist to make things easier for you. You are a bully and a manipulative, miserable excuse for a human being."

By this point, Draco's mouth had closed, and he was glaring at her. She was going too far, but she didn't stop there.

"For a moment I actually believed that maybe I was wrong about you, that maybe you were the right person to be Head Boy. For a moment you had me fooled. I thought maybe you had, for once, taken your responsibility seriously, but I was wrong. You have no interest in improving this school, helping anyone else, or having the rules apply to you. You were just putting on a show. You're still the same selfish, egotistical, spoiled brat you've always been, and you know what? You can stay that way. You may believe I'm beneath you, that I should bow to you, but I'm not going to drowning myself in any lakes or doing anything else to make your life easier. If my presence disturbs you so much, you can make more effort to avoid me."

And with that, she went back into her room and slammed the door in his face.

Draco felt like he'd been run over by the Hogwarts Express. That... She... He wandered into his room and closed the door. He sat down on his bed, and her words played and replayed in his head. Merlin... She really *hated* him. He could acknowledge to himself that maybe he had deserved some of her fury...he knew he hadn't always been... respectful toward her...but... he didn't think she'd needed to be so vicious. Something inside him hardened. Fine, if she wanted him to stay away from her, he was happy to oblige. He certainly didn't need her in his life. He didn't need anyone, least of all someone like her.

She had said he was the same person she'd always assumed he was, but this just proved that she was exactly what he'd always known her to be...a sanctimonious know-it-all, a Mudblood with no manners and no thought for anyone but herself. He'd gone to apologize, and she hadn't even let him get a word in. Well, he wouldn't be making that mistake again. That was the last time she'd ever get any sort of apology from him.

He readied himself for bed quickly and sat down on his four poster, but it was too early to sleep. He stared ahead at his wall, and his thoughts were drawn to what Granger might be doing in her own room, but he quickly stomped out that thought. He picked up his Potions book and decided to do his homework. It wasn't due until Thursday, but it would keep his thought where they should be.

It was late when he finally slipped into bed, and he was tired enough that he drifted off within a few minutes.

SB's Notes: So, was Hermione out of line? And was Draco's performance really that...a performance?

Save Yourself

Chapter 7 of 11

A little more insight into Draco's summer and childhood. The beginning of a mystery...

Disclaimer: The plot and idiocy belong to me, but the characters and the world belong to J.K.R. I make no claims on them, and I have no intention of publishing an encyclopedia for the masses, so there's really no need to sue me.

Thanks go to the magical and marvelous Southern Witch 69 for rocking my socks off... and of course for the beta read.

Over the next week, Draco made an art form of ignoring Hermione Granger. He would lie in bed until he heard the shower turn off in the morning, then wait exactly three and a half minutes before going in himself. He would then spend about fifteen minutes in the shower, three minutes drying his body and hair, roughly ten seconds performing an Antiperspirant Charm, three minutes shaving, and two more minutes brushing his teeth. He knew that by the time he spent these twenty-three minutes in the bathroom and dressed himself for the day, Granger would be leaving their common room herself. So, at roughly 7:42 every morning, he would press his ear to his bedroom door and listen to make sure the coast was clear.

When he arrived at breakfast, he was sure to make a point of not looking at the Gryffindor table or anywhere else Granger might be. He was lucky that they didn't have as many classes together as they could have, but even so, the ones they did have together were unbearable...or at least they would have been if Draco had cared. But he didn't...care. Not even a little bit. He didn't even notice that Granger never spared him a glance. Really.

Dinner, of course, was more of the same. On one occasion...it happened to be on Friday, not that Draco paid attention to things like that...he happened to be watching, *glancing*, at the doors to the Great Hall when Granger walked in with her *friends*. He certainly didn't stare at her for any longer than was necessary. He most definitely did not glare at Potter when he put his arm around Granger's shoulders...because he didn't even notice it... because he wasn't even looking. He was... eating. Right, he was eating.

And in the evenings, after dinner, he was forced to spend several hours in their shared common room, tolerating her presence. Well, he forced himself...after all, why should he let the harpy drive him into his own room just to do homework? It certainly didn't bother him that she didn't appear to realize he existed, let alone that he was breathing the same air she was. That was what he had wanted after all...for her stay out of his way. So really, there was no problem. Everything was perfect. He couldn't have been happier...at least with the Granger situation.

The nights were a different story. He'd been having dreams, bad dreams, since his father's death, and it was only getting worse. Summer had been different this time around. Having his father gone was not something new...after all, he'd been in prison the summer before. Truthfully, the fact Lucius was dead didn't change anything much; gone was gone. No, it wasn't really his father's absence that made him feel everything had changed, though it did contribute. It was his mother... Well, his mother had been... off lately. Distant. Most of the time, she seemed... empty, like she was alone everywhere, even in a crowded room. And then, even stranger than that, there were a few times that she had seemed on the verge of a breakdown. He could recall several instances where the emptiness in her eyes had been replaced by a desperate sort of... something. He had seen her eyes glass over with tears that she hadn't cried, even though she hadn't ever looked him in the eye. That was the most unsettling thing to him...that she'd never looked at him.

A bastard his father may have been, but he was still her husband, so he understood that his father's death had to be hard for her, especially how it had happened, but somehow this felt... wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he just couldn't shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong, that something awful was going to happen. And his sleep suffered for it.

He tried to put out of his mind that fact that his mother had hardly spoken to him all summer, that he'd never been more alone... It didn't matter. He wasn't alone now, here at school, was he?

* * *

Hermione left the Great Hall feeling content for the first time since she'd been back to school. It had been a long week, but things were finally settling into a pattern that she was comfortable with. Her classes were interesting, she was busy with her workload, her friends were great, and her relationship with Ron was slowly returning to

something like it had been before the disaster that had been their kiss. Malfoy had, surprisingly, been staying out of her way, so really, she had nothing to complain about.

She smiled as she turned a corner and entered the corridor her rooms were connected to. As she made the final few steps, she planned the rest of her evening in her mind. *Do Arithmancy homework, organize Charms notes, start on Transfigurations flow charts..*

In an instant, she felt her leg explode in pain. She cried out and stumbled forward, looking down at her body and unable to find the source of her agony. Her pulse pounded in her ears, and she looked around wildly, but saw nothing. She shut her eyes tightly and gritted her teeth, and it was then that she realized she'd heard voices, whispers, right before the pain and... the sound of footsteps, yes. The sound of a door slamming echoed off the stone walls, and she strained through the pain to try to hear more, but the voices had gone now. She couldn't hear any noises, at least not over the harsh sounds of her own breathing. If she could just get to her room, she could sit down... and, and think, and... but her brain wasn't functioning like it should. All she could think of was the pain.

But then, oh, yes, there it was...the portrait.

"Miss Granger, are you all right?" said the stuffy old wizard guarding her door. She cried out the password desperately. She needed to get somewhere... to her room... bathroom... to look at her leg. Why was it hurting so much?

She stumbled through the door-sized portrait hole and started towards the... bathroom; yes, that was a good idea. She was vaguely aware of Malfoy sitting in his chair, but she didn't spare him a thought until she tripped on the carpet and found herself in his arms. How he'd gotten from his chair to her so quickly, she didn't know, but her head was spinning, and the pain was strangling her, and the last thing she wanted was Malfoy near her.

"Don't touch me!" she choked as she jerked away from him and stumbled towards the bathroom. If she could just get there, yes... She slammed the door behind her, and the counter felt like ice against her arms as she rested on it. Removing her robe was a struggle, but she managed it slowly. When it finally lay in a puddle of black fabric on the floor, she looked down at her thigh and saw a hole in her skirt. The hole seemed to be in about the same place as the stabbing sensation, so she figured she'd probably found the source of her pain. It hurt so much worse just looking at it, and why was there a hole in her skirt? She watched in a sort of frozen fascination as blood seeped through the fabric and ran down her leg. She reached down to touch it and cried out as her fingertips brushed the opening.

She didn't notice the door burst open, but she was aware of Malfoy coming towards her, and hadn't she told him to leave her alone? But she didn't have it in her to stop him...the pain was too great.

He knelt down on the cold marble in front of her and yanked her skirt up, tearing the fabric away from her leg, taking sticky layers of drying blood with it. She tried to tell him to get the hell out, but her voice came out as a sob. And then she looked down and saw her blood pouring out of her bare leg, and she couldn't...she felt... dizzy. He might have been talking to her, and she might have said... something. Her vision was going dark...

Draco had been sitting in his chair in front of the fire, doing his homework, not wondering where Granger was, when he'd realized that he hadn't actually done any work for about half an hour now. He blinked his eyes and noticed that the flames he'd been staring into were seared into his vision in bright, wavy shapes. He leaned his head back and sighed. It was just so hard to focus...he didn't even know why he couldn't. He glanced around the room for something to occupy his thoughts, and his eyes fell on Granger's book. *Dune*. She'd said she loved it. She'd said he could never understand. She was wrong, wasn't she?

Over the summer, when he hadn't been able to take the oppressing silence of the Manor any longer, he'd Apparated away to the nearest town...a Muggle town. The first few times he'd gone, he'd merely observed. Each time a Muggle had looked at him, he'd been shocked enough to look away and Apparate home as quickly as possible. It wasn't so much the fact that they were Muggles that had startled him so; it was just that... he'd been taught his whole life that because Muggles weren't wizards, they weren't really... human. But the first time a Muggle had looked at him and smiled, it had been...well, he wasn't entirely sure that Muggles didn't have mud instead of blood running through their veins, but from the outside, they did look human. They looked just like everyone else. It had shaken him to the core the first time he'd realized he couldn't tell the difference between a Muggle man and a wizard just by looking at his face.

Granger was so sure he would never understand. Maybe she was right; there were certain things that he was unsure about, but there were also certain things that he *knew*. He knew that Muggles and Mudbloods were beneath him. He knew that he was stronger, better, more powerful than they were...that he'd been born that way and that it was his birthright. He knew that Muggles were primitive, that they were dangerous to everything in his world. He knew that the influence of Muggles and Mudbloods was slowly diluting and cheapening the oldest and purest of bloodlines and traditions. He knew that they were *different*.

Until this past summer, he'd always been sure that the differences between Muggles and wizards would be so obvious that anyone would be able to see them just by looking. But he'd seen a Muggle...many, in fact...and now, he wasn't so sure. Still, he reminded himself, just because the differences weren't as obvious as he'd always thought, it didn't mean the differences didn't exist. He just had to look harder. As he glanced again at Granger's book, he had to admit to himself that he was curious. Would he be able to tell the difference between a Muggle and wizard author by reading their books?

He had just given in to the temptation to find out when the portrait swung open and Granger stumbled in.

He noticed immediately that something was off. His first thought was that she was about to tell him off for reaching for her book, but the thought was gone as quickly as it had come. Something was wrong; he could see it in her face. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, and as she began to move forward, he noticed that she was limping. He was on his feet before he knew he'd moved, and when she tripped and began to fall forward, he was right there to catch her.

He tried to get a good look at her to figure out what was wrong, but he didn't get very far. "Granger..."

"Don't touch me!" she said in a strained voice, as though speaking hurt her. She pushed past him, and it was then that Draco saw her hands. They were covered in blood.

"What the...?"

She was clutching her thigh as she stumbled and fell against the bathroom door.

"Fucking h...Granger! What's wrong with you?" He tried again to help her, but she shook him off and staggered into the bathroom, closing the door behind her before he could get another word in.

Draco stood in horror, not knowing what he was supposed to do. There'd been so much blood, and he could hear her whimpering and gasping in there. He reached for the door, hesitated, then reached again, but... He dropped his hand to his side and began to pace, scowling. Should he go for help? She was really hurt, and what if...but he couldn't just leave her there bleeding...

"Ahhhh!" Her scream was loud even through the door.

That did it. He flung the door open and saw her sagging against the counter. His eyes went straight to her leg. On her right upper thigh, there seemed to be a hole. Her leg, and now the bathroom floor, was covered in blood. Draco felt the color drain out of his face.

He rushed over and knelt on the floor in front of her.

"What the hell happened?"

"D-don't know..." she cried. "H-hurts..."

Draco felt sick again, although it had nothing to do with the blood covering her leg. He didn't have a problem with blood.

Hermione was sobbing now, her whole body shaking.

Draco reached forward and lifted her up onto the counter. She winced hard when he touched her, and he didn't know if it was from disgust that he was putting his hands on her or pain from her leg.

He tried to lift up her skirt to get a better look at the wound, but the fabric was stuck to her. He pulled it away from her skin and cringed as she sobbed, but she didn't stop him. She seemed out of it, and that worried him in a way he couldn't analyze at the moment. There was too much blood, and he couldn't see anything else. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at her leg. Again, she didn't stop him. He siphoned off as much as he could, and when he was more or less finished, he could clearly see a small hole in her leg where something had penetrated it.

Good Merlin, he thought. *That's a bullet wound.* It had to be. He couldn't think of any spell that would localize a wound, a *hole*, like that. He'd had weaponry lessons from his father since childhood. *Of course the weapons of a Muggle could never stand against the mind and the wand of a wizard, Draco*, his father had said, *but it is always wise to know one's enemy.*

"Granger, did you see who fired at you? Did..."

But she didn't hear him. At that moment, she lost consciousness and began to fall off the counter.

Draco caught her and picked her up with a grunt. She was heavier than she looked. He had to get her to the hospital wing quickly. He briefly thought about setting her down and using his wand to levitate her, but he knew that there was no time for that. He carried her as fast as he could to the hospital wing and pounded on the door. Within moments, Madam Pomfrey opened the door. She looked at Hermione in Draco's arms and gasped.

"Bring her in," she said sharply. "Quickly."

Draco obeyed. He carried her in and set her down lightly on the nearest bed, breathing harshly.

"She's lost a lot of blood..." he said wearily.

"I can see that!" snapped the school nurse. "What happened to her?"

"I don't know," Draco said, sighing. "I think she's been shot."

"*What?*"

"Shot," he said, "with a gun. You know, a..."

"I know what a gun is, Mr Malfoy," she snapped. "I was asking...never mind! Just go get her Head of House!"

Draco didn't move. He just stared at Hermione's limp body and felt even more color drain from his face. "Is she going to be o..."

"Now!" Pomfrey barked.

Draco left the room quickly and headed straight for the teacher's lounge. It wasn't yet late enough for anyone to have gone to bed. If he was lucky, McGonagall would be there and he wouldn't have to search for her rooms. Before he knew it, he was pounding on the door of the lounge.

It opened quickly, and Draco saw Severus Snape staring down at him with a startled expression. "Draco?"

"Where's McGonagall?" he demanded through a pant, ignoring propriety.

"I'm here, Mr Malfoy," she said, walking to the door. "What's the problem?"

"It's Herm...er, Granger. She's hurt." He was out of breath, but the urgency in his voice was quite apparent.

"Where is she?" said McGonagall sharply.

"Hospital wing."

Draco didn't wait for her. He'd done what he'd needed to do, and he wasn't going to stick around. He walked as quickly as he could back to his room and closed the door behind him. He sunk onto his bed and closed his eyes.

This is unreal.

* * *

"Miss Granger?" said a calm voice from far away. "Miss Granger..." the voice said again, this time closer.

Her eyes flickered open, and she saw Professor Dumbledore looking gently into her eyes. She blinked and looked back at him, her vision a bit blurry.

"What?" she croaked. "Where..."

"Do you remember what happened to you, Hermione?" asked McGonagall from beside her.

What? What happened to me...

And then she remembered.

She made a jerking movement as she tried to sit up. "My leg!" It didn't hurt anymore, but she wanted to get a better look at it. She didn't get very far before she realized that she was obstructed by too many blankets. She made a frustrated noise, and Dumbledore said, "Don't worry, Miss Granger. Your leg is fine. The bullet came out easily, and our wonderful Madam Pomfrey repaired the damage. You're quite as good as new."

Hermione exhaled in relief, and then her eyes widened as she realized what he'd said. "Bullet?" she squeaked. Someone had shot her? In *Hogwarts*?

"Yes," he said simply. "Hermione, do you remember what happened? Did you see where the shot came from?"

"I... no, I..."

"Take a deep breath, my dear. Try to think it through. Retrace your steps from the last thing you remember."

She did as he'd instructed, took a few deep breaths and tried to calm herself down. She remembered classes... and dinner, and then... "I was... walking back from dinner, I think. I was almost at my room...in the corridor outside. I was just... thinking, and then my leg..." She winced as she remembered the exploding pain. She shuddered. "I can't remember what happened or where it came from. It just..." She looked at the Headmaster helplessly, hoping he would understand, but not knowing what else to say.

Dumbledore nodded and smiled encouragingly at her. She tried to remember what had happened after that, and it was... fuzzy at best. She remembered stumbling into her room and seeing her leg, and then everything was blank. "But wait!" she said urgently. "I think I passed out. How did I get here?"

"Ah," said Dumbledore with a smile. "Mr Malfoy carried you here."

Hermione felt as if she'd been slapped. "Malfoy... carried me? He... *what?*"

"I haven't spoken with him yet, but from what I understand, he carried you here and then alerted Professor McGonagall to the situation."

Hermione's eyes were wide.

"He... *Why?*"

"I suppose you'd have to ask him that," said Dumbledore kindly.

Hermione closed her mouth and stared fixedly at a point directly in front of her. *He could have let me die... Why didn't he?*

A few moments later, Dumbledore's gentle voice interrupted her thoughts. "Hermione, I want you to go back to your room and get some sleep. You'll be safe there. I want to speak to you in the morning...and Mr. Malfoy, too. Please let him know, and come to my office together before your breakfast."

Hermione nodded distractedly, her thoughts still on Malfoy as she struggled as hard as she could to recall what had happened.

"I also want you to try, if you are able, to remember whatever you can about what happened to you."

Hermione nodded. She *was* trying.

"Minerva, will you escort Miss Granger back to her room?"

"Of course," McGonagall said softly. Hermione could hear a worried tone in her voice, and she frowned. "Come with me, Miss Granger."

Hermione obeyed silently. She followed her teacher out the door and walked behind her, not really noticing what was going on around her. A glance at her wristwatch told her it was midnight. There were so many thoughts and feelings storming through her mind. She felt completely overwhelmed, confused.

Someone had just attacked her. Why would someone do that? Why would someone use *agun* to do that... in Hogwarts? Why would someone *have* a gun in Hogwarts? And there was more to think about.

Malfoy had... saved her life. Selfish, awful, annoying Malfoy, who hated her as much as she hated him, had saved her life. She could have died, bled to death. Maybe not. She couldn't say for sure what would have happened, but it was possible. Things were a little less fuzzy now, and she remembered telling him not to touch her. Malfoy, of course, had ignored her and had done what he wanted anyway, but what if he hadn't? She didn't want to think about it.

And she really, really wished she didn't feel as guilty as she did. Maybe guilty was the wrong word...*Conflicted*...that sounded right. She was in his debt. That thought made her feel very uncomfortable.

"Well, here we are."

Hermione snapped to attention to find McGonagall smiling tiredly at her. She returned the smile as best she could and said good night to her teacher, thanking her for her help.

She entered her common room and looked around nervously. A part of her was relieved that Malfoy wasn't in the room, but a part of her wanted to scream at him for helping her. She knew that was crazy, but she hated how confused she felt. Someone she hated so much had no business making her question that hate. And yet if he hadn't helped her...

She paced the room quietly for quite some time, thinking furiously. She let her thoughts and feelings take her where they would. She did her best to sort it all out, organizing herself in the only way she knew how, until she finally felt some clarity. After a while, she decided to go to bed.

But first, there was something she had to do...

* * *

A nine-year-old Draco Malfoy was eating dinner with his mother in the lavishly furnished dining room of his ancestral mansion when his father came in. Draco knew instantly what had was about to happen...this wasn't the first time after all. He felt fear well up inside him and looked at his mother. She continued to eat as though she'd noticed nothing.

The room was painfully still until Draco's father moved forward and backhanded his wife without a word. The force knocked her out of her chair, and Draco screamed out in fury and fear. His father ignored his attempts to get to his mother, but when she screamed at Draco to get out, he couldn't help but obey her. He knew things would be worse if he stayed, and he didn't want to make things worse. Maybe if he did what he was told, his father wouldn't hit his mother again.

He tore out of the room as fast as he could and ran up the stairs towards his own bedroom. He didn't want to hear anything. He covered his ears with his hands and pushed so hard it hurt, but it didn't shut out the sound of his mother shouting, "Damn you, Lucius! Your son saw that!"

He slammed the door behind him and ran to his bed. He dove onto the duvet and stuffed a pillow over his head, scrunching his face up as he felt tears rolling down his face. Not again... He hated this.

He cried into his pillow for what seemed like hours until he heard his door open. Draco froze and opened his eyes in fear, but when he saw his mother standing there, he began to cry again. She crossed to the bed and sat down. Draco wrapped his arms around himself, wishing they were his mother's, but she didn't hug him. She never hugged him.

"Your father loves us, Draco."

"No, he doesn't!" he shouted hysterically. "He can't! He hits you. He hits me. He doesn't love us!"

His mother was silent and he continued.

"One day, when I'm big enough, he won't hit me anymore, and I'll make sure he doesn't hit you either. I'll hit him first!"

"No, Draco, you can't. You can't save me, just like I can't save you. As much as I'd like to, I can't. You have to save yourself. But you can't do it by hitting your father. You have to learn to be strong. You have to trust yourself. Things will always happen around you that will cause you pain, but you mustn't be afraid, and you mustn't let yourself be defeated. You are my son...and your father's son. You're a Malfoy. Malfoys fear nothing."

Draco listened to her and felt her words strike him. She was right. He'd been weak. He didn't want to be weak. He wanted to prove that he was strong.

"Wipe your tears away, Draco. You must never let anyone see you cry."

He nodded and dried his face.

"Your father wants to see you."

* * *

Draco woke up in his room, still hearing his father's voice telling him that what he was doing was making him strong. He could feel the sting of his father's hand on his face.

The room was dark. He could see small outlines and shapes on his wall from the light of the moon coming through his window. He tried to slow his breathing as he wiped several tears from his face, disgusted with himself.

He still didn't understand how his mother had been able to stand staying with his father for so long, but before he could consider it further, there was a soft knock at his door.

It had to be Granger...unless it was someone else there to tell him Granger had bled to death. He got out of bed and walked to the door. He opened it enough to see who the intruder was and leaned against the doorframe. It was Granger. She was alive and looked perfectly well. Well, as well as she ever did, which wasn't saying much. He smiled smugly at that thought.

"What do you want, Granger?"

She cleared her throat and spoke, and he noticed she wasn't looking him in the eye.

"Professor Dumbledore wants to see us both in his office before breakfast tomorrow," she said in a quiet, expressionless voice.

"Why?" he asked coldly. She should at least have the decency to look him in the eye after what he'd done for her. Did she even remember?

"I don't know," she said, still staring at a point near his neck.

There was a long pause before Draco said, "Fine."

She nodded, and he turned his back on her, attempting to close the door. The bitch had woken him up to tell *hirthat?* She could have just told him in the morn...

"Thank you, Draco," she said quietly.

Draco froze, and he whirled around a moment later just in time to see Hermione's bedroom door close behind her.

SB's Notes: Well, here we are at the end of another chapter. There are no excuses for the lateness. I pretty much just suck. On thing though: I realize that we now know from DH that the Malfoy family probably wasn't nearly as abusive as I've made them out to be here. A bit screwed up, perhaps, but not abusive. I'm going to use the age-old excuse that I wrote most of this story before DH came out. It happens to be true, but mostly the point is that for the purposes of this story, I need Draco's childhood to have been a disaster.

Cheers and Happy Holidays until next time!

The Mirror and the Mystery

Chapter 8 of 11

In the aftermath of the attack, things are changing. Will Hermione and Draco be able to change with them?

Gigantic and smothering hugs go to SW69 for the beta read.

Disclaimer: I'm so not coming up with a clever disclaimer. You all know the drill anyway....

Hermione didn't get much sleep in the hours after she thanked Draco Malfoy for saving her life. She'd done it because she'd known it was the right thing to do. More than that, she'd done it because she knew she'd never have a clear conscience if she left it alone. A load of good it was doing her now though... She punched her pillow in an effort to make it comfortable for her head, but it was no use.

She drifted in and out of consciousness for hours, never quite able to organize herself into sleep. At 6:30 her alarm went off, and she dragged herself out of bed. The sheets were twisted everywhere, and most of her pillows were on the floor. She grabbed her wand off her nightstand and made the bed with a muttered, "*Emendo*."

She could see the early stages of morning through the window. Birds were twittering; blue light glowed on the tops of the mountains. On any other morning, Hermione might have noticed how beautiful it was. She wandered into the bathroom and turned the shower on.

A pang of annoyance struck her as she locked her side of Malfoy's door, but she ignored it.

It never took Hermione long to shower...she wasn't the type to fritter away time doing needless things...but today, Hermione stood under the hot water for a long time, letting the water warm her and awaken her exhausted mind and body.

When she stepped out, she stood in front of the large mirror and stared at herself, something she hadn't done in a long time. She'd never really liked mirrors to begin with, but more importantly, she'd never had time for them. But today was different.

She felt as though she barely knew her own reflection. Her appearance was the same as always on the outside. The same long mess of dark hair. The same brown eyes

and slightly too pale skin. But today, she looked closer.

She felt uncomfortable looking at her naked body this way. It was as though the things that were picking at her on the inside were apparent on her skin, picking at her there as well.

She wanted to look away, and she told herself it was silly to go on standing there staring at herself, but still, she couldn't tear her eyes away. If she stopped, if she walked away, it would mean her reflection had won, so she stayed put, determined to prove... something. She walked closer and stared hard at her own face. The bridge of her nose was covered with a sparse smattering of light freckles that she'd noticed before but had never thought much about. Now, for the first time in her life, she found herself forming an opinion about them: she hated them. They were an outward manifestation of the imperfection she felt inside.

She felt unsure inside, and she could see that she looked as lost as she felt. Maybe it was just a bad morning, but she'd always prided herself on being calm and in control. She'd always been independent and had thought of herself as the kind of person who could take care of anything on her own. Last night had proven that none of these things were true, and looking at her reflection now, she'd never been more aware that she wasn't perfect. She told herself that nobody could be perfect and that it was all right that she wasn't, but that didn't make her clenching stomach relax. She wasn't perfect, and as ridiculous as she knew it was, that bothered her just a bit.

She frowned at herself, and then finally, the mirror won. She lowered her eyes, turned around, picked her clothes up off the floor and walked out of the bathroom without a backward glance.

* * *

Draco hadn't slept all night. After Hermione had gone into her room, Draco had closed his door and cast a spell to light the room. He was still fully clothed from the day before. His pants and hands were stained with Hermione Granger's blood, and he felt dirty. Dirty for having her blood all over him and even dirtier for what it meant, that he had saved her. He had willingly...no, worriedly...carried her body to the hospital wing.

If Lucius could see me now... he thought bitterly.

He stripped down to nothing, wanting his disgrace to vanish with his clothes. He flicked his wand to put out the light and got into bed again, sliding his wand onto his nightstand and scrunching a pillow up to stuff under his head. But he was far from sleep. He watched the moon's progression as it arched through the sky until it was gone behind the mountain, and Draco was left only with his thoughts.

At about half past six, he heard the running water in the bathroom, and he turned onto his back to stare up at the ceiling. He briefly thought that it was odd that he could hear her...Draco always put a Silencing Charm on the room while he was in there. When he heard the shower door open and close nearly twenty-five minutes later, he wondered why she hadn't done the same.

It didn't matter though. In a few moments, she would be gone, and he could take her place. He waited for several minutes to hear her leave, stretching and preparing himself to get out of bed, but she didn't. He knew he would have heard her door if she'd gone. Maybe she had and he just hadn't noticed. He sat on the edge of his bed for several minutes, waiting for a sound. When none came, his irritation grew. Just as he was getting to his feet to demand she leave, he heard the distinct sound of her door opening and closing.

Finally...

He waited a few seconds just to be safe and then went to the door. His first attempt to open it was unsuccessful, and he realized she must have left it locked...probably on purpose, the bitch. "Typical," he grumbled as he retrieved his wand from his nightstand. An unlocking spell made short work of the door, and minutes later, as almost scalding water poured down Draco's back, he shut his eyes tightly and thought, *The day can only go uphill from here...*

But he wasn't allowed much time for relaxation. Granger had said that Dumbledore wanted to see them before breakfast, and that didn't leave him time for more than the bare necessities.

If Granger hadn't spent forty-five bleeding minutes in the bathroom... Girls.

Draco dressed himself distractedly, his mind on the events of the night before. Aside from the confusion he felt surrounding his own behavior, none of it made sense. Why would anyone want to kill Granger? All right, bad question...

Why would anyone want to *shoot* Granger... with a gun? Why not use a wand? And why had they missed? Really, he knew better than anyone how annoying she was, but who had she ticked off enough to want her dead? The whole thing was mad. Maybe Dumbledore would have an explanation...

With that thought to encourage him, Draco sped himself up. In a few short minutes, he was presentable and heading down to Dumbledore's office.

He arrived at the Headmaster's gargoyles and uttered the password: *Snickers*. Whatever that was... A knock on the door, and he heard Dumbledore's voice bid him to enter. He expected to find Hermione already there with an annoyingly impatient expression on her face...he could picture it now...but she wasn't. There were two chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk, and both were empty until the old man motioned for Draco to sit in one of them and he obeyed.

"Where is Miss Gra...?"

"I don't know," Draco said shortly. He wasn't the Mudblood's keeper.

"I see..." said Dumbledore. "Well, I'm certain she's on her way. Our Head Girl isn't one to keep others waiting, is she?"

Draco grunted in response, the morning's events still fresh in his mind. For several minutes, he occupied himself by glancing around at the various gadgets that the Headmaster had collected, but that only kept him occupied for so long. After a little while, he became aware of the fact that he was alone in a room with a man he had never exactly... seen eye to eye with. And neither of them had said a word. He stretched, coughed, scratched his hairline, and after several more minutes, he couldn't remember having ever felt so supremely uncomfortable.

He coughed again at the same time that Dumbledore said, "While we're waiting, Draco, I would like to address the issue of..."

A quiet knock on the door announced Hermione's arrival.

"Ah. Well, we can address that issue later, I think."

If it was possible, Draco began to feel even more supremely uncomfortable. He hadn't exactly thought ahead to this moment, but now that it was here, he found he had no idea what to say to Granger, how to act. She was the cause of all his current turmoil, and he couldn't think of anyone he'd rather be trapped in a room with *less*. But it was too late for that now... Dumbledore crossed the room to let the Head Girl in, and Draco suddenly didn't know what to do with his hands. His neck felt itchy, and he grimaced uncomfortably as he reached up to scratch it, tilting his head down and his eyes up.

Within moments, Hermione was walking across the room. Her face was expressionless as she sat down in the chair next to Draco, never so much as glancing at him. Draco realized he was staring at her, and that wouldn't do. He moved his gaze away quickly, but he couldn't help scowling; she was avoiding him, ignoring him, refusing to acknowledge his presence. Well, two could play that game. If that was the way it was going to be, it was fine with him. He relaxed his body and sat up straight, matching her aloof manner. To think he had let her get to him. To think he had been so *obvious* about it... It was not behavior befitting a Malfoy.

"Miss Granger, how do you find yourself today, considering last night's events?" asked Dumbledore.

"I'm fine," said Hermione in the same toneless voice that he'd heard her use once before...when McGonagall had asked her if she was all right and she'd responded with the same two words.

Judging by the near-hour she'd spent in the bathroom and the careful emptiness of her voice, she wasn't fine, but Draco wasn't about to push the issue. Dumbledore would have had to be blind and deaf not to reach the same conclusion, and Draco was sure he was going to make some pleasantly disarming comment and push the issue, but he only smiled and nodded.

Draco expected this was more out of respect for Hermione's dignity...an admirable sentiment, he thought...than any ignorance to the obvious. *Draco* kept silent because he was of the opinion that if she wanted to be miserable, he certainly wasn't going to talk her out of it.

A thought occurred to him then: she'd said 'thank you.' But... no, that wasn't enough to make any of this right. It almost made it worse. It was like rubbing in his face the fact that he'd betrayed himself. Well, Granger could fret about it. It would do her some good. *Know-it-all bitty...*

"I'm pleased to hear you haven't suffered any lasting damage then," said Dumbledore kindly.

* * *

Let's not go that far... thought Hermione bitterly. The bullet wound may have disappeared without a trace, but the damage, the *real* damage, was irreparable. She owed Draco a debt. And as much as she wanted for it to be, the simple 'thank you' she'd offered last night just wasn't going to cut it. There was no way around it. She owed Draco Malfoy her life, and that was a truly frightening thought.

She didn't know what to say or do now. She hadn't asked to be shot, and she hadn't asked Malfoy for help. She didn't know why he'd chosen to help her, and she wasn't sure she really wanted to know. But she did want to know who'd attacked her and why. She assumed that Dumbledore had called her here to tell her something about it. Though why he'd invited Malfoy...

"Miss Granger, have any other details come to you since we last spoke about the matter?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, Professor," she answered.

"Forgive an old man's impertinence, but I must ask you to recount everything that you remember, from leaving the Great Hall to waking up in the Hospital Wing, just one more time."

Hermione was silent for a long moment. If she recounted everything, that would include everything that had happened with Malfoy. Hermione wasn't particularly keen on reliving that scene, but she knew she couldn't lie to Dumbledore nor leave anything out when he'd specifically asked her for every detail.

She sighed deeply through her nose, her lips pursed tightly, then began.

* * *

Draco's interest was roused in spite of himself when Dumbledore asked Hermione to give an account of what had happened to her, as he was not even sure of the details. He tilted his head toward her enough so that he could see her when she spoke but still maintain a safe appearance of disinterest.

"I left the Great Hall and was walking to my room," she began. "I was almost there...in the corridor outside my common room..."

Draco eyes narrowed ever so slightly at her singularly possessive reference to *their* common room, but he continued to listen without interrupting.

"I heard voices around a corner nearby...whispers and... footsteps, I think. I didn't think much of it because it wasn't curfew yet. And I was thinking about my homework."

Draco snorted at this and received a brief glare from Hermione, but it was gone as quickly as it had been there, and she went on with her account as if she'd never noticed him.

"Then I felt the pain in my leg." She paused, as though not sure what to say next.

"Please, go on," said Dumbledore, removing his fingers from his chin in an encouraging gesture.

"I looked down and realized I was bleeding, and... well, it happened so fast...I'm still confused, Professor."

"I should imagine so," he said softly, and she took a deep breath. When she spoke again, her voice was steady.

"Then I walked into the common room..."

Draco rolled his eyes. *Fell, more like.*

"And I tripped on the carpet."

Collapsed in agony, Granger. Don't pretty it up.

"Then Malfoy..."

Draco stared at the floor again.

"...said something, I think."

Yes, I tried to help you, and you told me not to touch you

"I went into the bathroom because I wanted to get a closer look at my leg."

You forgot to mention how you slammed the door in my face...

"I was bleeding pretty heavily by then. I was rather dizzy, and I don't think I got very far with trying to inspect the wound. I don't really remember."

No, you were pretty busy screaming.

"Then Malfoy came into the bathroom and... helped me."

She sounded bewildered by the very thought of it, as though realizing it for the first time, and she turned her wide eyes to Draco.

His neck was itching again.

"I think the bleeding got worse after that..."

Very astute of you, genius.

"That's really all I remember," she said quietly. "I think I blacked out, and then... I woke up in the hospital wing."

"Thank you, Hermione. That was helpful," said Dumbledore with a smile.

Draco snorted again, but this time, Hermione didn't appear to notice. *Helpful? I figured that much out on my own.*

"Mr. Malfoy, would you care to pick up where she left off? I'm assuming of course that you remember what happened after Miss Granger lost consciousness."

You assume correctly, Draco thought with an inward sneer.

"Er, yes," he said, clearing his throat a little. "Miss Granger lost consciousness, and I escorted her to the hospital wing."

You carried her, a nagging little voice reminded him. *She bled all over you, and you carried her anyway, remember?*

"That's all."

This was pointless in Draco's opinion. They were getting nowhere. None of this was new information. It was very obvious to everyone involved what had happened after Granger had fainted. Draco had the feeling that Dumbledore knew all this and was deliberately making him and Granger state the obvious in front of each other for some twisted reason. He couldn't help the sudden desire to find the nearest sharp object and jab it into Dumbledore's maddening blue eyes.

"Thank you," said the old man, smiling ridiculously again. "Now I must pose a few questions, first to you, Hermione"

Hermione nodded.

"Do you remember if the voices you heard were male or female?"

Hermione bit her lip for a moment, then said, "No, I suppose I wasn't, er... paying attention." She flushed pink and Draco snorted. She glared at him again and crossed her arms defensively. "Well, it's not as if I could have known anyway. I've said already I only heard whispers."

Draco smirked back at her just for the pleasure of seeing her jaw tighten.

"Naturally," said Dumbledore, ignoring the tension between the two students completely as he turned his attention to Draco again. "And did you notice anything out of the ordinary as you escorted your partner to the hospital wing?"

Partner? Let's not say things we can't take back....

"Did you notice any other people on your way? Was there anything odd, anything that seemed out of the ordinary?"

Draco frowned and replayed the scene in his mind, looking for some detail that might shed some light on the situation, and he resolutely ignored the voice that told him he had been too focused on Granger to notice anything else.

"No, Headmaster," he said quietly. "I don't recall seeing anything strange." His frustration was turning rapidly into irritation. This was pointless and a complete waste of time. He had better things to do than sit here and take turns filling the silence with meaningless words. He had made the decision to get to his feet and make his excuses when Dumbledore spoke again.

"Very well," the man said in a tone of finality. "Then I must share with you both what I can."

He had both students' undivided attention.

"I'm afraid I know nothing more about the circumstances surrounding the attack than you do..."

Figures, Draco thought and shifted again to get to his feet.

"But there is one thing I can give you that will help."

"Help us?" Draco said blankly, now halfway between sitting and standing. He sat back in his chair again and raised an eyebrow. "With what?"

Dumbledore reached down, pulled an item out of a drawer and placed it on his desk in front of Hermione and Draco, then clasped his hands together in his lap. They were staring at a small, silver bullet.

Hermione gave a small shiver, and Draco wasn't surprised, as the thing had been lodged in her leg only hours before. He watched her stare fixedly at it for a long moment, then look up at Dumbledore.

"I thought it had been dissolved."

"No, Miss Granger, as you can see, it is quite intact."

"Professor," she began with a confused frown, "I don't want to seem impolite, but how does this help us?"

Draco was wondering the same thing himself.

Dumbledore smiled and said, "I'm glad you asked. You'll be happy to know that I spent a good while speaking to Arthur Weasley on this very matter last night, as it falls under his exact area of expertise. This is a Muggle weapon, Miss Granger, as I'm sure you are both aware. Muggle weapons, much like curses, can leave traces of themselves when used improperly." Hermione nodded, and Dumbledore continued. "And even often when used properly. In this case, when this bullet was fired from the gun that was used, it was imprinted with the gun's signature, so to speak."

When Hermione and Draco continued to stare blankly, Dumbledore went on.

"Let me be more specific. According to Arthur, when a bullet travels through the barrel of a gun, it receives an imprint of the barrel itself. In other words, the shell is marked on the outside by the inside of whatever it traveled through."

"Oh!" gasped Hermione, her eyes wide as comprehension dawned. Draco understood as well but remained silent; rather he leaned closer and inspected the bullet with narrowed eyes.

"Quite," Dumbledore said, nodding. "Arthur informed me that typically, when a bullet is fired, it would receive spiral markings from the barrel of the gun..."

"But how does..."

"I'm getting to that. Look closely at the bullet," he said, pushing it to the front of his desk.

Hermione and Draco leaned forward eagerly, not even noticing how close they were to each other, and after a long moment, Hermione gasped.

"There's nothing there!"

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "Clearly, this was fired from an unusual gun. Whether it has been magically tampered with has yet to be determined, but the fact that it escaped the barrel with no spiral marking makes it easier for us to narrow down the possible weapons used."

Draco glanced at Hermione as she stared at the piece of silver.

"There's more. Look at the bullet again."

This time Hermione and Draco knocked heads painfully as they leaned forward.

"Ouch!" yelled Hermione, messaging the lump forming on her head and scowling at Draco.

"Damn it, Granger, watch where your head is!" Draco snarled, massaging his own head in a similar fashion.

"Watch where *my* head is? You are such a..."

Dumbledore cleared his throat loudly.

"Sorry, Professor," mumbled Hermione.

Draco grumbled something incomprehensible, which was actually a combination of, "I'm sorry, too," and, "You should be."

"Quite all right. It's natural to forget oneself on occasion, of course. Now, look again."

This time Draco was more careful as he leaned forward to inspect the bullet. He squinted his eyes as he searched for whatever Dumbledore was speaking of. Something caught his eye, and he reached forward before realizing what he was doing. "May I?"

"Of course."

He held the thing up in front of his eyes. "C.E.S.," he said, perplexed.

"Initials," muttered Hermione, sounding equally baffled. "But who...?"

"Wait," said Draco. "You said that there should be spiral markings on the bullet. Why would there be initials, but no markings?"

"That, Mr. Malfoy, is what I would like Miss Granger to find out."

"What!" their two voices shouted together.

"Me? How would I..."

"Her? She can't even..."

Dumbledore held up his hand, and both students fell silent. "Hermione, I would like you to leave Hogwarts for a little while."

"What? But..."

"Please, allow me to explain. I would like you to leave school for a little while...partly for reasons of safety and partly because I think there is no person better than you to get to the bottom of this mystery. There is nothing more here at Hogwarts that will help you solve it, but in the Muggle world, not only will you be more safe, but you will have resources at your disposal that you would not have here."

"The library has..."

"...hundreds of books that would explain almost any magical problem, but this is not so much a magical problem as a Muggle problem that may or may not involve magic."

"Professor, I don't understand how you can say I would be safer outside of Hogwarts. There is no place safer than this school. Everyone knows that!"

"Normally I would agree with you, Miss Granger, but there is something strange going on here, and until we apprehend the person or persons behind your attack, I do not believe you are as safe here as you would be elsewhere. Whoever attacked you may do so again. And as I said before, I believe you are the best person to investigate what has happened."

"But...but..." she stuttered desperately. "I wouldn't even know where to start, Professor! And I don't understand...why *me*? Surely someone else..."

"Because this is happening to *you*, Hermione, not someone else. You are of age now, and you are more than capable, my dear."

Draco got the feeling there was more to Dumbledore's reasoning than he was saying. "Professor," Draco said, knowing it would be wise to keep silent, but unable to stop himself, "how can she possibly figure it out on her own? She may be an annoying know-it-all, but she's just a student." Besides, sending her away from the wizarding world seemed a little drastic, even to Draco. Not that the idea didn't have merit...

"She won't be on her own," said Dumbledore.

Draco waited for the other shoe to drop... and it did.

"I want you to go with her, Mr. Malfoy."

"WHAT?" Draco and Hermione shouted together in equally outraged voices. They turned and glared at each other for a brief moment before turning back to glare at Dumbledore.

Hermione recovered first. "Professor, I don't know why you are asking me to do this. It's... Well, I don't know why, but I can do it by myself. I don't need *his* help."

Draco snorted and Hermione glowered at him.

"You are a magnificently brilliant individual, Hermione, and your talent as a witch is unmatched, but even the best of us need help sometimes."

Draco rolled his eyes. He knew that Dumbledore was right, and he knew that Hermione would probably need help, but he was at a loss as to why it had to be him that gave it.

Hermione apparently had the same idea. "Why him?" she demanded at the same time that he spat, "Why me?"

"I'm afraid I can't give you my reasons, Mr. Malfoy. I must ask you to trust me."

Draco glared.

"But I'm Head Girl," Hermione almost pleaded. "I can't just *leave*."

"Oh, not to worry," Dumbledore said brightly. "I don't think you will be gone more than a few weeks, if that. I trust in your intelligence. In the meanwhile, there are more than enough Prefects to take over your duties."

Draco was screaming inside, but his pride stopped him from pitching a fit. Sharing a dorm was one thing, but leaving school and traveling together, working on a mystery together, that was just too much to ask. The whole thing had Draco feeling queasy. He considered refusing point-blank to go, but somehow he knew that wasn't an option.

Hermione must have known it, too. "What do you want us to do?" she said in a resigned voice.

Draco looked at her and found the stubborn set to her jaw that he had come to associate with her. He scowled yet again.

"I will leave that up to you," Dumbledore said, "though I will say that home is never a bad place to start. Now, I want the two of you to go back to your quarters and discuss where you will go from here."

Hermione nodded slowly, and Draco shook his head, rolling his eyes and glaring at the ceiling.

You've got to be kidding me...

"Fine," he said shortly. He stood up quickly and walked out of Dumbledore's office without another word. He'd do it. He'd play by the rules... for now. After all, a Malfoy knew when to fight and when to be calm and wait to see how a situation could be used to his advantage; however, there were a few things he would make perfectly clear to Granger first.

He stalked back to the common room and flung himself into his armchair to wait for the Head Girl.

* * *

Hermione was still in shock at what was being asked of her, but she was doing her best to trust the Headmaster. As she stood to leave the office, she turned to Dumbledore and said, "Professor, I know there's something you're not telling me. Please... If you could just give me some advice, anything."

Dumbledore sighed and said, "I have told you everything that I believe will help you. I know it isn't much, but... you are a truly remarkable young woman. I wouldn't give you a task that I didn't think you capable of taking on. As I said before, I think you should go home first. Your parents are Muggles, and to have raised a person such as yourself, I'm sure they must be very wise. They may be able to help you along."

Hermione nodded wordlessly and tried to smile. Then another thought occurred to her, and she spoke quickly. "Can I tell my friends what's happened and where I'm going?"

"I will also leave that to you. You may tell your friends whatever you trust them to know."

Hermione nodded again. "Thank you, Professor, for your help."

"You're welcome, Miss Granger. Good luck."

The Muggle Habitat

Chapter 9 of 11

Hermione talks with her friends, and Draco presses his face against the glass.

Everyone get out of the way while I smooch Southern Witch 69 a big one for beta reading this story.

Disclaimer: Sigh. Fine. I intend no infringement, and I make no claims on this fictitious world, which does not (it's a shock, I know) belong to me.

Hermione wandered back to her room full of ideas and worries. She didn't know what she was going to say to Draco, though she had a pretty good idea of what he was going to say to her. If he was half as confused, angry, and frustrated as she was, she figured he'd have several choice words to throw in her direction, and she was right.

She had only to enter their common room to be hit with, "Let's get a few things straight, Granger."

She sighed and crossed the room to sit in her chair next to Malfoy. "All right, but make it quick, Malfoy. We..."

"Shut up, Mudblood," he snarled, and Hermione's mouth snapped shut, her eyes wide. "First of all, I didn't ask for this. If it were up to me, you'd be on your own. I'd be happy to never see you, speak to you, or hear of you again."

Hermione swallowed hard, speechless. She found a spot on the floor and stared fixedly at it, waiting for him to finish. She knew there was no point in arguing with him about any of it, and she didn't really have it in her to fight with him anyway. It wasn't as if she was any happier about this than he was; she just knew what had to be done.

"If I had it to do over again, I'd leave you to bleed to death in that bathroom."

Hermione gripped her chair hard enough to make her knuckles turn white. She felt like she'd been slapped across the face. *Do not cry, Hermione Granger. Don't you dare.* When she was sure she wasn't going to humiliate herself, she forced herself to meet Draco's stare. Something that could have been regret if he were any other person passed through his eyes, but Hermione knew she must have imagined it. "I see," she finally said.

"Look, Granger, I'm trying to say that I don't have a choice about what has to be done here, and neither do you, but that doesn't mean we're going to be friends or..."

"You're wrong, Malfoy. I don't have a choice, but you do." She looked him straight in the eye, wanting to make sure he heard every word clearly. "Walk away. I can do this on my own. If you would really have left me to die, then I don't need you with me anyway." What she did need, however, was to figure out what she was going to say to Harry and Ron, and so she stood and walked away without another word.

* * *

Draco had known as soon as he'd said it that he'd crossed the line. The worse part was that it had been a lie, and he knew it. There was no way he would have let her die. A vivid image of her bleeding in his arms flashed through his mind, and he scowled.

No, he couldn't honestly say he had meant it, but he couldn't make himself say that he hadn't. She was right. He did have a choice. And he'd never hated himself more than he did then because he couldn't *choose* to leave her on her own, just as he couldn't have left her to die.

"Get back here, Granger!" Draco commanded furiously.

Surprisingly, she obeyed. She turned around and met his eyes warily. "What?"

"I'm not about to let you elbow me out of this either. I would never be able to show my face again if people knew that I'd been assigned to help you and refused. If you died because I let you go alone, I'd never live it down."

Hermione scoffed indignantly. "If that's what this is about for you, then you don't have to worry. Nobody knows anything about this, and I have no plans to tell anyone about your involvement. I have no intention of dying, so there's no need for you to be involved."

Draco shook his head. "Nice try, Granger, but you're not getting rid of me, so stop trying."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Malfoy, I'm offering you an out. Take it. You can do what we both know you want to do...leave the work to me and worry about yourself. I wouldn't even blame you."

"That's enough, Granger," he spat. "That is the last time I'm going to let you tell me what I'd prefer to do. You have no idea what I want. You don't even know me, you condescending bitch. But I have something you don't give me credit for. I'm not a coward. I'm a Malfoy, and I stick to my word. I told the old man I'd help you, and I will." She had no right to look at him like he was nothing, like he was irresponsible and lazy. She just assumed things about him, and he hated it. "Now sit down. We need to figure out what we are going to do."

Hermione stared at him for a long time with a confused look on her face, as though she couldn't believe he was pushing the issue, and it annoyed the hell out of him. "Fine," she finally said, eyeing him as if he were a wild animal that might decide at any moment that domesticity didn't suit it.

"Fine," she said again as she sat back down. "Dumbledore suggested we go to my parents first. He said they'd have some insight."

"Not a chance," Draco said, incensed by the idea that Hermione's Muggle parents could do anything to help the situation.

"I thought you said you were going to help me," said Hermione, crossing her arms.

"I did, but there's no way I'm going to spend time in your dirty Muggle house."

Hermione ignored his rudeness and said, "You have a better idea?"

Draco huffed as he thought. The truth was that he didn't have a better idea. As much as the thought of even entering Granger's filthy dwelling and spending time with her common family made his stomach turn, he couldn't think of another option. They really had nowhere else to go and no ideas of where to start looking.

"Fine," he said at last. "We'll leave tomorrow morning. I'll need today to put my affairs in order here."

"Right," she said, and apparently the conversation was over. She went into her room and closed the door softly, leaving him to consider what he'd just agreed to. Not just spending time in the Granger household, but all of it. He couldn't think of a logical reason to help her. He still couldn't understand why he was even bothering. But he'd just been so angry when she'd suggested he 'take an out,' and now he couldn't help feeling that he'd played right into her hands.

* * *

Hermione knew she was going to have to tell Harry and Ron about what had happened and why she was leaving for an indefinite period of time, but she didn't know how to say it.

She was antsy through all of her classes with them, and she knew she'd have to do it soon before her nerves got the better of her and she said the wrong thing. After their last class was over, she pulled them into an empty classroom and cast a Muffling Spell.

"Ron, Harry, I have to tell you something."

Ron, who was still avoiding her, pretended like he hadn't heard her, but Harry said, "What is it?"

"Something happened to me last night, something bad."

Ron immediately snapped out of his cold silence and said, "It's Malfoy, isn't it? He tried something. I'll kill him!"

"No, Ron," she said firmly. "It has nothing to do with Malfoy. Look, I don't think it's a good idea for me to tell you everything yet, but... I was attacked, shot."

"*What?*" said her two friends together.

"You don't look hurt," said Ron, his eyes narrowing skeptically.

"By a gun?" asked Harry perplexedly.

"I'm fine now...Madam Pomfrey fixed it up...and yes, by a gun."

They both stared at her blankly for a moment before Harry shook his head and said, "Wait *what?* Shot? In Hogwarts? How is that even *possible?* Fuck, Hermione! Are you *okay?*"

"I'm fine. Really. Look, we don't know much...I don't and Dumbledore doesn't, I mean. I didn't see who did it, and I'm as baffled as you are about why someone would even have a gun at Hogwarts, let alone use it."

Harry exhaled and nodded. "That's all right. We'll help you find out who did it, right, Ron? There hasn't been a puzzle we haven't solved together yet." Harry gave her an encouraging smile, and she smiled back sadly.

"I have to leave," she said simply. "Dumbledore thinks I should be the one to solve it, and he thinks I'll be safer away from Hogwarts."

"What? No!"

"On your own?"

"Nowhere is safer than Hogwarts!"

"Why?"

"I won't be on my own. Malfoy will be with me," she said quietly.

Ron looked murderous.

"No, Hermione," Harry began, shaking his head. "There's no way we're let..."

"Why is that little bastard going?" Ron spat.

"That's not important, Ron..."

"Hermione, we need to talk about this..." Harry said.

"I know you want to talk about it, but I can't. Malfoy will be with me, and I will keep in contact with you both and with the Headmaster. I'll be fine. I just wanted to let know what's going on and explain that I'll be gone for a little while. I'd tell you not to worry, but it'd be a waste of breath." She smiled at them, but neither smiled back.

After a while, Harry nodded once, and she gave him a grateful wink. She looked at Ron for some sort of reaction, but he just stood up and walked out of the room.

She couldn't help sighing again. "I've got to go, Harry. I'll see you tomorrow morning before I leave."

She gave him another smile, which he returned this time, and turned to leave. A quick trip to the library to gather whatever resources were available garnered few results, but a handful of books were better than nothing.

She spent the evening delving through them looking for something that could help her, finally giving up and going to bed when she'd been through three books to no avail. The next morning she got into the shower almost as soon as she heard Malfoy get out. Packing was a blur, as was the walk to the Great Hall...until she met Ginny, who ran into her arms like a crazy person, hugging her tightly.

"Harry told me... Oh, Hermione! Be careful!"

"I will, Ginny," Hermione whispered reassuringly. "Take care of Harry and Ron while I'm gone."

The two girls hugged for a while and then went to breakfast together.

Hermione looked around and found Draco seated at the staff table with Dumbledore, looking as bored as usual, and she wondered why he wasn't seated with the other Slytherins. She wanted to get at least a few bites down, and then she'd be ready. Only a few spoonfuls into her porridge, Ron and Harry came in and sat down next to her.

"Well, I guess you'll be going soon," said Harry.

"As soon as I'm finished eating," she replied, nodding. The silence as they ate wasn't quite comfortable, and then it was time. Best to get it over with, she told herself. She tried to smile as she got up to grab her bag again, but almost choked on the bacon in her mouth when Ron stood and threw his arms around her.

"Come back to me," he whispered before releasing her and walking out of the Hall. Hermione smiled and relaxed. Everything was going to be okay...she knew it. She gave Ginny and Harry a final wave and went to join Malfoy and Dumbledore.

* * *

Draco slept restlessly once again and woke up early to pack. Not knowing how long they'd be gone or what he would need, he thought he'd be safe and packed a little of everything he owned. Only a few minutes after he'd left the bathroom, he heard the shower turn on again and knew that Hermione was awake and moving through her own morning routine. Good. He didn't want to draw the whole thing out. The quicker they were out of there, the better.

He pulled on the pair of trousers he'd left out and a light-grey jumper over his white Oxford. After donning his shoes and stashing his wand in his pocket, he took one last look at the room, closed the door, and went down to the Great Hall for an early breakfast.

There were only a few other people in the place when he arrived...one of whom was the Headmaster. When the old man not-so-subtly beckoned him over, he resisted rolling his eyes and veered off to the staff table. He pointedly ignored the warm smile Dumbledore gave him.

"Judging by your lack of uniform and the bag you just placed on my foot, I'd say you and Miss Granger are leaving this morning."

"Yes, Professor," said Draco, kicking his bag a bit so it was no longer squashing Dumbledore. "The sooner the better, we figured."

"I quite agree. And I'm very proud to see you meeting this challenge head on."

"Thank you, sir," said Draco, faking a smile.

He had begun to spoon his breakfast into his mouth when something struck him. "Sir?" he said suddenly.

"Yes?"

"Yesterday in your office, you were going to say something before Granger showed up. What was it?"

"I think that can wait until another time, Draco. You have enough to be getting on with right now."

Draco nodded, showing down his curiosity and irritation, and went back to his breakfast. Dumbledore was certainly right about one thing; he had more than enough to deal with.

Hermione came in about a half an hour later with a bag similar to Draco's on one arm and a very anxious-looking Ginny Weasley clinging to the other. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but he wondered if Hermione had told her what was going on. Hadn't she said she wasn't going to tell anyone? Draco frowned.

He watched as the Weasel and Scarhead came in and sat down next to Hermione. Potter looked fine...as much as was possible for him anyway...but Weasley looked sick. Draco watched the scene covertly, and it was impossible to miss the tension between them all. When Weasley finally jumped up threw his arms around Hermione, Draco looked away. He hated the closeness between the friends that was so obvious even when they were fighting.

He thought of the people he called friends and how a scene like the one in front of him would be absolutely laughable. He hadn't said a word to any of them about what was going on, and he had no plans to. He turned again to Dumbledore to find the man already watching at him.

"I will tell the student body that you have gone to see the opening of the new Egyptian library with the Head Girl once you are gone."

Draco raised an eyebrow and wondered if the long-held suspicion that Dumbledore was omniscient might actually be true.

He looked back at Hermione's table to find that she had left it and was walking towards him. "I'm ready," she said simply when she stood next to him. Draco nodded and got to his feet...he wasn't really hungry anyway. Hermione smiled at the Headmaster, and they both shook his hand.

"Good luck to both of you," he said. "Please keep me informed, and I shall do the same."

They nodded and left together without another word to Dumbledore or each other until they were out the gates and into Apparating range.

"Granger, I thought you weren't going to tell anyone about any of this. Seems to me like you told your friends quite a bit."

"I said I wasn't going to tell anyone about your involvement, not that I wasn't going to tell them anything."

"You said..."

"I wrote to my parents yesterday and told them we were coming. They're expecting us."

Draco didn't trust himself to speak without saying something that would make Hermione strike him, so he kept his mouth shut.

"You should hold my arm since you've never seen where you're going," she said, holding out her right arm for him to take, which he did, making sure to touch her as little as possible.

"On three," he said, grabbing hold of his bag tightly with his other hand. "One, two."

* * *

When he arrived on the Grangers' lawn, Draco was astonished. He had expected to find himself in front of a hovel of the same sort that the Weasleys had the audacity to call a house. Hermione's home was quite large even by wizarding standards...not anything near the size and grandeur of his own manor, mind, but certainly not a shack. It was built in Tudor-style, painted in browns and tans. The lawn was large and well taken care of, and roses surrounded the walk to the door. Draco, against his will, thought the house gave off an air of wealth and class, or at least it would have if it had been the home of a witch or wizard.

"Granger, what do your parents do for a living...?" he mumbled, still in a daze.

"They're dentists," she replied a little shortly.

Draco didn't know what a dentist was, but if he were a Muggle and forced to make his own fortune, it was obvious that dentistry would be his career of choice. Maybe staying here wouldn't be so bad after all....

"All right, Malfoy," she said in that same shrewd tone, "let's get a few things straight."

Draco turned his head to her, a little startled.

"In my parents' home, you'll follow my parents' rules. You may not like this, and you may not like them, but you will treat them with respect in their own home. Is that clear?"

Draco rolled his eyes and began up the walk. "Honestly, Granger, I was taught how to behave civilly towards my inferiors before you were crawling."

Hermione snorted and moved past him, walking quickly to the door. She knocked a few times before opening the door and walking in. Draco stepped in behind her and closed the door softly. He set his bag down and looked around.

Not bad...

The foyer itself, aside from being stylishly decorated, was large enough to fit the whole of the Shrieking Shack in it...or at least most of it.

*She has this, and she spends her summers with Weasley?*he thought, bewildered.

"Hermione!" said a woman with thick, brown hair as she came around a corner from the right. Her almost wild hair and defined jaw line gave her away as Hermione's mother. She took her daughter in her arms and held her as she whispered something in her ear that Draco couldn't hear. He imagined it had something to do with her being shot from the worried look in her eyes.

She let go of Hermione and turned to Draco with a smile on her face. Muggle though she was, Mrs. Granger exuded warmth, and he barely caught himself before he grinned back at her. He settled for a slight upward turn of his lips instead.

"And you must be Draco Malfoy," the woman said, keeping an arm around Hermione's shoulder.

"I am. It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Granger," he said politely, if distantly.

"You may call me Jane, and welcome to our home."

"Thank you. It's quite beautiful," he replied truthfully.

Jane Granger beamed at him. "Well," she said, clapping her hands once. "I'm certainly glad I was able to be here for your arrival. Your father had to leave early for the office today, Hermione. He wanted to be here, but he sends his love and says he'll see you tonight."

"Okay," said Hermione cheerfully. "Are you leaving now?"

"Yes," her mother replied. "I'm sorry, dear. I'd love to stay, but I have a nine o'clock root canal. I trust the two of you can handle yourselves until we're home tonight. I'm sure you can show Mr. Malfoy around. Just don't set anything on fire."

The woman winked, and Hermione chuckled. "I can't promise anything, Mum."

Mrs. Granger laughed and hugged her daughter again quickly before grabbing a large, leather bag off of the mahogany table near the front door. "I made up the second guest room for Mr. Malfoy. You can show him to it whenever you're ready."

With that, her mother left, and there was quiet again. Draco looked at Hermione, who was smiling.

Second guest room? How many did they have?

Draco, who had watched the whole scene aloofly, stared at her curiously. It was as if he was seeing her for the first time. Hermione in her own home seemed somehow different. For once in his life, Draco felt out of place...for more than one reason.

"Your parents really love you," he said quietly.

If Hermione thought this was an odd statement, she didn't show it. "Yes, they do." She looked around her foyer once more and smiled again before looking back at him. "Thank you for being courteous to my mother."

Draco nodded once to show he'd heard her but didn't respond otherwise. Granger thanking him was still an idea he was getting used to.

Something strange was happening. Much of the anger he usually felt had evaporated when he'd walked through the Grangers' door. He felt more at ease than he had in a long time. Still, best not to lead himself or Granger into a false sense of security.

"Granger, this doesn't change anything. I'll behave like the well-bred individual that I am towards your parents, but don't expect me to treat you any differently. You're still a Mudblood and a know-it-all."

"Don't worry, Malfoy," she answered. "I gave up expecting things from you a long time ago. Follow me. I'll show you to your room."

He followed her up the large, wooden staircase that curved up to the left and opened up into a long, wide hallway with many closed doors. They walked the entire length of the hall before Hermione stopped at the end.

"Right here," she said, motioning to a door on the left. She opened it up, and Draco followed her in.

It was a fair size, but sparsely furnished...with a large bed against the opposite wall, a dresser, a walk in closet, and a nightstand. A mirror with a gold frame hung on a wall, and Draco briefly caught his own reflection as he crossed to the bed to set down his bag. "This will do."

Hermione leaned against the doorframe and said, "Your bathroom is right across the hall. I'm going to go unpack and change. I'll let you do the same, and then I'll show you where the kitchen is."

She disappeared from the doorway to walk down the hall, and Draco took her place leaning against the frame as he watched her. "Which one is yours?" he asked.

She pointed to a door on the other side of the hall, then disappeared behind it.

He had a brief urge to follow her and get a good look at the inside of that room, but pushed it aside in favor of unpacking. It didn't take him long to unload everything he had from his bag. He hung most of his clothes in the closet and stuck the rest in the dresser. He didn't need to change into anything else, so he went ahead and put his toiletries in the bathroom Hermione had told him was for his use. Once again he was impressed despite himself.

He sauntered back into the guest room and lay down on the bed, inexplicably tired considering it was mid-morning. This was all so strange. It was remarkable to him that he could feel so relaxed in this place. In *Granger's* home. A part of him had honestly thought there would be a literal stench to her house...that Muggles would reek in their natural habitat. That was certainly what his father had always led him to believe. But then, Lucius Malfoy was not exactly what could be considered credible. And with that ironic thought in his head, Draco drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Only a short while later, Hermione appeared in his doorway, intending to show him the rest of the house or at least the parts he would be using for however long they were there. But when she saw him asleep on the bed, she decided not to wake him. Aside from the fact that Draco Malfoy was much more tolerable while unconscious, she realized that he looked peaceful for once. His breathing was deep and steady, and there wasn't even a trace of his usual sneer.

She stood there watching him sleep until she realized what she was doing. The door made only a soft sound as she closed it, and her footsteps were light as she walked down the hallway and back to her room.

Intruders

Chapter 10 of 11

What does it mean to see someone as he or she really is?

I heart SW69, the best beta ever.

Draco woke up a few hours later and didn't recognize his surroundings. He was alarmed for only a moment before recent events caught up with him and he remembered. It was surprising that he had drifted off, he thought, and he wondered how long he'd been out. A glance at the clock on the wall told him it was almost noon, which meant he'd only been asleep for two hours. He frowned when he remembered that Granger had told him she'd be right back. Where was she?

He rose hesitantly from the bed and walked to his door to open it. Craning his neck to look down the hall, his eyes found Hermione's door, and he saw that it was closed. Unsure if she was inside or not and uncomfortable with venturing into new territory, he moved cautiously down the hall. As he paced closer, he heard the faint sounds of music and knew she must be inside. Uncertainty faded as curiosity took its place, and he couldn't help wondering what she was doing, alone in her own bedroom. He leaned back against the wall across from her door and crossed his arms.

Considering his options, he was half-tempted to go off and explore the Grangers' house on his own, but he knew it was a bad idea. And he couldn't just stand here doing nothing all day. This was Granger's house, he was her guest, and she should be catering to him, not doing whatever she was doing inside her bedroom. He reached forward to knock, but paused when his curiosity got the better of him. Instead he moved forward quietly and turned the handle of her door slowly, careful not to let it squeak.

As it turned out, he needn't have worried about alerting her to his presence. The music that had been faint from the hall was rather loud now that the door was open. He glanced around Hermione's room with wide eyes, and it struck him that it was as if he were touching something he had never been allowed to touch. He knew she would never have given him permission to intrude. It was even more amazing to see her room because it was just so... her. Someone else had decorated their rooms at school, but this room was all Hermione's. Everything in it was what she had chosen for herself. It was more than a room; it was a window into a girl who confused and often angered him. He didn't understand her at all, but this... this gave him a hint of who she really was.

It was something he'd never considered before. The idea of being curious about what Hermione Granger kept secret was absurd, but here Draco was. He really hadn't known what to expect when he'd opened the door. A part of him had expected to see tacky stuffed animals perched all over the place, but no animals were in sight. Her bed was made of black brass, and she had chosen pale-blue and gold satin for her duvet. Her walls had photographs...stationary photographs, he noted...of different scenes from places in the world. Places she'd traveled to, he assumed. A map of the world with small, red dots scattered across it took up a good portion of the opposite

wall.

There was a large vanity with a mirror next to her bed and several bookshelves, which were mostly filled. Draco recognized the television under her window for what it was, and he smirked. Another large, silver box was sitting on her dresser, flashing blue lights. He wondered vaguely what it was, but his attention rested finally on Hermione herself, who was sitting cross-legged at the head of her bed, writing in what he assumed was her journal.

Draco felt a sudden desire to know what she was writing, but didn't move, choosing to watch her instead. Even though he knew she wasn't likely to hear him, he kept his breathing as quiet as possible and stood as still as he could. She had tied her hair back again and had changed into Muggle clothes...denim shorts and a plain, yellow shirt. Her lips were moving slightly, and he realized she was singing along to the music. He listened more closely to the song and was surprised to find it wasn't revolting. It was smooth and sort of mysterious, much like the girl singing along to it, Draco realized.

Hermione smiled slightly for no apparent reason and laughed to herself, and Draco felt himself smile in turn. The sound of a violin rang through the room as the song played on, and she closed her eyes and bobbed her head a little until it was over and the music faded out. She opened her eyes and smiled, and Draco couldn't have breathed if he'd tried. She began to write again, completely unaware that there was someone watching her and that something was happening to him.

He wasn't sure how long her stood there, and he didn't really know what he was feeling or thinking. Suddenly, everything felt as if he were seeing it for the first time, and what he was feeling... He knew he really was feeling it for the first time. As he stared at her, it was amazing to him that after everything she'd been through and seen, she could still smile like that. She was untainted.

He was broken out of his trance when Hermione suddenly looked up and saw him standing there. Instinctively, he took a step back.

He expected her to start shouting at him, ordering him to get out, but she just looked at him with a startled expression on her face. Finally, she closed her journal and got up from her bed gracefully. She crossed to the silver box and hit a button, and immediately, the music stopped.

She turned to him and said, "Hi. You're awake."

His throat felt dry when he spoke. "Why didn't you wake me?"

She crossed the room and slipped her sandals on. "I thought you needed to sleep," she said, and then she looked him right in the eyes. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long," he lied, and then his curiosity defeated him again. "What was that song?"

Hermione came to the door and walked out into the hall, pulling it closed behind her. "Crush. Dave Matthews Band."

"Oh," he replied, and he knew he'd remember it for a long time.

He cleared his throat and stepped aside for her to move past him, trying to regain his composure. "Your room is rather... sweet," he said, relieved that it sounded as smug as he'd been trying for.

Hermione rolled her eyes and said, "You could have knocked."

"Where's the fun in that?" he asked, and he still felt he was being a little too... nice. He needed to piss her off. "I only wish you'd been naked, Granger...then I'd have something interesting to mention at the next Prefects' meeting."

She threw him an icy glare that made him smirk, and she led the way down the stairs. "If you're quite finished insulting me, I'll show you where the kitchen is."

"I'll never be finished insulting you, Granger. It's just too easy."

Hermione glared at him again. "Why am I not surprised?"

Draco followed her through a short hallway and a swinging door and found himself in a spacious kitchen with an island covered in blue tile, surrounded by barstools. Everything was very clean, he noticed, yet it still retained the warmth he'd felt since first walking through the front door.

Hermione pointed to the right and said, "Icebox," then pointed to the counter in the corner and said, "Coffee."

She indicated in the same way where the dustbin, silverware drawer, and dishes were located.

Clearly she wasn't going to cater to him.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, walking to the icebox and opening it.

Draco admitted he was and muttered something about poison that made Hermione roll her eyes. He walked up behind her and peered over her shoulder. "My God, Granger. You've got nothing here."

"My parents normally eat out. We can run to the supermarket later if we need to."

Draco held himself back from making a snide comment about the lack of house-elves who should be doing the shopping. Instead he reached in and grabbed a box labeled 'Captain Finkle's Fabulous Fish Fingers.' He wasn't sure what a Fish Finger was, but since he happened to know for a fact that fish did not have fingers, he thought it was a safe bet that these were probably edible. Besides, they looked to be the only substantial food in sight.

Hermione looked annoyed. "Help yourself," she snapped.

"I will," he replied, raising an eyebrow at her.

He looked at the box and then around the room. "How do I...?" he muttered.

Hermione sighed in exasperation and snatched the box out of his hand. She pulled out a handful of the things and placed them on a plate, then found another silver box and slid the plate in. She closed the thing and poked at it until it lit up and started humming, and Draco's eyes widened momentarily before he settled in a stance of nonchalance. The gadgets Muggles used as substitutes for magic had intrigued him for quite a while, and he was tempted get a closer look at this one.

"This is called a microwave," she said condescendingly, as though speaking to a child. "It heats whatever you put inside it."

Draco gave her a sneer but didn't dignify her with a response. There was a small area on the microwave with a timer counting down to zero, and Draco watched in skepticism. As interesting as this device was, he found it very unlikely that when the timer hit zero, his food would be warm.

When the timer reached zero and made a loud screeching noise, Draco *did not* jump in surprise. When Hermione reached in and pulled out the steaming plate of food, he was not impressed in the least. She handed him the plate, which he almost dropped when he felt how hot it was, and pulled a bottle of ketchup out of a cupboard.

Hermione repeated the process for herself and joined him at the bar with her own plate just as he was starting on his second finger...they were incredibly greasy, almost soggy, and he couldn't believe how good they tasted.

The two of them ate in silence, and Hermione finished first.

"I didn't want to be the first to bring it up," she said, "but we need to figure out what we're going to do next."

Draco swallowed his mouthful. "I thought we were going to wait for your parents to get home, then talk to them about it."

"Oh. Yeah... we were. I just... I mean, I didn't think you would..."

"Stop stuttering, Granger. Under the circumstances, I think it's our best option," he said. He didn't like admitting it, but what else were they going to do? Besides, Hermione's mother had been... nice, likeable. Perhaps her father would be, too.

Hermione nodded and stood. "It's 12:30 now. They'll be home at 5:30. That's five hours."

"I can add, Granger."

"Shut it."

"Make me."

"I'm going to go take a nap. I'm sure you can find a way to amuse yourself. The telly is through that door," she said, pointing to the right, "and the study is through that one if you'd like to find a book. I'm assuming of course that you haven't forgotten how to read."

She gave him a nauseating smirk and strolled out of the room.

Draco shook his head. Hermione Granger really went above and beyond the call of obnoxious.

A few more bites polished off his last fish finger, and he got to his feet. He placed his empty plate on top of Granger's on the counter and chose the first door she had pointed to. About an hour later, he was thoroughly bored with the telly, so he turned it off and decided to do some exploring. If he ever wanted to, he thought now was his best chance.

Ten minutes later, he figured he'd seen most everything, and he found himself in the study. An image of Hermione spending hours in here as if it were a bloody chapel came into his mind, and he smirked.

Draco looked around the room until he found the most valuable thing he'd seen yet in the house, and by 'valuable' he didn't mean monetary worth. Draco Malfoy loved the piano. It was a little-known fact, but he'd played since childhood. His father had demanded that he become an excellent pianist, and he had always loved playing, so he'd chosen not to let the fact that it had been his father's idea stop him from enjoying it. The Grangers' piano was very fine indeed. He smiled genuinely as he pulled the bench back and sat down. He was at home now.

* * *

Hermione wondered if leaving Draco alone and unsupervised in her house was a good idea, but she didn't fancy the idea of babysitting him, and she really did need a nap. The bizarre nature of the situation she found herself in had struck her more strongly than ever when she'd told Draco Malfoy to amuse himself with her telly. And if she wasn't mistaken, he had been noticeably less hostile towards her after his own nap. She wondered what had caused the change and how long it would last before he remembered that he was Draco Malfoy and that his mission in life was to be an insufferable prick.

Not that she didn't appreciate him behaving himself in front of her mother...she had honestly expected him to treat her mother with the same open animosity that he showed her. But he hadn't. He'd surprised her and had been very charming. Hermione suspected he had it in him to be charming at any time and chose not to be. What a shame, she thought. She could almost tolerate him.

She fell asleep easily and woke up several hours later, then rolled over to look at her clock. It was 5:15. She sighed sleepily and closed her eyes. She sincerely hoped her parents had some ideas. Her thoughts turned to her reluctant houseguest, and she wondered how Draco had chosen to spend afternoon; she hoped dearly that he hadn't disregarded her mother's request that they not set anything on fire.

She got out of bed and straightened her clothes. As soon as she reached the top of the stairs, she heard music. Someone was playing the piano. Someone was playing the piano very well. She froze for an instant before the music pulled her toward it.

It couldn't be...

No way.

Hermione quickened her pace and walked towards the study. She knew who the pianist had to be before she reached the archway, but when she saw him sitting there, his hands creating music like she'd never heard before, it hit her harder than anything ever had.

She watched him from the side as his fingers moved faster than hers ever could. His eyes were closed, and his expression was blank. His body swayed slightly, following his hands wherever they took him, and she was captured.

Then he opened his eyes, and she'd never seen him look more alive, not even when he was ready to hex her. She couldn't help feeling that she was seeing something she wasn't meant to be a part of, and it scared her... It moved her. How could this boy, this boy who had never been anything but horrible and selfish, create something so beautiful? She looked at him now and knew for certain that the face he showed to the world was not his true self; this was. The music gave him away.

Physically, he was the same Malfoy he'd been five hours ago, but something had changed. She was seeing him now...really for the first time...and she felt so much in that moment. Every emotion hit her like a tidal wave, and she found it hard to swallow.

A door opened and closed behind her, and she jumped. When Draco jumped and turned his head towards her, she jerked her own head away and turned to go greet her parents. She blinked the moisture away from her eyes and pushed everything she'd just felt deep down where no one would ever find it. What had just happened to her... was...

"Hermione," her father said, holding his arms out for her. She crossed to him and wrapped her arms around his chest.

"Hi, Dad," she whispered.

"I'm so glad you're okay," he said, pushing her back to look her over. "When I heard what happened... I..." His voice cracked, and Hermione hugged him again.

"It's okay, Dad. I'm safe."

"I know you are... thanks to this boy here."

Hermione's father released her and crossed the hall to Draco, who was standing awkwardly in the archway between the study and the foyer. She blushed as she remembered that she'd explained in her letter that Draco had helped her. She'd wanted her parents to know the truth, even if it was hard for her to admit, and she'd hoped that if they were kind to Draco, he might feel inclined to be pleasant himself. It had been a good idea, judging by the way her father was smiling at Draco as if he were the salt of the earth.

"Thank you," he said simply, holding his hand out to Draco. "I owe you my life and more."

Draco was speechless. The bond between Hermione and her father was obviously very strong. The way he held her and spoke to her... Hermione was her father's life. Draco hadn't known that kind of love and devotion from a father for his child was possible until that moment. He felt more out of place than he ever had. And then the man looked at Draco, and he didn't know what to do with his hands. This man emanated goodness and authority; he commanded respect in a way Lucius Malfoy never had. Draco was terrified for a brief moment, but then the man offered his hand.

"Thank you. I owe you my life and more."

Draco didn't trust himself to speak, so he shook the man's hand and nodded. He glanced at Hermione, but she was staring at the floor, a tight set to her jaw. A pang hit him hard in the stomach. He tried to ignore it and stayed as still as possible as he listened to Hermione's father give a detailed account of his most recent 'root canal.'

About ten minutes later, Hermione's mother came in the door and greeted both her daughter and Draco warmly. He hoped his smile didn't look as strained as it felt. Was this how Hermione's life was all the time? Draco wondered if she knew how lucky she was, and then he cursed himself for the thought.

He stood back and watched as the family had their moment together. Anger rose up inside him, and he walked into the kitchen to sit down on a barstool. The last thing he wanted was to hang around in the hallway witnessing something he would never have. He would not allow himself to envy Hermione Granger. She was a Mudblood, he reminded himself, and she had nothing that he wanted. There were certain things that were meant for Draco, and this would never be one of them. He and Granger lived in different worlds...literally. She had her friends and her family to rely on, and they had her. Draco was alone, and he was better off for it.

And if ever he had a moment of weakness when he forgot who he was and what Granger was, he would remember that when her father had thanked Draco, Granger hadn't been able to so much as look at him. It made it so much easier to remember why he hated her.

Points of View

Chapter 11 of 11

Hermione plays dress-up, and Draco takes a ride....

SB's Notes: Your Christmas wish is my command! To everyone who mentioned this as a story they'd like to see updated, I'm quite flattered, so thanks for the kind words... and thanks even more for the kick in the pants. I needed it.

Thanks go to SW69 for her beta skillz.

Chapter 11: Points of View

Hermione and her parents came into the kitchen a few minutes later, breaking Draco out of his bitter reflection.

"Well, Draco Malfoy, I don't think I've properly introduced myself. John Granger," he said, startling Draco as he thrust his hand forward again.

Draco shook it warily and said, "It's a pleasure."

"Not at all, not at all. Draco, while you're in my home, if there is anything you want or need, you have only to ask."

"Thank you, sir."

"You saved my daughter's life...I owe you so much. If there's anything I can do for you..."

"That's really not necessary..." Draco mumbled, looking anywhere but the Grangers.

"Of course it's necessary!" said Jane. "What you did let us keep our Hermione. If it weren't for... You just have no idea...well, I suppose that's not true. Goodness! You've known her for years! Of course you know how special she..."

"Mum," Hermione interrupted firmly, "we were hoping that maybe you'd be able to help us." She glanced at Draco before continuing. "We could certainly use any advice you have."

Since she was speaking, it was natural to look at her, so Draco did. It wasn't long before he was staring at her, and her voice began to sound far away until Draco told himself to focus. Her father began to speak, and Draco was grateful for the distraction as he tore his eyes from Hermione.

"Yes," he was saying, "I know. Your mother and I have been talking about it, and there is much to discuss, but there's something else that needs to be taken care of first."

"What?" said Hermione blankly.

"Did you think we'd forget what tomorrow is?"

Silence met the question.

"It's your birthday! I know you haven't forgotten."

"Oh, right..." Hermione gave a feeble smile. "That's nice, Mum, but I think this is a bit more impor..."

"Nonsense! We do realize that a lot has happened, but it can wait until we've all eaten. In fact, a good meal would do us good. And since it's your birthday tomorrow, we thought we'd go somewhere nice. Especially since you haven't been home for your birthday in so long. Remember how much we all used to forward to it every year? Who knows how long it'll be before we have an opportunity again? Nothing too fancy, just a nice dinner."

"What? Mum, no! Be serious. We don't have time to... I just want to get this over with."

Draco was feeling the same way.

"Hermione," John said, "we are being serious. We're not saying that we won't help you; we just want to celebrate your safety first, spend a bit of time with you. It can't hurt to delay the conversation a few hours."

"Please... There's nothing to celebrate, and we can spend time here. I..."

"Nonsense," Jane said, taking her daughter's hand. "This is a very special day. We want to remember it."

"Mum, it's not that big of a deal..." Hermione pleaded, looking horribly uncomfortable and darting nervous glances at Draco. "I'm fine. I'm safe. We really don't know what would have happened if Malfoy hadn't... I mean, well. I could have been fine. It's..."

Draco narrowed his eyes. It wasn't that he wanted any more thanks than he'd already received, but Draco could say conclusively what would have happened. He noticed Hermione's father glance at him, and he knew that the man agreed.

"We want to do this for you, Hermione. For both of you," he added, giving Draco another warm smile.

Draco stared hard at his hands.

Hermione seemed at a loss for words...something that Draco normally would have rejoiced at...but now he wished she'd open her mouth and tell her parents to get a hold of themselves. Draco agreed with Granger for once; the faster this whole thing was over with, the better. He didn't really fancy the idea of any sort of 'celebration.'

"Please, I..." Hermione muttered desperately, looking to Draco as if he would be able to rescue her.

"We'd like to leave in half an hour," her father said, and there was a decisive tone to his voice that told Draco the battle was lost.

"I have nothing to wear!" Hermione pleaded in one final attempt at dissuasion.

"What about that dress you wore to Jema's wedding?"

Hermione face turned bright red, and she mumbled something about it being too fancy.

Draco raised an eyebrow, trying not to smile. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all; he was imagining Hermione in a big, pink, frilly dress that would make her look about five years old, and he knew that he couldn't pass up the opportunity to tease her about it. He leaned back a little and folded his arms, smirking.

"It's not too fancy, Hermione, especially not for the place we're going."

"But you said you didn't want anything fancy!" Hermione cried. "Those were your words, Mum! 'Nothing fancy!'"

"Well," her father said. "It never hurts to look one's best, does it?"

Hermione looked close to tears as she looked back and forth between her parents.

"Go get dressed, love," her mother whispered, giving her a gentle shove. Hermione left the room completely defeated, and Draco couldn't stop himself from chuckling.

"She can be impossible, can't she?" said Mr. Granger in a stage whisper.

You have no idea.

* * *

Great. Just great.

She just wanted to get all this over with, and most of all, she wanted to be as far from Draco Malfoy as she could be. Then she wouldn't have to look at him and feel whatever it was that was strangling her. Instead, she now had to put on a stupid dress and spend the evening rubbing elbows with her parents and Draco, pretending like everything was all right.

She stomped up the stairs to her room and closed the door a little too hard behind her. Fine. She'd go. She'd smile. She'd even get herself prettied up like her parents wanted. Anything to get this over and done with. Then they could focus on what was important.

She turned her stereo on nearly full blast and walked into her closet. It wasn't hard to locate the dress she'd worn to her cousin's wedding two months earlier, as it was the only one she owned.

Hermione groaned as she held it out in front of her. Her nose wrinkled as her gaze swept over it; she supposed it wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been considering it was a bridesmaid's dress, but still, it was definitely more fancy than she was comfortable with. She rolled her eyes, sighed, and pulled off her clothes before she slipped the dress on. A glance in the mirror made her scowl; she'd forgotten that she shouldn't wear a bra with the damned thing, and oh, how she hated the fact that she owned a dress she couldn't wear a bra with.

Several minutes later, she had removed all unnecessary articles and, after struggling with the zipper, had resorted to magic to get the thing closed. The stool in front of her vanity was uncomfortable as she sat down and pulled an old tube of mascara, eyeliner, and a few other items she didn't remember having ever used. She rarely bothered with makeup, feeling that if she had ten minutes of unused time, she certainly wasn't going to waste in on something so frivolous, not when there was always something *important* to be done.

Of course, a small part of Hermione enjoyed getting dressed up... every now and then... a very small part. But it just wasn't worth it. It took a lot of work to make her hair suitable for the kind of dress she was wearing. Or at least it had three years ago for the Yule Ball. And well... actually, someone else had done it for her at the wedding during the summer, and she'd read a book the entire time, so she couldn't say exactly how long it had taken then. But that wasn't the point! It was the very principle of wasting time on silly vanities that bothered her. Hermione was at least glad that her hair wasn't quite the bushy disaster it had been in her fourth year; it was more curls than frizz now, most days anyway. Letting it loose from its tie, she watched it fall over her shoulders, smoothing the rogue curls as best she could. She threaded her fingers through it and piled it on top of her head a few times, reluctantly liking the way the wispy curls that fell framed her face.

Arranging the mess in a way that she thought could pass as stylized, she pulled her wand out of her dresser drawer and pointed it at her head, muttering a simple holding charm to make it stay still...as much as was possible. It would have to do; she certainly wasn't going to dig through her things for that mostly empty tube of Sleekeazy's. She smiled smugly to herself, silently daring her mother to make an issue of it.

Slipping on the shoes that matched her dress, she turned the stereo off and left her room. She knew she didn't look great, but she hoped her efforts would at least appease her parents.

A final, resigned sigh was released as she held to the banister and carefully stepped down the stairs. How she hated high heels...

* * *

Draco hurried up to the guest room to change shortly after Hermione, donning a clean pair of black trousers and using his wand to alter one of his Oxfords a bit...to make it

more dressy. He looked in the mirror and smiled, knowing he looked fit for the occasion.

He quickly ran a comb through his hair and used a fragrance charm he'd picked up from his father...rest the bastard...and that was that. The music was rather loud as he passed Granger's door, and he couldn't help smirking.

He found John Granger already waiting, looking very much the part of a dignified, wealthy gentleman, and Draco had to remind himself that the man was a Muggle. He smiled at Draco and beckoned him over.

"You'll need these," John said, holding up a tie and jacket for Draco to wear.

Draco nodded, slipping an arm into the black jacket, which, to his surprise, fit him perfectly. The jacket must not have belonged to Mr. Granger if it fit Draco...he was built differently...but Draco didn't question it.

"Thank you, sir."

The man nodded and said, "Do you need help fastening the cuffs?"

"Er..."

"I'll do it!" called Jane Granger, entering the foyer with a bright smile on her face. She wore a simple, black dress with pearls around her neck, and once again, Draco had to remind himself that she was a Muggle.

She stepped close to Draco and took one wrist, then the other, in her hands. He cleared his throat and looked away uncomfortably, forcing his feet to stand still.

"Very handsome," she said when she was finished, looking him over.

Draco resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He was glad at least that he was perfectly capable of tying his own tie.

"Hermione's not down yet?" she said, frowning slightly.

Her husband chuckled. "Of course not. She's up there glaring at herself in the mirror, devising last-minute excuses to get out of this."

"John... that's..."

Draco was struck with a mental image of this and laughed out loud.

"See, Draco knows I'm right." He and Draco shared a knowing smirk for a moment, which was interrupted by Jane's voice.

"Oh, Hermione, you look very lovely."

Draco's head snapped towards the stairs, and he saw her.

His first thought was that her mother's words hardly did her justice; the second was that she definitely did not look five years old. As she stepped carefully down the stairs and came closer, he wondered if this was the same girl he'd seen leave the kitchen half an hour earlier.

She was wearing a green, satin dress that hit the floor. It would have been very plain if not for the way it clung to her curves and swayed as she walked. Her hair was piled messily on top of her head, but even that suited her.

As she came even closer, he noticed that her face looked different, more defined. Her wide, dark eyes seemed even wider and darker, lined the way they were, and her lips shined, looking as if she'd just wetted them. She smiled at her mother, and Draco felt his stomach lurch. Hermione walked to her mother's side, completely ignoring Draco, and he clenched his jaw and looked down at the floor. She was only a Mudblood in a pretty dress, he reminded himself. Nothing to get excited about.

"Put this on, dear. And these."

"No, Mum," she said, a sharp warning in her tone.

"Don't be silly, Hermione. They'll go with your dress."

Draco looked up at the necklace and matching earrings Jane was holding out for her daughter. She was right; they would go with the dress. They were small and simple, and Hermione was just being difficult.

"Give them to me," Draco said firmly, holding his hand out to take the necklace from Jane.

Hermione froze.

Draco had had enough. He wasn't going to go through the whole night with her pretending he wasn't even there. He walked around behind her and felt his breath catch in his chest. A v-shaped stretch of her back was completely bare, and his eyes followed her pale skin all the way from the wide expanse between her shoulders down to the gentle indentations above the curve of her... Well, that was the last place he needed to be looking. He cleared his throat and stood up straight as he leaned in close to her to pull the necklace around her and fasten it. Her body was completely rigid, he noticed, and she smelled like raspberries.

A memory of her tackling him into his chair flashed through his mind, and he smiled to himself as he clasped the necklace. Taking her hand, which was clenched tightly, his fingers coaxed it open and placed the earrings in her palm before he moved away, backing up to stand next to her father. She met his eyes then, and he could see his own confusion mirrored there, the raw uncertainty.

"Wonderful!" John said, and Draco almost jumped as his eyes were drawn away from Hermione's. When he looked back, her eyes were focused on the floor again, and he knew that whatever it was he had seen in them was gone now. "Let's get going," John said, putting an arm around his wife.

"Hermione, would you two prefer to take your car or ride with us?"

The word registered with Draco, and an image of those four-wheeled contraptions he'd seen popped into his mind. He felt silly for not realizing until now that they wouldn't be Apparating, but of course they wouldn't. So... they'd be taking a... car. Draco looked at Hermione, who was again steadfastly avoiding his eyes, and the stab of irritation he felt gave him an idea. "Actually," he said to John, "I'd prefer it if we rode with you, sir. I don't think I trust Hermione to get us there alive."

Hermione's head snapped up as she glared at him, and Draco grinned. Hermione Granger was nothing if not predictable, and now she wasn't ignoring him; the uncertainty from before was gone as well, replaced now with the fire he recognized.

John chuckled and said, "Then you'll be glad to know that Hermione passed her driver's exam with one-hundred and eight percent."

"Of course she did..." Draco muttered.

"But if you'd prefer to ride with us, that's fine with me. Unless Hermione has any objections?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and snapped, "Let's just go," as she stomped out the doors, sending a final glare at Draco. Draco followed and watched as she grabbed hold of the handle to the rear door and pulled, sliding onto the seat smoothly once the door was open and slamming it closed quickly. Draco walked around to the other side and did the same, making a considerably less noise than she had. He glanced over at Hermione and found her leaning against her door, looking straight ahead, her jaw set. She almost looked physically ill.

He watched her for a moment as her parents took their seats, and then the car started to move.

Oh, dear. Logically, he had known the car had to move, but somehow it still surprised him. He swallow hard and focused on the muscles twitching in his stomach, his eyes shut tightly. Gripping the seat with his hands, he held his breath.

It was the sounding of Hermione chuckling that forced him to open his eyes.

"Feeling queasy?" She smirked, and for the moment, his nervousness was overridden by irritation. On the other hand, at least she was looking at him again.

"Shut up, Granger," he growled, closing his eyes again and sucking in a shaky breath as the car suddenly turned a corner. Thankfully, that was the last he heard from her, at least for a while.

Several minutes later, Draco's stomach had gotten used to car moving, and his nerves had calmed. He'd taken again to sneaking glances at Hermione, but she was back to staring straight ahead, though her body was less stiff now and swayed slightly with the movement of the car. He noticed that she had crowded herself up against the door even though there was plenty of room between them, and he rolled his eyes for what felt like the fiftieth time that night.

Draco knew that he should be thanking Merlin that she wanted nothing to do with him, that she was staying out of his hair, but he wasn't happy about being ignored. It was quite annoying, not to mention that now that the novelty of the car ride was wearing off, he was bored as hell. He wanted to get a rise out of her. But he couldn't do that if she kept pretending he didn't exist.

A glance forward told him that Hermione's parents were busy talking in the front seat. He knew they wouldn't hear him, so he thought for a moment and then chose a few words that were bound to stir something up.

"Hold my wand, Granger?"

Hermione looked at him like blankly for a moment before he saw a spark ignite in her eyes and a flush spread through her cheeks.

Bingo.

"What?" she gasped, her eyes wide.

"My wand, Granger," he replied as casually as he could, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. He pulled his wand out of his pocket, waving it lightly to demonstrate his meaning.

Hermione stared at it, then blushed harder and looked away, and he knew he had her.

"Not *that* wand, Granger. Although, I must say, I never knew you had such interesting thoughts running through that head of yours." He wagged his eyebrows at her and twirled his wand as he chuckled.

Hermione blushed harder still, but favored him with a glower this time.

"I mean, especially in front of your parents..."

He gave her a cocky, suggestive wink, designed solely to infuriate her, and judging by the narrowing of her eyes, he figured it must have worked.

"Give me that," she snapped, snatching his wand from his fingers. "I don't trust you with it."

"Give that back!"

"I thought you wanted me to hold it," she challenged.

Draco's mouth snapped shut. The truth was he hadn't though beyond his initial comment, which had been purely for shock value. He couldn't think of a reason he'd *actually* want her to hold his wand, and now she had it, and he had nothing. Back to square one.

Nice going, Draco...

Draco leaned back against the door with a sigh and folded his arms, sulking.

"Take it," she mumbled, tossing him his wand back at him. "It's not as if I have a use for anyway. I'd hide it, but there's no room for it in this... *dress*." She said the last word as if she were describing mold... or something worse.

"So you didn't bring yours then?" he asked, honestly wondering if she'd left it behind.

"I'd didn't say that." With a smirk of her own, she glanced down at her own chest, and Draco's eyes followed before he realized what he was doing and looked away.

He looked back a few minutes later and was glad to see that she was focused on the window. He didn't know when he'd have another excuse to look at her like this, so he after deliberating for a moment, he decided to take advantage of the opportunity that had presented itself.

And... she really was quite... striking. His eyes traced the lines and angles of her face, the curls in her hair, the defined shape of her collarbone... and down to...

"Malfoy."

"Hmmm?"

"I'm going to give you two seconds to stop staring at my chest before I take that wand back and use it on you."

"Is that a promise?"

She quirked an eyebrow, looking him slowly up and down, as though appraising him to see if it would actually be worth the effort.

Apparently it wasn't, and Draco was disappointed once again...and bored. She focused her attention elsewhere, and Draco was left to think. It struck him as rather odd that she hadn't really bitten back. He thought that any other time, she would have responded to his teasing much more violently. It felt... out of character. If there was one thing he could always count on, it was the ability to get a serious rise out of Granger. So what was different now?

He couldn't pretend for a moment to have any idea of what was going on inside her, but for once, he wished that he were one of the people she confided in, if only to get a better idea of how to wind her up. And... if he was honest with himself, she was not what he'd always thought she was. It was difficult to cling to his one dimensional view of

her now that he'd seen her in her own home, with her own family, her own memories. He hadn't exactly pictured what her life had been like as a child before Hogwarts, but it had definitely surprised him to find she was not at all underprivileged...and not just in a monetary sense, but in general.

He'd always been of the opinion that she, and those like her, were lucky to even be allowed to breathe the same air as people like himself. But now, to see her in the world she'd been raised in, it was apparent that she had a life outside of his view of her. If she somehow woke up tomorrow with no magic, her life would go on and would probably be just as successful as it probably would have been in the magical world. She didn't seem to need magic. It didn't seem to make her different one way or another. Over the last few days, weeks even, he'd begun to see her as her friends saw her, as her parents saw her. Just as a normal person. A person who got out of bed in the morning and followed the same routine as always. A person like himself.

There was still a voice in his mind telling him that she was a worthless Mudblood slag and that he was a fool for letting himself question that. The voice sounded very much like his father, and it was making less and less sense with each moment he spent in Granger's company. Yet it also made sense to him that the wizarding world was weakening with every Mudblood integrated in. There was something to be said for pureness of blood, pureness of magic, if only from a strength aspect. If someone like himself produced offspring with someone like her, there was an increased chance that the child or children would be born with weak magic or no magic at all. That was a fact. Sure, there were flukes, exceptions to this rule, like Granger and... *Potter*, but on the whole, they were diluting the power and traditions that were his rightful heritage. So how was he to reconcile what he knew to be true with what he was learning about Granger?

"Malfoy."

"What?"

"You're still staring."

* * *

Hermione breathed a quiet sigh of relief now that it seemed Draco had stopped trying to pester her. The shapes passing by the window were blurred with her thoughts as she pondered her life of late. When Draco had put his hands on her to help with her necklace, she'd felt a tingling in her skin, in her stomach, and her mind had been drawn back to the moment of watching him play the piano. It felt to her like there were two different Malfoys: verbal Malfoy and Malfoy by touch. When he opened his mouth, it was usually very hard not to loathe him, but other times, when he was silent, or touching her, or smiling... that Malfoy was one she had a hard time finding fault with. He was turning out to be more than what he appeared, and though she couldn't say she liked him all that much, she'd have a hard time *hating* him ever again.

And then there was... her awareness of him, which she couldn't deny. She was attracted to him...on a physical level certainly, and if there was more to it, it wasn't something she was ready to examine. It was just so convoluted. He could touch her so casually, and she knew it was nothing to him, but his touch gave her feelings she didn't want to have. She wished for space from him, both emotional and physical...time to process the things she was learning and the feelings she was having.

Although... the exchange about Draco's wand had brought an... interesting topic to mind. Draco's sexual history. He had to have... of course he had. She'd heard stories. She'd found them disgusting at the time and had wondered at their credibility. Surely he hadn't slept with *that* many people. And there was no way he was *that* good.

Hermione swallowed hard, forcing herself to focus on something... anything else.

Several minutes later, the car stopped in front of a very nice restaurant. She didn't wait for the valet to open her door. She needed air.

This was going to be a long night....