Bewitchments and Charmes

by sshg316

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2007 DMHG Fic Exchange on Live Journal.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"It has to be here somewhere," the bushy-haired woman muttered as she ran her slender fingers over the spines of the rare tomes. She sighed as she finished searching
yet another shelf and moved on to the next.

The library in the Department of Mysteries was a dark, dreary room with tall bookcases that stretched from floor to ceiling, each crammed full of unusual and ancient texts.
It was more of a storage facility than an actual library...who would possibly want to read in such a gloomy environment? There were no tables, no chairs, no cosy alcoves
to curl up in and while away an afternoon engrossed in a good book ....

Sometimes she really missed the library at Hogwarts.

"*Lumos,*" she said as she walked toward a poorly lit corner. With a groan, she bent down to check the bottom shelf, lowering her glowing wand so she could easily read the
titles. She sneezed fiercely as her movements stirred the layer of dust on the floor. An annoyed expletive crossed her lips as she dropped to her knees, and she wished for
what must have been the thousandth time that the Department of Mysteries had not placed a magic-repelling charm on all of the books, as well on the room, in an effort to
protect the integrity of the ancient texts; otherwise, she would have simply Summoned the blasted thing and been done with it. Exhausted and irritated with how long what
should have been a simple task was taking, she rocked back, resting her bum on the heels of her shoes. "For Merlin's sake!" she complained, completely exasperated.
"Has the wizarding world never heard of the Dewey Decimal System?"

She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear and continued the arduous task on hands and knees. She was so absorbed by her search that she did not hear the sound
of the library door open, nor did she notice the telltale clicking of footsteps on the stone floor.

"You know, Granger," an arrogant, if a bit amused, voice drawled, "I always knew one day I'd have you on your knees before me. I do wish you had selected a better
location...the floor you are crawling about on is filthy. But then, I suppose that must make you feel right at home."

Hermione rolled her eyes before looking up into the smug face of her tormentor. "And you would know all about filth, wouldn't you, Malfoy? You were on your knees in the
dirt quite a few times yourself, if I recall correctly."

Her jibe at his past as a junior Death Eater hit its mark, and she watched dispassionately as the amused gleam in his eyes faded, only to be replaced by his usual cool

disdain. His lips, which had hovered on the lingering edge between a smirk and a smile, curled into a sneer.

"Not bad," Malfoy replied as he flicked a speck of dust from the sleeve of his robes. "Witty, although a bit obvious, don't you think?"

Hermione shook her head and sighed quietly, wondering why they seemed to have such a compulsive need to snipe at each other. Like herself, Malfoy was an Unspeakable, and they often worked on the same assignments, as both were highly intelligent and detailed in their work. Most of the time, they managed to work quite well together ... even if they bickered their way through the day. Most of the time it was harmless enough; Hermione could only recall a handful of times that things had escalated into a full-blown row. He had not called her a Mudblood since their Hogwarts days, although he danced around the word at times. Even so, in her opinion, he took entirely too much pleasure in riling her ... and unfortunately, she just could not hold her tongue.

Surprisingly, it was generally Malfoy who would back away from a confrontation, even if he had been the one to initiate it. He had matured since the war, and Hermione had often wondered about the change in him. He was more relaxed and yet still tightly coiled, friendlier and yet still distant, brutally honest and yet still evasive...all at the same time. Whatever was going on with him, he was certainly confusing, and it was driving her mad.

Hermione did not like to be confused; it meant she did not understand something, and that was simply unacceptable.

"Did you need something?" she asked, careful to keep her voice neutral. She did not have the time or the patience to deal with a Malfoy temper tantrum.

He gazed about the library in an exaggerated manner. "Given that I am in the library, I do believe I am looking for a book," he said, his words overly enunciated, as though he were speaking to a child.

Choosing to ignore his latest attempt to bait her, Hermione swallowed the caustic reply that had leapt to her tongue and instead responded primly, "I gathered as much. Since we are working on the same project, I would hazard a guess you are also looking for the department's rare edition of *Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes*. "

It was Malfoy's turn to roll his eyes. "Of course I am. You have been in here for hours. They finally sent me in to fetch you ... and the book."

Hermione gritted her teeth in annoyance. "I said I would find it, and I will. And what do you mean hours? I can't have possibly been here that long."

"Yes, you have," he retorted, each syllable uttered with meticulous deliberation. "You have been here since directly after lunch, and it is now approaching half past four."

Her jaw dropped in surprise and then closed quickly; she would not have him comparing her to a fish. Belatedly, Hermione realised she was still kneeling on the floor and scrambled to a standing position. Unfortunately, she moved a bit *too* quickly, and as she stood, her foot slipped, twisting her ankle sharply. Blindly, she reached for the nearest shelf in an attempt to steady herself, but it was too late; she pitched forward, falling heavily onto the cold, hard floor.

Then she heard the clapping.

"Oh, well done, Granger! Quite graceful."

She glared up at him, her hair in wild disarray, her clothing now entirely covered in dust, as opposed to just the knees of her trousers. Malfoy's amusement was evident in the twitching of his lips and the hint of warmth in his otherwise icy grey eyes.

"Shut. Up." Her cheeks flushed in horrified mortification at his obvious amusement at her expense. Of all people before whom to make a complete ninny of herself, it had to be him. She was terribly embarrassed but determined to maintain her calm demeanour in front of the prat who so arrogantly stood before her ... even if his silvery grey eyes were sparkling with mirth.

"Such a gentleman you are," Hermione said sarcastically. "Well? Are you going to help me up or not?" *Honestly!* she thought. *He has to be the most arrogant, pompous, egotistical, self-absorbed, pretentious...*

She was ruthlessly hauled to her feet, Malfoy's fingers grasping tightly to her upper arms.

"All you had to do was ask," he replied blandly, his expression devoid of all emotion as he unceremoniously released her.

Her chin rose defiantly, and her eyes narrowed before she answered with a terse, "Thank you."

Malfoy offered a cool smile in response and turned away, but not before Hermione sensed his discomfiture, as though he was embarrassed. Why would that be? No, she must have misinterpreted his expression. His pure-blood sensibilities had probably been dismayed at having to touch her. *What a git.*

"We need to find that book, Granger. Where have you looked for it?" He had moved away from her and was already perusing the shelves.

Hermione eyed him warily as she rubbed her sore hip. She supposed it would go faster with both of them looking for the wayward book. In an effort to speak to him as little as possible, Hermione briefly indicated the shelves that she had already searched.

They stalked off in opposite directions, and the hunt for *Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes* began again.

~o0o~

Twenty minutes later, they were no closer to finding the book than Hermione had been when she first entered the library almost four hours before. She wanted to beat her head into the wall. Her neck and back ached from hours of fruitless searching, and she was more than ready to just go home and soak in a nice hot bath. She stretched, placing her hands on her stiffened lower back.

"This is the last bookcase, Granger," Malfoy said from behind her. "It ought to be here."

Too tired to say anything, she nodded. Malfoy took the upper shelves, as he was taller, and she took the lower. Hermione rubbed her eyes and yawned. When she located the book, she was going to find the information they needed and then *Incendio* it. Well, maybe not that. It *was* a book. On second thought, she decided it would be much more satisfying to find the person responsible for the library's nonexistent cataloguing system and hex *them* instead.

Within a few minutes, they were both standing, one at either end of the same shelf, until finally they met in the middle. There it was. Of course, it would be the very last book, on the very last shelf, of the very last case.

"Thank Merlin," Hermione breathed, reaching out to take the book. Before she could grasp it, however, a pale, long-fingered hand beat her to it, grabbing the book and pulling it from the shelf.

"I will take care of this. You may leave now," he said dismissively, waving a hand in the general direction of the door.

Hermione goggled at him. Of all the nerve! Her indignation at his high-handed behaviour spilled forth in a torrent of cutting words. "I don't think so! Give it to me now, Malfoy. I spent all afternoon searching for that book, and *I* will look for the Charm we need, and then *I* will make the final report!" She reached out, seized hold of the book and tugged it toward her.

Malfoy, however, did not let go.

"I said to *go home*. Look at you. You're clearly exhausted...you look a fright, by the way; your eyes are red from all this dust, your face is pale, and you can barely stay on your feet. What makes you think you can even *read* this book in your condition, much less make sense of it? Go *home*." His final word was punctuated with a sharp tug, causing Hermione to stumble forward, her fingers tightening their grasp.

His words regarding her appearance stung...no woman wanted to be told she looked a fright by a man. Even worse, however, he had insinuated that she was incapable of doing her job properly...and that was something she absolutely would not tolerate. Incensed, she lashed out, striking where she suspected it would hurt the most...his pride.

"Oh, you'd like that wouldn't you? I search for hours and hours, and you come in for twenty minutes and take all the credit, right? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised," she continued, an uncharacteristic sneer marring her features. "Just like a Malfoy to let their 'lessers' do all the work whilst they bask in the glory." She gave the book a vicious yank.

"Bitch," he said calmly, although the anger in his eyes belied his bland expression.

Exhausted and beyond frustration, Hermione's tenuous hold on her temper snapped. "I hate you!" she hissed, pulling on the book once more as she glared at him. It wasn't exactly true. She was aware her words were an overreaction born not only of fatigue but years' worth of squabbling and cutting remarks. Truth be told, she was tired of fighting with him all the time. She'd be damned, though, if she would apologise to the git. His response to her vehement statement, however, surprised her.

Malfoy's face contorted in rage, and he violently pulled until her body was flush against his, the book trapped between them. Glowering at her, he whispered harshly, "The feeling is mutual, I assure you."

Suddenly, a red light shot out from the book they were clinging to, undulating and rippling through the air like a ribbon before focussing first on Hermione's left hand and then Draco's right.

"What? No!" Hermione cried, her voice echoing through the room as the band of light tightened and pulsed, flattening her palm against the front cover of the book.

Time seemed to grind to a halt as she watched the red glow change to a blinding white, the light twisting and growing until it formed a cylindrical tube emanating from their hands to the ceiling. A whoosh of magic encircled the two of them once, then twice before the light collapsed, the magic having completed its task and returning into the book.

"No! Damn, damn, damn!" Hermione was well aware of what had just happened, but she had to try; she attempted to pull her hand away from the book, only for the magic to press her palm to the cover once more. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Her mind was a jumble of emotions and thoughts: exhaustion, anger, sadness, frustration, hysteria. Laughter won out in the end, startling Malfoy, which only caused her to laugh even harder, until tears of mirth coursed down her cheeks and her breath came in halting gasps.

"What the devil is going on, Granger? Tell me!" he bellowed, his eyes wide with bewilderment and confusion.

"Oh, my gods," she sputtered as she struggled to regain her composure. "The book ... the book has bound us to it. *Us*!" She nearly collapsed in yet another peal of laughter, bending over at the waist and clutching her stomach with her free hand.

Malfoy frowned. "Bound us to the book? Why?"

"B-because," Hermione managed to choke out through her laughter, "it thinks we're *...lovers*!"

"What?!"

She nodded earnestly, a stray giggle escaping her lips. "I read the most recent version of this book back in our fourth year at Hogwarts. The magical properties of the text must have been removed in later editions. Anyway, it contains a section on bewitchments and charms for relationships ... one of which is a Binding. It explained several different types of Bindings, each with a specific purpose. It was quite fascinating, actually..."

"Get to the point, Granger," Malfoy groused.

Giggling again...Merlin, she wished she could stop laughing...she nodded and hurriedly explained. "One of the Bindings is for quarrelling lovers. Only one of the pair needs to be holding the book, and the argument must cause extreme emotional turmoil in both parties for the magic to be activated. It forces the two to remain in close proximity to each other in the hopes that the relationship can be salvaged."

"You mean, we're *stuck* to this book?" he asked. He sounded horrified.

Hermione swallowed reflexively, her laughter vanishing in an instant; he was not going to like this. "Yes."

Draco's eyes widened, and he immediately tried to remove his hand from the book's back cover ... repeatedly ... but to no avail.

"Shite," he breathed. "Wait a minute. You said it was for lovers. We are obviously not. How the hell did this happen, then?"

Hermione stared at up at him, her expression serious as she answered softly, "You know the old saying, Malfoy: 'There is a fine line between love and hate.' Apparently the book doesn't differentiate."

"You must be joking." Quickly, his left hand pulled his wand from his right sleeve, and he spent the next several minutes casting *Finite Incantatem* over and over again, until finally his head fell back in frustration, his eyes focussing at some unknown point on the ceiling.

"I could have told you that wouldn't work," Hermione grumbled.

Malfoy returned his gaze to hers. "How is it broken? How do we get out of this?"

Cringing slightly, she replied, "We apologise to each other."

"Fabulous. I'm terribly sorry, Granger," he said mechanically, as if he knew that there must be more to it than a simple apology.

He was right.

Hermione's eyes flickered momentarily to the red leather book, and she took a deep breath. "The apology has to be reciprocated and sincere ... on both sides."

Malfoy groaned loudly, briefly closing his eyes as if by doing so he could make it all go away. A soft, disbelieving chuckle escaped his lips.

"We're completely buggered."

~o0o~

If her hand hadn't been magically cemented to the cover of the book, Hermione would have stomped away at his callous statement. She was positively livid. Of course he considered the situation to be hopeless...he had no intention of ever offering her a sincere apology; he probably didn't think he had anything to apologise *for*, the sanctimonious prat.

Hermione had wanted to beat her head into the wall before they found the blasted book, and now she wished she had done. Perhaps she would have beaten herself into a stupor and been unable to let Malfoy goad her into an argument; then they wouldn't be stuck...literally...in this godsforsaken mess.

"You realise, of course," he said accusingly, interrupting her thoughts, "that this is entirely your fault."

Hermione glared at him. "I believe you're as much at fault as I am," she snapped, "but placing blame is not getting us anywhere. It's already almost five o'clock. If we hurry back to the department office, maybe someone will still be there who knows of a way to release us from this spell."

He opened his mouth to speak but then seemed to think better of it. Instead, he held out his free arm in the direction of the door and drawled, "Shall we?"

Hermione looked at their Bound hands and then at the door before swinging her gaze back to Malfoy. "Before we make an attempt at walking, perhaps we should discuss how this is going to work."

He shook his head in annoyance. "Just follow my lead," he replied. Malfoy held the book out in front of them, as if they were sharing it while reading, and then wrapped his left arm around her shoulders, drawing her to his side.

Hermione stiffened at the contact even as she marvelled at how well they fit together...like two puzzle pieces...and it was impossible not to notice how nice he smelled or how good his body felt against hers .... She shook head. Surely something so very, very wrong should not feel so ... so ... *nice*. After a brief hesitation, her free arm rose and wound its way around his waist.

"Fine. Let's go," she said, annoyed with herself for feeling even a moment's attraction to Draco Malfoy.

~o0o~

When they reached the office, there was no one there; everyone else had already left for the night.

"Great," Hermione said wearily. Now they would be stuck like this at least until morning ... if not forever. They sat down on the brown leather sofa Malfoy had Transfigured from a desk chair. "What do we do now?"

Malfoy sighed and ran his free hand through his hair. The action surprised her as it mussed his hair...she had never seen a single strand out of place. It made him seem more human, more approachable somehow.

"The book is Charmed so that it has to remain in the Department of Mysteries. We can't leave this floor."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the wizard. "I know *that*! I work here, too, remember?" Composing herself, she continued in a much calmer tone. "I meant, what are *we* going to do? The easiest and fastest way to release the Binding is for there to be a sincere apology and a sincere acceptance of said apology. I think we both know the likelihood of that happening," she said snidely.

"A snowball's chance in hell," he muttered as he rested his head on the back of the sofa and stared at the ceiling.

Hermione swallowed the expected pang of hurt and replied, "Precisely."

They sat for several minutes, Malfoy staring blindly at the ceiling and Hermione uncomfortably looking anywhere in the room but at him. Finally, Malfoy seemed to snap to attention.

"I've got an idea."

"You do?"

"Let's order delivery. I'm famished."

Did all men think with their stomachs? Then she sighed. She supposed she was hungry, and they did have to eat. Hermione wrinkled her nose at what she fully expected his idea of dinner would be: some outrageously expensive, absolutely trendy but completely inedible concoction that wouldn't satisfy a flea. "What sort of delivery?"

He thought for a moment. "Do you like spicy?"

"I ... I suppose I do." What was he up to?

He arched an enigmatic brow before calling out, "Tizzy!"

Immediately, a house-elf appeared, bowing deeply before enthusiastically asking, "Young master is needing Tizzy?"

"Malfoy! Tell me you did not just bring a house-elf into the Department of Mysteries for the sole purpose of taking your dinner order!"

That damnable smirk was his only reply.

~o0o~

"My gods, this is delicious," Hermione said as she grabbed her second slice of pizza. New York Hot, he'd called it...spicy pepperoni with green peppers and jalapeños. "Where did you say this is from?"

They were seated on the floor in front of the sofa, having discovered that if they faced each other while sitting cross-legged, as though they were mirror images of the other, they could eat relatively comfortably. The large, square delivery box sat on the side of their free hands to allow for easy access.

Malfoy finished chewing before answering, "Mulberry Street in Notting Hill. It's named after a street in New York City."

"Fabulous," Hermione said, blissfully taking another bite. Her mouth was on fire, but it was worth it. Luckily, Tizzy had procured a bottle of wine along with the pizza, and she took a sip before asking, "Do I want to know how your house-elf managed to get delivery from Muggle London?"

"Probably not," he said distractedly as he eyed the box of pizza before shrugging and taking yet another slice.

"Mmm. I thought as much." Truthfully, Hermione didn't much care at that point. Malfoy had surprised her, not only with a delicious meal, but with his kind demeanour toward Tizzy. Given Dobby's experiences of living with the Malfoy family, she would have expected Tizzy to cower in fear in front of her master. Instead, the house-elf had been warm and friendly ... and he quite obviously adored Malfoy, who appeared to be just as fond of Tizzy. It was disconcerting, to say the least, and yet another example of how his behaviour tended to confuse her.

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence. Once the empty box and wine bottle had been disposed of, they settled in for their night's stay on the sofa.

"How in the world did you eat so much of that?" Hermione asked curiously, having just watched the wizard devour two-thirds of a twenty-inch pizza.

"I'm a growing boy," he replied smugly, causing Hermione to roll her eyes. "But that's nothing compared to Weasley. I've seen him eat one and half of those things all on his own."

Hermione stared at him in amazement. "Weasley? As in *Ron* Weasley? Tall, red hair, blue eyes, terrible temper? *That* Weasley?"

Malfoy's lips twitched in amusement. "He, Potter and I had dinner at Mulberry Street after the last Canons versus United game. It was a great match...Potter was able to obtain some spectacular seats."

Hermione shook her head, as if the action would somehow make his words make sense. "I'm sorry. Did you just say you had dinner with Harry and Ron...*my* Harry and Ron...after a Quidditch match that you attended *together*?"

He nodded, his expression smug but at the same time, a tad wary.

She felt something in her chest tighten and heard the blood rushing through her ears. Things just weren't adding up. He had gone to a game and dinner with Harry and Ron? Why hadn't they told her that? Surely they would have *told her that.* There could only be one answer: Malfoy was lying.

"I don't believe you. Just what do you think you'll accomplish by telling such tales, Malfoy?" she asked accusingly.

Just like that, his eyes shuttered, turning cold and hard. "Perhaps you should talk to your friends more often, Granger."

~o0o~

The next hour was spent in agonising silence as they read through what Hermione had mentally christened the "tome of torture." After their disastrous conversation over pizza, Malfoy had coolly suggested that they search for any loopholes or safe guards that might release them from the Binding. For the first time, she wondered if she might have actually hurt his feelings.

She shifted a bit on the Transfigured sofa, trying to find a more comfortable position; after hours spent with her hand stuck to the front of the book, her arm and back were aching. They were seated side-by-side, the book held between them, as if they were in a Muggle church sharing a book of hymns. Their free arms were, out of necessity, pressed against each other. Hermione shook her head at the irony; most of her life had been spent attached to a book, and now she couldn't wait to let go of one.

And so they read together, Hermione just skimming for new information and then waiting for Malfoy to finish reading and turn the page. Every so often, he would make an odd sound as he read, a murmur or a breathy laugh, most likely in reaction to one of the odd charms or bewitchments found in the book. They weren't finding any information on releasing the Binding, but at least time was passing by more quickly now that she was reading something...even if she had already read most of it previously.

Hermione sneaked a glance at the wizard who had been her enemy for as long as she could remember. Even she couldn't deny he was attractive. He was tall and fit, and the rather pointy features she remembered from when they were eleven had softened with age, although she would still describe his face as angular. His straight, white-blond hair was longer than when they were children, as per wizarding custom, and fell about his shoulders in sheets of silver. His eyes, she believed, were his best feature, grey pools that changed in depth to suit his mood...a warm fog for when he was pleased, an icy silver for when he was angry. Yes, Draco Malfoy was a very attractive man. It was too bad that his personality was so abhorrent. Well, perhaps 'abhorrent' was too strong a word ....

She was broken from her reverie by Malfoy sniggering softly as he scanned one of the pages. Tired of the uncomfortable silence, Hermione asked politely, "Find something amusing?"

He turned to look at her, eyes scanning her face, searching for something ... she didn't know what. One corner of his mouth quirked into a small smile, and he nodded. "There is a charm here that will return your goat to you if it's stolen. It's specifically for use only with goats."

Hermione felt the laughter bubbling up inside just before she dissolved into a fit of giggles. After a few minutes, she managed to control her amusement, but one glance at Malfoy's quizzical expression caused her to laugh even harder.

"It was amusing, Granger, but I'm quite certain it wasn't that funny," he drawled, his lazy grin at her antics softening his features.

He was breathtaking.

Hermione felt as though someone had doused her with ice water. She wasn't supposed to think of *him* that way. That was bad...very bad.

"So what was so funny, hmm?" Malfoy asked as he casually draped his left arm across the back of the sofa.

"Oh, erm. Right." She cleared her throat awkwardly as she struggled to return her mind to its previous train of thought. "Well, do you know of Professor Dumbledore's brother Aberforth?"

His brow furrowed in confusion as he nodded. "The bartender at the Hog's Head, yes?"

"Right. Well, I was just wondering if he used that anti-theft charm on his goats," she explained with a smile.

"And this is funny ... how, exactly?"

She glanced at him slyly. "I'm surprised you've never heard the rumours, Malfoy. It's well known that Aberforth Dumbledore is quite ... erm ... *fond* of his goats."

Malfoy blinked as he considered her words, and she watched the dawning comprehension as his face twisted into a grimace.

"Ew, Granger. That's just ... that's just bloody *wrong*." He shuddered dramatically, sending Hermione into peals of laughter once more, and soon his own deep chuckle joined hers, reverberating in the small room.

Once they had both calmed, they continued reading, each pointing out any peculiar charms they came across in the text, and Hermione pushed aside any thoughts of how comfortable the easy conversation and teasing felt.

As she read, she came across a charm that had not been included in the newest edition, one that she found quite peculiar. She frowned as she pondered over its possible intended uses.

"Something get your goat, Granger?"

She rolled her eyes. "Ha ha. Very funny. Actually, it's this medieval bewitching charm. I don't understand the purpose, beyond the obvious."

"Show me," he said, leaning in for a better a look at the page.

"Here." She indicated the section and then waited impatiently as he read.

When he was finished, he looked at her in amazement. "You really don't know what this is about?"

Disgruntled, Hermione shifted restlessly and turned away. "No, I don't." She paused for a heartbeat. "Surely it isn't merely a convenient way to steal. There has to be more to it than that."

When she returned her gaze to his, he was staring at her incredulously for the briefest of moments before a smug smile eased onto his face.

"Well, well, well. Something the know-it-all doesn't know. Tell me, have you read any wizarding fables?"

Hermione frowned. "Other than *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*? No. Why?"

"Because if you had, you would understand the purpose," he replied dismissively. "Now, the charm itself bewitches a noble wizard...a lord, if you will...into removing his signet ring and giving it to a witch who casts the charm. Correct?"

"I already know that part, Malfoy," she groused, folding her free arm across her middle in aggravation.

"Merely reviewing," he said, obviously warming to his role as teacher.

Hermione was certain that if he had been able to rub his hands together in glee at the opportunity to show her up, he would have done.

"Every pure-blood family has a signet ring," he explained. "They're passed down to the first-born son of each new generation upon his coming of age at seventeen. You see? This is the Malfoy family ring." He moved the back cover of the book just enough so that she could see the signet ring on the smallest finger of his right hand. The flat, oval top of the ring was inlayed with emeralds, which surrounded a silver "M."

"It's lovely, but what I want to know is..."

"Calm down, Granger," he interrupted. "I'm getting there. During medieval times, when a wizarding nobleman was interested in a witch, he would remove his signet ring and place it in her palm. If the witch placed the ring on any finger of her right hand, it indicated an acceptance of his offer of courtship, sort of a magical contract. A formal courtship would last one year. If they then became betrothed, the ring would magically transfer to the woman's left hand until after the marriage, when it returned to the wizard until their first son turned seventeen. If they decided they did not suit, the ring would return itself to the wizard. It's an old custom, and one that is often used as a plot device in old wizarding fables."

Disappointment flooded her. "So the purpose of the charm is to trick a wizard into courting a witch?" Her nose wrinkled in distaste.

Malfoy shrugged. "Yes."

She huffed, having hoped for something much more intellectually stimulating than the supplanting of an archaic courtship ritual.

"You really dislike not understanding something, don't you?" he asked, his expression curious.

"I like to know things," she said defensively as her chin raised a notch.

He shook his head and smirked. "Well, at least now you know what the charm is about. Learning about medieval courting and its related charms is very important, after all."

Hermione looked at him and in all seriousness replied, "Actually, the most important thing is that I still have my goat."

She grinned at him, feeling quite proud of her witty quip, and then they laughed together until their stomachs ached and their cheeks were damp.

~o0o~

Two hours later, they had finished reading the book, and although they learned nothing new about the Binding, they had at least discovered that the text did not contain any information relevant to the assignment that had been the origin of their current circumstance.

Now, they were quietly chatting about any little thing that came to mind. Somehow, over the course of the evening, she had become tucked into Malfoy's side, his left arm still draped behind her, stretched out along the back of the sofa. His fingers had fastened onto a wayward lock of her hair, and he toyed with it absentmindedly as they talked.

Hermione chose not to consider why she did not pull away.

"So after that horrible debacle in France," Malfoy was saying, "I spent a few months in Spain, Egypt, China, and then India, studying both wizarding and Muggle comparative cultures. Fascinating stuff, really. Somehow, I ended up in New York City, and I liked it, so I decided to stay. While I was there, I completed my apprenticeship in Charms, and when that was done, I decided it was time to return home. I was offered a job with the Department of Mysteries, and ... well, here I am."

"New York," Hermione said, smiling softly. "Ah, that explains the love of New York-style pizza."

Malfoy laughed, then inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Right you are."

Hermione turned her head to face him and was about to ask more about his travels, but she stopped when her eyes met his. A frisson of energy crackled between them, and Hermione's gaze drifted to his mouth. Her skin tingled in unwanted anticipation, and she watched, feeling as though she were standing outside of her body, as his tongue darted out to wet his lips. He seemed to lean closer until she was flooded with the unacceptable desire for him to close the distance between them and kiss her. Just as she began to fear that her wish was about to be fulfilled, Malfoy jerked away and cleared his throat.

"So what about you?" he asked conversationally, pretending as though the moment had never happened.

Unsettled by her unexpected reaction to his proximity, Hermione asked absently, "Pardon?"

"What did you do ... you know, after the war?"

Hermione stiffened and bowed her head to stare at her feet; she did not feel like talking any more. "I .... There's not much to tell. I'm suddenly quite tired. Do you think we might just go to sleep?"

Don't look at him, don't look at him, don't look at him. Despite her inner mantra, she did just that. He was staring at her, his expression unreadable, and she fought not to squirm under his intense gaze.

"Of course," he said finally, and he stood, indicating that she do the same. A wave of his wand, and the Transfigured couch was re-Transfigured into a bed.

It was an awkward task, but they managed to both lay down, Hermione on her left side and Malfoy on his right, the hands still glued to the book placed strategically between them near their heads. They quickly discovered if they opened the book, the backs of their hands could rest easily on the mattress, although the weight of the thick volume was a bit uncomfortable.

"*Nox.* Good night, Granger."

Hermione closed her eyes, effectively blocking him from her sight if not her thoughts. "Good night."

As she attempted to relax, her mind traitorously focussed on all the little incidents she had refused to think about over the course of the evening. There was one moment that she could not make sense of no matter hard she tried. Her lack of knowledge regarding the wizarding world's courting traditions would have been the perfect

opportunity for him to mock her for her non-magical heritage ... and yet, he had not.

She drifted into a fitful sleep with one question repeating itself in an endless loop...why hadn't he?

~o0o~

"Crucio!"

Pain shot like fire down her spine and into her extremities, and she was unable to contain the scream of agony that burst from her throat. She could vaguely hear Bellatrix Lestrange screeching at her to tell her about the vault, about the sword, and then the pain would intensify again.

After an eternity, the pain receded, and Hermione opened her eyes.

"What else did you take? What else have you got? Tell me the truth or, I swear, I shall run you through with this knife!"

Hermione had never known such fear as she did in that moment.

"What else did you take, what else? ANSWER ME! CRUCIO!"

And then she was screaming again, the curse firing through her convulsing body before it was lifted once again.

"How did you get in my vault?" Bellatrix demanded. "Did that dirty little Goblin in the cellar help you?"

"We only met him tonight!" Hermione sobbed; the pain was unbearable. "We've never been inside your vault .... It isn't the real sword! It's a copy, just a copy!"

"A copy?" screeched Bellatrix. "Oh, likely story!"

"But we can find out easily!" Hermione heard Lucius Malfoy exclaim. "Draco, fetch the goblin; he can tell us whether the sword is real or not!"

Hermione's eyes fell upon the pale, determined face of Draco Malfoy. But she wasn't looking at the seventeen-year-old boy he had been that day so long ago; it was the twenty-seven-year-old man to whom she had been mistakenly Bound who stared at her briefly before striding away.

Hermione was filled with rage. "Malfoy!" she cried, her entire body shaking in anger and pain.

Once he reached the doorway, Malfoy looked over his shoulder and sneered. "She got your goat, Granger." And then he was gone.

"Crucio!"

"Hermione! Hermione!"

She could hear someone shouting her name as she let out another piercing scream.

"CRUCIO!"

She screamed again and again, praying that the pain would stop.

"Hermione!"

"HERMIONE!"

She woke up screaming, tears streaming down her cheeks, her eyes wild and unfocussed. Malfoy's voice calling her name had jolted her from her nightmare.

"Are you all right?" He reached for her, his face grim and etched with concern, but she flinched and moved to the edge of the bed, curling her body away from him ... as far away as she was able.

"You ... stay back. Don't touch me!" Hermione's entire body trembled, her breathing harsh and ragged as she attempted to rein in her tumultuous emotions. The nightmare was a familiar one, more memory than dream, but this time, it had been different. Usually, she only distantly registered the presence of anyone other than her torturer in the Malfoys' drawing room. But this time, she had clearly seen the adult Draco Malfoy. It was confusing, and for once in her life, Hermione wasn't certain that she wanted to understand.

Even in the darkness, Hermione could feel him watching her as she calmed and her body relaxed. After several long minutes, she sat up, Malfoy coordinating his movements with hers until they once again sat as mirror images, the book between them. He quietly cast *Lumos*, and a soft glow illuminated the room.

"Are you all right?" he asked, repeating his earlier question.

"Yes. Just a nightmare. Nothing to worry about."

"That was some nightmare," he replied, his tone sceptical.

"I said it was nothing to worry about," Hermione snapped, wanting him to leave her the hell alone. At that moment, he was the last person she wanted comfort from.

There was silence for several minutes until Malfoy sighed. "It's always going to be like this, isn't it?"

Hermione found his defeated tone to be particularly infuriating. "What are you on about?"

"This!" he said, waving a hand between her chest and his. "This tension between us. No matter what I do, you'll never forgive me for how I treated you in school."

Hermione's jaw dropped in incredulity. "You think this about some name calling and a bit of bullying?"

"Isn't it?" he retorted. "I have tried for two years to make amends for my behaviour toward you, and you have rebuffed me at every turn."

Of all the insufferable .... "Listen, Malfoy..."

"No!" he interrupted vehemently. "I've waited two years to get this off my chest, and you are damn well going to listen."

Hermione was shocked into momentary silence. Her lips thinned into an angry line, but even in her emotional turmoil, her curiosity was too great to ignore. "Fine. Talk."

"I'm not the same person I was when we were in school," Malfoy began, his expression determined but earnest. "I did a lot of growing up during those years I travelled. I *changed*, truly changed. It took a lot of work and effort, and self-examination isn't the most pleasant task. But I did it; I faced my demons and emerged a new man."

His eyes glowed with triumph, and Hermione found herself mesmerised by his words.

"When I returned to Britain, I was determined to make amends for my past. I didn't return to my parents' home; I got a job on my own merits and rented my own flat with my own money. I began to volunteer every week at St Mungo's in the Spell Damage Ward, as well as twice a week at the orphanage for those children whose parents were killed in the war. It didn't matter that people believed it was all an act...I knew differently, and for once in my life I was doing something for someone other than myself. And it felt good."

He paused for a moment, staring at his feet as he considered his words. "After a while, I was able to personally apologise to several people, including Potter and Weasley, who both were eventually generous enough to accept my apology and offer an olive branch of their own...but I forgot," he said with a sneer. "You don't believe that they would have anything to do with the filthy son of a Death Eater. Did it ever occur to you that perhaps they knew what your reaction would be to their having voluntarily spent even the briefest moment of time of with me? Perhaps that is why they chose not to tell you."

Hermione stared at him, her eyes wide, knowing that they were on the cusp of something that she was not sure she was ready to face.

Malfoy glared at her defiantly. "I spent two years trying everything I could think of to make amends with you. I tried being nice, I tried being friendly. But oh no, that wasn't good enough for you. You wouldn't give me the time of day. In fact, whenever I approached you, you looked at me as if I were lower than the dirt beneath your shoes. So eventually I gave up. You are never going to accept that I've changed, and so why bother trying?"

Malfoy's rigid posture gave way, and his shoulders slumped in defeat. "It's such cruel irony that we should end up Bound to this ridiculous book, and the one thing that can free us is the very thing I have repeatedly attempted to offer and that you will never accept ... my sincere apology."

Hermione sat motionless, her mind processing the barrage of words that had been hurled at her with such fiery emotional intensity from a man she considered to be cold and unfeeling. In a flash, snippets of conversation from earlier that evening flooded her mind.

"The apology has to be reciprocated and sincere ... on both sides." "We are completely buggered."

"The easiest and fastest way to release the Binding is for there to be a sincere apology and a sincere acceptance of said apology. I think we both know the likelihood of that happening," she said snidely. "A snowball's chance in hell," he muttered as he rested his head on the back of the sofa and stared at the ceiling.

Her mind whirled as her preconceived notions about Malfoy were turned on their ear. He had not meant that he would not apologise; he had been convinced that she would refuse to offer forgiveness. She had misread him; she had been wrong. It was a bitter potion to swallow...and one that she was not yet ready to accept.

She shook her head in denial. "No. That can't be true. You constantly bait me. You're always sniping at me, riling me until I retaliate. If you've truly changed, then why do you persist in treating me so abominably?"

"Because I don't know how to act around you, damn it! When I attempt a friendly conversation, you ignore me. At least poking at you gets a reaction! What else am I supposed to do?"

"You could just leave me alone!" she retorted, pushing aside the small, niggling prickle of guilt she felt at his wounded tone. It was true; she did either ignore him or summarily dismiss him. No wonder he had given up. But all thoughts of culpability disintegrated in an instant with his angry reply.

"Believe me, I've tried," Malfoy snarled. "But I'm not the only one doing the baiting, princess. Take a long, hard look at your own actions before you go hurtling accusations at me."

He was right about that...she gave as good as she got...and she didn't like him reminding her of it one bit. "Damn you."

Malfoy released a howl of frustration and raked the fingers of his left hand through his hair. "What will it take?" he asked plaintively. "What do I have to do to prove to you that I'm a different person? Everyone but you is willing to give me a second chance ... *everyone but you*. Why?"

And then there it was. Hermione's epiphany came with a sudden clarity, and she struck with deadly precision. "You want to know why? Because everyone else wasn't tortured in your bloody drawing room while you just stood by and watched! You did nothing!" she cried, pouring all the pain and rage she felt into her words. "She cast the Cruciatus Curse on me over and over and over ... and you did nothing! If she'd have been given the chance, she would have killed me, and you would have done *NOTHING*!"

Breathing hard after her outburst, Hermione stared at the wizard in front her. Now that she had released her anger, she was shocked by the amount of vitriol she felt for him. She had pushed the feelings down until she was all but numb, using snide remarks and clever retorts to deal with his almost daily presence in her life. But the truth was, she was angry at him, very angry, for his inaction that day in the drawing room of his ancestral home, and her entire body shook with the intensity of it.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he whispered brokenly, his pale face white with guilt and remorse as he used her given name for the second time that night. "I ... I was a *child*. I know it's no excuse. I should have done something, anything. When they brought you in, I tried to be vague ... I knew that whatever they had planned, it wouldn't be good, and I didn't want ...." He paused, his haunted eyes closing briefly. "I was terrified for myself, for my parents. I was helpless to do anything ... and if I'm completely honest with myself, I'm not certain I would have done anything even if that had been an option." Malfoy took a shuddering breath. "I was a monster and a coward."

Then he began to laugh bitterly. "And now, look at me. I think I've changed, and yet what have I done? Spent the last two years trying to force you to listen to my apology, so that I can feel better and pat myself on the back for a job well done." He bowed his head, his chin resting upon his chest. "I'm a selfish bastard, and I don't deserve your forgiveness," he whispered.

Hermione listened with a stoic façade as her mind and heart wavered between her long-held anger and newly-found compassion. She had wilfully ignored him, not wanting to acknowledge his efforts to start anew, nor to listen to his apology; she had not wanted hear it because she had not wanted to forgive.

In an instant, Hermione's long-ignored sense of fairness overwhelmed her, and for the first time since that night at Malfoy Manor, she allowed herself to deliberately remember that night. She searched her memory for Malfoy's presence in the room as Bellatrix tortured her ... and she found him, tucked away in a corner, his pale face barely visible in the ill-lit room. Instead of the triumphant and gleeful visage she had anticipated and feared, all she saw was a frightened boy attempting to hide from the horrors he was witnessing, his eyes wide with terror.

Her heart broke for him. But could she forgive him? She looked at him, and remembered a lesson learned as a child: Forgiveness is not about what one deserves...it is a matter of grace, a gift freely given.

With shaking fingers, she reached out and gently placed her hand on his shoulder. He started at her touch, his eyes snapping to hers. She smiled slightly, her cheeks wet from tears she had not realised she was shedding, and said, "You may be a selfish bastard, but I forgive you anyway."

His brow furrowed in confusion, and his own eyes glistened. "What did you say?"

Her smile grew. "I forgive you ... Draco."

He blinked at her in stunned disbelief. "You..."

"There's more," she interrupted, her smile fading as her lips began to tremble. "I have been clinging to the past so that I could hold you accountable not only for your actions...or lack thereof...but for the actions of others, as well. It wasn't just about our rivalry at school; I was punishing you for what Bellatrix and the Death Eaters did to me, because you were a convenient target. That was wrong of me and unfair to you. I'm sorry! Please forgive me," she pleaded, her voice breaking as she began to weep

openly.

And then she was enveloped by strong arms, and her head was buried in a warm chest. Hermione clung to Draco as her tears washed away the years of enmity and bitterness. With his lips at her temple and hers against his neck, they whispered words of contrition and exculpation.

When her tears were spent, they lay down, still wrapped in each other's arms. As they fell into an exhausted sleep, neither noticed the tingle of magic as the Binding was released, and *Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes* slipped from their lax hands before falling to the floor.

~o0o~

Morning came early after such an emotional night, and Hermione felt a bit uncomfortable at having awakened in such an intimate embrace. Draco's flushed cheeks, however, eased her discomfort, and she smiled at him as she Untransfigured the bed, returning it to its original form as a desk chair.

Together, they walked to the Atrium so that they could Floo to their respective flats to freshen up before returning for the day's work.

"I was wondering," Draco drawled, hesitating before he entered the Floo. "Would you do me the honour of having lunch with me today?"

She grinned at him. "I'd like that."

Although his expression did not change, Hermione could feel his satisfaction at her reply. Rolling her eyes, she waved as he cast down his Floo powder and stated his destination, and then she did the same.

When she returned to her desk in the Department of Mysteries, she found a note attached to a small box. Recognising Draco's handwriting on the piece of parchment, she opened the box first and gasped: it was his signet ring. Her heart beat a staccato rhythm as she read the note.

Don't get your knickers in a twist, Granger. It's symbolic...a peace offering. If you'd rather, I can always get you a goat. ~DM

She smiled. A peace offering. *It's a start*, she thought, slipping the ring onto her finger before she left the office to walk to the library. She had a book to return.