

around for a quill and the half-written essay. "If Hermione tries to help me with it one more time I am going to *scream*."

"Well, we couldn't have that," Draco drawled lightly. "Let's see what you've got so far." He stole Harry's quill off him, setting in to read the unfinished essay with a faint frown on his lips. Harry wished they were alone, so he could kiss it off the blond's face.

"No wonder your grade has been improving this year," Parkinson mused, and Harry chuckled.

"It's not entirely his doing," he insisted. "I've been paying better attention. But not having this git throwing things into my cauldron helps." Draco elbowed him in the side without looking up from the essay. "Oi! Now who's the barbarian?"

"It's still you," Draco assured. "You're a terrible influence, too."

Harry grinned cheekily. "Someone has to keep you humble."

They were being stared at, but he refused to quit goading Draco, wanting everyone to see that they weren't going to start hexing each other. That Draco could be trusted.

It would be slow going, but he'd get there.

.-.-..

Harry didn't think much about the extra mail Hermione had been receiving in the days since the *Witch Weekly* article. Ginny had some too, but not nearly to the level Hermione was getting. Ginny burnt hers without even opening them, but Hermione insisted on reading every one. "I want to know what they're saying about me," she said, reaching for the letter on top of the stack.

"Why? It's all bollocks," Harry pointed out, picking up a discarded letter. "'*Harry Potter is too fine a young man to be played around by you, trollop*'."

"So you are too fine, but I am okay?" Viktor asked, dropping into an empty seat on Hermione's other side. He smiled at her, leaning in to kiss her on the cheek; ever since the second task, he seemed bolder in his affections. It was sweet, if Harry didn't think too much about how false Hermione was.

"I mean, look at me," Harry said, mock-posing. Ginny smacked him over the back of the head as she passed, not breaking her conversation with Luna. "Rude!"

Suddenly Hermione screamed, jumping to her feet and dropping the letter she was holding. Harry's wand was in his hand before he could even think about it. Her hands were covered in a yellowish-green liquid that smelled strongly of petrol, and was making enormous boils appear on her skin.

"Bubotuber pus!" Viktor exclaimed, sliding down the bench to avoid the nasty liquid. Hermione's hands were entirely covered in boils by now, and she bit her lip against a whimper of pain. "Come, I will take you to your medivitch."