

A Writer of Fictions

by eilonwy

A new term in a new place brings challenges and surprises.

Chapter One: Michaelmas

Chapter 1 of 2

A new term in a new place brings challenges and surprises.

Michaelmas



"I am a writer, writer of fictions,
I am the heart that you call home
I've written pages upon pages
trying to rid you from my bones..."
--"The Engine Driver"

The Decemberists

The sun-dappled leaves had begun to turn, and the air was growing crisp in the early mornings and evenings. It was the first week of October, and the first, or Michaelmas,

term had just begun. Hermione clutched several rather heavy books to her chest and strode across the quad, deep in thought. But it wasn't her classes she was ruminating about, nor the very long paper she was about to begin researching, nor the fact that she was *here*, at Oxford, finally realising a dream she'd had since she was ten.

It was the year that ought to have been her final year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry that she was thinking about so intently. It had been a year from hell, not the purposeful, quiet, orderly, academically rigorous experience she had always anticipated. Her NEWTs had been set aside, as she'd spent the better part of the term on the run with Harry and Ron. That is, until everything had come to an insane, explosive end, and Harry had finally done it...finally ended the life of the creature, for that is what Tom Riddle had become ultimately, who had terrorised the entire wizarding world for far too many years, wreaking havoc and death on the Muggle world as well before being brought to his ignominious end.

After that, they'd all begun to pick up the pieces of their lives very slowly and painstakingly. She'd thought the rest of hers would be spent with Ron. They'd grown closer gradually, during those crazy months of living in hiding; there had been stretches of time when they never knew from one day to the next where they'd sleep that night or where their next meal might come from. Being together had seemed to be what they both wanted and had been meant for.

Funny thing about that. Destiny, fate, call it what you will. It can play tricks, fool one's heart into believing even when the vital piece is still missing. In this case, the vital piece had been small. But she'd felt its absence even when she couldn't put a name to what was missing.

She and Ron had lasted for three months following the death of Voldemort and then had called it a day. It was, she believed, just as much a relief for him as it had been for her. Painful, yes, certainly. It had been wrenching at the time, but surprisingly easy to get over once the initial break had been made. She realised afterwards that it was because the bond, while strong, hadn't been the *right* sort and never had been, no matter how much they and others might have wished it so.

So now here she was, at the university she'd dreamt of attending for as long as she could remember. The wizarding and Muggle worlds were still very separate, but attitudes of the former were being forced to change towards the latter, now that the virulent racism of Voldemort's regime had been discredited and rejected once and for all. The re-formed Ministry of Magic had even encouraged young witches and wizards to go out into the wider Muggle world and explore a bit, get their proverbial feet a bit wet, and bring back what they learned so as to help cement positive attitudes within the community towards those outside it who did not live intimately with magic. Attending university and doing it non-magically was one excellent way, the Minister felt, to accomplish this. Special, intensive classes had been offered in the parts of the castle that had sustained the least damage in order to prepare interested students for their university entrance exams. The course had lasted an entire term, a sort of unofficial "eighth" year for those who stayed, beginning with a chance to review for NEWTs and get those out of the way. Once that was done and everyone had qualified as fully fledged wizards, it was time to begin preparing for academic life in the Muggle world, and for this class of young wizards and witches, this was completely outside the realm of their experience. Specially qualified faculty had been hired to help prepare the students for the vast areas of knowledge they'd never touched on previously.

Admissions procedures would be gently bent in many institutions of higher learning across the UK so that magical and Muggle relations could be further improved by the inclusion of young wizards and witches...the same philosophy as that which informed Muggle Studies at Hogwarts, but at a much higher level. Nevertheless, the prep course gave them all a window through which to see the rigours that awaited them, and they were formidable.

They'd sat their entrance exams in June of that next year. Everyone who qualified was admitted to the university of his or her choice. For Hermione, the letter from Oxford indicating that they were holding a place for her was every bit as momentous, in its own way, as the letter she'd received from Hogwarts eight years earlier.

On this golden autumn afternoon, Hermione's thoughts were swirling around those last days of the war when chaos had defined her life hour to hour. She sat down on a bench and closed her eyes, almost oblivious to where she was, her expression pensive. A light breeze, fragrant with the sweet, seasonal perfume of brightly coloured falling leaves, ruffled her hair. She was unaware at first when somebody stopped right in front of her.

When she did open her eyes, whoever it was had already gone, leaving only a flurry of scarlet and gold leaves swirling in his or her wake. Squinting, she could make out a figure in a dark, fleece pullover and jeans, the hood pulled up over his head, hurrying away. For a split second, the hood slipped a little, and there was a flash of bright hair before its owner yanked it back up again.

Three days later, Hermione slipped into her seat for her Mediaeval Lit lecture. It was the first meeting of the term, and the students, still coming in and milling about, waited patiently for the lecturer to arrive.

At three minutes before the hour, a small clutch of last-minute students burst in and hurriedly found seats. One in particular, a tall boy with a coiled, sinewy grace about him, sat down directly in front of Hermione, casually resting his arm across the back of the empty seat next to him. She glanced up to see and realised, with a start, that it was the same boy she'd seen three days earlier. He was wearing the same dark blue pullover, its hood pulled up against the chill.

She still hadn't seen his face, but Hermione found herself inadvertently staring at the back of his head. For the better part of an hour, as the lecturer droned on, she watched as he bent to scribble notes, then looked up to listen. Down, up, down, up, bend, straighten. Once...*once*...he turned his head ever so slightly, and she caught a very brief glimpse of his face, partly obscured by the hood of his pullover. But it was so fleeting that she couldn't really get a sense of his features.

That is, until he turned his head all the way around to look right at her, the hood slipping down.

A pair of all-too-familiar grey eyes opened very wide in a flash of genuine surprise, then regarded her speculatively, and finally, one eyebrow rose in an amused question. They looked at each other for what felt to Hermione like an hour. In reality, it was closer to thirty seconds...an agonising thirty seconds. When finally she found herself too dumbstruck to do anything more than stare, her mouth slightly open like a guppy, he grinned and turned back around.

Oh, this was not good. She'd already wasted too much time being distracted by the back of his head ~~before~~ she'd realised who it was. Now she found herself obsessing about the number of minutes left before the end of the lecture and what she'd say and do when it did end. Merlin above! *Draco Malfoy!* And then *Focus, Hermione. Your first class. Pay attention.*

Instead of which, all she could think about was how funny and out of place it was to see Malfoy using a Biro for the first time and writing in a spiral-bound notebook instead of the traditional quill and parchment.

All right, to be fair, she supposed she really ought not be all that surprised. After all, she ~~had~~ been peripherally aware of him in that intensive prep course; she remembered being taken aback on that first day a year before, wondering what had led Draco Malfoy, of all people, to seek a path outside the boundaries of the wizarding world, and then she promptly forgot about him, given that the class was fairly large and the work both constant and demanding. It was easy to lose oneself in it, putting blinders on everything but the most immediate goals. Still. To find him *here*...

Hermione had been fortunate in that she had been a lifelong reader, and even after Hogwarts became the whole of her education, she'd always read widely in Muggle literature. She found that this voracity stood her in good stead now, but only went so far she knew she would have to work twice as hard as everyone else in order just to keep up. She wondered now, still gazing thoughtfully at the back of Malfoy's blond head, how he was faring.

At last the lecture was over. The lecturer, Dr. Ponsonby, directed their attention to a list of suggested readings and then strode out a side exit. Hermione busied herself packing up her books, studiously checking that everything was in place three times over. Hoping he might have left by this time, she raised her eyes for a tentative glance and found him leaning against the seat backs in the row in front of his own, his arms folded over his chest, patiently watching her with a faint, somewhat enigmatic smile.

"Have you quite finished? Because I'm starved, and the half hour I had for eating something is now down to twenty minutes. Coming?"

All Hermione could do was nod and grab her rucksack because he'd already turned and was heading out the door into St Cross Street, up Longwall and into the nearby High Street.

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"Coffee okay?" Draco muttered distractedly, fishing his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans. She nodded absently, thinking all the while how strange it was to see him dressed like this, as if he'd been born to it. She had to admit, he certainly did the jeans justice. Or was it the other way round? Either way, he looked damned good.

"...and two lemon raspberry squares, please. Thanks!" she heard him say, coming out of her reverie. Hmm. Arrogant as ever, not even asking what she might like, just assuming she'd want the same as he.

"That'll be four pounds ten," the woman at the register of the Rose Cafe said crisply.

"Right," Draco muttered, pulling out some money.

"Do you need some help?" Hermione began, only to have her offer waved away. She watched, slightly incredulous, as he quite competently counted out the proper amount and handed it over, pocketing the change. His facility with Muggle money was startling. Well, his apparent facility with everything Muggle was startling, so far.

Hermione was intrigued.

They sat at a nearby table, dropping their rucksacks to the floor. Shortly afterwards, the waiter brought their food over, carefully setting coffees and plates of cake between them. Plumes of aromatic steam rose from the china cups.

Hermione took a small, careful sip and then looked curiously at Draco.

"What--?" she began.

He held up his hand.

"You're wondering what in Merlin's name I'm doing here." He lifted the coffee cup to his lips, letting his acknowledgment hang rather dramatically in the air.

Hermione nodded expectantly.

"Same as you, I expect. Studying for my degree."

"Well, obviously. But..." She couldn't help herself. "I don't mean to be rude, but...*why*?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Is it so difficult to imagine that I'd want to further my education at one of the finest institutions in the world?"

"Frankly," Hermione replied, "yes! I don't get it. I mean, I remember you being in the prep class, but, well...seeing you *here*..."

"It's the best place for me to study what I love most. Simple as that." He stirred his coffee to cool it a bit and took a forkful of the cake. A curl of creamy lemon curd remained on his lip, and before she realised what she was doing, Hermione had reached over to wipe it off. Suddenly embarrassed at her own presumption, she withdrew her hand.

"You...uh...had some...on your..." She pointed, blushing.

He touched his lip and found the remains of the lemon curd, drew a fingertip over the area and then popped his finger into his mouth.

"Thanks," he said, absently licking its tip.

Hermione was thinking back to what he'd just said. Simple as what? Malfoy studying at Muggle Oxford simply because he *wanted* to? There had to be more to it. She knew that he'd joined the Death Eaters their seventh year, but there was some question regarding whether he'd been forced. The general consensus was that he probably hadn't had much stomach for any of it, because at the end of sixth year, he hadn't been able to complete the dreadful task Voldemort had forced upon him -- he hadn't killed Dumbledore. And he'd become increasingly withdrawn at school the following year when everything was gradually going straight to hell for all of them. She'd heard that from Neville and Luna and others. He hadn't even been able to positively identify her and Harry to his father with any great conviction or relish before the final battle, even knowing that if he had done, he and his family would have got back into Voldemort's good graces. There had seemed to be a reluctance, a hesitancy. She remembered that distinctly. She also remembered her amazement. Then again, he had tried to capture Harry and deliver him to Voldemort...but it had been a rather half-hearted attempt that had come to naught, ending with Harry saving his life. After that, until the prep classes had begun several months later, she had heard nothing of him. And then he had kept pretty much to himself that entire next year. He'd been a walking enigma.

Even now, he wasn't offering anything more than a stock reply to her question, and something told her not to push.

"So then..." she began again. "What will you be studying?"

"History and English. You?"

"English too." She pushed the last bit of cake around on her plate and then looked up at him again, smiling shyly. "I love literature!"

Draco laid his fork down, an answering smile briefly lighting his face.

"Me too," he nodded. "I--"

He looked away for a moment, a faint flush colouring his cheeks.

"I suppose I may as well tell you. It's been three years after all. What got me reading Muggle literature was...you. Well, not knowingly. But it all started when...well, when I borrowed one of your books."

Hermione's head snapped up. "What?"

"Yeah, I... uh... it was in sixth year. You probably won't remember this. You were in the library one night after dinner, and I passed your table. You had a copy of *Lord of the Flies* along with a bunch of other books. The cover... it caught my eye. I was curious. So... well... I said something and then knocked some of your stuff off the table. And then, whilst you were collecting everything from the floor, I... uh... took it." He shook his head, a tiny smile on his face as he recalled this.

The memory of a night years ago came back to Hermione too. She'd had a long evening studying in the library: a tedious Arithmancy assignment had kept her swamped with work for the better part of two hours, but she'd finally finished it.

As she was putting the final touches on her work, Malfoy had sauntered past, his two flunkies in tow. He'd stopped at her table and glanced down for a long moment, then casually rested his hand on her pile of books.

"Well, well, Granger. In your usual spot, I see. You *have* read all of these at least twice tonight, have you not? No?" He clucked his tongue. "You disappoint me."

And then his hand had moved, inscribing a casual arc as he swept most of her belongings off the table. He'd looked at her in mock horror.

"Oh! *So sorry*. Clumsy of me. It seems I've knocked your things to the floor." And then he'd stood there, arms folded across his chest, waiting, the look of wide-eyed innocence on his face turning to a sardonic smile moments later.

Seething, biting back a righteous retort...It just wasn't worth it! It was *Malfoy*, after all! What else could one expect?... Hermione had dropped into a crouch, silently retrieving all of her things. The ink bottle had rolled into a table leg and opened, and a swath of black was soaking into her newly finished Arithmancy homework. It was ruined. Unless there was a way she could clean it thoroughly enough, she would have to do it all over again.

It wasn't until much later that she discovered her copy of *Lord of the Flies* had gone missing.

Now she looked at him and found that little smile of his suddenly infuriating.

"Think that was funny, do you, stealing my property? 'Borrowed' indeed!" she huffed. "I'll have you know I nearly had to recopy an entire assignment because of you! Two hours' work close to being ruined and all because you wanted my *book*?"

"I wasn't smiling because of that. I was just thinking what a complete arse I'd been."

Surprised but mollified, Hermione gave him a grudging smile. "Couldn't you just have *asked* to borrow it?" Even as the words came out of her mouth, she knew how silly they were under the circumstances.

Draco snorted. "Not bloody likely. Not then. Can you picture that? *Me*? Asking *you* for something?"

She had to admit she couldn't. "Well...after all that, did you like it, at least?"

Draco rocked back in his seat, gesturing expansively. "It was *brilliant*! I'd never read anything like it! Scared the living shit out of me though. That scene with Simon..." He shuddered involuntarily, wrapping his arms around himself.

"I know!" Hermione nodded. "I cried. Poor Simon! What they did to him was so brutal! And mindless. They totally lost their humanity, didn't they. It was horrifying!"

Draco toyed with the remainder of his cake, his expression somber. He appeared to be on the verge of saying more. Suddenly he glanced at his watch, his eyes widening, and jumped up.

"Oh, *shite*! Sorry, Granger, must go! I'm about to be late!" His voice came back to her as he sprinted away. "See you!"

Hermione was left sitting there and feeling rather as if she'd just been caught up in a small, passing hurricane. A hurricane that had just treated her to coffee, dessert and conversation, and it had actually been not only civil, but pleasant. Enjoyable, even. Not to mention enlightening on more than one front. She had plenty of food for thought now, to accompany what was left of her coffee.

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At a sprawling university with a population the size of Oxford's, one might suppose that students could fade fairly easily into the venerable, old woodwork if they chose, that anonymity might be something of an issue even for those who didn't seek it. In the short time Hermione had been here, this sense of isolation had proven both a blessing at times and a curse as she struggled to find her own niche. She was about to discover that she wasn't nearly as invisible as she had supposed.

Two days later, on her way to the library, Hermione had just stopped at the porter's lodge at Hertford, her assigned college, to check the "pigeon holes" for any messages or mail. No mail...nothing much at all, really, except for an advert from Blackwell's that she could see was in everyone's pigeon hole. No, wait, hang on... there *was* something...

Reaching in, she extracted a piece of blue stationery folded into a tiny, intricate shape that looked like a bird in flight. Carefully, she opened it. The handwriting was very neat and precise, the message to the point.

Holywell staircase 5 tonight 8 pm. DM

TBC

A/N: The unofficial title for this fic is "The Anti-Epilogue." I think it's self-explanatory!

Thanks, as always, to my marvelous beta, Kazfeist! You are my rock! No more need be said! Thanks, too, to my lovely beta Floorcoaster, who was a great sounding board for the initial idea when there were only a couple of tentative paragraphs in writing. Thanks, finally, to my new beta, Mister_Otter, who took the time to listen to me whinge when I wasn't sure where I was going with this fic and needed a shoulder and some excellent feedback, and for turning me on to the wonderful song whose lyrics begin the chapter and have given me the story's title.

I'd must thank the fantastic respondents at HP Britglish who have been so amazingly forthcoming with information about Oxford! I have picked their brains mercilessly and they've been and continue to be really super!

Disclaimer: As usual, not mine except for the plot and any incidental characters who may appear. I make no money from this story.

Notes:

Blackwell's...the bookshop students at Oxford frequent.

Porter's lodge...each college at Oxford has a porter's lodge at the entrance. Students nowadays have keys to get in, but in the past, that wasn't the case. It helped to be friends with the porter if you were out very late at night!

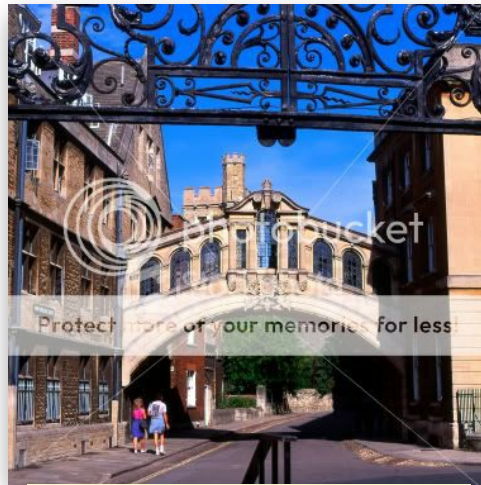
Pigeon holes...each college has what are known as "pigeon holes" in the area of the porter's lodge, where mail and notes from friends are delivered for each student. The inter-campus "pigeon post" delivers such notes.

And now a tour of Oxford and specifically, Hertford College:



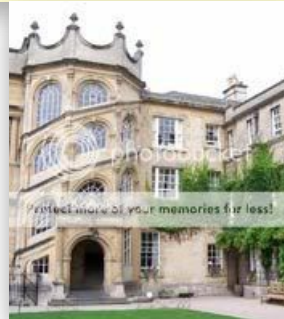
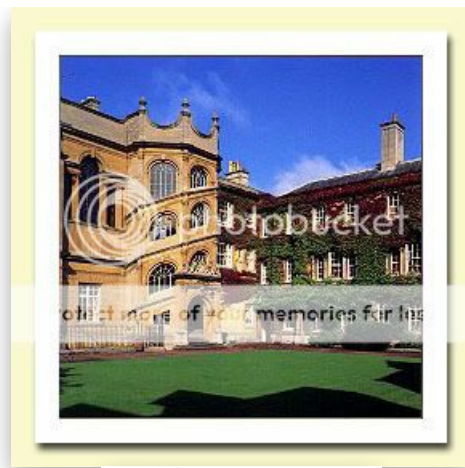
View of Hertford College and the Bridge of Sighs from Catte Street

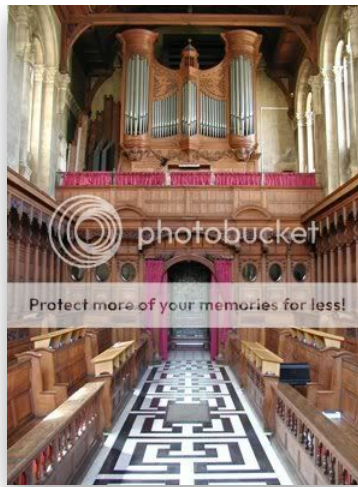
The Bridge of Sighs:



Overhead view of Cattle Street and Hertford College, photo by Stuart Yeates

Hertford College Quad:





The Chapel, Hertford College



Punts on the Thames, Oxford

Chapter Two: Crossing the Gulf

Chapter 2 of 2

A new term in a new place brings challenges and surprises.

Crossing the Gulf



Staircase 5!

Hermione stood stock still. This note could mean only one thing: not only was Malfoy a student at Oxford, but he'd been placed in Hertford, the very same college as she...and so, not surprisingly, in Holywell Quad as well, where all first-years were housed. Either this was an utterly bizarre coincidence or strings had been pulled. As far as she was aware, they were the only two from the prep class at Hogwarts to have been admitted to this university. It would stand to reason that they'd be placed together to help make the transition easier for both of them, the fact that she'd been raised a Muggle notwithstanding. She was willing to bet that wherever more than one Hogwarts student had been accepted, there would have been a special request to house them together.

She glanced at her watch. 5:30. Enough time to have some dinner and do a bit of reading before... Butterflies flitted through her stomach momentarily as she slipped the folded paper into her pocket.

The next two hours crawled by. If there were a Guinness World's Record for the number of times one looked at a wristwatch within a certain time span, Hermione was certain she'd already beaten it by a mile.

Dinner might as well have been sawdust. She wasn't even sure what she was eating, just that it was there on the plate, and it was green and brown and rather ghastly.

Retreating to her room at Staircase 2, she made certain that both the inner door and the outer one were firmly shut. Then she flopped down on her bed, burying her face in the pillows. The butterflies in her stomach had grown into Thestrals, and now there was an entire herd of them rampaging through. She clutched a pillow to her stomach to quell her nerves.

Really, this was silly. What had she to be nervous about, after all? It was just Malfoy. *Just Malfoy...*

She'd had every intention of reading, but her book remained untouched in her lap as she snuggled back against the comfy armchair pillow, thinking. What in Merlin's name could he possibly want? They'd had a nice time at the café, granted, but he was probably just being polite in asking her along...fellow Hogwarts student, somebody familiar from their world, and she'd been sitting right there; he couldn't exactly ignore her, could he?...although come to think of it, when had Malfoy ever been polite because it was the right thing to do? Such an idea went against eight years of experience, against everything she knew of him since the age of eleven.

So... if he weren't simply being polite, then... No, that was ridiculous! The very idea... he couldn't possibly...

She turned resolutely to her assignment: Dante's *Divine Comedy*. But productive reading was not on the cards for tonight, apparently, because the next thing Hermione knew, she was waking from a nap and the bedside clock read a baleful 7:40 pm.

She stared fuzzily at the display for one frozen moment and then shot off the bed, galvanised into panicked action. What was she going to *wear*? *Stupid, stupid, it doesn't matter, what's the difference, it's not as if it's a date or anything! Yes, but still. Right, the red one or the teal?* She kept up the internal debate as she hurriedly scavenged through her drawers to find the right top and then the right jeans. *Or what about that cute little denim skirt with the embroidery on the back pocket... Perfect!*

Teal top with the three-quarter sleeves, first three buttons left undone. Good. Her cheeks pinking up, she bit back a giggle at her own daring. *Denim skirt, black Capri leggings, black ballet flats. Yes. Silver hoops. Check.* A quick sweep of mascara, just a hint of blush and a drop of raspberry lip gloss for shine. She assessed herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the door and nodded.

Now...what to do about her hair! She tugged at it impatiently, wishing for the thousandth time that it was sleek and straight as a pin instead of the unruly mass of waves and ringlets she had to try and tame every single morning. Half up and half down? No, that made her look as if part of her head were exploding. She tried scrunching the waves with dampened fingers and that was okay, she supposed, but not wonderful. Finally, frustrated, impatient, and out of time, she twisted it into a messy bun, a few errant tendrils escaping here and there, and took one final look at herself. It would have to do.

Running her hands down her sides, she took a breath, turned and walked out the door, heading out to the quad to find the separate entrance for Staircase 5.

There it was, the wooden doorway framed all around in thick trails of ivy. Now...which floor out of the four? Quickly she scanned the board with all the nameplates. Ah. Malfoy, D. Room 12. Right, ground floor for the lecturer's rooms and then three more floors, four rooms to a floor. That would make it the third floor.

By the time she got there, it was 8:07 pm. Draco stood at the head of the stairs, waiting for her. He pointedly tapped the face of his wristwatch.

"Late! I expected better of you, Granger," he sighed, shaking his head in amused reproach. "Come in."

Pushing open the two doors, he beckoned her inside and then followed, making sure to shut them both behind him.

Like her own, his room was small. The furnishings were... minimalist, Hermione decided. Practically spartan, in fact. The bed was decorated with a simple, navy-blue duvet and a pair of soft pillows. The desk was extraordinarily neat and spare-looking...just a lamp, a blotter, a mug filled with pens and pencils, a phone, a laptop and a printer, which they'd learned to use in their prep class. A cork board was on the wall above it, but thus far, it was empty. A wardrobe stood in one corner. Apart from that, there was a chest of drawers, its top bare except for a brush, comb and shaving kit. The one exception to the overall asceticism of the room was the bookcase, which was crammed. Intrigued, Hermione made a mental note to have a closer look at his books later.

The only wall decoration was a poster above the bed, depicting a thin shingle of beach below an endless vista of sea and sky that shimmered in shades of pale blue, ivory, beige and a hint of lavender.

Draco had noticed her staring at the poster. "Like it?" he asked. "It's a Wolf Kahn."

"Who?" Hermione asked, feeling suddenly very ignorant. Clearly, Malfoy knew something about Muggle art, yet another surprise.

"Wolf Kahn. He's an American painter. Does these nature scenes that are very nearly abstract, but you can still tell what it is he's painting." He regarded the print for a long moment and then turned back to Hermione. "How does it make you feel when you look at it?" The expression in his eyes was completely without guile and genuinely curious.

"Well..." she began, studying the picture for a moment, "what I like about it is... the sea and the sky seem to blend together. You almost can't tell where one ends and the other begins. It's all one. It makes me feel... calm."

"Right!" Draco said excitedly. "That's it exactly! That's the whole point. Makes me feel that way too. Sometimes..."

He paused.

"Sometimes...?" Hermione repeated.

"Well, it's just... sometimes I'd like to just disappear into the picture, that's all." Draco gave a small, embarrassed laugh. "Stupid, really!"

"No, it isn't the least bit stupid. I know exactly what you mean. It would be lovely to be on that tranquil beach," she said softly, nodding. For a very brief moment, there was real warmth in his eyes as he looked at her, and then the moment was over and an awkward pause took its place.

Then he brightened.

"Would you like something? Coffee, maybe, or tea? Hang on..." He grinned suddenly. "I've got something really good!" He disappeared for a moment and then returned with a slender-necked bottle of crimson liquid, a small, plastic jug of chilled Perrier, two slices of lemon and a packet of shortbread. "Elderberry wine. I like it with a twist of lemon and a little bit of sparkling water." He pulled out the cork and poured some wine into a pair of glasses he'd fetched from the larger desk drawer. Adding just a splash of Perrier and the lemon slice, he handed one glass to Hermione along with the plate of shortbread. "These are very good too. Try one."

"Thank you!" Hermione smiled and took a small bite of shortbread, followed by a sip of the wine. It was really quite nice, very refreshing. "Mmm, lovely!"

Suddenly Draco seemed to notice that she was still standing.

"Please," he said apologetically. "Sit!"

And then, as Hermione went to sit down at the end of the bed, he moved to pull out his desk chair for her, and the two of them collided.

"Sorry!" they said together, stepping back, and Hermione blushed.

"Thanks," she added sheepishly, sitting down in the chair while he perched on the bed.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, enjoying their wine and biscuits. By the time her glass was empty, she still had no idea why he'd asked her to come, and he didn't seem in any hurry to tell her.

He seemed to sense the question in her mind. "I suppose you're wondering why I asked you here. More wine?"

Hermione nodded absently. "Yes, thanks." She held out her glass, and he refilled it along with his own, topping them up with a little of the effervescent water.

"I can't deny I was surprised to get your note." She brushed a loose tendril of hair out of her eyes and smiled. "So...how come?"

"Well," he replied, setting his glass down and going to the bookcase. "I thought I ought to give this back to you." He pulled a paperback book off a high shelf and turned. "Sorry for pinching it. Here." He held out his hand.

In it was her copy of *Lord of the Flies*. It had been relatively new when he'd taken it. But now it had the appearance of a book that had been read too many times to count. The cover was bent at the corners, and there was a distinct crease bisecting the centre. The tops of some pages were turned down slightly.

Hermione moved to take the book but then stopped, retracting her hand.

"No," she said quietly. "It's yours now. Keep it."

Draco stared at her for a moment and then sat down on the edge of the bed, the book still in his hand, gently running his fingertips over the crease.

"Thank you," he murmured. "It's meant a lot to me these last three years, you know."

"No, I don't know, not really. Why don't you tell me?" Curiosity had got the better of her, and the wine had relaxed her natural reserve.

His face was slightly flushed as he leaned back against the pillows, resting his wine glass against the top of one bent knee. Silence hung between them for just a moment before he began to speak.

"The first time I read it, I didn't really get what Golding was doing. It seemed to me that Jack and Roger were right to insist on hunting and running things. They were strong, and they were natural leaders, and most everyone fell into line behind them. No matter what. They knew if they didn't hunt, they would starve. It seemed to me that whatever they had to do was justified. Ralph and Piggy just seemed weak and foolish and not able to deal with the reality of the situation they were in. And I thought that Simon was stupid for crashing out of the woods the way he did. Of *course* they were going to mistake him for a wild beast and attack him! He ought to have known better!"

He spoke to her, but at the same time, seemed oddly unaware of her presence now, almost as if he were conducting a monologue in her earshot. His eyes flicked over her briefly as he tossed back the dregs of his second glass.

"Several months later, I... well, you probably know about the cabinet. And all the rest too. I didn't... I didn't want to do it, you know. But I was given no choice. Voldemort was going to hurt my family if I failed. I wanted to blot out what I was doing whenever and however I could. So I read. A lot. Whatever I could get my hands on. Anything to escape my own head for a while. I found myself drawn back to this book."

He closed his eyes for a minute, remembering.

"When I read it again, what Jack and Roger were doing seemed... I don't know... just *wrong*, somehow. Childish. They were playing at being tough warriors, but they were *kids*. They were in over their heads. They couldn't control it anymore. None of them could. And nobody was listening anymore. Nobody was *thinking*. They just *followed*. I knew what that felt like. It's as if they weren't human anymore; they were like animals, except animals are better than that. Animals aren't deliberately cruel like people can be.

"I was scared *shitless*, Granger. I felt like I was losing myself a little more every day. I felt like Simon. Except that he had no clue what he was walking into. I knew. I fucking *knew*."

He sighed explosively and covered his eyes, momentarily a bit dizzy. Hermione's own eyes had filled with tears. She turned away, wiping her wet cheeks with the back of her hand.

There was more, though, and there was no stopping it now.

"Have you any idea what it feels like to be trapped that way? Chained to a fucking psycho! But the scariest thing was how nobody seemed to question any of it. Me, Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, Parkinson, Nott... we all just bought into it, swallowed all that shite with a bloody please and thank you." He sat up and looked at her, his face blotchy and his eyes red. "We were being *played*, Granger. And I don't know about anybody else, but I was scared out of my fucking mind!"

He was hunched over now, his face in his hands. She could hear him taking gulps of air to steady himself. Impulsively, she sat down next to him on the bed, reaching a hesitant hand out to rub slow, gentle circles on his back. Finally, he raised his head and looked at her.

"I'm sorry. You didn't need to hear all that." He swallowed hard, looking away again. What the bloody hell had just come over him, spilling like that? He hadn't intended the evening to go like *this*.

"No, no, it's okay. Really! I'm glad you told me." Hermione shook her head, her throat tight. She paused and then added softly, "I understand."

Her hand was still warm on his back when he turned his head. His eyes were huge and very dark as they regarded her, never breaking contact; she knew, suddenly, that he was going to kiss her, and what's more, that she was going to let him.

His mouth was soft and cool and sweet like rain, his kiss gentle and fleeting, light as a moth's wing. And then he sighed and put his arms around her, drawing her close and resting his forehead against hers.

"Stay with me for a while," he whispered against her skin. He felt so very *tired* all of a sudden. "Please. I... I don't want to be alone."

"All right," she said quietly.

Slowly, carefully, they lay down together on his narrow bed, Draco on his side and Hermione curled around him, her arm looped about his waist. He twined his fingers in hers, and she could feel his shuddering breaths gradually slowing and steadying and falling into a regular rhythm. His sleep was fitful, and he would wake many times before morning, always finding her hand again before dropping back off.

She lay awake for a long time as he slept, and then she finally slept too, her dreams haunted by images of him with Ralph, Piggy, Jack, and poor, sad, lost Simon.

*

At 5:45 am, Hermione awoke and for a moment, had no idea where she was.

She was fully dressed, her shirt rumpled and her skirt hiked up; she had a headache and the world's worst taste in her dry mouth...and her arm was wrapped firmly around Draco Malfoy, of all people. His arm was flung over hers, her hand sandwiched between both of his and his fingertips moving lightly on her skin as he slept.

"Malfoy," she whispered, and then, "Malfoy!"

When she got no response, she tried again. "*Draco!*"

She knew he'd awakened because for just a second, his hands tightened convulsively around hers. He rolled over to face her, his eyes widening in momentary surprise. Then he remembered.

"Hey," he whispered. His head felt terribly heavy, and his eyes began to slide shut once again.

"Hey." Her voice was soft. "It's morning."

"I know," he murmured, burrowing into his pillow. A sleepy smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "Fancy that."

"Shall... shall we get up, then?" Hermione suddenly felt very awkward indeed.

Draco opened his eyes, raising himself up on one elbow to look at her. "I don't know about you, Granger, but 5:45 in the morning is not what I call a civilised hour for human beings to be awake. Go back to sleep!" He flopped back onto his pillow and with a muffled groan, rolled over again.

Hermione was utterly nonplussed. Good job she wasn't a betting person because the odds of finding herself in this particular situation with this particular person were long, to say the least.

A small giggle bubbled up and burst out of her. Just as her eyes were closing again, she heard laughter, soft and husky, in reply.

TBC

Disclaimer: These characters (except for original ones) are not mine, and I do not make any money from this story.

A/N: Thanks, hugs, and bouquets of flowers to my trio of marvelous and devoted betas, whom I'm proud to call my friends as well: kazfeist, floorcoaster, and mister_otter. You guys are the best, bar none!

What we in the US refer to as the "first" floor of a building is known as the "ground" floor in Britain. Therefore, Draco's room at Hertford is on the fourth floor for Americans, but the third for Brits.

In the oldest Oxford colleges, there are two doors for every student's room, an outer and an inner door. If you want privacy, you make sure both are shut. If you don't mind people stopping in, you leave the outer door open and just close the inner one.

The poster that Draco has hung on the wall above his bed is a print of Wolf Kahn's "The Gulf," painted in 1998.