

Draco's Heart

by MMADfan

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Chapter One: A Kiss

Chapter 1 of 17

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Chapter One: A Kiss

Draco's lips overcame his instant of surprise before his brain did, and they responded to the unexpected kiss, accepting and extending it. But then his brain kicked in, and he drew back.

"Ginny." He blinked at her.

"I didn't think you were ever going to kiss me."

"I wasn't going to. And we shouldn't." He looked around at the empty, abandoned classroom. They sat on Transfigured cushions on the floor, surrounded by their books and parchments. Late afternoon sun filtered through grimy windows.

"There's no one here," Ginny said. "We've met here almost every day for weeks. No one ever has seen us here."

"And if anyone ever does, they won't find us doing anything but revising for NEWTs. Not ever," Draco said. He handed her the notes he'd been copying and stuffed his copies into his book bag. "Thanks. I have to go."

"Wait! Draco, don't go. I'm sorry. I just thought . . . it seemed you felt the same," Ginny said, taking his arm as he stood.

Draco shook his head. "What I feel doesn't matter."

"What about what I feel?"

"I can't let that matter, either," Draco said softly. He lowered his head, and his long blond fringe fell over his eyes.

Ginny's friendship had been both unexpected and unexpectedly welcome. When he had returned to Hogwarts after more than a year in hiding in Sweden with his mother, Slytherin House had not welcomed him back with open arms. Professor Snape had done what he could to help him adjust to the new reality, but there was only so much that his Head of House could do...and only so much that Draco wanted him to do. He was a man, after all, and he'd taken care of his mother for that year in exile. He could take care of himself.

One of the first things Draco did was change his name. To please his mother, he had kept "Malfoy" as a middle name, but his surname was now "Newman." Anyone who called him "Malfoy" was simply ignored, as was anyone who tried to taunt him about his new name. He had slowly created a new place for himself in Slytherin House, and if it wasn't as a leader, he found himself content with that for the moment.

On Professor Snape's recommendation, the Headmistress had reinstated him as a prefect, and that had helped his standing in his House, if it also did create a few difficulties for him. He could not put one toe out of line, or he would lose both his prefect's badge and the symbolism that came with it. The badge was a concrete sign of the Headmistress's trust and of his own new start in a wizarding world with no more Dark Lord and an army of Death Eaters, and Draco did not want to lose it.

"Draco?"

Draco raised his eyes to meet Ginny's. "I'm a prefect, Ginny. I can't be caught doing anything even slightly outside school rules...or even right at the edge. This classroom isn't technically out-of-bounds for us, but even meeting here to revise is risky."

"And that's all it is?"

Draco's brows drew together and he shook his head. "I don't want to get you into trouble, either."

"I don't mean anything like that...school rules, getting caught, whatever. Are there other reasons? I don't want to make a fool of myself," Ginny said frankly, "and if I've misunderstood you, then . . . I guess I'll deal with it. But I thought you liked me."

"It's not a question of whether I like you or not. I have enjoyed revising for NEWTs with you, and you know I appreciate your help and like being with you. But we both have to think about the future, and you know what your father would say if you became involved with me."

"Actually, I *don't* know what he'd say, but I can pretty easily guess that your father wouldn't be happy about it."

"I don't know about that . . . but even if he thought it the best strategy for me to gain a place in society, it wouldn't matter to me. In fact, if he were in favour of it, it would worry me. But I don't really care what he thinks anymore. Or not much." Draco shrugged. He'd already talked to Ginny about his ambivalent feelings about his father. She knew that he cared both more and less than he wished to. "Mother wouldn't say if she disapproved, not unless she thought it would be a real disaster and not merely a . . . a social faux pas, but I think that she'd be happy if I were happy. But none of that matters. It wouldn't be good for you. You already have a lot of problems in your life; you don't need me making things more complicated, especially when it probably wouldn't last, anyway."

"So . . . you're saying you would like to, except for your father's opinion, which doesn't matter to you, and your mother's opinion, which you think would be okay, and my dad's opinion, which even I can't guess, and...what else was it?...oh, yeah, and that if we get caught doing anything more exciting than revising for the ethics portion of the Defence exam, you might lose your prefect's badge and become a disgrace and I'll lose points from Gryffindor. Or was losing points from Gryffindor a plus?"

"When you put it like that..."

"When I put it like that, it sounds like we should only go by what we feel, Draco. And I really like you. You've been seeming to like me, too."

Draco shook his head slowly. "It isn't that simple."

"Nothing's simple, Draco! And life pretty much sucks a lot of the time. But I feel better when I'm with you, and you do, too, I think. You're one of the only people who seems to understand me, or at least, to listen to me. And you've been really sweet. I had no idea what to think when you gave me those chocolates just because I'd loaned you some notes, but you liked me even then, didn't you?"

Draco took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yeah, of course I did. But . . . you aren't going to understand this, Ginny, but . . . I like you even more now, and that's why we have to stick to revising together and nothing more. We have to think about the future."

"You don't make any sense sometimes!"

"And *you* just dive right in without thinking about the consequences!"

Ginny was quiet. "Yeah, okay," she said. "Whatever."

"I'm sorry, Ginny. I didn't mean that." Draco reached out to touch her arm, but she pulled away.

"Doesn't matter what you meant. It's true. And you're smart not to get involved with me." Ginny's jaw was tight as she began to stuff her books and parchments into her bag.

"Ginny, don't be like that!"

"You're right. I just dive in and I get people killed." Her voice cracked, and she didn't look at Draco.

"Don't leave! Ginny!" Draco reached toward her, but she was already turned away from him, hurrying out the door, her head down. The door closed behind her.

Draco dropped his book bag with a thump and sank back down onto one of the cushions. That had been an abysmally stupid thing to have said. He knew how guilty Ginny felt about Percy's death. He had only been thinking of basic Gryffindor brashness, but he was certain that her mind immediately turned to that early morning when the Dark Lord...Riddle, Draco corrected himself...had turned his wand on her as she dashed out to Harry. She had survived, but her brother had been hit by the *Avada Kedavra* as he jumped on her, pushing her to the ground and out of the way of the curse. Then his father, for whatever reason, had distracted Riddle, who cast another *Avada Kedavra* at him. Potter, knowing that he had to be hit by the Killing Curse, had thrust himself into the path of the curse and kept it from hitting Lucius. Draco still didn't understand what had happened next, except that the curse hadn't killed Potter, and a phoenix had appeared from nowhere and carried his apparently lifeless body away. It must have been a very old and Dark magic that saved him. The rest, as they say, was history, and Potter had reappeared in the midst of the battle and engaged Riddle, destroying him.

Draco hadn't witnessed any of it, of course, but he had heard about it, and read all of the *Daily Prophet* articles. He wished he'd been there and been one of "Snape's Slytherins," joining the Headmistress in defence of the school, but a very uncomfortable part of him knew that if he had been there, he likely would have been fighting on the wrong side, whether he had wanted to or not. A familiar sense of frightened relief washed over him as he remembered the choice that the Headmistress had given him in the spring of his sixth year...relief because he had been given a choice and had chosen well, and frightening because he was all too aware that if things had been even slightly different, he either would have chosen badly or not been given any choice at all.

Draco shook himself internally and stood, grabbing his book bag. He hoped that Ginny got over his poor choice of words quickly and realised that he'd been speaking thoughtlessly. He wished that she could see that they both had to think of the future. He had to find a way to earn a respectable living and make a new place for himself in the wizarding world. Becoming distracted by a girl wasn't an option, even if she weren't a Weasley, even if she were some dull, inconsequential witch . . . he wouldn't want a relationship with some dull, inconsequential witch, though.

Suddenly, he saw a future where he had a job, a home, and . . . nothing else. He might never find another witch as interesting, lively, and intense as Ginny. Whatever his father's sins, and however those sins may have hurt his family, Draco knew that the one thing that meant more to his father than the Dark Lord, money, or his pureblood status, was his family. Lucius Malfoy didn't always do the right or wise thing for them, but Draco knew that his father loved his family.

Maybe this was a time to go with his feelings . . . to jump in with Ginny. Well, *no* jump in, but wade in slowly. Maybe it would be possible for his future and Ginny's future to merge.

He waved his wand, returning the cushions to their usual forms as a lectern and a small table, then he Levitated them to their home in the far corner of the room. He looked around, and assured that the room was in the same condition they'd found it in, he turned to leave.

Draco paused at the door to the classroom, startled by the sound of voices, one of them, the Headmistress's voice. He couldn't tell what they were saying, but they were coming closer. His heart pounded in his chest. He wasn't doing anything wrong, he reminded himself, and if he tried to hide and was found, that would look far more suspicious than simply stepping out of the classroom as though he were innocent...which he was. This was what Ginny didn't understand, this was what he would be bringing her into...a life with a very tenuous hold on respectability, where everything could be lost in a moment, with one ill-considered decision, with one rash choice, or at the whim of one powerful person who took exception to something he did, or just to the way he looked at them.

Draco opened the door and stepped out. Professor McGonagall and Laura Walker Manning, the librarian, were walking down the corridor toward him. McGonagall had just flicked her wand and opened a classroom door, and Manning stuck her head in. The Headmistress had already noticed him, however, and turned toward him, waiting for him. Draco swallowed and started down the hall.

"Good afternoon, Headmistress, Ms Manning," Draco said. When the Headmistress nodded in greeting, he thought for a moment that the two would just let him pass.

"Mr Newman, this is an unusual place to meet you on a beautiful Sunday afternoon," Professor McGonagall said.

"I was working. I found a quiet classroom to revise for exams," Draco replied.

Laura Walker Manning smiled at him. "The library is quiet...and it's even pretty empty today."

Draco blushed. "I was revising with someone. We were talking and exchanging class notes."

"Ah, then best to do that elsewhere," the librarian agreed with a nod.

"Revising with Miss Weasley again?" the Headmistress asked.

Draco's mouth opened and closed. He nodded. He hadn't thought anyone knew they were meeting. Professor Snape knew that Ginny was lending him her class notes for Defence Against the Dark Arts, which he wasn't taking that year...although a few weeks ago he had received permission from Professor Dumbledore to take the NEWT in it...but even Professor Snape didn't know that they were meeting regularly. Or he had found out and said nothing.

Professor McGonagall smiled. She seemed amused by his confusion. "I may not be omniscient, Mr Newman, but there are a few things that I notice. Miss Weasley seems happier than she had seemed, and I have no objection to the two of you using one of these classrooms for revision." She looked around them. "These classrooms haven't seen use in many years. Ms Manning and I are making plans to put them to use next year...though in a different capacity than they had. But nothing will be done to them until summer. Until then, feel free to use any of them...but be aware that I or another member of staff may be nearby. Preparing for the renovation, you understand," the Headmistress said, seeming almost to wink at him. "If I were you, I'd keep an ear out for them. I'll make sure that everyone on staff knows that students are allowed to revise in this wing...as long as that's what they are doing, and not . . . something else. We won't be advertising it, however, and you should find that you and Miss Weasley may continue to revise without being disturbed by other students."

Draco nodded. "Thank you, ma'am. And, um, thank you. For everything, you know?" He glanced quickly at the librarian, then back at the Headmistress. "I hadn't said thank you before."

"I am glad to see you doing well. Have a good evening, Mr Newman," the Headmistress said. "Now, Laura," she said, turning to the librarian, "I thought the new common room at the other end of the wing...less noise to carry that way . . ."

The Headmistress and the librarian continued talking as they walked, and Draco hurried away, relieved that it seemed that their use of the classroom had received the Headmistress's blessing. He would have to tell Ginny, though. He thought that Professor McGonagall's warning to "keep an ear out" for staff was her way of telling him that if there were anything other than revision going on, not to be caught doing it. She didn't seem at all troubled by the two of them working together, but then, she wasn't family. She was, however, highly influential, and if she didn't have anything negative to say about it, perhaps others would follow her lead.

Draco clattered down the stairs, taking the six flights down to the ground floor as quickly as he could. He could still catch some fresh air and warm spring sunshine for an hour before dinner. And if he sat in just the right spot, and if Ginny were in her dormitory room, she might look out and see him.

Author's Note: This story is set in the spring of 1999 and is a sequel to [Death's Dominion](#), an AU sixth- and seventh-year fic. It's also a companion story to [A Long Vernal Season](#). I think it can stand alone, however, and the essential points of *Death's Dominion* are recapped here when appropriate.

The "final battle" events described here are found in *Death's Dominion*, Chapter 29, "They shall rise again," and Draco's choice is described in *Death's Dominion*, Chapter 10, "Dead men naked they shall be one."

Draco's Heart is a short fic with short, fast-moving chapters. I hope you enjoy it!

Chapter Two: Something More

Chapter 2 of 17

Draco and Ginny study together, and Draco surprises Ginny.

Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Two: Something More

"Hi. I wasn't sure whether you'd come tonight or not," Draco said.

"I wasn't sure whether you'd be here." Ginny shrugged her book bag off her shoulder and looked at the cushions. "Interesting Transfiguration."

Draco shrugged one shoulder. "I was tired of brown."

Ginny flopped down onto one of the thick scarlet cushions. "Charms was fun today."

"Yeah, it was." He lowered himself to sit cross-legged on the other red cushion. "Transfiguration was a bit of a bore, though."

"I don't know . . . it was okay. I never understand the theory when Ouellette explains it, though. I think I understand it fine until I step into the classroom, and then she starts talking about it, and I am lost. I wish seventh year had more practical Transfiguration and less theory," Ginny said, making a face

"I like the theory, actually," Draco said, "but you're right that Ouellette doesn't always explain it very well."

"Professor MacAirt was better last year, I thought," Ginny replied. "I wish he'd stayed for this year."

"I guess he wanted to get back to business with his father." Draco smirked. "I think you just liked looking at him more than Ouellette."

Ginny laughed. "Yeah, all right, so I wasn't always listening to him, but he was good."

"They may have a job for me, you know," Draco said. "The MacAirts. I don't know yet, and I actually think that Professor MacAirt wasn't as positive about it as Mr MacAirt was, but I think I have a chance."

"They're friends with Professor McGonagall. You should talk to her. She'd say something to them, if you asked."

"Professor Snape already wrote a letter for me. I'll wait. If they want more references, I suppose I could talk to her."

Ginny nodded. She opened her bag and pulled out her Defence Against the Dark Arts notes.

"We could start with Transfiguration instead, if you want," Draco offered. "I think I understood it pretty well today."

"Okay." She rummaged through her satchel looking for her Transfiguration book.

"You know, Ginny . . . I'm sorry about yesterday. I really didn't mean that as it came out. It was a really stupid thing to say."

"It's okay. Don't worry about it. It's not like you said anything that wasn't true."

"I never should have said it, though, and not when we were arguing like that. And not that way."

Ginny nodded. "Thanks. I appreciate that. But it's okay." She opened her book and leafed through it to find the section the class was reading.

"I ran into Professor McGonagall after you left yesterday."

Ginny looked up, her eyebrows raised. "Here? What did she say?"

"That it's fine if we work here together. She did sort of warn me that if someone finds us together, we shouldn't be doing anything . . . well, anything that we shouldn't be doing."

Ginny snorted. "As if."

"Could be," Draco replied, looking at her intently.

She cocked her head. "Really?"

Draco shrugged.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, Draco. Just a thick Gryffindor here, remember."

He laughed. "Not half thick, Ginny! I've been thinking about what you were saying yesterday. I think you're right. Maybe my thinking about my future should include thinking about you being there in it with me."

Ginny smiled and nodded. "I like that—" Before she could finish her thought, Draco leaned over and kissed her lips. His kiss lingered as his fingers caressed her cheek, and he withdrew only slowly. Ginny blinked at him, lips still parted.

Draco sat back and gave her a half smile. "All right, Transfiguration of nonmetallic inorganic objects into metallic objects and the conditions that can interfere with the Transfiguration—"

"Wait! We're going over that?"

"That's what you have your book open to," Draco said.

"Yeah, I know, but . . ." She shook her head.

Draco twitched a smile. "We have to revise, anyway, Ginny, and if someone wanders down to check on us, that's what we'll be doing."

After going over Transfiguration, which Ginny understood better after Draco explained it, they turned to the ethics portion of the Defence Against the Dark Arts course. It was a new subject on the NEWT that year, so Ginny had shared her class notes with Draco, and now they were working through them together.

Finally, the classroom grew too shadowy to see properly, and the two packed up their bags.

"We should bring candles," Ginny said, not for the first time.

"People might see," Draco replied automatically.

"Yeah," Ginny agreed again. "Still, it would be handy."

"Yeah."

At the door, Draco stopped her. In the fading light, she seemed to glow, her skin milky white, and her hair still burnished red by the sun's last rays. He raised his hand and caressed her cheek, then he leaned forward and kissed her softly, fondly, separating reluctantly.

"Can you make it tomorrow night?" he whispered, his breath warm on her lips.

"For a while," Ginny replied softly. "I told a couple others I'd try to get together with them—Niamh and Luna. They've been good about putting up with my moods. We see little of each other now, and when school ends . . ." She shrugged. "We don't know how it will be then." Niamh was a seventh-year Ravenclaw, and Luna had returned for her sixth year, since she had left Hogwarts the year before to join Harry and Ron. She was petitioning the Headmistress to take her NEWTs early, with the rest of her original class, but she hadn't received permission yet, and it was possible that she would be required to attend one more year before she could take her NEWTs.

"Spend time with them," Draco said. "I'll be here from after dinner until just before curfew, if you can make it." He leaned forward and kissed her once more, this time lingering longer, and Ginny put her free arm around him. "Mm, that was nice," he said. "But curfew's coming up."

Ginny nodded. "I'll be here tomorrow."

Author's Note: A quick thanks to Hogwarts Duo and Stefdarlin for prereading this for me and giving me their feedback!

Chapter Three: The Past and the Future

Chapter 3 of 17

Draco and Ginny discuss the past, the future, and a possible date in Hogsmeade.

Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Three: The Past and the Future

"The Headmistress has approved the Hogsmeade weekend," Ginny said, moving aside to let a few third-years pass them in the hall.

"Yeah, I know. Snape announced it to us this morning, along with a lot of warnings and caveats," Draco replied. "I guess they're making the announcement to the school at dinner tonight."

"Are you going?"

"I'm not sure. I need to talk to Professor Snape first. I guess they're having a lot of Aurors and Hit Wizards on hand, and half the staff, too, and we're all supposed to pair up with someone and not be alone, just in case that vigilante's around." Draco shrugged, apparently unconcerned about the extremist who was targeting people whom he believed had escaped justice after the war, even though his father had been one of the targets. "I think it would be okay. But I don't know."

"So . . . if you go, do you want to go together? Since we're supposed to stay in pairs, anyway," Ginny said.

"We could go together with a group, I suppose, if you don't mind a few more Slytherins."

"Luna and Niamh will be going, I'm sure," Ginny said. "We could go with them, instead. Or make one big group. If your friends don't mind a Gryffindor tagging along, they

shouldn't mind a couple Ravenclaws. But I'd like it if we went together, you and me, whether we hang out with anyone else or not."

The two stepped out into the morning sunshine and joined the trickle of other seventh-year students who were making their way to Herbology class.

"If you think so," Draco said with a nod. When Ginny smiled brightly, he was glad that he had agreed. Her smile always seemed to make his heart swell. "Yes, if Professor Snape says it's okay for me to go, safe and all that, we can go together."

"I don't think that the vigilante would show up during a Hogsmeade weekend, anyway," Ginny said. "He doesn't attack people in public or in groups. He's a coward."

Draco gave a crooked grin. "Can eliminate any former Gryffindors, then."

Ginny smiled up at him. "You should join the Aurors, Draco."

Draco snorted.

"Actually, you should, seriously."

Draco smirked and shook his head.

"You'll have the NEWTS, I'm sure."

"There might be other disqualifications, though," Draco said.

"Whatever you do, you'll be good at it, I know."

"I got an owl from Mr MacAirt this morning...Cormac Quinlivan, not Alroy. I'll show it to you after class. He wants to talk to me again."

"Oh, Draco! That's great!" Ginny grabbed his arm and squeezed it to her. "What did he say?"

"I'll let you read it for yourself," Draco whispered. Professor Sprout was already directing students to plant beds. "There's no time now."

"You, Weasley and Mal Newman, you take that bed there. We're doing simple single variable microclimate charms this morning," Professor Sprout announced to the class. "I've put a sign in each bed saying which charm you are to cast on that particular area. Each of you casts on just half of the bed. When you and your partner have decided that you've each cast the charm to your satisfaction, I'll check them for accuracy and strength, and then you will move on to another area. I want each pair to perform at least three different charms before the end of the hour, so chop-chop! Don't dawdle!"

Working with Ginny was fun and went smoothly, and the two each managed to cast four charms to Professor Sprout's satisfaction, and she let them leave class early. They wandered down to the edge of the lake and sat on the lawn. Draco pulled out the letter and handed it to Ginny.

After scanning it, Ginny said, "This sounds like he might want to hire you, but he doesn't say for what. Did you apply for a specific job?"

Draco shook his head. "I just wanted to feel him out about opportunities. At this point, with the manor gone and everything else, if I wanted to go into business...and be able to go anywhere with a future, not just work for some little shop...it was basically down to him or the Zabinis." Draco shook his head. "I don't want to be one of Zabinis's charity cases."

"That's not very nice, Draco," Ginny said. "A lot of those Slytherins didn't have anywhere to go and no one to take them after the war. He gave a lot of kids a home."

"Yeah, and they and their families will be indebted to the Zabinis for who-knows-how-long." Ginny didn't understand the way these old Slytherin families worked. Draco shook his head again. "I'd be seen as another one of his wayward waifs brought under his benevolent umbrella. No, MacAirt is farsighted, really forward-thinking...that's what got him targeted by the, um, by Riddle all those years ago...and he recognises merit and rewards it. He never went to Hogwarts, so he doesn't seem to have the same strong feelings about the Houses...even though he taught here, too, ages ago, one of the Defence teachers. I think he'd be fair and that I could really go somewhere working for him. I don't want to be stuck in some really boring job for the next hundred years." He shuddered.

"I read an article in the *Daily Prophet* that said there'd be more opportunities in the next ten or twenty years than there've been in a couple generations because, um, well, the writer thought that all the people who are in prison or who were killed over the last few years opened up room for new generations. He said that this could mean more innovation and not so much conservatism. It was kind of upsetting when I first read it, but he could be right."

Draco smirked. "Probably written by a Ravenclaw. Yeah, he might be right. But I still think that people like me won't have it easy."

Ginny was quiet for a while. "You're so different, Draco. I keep half-expecting . . ."

When Ginny didn't finish her sentence, Draco finished it for her. "For me to turn into a nasty, two-faced, pureblooded prat with an undue sense of entitlement?"

Ginny smiled slightly and shrugged.

"I don't blame you. That's what I was. Or worse." Draco plucked a long stem of grass and put it between his teeth. "Yeah, worse."

"You were pretty bad," Ginny said softly.

"Like I told you before, that last year, when I was away with Mother in Sweden, I had a lot of time to think. We couldn't do any magic or we might have been found, and other than the complete set of Hogwarts textbooks in my bedroom, the house was supplied only with Muggle books. A LOT of Muggle books. And sometimes new ones would arrive by Muggle post. I think the Headmistress had them sent. That was kind of nice. It didn't feel like we'd just been dumped there and forgotten.

"I didn't have much to do but read. I shopped, since Mother wasn't up to it at first, and I got to like it, but I never really learned to speak Swedish. We kept to ourselves too much for that, and so I learned not much more than I needed to ask for our bread rolls at the bakery and our fish at the fishmonger's. Never went anywhere but the grocer's, the bakery, and the fish market," Draco said with a shrug. "So I read. I think I read every book in that house, even the romances that had been left in my mother's room. I read, and I thought, and . . . well, you know about that. All that other stuff before, being the big Malfoy, being better than everybody . . . that was just . . . I don't know, a veneer or something. I wanted so much, and I didn't think that I could get it any other way. What I wanted most was . . . well, friends. And what did I get? Numbskulls like Crabbe and Goyle. I only succeeded in alienating anyone who could do me any actual good...but that's not all that matters about friends, I know that," Draco added hastily. "It wasn't the happiest existence. I always wanted so much, and never really got anything, nothing but a task that I didn't want and that made me sick to think about. I never felt . . . good. Proud, but only because of my family name, really, and, I don't know . . . better than anybody else, sort of, but not good, if you know what I mean, not happy, and I didn't know what would make me happy, so I just . . . I just kept trying to . . . to fill myself up, taking and being nasty and..."

Ginny put a hand on his arm, stopping him. "It's okay. I know. I think this is the real Draco. I really do."

"Yeah? I'm not sure myself, sometimes." He took his stalk of grass and flicked it toward the lake.

Ginny handed the letter back to Draco. "It's nice that Mr MacAirt will meet with you here."

"I guess everyone knows we're not supposed to be going anywhere on our own whilst that nutter is running around hexing old ladies, gimps, and simpletons."

"Now *that* was not very nice, Draco."

"Maybe, but it was true." He gave her a crooked grin. "You'll keep me on the right path, Gin. I know you will."

"Yeah, well, it *wasn't* very nice. But like you say, pretty true."

Draco snickered. "But it would be embarrassing to show up at a meeting somewhere with a babysitter in tow," he said, "so I'm glad that Mr MacAirt said he'd come here. I'll have to ask Professor Snape if there's somewhere we could meet...I don't think that our classroom and its Transfigured cushions would quite do."

Ginny laughed. "Professor Snape might offer his office. Now that he's cleared out all that disgusting stuff, it would do."

"I don't think so. He still seems to guard his privacy carefully. I'm sure he'll find a place for us to meet, though. It's not like the castle is wanting space."

Ginny looked back at the castle. "They say it was full once. Do you believe that? That there were hundreds of students? That there were like, one hundred first-years every year? D'you believe that?"

Draco nodded. "Yeah. One of my ancestors kept a diary from the first day he entered Hogwarts through all seven years. He was one of the first Malfoys to attend Hogwarts, and he says that fifty were sorted into Slytherin with him, with almost forty in each of the other Houses. That'd be almost two hundred in one year. Even if most of them left after fifth year, that's still several times the number of students we have these days. And I don't know about Gryffindor, but there are rooms in the Slytherin dormitories that have been closed off, corridors that were completely blocked, walled over. The dormitories were once much bigger."

"I think that's true in Gryffindor, too, but it's hard to tell, because it's a tower. They say there are hidden rooms in the tower, though . . . there are some pretty silly stories about those rooms, but they also say that when Dumbledore was Deputy and Head of Gryffindor, his room was in one of the hidden chambers in the tower. They say he could look right through his window into the common room and see if anyone was up to anything." Ginny shrugged. "I don't think the teachers have that much fascination with us, to be honest. It'd be annoying, I'd think, to have a constant view on the common room."

Draco laughed. "Boring, too, most of the time, unless you're one of the kids."

"Yeah. Mum told me once that they use the portraits. The portraits tell the teachers if they see anything going on."

"I always thought Slytherin was wise not to have a portrait hanging on the common room door."

"Or he didn't care enough about what the students got up to as long as they weren't caught doing it," Ginny said.

"I don't think school was the same back then. They probably were a lot stricter in some ways and a lot more lenient in others. I don't think they cared about watching the students so much, though."

"Are you going to one of the discussion groups on Wednesday?"

"I don't know . . . last time I went . . . I felt like a freak."

"That's the point...no, no, what I mean is, a lot of people feel like freaks, just for different reasons. Or they don't feel like freaks, but they feel . . . confused or something. It's the same for everybody and different at the same time."

Draco shrugged one shoulder. "I'd rather just talk to you, Gin."

"You don't tell me everything, though, I know that...what about signing up for an individual session with Healer Glyndwr or someone like that? They're free whilst we're still in school, so you wouldn't need to worry about how to pay..."

"Snape's already mentioned that to me. I just can't. I can't."

"Okay. But you should talk to someone. It's made a big difference for me."

"We're not the same. You're you and I'm me. We're not the same at all."

"Whatever . . . I have to get to Divination and it's a long way." Ginny stood and brushed grass from her student robe. "You know, you're more like me than you want to think, Draco."

"Maybe. I don't think it'd help, but I guess I'll think about it."

Ginny reached down and ran her fingers through his hair, pushing his fringe back. "I'll see you tonight?"

"Yeah."

Ginny bent and swiftly kissed his upturned face before she turned and trotted toward the castle. Draco gazed after her.

"A Weasley and a Malfoy," came a voice from behind Draco. "Who would have thought it?"

Draco glanced up at Patterson. "Did you want something, *Hubert*?"

Patterson grimaced at the use of his given name. "Nah. Just skiving off Divination." He flopped down on the grass next to Draco, stretching out long legs and leaning back on his hands.

"She's not Trelawney...she'll notice you're not there."

"Didn't do the essay for today, and examining the way flower petals fall isn't my idea of fun," Patterson replied.

Draco snorted. "Flower petals?"

"Yeah. So . . . are you and Weasley seeing each other?"

Draco shrugged one shoulder.

"Is that who you've been sneaking off to see every evening?"

"Where's *your* girlfriend?" Draco asked, shifting the conversation.

Patterson frowned. "Ursula's not my girlfriend."

"Break up with you, did she, Hubert?"

"Okay, okay, *Newman*. And no, she didn't break up with me. We never were really seeing each other."

"That's not what it looked like."

"She didn't want to get serious. She's got some kind of job lined up and she's ambitious. She thinks being in a relationship would get in the way."

"What sort of job?"

Patterson shook his head. "I don't know exactly...something with Gringotts."

Draco laughed. "No wonder she broke up with you, Pat...you couldn't pay attention long enough to find out what she's going to be doing after leaving Hogwarts."

"She wasn't ever very interested in what I'm doing after Hogwarts."

"Yeah, what are you doing? Working with your father in the broomstick repair shop?" Draco yawned.

"Probably. Just to start out. Since my brother . . . well, he'll be away a few more years. Dad needs my help."

"You're lucky your dad's not 'away,' too," Draco said. "I know where his sympathies lay."

Pat scowled. "Your father didn't just have 'sympathies,' *Newman*...if he did, you'd have kept his name, I'm sure. You got off scot-free, too. And everyone knows what side you'd have been on if you'd been here last year. You'd be off with Nott and Goyle and the others, I'm sure, not sitting here on the grass at Hogwarts."

"And why aren't you?" Draco asked. "Couldn't pick a side? Didn't know who'd win, so you just didn't choose a side?"

"You weren't there. It was awful . . ." Pat said softly. "We'd just heard that Snape was dead, that the Dark Lord had killed him, and Professor Sinistra was trying to get us all into this . . . this dungeon room. She was going to lock us in, both for our own protection and to keep any wannabe Death Eaters from going over to Vol, Riddle, that much was clear. I didn't want to be locked in, but when Goyle and Nott . . . I wasn't with them, Draco. Believe me. It's not just luck that I'm not in prison somewhere. Maybe I didn't join Zabini, but it wasn't as if I had any choice there. He already had his little group of supporters, and except for the younger kids, the only other person he brought with him besides his group was Pansy. She turned around pretty quickly to defend Sinistra with Zabini's crew and force the 'unwilling' students into the room, which the Headmistress had supplied with food and beds and stuff. I wasn't fast enough, I guess. I just . . . I didn't want to be locked in, but I never would have joined Goyle and Nott after what they did."

"I don't know why they didn't just Stun her," Draco said quietly. "No one's ever really talked to me about what happened then. I only know what I've read."

"Sinistra was defending herself too well. I guess they decided it would be faster and easier just to kill her. Goyle's the one who cast the curse, but Nott wasn't squeamish, believe me. After that, it was sort of pandemonium. Zabini . . . I may not like him, but he's got talent. He managed to get everyone else into the room that had been set up for us, separate out the younger kids, and then he and his group of supporters kept guard until some Aurors came and placed stronger wards on the door. It wasn't pleasant, being locked up for more than a day with people who'd sided with Goyle and Nott. Crabbe was the worst. Wouldn't shut up, kept casting spells at the door. Finally, Millicent, me, and a few others got sick of him, and we ganged up on him. Stunned him and took away his wand. Told everyone else that they were to keep quiet or we'd do the same to them."

"Would you have gone with Zabini, joined Snape's Slytherins, if he'd asked?"

Patterson shrugged. "I like to think I would have, but I don't know." He shook his head. "I really don't know."

"See, Pat, I was given a choice. My choice was either to go to the Dark Lord's side or to enter the protection of the Order of the Phoenix with my mother. Mother's life was a misery. I knew that she wouldn't go without me, and I knew what kinds of things I'd have to do if I went to the Dark Lord...to Riddle. There wasn't any third option for me. I didn't even know about the battle till the day after it happened. We didn't get any wizarding newspapers. By the time I heard anything, I couldn't have asked to help even if I'd wanted to. We returned to Britain a week later."

"Seeing what he did to your father, I can guess what your choice would have been," Patterson said softly.

"Yeah . . ." Draco whispered.

"So . . . are you and Weasley seeing each other?"

Draco looked over at Patterson. "What did it look like to you?"

Patterson smirked. "Unless she thought that kissing you would turn you into a toad, I'd say it looked pretty cosy."

Draco gave a crooked smile, but didn't say anything.

"She's actually quite something, that girl," Pat said. "Loved watching her on a broom...intense, man, really *intense*. Don't tell anybody, but I was sorry when she quit the Quidditch team. Of course, makes our chances a bit better. We might actually end up second."

"Second's as good as last," Draco said automatically.

"Yah, whatever. At least we're not a complete disaster, like Hufflepuff. That kid, what's his name . . . little squirt who plays Seeker."

"Pinter."

"That's him. He's good. He must have been bit by a Mackled Malaclaw before he was Sorted, or something, to end up in Hufflepuff. They are fun to watch, though. Didya see their last game, when their Beaters flew into each other, knocked themselves off their brooms!" Patterson gave a whoop of laughter.

"It was a Beater and a Chaser, actually," Draco corrected, but he smirked. "Yeah, it's more like comedy than sport, watching them. But you're right about Pinter."

"He'll never stand a chance of making league Quidditch, though, not playing on that team."

Draco shrugged. "There's other things in life." He had too much to be thinking about with his own future to worry about some Hufflepuff kid's luck.

"Did you ever think about it?" Patterson asked. "Think about playing professionally?"

Draco shook his head slightly. His father used to talk about that, getting him on a team, using his influence to help him. Draco didn't think he was really good enough. He might have been able to get on a team by virtue of his father's pull, but he never would have gone beyond the reserves. He would have been lucky to play once or twice a season.

"It'd be a bit of a bore, I think," Draco said. "I'm thinking of business . . . like you," he added, making a gesture of amends for what he'd said before about his father's broomstick repair business, and for what he'd implied by it.

"I thought you might do an apprenticeship, Potions or something."

Draco shook his head. "I think business would suit me better. More . . . range. And if you get in with the right business, it's like an apprenticeship, anyway."

"You know where you're goin', then?"

"No, but I've ideas. A few things in mind."

"With the Zabinis?"

Draco snorted. "As if," he said, using one of Ginny's favourite phrases.

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Patterson stretched his long legs out in front of him. "Pretty soon, I'm afraid that if you're a Slytherin, you'll be either in Zabini's family or outside it, and if you're outside . . ." Patterson shook his head.

"Then it's up to us, people like us, to make other examples. Not that there's anything wrong with Zabini, and he's doing Slytherin well...I don't think there's been a week when the *Prophet* hasn't quoted either Blaise or his father about something, always mentioning Slytherin House somewhere in the article...but I think we've had enough of single leaders, and I think once we're out of school, we shouldn't all be thinking about Houses as much, anyway."

"I suppose . . . My mum was in Ravenclaw, you know."

"That'd be an easier House to be in than Slytherin, I think."

Patterson nodded. "So, are you and the Gryffindor girl serious?"

Draco shrugged. "We'll see."

"She was Harry Potter's girl," Pat said.

"Mm." That was an unpleasant thought, one he avoided.

"Is that why you're going out with her?"

Draco turned his head quickly and stared at Patterson. "Say something like that again, and I will forget myself and hex you, Patterson."

"Hey, all right! I was just sayin' . . . It's what a lot of people will think when they see you together, innit...you can't hex them all."

Draco shoved himself to his feet. "I'm going back up to the common room before dinner."

He didn't even look back when Patterson called after him, then caught up with him. The two walked back up to the castle together in silence.

Author's Note: If you think you recognize Pat from somewhere, he showed up in [The Sorting of Suzie Sefton](#).

If you'd like to refresh your memory, the Hogwarts battle chapter in [Death's Dominion](#) is in Chapter Twenty-Nine, *They shall rise again*. Some other events referred to here, such as the vigilante attacks, occur in [A Long Vernal Season](#).

Chapter Four: Plans

Chapter 4 of 17

Draco and Ginny plan their date and talk more about the future.

Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Four: Plans

"Niamh is going with Chip," Ginny said, sitting cross-legged on her scarlet cushion, "and Luna's going along with them. You and Chip get along all right, don't you?" Ginny was never clear on how Slytherin House politics worked.

"Yeah, I guess," Draco replied. Chip Thackery had been annoyed that Draco had been reinstated as a prefect, since he was already the male seventh-year prefect in Slytherin, but when Draco hadn't attempted to supplant him in his leadership within the House, Chip got over it quickly.

"So we can all go together? Unless there's another group you'd rather join."

"As long as we aren't all glued together, it's fine with me. I'd like us to have some time on our own," Draco said.

Ginny smiled brightly. "Yeah, I think we can do that."

"Of course, the village will be crawling with teachers and completely infested by Aurors," Draco said. "I don't know how alone we'll be able to be."

"We'll figure something out. I think we'll be able to find somewhere that's not 'infested,'" Ginny said.

Draco twitched a smile. "As long as we don't get caught."

"Yeah, I know...you're a prefect and everything."

"So . . . what did Niamh and Luna think when you told them I was coming along? That we're going together?"

Ginny shrugged. "Luna just looked dreamy, like usual, and Niamh mentioned that she was bringing Thackery. That was about it. I thought Luna was going with someone, too, but it must have been a mistaken impression, 'cause she didn't mention anything about it."

"I haven't seen her with anyone in particular. She mostly hangs out with other girls, and she's pretty strange...d'you think she's, you knowgay?" Draco asked, lowering his voice.

Ginny broke into giggles and shook her head. She opened her mouth to reply, and she just laughed more. "If she is, she doesn't only swing one way," Ginny finally said. "She and my brother...Ron...had a thing for a while. It didn't last, but over Easter, he said something about getting back together with her again." Ginny giggled again. "He probably would have been fascinated with that possibility, though. You should see the magazines I found when I did his laundry last summer. I left them all laying out on his bed, open to different pictures. Some of it was a little nasty, I thought. Anyway, he either got rid of them or he hid them somewhere other than in his dirty laundry. He was really embarrassed." She flopped back, laughing.

Draco smirked. He wished he'd had some of that reading material during that long year that he was living with his mother in Sweden.

"How was Divination today?" Draco asked, changing the subject from Luna and turning his mind away from wank materials.

"It was okay, but Duffy was in a snit. Only about half of us had done the assigned essay, and there were three guys missing. She didn't take it out on us, exactly, but she was in a bad mood."

"I didn't think that Duffy could do anything but giggle and simper," Draco said.

"She's usually in a really good mood, but she wasn't today. Actually, I think that she's trying to make it a real course, you know...more than Trelawney did...and give real assignments and stuff, but people took it thinking it'd be the same old tripe and they could get away with not doing anything, just coast through making stuff up till the exam, then do a little cramming and cross their fingers for the practical portion."

"Yeah, I know that Pat didn't go. He came down and sat with me after you left for class. He said he didn't go because he hadn't finished the essay."

"You know, Duffy's really pretty nice. I think that if people asked for an extension of a deadline, she'd give it to them."

"She's just so . . . *Hufflepuff*," Draco said. "Sorry, don't mean to sound like that, but really. She is such a cheery little lightweight."

"You just don't like Divination."

"I don't. It should be outlawed," Draco grumped. "When it's inaccurate, it's stupid, or even exploitive, and when it's accurate, it just causes problems. It's a disaster any way it goes."

Ginny laughed. "Then let's start our Charms assignment."

After Charms, they moved on to Transfiguration. As the room grew darker, Draco closed his book and reached over to close Ginny's.

"I think it's time we pack up for the day," he said.

Ginny nodded. "Herbology was kind of fun this afternoon," she said as she opened her book bag.

"Yeah, especially since she let us leave so early," Draco said. "I'm getting tired of going to classes. I'll be glad when NEWTs are over."

"Me, too . . . but I still don't know what I'm going to do. I haven't any idea at all, and that makes me nervous."

"I wrote back to Mr MacAirt. When I meet with him, would you like me to mention you? Would you like to see if there's something in one of his businesses that you might like to do?"

"He's a very important man, Draco. I can't waste his time when I don't have any idea of what I might do. I don't know a thing about business."

"He seems pretty intuitive. He might talk with you and come up with an idea for you."

Ginny shook her head. "I don't think so."

"I do," Draco said. "In fact, since he's meeting me here, why don't you come along just so that I can introduce you? Then it would be easier to ask about talking to him yourself."

"Just the idea of talking to him when I haven't a clue makes me nervous. I don't know . . ."

Draco grinned. "He's even better looking than his son!" he teased in a sing-song voice.

Ginny laughed. "That would be even scarier! But okay, I'll let you introduce us." She leaned over, placing her hand on his cushion next to his leg, and kissed him. "Thanks, Draco."

Draco put his hand behind her head and drew her closer. By mutual unspoken agreement, they had been avoiding any kissing or touching until they were finished with their revision, that way it would be easier to keep from doing anything that they shouldn't be caught doing. Right now, as Draco's tongue explored Ginny's mouth and one of his hands drifted to her breast, it was very difficult for him to restrain himself from pushing Ginny back onto her cushion and going further. He reminded himself of Headmistress McGonagall's warning, though, and gently pulled away.

"That's one reason I can't wait for NEWTs to be over," Ginny said with a sigh. "I want us to spend real time alone together, not just like this."

"Mm, me, too," Draco said, leaning forward and kissing her softly once more. "I have a flat, you know. It's at my parents' place in Leeds...they're not there, of course, after the firebomb attack by that loony, but the house has been repaired, and my flat wasn't damaged at all . . . well, it did smell a bit funny from the smoke and the potion, but that's probably gone by now. It's just a small flat, the ground floor...the basement, really...only four rooms, but it's quite well equipped . . ."

"It sounds wonderful," Ginny said. "I don't know where I'll live after school. I'll probably go back to the Burrow for a while . . . Ron has a flat in Diagon Alley near the twins' shop, but he doesn't like it. He thought it was great at first, right in the centre of everything, but it's too noisy, too small, and the Charmed plumbing is really bad, so the drains always smell nasty. Over Easter, he was talking about getting a different place this summer, maybe something we could share. I don't know, though. I'd have to see the place, and I'm not sure whether I could live with him or not. He's kind of a slob, and I think he might expect me to pick up after him all the time."

"Maybe if you work for Mr MacAirt, you could get your own flat . . . or maybe we could get one together. Eventually. If you wanted. We could talk about it."

"I think that might be a good idea," Ginny said, smiling. "We'll need to think about it . . . see how things go."

Draco nodded. He hoped that they could be really alone before NEWTs, but he would have to think about how to manage that. Being caught not only meant losing his prefect's badge and some privileges, it meant exposing Ginny to embarrassment. Himself, too, though that was not his paramount concern. In addition, he really wanted to have their first time together be in some more romantic...or at least more comfortable...place than some abandoned classroom or damp, secluded nook in the dungeons. That might be fine for some couples, but not for him and Ginny, not for their first real sex and not just snogging. Making love. Draco smiled.

"Yeah, we'll have to see how things go," he said.

Chapter Five: He's My Date, Ron

Chapter 5 of 17

Draco and Ginny go into Hogsmeade together and have an unexpected encounter.

Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Five: He's My Date, Ron

Saturday dawned brightly, and considering the rainy weather of the previous few days, it seemed to bode well for the Hogsmeade outing. Draco had been correct, and it did seem that half the staff was accompanying the students that day, although Professor Snape had stood inside the gate, arms crossed, watching as everyone left, then he and Rath had closed and warded the gates behind them. There were several Aurors scattered about the village, at least eight, Draco thought, and between them and the teachers, Draco didn't hold out much hope for catching some time alone with Ginny.

As Ginny had suggested, they joined long and lanky seventh-year Slytherin prefect, Chip Thackery, who wore his Snape's Slytherin gold-and-silver double snake ring that day, Niamh Donovan, the Ravenclaw Head Girl, and Luna Lovegood.

"Where to first?" Ginny asked.

"I want to stop at the Quidditch supply shop, if that's okay with everyone," Niamh said.

"Whatever your heart desires, desire of my heart!" Chip said, planting a kiss on the top of her head.

Draco hid his grimace with a cough. "Yeah, that's fine with me, too," he said.

The others concurred, but Luna hung around just inside the door, looking out at the street.

"Expecting someone?" Niamh asked her.

Draco wandered over to the display of Snitches.

"Yeah," Luna said. She giggled. "The 'desire of my heart.'"

Draco rolled his eyes at Ginny, who grinned and picked up a pair of racing gloves.

"Did you see him in your flower petals during Divination this week?" Chip asked with a smirk.

"No, I see him right now," Luna said calmly. She opened the door and waved at someone out on the street.

Draco turned to look out the large window that faced the street. He could feel the blood drain from his face. He grabbed Ginny's arm, and she turned toward him, ready to complain about his grip, then she saw his expression, and she followed his gaze.

"Oh my . . ." she breathed.

Niamh looked almost as stunned as Draco and Ginny, but Chip was grinning his wrinkled bulldog grin.

"Luna!" Niamh said urgently. "Why didn't you tell us that Ron was meeting you?"

Luna shrugged, and Niamh looked at Draco and Ginny, then up at Chip. "Chip, take Draco somewhere, anywhere. Ginny, you can stick with me."

"And where are we supposed to go?" Chip asked. "And how are we supposed to get there?"

Indeed, it was too late for anyone to leave the broomstick shop, even by Apparition; Ron was right outside the door, and now he was stepping in, leaning toward Luna, and kissing her lightly.

Ginny took a breath and stepped forward. "Ron! Hey! I didn't know you were going to be in Hogsmeade this weekend. I thought the Cannons were playing Puddlemere today." She threw her arms around him.

"Wotcha, Gin! I don't have to be at the stadium until two, and the game begins at four. Wish I could bring you! I'll be starting Keeper today." Ron's gaze moved from Ginny's face to the back of the shop, where Draco stood looking at children's starter brooms. An expression of distaste crossed Ron's face. "Let's get out of here. I'll treat you and Luna to a pastry at Puddfoot's. Are Niamh and Thackery coming, too?"

Niamh and Chip were watching with interest, wondering what would transpire and how Ginny would handle this.

"They might, and so's Draco..."

"Oh no, leave him here to play with the toys," Ron said with an undisguised sneer. "Just his thing, innit?"

"We can't. We're in pairs, and he's my partner," Ginny said firmly. When Ron just stared at her, she added, "My date. I'm sticking with him. But you and Luna go have something at Puddifoot's. I'm still full from breakfast anyway."

Ron gaped, then he whispered, "Ginny, you can't mean..."

"I made a pig of myself this morning," Ginny said blithely. "The house-elves made waffles, and I must have eaten six, at least. I couldn't eat anything right now."

Luna, who had been watching impassively, took hold of Ron's elbow and began to pull him out the still-open door. "C'mon, Ron, I want a cream-filled cauldron cake."

When the door had closed behind Ron and Luna, Ron still looking back at the shop open-mouthed as he limped away, Niamh said, "Well, that wasn't half awkward."

"Yeah, but our Gryffindor witch handled it with aplomb, wouldn't you say, Newman?" Chip said.

Draco stepped over and put his arm around Ginny. "As could be expected," he replied, though he actually felt an acute sense of relief. He kissed the side of her head. There had been a part of him that had feared that Ginny might disavow him, or presumed that she would at least minimise her association with him. He grinned. Well, now that Ron knew, it seemed there was no need to pretend they weren't together on a date. He kissed her temple and gave her a squeeze.

"I'm glad that Luna was quick-thinking enough to get Ron out of here before he could decide to make a scene," Ginny said. "I actually didn't know they were seeing each other again, although over Easter, Ron did say he had made a mistake breaking up with her when he did."

"That wasn't the classiest thing he's ever done," Chip said, "breaking up with a girl after she was nearly killed and was so badly injured with those . . . scars. Downright cheesy, I'd say. It's good of her to take him back."

Draco gave a slight shrug. "He probably wanted to escape everything. Seeing her probably reminded him of . . ." Draco looked over at Ginny, then decided that it was one thing to be sensitive to her feelings and another to completely avoid very large, if uncomfortable, topics. "Reminded him of the battle, of all the losses. I can understand that."

Ginny nodded. "I think you're right. He said something like that to me, actually, though not about Luna. I'm glad you're understanding, Draco."

Another group of students came into the shop, and Niamh turned to find the broomstick maintenance kit she wanted.

"We'll meet you outside of Honeyduke's," Ginny said. "It's getting a little crowded in here."

Niamh and Chip agreed, and Draco and Ginny left the broomstick shop and strolled together down the street toward the sweets shop. Draco half-expected an angry mob to descend and pelt him with spell-born rocks for walking down the street with his arm around a Weasley, but no one seemed to even give them a second glance. He relaxed.

"What are you going to tell Ron? Or actually, what are you going to tell your dad?" Draco asked. "Ron's not likely to keep this to himself."

Ginny shrugged. "I don't know. I think my dad wants me to be happy, and even if he were a little worried about you, I think he'd give you a fair chance. I don't think he'd judge you by your father, anyway."

"Good thing, too, 'cause I think they hate each other. Or did. I don't know if my father has enough strength to hate anyone that much anymore. He still doesn't like him, though, I'm sure."

"Well, let's not let them make us into some kind of Romeo and Juliet, okay? Life has enough drama in it without that."

"A couple years ago, I would have asked you who they were, but I read all of Shakespeare's plays whilst in Sweden," Draco said.

"You're ahead of me, then. I only know that they're some kind of star-crossed lovers from one of his plays, like the young witch and wizard in the 'Tale of Timothy and Esmeralda,'" Ginny said.

Draco groaned. "That story is even worse, and not as well told, either."

"I don't know . . . we had a storybook written by my Great-great Grandfather Prewett...or was it 'great-great-great'? Anyway, it had a lot of illustrations in it, and that was one of the stories he told, about how their fathers hated each other and their hatred fated the young lovers to an early and tragic death. It seemed very romantic when I was about eight," Ginny said with a grin.

"I think we had the same book in our library," Draco said. "It was one of the ones I learned to read out of. Very florid, with a lot of tragedy. *Definitely* to be avoided!"

Ginny laughed. "Right! No tragedy for us! We'll keep a sharp eye out to avoid it!"

The two continued their stroll to Honeyduke's, where they leaned against the wall and talked, waiting for Niamh and Chip, until one of the shop workers came out and told them not to lean against the shop wall. Ginny rolled her eyes, but Draco apologised respectfully and explained they were waiting for friends to arrive. The wizard huffed sharply through his teeth at that, but didn't say anything more, leaving them to wait outside the shop.

Finally, Niamh and Chip came into view, and Ginny waved. When Niamh waved back, then made a shooing gesture, Ginny took Draco's arm and the two went into the sweets shop.

"I loved those truffles you gave me," Ginny said. "It was a sad moment when I ate the last one!"

"We could get more," Draco said.

"I think I'd like to save having truffles for special occasions...like as unexpected presents," Ginny said with a grin. "I'd love a bar of dark chocolate, though. One of those big, double-thick ones. I can make them last a week, sometimes longer."

Draco grinned and bought them each one of those, then he bought an acid pop for himself, after Ginny declined.

"I'm going to get Sefton some buzzing humbugs . . . green apple and peppermint this time, I think," Draco said. He pointed out the humbugs to the witch behind the glass counter, and she filled a small white bag with them.

Ginny grinned as they stepped away from the counter to let Niamh and Chip order some sweets. She told them that they'd meet them in the Three Broomsticks at noon, then said to Draco, "It's really cute to see Suzie tag along after you, you know? She doesn't do it as much as she used to, but it was like you had a little puppy bouncing behind you."

Draco gave a crooked smile. "Yeah, well, she was a bit lost at first and needed some help, and she's a smart kid, so I didn't mind. She's a lot more Slytherin than I'd have thought when I first learned she was Muggle-born. But she's really sharp, especially about people."

"Do you think she has a crush on you?" Ginny asked curiously.

Draco shook his head and stuck his acid pop in his mouth as they stepped outside the shop. "Nah," he slurred around the pop, "don't think sho." He took the acid pop from his mouth and said more clearly, "She does have a big crush on our Head of House, though." He laughed and wrapped up his pop for later.

"On *Snape*? You're kidding?!"

"No. Perfectly serious. I think it may have died down to a mere case of hero worship lately, though. But she thinks he's terrific. Has ever since she tossed her cookies on him back before the Sorting."

Ginny laughed. "Oh, Merlin! That's funny! I can't imagine that! A crush on Snape!" Ginny laughed again. "I mean, I can see *maybe* for an older student, that whole untouchable wounded-and-brooding look, but for a *first-year*? I thought he scared them all so bad they wet themselves just thinking about him!"

Draco snorted a laugh. "Not her, not even after vomiting all over him. Maybe that's a sign of love to Muggles or something! Vomit!"

"Oh, Draco, you're terrible!" Ginny said with a laugh.

"Yeah, I can see the courtship rituals now, who vomits first, the colour of the puke..."

"Draco, stop it!" Ginny said, convulsed with laughter. "You're going to make *me* sick!"

"She threw up on me, too," Draco continued with a grin, undeterred even after Ginny punched him in the arm. "It was purple, so apparently purple puke is not indicative of true *lurve*." Ginny punched him again. "Ouch! Okay, okay! You win, Weasley! You sure pack a punch!" He put up his hands in mock surrender, but then grabbed her with one arm around her neck and pulled her back toward him, pretending to be about to choke her, but giving her a kiss on the cheek.

"Hey! No roughhousing," a deep voice behind them said.

"Oh, er, we were just . . . just fooling around," Draco said, turning to see who was speaking to them, and going pale.

Ginny, still flushed from laughing so hard, pushed some hair back from her face and smiled up at the tall young Auror. "Sorry, sir. My fault."

"You're Ginevra Weasley, aren't you?"

Ginny nodded.

"I knew your brother Charlie quite well in school. When you see him, tell him that Clovis Hutchins said 'hi.'"

"Okay, I will. And we'll behave more properly," Ginny said.

Clovis gave a quick grin. "I have to earn my pay. Don't worry about it, Ginevra."

"Thanks, Clovis!"

When the young Auror had moved away, Draco took Ginny's arm and began to walk quickly down the street.

"I'm sorry about that, Draco."

Draco shook his head. "It's all right." He shot her a smile. "*I* was getting a little disgusting."

"Yeah, you were. Downright revolting! Purple puke!" Ginny shuddered and laughed.

"It was purple. Suzie'd been eating Droobleberry-flavoured buzzing humbugs...turns out she's allergic to Droobleberries...and they turned her vomit purple. And it was all over my best student robe, too. It was the first day of classes."

Ginny shook her head. "I'm surprised you let her hang around you after that."

Draco shrugged and pushed open the door to Scrivenshaft's for them, ringing a set of bells. "I don't know, maybe it was a bonding experience or something, if not true *lurve*! Anyway, she was mortified and pretty sweet." She had also seemed to like Draco just for himself right from the start, which was an unusual experience for him.

"She's going to go down in Hogwarts history as the girl who came to Hogwarts and the first thing she did on getting to the school and stepping off the boat was throw up on the Head of Slytherin...and she not only survived it, she was Sorted into his House!"

The two looked at the various quills and some quill boxes and stands, then Ginny pointed at a fountain pen display. "Some of those are cool."

Draco nodded. "Not very traditional, though," he said dubiously.

"The Headmistress uses one sometimes. She has one that is black with gold on it. It's really posh looking."

"They are nice . . ."

"Interested in our fine writing instruments?" the shopkeeper asked as he stepped up to them, a genial smile on his face.

"Not today, but they are nice," Draco said politely.

"That red one is beautiful," Ginny said, pointing to one that was a deep, lustrous red.

"Ah, yes, and that one comes standard with a self-filling charm, as well, so as long as your Charmed inkwell is nearby and has ink in it, your fountain pen will not run dry," the shopkeeper explained. "But for just one Galleon and one Sickie extra, we can place the charm on any fountain pen you purchase."

"Maybe I'll ask for one for my birthday," Ginny said with a smile. "Thanks for your help."

"There are also some very nice fountain pens with Hogwarts themes, including ones for each House. That brighter red fountain pen there...here, I'll show you." The wizard opened the case and took out a scarlet-coloured pen. "You see it has a Gryffindor shield on it here on the clip, and there are ones like it in Ravenclaw blue, Hufflepuff yellow, and Slytherin green, and each comes with two bottles of ink, one black and the other in the same colour as the pen."

"Yellow ink?" Ginny said sceptically.

"I know...I'm Hufflepuff, myself, and I never found a use for yellow ink," the shopkeeper said with an amused smile. "It looks quite well in the other colours, though. You, sir, you're a Slytherin, correct?" the shopkeeper asked Draco.

Draco nodded.

"This is our best Slytherin pen set. Emerald green with an emerald chip on the clip. It has silver accents, as you can see...genuine silver, not alloy...and includes the self-filling charm, a special ebony and silver case, and a matching Charmed inkwell, also with silver accents."

"Very . . . well executed," Draco said, trying to be diplomatic. He wondered what Snape thought of fountain pens . . . They would be easier to carry about than a quill. They looked very slick, even the ones without the extras.

"I think we're just looking today," Ginny said.

"We also have a fine supply of notepaper charmed with the respective House shields at the top, and it can be personalised for a modest fee," the shopkeeper said.

"I'll remember that. Thanks!" Ginny replied with a smile.

The two left the shop, bells jingling after them.

"I got the feeling he didn't like people looking and not buying," Draco said.

"I didn't. I think he just likes all of the stuff he sells. Besides, on a Hogsmeade weekend, for every person who just looks, there's another one who buys. I don't think they actually mind."

"I do have to stop at the apothecary," Draco said. "I need more Shrivelfig and a few other things, then we can meet Niamh and Thackery at the Three Broomsticks for lunch."

Ginny looked up at the clock tower. "Yeah . . . and if we're *really* lucky and time it well, we might meet Luna and her date, too."

"Don't remind me," Draco groaned.

Ginny laughed. "I need a new glass stirring rod, and another birch one, so a stop at the apothecary's good for me, too."

Author's Note: The story of Suzie Sefton and her arrival at Hogwarts is in the four-chapter story, ["The Sorting of Suzie Sefton."](#)

Chapter Six: Hermione

Chapter 6 of 17

Ron and Luna pay a visit to Hermione at Gareth's house in Hogsmeade. Ron tries to enlist Hermione's sympathy.

Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Six: Hermione

"And she was with *Malfoy*," Ron finished with a dramatic sigh. Luna reached over and patted his hand. "She said he was her *date!*"

He and Luna had shown up on Gareth McGonagall's doorstep, looking for Hermione. Gareth had explained they were in the midst of work at that moment, and he should return later in the day, but Ron had looked so stricken, Gareth had shaken his head, sighed, and opened the door wider to let them in. Now they were all in the kitchen, Hermione, Luna, and Ron sitting around the table, and Gareth making them tea.

"I thought that Malfoy was still in hiding somewhere under Ministry protection from the vigilante," Gareth interjected innocently. "He and his wife."

"His *son*," Ron said with a grimace. "Not Lucius. That would be a whole different kind of disgusting."

"Ah, Draco Newman, you mean," Gareth said, setting down the teapot on the table as Hermione Summoned cups and saucers from their cupboard.

"That must have been a surprise," Hermione said reasonably, "but I think that everyone at the school has to have someone with them when they leave the grounds, even the staff. Maybe they were just put together, assigned to each other..."

"No, Ginny said specifically that he was her *date*," Ron said. He gestured toward Luna, who was quietly sipping her tea. "And Luna said they've been seeing each other for a while."

"I don't think it's the end of the world, Ron," Hermione said.

"I've only met him a few times, but Mr Newman seems a fine, well-mannered wizard," Gareth said, emphasising the young wizard's new last name.

"Yeah, he would when he wants to make a good impression on you, but he's . . . he's awful," Ron ended lamely.

"He's not so bad," Luna said quietly. "Ginny is happy and he has been good to her."

"How can you say that? I was in school with him for six years...until Professor McGonagall helped him to run away. No offense, Gareth."

"People who say, 'no offense' are usually expecting offense to be taken," Gareth said. "So I suggest that if you wish to avoid offense, do not say anything you consider offensive. However, no offense taken. Aunt Minerva did assist Draco and his mother in their escape from Riddle."

"Yeah, and I still don't understand it. All the innocent people who died, and Professor McGonagall saved *them*. A couple nasty, spoiled purebloods just . . . just *drenched* in the Dark Arts. And then she let him back in school, and now Ginny announces she's dating him."

"A lot has changed, Ron," Hermione said. "And if he makes Ginny happy..."

"It's just a Slytherin plot, I'm sure. He just wants people to forget he's a Malfoy and let their guard down. He wants to use Ginny. He'll make her miserable once he's got what he wants," Ron retorted.

"I don't think so," Luna said. "It's been more than two years since you had any real contact with him, Ron. He's grown up. I think you should give him a chance before you go off on him."

"I give him a chance, and he'll take it and he'll hurt Ginny," Ron said, his eyes narrowed. "He's always been a nasty little snake."

"And if he's not given a chance to be anything else," Gareth said, "he never will be. My aunt would not have offered him the choice she did if she did not believe that he was . . . redeemable, that he had some kind of decent possible future ahead of him."

"What choice did she offer him, then?" Ron demanded.

"That's for you to ask him...in a less confrontational manner...not for me to say. But as far as you know, he's done nothing wrong but offend you by dating your sister, and I would say that's more your problem than his," Gareth said.

"I bet *he's* the reason that Ginny quit Quidditch and broke up with Harry," Ron said, his brow lowered and his jaw thrust out. "She told him there wasn't anyone else, and she was sneaking around with Malfoy the entire time."

"That's not true," Hermione said.

"No, it's not," Luna agreed. "They started seeing each other some time after that."

"What would you know about it?" Ron asked Hermione, ignoring Luna.

"You know that she talks to me, and we write. But I also know from someone else that she had been miserable, that she had grown to hate playing Quidditch, and that she needed a break from Harry."

"So did you know that she was seeing Malfoy?"

"Newman," Hermione corrected. "No, but her last few letters have been much happier than they used to be, and she mentioned recently that she had a new revisions partner who was making it more fun to prepare for NEWTs. I assume now that that was Draco."

"I don't understand," Ron said, his brows drawn together in puzzlement. "Why aren't you upset about it? You slugged him once, or have you forgotten? He used to call you a Mudblood."

Hermione coloured, but shook her head. "He was a kid then. We've all been through a lot in the last few years. You saw what Riddle did to his father, and now both his parents are in hiding and he can't even know where they are. It's not as though Draco's had it easy recently. Let him have his fresh start. I know that Professor Snape has benefited from being given that opportunity, and we all are better off for it, too."

Ron snorted in derision. "He's worse than Snape ever was...at least Snape was really always on our side and almost died defying Riddle...Malfoy was always a tosser, and he and his family were Death Eater Central there at Malfoy manor. He just got off lightly. If he hadn't been spirited away by Professor McGonagall and the Order of the Phoenix, he'd have stayed on the wrong side, believe me!"

"At the time that happened, your father had already become leader of the Order, hadn't he?" Gareth asked rhetorically. "And Professor Snape was *not* always on our side. He used to be a Death Eater. A real one. He's been on our side for almost as long as you've been alive, Ron, but that's not forever. Snape changed sides, and without him, we might not have won, and I'm sure that many more people would be dead if it weren't for him. He's one of my closest friends, and anyone who says that he shouldn't have been given a second chance . . . they're either misguided fools or mean-spirited bastards. Draco was never as bad as Snape once was, and Snape's my friend now. Give Draco a chance, Ron, or at least, don't get in his way."

Ron scowled into his teacup. "Yeah, okay, so Snape wasn't always on the right side...and he was pretty nasty when we were in school, too...but I know what you mean about him. He's also improved since the war. I know that he helped Ginny this spring when she was really depressed. Ginny and Dad both told me that, and I've thanked him for it." He looked over at Luna and placed his hand on hers. "And talking to Dad and Ginny about trying to escape all the bad memories of the war made me rethink some of the things I've done, some of the stuff I did after the war. Indirectly, I have Snape to thank for that, too. But that doesn't mean that Draco's deserving."

"It's not about *deserving*, Ron. It's about *needing*," Gareth replied. "He needs this chance to start fresh, and without it, he'll be stuck where he was. You don't have to give him that chance yourself, and you're not responsible for his choices, but you can either let the man get on with his life so that he can try to take advantage of that chance, or you can be an obstruction and get in his way. Now, I don't know how serious he and Ginny are, and I don't know whether he'll break her heart...or whether she'll break his...but I think that you should give Ginny some credit and let her make her own decisions about whom she's friends with and whom she gets involved with. And if she does get hurt, you'll still be on good terms with her and you can be there to help her. If you alienate her, she won't want to have anything to do with you no matter how well or badly the relationship goes."

"Yeah, well, as long as she doesn't expect me to spend any time with him," Ron said with a huff.

"I think you should," Luna said. "At least a little bit of time. Get to know him a little, see the two of them together. You'll see what's going on instead of just guessing and imagining things."

"Luna's right, Ron, and so's Gareth," Hermione said. "I can't say I would have chosen Draco for Ginny, but I think it's a good idea to give him a chance, or at least be kind to your sister about it, and listen to her."

"I suppose," Ron said reluctantly. "Dad's gonna go spare when he hears about this." He looked over at Hermione. "Hey, maybe you could tell him, Hermione. He might not kill the messenger if you told him."

"He's not likely to kill anyone, Ron," Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, but he *hates* Malfoy...Lucius...and I know this will about kill him. Someone's got to break it to him gently. You'd be better at that. And Dad likes you."

Hermione shook her head. "If Ginny asks me to, maybe, but otherwise . . ."

"You'll be going over to check on him again, right?" Ron asked. "Tell him then. Just . . . make it a part of the conversation, slip it in somehow. I know you can do it. I would, but next week, we're off for the Continent for a few games. I really appreciate your keeping an eye on him for us. With Charlie back in Romania, Bill and Fleur busy with the baby, and the twins...well, you know the twins...and then my travel, we just don't look in on the Burrow as much as we should. We all really appreciate it, you know. Dad's

doing so much better than he was."

"He's taking better care of himself," Hermione said noncommittally. "I don't know when I'll be dropping by the Burrow . . . but if you're going to be away, I suppose I could stop by next week some time, just to look in on him. I'd rather leave that news to Ginny to handle, though. If it happens to come up naturally in conversation, I may mention that Ginny's started seeing someone new. But I'm not going to do it like I'm warning him about it."

"Thanks, Hermione! You're the best," Ron said.

"Now, I don't think that my house is on the approved list of Hogsmeade-weekend destinations," Gareth said to Ron, pushing back his chair and standing, "so you ought to get Luna back to the High Street before she's missed. And Hermione and I were in the middle of some complicated calculations, so we need to get back to work. The Venetian Ministry isn't paying me a commission to be an agony aunt for unhappy wizards!"

Chapter Seven: The Three Broomsticks

Chapter 7 of 17

Ginny and Draco are having lunch at the Three Broomsticks with their friends when Ron and Luna arrive.

Not DH-compliant.



Chapter Seven: The Three Broomsticks

Niamh was the first to see them enter the pub. She squeezed Chip's thigh under the table, and Chip looked up. He leaned over and whispered to Ginny, who turned her head to look toward the door. Ginny took Draco's hand.

"My brother just came in with Luna," Ginny said. "Just don't look and don't . . . please try not to do anything provocative."

"Like hold your hand?" Draco asked with a smirk, shaking his head.

"Shh," Niamh whispered. "They're coming over."

"Good thing we got a large table, then," Ginny said, turning to watch her brother and Luna approach. She smiled up at them. "You're having lunch here, too?"

"I never got my cream-filled cauldron cake," Luna said. "I'm getting hungry."

"Yeah . . . and I need to eat before I Apparate to the stadium," Ron said, trying to avoid looking at Ginny and Draco's hands, and only succeeding in staring.

"If you want, you can join us," Ginny said, "if that's all right with everyone else...are we expecting anyone else?"

Niamh shook her head.

"Fine with me," Chip said. He looked at Ron's right hand, which sported a double snake ring like the one he wore. "Always ready to share a meal with another Snape's Slytherin, after all," he said, reminding everyone at the table...including Ron...that during the battle, Ron had joined the group calling itself "Snape's Slytherins," and that after the war, Blaise Zabini had given him the same ring he'd given all the Slytherin combatants. Ron had joined the Slytherins because they had formed Harry's guard on the battlefield until they reached Riddle, but Ron had also identified himself with them when he gave an interview to the *Daily Prophet* the day after the battle. A Gryffindor Slytherin, who wasn't Slytherin at all, but he had stood with them and fought with them and forgotten for that time that there was any difference between them.

"Okay," Ron said with a nod, looking at Luna, who smiled. He pulled out the chair next to Draco for Luna, then he took the chair between Luna and Niamh.

"We've ordered," Chip said. "I'll try to get the wait-witch back."

There was no need for that, however, since a wait-witch quickly stepped up to the table to take the newcomers' orders. Ron, although dressed casually otherwise, was wearing his orange Chudley Cannons cape and hard to miss.

Niamh started the conversation by pulling out her new broomstick maintenance kit and showing it around. "Since I won't be able to afford the new Nimbus Victory, I thought I could at least baby my Nimbus Seventeen Hundred along for a while longer with a better maintenance kit than the one I've been using."

"That's a good-looking kit," Chip said. "I like the Charmed altimeter and speedometer combination. Are you going to use it?"

"I thought I'd try it," Niamh said, "although I've heard that they can interfere with aerodynamics if you install it yourself. You have to have special charms cast to prevent it, and I don't know them."

Luna lifted the round brass Charmed instrument from its nook in the kit. She stared at its foggy window dreamily. "Helena Benetti may know the charms. You should ask her. She might teach them to you." She breathed softly on the window, and it cleared, revealing "0 / 622." She breathed on it again, and it showed "0 / 2040.7." She passed it on to Ron and the window fogged over again.

"How much is the Victory going to cost?" Ginny asked as the rest of the maintenance kit was passed around and admired.

"They aren't advertising a price yet, but the chap at the shop this morning said he'd heard it would be close to a thousand Galleons, retail. I hope it won't be that expensive, but it's supposed to be almost as good as some of the specialty one-of-a-kind brooms that go for a few thousand each," Niamh replied.

"Ms Benetti was a tester for the broomstick," Ginny said as a big bowl of prawn-flavoured crisps arrived on the table. She reached in and took a couple. "I tried to get her to tell me about it, but she just gave me one of the promotional brochures. She has some kind of confidentiality agreement about it or something."

"I wonder if she gets a free one," Luna pondered.

"Maybe," Ron said, speaking up for the first time. "Some of the players on my team have endorsements with Nimbus, and they get free Nimbus Twenty-One Hundreds. They get an extra fee if they fly them during the games. Johnny Crumb gets ten Galleons for every game he flies his in, and he gets an extra Galleon for every goal he scores when he's riding it."

"He must have done well in that last game against the Harpies, then," Chip said. "How many goals did he score? Twenty-three? Twenty-four?"

"Twenty-three," Ron said. "So even though we lost, he still made thirty-three extra Galleons just for playing in the game."

"I read that the Ministry was thinking of making it illegal for that kind of payment...for scoring goals. They say it's too much like gambling on their own game or something," Niamh said, biting into a crisp.

"With my luck," Ron said with a melodramatic sigh, "they'll pass that law as soon as a company becomes interested in having me do an endorsement for them!"

Everyone chuckled in sympathy.

"Ah, they'd probably find some other way of paying the players then," Chip said. "Especially Nimbus. They spend a lot of money on advertising. I have a cousin who works for them, and all he does is work on promoting the new models."

"Can't he tell you how much the new Victory will be?" Ginny asked.

"If he wanted to get sacked, yeah," Chip said with a grin. "He did say that after the broomstick came back from what they thought would be the final testing in March, they had to rework the charms, so the release was moved from May twenty-sixth to the sixth of June so they'd have more time to polish the charms and get them perfect. I think it's going to be a really zippy broomstick."

Draco twitched a smile. "Maybe if the Hufflepuff team had them, the charms would keep them from flying into each other."

They all laughed at that, but then Niamh said, "Ms Benetti has been working with the Hufflepuffs, trying to get them to play as a team. They'll be better next game, I think, the match against Slytherin."

Luna smiled. "I saw them. They were running around on the ground waving funny sticks in the air. I didn't think it looked very useful, although it did look exhausting."

"I'm not sure," Niamh said, "but they'll be better. They have a new Chaser, too."

"I know what they were doing," Ginny said smugly.

"What?" Chip asked.

Niamh frowned slightly, but didn't say anything.

"She had them playing Muggle lacrosse a couple weeks ago, and then after that, they were playing broomstick lacrosse, which is apparently a sport they have at Whiteshell. It's supposed to improve their coordination and teamwork. Next autumn, she's going to form wizarding lacrosse teams, just for fun," Ginny said.

"So Benetti's staying at Hogwarts?" Ron asked. When Ginny nodded, Ron said, "That's good. I know that the Harpies and the Pride of Portree were recruiting her...or trying to...and I think some European teams were interested, too. I thought she'd go back to Sweetwater, actually. She was one of their highest paid players. Hard to believe she'd give that all up for a piddly job at Hogwarts."

"She says she likes it here," Ginny replied. "I think she's made friends."

Their food arrived, and conversation ebbed as they ate.

As soon as he saw that Luna had finished her meal, Ron signalled the wait-witch and paid their bill. He and Luna rose from the table, saying their good-byes, but Ginny got up and followed them to the door.

She threw her arms around Ron. "Thanks," she whispered. "Thank you, Ron. I'm so glad you came and that . . . that you were nice to Draco."

Uncomfortable, Ron said, "Well, it was nice to see everyone again. You and Niamh. And Thackery."

"And Draco?"

Ron hesitated, then he said, "I'm trying to pretend that he's a stranger I'm meeting for the first time. But without all the 'get-to-know-you' questions."

"Still, I'm glad you came. Good luck against Puddlemere!"

"Yeah, now that Millicent can't play, I think we have a good chance. She was one fierce Beater. Check the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow. You'll know then whether I celebrated wildly and fell over dead-drunk tonight or drowned my sorrows . . . and fell over dead-drunk tonight." He gave a half-smile.

"I might be able to listen to the game on the Wizarding Wireless," Ginny said. "I'll try to!"

"Listen, Ginny . . . someone needs to tell Harry. You know what. It wouldn't be good if he found out . . . some strange way. He's my best mate, always has been. You know what he's likely to think."

"You tell him, then," Ginny replied.

"No, no, it has to come from you."

"But how? I'm at school! And he made little enough time for me even when we were seeing each other . . . You need to tell him," Ginny insisted. "Better from you than someone else. I just hope you're nice about it and don't egg him on. I don't want Harry chasing Draco down, wand drawn!"

"You care more about Draco than you do Harry," Ron said with a frown, his brow furrowed.

"No. Or yes. But that's natural. And I hope you'd feel the same about Luna. Please, Ron . . . I'll write a letter for him and send it to you. You can explain as best you can...just keep it to the minimum...and then give him my letter, okay?"

Ron nodded reluctantly. "Yeah, okay." He looked down at her, shaking his head. "But *you* are telling Dad. And I want to be far away when you do."

Ginny quirked a sideways grin. "Sure. Thanks again, Ron. You're the best big brother a witch could want!"

For the first time since Ron had stepped into the Quidditch supply shop and heard Ginny call Draco her "date," he smiled broadly. "I have your back, Gin. No matter what. I'm no fan of the chap's family, but . . . prove me wrong, I hope, little sister. For your sake. Prove me wrong."

He kissed her forehead, then left the pub with Luna, taking her arm and then pulling her close and putting his arm around her. Ginny watched them walk down the street toward the joke shop, Ron's limp barely noticeable, then she turned and saw Draco watching her. She smiled, and she was pleased when his pinched expression relaxed, and he returned her smile and held out his hand, gesturing to her to return to him.

Author's Note: Millicent Bulstrode was one of the victims of the vigilante's attack at the end of March in *A Long Vernal Season*.

Helena Benetti first appeared in *Death's Dominion*, and she's appeared in *A Long Vernal Season*, where she's the Hogwarts Flying instructor and Quidditch coach and referee. She had help from Severus when she did some of the test flights for the new Nimbus Victory.

Ron's limp is from the injury he received during the raid on Malfoy manor in *Death's Dominion*, when he was hit by a *Conruptus*, which caused gangrene-like damage to one of his legs. Millicent's injury was caused by the same curse.

Chapter Eight: Professor Snape

Chapter 8 of 17

Snape has a word with Draco.



Chapter Eight: Professor Snape

As Ginny returned to the table, Draco's expression changed yet again, though to one she could not read. She took his hand as she sat down, but Draco let go of her hand and reached for his mug of butterbeer.

"What is it?" Ginny asked.

"Professor Snape just came in with McGonagall...Gareth, not the Headmistress," Draco said softly.

Ginny's brow furrowed. "I thought Snape wasn't coming into Hogsmeade today," she whispered.

"Apparently there was a change in his plans."

"Yeah, but I heard that it's because he's a target and..."

"Okay, you two, whispering luvvy endearments can wait till you're somewhere else," Chip said. "Time to order dessert. What does everyone want?"

There was a greater selection of desserts available than usual, and Niamh speculated it was to keep Hogsmeade weekend patrons from leaving the Three Broomsticks to have their dessert at Madam Puddifoot's.

"Mr Newman, when you have a moment, I would like to speak with you."

Draco looked up at Professor Snape, who had appeared silently beside him. He nodded. "Yes, sir."

Snape went back to the short rectangular table he was sharing with McGonagall by the wall on the other side of the pub. When he was more-or-less out of earshot, Chip said, "Ooo, what've you done this time, Newman?" He laughed.

Draco shook his head. "I don't know. Gin, could you order me something...surprise me...and I'll be back in a minute." Despite the wording of Snape's summons, Draco recognised it as just that, a summons. No delay would be justifiable, particularly not the mere task of ordering dessert.

Draco crossed the crowded pub to where Professor Snape and McGonagall sat. Gareth had a pint in front of him, and Snape was drinking water with a lime wedge, but their food had not arrived yet.

"Good afternoon, Mr...er, Professor McGonagall," Draco said, remembering that as Gareth had taken an apprentice, he should properly be addressed as "Professor," although the young wizard didn't seem to care either way. "You wished to see me, Professor Snape?"

Snape nodded. He looked around, saw a free chair, and flicked his wand to draw it over to the end of the table. "Sit."

Draco sat.

Gareth smiled at him. "No need for the formality...'Gareth' is quite all right, if your Head of House has no objections."

Snape snorted and seemed to roll his eyes in derision, but he didn't say anything in response. "I just saw Ronald Weasley leaving." Severus glanced at Gareth, then continued, "McGonagall tells me that you and Miss Weasley encountered him earlier."

"Yes, sir. We ran into him at the Quidditch supply shop, and he and Luna just had lunch with us."

Snape's left eyebrow rose. "I see no evidence of mayhem."

Draco gave a crooked grin. "No, sir. We just ate lunch and talked about Quidditch. That is, everyone did. Ron and I didn't really interact."

"It is good that you didn't," Snape replied, "as I would have been too late if there had been a problem."

Draco flushed. "I can take care of myself, sir."

"I have no doubts, and neither does McGonagall. We were simply . . . considering the question of whether Mr Weasley had . . . overtaxed his own self-control and challenged yours."

Draco blinked, interpreting what Snape had said. "No. I think that Ron didn't want to upset Ginny or Luna."

McGonagall grinned. "That may be the best we can hope for at the moment." He looked at Professor Snape. "Sorry to have dragged you down here for nothing, Snape. But when Ron left the house, I wasn't sure of his mood, and Luna said something about meeting everyone in the Broomsticks."

"You can buy my lunch, then, McGonagall, and it won't have been for nothing," Snape said.

"I didn't want you to have any trouble that you might prefer to avoid, Draco," Gareth said. "Sometimes a man is pushed into a corner and has to react. I just didn't want to see you come out of that corner with any difficulties waiting for you in my aunt's office, if you know what I mean. But I'm glad to hear that Ron behaved like a gentleman, more or less, and that your lunch was peaceful."

Draco nodded, assuaged by the unambiguous explanation the Ravenclaw gave. Sometimes even when Snape was being clear, there was some cryptic underlying motivation or message to be read, and Draco didn't want to spend any time trying to figure out why Snape felt moved to come into Hogsmeade when he hadn't planned to, or why he had specifically wanted to talk to him.

"Don't forget yourself, Newman," Severus said. As an afterthought, he added, "And enjoy the rest of your afternoon."

Taking that as a dismissal, Draco nodded and rose. "Thank you, sir. I hope you both enjoy your lunch."

He tried to look relaxed and not hurry as he returned to his own table. Ginny had ordered some chocolate cake that was practically black, it was so dark, and there were two forks. Draco suppressed his smirk. It was a very large piece of cake, and he supposed that girls found it romantic to share a dessert with their date. He gave her a crooked grin as he sat down and picked up one of the forks. He supposed he should actually find this a flattering and positive gesture.

"Cake looks good, Gin."

"I waited till you were back to try it...I hope it tastes as good as it looks!"

Draco let Ginny take the first bite, then he cut into it with his fork, getting just a bit of icing with the cake. Seeing the expression of bliss cross Ginny's face, he smiled and tried his own piece. He nodded. It was very good, and certainly the sort of chocolate that witches seemed to swoon over.

Chip had a slice of apple pie, and Niamh had a bowl of fresh berries with whipped cream on top and a ginger newt on the side. She gave her ginger newt to Chip and spooned most of her whipped cream onto his slice of pie.

"Don't you like whipped cream?" Draco asked, thinking that the berries and cream looked even more tempting than the chocolate cake...though he'd not tell Ginny that, and he was enjoying the cake.

"I'm trying to diet," Niamh said with a sigh. "I should have asked them to leave off the whipped cream. It's so much easier to avoid it if I don't see it."

"You are just perfect as you are, light-of-my-life," Chip said, squeezing her thigh.

Niamh smiled radiantly. "Well, I want to stay that way, don't I, Chipper?"

Draco suppressed his grimace. He hoped he didn't start talking that way to Ginny...at least not in public. Sharing cake was one thing, using silly endearments within the hearing of others was quite another. He hoped that Ginny didn't expect that of him. Her parents had always seemed to be ready to coo over each other regardless of the company they were in. His own parents were much more restrained in public...and even in private, their gestures of affection were muted, though Draco knew that they were devoted to each other, or at least, that his mother was devoted to his father and his father needed his mother.

Draco glanced over at Ginny. Losing her mother had been a terrible blow, and not just to her. Ginny had told him that without her mother, it seemed that the family had lost its centre and was fragmenting without her. He thought that was improving, and from what Ginny had told him, the entire family was working harder at maintaining their ties...and at helping Arthur Weasley. Apparently, the man had been quietly falling apart with no one noticing, not even his grown sons, and Ginny credited Professor Snape with noticing and for instigating Arthur to seek help, much as Snape had done for her.

Draco felt a warm sense of pride in his Head of House. Being a catalyst for change was as important as being the instrument of change, and Professor Snape had helped Ginny begin changing her life to try to find some happiness again, and he had made sure that her father had not continued his downward slide. Professor Snape might not be the most outwardly warm and caring individual Draco had ever met, and Snape's sarcasm and rather jaded view of life would be evident to almost anyone within a short time of meeting him, but despite his somewhat sharp and acidic nature, he still could be a positive force in the lives of others, and Draco had no doubt at all that his Head of House cared about him.

Draco glanced over at the corner table where Snape and McGonagall sat talking and eating. McGonagall was animated, and whatever he was telling Snape, it must have been amusing, since the corners of Snape's eyes crinkled and one side of his mouth turned up in a slight smile. Draco smiled, himself. It was good to see his Head of House relaxed enough to enjoy his own life.

"So, what did Snape want?" Chip asked.

Draco twitched one shoulder. He couldn't very well say that it was perfect business, since Thackery was the senior prefect.

"He probably saw Ron leaving," Niamh said perspicaciously, "and wanted to make sure no blood was shed."

"Something like that," Draco replied.

"Professor Snape cares a lot more about us...us students...than he seems to, I think," Ginny said.

"Yah, I'd say so," Chip said, his brow puckering. "He did nearly die for us, after all."

"I meant . . . caring in an ordinary way, not just heroically," Ginny said. "They're both important."

Niamh looked across the room where the two wizards sat talking, and now looking at a parchment spread on the table between their plates. "I never used to think he did...especially if you weren't a Slytherin...but he's been different this year."

"For obvious reasons," Draco said.

"I think McGonagall's been a good Headmistress, too," Chip said. "I always liked old Dumbledore, but McGonagall, let's face it, she's younger and more innovative."

Ginny shrugged. "I think she's doing great, too, but I bet that when Dumbledore became Headmaster, people said the same thing about him. I hear that Dippet was a real stick in the mud, and kind of weak, too. A pushover when it came to the Board of Governors."

"Probably," Niamh said, "but McGonagall's just different in a lot of ways. She's more approachable than Dumbledore was, and I feel like you can have a real conversation with her, too. It always felt . . . stilted or something when I talked to Dumbledore."

"That's probably at least partly because she was our teacher," Draco said. "We knew her before she was Headmistress. But you're right. She's doing a good job. So did Dumbledore. But I think that anyone who thought she'd be weak and ineffective following Dumbledore has been proven wrong, and not just because she defended the school so well last year. She's a real force herself. A lot of people underestimated her."

"Dumbledore was a hard act to follow," Ginny agreed, "but we Gryffindors always had faith in McGonagall."

"I think it said a lot that she kept Snape on as her Deputy even after Riddle was dead and the war's over," Chip said. "I know that some people were saying that she'd probably pick someone else now that he wasn't needed as a spy."

"They did, but she kept him, and she knows what she's doing," Niamh said with a nod.

"It was good for Slytherin House, too," Draco said. "I don't know whether I would have come back, NEWTs or no NEWTs, if he weren't kept as Deputy and Head of House. Unless he'd decided not to teach anymore, of course."

"There were some people who thought it might be better if he didn't, I heard," Niamh replied. "You have to admit, Snape's never been popular."

"Popularity isn't everything," Ginny said defensively. "And as you say, the Headmistress knows what she's doing, and he works for her. She obviously respects him, and he respects her, too. I think they're a good team and they're good for the school."

"Yeah, they're both all right," Niamh agreed. "So, what do you all want to do next?"

Author's Note: In the next chapter, Ron pays Harry a visit at Grimmauld Place.

Chapter Nine: Harry at Home

Chapter 9 of 17

Ron drops by Grimmauld Place.



Chapter Nine: Harry at Home

"Hey, Ron! I'm glad you stopped by! I listened to the game on the Wizarding Wireless yesterday. You were brilliant, mate!" Harry said, letting his friend into the house, then closing the door behind him. "I was just going to have some breakfast. You want something?"

Ron followed Harry down to the kitchen. Harry was dressed in a drab, somewhat dirty, brown bathrobe, purple boxers with animated Charmed Golden Snitches on them, a white vest, worn thin, with a tear in it, and a pair of drooping, stretched-out socks that had once been white but now bore a pale pink blush, except for the soles, which were practically black.

"Breakfast?" Ron asked. It was almost noon. He'd celebrated the night before, but despite his words to Ginny, he had only had a few drinks before heading back to his flat. "That's okay. I ate earlier. I actually thought I'd invite you to lunch. That new place in Diagon Alley, the Love Apple...yeah, the name's terrible, but the food's terrific, and today is their Italian lunch special. Their linguine in red clam sauce is great." He took a seat at the familiar kitchen table.

"I don't know. Maybe later," Harry replied. "Have some tea. I made it just before you got here. Sure you don't want some cereal or something?"

"Nah, that's okay." Ron Summoned a mug from the rack by the sink and poured himself some tea and stirred in a little sugar.

Harry shook some corn flakes into a bowl. He Summoned a bottle of milk from the cool cupboard, flipped off the cardboard lid, gave it a sniff, shrugged, and poured it over his cereal. He spooned three heaping teaspoons of sugar over it. The wooden chair screeched on the slate floor as he dragged it out and sat down.

"Milk?" Harry asked, dribbling a little into his own mug and then putting the bottle down near Ron.

"Just black today," Ron replied with a dubious glance at the milk bottle. He replaced the cardboard cap.

"You must have been celebrating," Harry said with a grin.

"Yeah, we went out to this pub in Durham. It was wild. Lots of fans. But it was a pretty early night. I was home by eleven, actually."

"I should have gone to the game. I didn't have to work yesterday."

"You're not working today, either, from the looks of it."

Harry shook his head and chewed his cornflakes. "Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Sometimes Friday afternoons, if there's a late week delivery that needs unloading."

"I'm surprised you haven't quit yet," Ron said.

Harry shrugged one shoulder. "It's easy enough and all. And look at my arms." He pushed back one of the bathrobe's floppy sleeves and made a muscle. "Better than a work-out."

"Stocking for a Muggle grocery isn't my idea of a fun job, work-out or no."

"They put me on the cash register for a while last week when one of the girls was puking her guts out. I think she got herself knocked up." He took a swig of tea. "I like working in the back better, or stocking the shelves. It's more peaceful. My boss is a good guy, too, but he's beginning to get ideas. He was suggesting I might want to work more hours so I could work my way up to assistant manager or something. That's not for me."

Ron sighed and shook his head. "What about the Aurors? I thought you were just going to take a short break and then join the MLE. This was just going to be a bit of a lark, I thought."

"I don't know. I'd like to do something at the Ministry, but it seems that everyone wants me to join the Aurors, and I'm not sure anymore if I want to do that. I can't start it and then quit later if I change my mind. There's just . . . too much pressure right now and all. I think it would be cool to work in the Department for Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. But as long as I'm Harry Potter, everyone will think I belong in the MLE. And I think that will be forever. I don't have any NEWTs, and even though they're waiving them if I join the Auror squad, I don't know if they'd do the same for some other department."

"Well, as long as you're thinking about the future," Ron said. He took a long swallow of tea. "To be honest, you look like hell."

"What?" Harry looked down at himself. "Eh! I didn't have to work yesterday, I'm not living with anyone, I'm not dating anyone, almost no one just drops by...I'm glad you did, though...and so I just wear what's comfortable."

"I thought you had a date last week."

Harry rolled his eyes and pushed his empty bowl back. "That was a disaster. I don't know what I was expecting, but Padma was all over me at the restaurant, but then I brought her back here, and twenty minutes later, she's storming off like I've offended her somehow. I never should have agreed to the date in the first place, but Parvati kept telling me how much Padma liked me, and I thought it could be fun. It wasn't."

"Sorry about that, mate."

"Yeah, well, once she's out of school, Ginny and I will get back together, I'm sure," Harry said. He grinned and winked at Ron. "Better not to get too used to being a free man and all."

Ron let out a breath. "Uh . . . yeah."

"What is it?" Harry asked. He got up from the table and dumped his tea in the sink, then turned to the cool cupboard and took out a can of Coke. It popped open with a hiss.

"Ginny's actually started seeing someone recently. I ran into them yesterday in Hogsmeade. I went to meet Luna."

Harry's brows came together. "She's seeing someone? Maybe it was just one of those Hogsmeade weekend kind of dates."

Ron shook his head. "I don't think so. I don't know if it's serious, but I think they're actually seeing each other regularly. Hermione mentioned something about them revising together for the last few weeks."

"Who is it?"

"It surprised me, to be honest, but it's, um, it's Draco." Ron shrugged one shoulder.

Harry stared.

"Here, she sent me a letter to give to you. Got the owl this morning." Ron felt through his pockets until he found the letter and held it out to Harry. Harry just stared. Ron put the letter down on the table. "I just thought you should know. I suggested that she tell you herself, but she's up at Hogwarts and all."

"Draco? Malfoy?"

"He calls himself 'Newman' now, but yeah, him." Ron bit his tongue, keeping himself from ranting about Malfoy. It was hard enough to tell Harry as it was. He wasn't going to make it worse...and he did want to stay in his sister's good graces.

Harry sank back down into his chair, putting his can of Coke down with a clunk. A little of the brown liquid overflowed and fizzed on the table. "You're not joking, are you?"

Ron shook his head and pushed the letter toward Harry. "Wish I were, mate. Was quite a shock to me, too."

Harry picked up the letter and looked at it, but didn't open it. "Bugger," he said softly.

"If it's any consolation, she only just started seeing him recently. After you two broke up."

"It's not any fucking consolation," Harry said. "What's that friggin' bastard up to? How dare he think he can date Ginny?! He's a mother-fucking Death Eater, for Merlin's sake!" He slammed the letter back down on the table, making the can of Coke jump and spurt.

Ron raised one hand slightly. "Calm down. He was never a Death Eater. You know that. Luna assures me he's changed, too. I'm not enthusiastic about it, but it's probably just a passing thing. You know that Ginny's been confused lately. She . . . she probably just wants to have a little fun."

"Have a little *fun*? Yeah, like that was on her mind last summer. Every time we got together, I tried, and she . . . *Fuck!*" He picked up his empty cereal bowl and hurled it across the room. It hit the wall with a loud bang, then crashed to the ground, but it didn't break.

"Listen, Harry, that's not fair. It's not like any of us were up for much fun last summer, not really. Mum dead, Percy dead...and Ginny felt even worse about that than the rest of us because of how he died...let's face it, it was not a good summer for the Weasley family."

"I know, I know. I tried to help her forget it all, though! It's *not fair!* All that time, all through school, she kept wanting something with me and I couldn't get involved, and then finally when my life's my own, when I can finally begin living, she changes her mind! How could she do this? How could she?"

"I'm sorry, Harry. Really, I am."

"And *Draco*? What's she playing at, choosing him? Wants the bad boy? And him, if he's been . . . *beertouching* her!" Harry's lip curled in disgust. "He probably just wants to get a leg over and no one in his own House will give him the time of day anymore, so he's conned Ginny. Sweet-talking Malfoys, born with a silver spoon in their mouths and a snake in their hearts."

"Harry . . . you're my best mate, you know that, and I know that Ginny cares about you a lot. She may get back together with you sometime in the future, or she may not...let me finish, Harry...but I don't think that flying off the handle is the way to improve your chances with her or even just keep her friendship. I don't want to be caught

between you two, either."

"If Draco's been . . . if *they've* been doing it, I don't want her back, especially since . . . well, I don't want her back," Harry said, his brow lowered grimly. "She's out of her mind, Ron. You've got to see that. Quitting Quidditch, then breaking up with me, and now this."

Ron shook his head. "She seemed happier and more herself when I saw her yesterday than in a long time. You could tell at Easter that she was feeling better, and she seemed less tightly strung, but yesterday, she seemed happy. I'm not in favour of her seeing Draco, myself, but I do want her happy. And as you pointed out, NEWTs aren't that long off. Once she's out of school, she might not see him anymore. It could just be a passing thing. Dad said he thought she was moving back to the Burrow for a while, at least whilst she looks for work."

"What's she going to do?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. Dad said that they might have a place for her in the Department for Magical Games and Sports. She might be interested in that."

Harry sighed. "I don't want you stuck in the middle, either, mate. I just can't believe it . . . You know, for so long . . . everything I did was focussed on Voldemort. The rest of my life, it was what I did in between. Now . . . I don't know. Being the Boy Who Lived and the Wizard Who Didn't Die Twice doesn't exactly prepare you for what comes after that. Maybe I should just give in and join the Aurors," he said, shaking his head. "I used to really want to be an Auror like my mum and dad."

"You'd be good at it. You have a lot of talent, Harry, and a lot of magical ability. And you have never wanted Dark wizards or bullies to get their way. You could do some good as an Auror."

"I suppose . . . I still can't believe Ginny." He ran his finger along the short edge of the letter that still lay on the table. He blinked and swallowed. "She left me and went straight to him. I just . . . I don't know what she wanted from me, but I guess I didn't have it."

"I think . . . I don't say this to rub salt in, Harry, but I think that you reminded her too much of all the pain of the last few years, especially of Percy and what she did when you went out to meet Riddle. And she said something similar to me once, actually, that she didn't know what you wanted her to be, but she wasn't it."

"Yah . . . but if I see Malfoy before he sees me, somebody better be there to hold me back, that's all I can say." Even as he said the words, however, Harry sounded resigned, and not threatening.

"Listen, you go get dressed and I'll take you out for lunch in Diagon Alley. We'll go to the Love Apple...in the middle of the day, it's not so much a couples' place...and we'll stuff ourselves with pasta and drink cheap red wine and forget our troubles for a while. You might even meet someone. There's a cute wait-witch there...I think she was in Hufflepuff a couple years ahead of us. Julia. Very cute, blonde, nice arse, friendly smile."

"All right." Harry shoved back from the table and stood. He looked at the letter for a moment, then picked it up and put it in his bathrobe pocket. "I'll be ten minutes. Fifteen...I should probably shower." He rubbed his jaw. "And maybe shave."

"Take your time. I'll just read yesterday's *Prophet*." He pulled the newspaper toward him, then shrugged. "Last Friday's *Prophet*."

Author's Note: Next up, Arthur learns the news.

You may have noticed that I started adding titles to the chapters, retroactively...I was getting tired of referring to a chapter as "the one where Ron visits Hermione at Gareth's," or whatever. Also, it's easier to go back to a specific chapter when I've got a title for it in my document bookmarks. I don't have to wonder whether I want chapter eight or nine.

I have about 16 chapters drafted, and anticipate between 20 and 24 chapters for the fic, partly depending on whether I take the couple past the Leaving Feast.

Thank you again to Stefdarlin and Ang of Hogwarts Duo for their feedback on the chapters.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter Ten: Arthur and Hermione at the Burrow

Chapter 10 of 17

Hermione stops by the Burrow to see Arthur.



Chapter Ten: Arthur and Hermione at the Burrow

Hermione knocked on the door and then pushed it open and stepped into the kitchen of the Burrow.

"Hello? Arthur? Are you home?" She assumed he was, and that he was up already, since he'd left the door unwarded, though she knew the password.

She heard Arthur on the stairs, and a moment later, he was there, dressed in an open-necked white shirt, brown trousers, and slightly scuffed brown shoes, drying his hands on a small towel. Hermione was already at the kettle, wand out, heating water for tea.

"Hermione! I hadn't expected to see you today! But I am glad," Arthur said with an enthusiastic grin. "I thought you were going to your parents' this Sunday."

"I am, but later, just for the afternoon, I think," Hermione replied. "You haven't had breakfast yet?"

"I was about to . . . cornflakes, I thought."

"Cornflakes? That won't hold you. And knowing you, you'll forget your lunch until you're about to fall over. Let me fix you a fry-up," Hermione said, opening the door to the cool cupboard. She smiled. "Glad to see you've been to the market."

"I did pick up a few things, yes, and there's fresh milk and eggs, but I have to admit that Bill and Fleur stopped by yesterday afternoon with the baby, and they brought me some groceries...some nice fresh fruit and vegetables, you'll be happy to hear," Arthur said with a smile. He spooned some tea leaves into the waiting teapot, then Hermione poured the hot water over them.

"What would you like with your eggs? Bacon or sausages?" she asked.

"Oh, bangers would be lovely." He Summoned two sets of cups and saucers and two plates, then opened a drawer and pulled out some silverware.

"Bangers it is, then!" Hermione said, setting a pair of frying pans on the cooker.

Arthur set the table for them and poured some milk into a small pitcher, then he sat down and watched as Hermione started the bangers cooking.

"Toast?" Hermione asked.

"I'd not mind a bit of fried bread, actually, but toast is fine...less work," Arthur said.

"No trouble." Hermione sliced some bread.

"You'll have something, too, won't you?" Arthur asked.

"Just a slice of toast," Hermione said. "I ate already."

"I think there were some nice preserves in the groceries Bill and Fleur brought."

Hermione smiled. "I'll try some of it, then."

Arthur poured the tea as Hermione broke two eggs into another hot frying pan and then moved the sausages aside and put a slice of bread in to fry.

"I love your fried bread," Arthur said.

"It's just fried bread."

"I like the way you butter both sides first and don't just cook it in the fat."

Hermione nodded. "My mother's always done it that way, on those rare occasions she makes it. You can have another slice after this one is done and there's room to cook it."

"So . . . I am pleased to see you, but was there a reason for this early morning visit? I'd thought you probably wouldn't be around until later this week, at the soonest."

Hermione shrugged and put the eggs on a plate, which she had first warmed with her wand. "I hadn't been able to drop by last weekend, and this week was really busy between my apprenticeship and everything else, but I wanted to see how you were doing."

"I got your owl the other day. I'm sorry I didn't write back immediately, but it was a busy week at work for me, too. I didn't mean to worry you."

Hermione put the plate of food in front of Arthur, used her wand to send another slice of buttered bread to fry, then waved her wand over a third slice to toast it. "That's all right...it's only been a few days."

"I don't want you to worry that I've fallen back into chaos again, though," Arthur said, smiling wryly. "I'm keeping the place up well, and still eating, too."

"I'm sure that I'd hear from Dobby if you weren't!" Hermione said with a grin. "Is he still coming every Friday?"

Arthur nodded, his mouth full.

Hermione spread mixed berry jam on her toast. "I saw Ron yesterday."

"Did you? I went to the game. He played really well. Afterwards, I went to the pub they were all at, but it was noisy and crowded, so I didn't stay long. I just congratulated him and let him have fun with his mates...didn't want to have his old dad hanging around when he was partying with his friends. Were you there? I didn't see you."

Hermione shook her head. "No, we worked most of the day yesterday. I saw him at the house. He came around yesterday morning with Luna."

"Huh. Was it a Hogsmeade weekend, then?" he asked rhetorically. He dunked a bit of his fried bread in his egg yolk. "Great fry-up, Hermione. I'm glad Ron got back together with Luna. I felt badly when he just stopped seeing her so suddenly. I don't think he even talked to her about it, you know. Just disappeared from her life right when she needed him. But you know how I felt about that."

Hermione nodded, looking pensive.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I know that at one time, you and he . . . we thought so, too. Molly and I."

She shook her head. "I wasn't even thinking about that. I rarely think of it these days, in fact. I was just thinking about the different couples I know, and how I might have thought some of them unlikely ones, but really, they aren't. And what matters is whether the couple is happy."

Arthur sipped his tea and nodded. "Right you are, Hermione. How is Tarrant?"

"I haven't seen him in a couple weeks. I think we're better just being friends, actually. He and Gareth went out with a bunch of friends on Friday night, though, and Gareth said Tarrant's fine."

"Didn't break his heart?" Arthur asked, smiling.

Hermione laughed lightly. "No, confused him and frustrated him, maybe, but I didn't break his heart. I think it was a relief to him when I said it might be better if we didn't date."

Arthur smiled at her across the table. "Someday, Hermione, you'll meet the right wizard, and he'll be a lucky, lucky man."

"You're just saying that because you like my fry-ups," Hermione said with a laugh.

"More than just your fry-ups." Arthur blushed and cut a piece of sausage with his fork.

"Speaking of couples, Ginny's started seeing someone new," Hermione said, Summoning a banana from the counter.

"Really?" Arthur chewed and swallowed. "She hadn't mentioned anything to me about it...unless it's this mysterious bloke she's been revising with. Maybe that's why she's sounding so cheerful in her letters recently."

"I think so," Hermione agreed. "She does seem happier. Ron actually ran into them in Hogsmeade yesterday morning before he and Luna came to see me. They were all out in a group, I guess, Ginny, her date, Niamh Donovan and her date, and Luna, who'd planned to meet Ron in the village but hadn't mentioned it to anyone. They all had lunch together later."

"That sounds like fun. So, who's the wizard?" Arthur asked, taking a bite of his second slice of fried bread.

Hermione took a sip of tea and waited for Arthur to swallow. "Draco. Draco Newman." She was glad that she had waited until Arthur had swallowed, since he turned beet red and looked as though he were about to choke as it was.

"That's Draco Malfoy," he finally said.

"Yes. That's him. Luna says that he is making Ginny very happy..." Hermione began.

"Making her *happy*?" He shoved his chair back from the table. He stared and shook his head slightly. "I don't think there's been a Malfoy born who's ever cared about *anyone's* happiness...and if you mean, well, the *other*, I don't want him touching *my daughter!*" He shoved his chair back farther and stood.

"Calm down, Arthur. You can't very well go charging up to Hogwarts and demand that Ginny not see him, after all."

"Can't I? Can't I just?"

"No, you can't," Hermione said reasonably, "and it's a good thing, too. It would only make Ginny more attached to him...or to the idea of going out with him, anyway...if you did something like that. And I don't know whether they've done anything physical yet, and I don't think that's something you should be thinking about."

Arthur sat heavily back in his chair. "How can *not* think about it? And like father, like son, I'm sure." He shook his head. "He was always nasty. He hates Weasleys as much as his father does. Ron must have been livid."

"I'd say that Ron was pretty shocked, yeah, but they all had lunch together after, and the Aurors weren't called in to break up any honour duels, so I'd say it went peacefully."

Arthur snorted. "After what Lucius Malfoy did to her, I can't believe the nerve of that boy thinking he can go out with her. I don't understand why Ginny doesn't see how bad this is...she hasn't forgotten the diary and how it nearly killed her. No one can tell me that Lucius wasn't fully aware that he was giving my daughter something evil."

"That was Draco's father who did that," Hermione said, "not Draco himself. I am sure that Ginny hasn't forgotten it. But Draco did change his name in order to distance himself from his father, after all."

"It doesn't change who he is at heart."

"No, but if his heart is changing, that could be why he was moved to change his name, and why he appreciates Ginny," Hermione replied. Before Arthur could respond with another objection, she added, "Don't forget that Ginny has been at school with him all this year. She's only started seeing him recently. I don't think that she would be dating someone who was like the Draco who I was in school with. I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, and to trust Ginny's judgment, at least for now, at least until he does something to break our trust. I think you should, too. She will appreciate your support, especially if she does fall in love with him." Hermione reached across the table and patted Arthur's hand. "I'm sure she doesn't want you to disapprove of who she falls in love with, whoever it is. After all, how much control do we have over things like that? It's a matter of the heart."

"And Draco's heart is a black as ever," Arthur said with a sigh.

"People have said that about Severus Snape and you always used to defend him. I've always found that one of your admirable traits, you know, your defence of Severus," Hermione said softly. "Severus must have been much worse than Draco was...or at least, he became much worse...but he changed. Draco was given an opportunity to take a different path from the rest of his family, and he took it. That should count for something."

Arthur's shoulders were slumped. "I know I will only drive her closer to him...or even just drive a wedge between us...if I try to interfere, but I remember Lucius too well, and I see the man in his son."

"It may not go anywhere. You might have nothing to worry about at all. It could be one of those end-of-school flings people have sometimes. And before you knew that it was Draco, you said yourself that Ginny was sounding happier."

Arthur nodded. "I did. You are wise, Hermione. I will restrain myself. But I wish she had told me herself."

"I can just imagine your reaction to such a bombshell dropped in a letter," Hermione said.

Arthur smiled at her and turned over his hand to give hers a squeeze. "That's why you came today, so I wouldn't hear about it some other way and go flying off the handle and do something I would regret. Thank you, Hermione."

Hermione smiled. "You Weasleys do have a bit of a temper, and you're not Sorted into Gryffindor for nothing!"

"And you're right about Severus. I know that he changed sides years ago and that some people made it very hard for him. He would have been an easier man, a *better* man, if more people had accepted him after he turned away from Voldemort. That took guts. And he's been a friend to me."

Hermione nodded. "I know. He's become one of the best men I know, even if he's still not an easy man."

"All right, Hermione," Arthur said with a nod. "If he and Ginny are still seeing each other after the Leaving Feast, I'll give the lad a chance. If he doesn't treat her properly, though..."

"You're her father. Of course that's a concern, and you'd have every right to be angry if he didn't treat her well. But I'm glad you're going to give him a chance. It will mean a lot to Ginny, I'm sure."

Arthur gave a slight smile. "As you say, it's a matter of the heart, and we don't always have a choice about whom we fall in love with, even if everyone around us tells us that it's inappropriate."

"Then let's make it easier for Ginny and let her know that if she thinks Draco's appropriate for her, then so do we...as long as he treats her right," Hermione added with a grin.

"Agreed! Now, I'll clean up the dishes...no, no, let me. You made breakfast, and I ate more than you did," Arthur said, standing up and drawing his wand to begin taking care of the dirty dishes. "Tell me about how your apprenticeship is going. Does Gareth regret refusing the Ministry's commission? I know there were some rather unhappy people in the Department of Mysteries when he told them he'd burned all his notes and wasn't going to take the commission, whatever it was."

"Well, after they practically arrested his mother, you can hardly blame him for having uneasy feelings about the Ministry, besides . . . I can't say what the commission was, but it was . . . somewhat related. I guess he felt they'd be using him...all of us, including his mother...for something he didn't really approve of, once he figured out their

purpose."

"Mysteriouser and mysteriouser!" Arthur said. "So has he received any other interesting commissions since then, or is it still...how did you put it?...unimaginative tripe and as interesting as the dust bunnies under your bed?"

"Less interesting than the dust bunnies under my bed," Hermione said with a giggle. "We have a new commission from the Venetian Ministry that's interesting, and Gareth's working on something in collaboration with his cousin Morgana, who's a big muckety-muck in Australia. He's working on that alone, though, so I don't know what it is."

"She's the one who helped you find your parents when you lost them last spring, isn't she? Morgana McGonagall?"

Hermione nodded as she took a swallow of tea. "Yes, and she was a Slytherin, too. No one here would give her a chance to advance in the Ministry, so she emigrated to Australia back in the early eighties, and now she's Deputy Minister for Information Sorcery."

"She visited the Ministry for several weeks earlier in the spring...they're thinking of implementing some innovations and were consulting her about it. I didn't meet with her since I'd taken that extended holiday, though she did owl me, and I did hear that she's clever."

"I saw her again, too, when she visited Gareth whilst she was in England...and I agree, she certainly is clever. What innovations are they considering?"

"Oh, by the time they're implemented, my grandchildren will have grandchildren, probably, but they're thinking of completely reorganising the Department of Mysteries, the Magical Law Enforcement Department, and a few other departments, as well, realigning things, creating new subdivisions, that kind of thing. Kingsley calls it 'modernisation,' and most of the people at the Ministry call it a mess, but it might be good." Arthur shrugged.

"I was impressed by the differences between the wizarding world in Australia and the way things are done here. It's quite different, quite modern, to use Kingsley's term. I think we probably could get a lot of good ideas from them. I wished I'd had more time to learn about things there, but I needed to get my mother and father home and find them a place to live here."

"How are the renovations to the house in Cornwall going?"

"Very well...Mum and Dad are glad that they decided to add on rather than change anything about the old house itself. They think they'll be able to have their new practice open by mid-June."

"Will your mother still be going to Truro regularly?" Arthur asked as he waved his wand to dry all the dishes before putting them away.

"Yes. She really enjoys that. Reconstructive dentistry is really her main interest, what she trained in, and it was a bit of good luck that there was that opening in Truro when there was."

"Is it a long way for her to go?" Arthur asked, trying to puzzle out Muggle distances.

Hermione shrugged. "I guess, but she enjoys the drive, and sometimes she gives someone else a lift who's going in, too, which saves them the bus and gives her some company."

"A pity you can't just give her Portkeys," Arthur said.

"I'd be in more trouble with that than if I made her car fly!" Hermione said with a giggle.

Arthur laughed, remembering his flying Ford. "Yes, that was a difficult one to wriggle out of."

"Ron had some lunkheaded ideas sometimes, but that one!" Hermione laughed. "People are still talking about it. And apparently the centaurs were none too happy to have a Ford Anglia chugging around their forest, either!"

"I just wanted to see whether I could do it, you know. And the car did have a cloaking charm. It wasn't meant to last long. Just for zipping around the field here at the house. And I never did have a chance to try it myself," he said with a sigh.

"Probably just as well! Molly would not have been happy," Hermione said with a laugh.

Arthur shook his head, but he smiled. "No, she was very unhappy with me as it was."

"But you got to keep your shed!" Hermione pointed out.

"That I did. I'm going to tinker about in the shed a bit today, in fact...can you join me?"

"I'm really glad you're doing that again," Hermione said, standing. "Taking an interest. It's important for you. You had a lot of people worried about you, you know."

"I know. And thanks to you, *I am* taking an interest again." He turned pink. "In my hobbies and such."

"I told Mum I'd be there at noon, so yes, I can stay for a while, make sure you don't blow something up or set yourself on fire...or make a toaster fly!"

Arthur laughed. "Let's go tinker a bit, then."

Author's Note: For anyone who hasn't read *A Long Vernal Season* and is wondering what Hermione's up to, she's Gareth McGonagall's Arithmancy apprentice and lives with him and his mother, Gertrude Gamp, in their house in Hogsmeade. She's also taking Muggle university classes and training with Alroy MacAirt to be an Animagus, so she's been a busy witch! When Severus discovered what a state Arthur Weasley was in, and how he was living in chaos, he mentioned it to Hermione, who went to the Burrow and started in on the cleaning, taking charge, like Hermione does love to do.

Chapter Eleven: Letter from Home

Chapter 11 of 17

Ginny gets a letter, then she writes a few of her own.



Chapter Eleven: Letter from Home

The Burrow

9 May 1999

Dear Ginny,

Did you hear the Cannon's game on the Wireless yesterday? Ron did really well. I went to the match to cheer him on. It was a great game. Afterwards, the players all went to a pub to celebrate. I went for a little while just to congratulate Ron, but I left early so he wouldn't have his old dad cramping his style.

I saw Hermione this morning. She arrived quite early, just in time to make me breakfast, a hearty fry-up instead of my usual corn flakes how lucky can a man get? and we tinkered in the shed for a while. We even mowed part of the lawn using a Muggle lawn mower! It made quite a racket, though, and it took a lot more time than I thought it would. It said it was "self-propelled," but that doesn't mean what you think it does. You still have to stand behind it and push. Hermione says that the ones that aren't self-propelled are even harder to use. Muggles really are amazing, aren't they? She said that her mother is going to continue to drive all the way to Truro regularly even after her parents start their dentistry practice. I think it's a long drive. But that's Muggles for you!

Ron really has started seeing Luna again, I hear, just as he said he would, and I think he's very serious about her this time. I was very glad to hear that. You all have known each other since you were toddlers, and Luna is a good witch for Ron, I think. She forces him to be the sensible one though I do think that she's a lot more sensible than we sometimes give her credit for. Hidden depths, that one.

Hermione tells me that you are seeing someone, too. This mysterious revisions partner you have mentioned to me. I don't think I would have ever guessed you would be revising with Draco Newman, let alone dating him, but I look forward to hearing all about him from you. Although I've seen him, of course, I've never really got to know him. When school's over, you will have to have him over for dinner at the first opportunity. It will be interesting to meet him and see what sort of young man he has become.

You can probably tell that I'm not excited about your dating Draco, but if you care about him, I'd like to get to know him and give him a fresh start. If you are happy and he treats you well, that's all a father can demand. It would be nice if he made a decent living, too. And by "decent," I don't necessarily mean well-paid.

Please write me and tell me all about how you're doing. I was talking with Gerald Cummings in Games and Sports the other day, and he said he'd be happy to interview you about a position. If you want to, you can send your CV directly to him.

I hope you're taking care of yourself. We all love you! I'm very proud of you, Ginny.

Love,

Dad

Ginny blinked, then read the letter twice more. She grinned. Her father had decided to give Draco a chance! It must have been Hermione's doing. She thought she could hug her, if she were there to hug.

She pulled out her quill and a fresh sheet of parchment.

Hogwarts School

9 May 1999

Dear Dad,

Yes, I heard the game on the wireless. It sounded really exciting. Ron did great. I hope they let him start more often now. It will be great to be out of school so I can go to the games, too. I'd love to cheer him on with you. Draco loves Quidditch, too, and even though he likes the Harpies best (you can probably guess why!), I know that he'd cheer the Cannons along with us.

I don't know about a job at the Ministry, Dad. I really appreciate your talking to Mr Cummings for me, and if you want me to, I'll send him my CV, but the idea doesn't really appeal to me. I think I wouldn't mind working in the Ministry some day, but I'd like to see if there's anything else I might enjoy more and be better at first.

In fact, Draco has another interview with Mr MacAirt from the Golden Cup Enterprises, and he said that he would introduce us so it wouldn't be too awkward for me to ask him for an interview, too. I think Draco's got a lot of ambition, and he thinks that Mr MacAirt could provide him with some very good opportunities. I hope he does get a job there. He tries to pretend he's not worried about it, but I know that he really would like to work for Mr MacAirt and would be very disappointed if he didn't get a job with him. Anyway, I'm going to see what Mr MacAirt says. I guess that GC Enterprises is really big...he even has some Muggle businesses! But Draco said he's sold most of them, and right now, his main Muggle businesses are a bunch of amusement parks and a sweets factory. Mr MacAirt's concentrating more on his wizarding business now that he's better. He taught your Defence Against the Dark Arts class one year, didn't he? I remember Mum saying something about him once.

Thanks for giving Draco a chance, Dad. He really needs good friends, and it isn't easy for him. I really hope you will like him when you get to know him. He's very sweet and vulnerable inside, and he works really hard at self-improvement. He has some self-confidence issues, too, because he thinks that maybe he wasn't worth anything except his name, if you know what I mean. People were fake friends because of who he was. I try to let him know that he's got a lot of good things about him and that he's really smart, too. He's also afraid that people will judge him because of his father, and that's all a big mess. I'm sure you can imagine! Having Lucius Malfoy for a father??? But he has been really nice to me. I loaned him my class notes once, and he gave me a box of truffles to say thank you. And I could tell he was really surprised that I'd loan him my notes just like that, without him even asking about it. He expects people to have a low opinion of him, and I think it makes it hard for him, even though he keeps working away. So we started to revise together just a week or two before Easter, then after Easter, I just got to like him even better. I think you'll like him, too. He's not like he was when he was a kid. And he's not like his father, either.

We had a great time in Hogsmeade yesterday. We hung out with friends and we had a really good lunch at the Three Broomsticks. Draco and I shared this delicious chocolate cake. Oh, and we ran into an Auror who knows Charlie...Clovis Hutchins. I thought his name sounded familiar, but he said to say hello to Charlie for him, so I probably ought to write him a letter today, too. I hope that Charlie can get that other job at the Welsh dragon preserve so he can be closer to home. It would be good to

have the family be able to get together more often...maybe dinner at the Burrow at least one Sunday a month? Hermione might want to come sometimes, too. I'm really glad that she's been such a big help to you. I don't know what we would have done without her. Be sure you thank her a lot and are nice to her! Well, I know you're always nice, Dad, but you know what I mean. I just know that she's got a lot going on with her apprenticeship, her Animagus training, and her Muggle university classes, so I think we Weasleys are all very lucky to have a friend like her.

I love you, too, Dad, and I'm so glad that you aren't mad at me. I think I might really like Draco a lot. A lot a lot. But we have to see how things go after the Leaving Feast. He may be too busy for me then. I hope not.

Love,

Ginny

Ginny read over her letter, and then started a new one, though not to Charlie.

9 May 1999

Dear Hermione,

You are an ANGEL! Dad wrote me a letter this morning, and I don't know what you said to him when you told him about me and Draco, but whatever it was, he's willing to give Draco a chance. Thanks!

I assume you found out from Ron and Luna yesterday somehow. I'm sorry I didn't say anything to you sooner myself, but I just wasn't sure how. I know you had a lot of trouble with Draco when you were in school together. So I didn't know how to tell you that he's really different from how he used to be. He's funny, and smart, and really nice to me. And he's gorgeous. I think he's gorgeous, anyway. He's got a lot of ambition, too. He's working hard to get a good job when he gets out of school, and he wants me to get a job I'd like, too. We've even talked about living together. We aren't sure yet, and it was just something he mentioned, but when he said we might be able to get a flat together, I swear, it was not just sweet, it was really sexy, too. But he didn't say it like it was sexy, if you know what I mean. Just like it might be practical. But it still sounded sexy to me. And, of course, we do want to be together like that. Being at school has made it really hard to have private time together. Actually, we haven't. We've been alone, but Draco's being really careful because of being a prefect and he doesn't want me embarrassed, either. But he's really, really, really sexy. It's hard to think about having to wait more than a whole MONTH before we can be alone together. But I'm nervous about it, too. I wish I could talk to you!

Thanks again for talking to Dad for me. And thanks for being such a help to him.

Ginny

Ginny had another letter to write, and she wasn't looking forward to that one. But first one to Ron.

9 May 1999

Dear Ron,

Thanks for being open-minded yesterday. It meant a lot to me to have my big brother be so supportive. I think that as you give Draco a chance, you'll be glad you did.

I got a letter from Dad this morning. I was really surprised, but Hermione had talked to him, and he actually said that when school's over, he wants me to invite Draco for dinner at the Burrow. It sounds like he's being really open to it. I can't wait to tell Draco. We were just saying yesterday how our fathers hate each other. I'm so relieved Dad's not going to be awful about it. I'm sure that I have Hermione to thank for that.

I really do like Draco, and I think that if you get to know him, you might like him, too. At least you'll see that he's different than he was when you knew him.

I'm going to put a letter to Harry in with this one. Could you give it to him as soon as you get it, and break the news to him gently before he reads it? Please do give it to him in person, even though I'm sure that won't be easy for you...and please, please, please don't tell him how awful you think this is. Please. I don't want you to think it's awful just because of the way things used to be. That's all over now. Draco's important to me, and I don't know what I would do if you were against us.

Thanks for being so nice at lunch yesterday. Oh, and congratulations on the game! You did really great. I listened on the wizarding wireless with a bunch of other girls and we all cheered you every time you blocked a Quaffle!

Love,

Ginny

Ginny set down her quill and gazed out the Gryffindor Tower window at the bright blue sky and the puffy white clouds. She knew what she wanted to tell Harry in her letter, but she knew that what she wanted to say wouldn't be good for him to hear, not at the same time she was telling him that she was seeing Draco . . . and that Draco made her happy. This would be a hard letter to write.

Chapter Twelve: Dear Harry

Chapter 12 of 17

Harry reads his letter in private. Ginny gets one in return.



Chapter Twelve: Dear Harry

Harry sat down on the closed toilet seat and took Ginny's letter from his bathrobe pocket. He looked at his name, written in Ginny's familiar handwriting. He fingered the edge of the parchment and shook his head. He knew that he hadn't been what Ginny needed, that what she had needed from him the previous summer, he hadn't given her. There had even been a part of him that had known that at the time. And what he had needed . . . he hadn't known what he'd needed or what he was trying to get from Ginny, but it hadn't been fair of him to try to wrest it from her, that unknown something. He had thought it had been sex, but sex had only been the symbol, and he hadn't gotten what he needed or given her what she had wanted from him.

But did she have to go to Malfoy? Harry swallowed past the lump in his throat and took off his glasses, dashing some tears from his eyes. He put his glasses back on and opened the letter, breaking the Sticking Charm. He took a deep breath.

9 May 1999

Dear Harry,

Ron probably has told you that I've started dating Draco. I don't want to make this about Draco. My dating him has nothing to do with you, and I hope that you understand that. Still, I know that you're probably not thrilled with the news that I'm seeing someone, let alone Draco.

I'm happier, Harry, and a lot of that has to do with Draco. I love you, but you know that things weren't right between us, that there were so many things going wrong between us...and not everything was your fault or my fault, but it was just the way things were...and nothing was going to make things work the way either of us wanted them to. I hope that eventually we'll be able to be friends again. I know that you hoped we would get back together, but that's just a dream, and it's not one that I share anymore.

I know you're going to want to make this about Draco, and maybe if I were dating someone other than Draco, you would feel differently, but I didn't start seeing him until after I told you that our relationship was over. I wasn't even thinking about dating him. We just started revising together a couple weeks before Easter, we spent a lot of time together, and it went from there.

Draco's not replacing you, Harry. He is just who he is, and that's what's right for me now. We have fun together, I like him, and I really enjoy being with him.

I hope that you find someone you enjoy being with, too, and I hope that we will all be friends.

Ron was doing me...and you...a big favour by bringing you my letter. I hope you will appreciate it and not take it out on him. He wasn't happy about seeing Draco and me together, but he was really supportive of me, and he even had lunch with us and a couple others in the Three Broomsticks, and it went okay. It was a start. Ron was really trying to be good to me, so I hope you don't hold it against him.

I hope that you're doing okay. Are you still working in that Muggle shop? Were you still going to talk to them over at the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes? I think you should see what they say...or are you reconsidering entering the Auror training programme? Whatever you do, I hope that it's satisfying. This is a time of opportunity for you, for all of us.

Write me back if you want to, or if you have any questions.

Love,

Ginny

Write her back if he wanted to . . . Harry shook his head. He folded the letter and put it back in his bathrobe pocket before he took it off and hung it on the hook on the back of the door. He stripped and turned on the shower. A time of opportunity, Ginny had said . . . the opportunity for lunch with Ron, to start. He stepped under the spray of warm water, raised his face, and let it wash over him.

"I got a letter from my dad this morning," Ginny said, flopping down on the grass beside Draco. "He said that I have to invite you to dinner at the Burrow. He wants to get to know you."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "You're joking."

"No," Ginny said, shaking her head. "I'm not at all. He said that Hermione told him that we're dating. She must have put it well, because he didn't give me a lecture or anything."

"Hermione Granger told him?"

"Yeah, good news travels fast," Ginny said with a smile. She leaned over and kissed him.

"Hermione . . ." Draco blinked. "She heard it from Ron?"

"Apparently."

"She doesn't like me, either, though."

Ginny shrugged. "We're in luck, 'cause she does like me...and my dad...so she wanted to break it to him gently, probably."

"Huh . . ." Draco thought about that. "I don't know whether my father would be so understanding, no matter who told him, if he felt about you the way your father probably feels about me."

"Your father . . . he kind of saved my life, you know. Mine and Gareth McGonagall's. If it hadn't been for your father, it wouldn't have been just Percy who died."

"My father? How . . . He couldn't even stand for weeks after the battle. How could he have done anything?"

"Gareth had come out after me and Percy," Ginny said softly. "Voldemort had already cast the Killing Curse, and it had hit Percy. Voldemort was just about to cast another curse in our direction...he'd already started...and it would have hit one of us, Gareth or me." Ginny stopped.

Draco waited, then he asked, "What happened?"

"Your father said something to him to deliberately turn the attention on himself, not on us. I couldn't hear what he said, but it made Voldemort angry. That's why he cast that *Avada Kedavra* at your father, the one that hit Harry."

"I'll never understand why Harry didn't die," Draco said. "Is he just immune to the *Avada Kedavra*?"

Ginny shook her head. "Just to Riddle's, I guess. But if it weren't for your father, I might be dead. So . . . I know that he gave me that book my first year at Hogwarts, and that he didn't care what might happen to me, but he kept Riddle from killing me last year. It sort of . . . balances out."

"Balances out?" Draco looked incredulous. "No..."

"All right, whatever, but still, maybe my father doesn't hate yours quite as much as he used to."

"My father was dying," Draco said. "He had been tortured. I don't think his motives were purely about saving your life. Your father probably realises that, too."

"Maybe. But you should give your father just a little bit of credit, I think."

Draco twitched one shoulder.

"I know you want to," Ginny said.

"I've only heard about what happened from other people, and from the newspaper, not from my father. He never told us about that, about that curse, and why the Dark Lord...Riddle...had cast it at him. Or he never told me. Maybe he told Mother. But he didn't tell me about what happened out there that morning of the battle. He did say that Potter'd told him that the Dar, that Riddle had lied to him about us, and that we were still alive and safe." Draco's eyes were unfocussed as he remembered his father's tears when he had first seen them. He had never seen his father cry before.

"I hope they catch that vigilante soon so that your parents can come home," Ginny said, taking his hand.

Draco nodded. "A lot of people will be relieved." He looked up. "An owl."

"Hedwig," Ginny said. "Harry's owl."

"Harry. I guess news does travel fast. Your brother must have told him."

Ginny took the letter and told Hedwig to go to the Owlery for a snack.

"I asked Ron to tell him right away, and I wrote him a letter myself for him to give to Harry. I didn't think I'd hear back from him, though. Harry's not much for writing letters."

"Do you want me to leave? You probably want some privacy."

"No, that's all right." Ginny opened the letter.

Dear Ginny,

I didn't kill the messenger. Ron and I had lunch in Diagon Alley.

I had visions of you and Ron and me all living together here at Grimmauld Place, Luna too if she wanted. Like a family. Now that won't happen.

I thought that when you broke up with me it was bad but this is the definition of bad. I suppose I didn't really believe it. I thought it was just that we had to wait until you were out of school and that it was too hard to be trying to keep the relationship going when we were always apart. But you're right, it was more than that.

You know how I feel about Malfoy. I don't need to tell you. He tried to make my life miserable, he hated Ron, and he didn't care about you at all. He looked down on every Weasley ever born, you included. You know that. You know that the Malfoys have always been steeped in the Dark Arts from their first breath. I don't know how you could forget any of that. Maybe he's changed. That would be nice. If all that dying meant that some people could change. That would be good. But even if he's changed, he's not right for you. I hope that when you learn that for yourself it's not too late and you aren't hurt.

You asked if I'm still working in the Muggle shop. I am. But maybe it's time for a change for me too. I'm going to go right to the top and talk to Shackbolt. There's no point in being the Wizard Who Didn't Die Twice nowadays if I can't at least talk to the Minister himself, right? Maybe I can work in the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, at least for a while. Although maybe I might be able to help catch that vigilante first. Moody was here a couple weeks ago and wanted me to work with him. He's a special consultant to the Ministry on it and he thought that I could help him, do some leg-work (no pun intended) for him.

I love you Ginny, and I'm sorry that it didn't work out between us. I'm sorry if you didn't feel that I was giving you what you needed, especially last summer. Maybe later, when we're both older and have careers and everything, we can try again.

Harry

Ginny folded the letter and put it in her pocket.

"So?" Draco asked.

"He's not happy."

"I didn't think he would be. Is that all?"

Ginny shook her head. "He has to get his life together, that's all. He's just going to have to figure out how to do it without planning on me being in it."

"I don't envy him that," Draco said. He reached over and brushed some hair back from her face. "I want to plan . . . and I want you a part of those plans, at least to see where we can go together."

Ginny smiled. "I want the same thing, Draco."

Chapter Thirteen: A Fatherly Talk, Snape Style

Chapter 13 of 17

Draco has a meeting with Professor Snape in the Potions master's office.



Chapter Thirteen: A Fatherly Talk, Snape Style

Draco knocked on Snape's office door, and it opened to him.

"Mr Newman," Severus said with a nod, "have a seat."

Draco sat uncomfortably, but, remembering not to slouch, he straightened and waited for Professor Snape to speak.

Snape closed the door to the office with the barest flick of his wand. "You asked about a place to meet with Mr MacAirt."

Draco nodded, relieved. He had worried that his Head of House was going to lecture him about something to do with Ginny.

"There is an unused office on the fourth floor...it used to be used for small staff meetings, but not in several years. It's down the corridor that's to the left of the library. First door on the right. You may meet Mr MacAirt at the gates and bring him there, if you wish. Let me know when you will meet."

"Yes, sir. I should find the room first," Draco said. "I hope it doesn't move."

"It has remained in the same location relative to the library for the entire time I have taught here," Snape said drily. "If it moves in the next few days, it will be extraordinary. MacAirt may even know the room himself, since he taught here in the sixties."

"What subject? Oh, Defence, of course," Draco said, remembering and answering his own question.

"Yes, Defence. But that was many years ago. By all accounts, the man is a talented wizard." Snape managed to say it as though he were unsure whether he approved of that fact or not.

"Did he teach my father and mother?"

"I don't know which year he was here. There have been many Defence teachers."

Draco snickered. "Some of them less incompetent than others."

"It is a difficult proposition, to hire a different teacher every year for a subject. By the time you were Sorted, it was becoming almost impossible to find competent teachers. Hence the Umbridge woman your fifth year."

"You weren't incompetent," Draco said. "Why did it take so long for you to teach Defence?"

"Because each teacher who was hired for more than one year had something terrible, or at least, unfortunate, happen to him...or to her...if he started teaching the second year, and often sooner. That should have been a tip-off there was something very, very wrong with Quirrel." Snape shook his head. "I knew there was *something* wrong with the man . . . But that aside, Quin MacAirt was here when there were still multiple candidates for the job each year."

"Before they started scraping the bottom of the barrel, you mean."

Severus twitched an eyebrow.

"But why didn't you teach Defence sooner?"

"It was Professor Dumbledore's decision. We did not know what would happen to me if I were to teach Defence. We were also waiting until the Dark, Riddle showed himself. It was complicated. I can say no more."

"Is that why Dumbledore's teaching Defence again this year? To make sure the curse on the position is really gone?"

"I do not know whether that figured in his decision or not. I believe . . . that he did not wish to teach Transfiguration again, which had been his subject before he became Headmaster, as you know." Snape seemed to ponder what more to say about it. "I believe he has been an effective teacher. You would have done well to continue to take it."

"You know why I couldn't," Draco said uncomfortably.

Snape looked at him for a moment, his dark eyes unreadable. "It would be good if you were to overcome that feeling. It would have been better for you if you had faced it from the beginning. However, I understand your instinct to avoid him."

"I was supposed to . . . you know what I was going to do. Or was supposed to do. And he knows it. And the Headmistress had told me that he died...well, supposedly died, I know now...in order to save me from doing it. What am I supposed to think when I look at him? What is he thinking of me?"

"You should talk to him, Draco. Talk to him before you leave school. You'll be glad you did."

"Yeah . . . I suppose so."

"In fact, Professor Dumbledore would appreciate it. He expected that you would come speak with him about your NEWT in Defence, and you have not, even after he gave his permission for you to take the exam."

"Oh." Draco turned red. "Do I have to? Will he revoke his permission if I don't?"

"No, but I think it's important for you to do. I don't believe you will regret it, even if you are uncomfortable at the time."

Draco took in a deep breath and let it out. "I'll think about it."

"One more thing, Mr Newman," Snape said as Draco tensed, ready to stand and leave.

"Yes?" Draco said, relaxing back into the chair.

"Miss Weasley."

Draco waited.

Snape cleared his throat. "You know that your father asked that I . . . offer you counsel when you need it."

Draco shrugged.

"I know that you are not . . . you are not a child, Draco. I don't need to tell you, I am sure, where babies come from or how to avoid them."

Draco turned even more red than he had been.

"Nonetheless, I think it would be wise of you to discuss spells and potions with Madam Pomfrey. You and Miss Weasley together, if both of you were comfortable with that. Otherwise, I shall suggest that Madam Pomfrey schedule an appointment with Miss Weasley herself."

"Ah . . . that's not necessary." Draco swallowed. "Really, sir. It's not necessary."

"You don't want any untoward incidents to disturb your relationship with Miss Weasley, or interrupt any plans you may have. Or which she may have."

"I really mean that it's actually *not* necessary. I appreciate your, um, advice, sir, but we're not . . . that is, we're at Hogwarts." He touched his prefect's badge. "We've been very careful. I mean, we're not, um, being, um . . ."

"I understand," Snape said. "But presumably at some point that may change. With Miss Weasley or with someone else. I want you to be aware of your options and responsibilities."

"Like you said, Professor, I'm not a child. It's not as though I have no experience."

Snape fixed him with his gaze. "And what measures have you taken in the past?"

"Really, sir...all right, uh, I don't know exactly, but they took potions. I don't know what ones."

"You left it entirely to the girls and you didn't discuss it with them?"

Draco looked appalled. "No! That would be . . . weird. Besides, I was a lot younger then."

"It is not 'weird.' If you are sufficiently intimate with a witch to engage in sexual relations with her, you are sufficiently intimate to discuss the ramifications of such activity," Snape said with disgust. "It is responsible. And sensible. You do not want to have some untoward event interrupt your life."

"You mean that I don't want to get a girl pregnant."

Severus nodded curtly.

"They didn't want that, either. They took care of it, I'm sure."

"Good. And no doubt, Miss Weasley will be equally responsible. However, if you respect Miss Weasley, you will talk to her about this before you engage in any such activities."

"We've hardly even *talked* about sex yet," Draco said. He hung his head in embarrassment, his blond fringe falling in front of his face, then he looked back up at his Head of House. "Okay, 'Dad,' I'll be sure to look into taking measures myself, and I'll talk to her, too. But I don't want to make a big deal over it, and I don't need to talk to Madam Pomfrey. I really don't."

Severus's cheek twitched, perhaps in amusement. "Very well. Take this, then." He opened a drawer and took out a small blue-bound booklet. "It has descriptions of the most commonly used contraceptive spells and potions for wizards. Be aware that a spell alone is not always effective, particularly when you first begin to learn to cast it; however, male contraceptive potions can have some untoward side effects for many wizards. That is one reason it is good to discuss such things with Madam Pomfrey...or with a Healer, if you would be more comfortable with someone different. She can make recommendations tailored for you personally. On the other hand, if you speak with Miss Weasley before it becomes an issue, then you can decide together..."

"No, that's all right. I'll, um, I'll just talk to Madam Pomfrey myself." He shoved the booklet deep into his pocket. "After I've read the booklet. And when it becomes an issue. I'm sure that if we, well, if the situation happens, then we'll talk about it. Ginny and I."

"Very well. And if you have any questions . . . about relationships. About . . . women . . . if you have anything at all that you'd like to discuss, on any subject, you may talk to me. Just don't ever call me 'Dad' again."

Draco smiled. "Okay. Thanks, Professor. I appreciate it." He was sure that Professor Snape had been at least as uncomfortable with the conversation as he was, and Draco couldn't imagine that Snape was used to giving advice about women, but he did appreciate the offer.

"When I was your age, I had no father...no parents...or other mentors to speak with about such things, and my judgment was not always as good as it might have been. Our situations are different, but if I can assist you in such matters, I will. What is most important, Draco, is to respect yourself and to respect the person you are with."

Draco nodded. "I suppose maybe I didn't used to think about things like that, myself, but it's different now. I'm older, and Ginny is different, too. I do respect her."

"Good," Severus said with a nod. "I did tell your parents that I would be available to you; however, I have known you since you were born. You are always free to come to me about anything, regardless of what assurances I may have given your parents, and do so in confidence. Whatever it is, I will listen. And not simply as your Head of House."

"Thank you. I will remember that."

"Good evening, Draco. Be sure to inform me of your appointment with Mr MacAirt when you schedule it."

"Yes, sir, I will. Good night."

Chapter Fourteen: Just You

Chapter 14 of 17

Draco and Ginny spend more time together. He reports on his conversation with Snape.



Chapter Fourteen: Just You

"He wanted to talk to you about *what*?" Ginny asked.

"Sex. It was almost as bad as the time Father sat me down when I was ten and talked to me about Crups and where Crup puppies come from. I already knew about Cruppies, and I had no idea why he was nervous about talking to me about them. It was only the next day, when I came into my bedroom to find a book called 'What Every Young Wizard Needs to Know About His Body,' that I figured it out." Draco shook his head, but Ginny dissolved in laughter.

"Wha— wha— what every young wizard needs to know about hi— *hisbody*? Oh, oh, dear!" She collapsed back on her cushion and laughed uncontrollably. "I'm just trying to imagine that!" she said when she finally controlled her laughter, much to a red-faced Draco's relief.

"It is *not* funny!"

"It is. Just *too*. But I had six older brothers. And my mom and I always talked about all kinds of things. I mean, I'd seen her with her period, so I knew what that ~~w~~*ears* before I was ten. And I'm sure that all of my brothers knew where babies come from!" She tried to keep herself from laughing again, aware that Draco was uncomfortable. "Of course, you were an only child, so I'm sure it was different for you. And I was the youngest, so by the time I came along, I think my parents were more relaxed about all that stuff. They might have been different when Bill and Charlie were kids. But I still can't believe that Snape wanted to have a birds-and-bees talk with you, especially at your age."

"Well, it wasn't exactly that," Draco said. "He feels . . . I guess he feels a sort of special responsibility for me. He was trying to be fatherly, I think. To be fair, I don't think he's had much practice at it."

"Another brave act by the Wizard Without Peer," Ginny said, smiling mildly, but with no derision in her voice.

"Anyway, after seeing us together in Hogsmeade the other day, he wanted to impress upon me the responsibilities that adult wizards have in relationships." Draco's blush deepened. "That is, he hoped that if we were, um, engaging in more sexual activity than we actually are, that I would be responsible about it. Or at least, that I would talk to you and not just . . . just sow my wild oats, I suppose."

"I think you're very responsible, Draco. Did you explain that we're not? That the opportunity hasn't arisen, I mean? Not that I wouldn't with you, you know," Ginny said. "And I'm sure you'd be . . . well, responsible, as he put it."

Draco nodded. "Yeah. I did tell him that, too. But I thought that maybe I should mention it to you now. I wondered if you'd thought about it. I was wondering ~~if~~*what* you thought about it. We've only sort of talked about being alone together and having more privacy . . ."

"Well, I don't think you're just sowing your wild oats. If you were, I'm sure you know some corner of the castle where you could do your sowing without being caught, or try to do some sowing, anyway. As for me, I'd like it if we could get away and . . . well, I'd like it if we could get away and have some time privately together," Ginny said, this time blushing herself. "I'm not sure if I could, or that I would, or that . . . well, I'd like it to be sort of natural. Not like an appointment, you know—'now's the day we have sex for the first time.' I'd like it to sort of just happen. But I also think you're right about talking first. And I don't want it to sort of just happen without my having some idea that it might happen that day. And not in a corner somewhere."

"Of course not," Draco said, blinking and trying to comprehend Ginny's somewhat rambling and contradictory statements. "We're not some horny fifteen-year-olds who just want to do it. We're in a relationship."

"Yeah." Ginny smiled brightly. "We are, aren't we? And as soon as the Leaving Feast's over—well, not that *veryday*, obviously, but that week, you're coming to dinner at the Burrow and we'll have dinner with my dad. He's very fair, my dad. Even if he wants to dislike you, he's promised me he wants to get to know you, and he will give you a chance."

Draco nodded.

"So, what about your parents? I mean, Merlin only knows when they'll be able to return to the country and the wizarding world. If we've been together for a long time when they finally return, they could be really surprised. Is there any way to write them a letter?"

Draco shook his head. "I can't have any contact with them at all. I suppose I could see whether someone in the Ministry could send them a letter for me . . . they must have a way of watching them and contacting them. But right now, that's not necessary."

Only if he and Ginny married, Draco thought, would he try to contact his parents about it. He smiled. He'd never thought about marriage as something he wanted to do, though he'd always assumed somewhere in the back of his mind that he would. Pansy Parkinson, maybe, or Daphne, or some other Slytherin of the right age and background. Daphne was apparently dating Neville Longbottom now, the two of them having got to know each other better after the Hogwarts battle. And Pansy . . . he wasn't even certain what Pansy was doing. Something in the Ministry, he thought. Her joining Blaise's group of Snape's Slytherins—regardless of what had motivated her—had been well rewarded. She had never seemed to him to have been interested in a career, but she was full of surprises. There was Millicent Bulstrode, too, of course, but she'd joined Puddlemere United, then been attacked by that vigilante and gone to America for some specialised treatment. He'd never really been interested in her, anyway. He thought he'd just been a notch on her broomstick to Millicent, but he hadn't cared at the time. He'd never really liked her, or even been attracted to her, but she had been an experience . . .

Marriage to Ginny, though . . . Draco gazed at her, and he felt that he could be happy seeing her every day, sharing everything with her, having her support, and giving her encouragement, himself. His smile grew.

"What is it?" Ginny asked, wondering why Draco was looking at her that way.

"Just you." He leaned forward and kissed her, then he lay beside her on her cushion and held her, smelling her hair, stroking her back, and holding her closely. "We'll have that day," Draco whispered. "Soon . . . but we'll take it slowly, too. And if it takes more than one day . . . however slowly you want it . . . we have a lot of time ahead of us, Gin." He kissed her, and he didn't understand when she buried her head in his shoulder and just shook, her arms tightly around him, but he didn't ask any questions.

They lay there in the silence of the dusty, barren classroom until it grew too dark to see, and when they finally left, Draco walked Ginny to Gryffindor Tower, holding her hand the whole way, and then, standing before the prying eyes of the Fat Lady, he kissed her gently good-night.

Chapter Fifteen: A Responsible Wizard

Chapter 15 of 17

Draco helps Ginny when she needs him.



Chapter Fifteen: A Responsible Wizard

Ginny tossed her heavy bag onto the floor. Draco looked up.

"Don't say anything. I know I'm late," she said irritably, plopping down on one of the cushions.

Draco, who hadn't even been thinking of saying anything of the sort, watched as Ginny impatiently dug through her satchel, muttering under her breath.

"Fuck. I don't have my Charms book with me."

Draco's eyebrows began to twitch upward before he mastered his expression, but Ginny saw it.

"It's been a bad day. And yes, sweet Ginny Weasley can swear. If you don't like it, you can just, just, just get lost."

Draco would have taken offence, but Ginny was pale and seemed close to tears as she pulled out some parchments and tried to put them in some kind of order.

"What's wrong?"

"*Nothing's* wrong! Nothing!" Ginny stuffed the parchments back in the bag, hunted through it some more, only to pull out the same parchments again. She threw them on the floor.

"Something is wrong," Draco said. "Can I help?"

"No, you bloody well can't help."

"If you would tell me..."

"Just leave me alone. I never should have come tonight. Everything's a mess. I can't find anything. I'm just stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid!" She shoved her bag and the strewn parchments away, then lay on her side on her cushion.

"Are you sick?" Draco asked. He didn't think she looked well.

"*No!* I am not *sick!* Why do wizards always think you're sick! I'm not sick. I just feel wretched."

"Oh." Draco thought a moment. He was fairly sure now what was bothering Ginny, but he didn't want to say something that would upset her more. "Do you have a headache?"

"A little." Ginny sniffed.

Draco moved over to sit behind her, and he began to rub her head. "Don't bite my head off, Gin, but, um, if you're not sick, but you aren't feeling well . . . is it, how do you want me to put it? Is it the time of month for you?"

Ginny frowned. "Sort of. It should be. Probably tomorrow. And I feel hideously awful. Nothing is going right today, everyone around me is completely stupid, and I just feel like I'm going to jump out of my skin. All my nerves are just jangled. And I have rotten cramps and a backache already. I'm sure all that information is way too much for you."

"No . . . except, well, at the risk of sounding like one of those stupid people, don't you have a potion or something that you take..."

"*Yes!*" Ginny sounded exasperated. "Or I *would*, but I gave mine to one of the first-years a couple weeks ago and I forgot and now I haven't any and I went to the infirmary but Madam Pomfrey wasn't there and I asked Luna but she didn't have any and I was late to see you..."

"I see. I get the picture. But one of the infirmary house-elves could have fetched Madam Pomfrey for you..."

"I didn't want to wait around. I went by the infirmary between Transfiguration and Charms, and then again just after dinner, but I was late to see you. I should have stopped Madam Pomfrey in the Great Hall, I guess."

Draco's fingers moved from Ginny's head to her shoulders.

"Mmm, that does feel nice. I'm sorry I'm in such a rotten mood, Draco. I didn't mean to take it out on you."

"Mother had a hard time a couple months when we first moved to Sweden. I finally spoke to the Squib whose cousins we were supposed to be, and his wife brought by some Muggle tablets that seemed to help. Mother liked hot water bottles, too."

"Mum used to put hot water bottles in our beds during the winter," Ginny said, blinking back tears. "She'd always charm the sheets warm, but she'd say there was nothing like a hot water bottle for real comfort." Ginny blinked again, and a few tears rolled down her cheeks.

Draco stroked her back for a moment, then he got up and dug deep into his book bag, pulling out a wool scarf in Slytherin colours. "Never took it out of my bag after the last time I used it," he explained.

He folded the scarf, then cast a Transfiguration on it, creating a small, soft cushion, then he cast a strong warming charm on it. He knelt and held it out to Ginny. "Would this help a little?"

Sniffing, Ginny took the warm green and silver cushion and held it to her tummy. "Thanks, Draco. Considering you're such a guy, you're being awfully nice. Especially when I was so rotten to you just now." She sniffed again and more tears rolled down her face.

Draco smiled. "Yeah, I am a guy, but I love you, Ginny, and I don't like to see you unhappy or in pain." He bent and kissed her salty cheek.

Ginny burst out crying and reached for him. Draco held her for a minute, then he said, "If I went to see Madam Pomfrey, would she know what potion you need?"

"You don't want to do that..." Ginny wiped her face with her sleeve.

"Yes, I do. You'd feel a lot better, wouldn't you?"

"Of course..."

"You just stay here. I'll be back as fast as I can!"

On his way down to the infirmary, Draco was struck forcefully by the awkwardness of asking the school matron for a potion for what his father used to refer to as "female troubles"...which seemed to encompass everything from menstrual cramps to miscarriage to menopause...but he also remembered what Professor Snape said about adult wizards behaving responsibly. This seemed responsible. And surely if he could mention to a Swedish Squib whom he barely knew that his mother was having "that time of the month" troubles without her usual potions from home, then he could go to Madam Pomfrey, a Healing professional, and ask her for a potion for Ginny.

What struck Draco as being even more awkward, however, was the fact that he'd told Ginny that he loved her. He hadn't meant to say it, and even though he'd known as he said it that it was true, it seemed early days to be declaring his love like that. Still, Ginny seemed to appreciate it, if the copious tears and tight embrace were any indication. At least she hadn't rejected it, which he would have feared if he had given any thought to the declaration before he'd made it.

Madam Pomfrey was just rounding the corner from the Hospital Wing as Draco approached. She smiled.

"Come to see me?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"How may I help you?" Madam Pomfrey asked, turning and heading back toward the infirmary.

"Er . . ."

"Why don't we go into my office and talk," she suggested. They reached the infirmary, and she flicked her wand, opening the warded doors.

"That's not necessary," Draco said hastily, thinking that his Head of House had probably told the matron that he might be coming to see her to discuss wizards' contraceptives.

"I have time..."

"I just need a potion. For Ginny Weasley."

Madam Pomfrey's brow furrowed. "She should come to fetch it herself, at least the first time. I need to speak with her..."

"It's not that sort of potion. At least, I don't think we're talking about the same thing," Draco said, blushing but trying otherwise to appear nonchalant.

"And what are we speaking of?"

"She doesn't feel well. She has, um, headache. And doesn't feel well, and, um, she gave her potion to a first-year a couple weeks ago. It's for her monthly, um, her time," Draco ended lamely, unable to maintain his attitude of nonchalance under the matron's sharp, blue-eyed gaze.

"Well, this is unusual," Madam Pomfrey said with a smile, "but I can give you a potion for her."

She crossed over to her large potions cupboard and waved her wand, removing the ward on the doors. She drew out a small blue bottle, then she glanced over her shoulder at Draco. "Does she have her period yet, do you know?"

"She said tomorrow, she thought. She just feels sick now...notsick, she said, but..."

"Yes, I understand." Madam Pomfrey reached into the cupboard and drew out another small bottle, this one, deep red.

"She's very emotional, too, and she says her nerves are frayed," Draco said.

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "She can take this one...the one in the red bottle...today, and the other when her period commences."

"And that's all?"

"That's all. She should be fine for the duration. If she isn't, she can come see me. A house-elf can fetch me at any time," the matron said.

"That's what I told her," Draco replied with a nod. "She came by before, and you weren't in the infirmary, but she didn't wait and ask for you."

"I was probably just around the corner in my rooms," Madam Pomfrey said, "but even if I were elsewhere, I can always return if someone needs me."

"I think she wasn't thinking as clearly as usual, and she said she was in a hurry."

"Well, these should fix her up just fine," Madam Pomfrey said, leading Draco toward the infirmary doors.

"That's good. She wasn't herself at all."

"The potions should take care of that. But if they don't do the trick, she can have me called for...or you can do it. It's quite gentlemanly of you to fetch her potions for her, Mr Newman."

"It seemed . . . expedient," the young wizard said.

Madam Pomfrey smiled brightly at that, as if hearing more in the word "expedient" than he had intended to imply. "Yes, dear, I'm sure it did." She patted his shoulder. "But Miss Weasley's a lucky young witch. Good evening, Mr Newman!"

"Good evening, Madam Pomfrey," Draco responded politely as she headed down the stairs. He turned and started back up to the sixth-floor classroom.

On arriving in the classroom, he found Ginny still curled up on her large red cushion, hugging his Transfigured scarf to her lower abdomen.

"Heya!" Draco greeted her, trying to sound cheerful and as though he fetched witches' menstrual potions every day. "Madam Pomfrey gave me two potions. The red bottle for today, and the blue one for, um, later. When it comes."

Ginny turned her head and looked up at him. "Thanks, Drake." She took the red bottle from his out-stretched hand. She wasted no time in swigging the potion down. She let out a sigh, closing her eyes. "Oh, much better already." Her entire body seemed to relax.

"Good!" Draco said. He sat down on his own Gryffindor-scarlet cushion and set the blue potion bottle beside her.

Ginny opened her eyes. "I feel normal now. Thanks very much, Draco."

He shrugged one shoulder. "Madam Pomfrey said that if the potions didn't help, you could come see her whenever and an elf would fetch her."

"Did she ask why you were getting the potion for me?" Ginny asked, sitting up and crossing her legs.

Draco shook his head. "I believe she thought it was simply expedient, since you weren't feeling well."

Ginny nodded. "I really appreciate it, and I'm sorry I was rude to you earlier."

"I assumed it was because you didn't feel well," Draco replied. "I'm glad the potion worked."

"I should have just waited earlier and had one of the infirmary elves get Madam Pomfrey for me, but I don't know . . . I guess I just felt too awful to want to wait around or something."

"Do you want to work on something now?" Draco asked, reaching for his book bag.

"No, not tonight, if that's okay with you. I'm feeling fine, but I'm really tired. Let's just talk."

"Okay," Draco agreed. "I've confirmed an appointment with Mr MacAirt for seven-thirty Thursday evening. I'm meeting him at the gates. Mr Rath will be there to let him in. I thought you could meet him with me and walk with us back up to the castle."

Ginny nodded. "All right. I don't know how I'll go about asking him for an interview myself, though. He's a very important man, and I'm sure he's very busy. He must have more important things to do than to meet with seventh-year Hogwarts students."

Draco shrugged. "He's meeting with me personally. He was very open to it."

"Yeah, but you . . . maybe you don't know exactly what you want to do, but at least you have some ideas. I don't have a clue. I suppose I could ask him if there's someone in his company I could speak to."

"Look, if he doesn't want to speak to you himself, I'm sure he'd refer you to someone else, but if he's willing to, I think you should talk with him directly."

"All right . . . he did teach Mum and Dad when they were in school, so maybe he'll remember them."

"I'm sure he knows who they are, anyway, Gin. You don't seem to remember that your Mum and Dad...your entire family...are heroes."

"I'm not. I had to sit in the infirmary with all the other underaged kids and just watch." She sighed. "Or that's what I should have been doing. If I'd been where I was supposed to be, Percy would still be alive."

"You don't know that. Something else could have happened to him later, you know. And the way I've heard it, and from what you told me, that sequence of events let Potter receive the Killing Curse...though I still don't understand why that was important, except that it had something to do with a prophecy that the Dark Lord believed...and things might not have turned out so well for everyone else in the end. Percy loved you, obviously, and he was also fighting against the Dark Lord. I'm sure he would have preferred to live, I'm not disputing that, but I think that if he knew he was going to die, that would have been his choice. Saving you and helping Potter."

Ginny nodded, looking down. "It doesn't really help, though, even if what you say is true and I believe it. I still feel guilty about it."

"I know . . . but you did act out of love. You didn't know what would happen. You didn't set out to have it happen that way." He reached out and stroked her cheek, then ran his fingers through her hair. "You have fire and passion, Gin. Don't lose that."

Ginny shook her head doubtfully.

"Don't lose it. Just . . . temper it a bit, maybe. But I love that in you. Being with you makes me feel really alive, you're so . . . *intense*. It's one of the many things I love about you."

Ginny gave him a small smile and blushed. "Well, I'm glad of that, I guess." She paused, looking at him thoughtfully. "I love you, too, Drake," she said softly.

Draco pulled her towards him and kissed her. She leaned into him, slowly pushing him down onto his cushion, her kiss growing in passion. Finally, she came to lie fully on top of him. Draco's hands trailed down to her buttocks, squeezing, but then he broke their kiss and held her tightly, his arms encircling her.

"I hope we can be alone soon," Ginny whispered in his ear. "Maybe another classroom somewhere..."

"No," Draco said. "I'll try to work something out, but not a classroom. Somewhere we can take our time and relax. Neither of us would ever feel completely relaxed in a classroom, no matter how deserted and out-of-the-way it was."

Ginny sighed.

"I thought . . . maybe my flat," Draco continued. "If we can get away from the school for a few hours."

"We can't do that. If you were caught..."

"Let me think about it for a while," Draco said. "I'll think of something."

"Otherwise . . . I guess the NEWTs will be here fast enough. It won't be too long before we leave school. We can just wait."

Draco nodded. "We could." He kissed her soft cheek. "We could wait . . ."

Chapter Sixteen: Thanks

Chapter 16 of 17

Harry gets another letter. Draco plans for the future.



Chapter Sixteen: Thanks

12 May 1999

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dear Harry,

I hope you read this and don't destroy it as soon as you see it's from me. That would probably be what I'd want to do if I were in your position.

I've been thinking about a lot of things lately, including my debt to you. I know that you had your own reasons for doing what you did when you got in front of Riddle's Avada Kedavra and saved my father, but the fact remains, you did save him.

I may not be on good terms with my father right now, and I don't agree with what he did when he joined the Death Eaters, and I think that a lot of his ideas, which he taught me for years, weren't right ones, but he is my father, and on behalf of my family, I want to thank you for saving him, and thank you for telling him that my mother and I were well and safe. I know it was a relief to him, and if he had died then, he would have died at peace knowing that. So thank you, Harry.

I will be surprised if we are ever friends of any sort, but I don't want to be your enemy. I'm sure that learning that Ginny and I are seeing each other must have been hard. It's not something I'd want to hear. However you feel, I can't change that, I suppose, but I want to tell you that I know that Ginny is special. If I were a Gryffindor, I might try to be noble and tell her to go back to you, since my family owes you a debt of sorts. But I can't do that, and it probably would be wrong for her, too, to try to tell her what to do. She's got a lot of spirit, and I don't think that would go over very well with her.

If you've read this far, you're probably wondering what ulterior motives I have in writing this to you. I don't know what they are, myself. I just know that I have been thinking about you, and I thought I owed you at least my thanks, and maybe some explanation. The thing is, I don't have an explanation. Not for why Ginny and I are seeing each other. I can't think why she'd want to be with me, of all people. I do know that I don't want to date anyone else but her. Every other witch pales in comparison. She's like a living rose, blooming brightly in the cold, dead of winter. She's so intense and alive. But you know that, I'm sure.

Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that I know I was an ass when we were in school together. Worse than that...I'm sure you could think of a lot of descriptions that would fit. I don't want to be that kind of person again, and I don't want to be the kind of man my father was, either.

I wish you the best of luck in your future. I hope we can get along when we see each other, as we probably will.

Sincerely,

Draco M. Newman

Harry snorted and shook his head. The Slytherin couldn't even manage a decent apology for his past behaviour, let alone one for taking Ginny. How Malfoy thought it was appropriate to even be writing him a letter after everything, Harry couldn't imagine.

If he took Malfoy at his word, it seemed to Harry that at least Malfoy recognised he didn't deserve Ginny. If he took him at his word. The wizard was still a Slytherin, and although there were certainly honourable Slytherins, Harry didn't think he could ever take any at their face value...not even Snape, as much as he might admire the older wizard now. And a Malfoy was a Malfoy, whatever he decided to call himself. Still . . . he could be a man and give Draco a chance. After all, as he'd told Ginny, if all that dying meant that some people could change, that would be good. It wouldn't be a bad thing if Draco grew up to be a different man from the one his father had been grooming him to become. And Ginny could be a good influence on him.

If Draco genuinely cared about Ginny...though Harry doubted that Draco could ever love her the way he himself did...that at least said something positive about his judgment, Harry thought. Dumbledore had always said it was a person's choices that determined their worth, not their abilities. He'd wait and see where Draco's choices led him. He just hoped they wouldn't lead Ginny into a life of pain.

Yeah, Newman. He'd see what kind of new man Draco turned out to be.

Harry stood and Summoned his new deep blue cloak. Time to get ready to meet his boss in Diagon Alley. Mad-Eye Moody had become no more patient with the end of the war, and Harry didn't want to be late for his first day of work. Tracking down the vigilante with Moody was now sounding far more appealing than stocking packets of crisps and cans of Coke at a Muggle grocery. Harry was ready to face his new life.

"You wrote Harry a letter?" Ginny asked incredulously. They were sitting together on a single large red cushion set against the far wall of the classroom, a few small green

and silver pillows between them and the wall. Ginny was leaning against them, and Draco was lounging against her.

Draco nodded. "I couldn't get it off my mind. You. Him. My father. That day. Then here I am, or there I was, miles away, sleeping soundly . . . I just kept thinking about it. So I thought if I wrote him a letter, it would help."

"Did it?" She touched his hair, turning his head slightly so she could see his face.

"A little. But I think it was a stupid thing to do now," Draco admitted. "At least to have written it and sent it. He couldn't possibly understand why I would want to write him a letter. He probably thought it was some ploy, though I don't know what he'd think I'd have to gain from it. Or maybe he thought that I just wanted to rub it in that I was with you now."

"Did you?"

Draco shook his head. "The opposite, actually. I feel . . . so happy with you. I don't know how Potter felt about you, but it must have hurt him . . . I just . . . I wouldn't want to be him." He shrugged. "Mostly, though, I felt I should thank him for what he did that day. Telling my father that we were alive, and then saving his life. Maybe saving my father was just . . . I don't know . . . an unintended consequence, but he still did it. And after everything else, too . . . we were enemies, maybe we still are, but Potter did our family a service. The Malfoys may never have had the . . . the generosity of spirit that you Weasleys have, but when we recognise a debt . . ." Draco shrugged again. "I do regret things that I said and did, even though I don't think I could have done anything differently, not who I was back then. And so I owe him more thanks for it because of that, because he did it despite our personal enmity."

"I guess I see. I never thanked your father for saving us. I never even saw him again after the battle."

"If he ever returns, you can thank him then, if you feel the need."

Ginny caressed his cheek. "I'd rather thank his son, instead." She leaned forward and kissed him. "I love you, Drake," she whispered before kissing him again.

"I love you, too, and I am going to do all I can to deserve you and to make you happy and proud of me. I want you to be able to hold up your head when you're with me. I am going to work hard and be someone for you, someone you can be proud of."

"We'll do that together. I hope that your interview with Mr MacAirt goes as well as you hope."

"So do I. He seems willing to give me an opportunity, and I'm not sure whether there are many who would."

"I'm sure there are more than you think, Drake. You will have your NEWTs, and I bet your references from the teachers will all be very good."

Draco shrugged. "Maybe." He stroked her cheek absent-mindedly and ran his fingers through her hair. "You are still meeting him with me, aren't you? Mr MacAirt, I mean."

"Sure. It does sound better than some other things I've thought of...or that my Dad has. He thought I'd like to work at the Ministry in Games and Sports, and I can't think of anything more dull right now than working at the Ministry."

"You should do whatever you want, Gin. You'll be great whatever you do, I'm sure."

"I'd still be floundering if it weren't for you, though. I'd never have even thought of talking to Mr MacAirt. Now the more I think about it, the more it sounds like a good idea."

"I'm glad." Draco sighed and looked at his watch. "I can't stay much longer. I wish I could."

"You have to go?"

"I have to meet with Professor Dumbledore."

"Oh, about your NEWT in Defence? I thought he already approved your sitting the exam."

"He did . . . Professor Snape thought I should meet with him." Draco shrugged.

"I guess he might be able to answer some questions about what we've been reviewing."

Draco shook his head, not looking at her. "I don't think we're going to talk about NEWTs, Gin."

"What, then?"

"I . . . about . . . the time my mother and I spent in Sweden."

"Oh." Ginny looked puzzled. "You disappeared right after we all thought Dumbledore died. Did he take you away or something?"

Draco shook his head again. "I don't want to talk about it, Gin. But the day he died, the Headmistress met with me and offered me a choice. I chose to . . . run away, I suppose some people might say. I decided to go away with my mother."

"What was your other choice?"

"To stay. To join him. The Dark Lord. Tom Riddle."

"Then you chose right," Ginny said vehemently.

"I don't want to talk about it." Draco shoved to his feet.

"Will you tell me more someday? I'd listen."

Draco looked at the floor. "I know you would, but I don't know if I ever will. I don't even want to see Dumbledore now, but Snape said . . . he thought it best."

"I'm sure it will be all right, whatever it is you have to talk to him about," Ginny said.

Draco twitched one shoulder. "I'll see you later, Gin." He picked up his book bag.

"Drake, wait...I just want to say that I understand that it can be hard to talk about certain things, things we've done or thought or wished, but it can be really good afterward. And whatever you decide to do, to tell me about it or not, it's okay. I still love you."

Draco's grey eyes gazed at her unblinkingly for a moment, then he nodded. "I love you, too." Whether he deserved her or not, Draco didn't care. He wanted her, he needed her, and he loved her. And he'd keep her as long as he could.

Chapter Seventeen: Pinball Wizard

Chapter 17 of 17

Draco meets with Dumbledore.



Chapter Seventeen: Pinball Wizard

"Good evening, Mr Newman!" Professor Dumbledore stood and came around his desk.

Draco nodded. "Sir." He swallowed.

"You know, I thought we might speak elsewhere, somewhere a bit more comfortable than my office," Dumbledore said. "This isn't official Hogwarts business, after all...although if you have any questions about preparing for the Defence NEWT, do ask!"

"Thank you, sir. I haven't any at the moment." Draco followed Dumbledore out of the office, waiting for him as he waved a hand to lock and ward the door behind them.

"I thought we'd have a drink down in my laboratory, if that suits you," Dumbledore said as they walked down the wide corridor. "My 'playroom,' as Minerva calls it," he added with a wink.

Draco had heard, of course, that Dumbledore had been given the lower levels of the Headmistress's Tower to convert to his own use, but he didn't think that any student had ever visited the former headmaster's new private sanctum. It was likely that even staff didn't disturb him there unless invited. His curiosity about the old wizard's laboratory wound itself around his nervousness about his meeting with the man whom he had been ordered to murder.

The entrance to Dumbledore's playroom wasn't far from the Defence Against Dark Arts office, and was just around the corner from the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the spiral staircase leading to the Headmistress's Office. The door was old, its dark wood, scarred, probably culled from elsewhere in the castle, and at the pass of Dumbledore's hand the door seemed to shiver slightly, then the old wizard grasped the large, heavy metal ring that served as a door handle and, with a gentle tug, opened the door.

"If ever you need to see me and you cannot find me elsewhere, you may look for me here." Dumbledore indicated a small black handle beside the door. "Just pull the doorbell."

Draco nodded. He could not imagine a circumstance in which he would seek the former headmaster, but one never knew when such information might be useful.

Lanterns set along the wall lit as Dumbledore stepped onto the first stair. "I shall go first, as there is also a door at the bottom."

The door closed as Draco followed Dumbledore down the stairs, and he wondered how the old wizard could trust him to walk behind him like that. He touched his wand in his robe pocket, remembering another flight of stairs, a flight leading from darkness into darkness, with no Lumos from his wand, then how he had handed the Headmistress his wand when she had asked . . . and what he had learned, what he had been offered, and what he had chosen.

He swallowed as Dumbledore opened the door at the bottom of the long flight of stairs...two levels down, Draco thought it must be. Stepping into the large, high-ceilinged stone room, Draco saw that he was correct: windows on the other side of the room looked onto a courtyard and there was another door leading out to it. Toward the back of the room, behind Draco on his right, there was a Potions workbench with various instruments, mortars, retorts, and cauldrons set out, and more instruments hanging on the wall above it. To Draco's left, there was a wall lined with bookshelves, a decorated screen, partially folded, and a tall reading table with a heavy book open on it; across the way, there were more bookshelves, a hat tree with a heavy cloak hanging from it, but also some other peculiar items that Draco didn't recognise, including what appeared to be a table or glass case with blinking lights in it and in another glass case above it, a Dark detector, perhaps; in the centre of the room were a comfortable sofa and a couple well-upholstered chairs with a low table between them.

"Come, have a seat, Mr Newman," Dumbledore said when Draco just stood there, looking around himself.

Draco took a seat at the end of the sofa, consciously relaxing and sitting all the way back, and not perching on the edge of a cushion as though he wished to jump up and flee...though he did.

"I was glad when you asked to meet with me," Dumbledore said with a nod. He crossed over to a bar behind the seating area. "Would you care for a drink? Elderberry cordial? A sherry? Port? Butterbeer? Cherry fizz?" When Draco hesitated, Dumbledore added, "I also have firewhisky and Scotch."

Draco swallowed. "Whatever you're having, sir."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Sherry, then...somehow, I don't see you as an elderberry cordial wizard, though it is quite nice!"

Draco's attention kept being drawn to the strange glass case with the blinking lights.

"You like my pinball machine?" Dumbledore asked, handing him his sherry.

"Pinball machine?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Muggle contraption. A kind of game. Quite fun. They normally run on electricity, but a friend of mine gave me this one for Christmas, and it's all charmed. Still functions as it should, though. Even tilts at the most awkward moments! I'll show it to you in a bit, if you like." He waved his hand, and the coloured lights were extinguished. "It is a tad distracting at the moment, however."

Draco took a sip of his sherry and looked around the room again. "Nice room, Professor," he said, trying to think of something to say.

"I am enjoying it," Dumbledore replied. "I hear that you have an interview with Quin MacAirt soon. Interested in working for one of his companies?"

Draco nodded. "I hope to go into business, and I thought that there might be opportunities with Golden Cup Enterprises."

"Indeed. Quin has many ventures...in fact," Dumbledore added, gesturing toward the now-dark pinball machine, "it was Quin who gave me the pinball machine. I believe he is considering opening a small wizarding arcade somewhere in Ireland, possibly in Dublin's Dorcha Court, and if that is successful, he may create a full recreational park if he can find an appropriate location for it."

"That sounds difficult, with all the Muggle protection laws."

"Which is why he's opening the arcade in Ireland. Their restrictions on Charmed objects are not as broad as those here, though he must take safeguards with how he charms any wizarding equipment that might somehow resemble a Muggle object, even if it is highly unlikely that it would ever fall into Muggle possession. Of course, finding an appropriate piece of land for an entire park might prove a challenge."

Draco nodded. "I don't think that the British Ministry would approve anything like that. Father . . . Father said that the last Quidditch World Cup was almost held in Ireland because Fudge's people put so many obstacles in its way, but that Ludo Bagman and the Games and Sports Department convinced Fudge in time that there'd be a lot of Galleons in it for us."

"Yes, I remember that debate. There was a movement afoot to move it to Leitrim, though Finland offered to host it. More fitting, I thought, for an Irish National team to play on Irish soil, but the organisers do like it to be held in a neutral country," Dumbledore replied. He paused. "Not that the events following the match were neutral."

Draco reddened, remembering his father's role in those events.

"But come," Dumbledore said, "we didn't meet to speak about such things! I was sorry to hear that you are separated from your parents for the foreseeable future."

Draco nodded. "Mother would want me to finish my education and begin my career."

"And your father?"

Draco twitched an eyebrow. "Presumably the same."

Dumbledore took a sip of sherry then set down his glass. "Severus tells me that you have become somewhat estranged from your father."

Draco's eyebrow twitched again, his shoulder echoing it in a slight shrug.

"My father was a very good man," Dumbledore said. "He was a good husband, a good father, a friend to many. I lost him when I was young...much younger than you are now, just a boy, in fact. I never knew what became of him; I didn't learn it for many, many years. When I did, I was filled with remorse that I had not sought him myself, when there was still time, and greater sadness that it was another who had discovered his fate, and not I. But I had felt unreasonable shame that he had apparently left us, that he had vanished, leaving only a mystery behind him."

"Are you saying I should find my parents wherever they've been hidden?" Draco asked.

"No. They are safer, as are you, the way things are at the moment. But when your parents return...for I cannot believe that this sadly delusional person will not be caught...you should maintain some tie with your father, and not simply for the sake of your mother, but for his sake and your own."

Draco snorted softly, a mere breath of a laugh, and shook his head. "You know why he and my mother were hidden by the Ministry, and you know what he did, who he was. He brought shame to us, to Mother and me. Your father . . . he sounds like he was a decent man, whatever it was that took him away from you...and it wasn't Azkaban or a Dark Wizard, I'm sure."

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, it wasn't. It was . . . an accident, one could say. But I saw your father lying out there on the Hogwarts grounds, a physical wreck on the edge of death, and I saw him defy Voldemort..."

"Because he'd been tortured! Because he had nothing left to lose! If luck had been different, he would have been standing beside him! We both know that. And now he'd be dead or back in prison, leaving Mother once more...and me...to fend for ourselves with that legacy."

"We are often saved by mere luck, Draco. I had a bad patch as a young man myself, and it was only through good fortune and the kindness of strangers that I pulled myself out of the mire I'd sunk into. Admittedly, my actions at that time were generally of a detriment only to myself . . . and perhaps to a few acquaintances whose own paths were already not the best for them. But there were other things, earlier, which I had done and which had so demoralised me . . . I tried to flee my past, Draco. That is never a good way to escape the consequences of what one has done or left undone. Fortunately, I was given a second chance, as I say, through the kindness of strangers."

"And you and the Headmistress," Draco said softly, "you gave me a second chance."

"We offered one to you, at least an opportunity for one. You're the one who took the opportunity and decided to change. And it appears that you are doing well on that path."

"But my father . . ." Draco's brow furrowed. "Professor Snape said once I should try to forgive him, more for myself than for my father's sake."

"Wise advice, I think."

"Why did you do it?" Draco asked suddenly, grey eyes looking up and meeting Dumbledore's blue ones for the first time. "Why? I tried to imagine it, before I knew you weren't really dead, but even now, I don't understand why."

"Not simply for you, though you were one of the primary people I was considering, and whom the Headmistress considered when she averted my original plan to..." Dumbledore gave a wry smile "...to meet my end in the way I believed was fated. Neither of us wanted you to become a murderer, Draco, and the Headmistress was particularly concerned about what would happen to you, murder or no murder, if you were forced to join Riddle after my death."

Draco touched his left arm unconsciously. "I would not have had any choice left. I might not have liked it, but if I didn't do ~~as~~ demanded . . . Mother and I would both have been dead, and likely tortured beforehand."

"You were never branded."

"No. It was supposed to happen over the Easter hols. I'd thought he'd do it earlier, even before I returned to Hogwarts in September, but he didn't, didn't even say anything about it," Draco said with a puzzled frown.

"Severus."

Draco looked at him quizzically.

"Professor Snape persuaded Riddle to wait, to hold off. Convinced him it should be a reward, or some such thing . . . Not on my advice, you should know. I only learned of it much later." Dumbledore picked up his glass. "Severus hoped even then that somehow he'd be able to save you, but without having to . . . to carry out that final deed himself. He can be a rather obstinate young man," Dumbledore said, an affectionate smile crossing his face.

Draco frowned. "That still doesn't explain . . . I don't understand. I was a Malfoy. My father's son. Pureblood to the last. Wanting power however we could get it. Muggle-baiting and Muggle-hating. Born to it. And I was going to . . . you know what I was going to do."

"You can't even speak of it now, in plain words, Draco my boy," Dumbledore replied gently. "And I don't believe you would have killed me, murdered me, not when it came to it."

"I *would* have . . . I might have . . ." Draco sighed and looked down into his pale gold sherry. "I don't know. I didn't want to, but I thought I had to. Until he actually told me to do it, I probably would even have thought it was a good thing. Father always said you were the worst thing to happen to Hogwarts," he whispered. "I believed him. I believed everything Father said." Draco blinked rapidly.

"It is a hard thing to realise that someone you love, someone you admire, has been wrong. So very wrong, in your father's case. That he had a flawed view of the world and that this view brought you all such misery. But for you . . . as I say, he is your father. Perhaps you might even serve as an example to him. He is proud of you. If you reject him, if you scorn him . . . it will be painful for you both. If you accept that he is your father and that he loves you, despite all of his flaws and his misdeeds...for I will not pretend that your father was a good man, that he did not cause many innocent human beings pain...if you accept that he is your father, he may feel moved to improve himself so that you might be proud of him again. And even if that does not happen, you will be able to look at yourself in the mirror in the morning and know that you are doing the right thing."

"But everything he taught me..."

"I don't say that you should pretend that your father was right or that he did not create his own current sad situation. You can reject the things he did, reject murder, cruelty, and the Dark, turn it out from your own heart, and yet still offer your father some forgiveness for his having led you astray and for having unwillingly caused you and your mother such pain and sorrow."

Draco merely looked down.

"Was he cruel to you?" Dumbledore asked. "Violent?"

Draco shook his head slowly. "But he wasn't a good father. I thought he was, but now I see better. You are right, though: he did not intend for Mother and me to suffer. He thought he was doing it for us, I think."

"Give him a chance, Draco. And if he seems unrepentant, then you can avoid him if you must. You certainly do not want to reward any return to his previous ways. But you will know that you, at least, tried to do the right thing. Your mother would appreciate it, as well, I am sure."

"You still haven't said why you cared, why you...or the Headmistress...wanted to give me a choice. After you died like that, you could have just left me to the fate I was born to, a Malfoy's fate."

"I didn't want you to become a murderer, and I didn't believe you had it in you...which is *good* thing, Draco, *not* a weakness...but more than that, we both wanted to see you out of it all. If we could have done the same for some of the other young witches and wizards who played roles in all of this, we would have. But it was not possible to snatch up everyone, not without allowing the wizarding world to fall into Darkness. You, however, we *could* pluck from your situation and hide you, save you, give you an opportunity to have some part of your youth unsullied by the demands of a Dark Wizard or the expectations of an intolerant, elitist pureblood society. The young man I see before me now justifies our hopes for you."

"You didn't think that I was just . . . born to be like my father?"

"No, although you might have become more like him if things had gone differently at the Ministry that night he was arrested," Dumbledore said. He flicked a finger and poured himself another glass of sherry.

"But Harry Potter, you believed he was born to defeat the Dark Riddle. You believed he'd be on the right side."

"I certainly did hope so, and as his character emerged, I was sure of it. He has a good heart, and although his upbringing was not ideal, it did teach him some discernment about people. He is another boy I would dearly have loved to pluck from Hogwarts and send to Sweden or Australia or America, or send him away even earlier in his life, but . . . his role was different from yours."

"He'd never have stayed away, anyway, knowing Potter," Draco said heavily. "Besides, he was on the right side. Born to the right side."

"But he still had choices to make," Dumbledore said. "And many of his choices were difficult ones. Do not think otherwise."

Draco's hand shook as he raised his glass to his lips and tasted the sherry. He closed his eyes and tears trickled down his cheeks. He swallowed, then set down his glass. "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. I wish . . . I wish it all hadn't happened. I'm sorry I said I'd do it. I just . . ." More tears leaked out.

"You were a boy wanting to be a man," Dumbledore said softly. "You did what you believed you had to do. You love your mother. No one will ever fault you for that."

"And I was afraid," Draco whispered, his voice roughened by unshed tears. "I was so afraid."

"It's all right. I know."

Draco bent his head, covering his teary eyes with his hand. "I am sorry."

"We forgave you, Draco. And we're glad you returned for your seventh year and are doing so well. I'm quite proud of you, if you don't mind my saying that."

Draco shook his head, still not looking up.

"Here, now, finish up that glass of sherry, and then we'll both have something a bit lighter...a butterbeer, perhaps?...and I'll show you my pinball machine." Dumbledore waved his hand, and with a ringing and dinging, the lights came back up on the machine. "We'll see whether experience or youthful reflexes win, hmm?"

Almost three hours later, an after-hours pass from Dumbledore shoved into the pocket of his school robe, Draco made his way through the quiet corridors and stairways leading down to the dungeons. His face glowed and he wore a slight, unconscious smile as his feet tapped their quick way down one of the many staircases. Whatever his father thought of Muggles and Dumbledore, pinball was *awesome*. He'd forgotten where he was, he became so engrossed in playing pinball, and although at first, Dumbledore had won, racking up points through well-practised finesse and the more cautious timing of an older man, Draco soon caught up and surpassed him. Dumbledore didn't seem to mind, though, cheering enthusiastically whenever Draco made a particularly difficult shot or got a high bonus.

Claiming fatigue, for the last hour and a half, the older wizard had sipped butterbeer and watched Draco play, seeming to get as much enjoyment out of watching the young wizard's pleasure in the game as he'd had when he'd been at the flippers himself. Draco never would have believed that a stationary Muggle game could be so much fun...when he had once unconsciously used magic to try to move the steel ball into one of the bonus holes, the machine went silent and its lights dimmed; a "magical tilt," Dumbledore had called it.

The former headmaster had shown him a few techniques for trapping and releasing the steel ball with the flipper, or bouncing it from one flipper to the other to get the right angle for the ball to shoot up a special alley and rack up extra points, and how to nudge the machine just enough to coax a ball into a good spot to bounce off a bumper but without tilting the machine and having to start over. Draco wondered how long a really good player could play on a single silver Sickle if they kept getting free games.

"Mr Newman."

Draco, startled, turned his head. He'd been so caught up in thinking about pinball, he hadn't noticed anyone in the shadows at the bottom of the stairs.

"Professor Snape," Draco said, blinking and reaching into his pocket, "I have a pass here, somewhere." He fumbled in his other pocket.

"You had an appointment with Professor Dumbledore this evening."

"Yes, sir. I'm just coming from there." He reached into his right-hand pocket again, and this time, he found the bit of parchment that Dumbledore had given him before he left. He offered it to Snape.

Snape shook his head slightly and did not reach for it. "It was a very long meeting."

"Not really. Well, it was, I suppose. But he has this thing, this Muggle game, a pinball machine. He was showing me how it worked."

Snape just looked at him a moment. "Timing is everything. And do not use too much force, or you will tilt." He twitched a brief smile. "I was once rather well acquainted with a particular machine, myself. The Fireball."

"With the one he's got, if you try to use magic on it, it tilts, too," Draco said.

"You enjoyed it."

Draco gave a half smile, which almost instantly spread. "Yeah. Yeah, I did."

"I shall have to accept his invitation to play sometime, then," Snape said, his dark eyes glittering in the torchlight.

"You should," Draco said, nodding.

"And your conversation? It went well?"

"Yeah. Yes, it did. And you were right; I'm glad I talked to him. I feel . . . relieved, I suppose."

Snape nodded. "Good night, Mr Newman. Check on lights out for me, please. Take points if anyone under year five still has their lights on or is out of bed."

"Yes, sir. Good night."

Feeling quite cheerful, Draco headed down the corridor to the Slytherin common room, thinking that he would have to ask Mr MacAirt about his plans for a wizarding arcade and whether there might be some job for him there. Moving to Dublin for a fresh start might not be a bad thing at this point . . . if Ginny came with him.