

Like a Flower to the Sun

by mayfly

Neville has the most unlikely of admirers.

one-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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The air in the greenhouse was thick and muggy. Draco rolled up the sleeves of his robes, wishing he could take them off completely as the material stuck to him, thick and damp. His hair was limp and plastered to his head, heavy with sweat. Absentmindedly, he brushed the damp tendrils off his heated forehead as he studied the pair in front of him. Hannah Abbott, blonde and pretty, and completely useless with plants, and Neville Longbottom, tall and stocky, with wide, capable hands and a deep gentle voice that he was using to good effect as he patiently explained to the witch why her Querulous Geraniums were drooping.

Draco hid behind his own perfectly healthy plant as he shamelessly stared, letting the soothing cadence of Longbottom's voice wash over him. He had been doing a lot of staring ever since he had returned to Hogwarts grateful and surprised to be accepted back in spite of everything to redo his seventh year, since the previous year had been declared invalid. Sometimes it was as if the previous year the Year of Terror, as Draco privately thought of it with a shudder had never been, and other times its indelible marks could be seen everywhere.

Draco often wondered if this new fascinating Longbottom was a result of the war, or would have taken form in any place. He could remember relentlessly mocking the awkward bumbling boy during their first few years at Hogwarts. Now, however, Draco's greedy eyes caressed the broad expanse of the Gryffindor's back and drank in the gentle way the blunt-fingered hands smoothed over the plant's delicate leaves. A slight shiver ran down his spine. He knew what those hands were capable of.

While Draco had cowered in the shadows, terrified of the monster in his home and the lunatics that had all but taken over the school, Longbottom had proven why he had been sorted into Gryffindor. Draco had never had much patience for heroes. He had always found Potter insufferably aggravating, even now when he no longer stormed around the school like a long-suffering martyr, but rather strutted bright and smiling, the mantle of victory light on his shoulders. But Longbottom was a different sort of hero, with his modest and crooked smile, unobtrusive loping walk and shy and low laugh.

Try as he might, Draco could not forget the terrifying shining moment when Longbottom had defied the Dark Lord. Draco's breath had caught in his throat, a helpless painful wail threatening to escape. And then, when he had thought it was over, the unlikely foolish hero no more, Longbottom had pulled a glittering sword out of the hat and, in one fluid move Draco would never forget, killed the monstrous snake. Draco had almost choked as all the air left his lungs in a rush and his heart beat loudly in his ears, drowning out all other sound. An unfamiliar feeling churned in his stomach, making him feel ill and nauseous. Afterwards he had realized that the feeling had been admiration, envy and even a little bit of lust, a feeling that often returned in relation to Longbottom.

Longbottom lifted his head from the contemplation of Abbott's sorry plant and caught Draco's eye. Draco quickly looked away, a light blush rising on his cheeks and his stomach once more twisting into knots.

Try as he might, he couldn't help himself. He was like a moth drawn to light. Scant minutes later he lifted his head again to sneak another covert glance at Longbottom.

The other boy was obviously in his natural habitat. He was at his most competent and, to Draco, his most alluring. He faintly glowed with contentment and pleasure as he lovingly tended to his own plant.

Even though he despised getting his hands dirty, Draco had nevertheless always rather enjoyed Herbology; he must have inherited his mother's green thumb. But his enjoyment had always been rather abstract and distanced. Nowadays, he never ceased to be amazed by the way Longbottom got personally involved with all his plants. Draco wouldn't be surprised if he had named them too.

It made Draco most embarrassingly wish he were a plant, at least for a little while. He blushed slightly as he imagined Longbottom's strong calloused hands moving carefully over his leaves, stroking and caressing. As if he sensed something, the boy in question looked at Draco to find him staring dreamily once again. Draco coloured even brighter than the last time and looked down, bemoaning his inability to prevent himself from making a fool of himself in front of the other.

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It was one of those rare sunny and relatively warm days at the end of November, and it seemed like the whole of Hogwarts was taking advantage of the weather. The grounds were full of groups of students playing, running, strolling, lazing around, giggling, reading and playing Exploding Snap.

Draco sat perched on a large rock a little way back from the pond, overlooking most of the various groups of other students sitting around the rippling water.

When he had come back to Hogwarts, he had known it wouldn't be easy, but he hadn't known it would be so lonely. Blaise and Theo were his only friends who had returned and would talk to him with some semblance of normalcy. Everybody else either shunned him or else acted stiff and awkward around him.

Only the Gryffindors treated him more or less as they always had. They rarely showed overt hostility, but most stared at him with an unspoken challenge in their eyes. Only the boys from his year broke from the norm.

He had struck up a very awkward truce with Potter after very self-consciously acknowledging the life debt he owed the other boy and expressing his gratitude for his support of Draco and his mother during their hearings in front of the Wizengamot over the summer. Now that they were back at school, Potter mostly ignored Draco, just like he pretty much ignored the existence of everybody but his Weasley girlfriend and his faithful sidekicks. On the other hand, the male Weasley would stare at him angrily upon occasion, but mostly left him alone, and Thomas was uncomfortable in his presence and would studiously ignore him.

But it was Longbottom that truly perplexed him; he acted as if nothing had happened. As if Draco hadn't relentlessly mocked him for years. As if Draco hadn't been on the wrong side. As if Draco hadn't let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. As if he hadn't found Draco in Myrtle's bathroom last year, pale and shivering, throwing up the whole of his stomach after a visit to the Dark Lord. As if he hadn't unremittently watched Draco since then and seen how the blond was slowly wasting away, becoming a pale, too thin shadow of his former self at the same time that Longbottom was growing into himself and turning into someone that even Draco grudgingly and in spite of himself had come to envy and admire.

But now that all that was over, Draco didn't know how to act around anyone anymore, especially Longbottom. Longbottom acted as if he had completely forgotten and forgiven the past. On occasion he would get a serious faraway look in his eye when talking to Finnigan or Weasley in particular but in general he went on his merry way, whistling slightly off-tune as he invariably made his way in the direction of the greenhouses, smiling at all and sundry, even Draco!

At this very moment Longbottom was sitting on the lawn in front of the lake with his Gryffindor friends, laughing. It was a deep, warm sound that reached Draco on his lonely perch and enfolded him, warming him and comforting him more than the heavy cloak he had wrapped around himself.

Draco had chosen his seat strategically. It afforded him a very good view of the Gryffindors and at the same time was unobtrusive enough not to be noticed. Longbottom had noticed him staring too many times lately Draco seemed to lose his Slytherin subtlety around the other boy and he would rather not be taken for a crazy stalker. Of course, if he was noticed, they would most probably believe he was simply ogling Potter, the Saviour of the Wizarding World. In previous years that would no doubt have been true, as Draco had unfortunately spent far too much time on Potter when he was younger. Potter might have single-handedly killed the Dark Lord using Draco's wand and been universally proclaimed the biggest of all Hogwarts Heroes, but Draco had quickly realised that his interest in the other boy had all but disappeared. There was only one Gryffindor that attracted Draco's attention of late, and it wasn't Potter.

Even though Longbottom was a very late bloomer, Draco couldn't help but think that he should have realized it sooner. Longbottom was a pure-blood after all, and from a very respectable family to boot. It was almost a pity he wasn't a girl, Draco thought wryly. His parents would have considered him a great catch in this new, post-Voldemort world. Of course if Longbottom were a girl, Draco wouldn't be nearly as interested. Not many people knew that Draco preferred wizards to witches, even though he suspected that his mother had worked it out, but Draco found that he no longer had the energy and will to actively hide it.

After the last couple of years, Draco had had enough of restrictions, had had enough of pretending to be stronger, braver, colder, straighter than he actually was. He had decided that it was finally time to do what he wanted and be what he wanted. He found that what he wanted most at present was to ace his NEWTs he crammed desperately at all hours of the day and night in a desperate and hopeless bid to get better marks than the insufferable Granger bint and to befriend Longbottom. He was still working on the second. That was why he was presently sitting uncomfortably on a hard cold rock, observing Longbottom and his Gryffindor friends.

He didn't have too long to wait. Potter had meandered off to find his girlfriend relatively early on. Not much later Granger had appeared to drag Weasley away. Longbottom, predictably, could only resist the lure of the greenhouses for so long. Draco was soon enough left to glare at Finnigan's head and will him to leave, until a seeming eternity later he too left, leaving a lone Gryffindor behind.

Draco got up and steeled himself. You can do it, he sternly told himself as he purposely strode towards the lone remaining Gryffindor. Thomas had taken out a sketch pad and was absentmindedly doodling. But Draco was not to be deterred. He would do this.

"Can I please sit?" he asked stiffly once he reached the other boy. "I really need to talk to you." He sat down without waiting for a reply and looked at Thomas, wondering where to start.

Thomas had started upon seeing Draco and was now looking decidedly uncomfortable. "What did you want?" he asked sharply.

"Well, you see..." Draco began, grappling for words. "About last year..." he went on, watching Thomas stiffen. "It was awfully unpleasant," he concluded awkwardly.

A loud snort was all the answer Thomas gave to the distinct understatement.

"Heh, you're right," Draco amended. "Bloody horrible was what last year was. For everyone." Thomas shrugged noncommittally and stared at his hands.

Draco swallowed nervously. "But, hmm... I just wanted to say, about the Manor... I'm really sorry. I mean, it was... I wish..." Draco trailed off. How do you apologise to someone for imprisoning them in your cellar?

Fortunately, Thomas made it easy for him. He scrubbed a hand through his short wiry hair before looking at Draco and speaking. "I understand. Apology accepted. I know how it was. I am pretty perceptive, you know; I saw how it was for you... I understand."

And just like that a knot in Draco's chest that he had been carrying around for ages loosened. He smiled gratefully and a bit shyly at Thomas. "Thank you," he said, and meant it.

Thomas returned a crooked smile of his own. "Yeah. We're okay."

They sat together for a while in peaceful companionable silence, and for a little while Draco forgot all about Longbottom and impressing him by making nice with his friends. Thomas was an all right bloke, even though he was a Gryffindor and a Muggle-born to boot.

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It was late evening: the time of day when the library was empty save for random Ravenclaws and Hermione Granger. Draco carefully weaved his way around tables and through overflowing aisles. He was headed for a particular table near the back, favoured by Luna Lovegood.

It was a couple of days after his talk with Dean Thomas. Any guilt he felt over Thomas' treatment was nothing compared to the uncomfortable remorse he experienced every time he saw the Ravenclaw girl. Thomas was a boy and a Gryffindor; dangerous and unpleasant situations were supposed to be all in a day's work for them.

However, Lovegood was a completely different story. She was a pretty, fragile, pure-blood girl. Girls like that do not belong in dark musty cellars, no matter how barmy their fathers might be. He had been unable to sleep comfortably in his own bed at the Manor, knowing that the blonde girl was in his cellar with Ollivander and there was nothing he could do about it because he was too much of a coward.

As he turned the corner from the section on imaginary and extinct fauna and flora, the table he was headed for came into view. Lovegood was seated at it, just as he had suspected, nose in a book as she idly chewed the end of her multicoloured quill.

He carefully strode over and pulled out a chair to sit opposite her.

She lifted her head and blinked at him. "Draco," she said in her strange calm voice, without a hint of enmity and reproach, and immediately Draco felt even more guilty and ill at ease.

"Luna," he answered awkwardly.

They spent a minute silently looking at each other. When Lovegood made to return to her book, Draco rushed to speak. "I wanted to talk to you," he began. "About last year, at Malfoy Manor. I feel very bad about everything. It was an awful thing to do, hold you hostage like that, and not even in a proper room. I know it's too late now and it doesn't make any difference, but I really am very, very sorry." There! He had said it. The second time was easier than the first.

"It wasn't a very nice thing to do," Lovegood answered serenely, "but I don't blame you. It was hardly your fault. It wasn't that bad really."

Draco could hardly believe the strange girl. "How could it not have been that bad? A girl like you should never be shut in a dirty cellar!" he exclaimed without thinking.

Lovegood smiled brilliantly. "Thank you, Draco. It's nice of you to say that."

"Yes, well," he mumbled. The wacky Ravenclaw never failed to confuse and unbalance him. "Anyhow, I should have done something about it. Found a way to free you, but I'm not very brave," Draco mumbled at last, feeling acutely embarrassed confessing so much.

"Not everyone can be brave," Lovegood informed him, "but you shouldn't worry, Neville doesn't care about that."

Draco whipped his head up so suddenly he almost got whiplash. "N-n-neville?" he asked, surprised. "What has he got to do with anything?"

"You like him." It wasn't a question, but a statement. Draco opened his mouth to deny it when she continued. "But that's all right; he likes you too. It always nice when people like you back, don't you think?"

Draco was flabbergasted. "He likes me too?" he whispered, unbelieving, certain that Lovegood was having him on. "How? Why?"

The blonde girl shrugged, supremely unconcerned with the shock and turmoil Draco was feeling. "You are rather pretty," she said by way of explanation, "and you are much nicer than you used to be. I think Neville said something about the most difficult and prickly plants giving the most beautiful blooms. Oops, I don't know if Neville wanted me to tell you that."

Draco was at a loss for words. He had been prepared to slowly, carefully court the other boy for his friendship, barely hoping for the possibility of more, and to find out that what he wanted was within his grasp...

Lovegood closed her book carefully and got up. "Come on." She grasped him by the elbow, pulling him out of the chair. Draco let himself be manhandled easily, his mind a whirl of possibilities.

The slight girl proved to be stronger than she looked as she dragged him out the library and through the school's winding corridors. He went with her, curious about their destination.

Students stared at the unlikely pair as they passed. Near the castle entrance they came across Potter, arm in arm with his red-haired girlfriend. "Luna?" he asked, surprised.

"Oh, hello, Harry," she answered without breaking her stride. Draco and Potter shared a strangely understanding look over her head.

Once they were out on the grounds, it became glaringly obvious that they were headed towards the greenhouses. Even though a feeling of trepidation started to grow in his stomach, Draco continued to let the girl lead him where she wanted.

Inside the greenhouses the air was hot and humid, as usual. In the far corner Longbottom was bent over a large angry-looking plant.

"Neville!" Lovegood shouted happily as soon as they entered.

Longbottom turned round, heavy dragon hide gloves on his hands and a smudge of soil across his left cheek. Draco flushed, unable to draw his eyes away from the dark smear.

"Hello, Luna," the Gryffindor replied, his voice slightly less steady than usual. "Draco." The last was said with an audible quaver, and Draco furtively looked into the other man's brown eyes to find that he looked almost as nervous as Draco felt. They stared at each other for a long minute.

Draco swallowed thickly. "Hello, Lon... Neville."

Lovegood laughed brightly. "Silly boys," she told no one in particular. "I'll go now, I'm sure you have plenty to talk about." Before they had time to argue with her, she had skipped out of the greenhouse and closed the door firmly behind her, leaving them alone.

Neville shuffled his feet lightly, an odd hopeful look on his face. "Dean told me that you talked," he said.

"Yeah, we did," Draco answered, taking a small step closer. They both fell silent again for another long minute.

Heart beating hard and loud within his chest, Draco took another small step forward. "Loveg... Luna told me that you like prickly difficult plants," he told the other man.

Longbottom blushed slightly and rubbed at the smudge on his cheek, making it worse. "I do," he answered, taking off his thick gloves. "They need more care and patience, and you often get stung, but in the end it's always worth it." Longbottom was looking at Draco with an odd intensity, and Draco's breath caught as his pulse fluttered wildly.

"How about particularly vicious plants? Ones with no redeeming qualities?" he asked.

"Everyone... all plants have redeeming qualities," Longbottom answered as Draco took another small step closer.

"How about plants that have grown twisted and deformed? Can they change? Are they worth your trouble?" Draco's voice had fallen to little above a tentative whisper.

"It's the most hurt plants that need the most love and care," Longbottom answered with conviction. "Everyone... all plants can grow into something beautiful and useful if you just give them the chance."

Draco took one last step closer until he was in front of Longbottom. "And you would give them a chance, wouldn't you?" he asked, his voice breathy and shaky.

"Yes, I would," Longbottom answered simply, raising a calloused hand to gently trace the sharp curve of Draco's jaw.

The End