

A Weasley of His Own

by mayfly

"Appearances really aren't everything, are they?" Post-war: Draco and Percy both manage to survive the war, but Draco thinks he should do some damage control to his social image, and decides to seduce/form an alliance with a Weasley. (Prompt 27 of the two_broomsticks 2006 fall fic-a-thon: Draco/Percy.)

Part 1 of 2

Chapter 1 of 2

"Appearances really aren't everything, are they?" Post-war: Draco and Percy both manage to survive the war, but Draco thinks he should do some damage control to his social image, and decides to seduce/form an alliance with a Weasley. (Prompt 27 of the two_broomsticks 2006 fall fic-a-thon: Draco/Percy.)

Notes: My first fanfic ever. Lots and lots of thanks to my beta raisinous fiendling for helping me out and giving lots of good advice.

Draco Malfoy looked at the slip of paper one more time. "*Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Wizengamot Administration Services. Head of Archives. Office 217. Percy Weasley.*"

He could hardly believe that he was actually going to be working for a Weasley, and the worst part was that he didn't know if he should be disgusted or elated. It was certainly disgusting for a Malfoy to sink so low as to become subordinate to a Weasley. At the same time he couldn't help being elated since, in the new order of things, the fact he was permitted to work for a Weasley might mean that he was finally going up in the world. Draco wasn't taking well to social ostracism, and his Malfoy sensibilities stung from having to practically beg for employment.

A female voice intoned, "*Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters and Wizengamot Administration Services,*" distracting Draco from his thoughts. Exiting the lift, he briskly walked through the Ministry hallway until he noticed a men's toilet.

He hastily entered the empty room to calm his nerves and check his appearance, taking some time to splash water on his face and scrutinise himself in the mirror. His light blond hair could be considered slightly too long, but Draco thought it quite became him. He played with it until it sat to his satisfaction.

First impressions are everything, he reminded himself.

He had to impress this Weasley before he had a chance to recognise him. Draco tried his best to smooth down his respectable dark robes and devoutly hoped Weasley wouldn't notice the frayed edges.

Taking a deep breath, Draco looked at himself in the mirror once more. He reminded himself that he was smart, he was charming, he was reasonably good-looking, and he was indisputably capable and definitely overqualified for the position. He would impress Weasley with his abilities and woo him with his charm. He would *make* him see that this Malfoy was worth so much more than this subservient life of begging and scrounging. If a Weasley would champion him, the possibilities were endless! Draco wanted a better future so much that he could almost taste it. Percy Weasley might not have been the most influential and well-known of all his family, but he was a Weasley which was enough on its own and he did hold in his own right quite an important, albeit not obviously so, position in the Ministry.

He was filled with hope and a new certainty; barely twenty minutes ago he had been handed the slip of paper with his new position and already he had a plan! A plan that was going to work because he was going to make it work. He was not going to let his impatience botch things up like it so often had in the past; he was going to proceed slowly and carefully. He had a whole year. In a year he was sure he could make even a Weasley like him, or at least grudgingly respect him.

Draco quickly walked the rest of the way to office 217. He couldn't afford being late. Every little thing counted when trying to impress someone, and from what little he knew of this particular Weasley, punctuality was very important.

Straightening himself up and summoning his most pleasant countenance, Draco prepared to do his best and knocked on the door of office 217.

Upon hearing the 'Enter', he opened the door and plastered on an affable smile, only to be met by a curly red head bent over a pile of papers and a furiously scribbling, quill-wielding hand.

Momentarily set back, Draco stared at the bent head for a few seconds before politely but loudly clearing his throat. One long-fingered, freckled, liberally smudged with ink hand was lifted, and the industrious Weasley intoned, "Just a minute," without ever lifting his head.

Draco was taken aback and in a former life would have been mortally offended by this high-handed behaviour. As it was, he obediently stood there, taking the chance to look around the office. It was a small office, made even smaller by the incredible amount of files, folders and books contained in it. He was pleased to note that Percy Weasley seemed to be a very neat person. With the exception of the chaos on his desk, the rest of the office was remarkably ordered. There was a window at the back with a magical view of bright blue skies, under which sat two overgrown plants that were obviously trying to break their way out of their undersized pots.

The sound of quill scratching on parchment ceased, and Draco looked round to find the redhead looking at him curiously. Draco hadn't remembered that this Weasley wore glasses, but on seeing that short-sighted scrutinising look, he distinctly recalled being told off by this former head boy. The memory was so old and from such a different lifetime, that Draco felt a sharp pang of something indefinable in his chest and barely remembered to smile and bow slightly.

Weasley cocked his head to one side. "Malfoy, right? Lucius' son. Draco, isn't it? Same year as Ron."

Shit, he was recognised already! Most people took longer to place his face. Draco hoped there still was a way to salvage the situation and make some sort of favourable impression.

"Yes, sir. Draco Malfoy at your service. You asked for a replacement for your secretary. And... well, here I am." Draco tried to smile cheerfully but felt like he failed dismally.

"Hmm... You are to replace Mandy?" Weasley queried.

"Yes, sir. Here are my papers." Draco carefully handed him a sheaf of papers from his bag and started to worry he would be ignominiously dismissed.

"Hmm... Yes..." The Weasley examined the papers carefully. "Well, it all seems in order. Have you had any experience with this sort of thing?"

"I was assistant to the secretary of the director for the Issuing and Regulation of Portkeys at the Department of Magical Transportation for a year, assistant at the House-Elf Registration Office at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures for four months, and assistant archivist for the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes for six months." Weasley seemed to be quite interested in Draco's recital and scrutinised him some more before speaking.

"Mandy wasn't exactly a secretary; she was more of a personal assistant. It will be hard for anyone to take her place, but needs must. I expect you to be in the office every morning by half past eight, and you may have lunch whenever you find most convenient. I suggest you install yourself at her desk and get a bit acclimatised. You should find her Floo address in case you ever need to ask her anything. She also said you could owl her whenever you need to."

Draco smiled shakily - things hadn't turned out too bad after all - and made his way obediently to Mandy's desk.

Stepping into Mandy's shoes proved to be easier than Weasley had predicted. Her desk was remarkably well-ordered, and she had left behind a detailed list of duties. Of course that didn't stop Draco from Floo calling her a couple of times on flimsy excuses in an attempt to find out more about his employer. Mandy, whom he vaguely remembered from school, proved to be a very bubbly mother-to-be who only had the best to say of Weasley, adding almost as an afterthought that he was a very demanding and precise man to work for.

Every morning Draco had to make sure Weasley drank his tea, and every lunchtime he had to try and make him eat something. During the day Weasley got lost in his archives, researching various occult and forgotten subjects. Draco would often get dragged into it as well, and for hours one blond head and one red head could be seen poring over manuscripts and feverishly writing. Eventually, Draco would lift his head to stretch and ease the crick in his back and would catch sight of the clock: seven in the evening. It would then often take a whole hour of cajoling and putting things back to get Weasley to go home. By the time Draco was home, had a light supper and fell into bed, he was exhausted and couldn't for the life of him tell where the whole day had gone.

Draco's actual work seemed to be comprised mostly of organising Weasley's schedule and appointments ... a task that proved remarkably easy. Weasley had a virtually non-existent social life, and all his agenda held were departmental meetings, appointments with various Wizengamot members, the birthdays of the numerous members of his family, and official functions. Draco could only shake his head. Social outcast as he was, even he had a fuller schedule than Weasley. Well, at least on weekends, Draco conceded.

"So how are things going with the wearisome Weasley?"

Blaise's white teeth shone in the dark of the bar as he grinned at Draco and took another gulp of his drink. Loud music blared around them, and the pair had to shout to hear each other. Draco bent towards Blaise before yelling his answer.

"He's not so bad. Not nearly as tiresome or as overbearing as some. The only real problem is he works such long hours! During the week, I practically forget what my place looks like!"

"You do realise that you don't have to stay and slave away for the Ministry? You can come and work for me any time you want. But, yes... you want to restore your family name to its former glory."

Blaise sighed dramatically and returned to his drink while looking out over the dance floor.

Draco softly hummed along to the music and followed his friend's gaze to the dancing silhouettes under the flashing lights. Then he leaned back towards the other man.

"It's really not too bad, Blaise. Working for a Weasley could be my big break if I play my cards right. Besides, my job is mostly arranging and organising his work and appointments. You know how much I enjoy running people's lives for them."

Blaise grinned widely again.

"And telling them what to do. Do you order Weasley around then?"

Draco laughed at the thought of ordering Percy Weasley around. He might be inordinately obedient to his superiors, and it was true that he had to be practically bullied into eating and going home, but otherwise he seemed almost as immovable as a rock. *Like all Weasleys*, Draco mused.

"It's only been two weeks, but give me time, and I might get there yet!" Draco grinned.

They both laughed at that, and Draco wondered if he would really be able to make it happen. After a moment, he shook all serious thought from his mind; it was his night out. He looked at Blaise and lazily stretched.

"Fancy dancing?"

Blaise laughed again, showing off his whiter than white teeth, and shook his head. "I think I'll just sit here and admire you from afar."

Draco gave a soft chuckle and made his way to the dance floor to join the throng of moving bodies, leaving all concerns behind for the time being.

Draco looked at his watch. Half past one. It was a slow day, and he had had everything finished and in order ages ago. Weasley, having completed everything else, seemed to have started on a project that wasn't due for another month or more.

Draco stretched himself lazily, leaning his chair backwards precariously and stretching out his hands over the neatly ordered desk. He had worked closely with Weasley for the past weeks and spent an inordinately large amount of time with him. He had proven himself as a capable and quick-witted assistant. But it wasn't enough; he needed to talk to Weasley, make him fully appreciate his abilities, make the redhead like him and want to help him.

Draco blessed his luck for handing him a tolerable Weasley, one whom it shouldn't prove too great a hardship to befriend. Who knew what he would have done if he had landed that obnoxious Weasley from his year? He looked at his watch one more time, steeled his resolve, and got up to try and start things moving.

He carefully knocked on Weasley's office door and let himself in. His superior lifted his head from the papers he was poring through and gave Draco a small distracted smile. A smile that, even though Draco rationally told himself Weasley didn't really mean, still warmed him. It was so rare that people smiled at him, especially in the Ministry.

"Draco, what can I do for you?"

That had been another pleasant surprise. Weasley proved to be one of the few people to call Draco by his given name rather than address him as Malfoy. Draco tried to ignore all distracting warm feelings and address the matter at hand.

"It's lunch time, sir," he said patiently.

Weasley blinked and then glanced at the clock on the wall. "And so it is. Would you like to take a lunch break?" the redhead asked, perplexed.

"Yes, I would, sir, but you should take one too a real one. Leave the office for a change."

Weasley looked surprised and opened his mouth to protest, but Draco kept on speaking.

"You have no appointments today, and you are rather ahead on your work. You have plenty of time; you should take a real break for a change. Besides..."

Draco put on his coy and abashed look that invariably got grandmothers feeling sorry for him.

"...I feel lonely eating by myself. I would really appreciate it if you could keep me company."

Weasley looked suitably surprised and at loss for words. Draco smiled prettily and tried not to overdo the puppy dog look. It wouldn't do to lay it on too thick. Weasley seemed to waver for a bit and be on the verge of declining before obviously coming to an impulsive decision.

"All right. Why not? Let's have lunch together. We could go to the Ministry cafeteria or..."

Draco could see Weasley was getting an even more impulsive thought.

"...we could go to the pub near the Ministry, where I often have my dinner."

This was going to be better than Draco had hoped.

"Yes, the pub sounds wonderful," he nodded. "Let's go there."

Draco looked round the pub as they waited to be served. It was a cosy, affordable pub very near the Ministry, yet he had never been there before. Used as he had been to living expensively and spending widely, he found it hard to scrounge and economise, but that was what he had to do. The manor was his given back to him in appreciation for his assistance during the war and the trials but it was in ruins, and his inheritance had been confiscated to pay for his father's war crimes. His father had spent the majority of the war in Azkaban, but had been tried and Kissed as a representative of all the Death Eaters who had died and thus revenge couldn't be taken on them.

Thoughts about his father made Draco even more determined to restore his name and his home by any means. He turned his attention back to the present. Opposite him sat Percy Weasley, a surprisingly reasonable Weasley, twiddling his thumbs nervously and gazing out the window now and then. A sliver of rare sunlight fell on his head, turning his hair a burnished copper. Draco felt himself get caught up in the moment; the colour and the slight curls of his superior's hair reminded him momentarily of the youngest Weasley girl, the only one of the lot that he had found easy on the eyes.

Draco shook his head to stop the traitorous, wandering thoughts; he couldn't afford to lose concentration. He had got Weasley out of the office; now he had to get him out of his shell.

Draco smiled charmingly.

"So... you say you come here often?"

Weasley started, apparently lost in his own thoughts, and turned to pin Draco with his sharp blue gaze.

"Yes, actually," he said. "It's close to work, it's quiet and comfortable, and the food is good. I would say I come here most nights. It's certainly better than eating at home, especially with my cooking." Weasley gave a self-deprecating chuckle.

"I'm sure you're not so bad at cooking as all that," Draco purred.

He used the tone of voice that used to make girls blush at school, and Weasley ducked his head and gave a slight smile.

"So you live alone then? No charming lady friend to cook hot meals for you?"

Here Weasley gave a hearty chuckle.

"No, no lady friend."

Weasley looked at Draco for a second with that piercing gaze of his, and for a paranoid moment Draco thought he had been found out, that Weasley could see right through him and understood everything; it almost made him feel ashamed. Almost.

"So, how about you, Draco? Any 'lady friends'?"

Draco could hear the humour in the voice; he was almost offended, but Weasley was smiling as he looked at him, and that was a good sign. It also warmed him, as usual. It wasn't hard to blush Draco blessed his fair skin and to mumble in fake abashment.

"No lady friend either." And then to add as a supposed afterthought, "Wouldn't be able to support a lady in the manner she deserved anyway. Not anymore."

He cast a sly look at Weasley to see how he took it. Weasley just looked at him in his typical manner before saying earnestly, "You shouldn't put yourself down, Draco. I'm sure you have a lot to offer the lady of your choice."

Somehow he found it even easier to blush and duck his head this time. What was harder was fighting the inexplicable warm feeling inside.

Once their food arrived it was even easier to talk to Weasley with the ice effectively broken. He tried to lead the conversation to finding out more about Weasley and explaining his own situation, but somehow found himself talking about his father and his childhood at the manor.

Before he knew it, he was gesticulating animatedly, immersed in a spirited description of a childhood escapade involving Vince, a Kneazle and his father, only to realise that it was Percy Weasley ... his superior, the man he wanted to impress with his abilities and his seriousness, the son of Arthur Weasley, who hated and was hated by Lucius Malfoy ... that was listening to him intently while pinning him with curious amused eyes.

Draco suddenly forgot what he was saying.

"...Ugh, yes," he finished awkwardly. "Well, that's a rather old childish story that I'm sure you weren't interested in. I am sorry to bore you with it."

Although Weasley looked like he disagreed, Draco wildly looked around for an escape and glanced at the clock.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "Look at the time. It's ten past three!"

With these magic words, Weasley's face immediately changed from relaxed amusement to stressed urgency. Strangely enough, Draco felt a pang of disappointment surge through him.

"Come on then. We have to return!"

And with that Weasley jumped up and almost bolted back to the Ministry with Draco in tow.

After a precedent had been set, and Weasley realised that the end of the world hadn't come and that their work still got finished ahead of schedule, it proved easy to persuade him to take another lunch break together. Soon it became quite an institution; several times a week they would go to the pub to eat and talk.

Weasley would on occasion open up and offer titbits and glimpses into his life and past and the workings of the ever-growing Weasley family, but Draco always ended up being led on by that gentle smile and those curious amused eyes to share more and more anecdotal stories from his childhood ... replete with funny impressions and wild hand-waving ... as well as confessions about his life after the war. He shared things he had never planned on sharing with Weasley... his Weasley. Things that his Weasley would listen to with amusement or compassion or even righteous indignation on Draco's behalf. And sometimes his Weasley would lay a comforting hand on his own and look at him earnestly, and Draco would find himself too busy fighting the burst of fiery warmth in his chest and the prickling at the corners of his eyes to remember to rejoice that his plan was working so well.

The scroll was tightly rolled and sealed with a beautiful, golden wax seal; nevertheless, Draco immediately knew what it was. The parchment was heavy, with an intricate red and green border in a holly design; it even smelled faintly of cinnamon. Even though Draco hadn't seen one of these in a long time, there was no mistaking the invitation to the Ministry's Yule Ball.

Draco had only been once. When he was fifteen, his father had finally decided he was old enough to accompany his parents. If he had known then that it was going to be a once in a lifetime experience, he would have paid more attention to the event and spent less time getting inebriated with sweet-tasting mead and flirting with people who were too old for him.

He gripped the scroll, suppressing a pang of longing for what had been and could be no more, and knocked on Weasley's door. He was not surprised to find his superior thoughtfully reading an old book. Weasley lifted his head and smiled, as was his wont when seeing Draco.

"Draco! Come here and look at this."

Draco held up the scroll.

"Your Yule invitation has arrived, sir."

"Yes, good. Put it over there then. Now, you must see this."

Draco obediently put the scroll on the desk and went round the desk to see.

"You remember the March case of course, the dispute between the vampires of Yorkshire Moors and the Pickering family. Now, this case isn't entirely the same, as you can see. For a start it doesn't concern vampires, which you might say should discount the case immediately, but if you look closely you will find the similarities fascinating..."

As was his habit, Weasley sucked Draco into his research and his theories, letting the scroll lay forgotten for the time being.

Later on, in their usual pub for it was a pub-lunch day Draco couldn't help but remember the invitation.

"So, sir, the Yule Ball invitation came. Any thoughts about who you might take?"

Weasley scratched behind his ear and glanced distractedly out the window.

"No, not really."

Draco wanted to pursue the matter. The Yule Ball was a prestigious affair, and Weasley needed to carefully consider his date, but the subject was obviously closed, as Weasley was now earnestly leaning forward on the table and talking excitedly about their most recent subject of research.

"So what do you think of the werewolves versus the Bulstrodes? It is a very old case, and you can argue that there is rather a difference between vampires and werewolves, but they are both considered dark creatures, and you must have noticed other similarities. Like, for example, the antiquity of the estates and the relation of the clans to the land."

Draco frowned thoughtfully.

"To me, it's not so much a question of vampires or werewolves," he said finally, "as much as the difference between the Yorkshire Moors and the Welsh hills. Both lands are old, but they are also intrinsically different, and I think the question will fall there."

And with that, Draco let himself fall into a comfortable dispute with Weasley over the March case. He didn't really mind; on the contrary, he never ceased to be flattered that Weasley would want to talk to him like this and seemed genuinely interested in his opinions. It almost made Draco feel like Weasley could consider him his equal.

The end of November proved to be quite rainy and uneventful, and by the time December had come, the lack of anything more interesting in his life had Draco practically dying of curiosity about who his Weasley would eventually take to the Ball. Weasley himself was scandalously unperturbed by his shameless procrastination, and that drove Draco mad. He had tried asking a couple of times if he had finally found a date. He had even hinted that time was flying and if his superior didn't want to suffer the indignity of attending alone or with a second-rate companion, he had better get a move on it. All the redhead did was smile condescendingly as if Draco amused him but was not to be taken seriously and change the subject. It didn't take Draco long to come to the conclusion that the only way to satisfy his curiosity was to go to other sources and perhaps discover Weasley's past dates.

It didn't prove hard to do.

The other secretaries of the Wizengamot Administration Services or Wiz Admin, as they liked to abbreviate themselves had grudgingly accepted Draco into their little circle upon seeing that he was here to stay for what seemed like a year. Draco often spent his coffee-break, or any lunch break that wasn't spent with Weasley, with them. Under better circumstances he would never have socialised with such people, and he was constantly acutely aware of slumming, but what was he to do? Besides, he reasoned, they were a very good source of Ministry gossip.

One day over coffee, after a lull in the conversation, Draco put down his cup and carefully said, "Mister Weasley got his Yule Ball invitation weeks ago, but it doesn't seem like he has invited anyone yet."

He looked up to scrutinise the others' faces before hastily adding, "Of course, I might be wrong."

Julie, the eldest secretary, clucked her tongue while Dotty, the most outspoken, spoke first. "Well, that's our Mr Weasley for you. A true gentleman and a conscientious worker, but..."

"...Last year they say he showed up alone. I suppose he might just do the same again," added George, one of the court's minute takers.

Draco was shocked and disappointed. "Alone?!"

"Yes, the poor dear. Mustn't have much luck with the ladies," Julie put in. "As I recall, he took Mandy a couple of times."

"Ooh, lucky Mandy!" squealed Cathy, who was almost as new as Draco to the department.

"Lucky that Anthony was all right with it, you mean," said Dotty rather snidely.

"But this is preposterous! Didn't he ever take a real date?" Draco demanded, feeling decidedly outraged. He was starting to feel like his superior was letting the side down with this undignified behaviour.

Julie scratched her head in thought.

"Well, he did take Gabrielle Delacour one year, his sister-in-law's sister."

"And we all know how that ended up!"

George's exclamation earned curious glances from Draco and Cathy, so with the air of a seasoned gossip, he gleefully continued.

"They say he showed up at the Ball with a radiant part-veela on his arm, but left it with a crying Hannah Abbott clinging to him. Apparently, their respective escorts had hit it off so well as to be discovered on one of the balconies in quite an intimate position."

George laughed heartily while Cathy giggled and Dotty snorted. Draco, for his part, didn't quite know how to react.

"A couple of weeks later, Gabrielle Delacour and Eric Blackeagle were married."

Julie sent a frustrated look George's way.

"Now that I come to think of it, he went with Penelope Clearwater, now Penelope Adams, once too. That was quite a while ago. He was new to the position, and the war was just over..."

Draco remembered Clearwater. She was the prefect that had got petrified back in a previous life when he was a second year in Hogwarts.

"And how about old Mr Badger? Every year he takes a new bright young thing to the Ball, and he's just getting fatter and balder and older each year," said Dotty laughing.

"His luck isn't much better. He might take a bright young thing to the Ball, but he certainly doesn't always leave with one," George added with a snicker.

"It's not any worse than Miss Barnaby, who first took all her brothers, then all her cousins and now is going through her nephews," said Julie, referring to a now elderly member of the Wizengamot.

"And Mr Finch-Fletchley, who took a man?" Dotty put in.

"Not just a man, a Muggle!" George intoned, and Julie looked scandalised all over again about the old affair.

Draco had heard of Finch-Fletchley. He had taken his obvious boyfriend to the Ministry Ball as a sort of statement. What he hadn't expected was that the furore created over bringing a Muggle far overshadowed the fact that he was a man.

The Ministry hallways were by now gaily decorated, and the atmosphere was more cheerful and relaxed than usual while everyone eagerly awaited the holidays.

It was just under two weeks till the Yule Ball, and Draco had finally given up on interrogating his Weasley about whom he was bringing. He had been eventually forced to accept that either Weasley was uncharitably keeping his choice of date to himself or else he was going alone. Draco wasn't quite sure which case he considered worse.

March's vampire case proved confusing and complex, and thus took up most of their time and thoughts. They spent even more hours than usual poring over texts and discussing possibilities, and Weasley had quite a number of meetings with the Wizengamot members in charge of the case. Draco got so immersed in the research that he ended up occasionally taking notes home with him to read over something he had never done before.

Before the war, Draco had only had vague dreams and ambitions about his future, but whatever he had wanted, it was certainly something glamorous and exciting; it was not being secretary to an archivist. After the war, Draco's ambitions had been turned towards learning to get by, and he had to admit that working for Weasley was the best job he had ever had so far.

He often got so carried away by the job and the research and the daily routine that he forgot about his plan. Fortunately, it seemed to be working perfectly all by itself with hardly any further pushing by him. He had got so close to his Weasley that the redhead had grown on him and he had started to quite like the fellow. Even better was the fact that Weasley seemed to like him too, and it was obvious that he had grown to show a healthy appreciation for his abilities.

Draco had become quite optimistic, and the feeling had given a new bounce to his step. Both Julie and Dotty had noticed and discreetly or not so discreetly in Dotty's case had asked if he had got himself a girlfriend. Draco just smiled mysteriously.

It was late Thursday morning, and Draco had just finished writing out the report for January's project; they were ahead of schedule as usual. He spent some minutes admiring his turn of phrase and checking his footnotes before going to have Weasley look it over and sign it.

Entering the office, he found the redhead gazing at some imaginary spot high above the door and twirling his quill absently.

Upon Draco's entrance, he put the quill down and smiled at Draco, as was his habit.

"Yes, Draco?"

"I just finished writing up the findings on the regulation of dangerous plant mutations."

"Very good, Draco."

Draco handed the parchments over, and Weasley diligently read them over, nodding and humming and making slight corrections, as was his wont. When he had finished, he signed it and looked up at Draco, smiling once more.

"Well done, Draco. Just send it on its way, and we'll be done with that."

Draco smiled back at Weasley, warmed by the small compliment, but Weasley made no move to return the parchments he had in the meantime rolled up and sealed with his official stamp. On the contrary, he seemed to be studying Draco.

"Draco, do you have any plans for Christmas Eve?"

The question was so unexpected and bizarre that Draco was at loss as how to respond.

"I do know that it's rather late in the day, and it is very possible that you have already made arrangements, but I thought I would just ask..." Weasley continued.

Draco did actually sort of have plans. The past couple of years it went without saying that he would go to Blaise's Christmas Eve party and spend Christmas day very much hung over. But a mad notion crossed his mind, and he blurted out, "No, I don't. Not really. I mean, I don't have any real plans for that day. As such."

Weasley looked momentarily surprised before slowly smiling.

"How would you like to go to the Ministry's Ball?"

Even though that was the mad notion that had crossed Draco's mind for a crazy minute, he hadn't really expected Weasley to say it and, as such, he was left totally speechless. He stared at the other man with wide, surprised eyes. Weasley continued talking.

"I'm not taking anyone else with me, you see, and the invitation does say 'Percy Weasley and guest'. I thought it would be a pity to leave the invitation unused when it was quite obvious that you would like to go to the Ball. You would like to go, wouldn't you?"

Draco nodded slowly, not really believing what he was hearing.

"But...um..." he stuttered, "I'm not a woman."

Weasley laughed at that.

"No, you're not. I don't see why that should matter. They are no specifications about the gender of one's guest."

"People might get the wrong idea..."

Weasley didn't look very convinced.

"No one seemed to get the wrong idea when I took Mandy. I don't see why it should be any different with you. You really shouldn't worry about unimportant things. What you should consider are the people I could introduce you to there. You could do so much better than this, and you know it, and I might be able to help you a bit."

Weasley was looking at him with that sharp knowing gaze of his, and Draco's heart was beating in his ears. That was exactly what he had wanted! It was being handed to him on a silver platter by this Weasley that understood him and saw through him. He looked into the earnest blue eyes and spoke without thinking.

"But I'm a Malfoy. What would it do to your reputation to take a Malfoy to the Yule Ball?"

Weasley smiled wryly; it was a barely noticeable upturning of the corners of his mouth.

"I'm not as concerned with my reputation as I once was, seeing as it no longer is what it once was. Anyway, Draco, appearances really aren't everything, are they? I think you should come, but if you'd rather not, it's really up to you."

Draco could barely breathe; he knew had no fight left in him. Why was he fighting anyway? Of course he wanted to go.

"Yes," he breathed. "Yes, I'll come to the Ball with you. I'd like it very much. Thank you."

Draco stared at Weasley, winded, while the other man gave him the smug smile of a victor and picked up the forgotten scroll to hand to him.

"Good. That's arranged then."

Draco took the scroll silently, nodded to his superior, and exited the office.

The rest of the day passed in a sort of daze. He couldn't stop thinking about the invitation and hiding a secret little smile behind his hand. His plan was working! Weasley was going to help him. But, more than that, another part of him the one that pined for the luxury of his youth was overjoyed to go to the Ball for the Ball's sake. That part of him wanted to compare the floating chandeliers and the dancing Christmas trees to those hazy images from his youth and would have loved to dance the night away as if in a dream.

Strangely, what really seemed to warm him inside and create a lightness he couldn't stop bubbling up and turning into a soppy grin or an aborted giggle was the fact that Weasley had asked him, Weasley wanted to help him, Weasley wanted to go to the Ball with him. It was almost as if Weasley... his Weasley... cared.

And, in a rather peculiar turn of events, that thought made Draco quite giddy.

Part 2 of 2

Chapter 2 of 2

"Appearances really aren't everything, are they?" Post-war: Draco and Percy both manage to survive the war, but Draco thinks he should do some damage control to his social image, and he decides to seduce/form an alliance with a Weasley. (Prompt 27 of the two_broomsticks 2006 fall fic-a-thon: Draco/Percy.)

Draco sat on his bed, staring at the mangy contents of his open wardrobe. He stared as if staring would miraculously produce something where nothing emphatically was. The longer he stared without any result, the more he despaired.

It was a fine Saturday morning for December at least and upon waking Draco had decided to see what he would wear to the Ball. Since Weasley had asked him, Draco had felt a constant excitement simmering inside him. He smiled too often, chattered too excitedly and practically bounced. Julie wanted to know the reason, Dotty demanded to know and Blaise just looked amused and intrigued, knowing he would eventually find out.

Draco buried his head in his hands, feeling thoroughly distressed. He had only four days till the Ball, and he had nothing to wear! All his robes were old, or frayed, or completely wrong for the occasion. He looked again at his 'best' robes, and his heart sank even more. He couldn't wear that: the edges were frayed, the cut was too stuffy and, worst of all, Weasley had already seen him in it. Draco blushed at that last thought. But it was true: he wanted to impress his Weasley as much as he wanted to impress anyone else he might be meeting at the Ball.

There didn't seem to be a way out of it. Draco would have to dip into his painstakingly gathered economies to buy a new set of robes. He felt a tightness in his chest as he thought of the manor, empty and rotting.

He had risen from the bed to get ready and go out and do it before he changed his mind when he suddenly remembered Blaise. With new excitement filling him, he rushed to the fireplace, threw some Floo powder in and yelled, "Blaise Zabini's flat!"

The fire flared up green, and he stuck his head in, shouting for Blaise.

A few minutes later, a sleepy Blaise stumbled into his living room on the other side of the Floo connection, tying up a hastily thrown on robe. He scratched his head and glared blearily at Draco.

"Stop your infernal shouting. You're going to wake the delectable little brunette I picked up yesterday."

Draco grinned at that.

Blaise yawned and rubbed his eyes before kneeling on the floor in front of the fireplace. "So what's the emergency? And it better be an emergency!"

Draco ignored Blaise's warning glare. "I need some robes, good dress robes, and I thought you might want to lend me some." After that pronouncement, Draco smiled charmingly at his friend.

"You need dress robes? This time in the morning? I'm taller than you anyway..."

"Pfft, details. That's what magic is for," Draco answered airily.

"What do you need these robes for? Why should I give you some?" Blaise stopped talking abruptly, shook his head as if to clear it and glared at Draco. "This is not an emergency. I am going back to bed. Goodbye!" He got up and started marching back to bed.

"The robes are for the Ministry Yule Ball!"

That stopped Blaise in his tracks. He turned around again to look at Draco.

"What?"

"I'm going to the Ministry Yule Ball, and I need presentable dress robes. Will you, as my best friend, please help me out and lend me some?" Draco finished with another charming smile as he fluttered his eyelashes at a gobsmacked Blaise.

"I want to know the whole story. Now," pronounced Blaise as he neared the fireplace again.

"Not until you present suitable dress robes. You will learn everything upon appearing with suitable offerings. Bye for now!" And with a farewell cheeky grin, Draco withdrew his head and turned off the connection.

Blaise scratched his head again. He thought about the pretty brunette. Then he thought about Draco's story and wondered how long it would take to wake her and get rid of her as courteously as possible he did want to see her again so he could get to Draco's.

Noon had come and gone, and Draco was getting agitated. What was keeping Blaise? He huffed and threw down the old newspaper he was leafing through, staring moodily at the fire. At that moment the flames blazed up, and Blaise stepped through with a pile of robes in his arms.

"I know how picky you are, Draco, so I brought a selection," was all he said by way of greeting.

It was enough. Draco jumped up and snatched the robes from Blaise, spinning about and practically running the other way. "Bedroom!" he shouted over his shoulder.

Blaise knew better than to come between Draco and new clothes and ambled after him.

Draco was excitedly spreading out the robes on his bed and examining them. He compared the colours, scrutinised the fabric and finally tried on all the robes, testing the cut. He twirled and looked at himself from all angles, frowning at the slightly-too-long sleeves and hemlines and slightly-too-wide shoulders.

Blaise lounged on Draco's bed, observing. The scene reminded him of school, when Draco would spend hours trying on clothes for dates, balls or even only Hogsmeade weekends. Blaise admitted that Draco looked good in almost any clothes, but he looked even better in expensive ones. More often than not, they looked like they were made just for him, and he definitely knew how to wear them and make them look natural.

Finally, Draco decided on dark blue robes with silver trimmings. "These, I think. What do you say?"

Blaise simply nodded his agreement as Draco concentrated on the necessary alteration spells. When, at last, Draco found the robes to be to his satisfaction, he twirled once more to admire himself.

"Well?" said Blaise finally. "Where's my reward? I want to know everything. How did you get an invitation to the Yule Ball? Who are you taking? Spill!"

Draco smiled mysteriously and sat on a chair.

"Draco!"

"I didn't get an invitation. I was invited," Draco said eventually, still smirking mysteriously.

Blaise conceded that that made more sense. "So who's the lucky or unlucky bird?"

Draco smiled triumphantly before answering. "Percy Weasley. He invited me."

"Percy... Weasley?" Blaise stared at Draco a few seconds, surprised, and then smiled lazily. "You cad, you! So you seduced him, then. Good on you!"

Draco laughed and shook his head. "I didn't seduce him."

That surprised Blaise. "*He* seduced... you?"

Draco laughed harder at that. "No, he didn't seduce me either. He's too much of a gentleman, I should think. Besides, I'm sure he's perfectly straight."

As far as Blaise knew, being straight did not necessarily offer one immunity to Draco's charm. He knew a number of "straight" men who had succumbed to his blond friend's seduction himself included.

"So he just invited you? He wouldn't rather go to the Ball with some pretty girl?"

Draco scowled a bit before answering. "Yes, he invited me as his 'guest', and no, he wouldn't rather go with some 'pretty girl'. He said he wanted to introduce me to certain important people he knows."

Draco looked immeasurably smug at that, while Blaise was quite impressed and said so. There was no point in keeping praise from Draco.

"I must say, I'm impressed. Your plan seems to be working perfectly. It looks as if you've got that Weasley of yours eating out of the palm of your hand."

Draco's self-satisfied smile became even more smug as he basked in his friend's praise.

"Well, what can I say?" he said in mock modesty, but soon felt the need to clarify. "I wouldn't say I have him eating the palm of my hand, exactly. It was completely his idea to invite me. It turns out that my Weasley is perfectly capable of taking positive initiative." Draco said this as if he could personally take credit for it.

"Well, congratulations then. No need to say good luck. I'm sure you'll charm the socks off everyone, as long as you think before you speak."

"Don't I always?" Draco protested indignantly.

Blaise snorted.

"See you Christmas day, then, to hear all the details. Unless you get lucky, that is," Blaise said, waggling his eyebrows.

"I will definitely be getting lucky, just not *that* way. That, I leave up to you. You have another cute little thing on the agenda, I suppose?"

"Maybe I do; maybe I don't," said Blaise airily, but from the slight smirk playing at the edge of his lips, Draco inferred that he definitely did.

Draco had tried his best not to be late. He really had. But somehow, what with shining his shoes to perfection, getting carried away with grandiose daydreams of his possible futures in the bath and making sure his robes hung just so and his hair was perfectly styled, time had flown and now he was running late. Not too late, though, to forget to cast an *Impervius* over himself before taking the Floo to the Ministry Floo central. It wouldn't do to get soot on his robes.

The Floo central was a chaos of chattering couples and families appearing out of the various fireplaces and excitedly brushing themselves down before making their way to the Ball.

Draco straightened his robes out and briskly walked towards the main Ministry Atrium. There, under the fountain, ramrod straight, stood a tall thin figure with bright red hair in robes of such dark green they almost looked black. Draco felt his breath catch yes, Percy Weasley cut a fine figure when he dressed up and strode towards him.

Weasley noticed him coming and sent a bright smile his way, looking him up and down. "You look very handsome tonight, Draco," Weasley informed him solemnly, but a smile playing at the corners of his mouth gave him away.

Draco couldn't help smiling, gratified by the compliment. He breathed a "Thank you" before biting his tongue to stop himself returning the compliment.

Weasley smiled properly now.

"Shall we?" he asked holding out his arm.

He quickly realised his mistake and chuckled, abashed. Putting down his arm, he stood straighter and cleared his throat before speaking again. "Sorry. Shall we, then?"

"Of course," answered Draco with a smirk and a small bow.

And with that, they made their way boldly to the Ballroom.

Upon entering, Draco lifted his chin a bit higher and tried to squash the butterflies in his stomach. A stately old house-elf appeared before them.

"Name?" he asked simply.

"Percy Weasley and guest," answered Percy, slightly pompously.

"Sirs, follow me," was all the creature said before showing them the way to their table.

The night before, as Draco tried to go to sleep in spite of anxious anticipation, it had crossed his mind that they might be sharing a table with the whole obnoxious Weasley clan. That fear had not gone away with the light of dawn. Now he breathed a silent sigh of relief as he noticed other bright-red heads at a central table, one they were definitely not heading for.

Their table was to the side and held a number of Ministry officials whom Draco recognised and their wives. Opposite Draco sat Dedalus Diggle, Order of Merlin, Third Class and old member of the Order of the Phoenix, now working for the department of Magical Co-operation. He looked quizzically at Draco, his brow slightly furrowed.

He's trying to place my face, thought Draco, and he sat a bit stiffer.

Weasley was greeting the others and exchanging pleasantries.

"Hello, Ernest. How are you? And Miriam. You are looking very well."

The grizzled old man with the fat moustache patted Percy on the back and spoke in a booming voice. "Can't complain, my dear boy, can't complain." His thin wife smiled simply and tilted her head in acknowledgement.

Ernest noticed Draco and asked Weasley curiously, "And who, might I ask, is the young man with you?"

"Yes, yes, of course. How rude of me!" Weasley exclaimed. "I decided not to take a date to the Ball. Instead, I brought my close associate, Draco Malfoy."

He started making introductions, ignoring the stares and raised eyebrows he was getting.

"Draco Malfoy. Ernest Mockingbird. Miriam Mockingbird. Julius Archer. Athena Archer. Dedalus Diggle. Clara Pearson. Mark Brown. And..." he paused when he reached a petite blonde.

"Jasmine Parkinson," she supplied with a smile. Draco wondered how he hadn't noticed her before.

Hers was the only genuine smile on the table. The rest smiled awkwardly and nodded in acknowledgement, but it was obvious they didn't know what to make of him.

Diggle spoke first. "Draco Malfoy, you say? Any relation to Lucius Malfoy?"

Draco felt himself stiffen even more. *As if he doesn't know* he thought spitefully.

"He was my father," he answered stonily, his eyes daring anyone to say anything to that. Nobody did.

Draco then turned to Jasmine and broke the stifling silence. "I believe we have already met, Miss Parkinson. You are Pansy's cousin, are you not?"

Jasmine smiled genuinely again. "Indeed I am. And I remember you as well. There's no need for formality; you may call me Jasmine."

Draco smiled back and nodded. *Here's somebody not necessarily against me*, he thought.

"And you may call me Draco."

"You know, Draco, Pansy was quite taken with you. It is a pity things didn't work out."

From the amused smile playing about her lips, Draco was sure she knew about his preferences.

"Things did work out for Pansy in the end, of course, and she is very happy with Adrian. And I am sure you'll find someone too, if you haven't already." With that Jasmine glanced meaningfully at Weasley.

She's a Slytherin to the core, and she plays like one, Draco thought.

"Don't worry about me," he answered airily. "I'm sure my luck will change soon. How about you? How is your luck holding up?" In his turn, he glanced meaningfully at Mark Brown.

After successfully changing the conversation's course, Draco settled into a comfortable chat with Jasmine while the rest of his tablemates slowly accepted they were going to share a table with a Malfoy.

Sometime later, Draco heard a slight commotion and felt Weasley leaving his seat. He turned his head curiously to find his boss warmly greeting Bill Weasley and his sister-in-law.

"Bill, there you are! Late as usual. And Fleur, don't you look lovely? How are you?" Draco saw his Weasley smiling happily at the couple and looking fondly at Fleur Weasley's large stomach. He squelched the sudden feeling of jealousy; his Weasley never smiled *that* widely at him nor seemed *so* happy to see him.

"Not my fault, little brother. Fleur couldn't decide on robes. She said they all made her look fat. Imagine that!" Bill Weasley laughed heartily and winked at his wife.

"Don't listen to a word 'ee zays," she sniffed, hiding a fond smile. "Ze twins are very well, zank you, and very restless. Zey keep me up all night." She rested her hand on her belly and rubbed it affectionately.

During the whole exchange, Draco couldn't tear his eyes away from Bill Weasley. It wasn't the first time Draco saw him; he had seen him at the trials and had even attended the ceremony where he and other members of the Order of the Phoenix were presented with their Orders of Merlin. But, no matter how many times he saw him, he couldn't help staring at that ravaged face in horrified fascination while vague feelings of guilt and unease stirred inside him. He had heard that the oldest Weasley had been attacked by a werewolf during the battle of Hogwarts the night Dumbledore died. If that was the case, then... Draco didn't even want to think about what that meant.

The elder Weasley looked over his brother's shoulder, surveying the people seated at the table. Eventually his eyes landed on Draco, and a slight frown creased his brow. He turned to Percy.

"Percy, did you bring anyone to the Ball this year?" he queried.

Percy started and looked slightly flustered. "Of course. I forgot. Yes, I did. Sorry."

He moved to the side so they could clearly see Draco. "Bill, Fleur, this is Draco Malfoy. Draco, meet my brother Bill Weasley and his lovely wife Fleur."

Draco stood up and gave a slight bow.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," was all he said before sitting back down.

"Likewise," Bill Weasley practically growled with a suspicious look, while Fleur smiled at Draco questioningly and laid a hand on her husband's arm.

"Nice to meet you, Draco," she said simply.

The couple took the last two remaining seats at the table and started greeting the rest of the guests. Dinner was served shortly after, and Bill Weasley traded a couple of cautious words with Draco and Weasley before turning to Diggle. He continued, however, to shoot curious and suspicious glances Draco's way throughout the meal.

The last piece of cake had been eaten, and the music had started when Bill Weasley suddenly addressed his brother. "Percy, have you seen the others yet?"

"Well, no. Not yet," admitted the bespectacled man.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Let's go!" With that pronouncement, Bill Weasley got up and put out a hand for his wife.

"No, you run along, mon chéri. I'll stay 'ere, I zink. Just come back soon. I want a dance!" With an imperious wave of the hand, Fleur waved her husband away and returned to her conversation with Athena Archer.

Draco discreetly followed the brothers' process through the room with his eyes. He noticed them talking earnestly, their heads together, and a small ball of worry formed in his stomach. What if his Weasley was warned away from him? He surely would follow his family's advice, wouldn't he? He saw the pair approach a gathering of red heads and start a new round of greetings and small talk. Draco tore his eyes away as the ball of worry started squirming.

Before long, the brothers were back, and Bill Weasley whisked his wife off to the dance floor.

Weasley lay a hand on Draco's shoulder, interrupting his conversation with Jasmine and Mark Brown.

"Draco, are you busy? There are some people I would like you to meet."

Draco felt warmth seep into his shoulder from Weasley's palm and tried not to lean into the touch.

"No, it's all right. I'm coming," he answered and then turned to the couple next to him. "Please excuse me. I hope you don't mind."

He got up to follow Weasley, feeling excitement and anxiety battling inside him.

"I spotted Alistair McIntosh, from Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, and I'm sure we'll find Persephone Griffin from Wizengamot Administration, and... Well, we'll see who else," Weasley chattered on as he led Draco across the room. Draco rushed to keep up with his long strides while steeling himself for the task ahead.

Over the next few hours, Draco was introduced to a number of important or influential Ministry officials. Weasley's recommendations were flawless, and Draco charmed and flattered and simpered perfectly. Many were suspicious or downright hostile, but Weasley's endorsement persuaded them to at least listen. And by the time Draco had finished, no one wrote him off immediately any more and a couple of wizards seemed to be contemplating him positively.

The evening was going perfectly, and Draco was actually having fun. This was what he loved: brushing shoulders with the influential, indulging in behind-the-scenes politics and using his charisma to get what he wanted. He and Weasley worked effortlessly together as a team, as if they had done this many times before and each knew how to fill in the other's words. Draco was sure he was glowing from exhilaration, and he couldn't help throwing quite a few disarming smiles Weasley's way. The first few seemed to catch Weasley unaware, making him start and duck his head, but after a while he responded with warm smiles of his own.

They were leaving yet another successful encounter, and Draco was looking up at his Weasley with bright eyes. "That went good, didn't it? Thank you. You were wonderful. *We* were wonderful!"

Draco's joyous humour was catching, and Weasley's smile got warmer and wider as he let Draco grasp his arm in excitement.

"There you are, brother dearest," a new voice interrupted their joyous celebration.

"Yes, *brother*, we have been trying to catch you for a while now."

They turned round only to come face to face with the Weasley twins. Draco groaned inwardly; the last thing he wanted was his perfect evening to be spoiled by his Weasley's unfortunate relatives.

"Fred. George."

Weasley didn't seem overjoyed by the meeting either, if the stiffness in his spine and manner of speaking were anything to go by.

"Was there anything in particular you wanted to talk to me about that you forgot earlier?"

The irritating pair simply smiled dangerously and looked meaningfully at Draco.

"No, dear Percy, it wasn't us that forgot something."

"It was you."

Draco hated it when they filled in each other's phrases. He was sure they only did it to annoy.

"Yes. You forgot to introduce us to your lovely date," said one twin.

"The date you seem quite intent on showing around," put in the other.

"Not that we can blame you for wanting to show him off," continued the first with a leer at Draco. "He's a pretty one, he is."

"Too bad about his family name," finished the other cheerfully.

Draco flushed with anger and embarrassment. The Weasley twins were being rude and offensive in the most provocative way. His arm twitched with the desire to hex them, and he resolutely bit his tongue to keep all the cutting retorts that sprang to mind from escaping. They obviously wanted to provoke him and cause a scene, but he was going to show them that he, unlike them, had grown up, so he satisfied himself with glaring at them.

"Fred! George! Your behaviour is utterly disgraceful. Draco is my guest, and I will not tolerate the pair of you insulting him. This is the exact reason I *did not* introduce him to you, any of you. Now, apologise immediately!"

Weasley was furious and had gone bright red as he glared daggers at his brothers. Somehow, Draco found the room in his mind, despite his indignation, to feel gratified that his superior rose to his defence.

"So he's *Draco*, is he? He must be putting out then," the twins continued, unperturbed.

"Yes, do tell us. Is he as good as all that?"

The twins shared a look and smiled gleefully as they waited for one of their victims to explode.

Percy Weasley spluttered, obviously not knowing how to respond to the preposterous accusations.

But Draco couldn't hold his tongue any more.

"Oh, look at them!" he snarled venomously. "Aren't they just precious? It's Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum, the family clowns, come to amuse us. Anything for a laugh, right, boys? Because, really, that's all you're good for, isn't it?"

The twins only chuckled in response, infuriating Draco even more.

"But we shouldn't judge you too harshly," he continued. "I'm sure that, poor jokers that you are, you don't know any better. It must be hard sharing one defective personality and one mentally-impaired brain between your two great oafish bodies. I feel for you, I really do. The odds you have to overcome just to make one pathetic attempt at a joke..." Draco concluded mockingly.

The twins waggled their eyebrows at him and looked thoroughly amused. But Draco was only getting started. He took a deep breath to continue his tirade, when he was stopped by a firm hand on his shoulder. He turned round to find Weasley looking at him seriously.

"Leave it, Draco. You're just wasting your time. There is no getting through to them. Let's go."

Weasley looked at his brothers stonily. "Good bye. I do not want to see the pair of you near me or Draco again this evening. Actually, I do not want to see you again at all until you apologise properly."

After that final announcement, Weasley turned round and steered Draco away from them and out of the crowd into a secluded corner. There he dropped his hand from Draco's shoulder and looked at Draco earnestly.

"I must apologise for my brothers' awful behaviour. They were being deliberately provocative and insinuating. But it is untrue, what they say: no one believes our relationship to be anything more than it is. No one thinks those things about you. They just want to get a rise out of us."

Draco took a couple of deep breaths to calm himself and looked Weasley steadily in the eye.

"I see", was all he said.

What he *really* saw was that they had somehow found out about Draco and were determined to out him in the worst possible manner.

Something in his eyes must have given his discontent away because Weasley anxiously ran his fingers through his hair, looking around to make sure they were alone, and then lowered his voice as he drew nearer to Draco.

"But I do see they managed to plant suspicions in your mind which, I am sure, was one of their objectives." Weasley dropped his voice even lower before continuing. "Their insinuations weren't completely unfounded. I *do* prefer the company of... men to that of women. I don't know how they found out. Hardly anybody knows."

Weasley noticed Draco's startled wide-eyed expression and hurriedly continued. "Don't worry, Draco. No one knows, and I'm sure you have nothing to fear. Nobody's about to cast unfounded aspersions on your character except my brothers, and no one takes the twins seriously."

Draco could hardly breathe. It wasn't him the twins wanted to out after all. His Weasley was gay, and he didn't know how to react. It wasn't something he had ever considered possible.

Weasley was still looking at him earnestly, and he had to react somehow. He nodded his head slowly.

"Yes. I understand," he breathed. "It's all right. There's no problem."

Draco hardly knew what he was saying. He wondered if he should tell Weasley that he understood all too well, that he was gay too.

In the end, he didn't, and they made their way back to the table, the conversation between them stilted.

Draco spent the rest of the night making small talk with Jasmine and dancing with various witches whose faces and names he hardly noticed. He was in a strange state of exhilaration and shock. The triumphant feeling from the meetings and the marvellous chemistry with Weasley returned and elated him. But behind that, a voice kept on reminding him of Weasley's confession. He didn't know what to make of it. He didn't even know if it was a good or bad thing. Did he want this new information to make a difference? At some point during the evening he caught his Weasley, tall, lean and handsome in his dark green robes, talking pleasantly to a good-looking man, and Draco felt a strange pang of annoyance. Or was it jealousy? He gripped his dance partner tighter and twirled her almost violently.

They left the Ball together, before it got too late. Weasley walked him to the Floo central and looked at him intently, his eyes burning into Draco as if he were trying to read his mind or understand something while they said their good-byes, and he let Draco Floo back home first. Weasley's gaze stayed with Draco even after he had returned home that night.

Once home, Draco stripped quickly and threw himself into his bed, his mind a churning confusion of wayward thoughts.

Blaise didn't help Draco arrange his thoughts and feelings about Percy Weasley because, quite simply, Draco didn't tell him. He told him all about the people Weasley had introduced him to and the way Draco had charmed them, of course, but he didn't say a word about the other man's confession. Draco reasoned to himself that the confession was of no importance and it didn't change things.

Only it did.

Draco couldn't stop thinking about the fact that Weasley liked men. He wondered what kind of men he preferred, how many he had been with. He even wondered what positions he preferred. Now that Draco knew that the possibility existed, he couldn't help but look at Weasley differently. Worse than that, he couldn't ignore the fact that he was attracted to him anymore.

Over his scant Christmas holidays, in between plans for his future and musings over what doors the people he had wooed might open for him with a little persuasion, images of Weasley kept on intruding. Weasley smiling at him over a dusty book. Weasley squeezing his hand in an attempt to offer comfort. Weasley in his dark green dress robes. Discussing projects with him. Eating lunch together. Complementing each other's sentences perfectly at the Yule Ball. The way Weasley defended Draco to his own brothers. The way he looked at Draco before he Flooed home.

Upon returning to work, Draco told himself strictly that things wouldn't change and that he wouldn't get carried away by his blossoming crush. They would both be professionals, and everything would be just like it was before.

Only it wasn't.

The department was full of gossip about the Ball, and everybody had heard that Weasley had invited Draco. Draco was assaulted with questions, knowing looks, and whispers behind his back. Worse than that, Weasley himself was strangely uptight, and at odd times Draco would find the other man looking at him with a strange intent expression, as if he was trying to puzzle something out. Draco was sure Weasley suspected his growing crush, and he tried his best to act collected and disinterested. However, he couldn't help sneaking glances at the redhead when he thought he wouldn't notice.

Draco memorised the exact hue of his red hair. The way he would absently push his glasses up his nose. How his forearms looked when he rolled his sleeves up. The precise location of the freckles on his long hands. The blue of his eyes. The lean line of his body as he stretched to take down a folder from a high shelf. The timbre of his voice. All these things Draco would play back to himself when he returned home, and it wasn't strange, all things considered, that glimpses of his Weasley intruded into his disjointed dreams at night.

The more Draco tried to act as if nothing had changed, the more it became painfully obvious that things *had* changed. Their conversations became more stilted. Weasley's questioning glances became more piercing. Their pub lunch-breaks were dropped. The atmosphere in the office became quite awkward, and it was as if they were tiptoeing

around each other.

One evening three weeks after Christmas, Weasley called Draco into his office.

"Draco, do you remember Wallace Whirlpool from Magical Accidents and Catastrophes?" he asked without preamble as soon as the blond had closed the door behind him.

Draco remembered Wallace Whirlpool very well. Draco never forgot a face or a name, and even if he did, he would hardly have forgotten anybody he had met at the Yule Ball.

"Yes, sir, I do," was all he answered.

"Good, good. You should be happy to know that he and I have been in touch since Christmas. Mister Whirlpool was positively impressed by you. He also owes me a favour or two."

Here Weasley stopped to shrug and take a breath. Draco wondered what the redhead was leading to. He barely dared to hope.

"It seems that his department is in need of another inspector for the Obscure Magical Accidents sector," continued Weasley finally, looking at Draco meaningfully. "I know it isn't much. Not really enough for someone of your abilities, but it is a start. It is a permanent position, not a substitute one like the one you hold now, and I think you might enjoy being out in the field, rather than constantly cooped up in the office."

At last, Weasley fell silent, gave Draco a little smile and looked at him expectantly.

"It sounds perfect, thank you, sir," Draco rushed to say. "I don't know how to thank you for all you have done. I am very grateful, and I'm sure this position is good enough for me. I'm not quite so arrogant as I once was."

Draco didn't quite know how to express his feelings. He was blown away by the fact that Weasley would spend so much time and work so diligently for his behalf. It was more than he had ever hoped for, more than he expected anyone to do for him.

"Wonderful," answered Weasley. "You do have an interview to get through on Thursday, but I am confident that you'll persuade them to hire you. You can be quite... persuasive."

Weasley gave that damn little smile he was prone to lately: slightly fond, slightly wistful. "Anyway, you should be ready to start work immediately on Monday."

That certainly threw Draco off. He never expected it to be so soon.

"But, sir, I can't just leave you," he stuttered. "Mandy's not due back for quite a number of months yet..." Draco found himself trailing off.

Weasley gave that smile again. "Don't worry about that, Draco; this is the chance you wanted. I can apply for another fill-in easily enough."

Conflicting emotions warred inside Draco. He wanted to grab this chance with both hands and not let go, but at the same time he wasn't ready to take his leave of Weasley. He had forgotten that his time with Weasley would eventually come to an end, and now that it seemed time to go he was oddly reluctant to do so.

"But, sir, it doesn't seem right to abandon you like this!" Draco argued.

Weasley laughed briefly and suddenly turned very serious. "No need to become so dramatic, Draco. You have been a wonderful assistant, and I will sorely miss you. I enjoyed spending time with you. But we both know that things have been awkward since the Yule Ball."

Draco started and felt his eyes widen as Weasley continued.

"I am not in any way blaming you, but it seems that you are no longer comfortable in my company. And perhaps I am no longer in yours either."

The latter was said so softly that Draco wasn't quite sure he heard right.

Draco's breath caught in his chest. He wanted to tell his Weasley that it wasn't like that at all. For one crazy moment he thought about telling him how he really felt about him, but then he realised that Weasley probably already knew and that was why he was sending Draco away. The other man was looking at him in that intent and questioning way, and Draco, mesmerised, couldn't look away. He was certain that those eyes burned right through him, and could see and understand everything.

"No sir, it's not..." he heard himself beginning, only to be interrupted by Weasley.

"Draco, there's no use in pretending any more. This is for the best. It is what you wanted all along."

Draco felt the last sentence like a punch to his stomach. All the air suddenly left his body as Weasley continued to stare at him.

"Yes, sir. OK, sir. You are right. Thank you, sir," Draco stuttered lamely.

Weasley gave his little wistful smile again and continued to look at him as if there was something about Draco that was of immense interest and he was determined to work it out.

Finally, Draco turned round and fled the office and Weasley's piercing blue eyes, his mind once more a confusion of conflicting thoughts.

Draco walked briskly through the corridors of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He was on his way to office 217, and he had a plan.

For the past week, he had been working for Obscure Magical Accidents, and he was rather pleased so far. The work was interesting and gave him quite a few chances to flaunt his reasoning and deductive abilities. However, his co-workers hadn't fully accepted him yet; they still treated him with caution and distrust. That didn't worry Draco too much, for he knew that in time he would win them over.

His problem was that he missed Weasley and found himself thinking about him much more often than he should have been. No matter how hard he threw himself into his work, he couldn't stop thoughts of Weasley trespassing. That's why he had a new plan. He recognised that he wanted the redhead, and what's more, he was well on his way to falling for him. He had very much liked his life with Weasley in it, and he wanted what he had had back, and more. His plan was simple: he was going to seduce him. He had managed to charm Weasley into liking him and helping him; now he was going to charm him into desiring him.

Draco quickly reached office 217. It was seven o'clock in the evening, so he wasn't surprised that the new secretary had already gone home. Just as he had expected, light shone from under the closed door. Weasley was still there.

Draco's heart beat wildly in his chest as he straightened himself out and breathed deeply to calm himself before knocking. Having a plan and a goal to aim for usually made Draco calm, determined and calculating, but somehow Weasley managed to throw Draco completely off. He was certainly determined now, but somehow the butterflies in his stomach refused to go away.

With one last deep breath he knocked on the door, barely waiting for the "Enter" before letting himself in. His breath caught at the sight of that familiar head of red curls bent over a book, but he forced himself into a mock-casual pose that he hoped was fetching, leaning against the closed door. As Weasley lifted his head, he resolutely ignored

the butterflies and tried to smile seductively. He was gratified to see the other man start, his blue eyes widening.

"Draco!" exclaimed Weasley. "This is a surprise. Hello."

"Good evening..." Draco swallowed and resolutely added, "... Percy."

Weasley still seemed puzzled and looked at Draco expectantly.

Draco grappled to remember what he had planned to say.

"It's seven o'clock," he began, "and almost everyone has gone home. You really shouldn't still be working. I just finished. A case ran late, you see."

Shit, he was babbling! He took a deep breath before continuing. "I was just going to have dinner. I'm sure you must be hungry too."

Draco ducked his head slightly and looked at Weasley from under his eyelashes. "You know how I hate eating by myself... Would you care to join me?"

Weasley's brow furrowed. "Join you?"

His intent look was back again. It was as if there was something he didn't understand. Draco wondered how obvious he had to become.

"Yes, for dinner. I'd hate to eat alone. And... Well... I liked our lunches. I miss them." Draco's tried to make his tone as persuasive as possible without sounding too desperate.

Draco observed Weasley hopefully as the other man continued to study him. Weasley gaze was intent and searching, and Draco tried his best to respond with a look as earnest and open as he could muster. Eventually Weasley seemed to find some sort of answer in Draco's face. Draco saw Weasley's eyes brighten as he came to a decision and smiled tentatively.

"Yes, OK, I'll come to dinner with you. I'd like that. I missed... our lunches... too." His voice was slow and cautious and hopeful.

Draco smiled brilliantly. "Wonderful! I know just the place. It's a pub near the Ministry, and I hear it's cosy and comfortable."

Weasley's smile grew stronger and conspiratorial as he answered. "I'm sure I'll like it."

Draco felt a hopeful fluttering in his chest.

This might just prove easier than I believed he thought happily as he helped Weasley Percy tidy his desk.

fin