

Pigeons & Crumbs

by Jenwryn

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The battle was over. The battle had been over for more than five years now, and yet somehow Hermione's life was still off track. It was inexplicable how it had affected her. Harry had been through much worse Harry had faced Voldemort Harry had *died* and yet Harry had simply picked himself up, dusted himself off and moved on. He'd continued his studies and his career and his relationship with Ginny Weasley, continued everyday life, as though none of the bad things had ever happened.

Hermione, on the other hand, was oddly at a loss.

After the war she'd had no real desire to return full-time to the Muggle world, and so she'd found herself a dank little flat close to Diagon Alley. She too was studying international wizarding law but somehow her heart just wasn't in it anymore. For a while she'd believed it was nothing more than a phase she was going through: 'post traumatic stress' were the words she'd used to diagnose herself. But eventually she'd had to accept that the scars ran deeper than the silvery lines on her skin and that the darkness had persistent roots. Still, she'd continued to hope that Ron would be able to dig her out of it. But that had been another delusion, and two years ago they'd finally gone their separate ways once and for all. They'd seen little of each other since, despite the fact that she passed George's shop on an almost daily basis.

And now?

Now Hermione sat in a shabby Muggle cafe in a London backstreet and stared numbly at her coffee. Somehow, during her years at Hogwarts, her life had become just as fixated upon defeating Voldemort as Harry's had. But now it was all over and Harry was happy while she... The witch sighed loudly and tipped another dash of sugar from a little paper sachet into her cup and stirred it absently. She wasn't even sure where the years had gone.

"You know that will make you fat, right, Granger?"

A slender shadow passed across her table, and Hermione's head snapped up at the sound of a voice she hadn't heard for years and yet was still as familiar to her as if it had been yesterday. "Malfoy!" To her surprise she could feel a smile on her face at the sight of him.

He arched his eyebrows and smiled his old habitual smile back at her, that same one that always seemed to hang in the nebulous space between pure arrogance and a child's desire to please. He pulled up a chair and sat down at her table without bothering to ask permission. "Been on any pointless moralistic crusades lately?" he inquired smoothly.

She gave him a look. "No. And you? Tortured a house elf yet today?"

He shook his head and then shrugged. "But it is only eleven o'clock." He made an imperious motion in the direction of a young girl clearing the tables, and the girl gave him a strange look.

"It's not that kind of cafe," explained Hermione in an undertone. "You're supposed to go place your order yourself."

He ignored her, made another motion at the waitress, and smiled smugly when she came over. He ordered a coffee. The girl rolled her eyes and gave him another weird look, but took his order.

Hermione shook her head slightly he obviously hadn't changed that much then. She also realised that, while she hadn't thought much of it, Malfoy was probably an unexpected sight for a Muggle in this part of town. He was dressed in black from head to foot, a colour that gave him a deathly pallor and made him seem like some impeccably groomed Goth. An impeccably groomed, rich Goth... the Malfoy family may have fallen socially, but he still carried their wealth proudly in his bearing.

Draco and Hermione sat in silence, watching a handful of pigeons wandering around beneath the tables in search of dropped crumbs. Finally the girl brought the coffee. Malfoy helped himself to the rest of Hermione's sugar, stirred it in, and then took a mouthful. He pulled a face, "Good God! And you drink here voluntarily?"

Hermione shrugged. "It's cheap."

"Yes," he agreed darkly, "and there's a good reason why. Now I understand the need for the sugar."

The witch shrugged again. She didn't give a damn anymore what people might think of her, and she certainly couldn't be bothered worrying that he might look down on her because she was poor or Muggle-born she'd proven her right to the wizarding world during the war. They all had.

She leant back in her chair, her coffee held warm in her cold hands, and studied the young wizard seated in front of her. It was strange to realise how pleased she was at the sight of him. All those years spent hating the very ground he walked upon and now and now there was nothing but a warm feeling at seeing someone she knew someone who was unlikely to spend hours ineffectually and irritatingly trying to cheer her up someone who wasn't going to make her feel bad about the depressed rut her life had sunk into. He was just Malfoy. Hermione could take shit from Malfoy because she expected it from him, and that was the end of the matter. And she was pleased to see him.

"So what have you done... since?" she asked quietly and sipped her coffee.

Draco didn't need to ask 'since what?' because he knew exactly what she meant: since the battle, since the war. His whole life was divided into before the war and after it. Nothing had been the same since those months under the Dark Lord's command, since the terror, the conflict, the hate, the resentment... Since the knowledge that in the time following the slaughter at Hogwarts his family had been slowly but methodically stripped of whatever status they had left and been spat upon by public opinion because they had been Death Eaters. Draco could still feel the mark on his arm even though he knew it would never burn again.

He made a non-committal noise. "Oh, this and that. Working, mostly. Family business. I spent fourteen months in Shanghai but mostly I've been here in London."

"Really? I haven't seen you."

He made a movement that was like a stillborn shrug and stirred his coffee. "I keep to myself. Everyone else..." He paused.

"Has moved on," she finished for him.

Malfoy raised his head slowly and met her gaze across the table. He'd never realised that her eyes were that shade before, and now they bore into him intensely. He looked away across the street. "Yes. They've moved on."

She put her coffee down and watched the pigeons beneath the tables. "It's as though none of it ever happened for most of them," she commented quietly. "Neville he's working at Hogwarts, did you know? Herbology Professor. Sends me an owl now and then, he does. Talks about plants and Luna... Ginny and Harry are married he's working as an Auror and she's due a baby in June..." Draco looked at her again and watched as her gaze seemed to turn inwards. "Sometimes I wonder," she continued, "if maybe it's because they already knew real pain. They already knew how to face darkness." She turned her view back out onto the world and looked at him across the table. "They just keep on living, and I'm stuck with the screams in my head."

Draco reached out and picked up her used plate, taking the crumbs left on it from a sandwich she'd eaten and tossing them slowly to the pigeons. He didn't seem to think about the fact that at least some of the crumbs must have fallen from her mouth, and if he did, he clearly wasn't bothered. While he fed the birds, he asked, in a conversational voice, as if he were discussing the weather, "Do you find that you can't sleep through a whole night on your own without waking up repeatedly in a cold sweat? And that if someone has shared your bed, they complain that you mutter in your sleep?"

"It's the *fighting* in my sleep that they hate the most. My last ex left after I blacked his eye." The last man had been six months ago, and she'd almost lost heart for that too. Or, she'd thought she had. Draco put the empty plate down on the table and licked his fingers free from her crumbs. She watched the movement, his fingers at his lips, with an unreadable expression on her face oddly transfixed.

"I'm going to Gibraltar," he announced calmly, "the day after tomorrow."

"Gibraltar," she repeated, trying out the name on her tongue. Vague impressions of rocks and scrub and Spain rose up in her mind.

"Yes. My father has a business partner in Gibraltar. There are documents to be signed, plans to be drawn up. I thought afterwards I would continue to Morocco for a while. I'd like to see the desert, I think, but I don't much fancy the nights with the cold sweats. I don't travel well on my own." He leant back against his chair and studied her. Granger had changed since Hogwarts. She seemed darker, as though she had a weight buried deep in her soul that she thought nobody else could see. She seemed harder, too. Like a diamond that could scratch glass.

The witch felt his eyes on her and stirred her coffee slowly. There were only the dregs left now. He'd been right. It wasn't very good. "You should take someone with you, then, if you don't travel well on your own."

Malfoy looked at the pigeons pecking persistently at the ground even though the crumbs were all gone. "Even/ didn't know I was going until yesterday. Where would I find someone at this last notice? They've all got their happy little families and their happy little lives." The bitterness he'd meant to hide had slipped out with his words.

Hermione heard it and joined him in his observation of the birds. "I've never been to Gibraltar," she said softly. "I read once, though, that they have macaques there. Everyone calls them Barbary Apes, you know, but they aren't really apes at all. They're macaques."

Their eyes met slowly across the table again.

"I didn't know that. I should take you with me, Granger, just to keep on hand for my daily dose of useless facts." And he laughed coolly to show that he didn't mean it, to belie the expression lurking in the depths of his eyes.

Hermione lay the teaspoon down very carefully on the edge of the saucer. "Alright."

His face shifted with an unreadable expression. *"Alright, Granger?"*

The witch nodded and pushed the saucer gently away from the edge of the table as though she were worried it might somehow tumble off and shatter into a thousand shards. "I'll come with you."

Momentary silence. Then Draco beckoned for the girl again, and Hermione sat, waited, and let him pay. When he had, they stood and looked indecisively at one another, and indecisively at the pigeons, and indecisively at the Muggle world around them. But when he reached out his hand, she took it, and together they left the cafe and walked across the road, the pigeons scattering behind them.