

Dead Ends and Different Paths

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One-shot Story

Chapter 1 of 1

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Owing life debts to Potter was nearly unbearable. Not that Draco, in any way, wanted to refuse owing them or that he was ungrateful for what Potter had done for him. It wasn't even the fact that he owed them to Potter, of all people. It was more the fact that he owed someone something at all. And *twice*! Usually other people owed him.

The worst bit, the absolutely unacceptable bit, was that he didn't know what Potter thought of it. He didn't know if the other man would some day show up on his doorstep, from out of nowhere, and demand payment, or if he just didn't care whether or not Draco ever thought of the life debts. It had been a bit of a shock for Draco to discover in himself the need for Potter to know that he acknowledged the debt, and that he appreciated that Potter had helped him in spite of their enmity at a time when Draco really hadn't deserved it.

Draco had given it a lot of thought, and after several weeks' consideration, he reached the conclusion that he needed to talk to Potter, and preferably face to face rather than by owl. There was just the small problem that he didn't know where Potter lived, and he was fairly certain that Potter would simply ignore him if he were to contact him by owl to set up a meeting. Most likely his house was Unplottable too, and Draco's owl wouldn't be able to find it.

Maybe he could go through one of Potter's friends? He had no idea what Weasley was doing these days, but he had seen Granger in Diagon Alley a couple of times, specifically in and around Flourish & Blotts. If he kept an eye on the shop, it should be possible to corner her. For the next two weeks Draco skulked about Diagon Alley, trying to keep an eye on the bookshop's customers, but there was no sign of Granger. If he didn't know any better, he would have thought that she somehow knew he was waiting for her and deliberately avoided him.

Irritated that his plan was being foiled before it was even set in motion, Draco tried speaking to the shop assistant inside, and it turned out that Granger frequently had new books delivered directly to her home. With a few winks, a great deal of charm, and a little bit of flirting, he managed to get the young woman behind the counter to give him Granger's address.

Carrying a large bouquet of flowers and a bottle of expensive white wine, Draco then ventured into Muggle London and found Granger's flat easily enough, following the directions the shop assistant had given him. He didn't feel very comfortable in these surroundings, and he hoped Granger was home and would open the door quickly.

He waited a while, but nothing happened. Wondering if perhaps she wasn't home, he tried peeking through the spyhole in the door, but he couldn't see anything. For a moment, he considered casting a couple of spells on her door to reveal whether or not she was in, but he quickly dismissed the idea. After all, this was Granger. She was bound to have a number of unpleasant wards on her flat to prevent that.

He knocked again, a bit harder this time, in case she just hadn't heard him the first time.

"Go away, Ron!"

Draco grinned at the muffled shout from the other side of the door. So she was in after all, he thought, and started knocking harder. It was only through sheer luck that he avoided knocking on Granger's forehead when the door was suddenly torn open.

"Look, didn't I tell you ... Oh. Hello."

If Draco hadn't been so surprised, he would have laughed at the dumbfounded expression on her face. As it was, he was too busy staring at her hair. Or lack thereof. Gone were the wild, bushy curls he remembered so well and replaced with a short-haired cut, leaving her hair only just long enough to look slightly wavy. It changed her entire face completely. When had she done that? She had looked completely normal the last time he had seen her in Diagon Alley.

Granger pursed her lips and drummed her fingers against the doorframe.

"Did you want something?" she finally asked impatiently.

Draco pulled himself out of his momentary state of disbelief. For some reason he had never imagined that she would ever cut her long hair. There were so many other things he had accepted changing. Pansy gaining weight. Greg losing weight. His son growing up and his wife growing cold. He could even accept the fact that he was beginning to lose his own hair, although that still rankled. Granger had, in his head, always been a constant. Always a swotty know-it-all with long, unmanageable hair.

"Yes, I... I need to talk to you," he managed, holding the bouquet out towards her. "These are for you."

Granger didn't take the flowers. She just looked suspiciously at them.

"Look, just take it. It's not going to kill you. You'll notice there's no Devil's Snare in it," he said, holding the bouquet a little closer to her.

"The last time I recall seeing you give somebody something, they ended up under the Imperius Curse," Granger grumbled, but took the flowers anyway. "Would you mind telling me why you are showing up on my doorstep with wine and flowers?"

"I need to talk to you about something," Draco repeated, curiously trying to get a look at the inside of her flat over her shoulder. "A favour, actually. I'd prefer not to do it out here on the doorstep, so may I come in?"

Granger looked like she wanted to say no and send him on his way. Then she glanced at the flowers in her hand and a look of insecurity came over her face.

"If you must," she sighed and stepped aside, letting him into the living room.

Draco stepped inside and put the bottle of wine on the coffee table, looking around the living room.

"It's a nice place you've got here," he lied politely. How anybody could live in such small rooms was beyond him, and it didn't help that she had crammed a vast amount of books and a little too much furniture inside too, not to mention a number of Muggle things that he couldn't figure out what was for.

"You're lying," Granger said. "Hardly a good start to lie to people just before asking them favours."

Draco smiled slightly. She did have a point. "Alright, Granger, if that's how you want it. I don't understand how you're not being driven slowly mad in this utter lack of space, or why you insist on wasting your time on all that Muggle stuff, when surely magic can provide you with a better alternative.

"What is this favour you want, Malfoy?" Hermione sighed, as she sat down.

"Straight to the point, then?"

"If it means you'll leave sooner, then yes."

Yes, Granger was definitely a constant.

"All right. I need to speak with Potter. I was wondering, if you might be so kind as to provide me with his address," Draco said.

"Why?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"Because I don't know where he lives," Draco answered with some confusion. He would have thought that much was obvious from his request.

"Why do you want to see Harry?"

Draco was tempted to tell her to mind her own business, but that definitely wouldn't give him what he wanted.

"It's a private matter," he said shortly, "concerning life debts."

"Oh, yes, you owe him one, don't you?" Hermione nodded. "Are you going to offer payment or something? I don't think it works that way."

"Two, actually," Draco corrected. "So, will you give me his address, please?"

"No."

"What?" Draco stared at her in indignation. "I asked you nicely! I even said 'please'!"

"Yes, you did," Hermione agreed. "Look, it's got nothing to do with you, or how you asked me. It's just that *never* give Harry's address to anybody. If you were my mother and asked for it, I would still say no."

"What, can't Potter look out for himself? Does he need a girl to protect him?" Draco smirked.

Granger narrowed her eyes.

"That's not going to help, you know," she said coolly and shook her head. "You were doing so well. I almost believed you had grown up."

Draco winced. He hadn't been able to help himself. Old enmities were hard to let go, and mocking Potter and his friends was almost second nature to him.

"Right. Old habits..."

Granger nodded, and Draco was relieved that she seemed to accept that as a sort of apology.

"Whether you think it unmanly or not, he does need all the protection he can get. Did you know that he dreamed about becoming an Auror since he was eleven?" Granger said.

Draco shook his head, uncertain of what Potter's childhood dreams had to do with anything. As far as he knew, Potter *had* become an Auror, and Draco had even heard

that he had passed all his tests with flying colours.

"He's got a desk job in the Auror department now. He never gets sent out on any sort of assignments because his very presence causes even more confusion with the crowd that invariably gathers around him," Granger grimaced in distaste, "wanting to shake his hand, or pretend they're his friends and what not. There are plenty of sycophants out there." She paused again before adding pointedly, "I would have thought you would know more than enough about sycophants yourself."

Granger's last words immediately led his thoughts to dwell on his wife for a moment. There was no doubt in his mind that Granger was referring to the wealth of his family and the influence that alone had given him in Slytherin House during his school days. He had always been used to being the center of attention and known why, but it wasn't something he had given much thought. He had just enjoyed it and never once thought that it might be a bad thing. What if it was, though? And what if Astoria was just another gold digger? What if that was the reason she distanced herself so much from him?

"What are you thinking about?" Granger asked quietly, pulling him out of his own little world of thought. He had almost forgotten she was even there.

"Nothing..." he lied, wanting to turn the subject away from himself. "Don't they bother you and Weasley as well?"

Granger shrugged. "Not really. The community has always focused on Harry. We were just the side-kicks." She tilted her head to the side. "Now, what were you really thinking about?"

"What business is it of yours?" Draco snapped.

"I'm sorry. It's just that you looked really troubled, and I'm sort of wondering what a supposedly happily married man is doing bringing wine and flowers to another woman," she said. "Especially since the woman in question is me. It's not like men are standing in line at my door, married or otherwise," she added with a shrug. "Besides, you're asking me for a favour, so I should get to ask you something in return."

"Happily married," Draco scoffed and glared at her, wondering if his need to talk to Potter was really worth this. It was no good though. Granger had somehow managed to give him that final poke that made all his frustrations unfurl and seek outlet. "If you must know, I was considering the fact that my so-called happy marriage fell apart years ago. Does that sate your curiosity, Granger, or should I go on? Should I tell you about how Astoria sleeps, not only in a separate bedroom, but in one at the other end of the entire bloody house? About how she's hardly ever let me into her bed since Scorpius was born? About how she rarely speaks to me, unless she has to, and how, if it wasn't for our son, she would probably never see me at all?"

Granger remained silent as Draco continued to glare at her.

"Was that what you wanted to hear, Granger?" he asked quietly.

"So what they show in the papers and magazines is just a facade, then?" she finally asked.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Bravo, Granger. And to think you used to be so clever. Maybe that went away with the hair," he sneered, hoping once again that it might be possible to get her to change the subject. The woman really was too stubborn for her own good. Little wonder Weasley had divorced her.

"Don't you start on my hair as well," Granger said, narrowing her eyes. "I get enough of that from Ron."

"What did happen to your hair, anyway?" he asked with a smirk, curious in spite of himself.

Granger rolled her eyes. "I had it cut. I just wanted to try something new. Why is that such a big deal?" she snapped irritably.

"And given that you obviously thought I was him when you shouted 'get lost' at the door, I take it Weasley didn't like it?" Draco asked.

"He's the only person I know, who hasn't worked out the concept of ringing the doorbell yet," she said with a shrug and pouted. "He said it looked ridiculous."

"I disagree," Draco said, looking thoughtfully at her. She definitely didn't look ridiculous with her new haircut, but he decided it was probably best to keep the fact that he still preferred the longer, bushy hair to himself. He imagined that was what Weasley had meant with his comments as well, although he obviously had a clumsy way of expressing himself. "Why do you care about what he thinks, anyway? I thought you had divorced him."

"We're still friends," Granger said, "and we're better off as such. We just couldn't make a marriage work. Splitting up was the best thing we ever did. We're both much happier now, and strange as it may sound, the children are too, now that we're not constantly fighting anymore."

There was a funny look on her face when she said the last bit, like she was wondering why he didn't divorce his wife if their marriage was so bad. A part of Draco wished he could, but Malfoys didn't divorce. There were all sorts of clauses in the inheritance traditions of his family and in the wedding contract that prevented that. The much larger part of him wanted to fight for her and win her back. He had loved her when they got married and he still did now. He didn't know why he had never even protested when she pulled away from him. He had never seen it coming, and suddenly it had just been too late.

Staring at the still unopened bottle of wine on the table next to the vase of flowers, he added, "Are you going to open that, Granger? I could use a drink."

She didn't answer. She just looked at him in a thoughtful, distanced way that made him slightly uncomfortable.

"Don't you think you'd be better off taking it home and sharing it with your wife? Maybe if you talked about it, you'd find that..."

"I didn't come here to discuss marriage, be it yours or mine," Draco snapped irritably. "I just wanted Potter's address."

"I believe we've already covered that," Hermione said, getting up from her chair as if getting ready to bid him goodbye. "I can't do anything other than talk to him on your behalf, and then maybe he'll get back to you."

Draco took it as a sign that it was time to leave. He wasn't going to get anything else out of her, and he suspected that if he stayed much longer she would continue to try and wheedle details of his non-relationship with his wife out of him.

"And if he doesn't?" he asked.

Hermione shrugged. "Not my problem. I suppose then you'll just have to learn to live with it."

"Fine, then," he said, getting up as well and casting another glance at the wine. He really could still use a drink, but perhaps wine wouldn't have been strong enough, anyway. "Seeing as you're unwilling to share the bottle with me, I can recommend it with veal or venison. May I use your Floo?"

"Of course," Granger replied and gestured at the wine and the flowers. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather share those with your wife?"

Obviously, only her hair had changed. She just wouldn't give up, yet she expected him to do so.

"No, I wouldn't give her something that had already been given to someone else," he said, taking a pinch of Floo powder and throwing it into the fire. "I can actually afford to buy her something else, you know. Besides, Astoria tends to prefer white wine." Stepping into the greenish flames, he didn't give Granger a chance to respond to his reminder that she talked to Potter for him, before he called out Malfoy Manor and Flooed out.

Nearly three months had passed and Hermione hadn't seen or heard from Draco Malfoy again. True to her word, she had spoken to Harry about her strange visitor and told him that Draco wanted to get in touch with him. Harry hadn't seemed too thrilled at the thought, and he hadn't been particularly interested in claiming the debts that Draco owed.

"Why would he want to talk about that? What would I ask him for? Money? I've got money," Harry had said, waving Hermione off. "If it's because he's seeking forgiveness or something, that's fine. Good for him. I just stopped caring about all that years ago."

"So tell him that," Hermione said with a shrug. "It seemed kind of important to him."

"If it was important, why didn't he just ask me at the train station when we sent the children off to Hogwarts?" Harry asked, shaking his head slightly.

"I don't know," Hermione said. "Maybe he wanted to talk about it in private or something. At any rate, I promised him I'd tell you, and I have, so it's up to you now."

"I'll think about it," Harry had promised, although Hermione thought he had sounded rather dubious about it. They hadn't spoken about it again since, and Hermione had almost forgotten all about it when one day there was an unfamiliar owl at her window, tapping the glass with its beak.

Hermione let it in and untied the letter attached to its leg. The owl had obviously not been instructed to wait for a reply because it took off again before she had opened the letter.

Granger,

As much as it pains me to admit it, I followed your advice and had a number of talks with Astoria regarding our situation and our marriage. I will spare you the unnecessary details that you undoubtedly aren't interested in anyway. Suffice it to say that we have, with a few exceptions, been sharing the same bed for nearly a month now, and I believe that we are well on our way to resolving, if not all, then at least some of the misunderstandings between us. With a little bit of luck, the next time you see us attending a function together, it won't be an act.

I haven't yet heard from Potter, and I have realised that I'm unlikely to ever hear from him. Perhaps this is for the best. Nevertheless, I am in your debt, and I would have sent you a thank you present, but my wife would have murdered me if she found out about it. It's probably bad enough that I'm owling you in the first place, and at this point I'm not particularly interested in upsetting her.

-Draco Malfoy

Hermione read the letter twice with an odd feeling of unfinished business. Draco had just wanted to speak to Harry, but had somehow found the courage to try and make up with his wife instead. It had seemed so important to him that he got in contact with Harry when he had visited her, but now as she read the letter, the entire episode had been summed up in just two short sentences, almost as an afterthought. As if being reunited with his wife made talking to Harry not really important to him anymore. Strange how life turned out sometimes and how one dead-end could still be the opening of a different path.

Fin

18. Draco finally realizes how much the trio has done for him, and he

contacts one of them (can be any member) to express his gratitude.

What happens is truly unexpected... yet not unwanted.