

Gravity

by floorcoaster

It's about arranging stacks of books, wall colours, and jumping off a cliff.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 5

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Prologue

The final battle of The Great Wizarding War took place on the grounds of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry over the course of a few days. Never before had so great a quantity of magic been unleashed over so small an area. On the final day, when all restraints were removed and the battle ranged over a scant few acres, the fighting came to a head.

At the center of the battlefield were Harry Potter and the self-proclaimed Lord Voldemort, unleashing spell after spell, neither successfully gaining an advantage over the other. Then Voldemort channeled all his power into a Rending Curse, meant to split a human body in half as though merely ripping up a piece of parchment. Harry deflected the Curse into the ground.

The effect was immediate. From the point of contact, the ground itself began to split. The rift traveled from between the two men through the Forbidden Forest and then continued on to the sea. On one side, the ground rose up towards the sky; on the other, it fell toward the sea.

The spell alone should not have been enough to upend the earth, but directed into the ground it drew upon all the residual magic in the earth from every spell that had been cast upon that battlefield. The Curse was so powerful that the coastline was altered as well, cleaving large sheets of rock from the upwardly expanding land and dropping them into the water below. The result was a sheer cliff, rising high above the ocean waves on the northern side of the rift. The new landscape stretched four miles in both directions.

The creation of the rift happened too quickly to allow escape from the changing landform. Many died, mostly servants of the Dark Lord. He had based his forces in the Forbidden Forest, among whose denizens they had more allies than friends, and the sudden upheaval had felled the great trees with a speed that had crushed everything that lay beneath them. Only those who were actively involved in the fighting on the school grounds itself at that moment survived the initial destructive power of the Curse.

Draco was there when the rift began, fighting two Death Eaters. Like most of those present, he was thrown violently to the ground. He watched, awestruck, as the crack spread from where Harry and the Dark Lord stood to the Forest, only managing to tear himself away from the sight of the cataclysm unfolding before him long enough to stun the Death Eaters. He could feel the earth moving, rumbling beneath him. He stared as the ground began tumbling and rolling as though it were the surface of the ocean and not solid rock.

When the ground stopped moving, the battle between the two primary antagonists resumed, only to be quickly won by Harry. Voldemort had been so weakened by the damage he had unwittingly inflicted that he was unable to stand after falling to the earth.

Draco stood cautiously, scarcely able to believe that after years of fighting, planning, struggling, with each side trying to gain an inch on the other, after days of a near-constantly raging battle, it was finally over.

Harry had fallen to his knees, and Draco thought perhaps he, too, was having a hard time accepting his own victory.

A few feet from where Draco stood, someone cried out. He looked in the direction of the sound and saw a Death Eater stumbling toward the Dark Lord's unmoving body, screaming as she ran. Draco Stunned her, but the news spread quickly, and the Death Eaters either surrendered or Disapparated and whatever fighting had resumed ceased. Without the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters, the other creatures and magical peoples who had sworn to fight for them gave up.

Draco watched as those fighting against the Dark side rushed toward Harry, then he went looking for his father. When he found him, unconscious and injured but alive, a wave of relief and something else indescribable coursed through him. Draco disarmed and bound him for the Ministry to find.

He headed back to where a group of Aurors were talking and pointing toward the Forbidden Forest. When he was close enough, he heard them discussing flying over the rift to survey the damage and immediately volunteered to go with them.

Three Aurors went to the lower side of the coastal cliff, but he flew to the very highest point and dismounted. The air around him cracked and popped with the unbound remnants and sporadic flashes of raw magic. It would settle soon and return to the earth in its own way, to be absorbed and spread throughout all living things.

Draco stood as close to the edge as he dared and looked down. Waves were engaged in their endless battle with the land, beating relentlessly against the rock face far below. Jutting out of the water were the rocks that had been cleaved from the cliff wall. As he stared at the water, the height dizzied him and his vision blurred. He stumbled, and the pack of supplies he had thrown over his shoulder fell. Before he could grab it, it went over the edge.

He considered Summoning it, but something held him back. Enthralled, he instead watched as the pack, as though in slow motion, tumbled through the air and finally fell into the water amidst the jagged rocks. The wind died, and all he could hear was the gentle murmur of the distant pounding of the waves.

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End Notes: Many thanks to my betas, Eilonwy, Z, and Buzzy. Bigger note to follow chapter one.

One

Chapter 2 of 5

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Chapter One

As soon as possible, Draco purchased the land around the cliff, covering nearly two hundred acres. It had taken three months for the Ministry officials to survey and clear the land, and extend the anti-Muggle protection of the Forbidden Forest to the newly reshaped stretch of coastline.

He called the cliff the Black Heights after his mother and himself. As he waited to procure the land, he had a small house built on the grounds of Malfoy Manor. Once the transaction was complete, he hired a magical contractor to relocate the house to a spot near the edge of the cliff that gave him an unobstructed view of the water. He then Obliviated the workers, as per their agreement, to prevent them from knowing where he lived. The house itself was nothing compared to what he had grown up in...a vast, cold and dark mansion...but then, he wanted nothing to do with the kind of life he had known as a child.

It was a small, empty house with bare white walls.

It had a kitchen, a sitting room with a fireplace, two bedrooms and one bathroom, plus a small laundry area. It was painted grey with a black roof and black shutters and a green front door. All the inside walls were stark white, a blank canvas, much the way he himself felt at the end of the war. He almost felt as though he could start his life afresh. Almost.

The bedroom was sparsely furnished, which suited him because he had learned that one didn't need much in life, contrary to everything his father had ever told him.

He had a place to sleep, a place to put his clothes, a place to put his books and reading light, and a place to sit while reading. He read a lot. People who read a lot *said* read a lot, and people who did not read said he read obsessively. He didn't mind...knowledge and power and all that. It was a different kind of power from what he had been taught, though. It was the power to speak, to articulate, to enlighten. Maybe someday he would exercise it.

He occasionally considered purchasing something to hold all the books; the stacks in his bedroom were starting to infringe on his usually meticulously neat and orderly brain. Yes, a bookshelf would be perfectly reasonable and justifiable, he decided more times than he could count. But he always put it off.

The other bedroom contained no furniture at all. He put his broom in there and all the books he didn't read often. They too were in stacks all around the room: neat, logical stacks, of course. Organized by topic, or author, or date of publication or some other obscure method, depending on how he felt that day. It was something he did to pass the time...rearrange the stacks.

The sitting room held a sofa, a chair and a few tables, plus a small writing desk for when he brought work home. There was nothing set out on the horizontal surfaces, no pictures or art on the walls, nothing to indicate the house was actually lived in. Most sitting rooms have at least one picture somewhere, maybe tossed carelessly on the mantelpiece and dusted every other month. This room held nothing but furniture. In this room, he sat to read. During the day, he preferred it to the upstairs because of the large windows that allowed a pleasant breeze through the house when open and provided copious light.

He did *not* have to work, of course. His mother had left him a considerable fortune upon her death, and he had been given control over his father's assets while Lucius served a life sentence in Azkaban. Draco had lived at Malfoy Manor immediately following the war until the house had been moved to the cliff. During the first few weeks, he had tried not working, electing to leave the running of the family business to the board of directors. Instead, he oversaw the design and construction of his house and rearranged his books.

Very quickly, however, he came to realize that with nothing else to occupy his mind he could only rearrange his books in so many ways before he started dreaming about words and letters and numbers. They had arms and legs, and often took sides and started wars, spilling, instead of blood, black ink.

One morning, four weeks after the war and its hype had ended, he woke fresh from a dream with an idea. Before even eating breakfast, he went to his library and ordered his books by the seventh letter of the seventh chapter in stacks of seven times seven. He placed the last book on the last pile, gave a satisfied smile, walked directly out of the house, past the anti-Apparition wards, and made his way to the London offices of Malfoy Enterprises. He found it terribly amusing to see the reactions of the employees when he walked in the door and announced that he was taking charge.

He worked mostly from the manor even after he stopped living there, holding meetings, throwing dinner parties, and entertaining business clients and important customers. However, he generally preferred to be in the cliff house, and so he often brought work there.

The kitchen was the only room that looked lived in. There were pots of herbs on the windowsill, tomatoes and avocados ripening in a bowl, pots and pans hanging from hooks, cookbooks on shelves, and cutting boards and an assortment of high-quality knives in a block on the counter. It was a little-known fact that he liked to cook and that he was very, very good at it. A table and chair completed the room.

The house also had a small porch out back facing the cliff, with two outdoor chairs. He liked to read on the porch and did so as often as the weather allowed. There were stairs that led to a small entry porch out front. He kept a chair there, too, for reading in the morning. He could read almost anywhere and did. A lot. Read, that is. After all, outside of his business responsibilities and work for the Ministry, it wasn't as if he had a social calendar.

He had been living there for three weeks when two friends came to visit him. "Friend" was a new concept to him. He had never really had one before, not a real one, at least, not an honest, true, loyal, I'd-give-you-the-bigger-piece-of-cake friend. And now he had two.

It started during the war when they'd fought together and sacrificed together and got hurt together and saved lives together, including each others'. A friendship of sorts began then, which only grew once the war ended.

There were two choices of what to do when he realized that everything he had ever believed his whole life was rubbish. One, he could continue to fight for the Dark Side despite his life-altering revelation and watch his soul slowly eat itself away. Or two, he could swallow his pride and throw himself on the mercy of the lions, to be stomped on, ripped apart, chewed up and spat out. In other words, turn himself over to the Light Side and offer his repentance and services. If they would take them.

To his great surprise, they had accepted him, even after two years of service to the Dark Lord. He'd had a sneaking suspicion that ~~she~~ she had had something to do with it, but he couldn't be sure. As a general rule, she had not been keen on talking to him, so he had given up hope of ever finding out. Her friends...now *his* friends...had been angry and reluctant and adolescent. They had not wanted him there and had resented him, for obvious reasons. He'd understood those reasons and done his best to stay away from them.

The adults in the Order, especially those who had been through all of this once before, had seemed almost eager to embrace his turn. He suspected it was because of all they had seen, all the horrible, frightening things they had been through once and now a second time, that they understood what it was like to face impossible circumstances. Anyone who truly wanted to be freed from the Dark life was another reason to keep fighting, proof that even in the Darkest times, within the Darkest people, life and light could still exist.

But he had not been able to stay away from Harry and Ron forever. Because he was pretty good with a wand, he would frequently be sent on missions with one or both of them. Sometimes they'd had to sit on the hard, cold ground for hours just waiting for something to happen. It was inevitable that they talked, or, more often, argued, yelled, and threatened. Once they had almost been made because of the fighting, so they stopped. Then Draco had saved Harry's life. After that, slowly, because he really *had* changed, they came to see it, and finally, to accept it. After that, they had begun to see and accept *him*. But it had been slow. Since he had not carried any expectations whatsoever when he had gone to the Order, he counted everything positive that happened to him as a bonus. At the end of the War, he had two bonus friends who had previously been enemies. Sometimes life happens that way.

So the friends came.

Knock, knock, knock.

He opened the door.

"Green door," said Harry with a goofy grin. "You trying to say something, Malfoy?"

"Are Gryffindors even allowed through it?" asked Ron. "I bet it's spelled to only let in Slytherins."

Draco opened the door wide and just smirked, challenging, waiting to see if they would step through.

Ron shrugged and went through the door. He wasn't cursed or hexed; nothing happened. Harry followed, closing the door behind him.

"Didn't actually think the door was cursed," said Ron lightly.

Harry was looking around at the sparse room. "Say, Malfoy, exactly how long have you lived here?"

"Three weeks."

"I don't mean to sound ... poncy, but it's a bit ... empty."

Draco shrugged. "I do not see the point in changing it; I hardly care."

"It's depressing. Ginny's put...stuff...all over, and our walls are all different colors, and..."

"Harry," he said patiently. "You have Ginny. I do not have a Ginny. So my walls are white."

"You need a Ginny, mate," said Ron. "These walls are...painful." Ron squinted and shielded his eyes, grinning stupidly.

"There is only one Ginny, and Harry has got her ... " Draco shrugged.

Ron shook his head. "Not *Ginny*, Ginny; you need a *girl*, mate."

Harry laughed. "Malfoy? Ron, haven't you heard? He's...how did you put it, Draco? Unfit for romantic interaction."

Ron laughed. "Unfit? How so?"

"Perhaps we could talk about something else," said Draco.

He never liked talking about himself, especially in relation to the opposite sex. There had been one girlfriend in his life, and the relationship had been mostly a sham. They were friends now. Well, the ex-Slytherin classmate sort of friends, anyway. The kind who invited each other to parties and sent gifts at Christmas. But it had never been much of a relationship. Pansy had just been a distraction, someone to have around to boost his ego and make him look good. He had never been particularly fond of her or even nice to her in school, but she had put up with him because she was vain too and *he made her look good* as well. After he joined the Dark Army, just before their sixth year in school, he had no time for her and ended things. To say that she didn't take it well was like saying that Voldemort was not an old softie.

He had not had an especially easy time of things that year, but for different reasons entirely. It wasn't anything to do with her. It was as if, that entire year, he had been caught up in a giant, rushing noise that kept getting louder and louder as he waited for the explosion. Every day the sound had grown more powerful, pressing on him more forcefully, until that dark night under a green glow when it suddenly stopped, leaving him in a place of silence where he could not even hear his own screams.

He had left Hogwarts that fateful night, never to return. While in the service of the Dark Lord, there was no possibility of romantic distraction. Such 'lowly' emotions as affection and love were scorned. Not that he cared or wanted to experience those emotions. He could barely remember ever having been happy at all, so he concluded that he was incapable of experiencing that particular emotion. A man who could not be happy could not possibly expect to be capable of making someone *else* happy.

Draco's time with the Order had been very eventful, yet he had only a handful of truly good memories from the year and a half he had been with them. The earlier months were spent in isolation and introspection, and he did not speak much to anyone until he was befriended by Ron and Harry near the end of the war.

One of those good memories was bittersweet, coming on the heels of his worst memory. After he had learned that his mother had been killed, *she* had held his hand and sat with him as he sobbed like a girl for an hour. The only link to life he had during that dark hour was her hand, and he had held on tight, afraid if he let go he would tumble downward, unable to stop his fall.

He loved his mother despite the fact that, for most of his life, she had been an elusive figure at best, someone who shared his hair color, but not much more. He didn't know until later... after they started talking and developed an actual relationship...that his father had forbidden her to "have any sort of *female* influence" on him. From Lucius, that meant that she could not be affectionate or show that she cared about him in any way. When she sent him sweets at school, he had easily dismissed it as an attempt to appear better than other parents and refused to believe that his mother held him in any regard. His father's work had been thorough.

He had seen his mother just once after he joined the Order. It was on her birthday, twelve months after he had changed sides, in a park she loved in the nearest village to her home, the home where he had grown up but no longer belonged. Something told him to go there that night. He was not one to give any sort of credence to divination or Seeing or any of that rubbish, but that day he had experienced a persistent, nagging urge to *go* there. So he did and she had been there. Each had been surprised to see the other, but Narcissa had embraced him tightly, as though the next moment depended on it.

They had talked for hours. Narcissa confided her fears, her secrets, and her hopes to Draco. She told him she had never wanted that life for him and was thankful that he had left it. If she could have abandoned the Dark Lord, she would have too. Draco pleaded. Narcissa cried, telling him she had made her decision long ago and now she had to pay for it. She told him she loved him, and Draco had cried and pleaded even more earnestly. There was something desperate in the way his mother spoke, something in her eyes that made him nearly frantic. She had smiled, tears in her own eyes, and said goodbye.

Two months later, he received a letter from his father informing him of Narcissa's death. It was a cold letter, absent of emotion, though Lucius did manage to attempt to blame her death on Draco. He told him she had died of a broken heart caused by his defection and shaming of the Malfoy name. If Draco had not seen her that night, he probably would have believed it. While the pain was staggering and overwhelming, it could have been considerably worse.

He felt numb for months after his mother's death. He had continued in his work, fighting for the Order, trying not to disappear into his own despair, but he could barely remember that time; it was just a haze.

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They went outside to the edge of the cliff, brooms in hand.

"So. Jumped yet?" asked Harry.

Harry Potter. He had killed the Dark Lord, freeing Draco from the prison he had locked himself in. It was true he had freed thousands of people from fear, hate and pain at the Dark Lord's hand. But Draco felt that freedom like no other. After all, he was the only successful defector from the service of Voldemort. No one else had managed to stay alive to the end. He alone felt true redemption and release after the reality of the Dark Lord's defeat had time to sink in. At first, he had been numb.

Draco remembered watching the celebration at Headquarters after the final battle as though he were peering through a grimy window. Even though he could count some of the people in the room as friends or at least nearly friends, he did not feel a part of them. He had not been there from the beginning and had in fact spent more time fighting against those gathered than for them. As he sat in the room against the wall, his brain turned off, his thoughts stopped, and he could only stare blankly in front of him. Then a round of hugging started, and when *she* threw her arms around his neck, he felt his breath hitch in his throat, and he was thrown into another good moment. He didn't respond to her hug, just felt all of his body slowly start working again and the emptiness start to wear off. She didn't wait for him to react, just moved on to the next person. It was only after the fact that the moment sank in, and by then he could only appreciate the memory of it instead of enjoying the actual moment.

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"Harry, if he'd jumped, we'd know about it," said Ron. "For one, he probably wouldn't shut up about it...you know how full of himself he is."

Ron and Harry were something of a two-for-one deal. Amidst all the lifesaving that occurred within the Order over the years of fighting, Draco had saved Harry's life. That started the whole "friends" and "bigger piece of cake" thing. Ron soon became his friend as well and even ended up saving *his* life at one point. Harry started keeping a running score of who had saved whom and how often.

She was another matter completely. Though she had been one of the first to accept him, to believe in his turn, and had encouraged the others to truly give him a chance, Hermione had never gone on missions with Draco. While no one questioned her skills as a fighter, she was too useful as a researcher and strategist to spend long, boring hours on stakeouts waiting to see if anything would happen. Harry and Ron, on the other hand, were always volunteering for anything that might get them involved in a bit of action, regardless of how much waiting around they had to do first, and Draco simply went wherever he was sent. As a result, they had never really become friends. They were cordial, even friendly, but not friends. He wouldn't expect her to show up at his house, unannounced and uninvited, like Harry and Ron did. It had surprised him to learn that it wasn't a three-for-one deal, as he'd assumed. She didn't come with the package, which was fine. Two friends were enough to deal with, considering he'd never had any before.

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"As soon as I do it, Weasley, you'll be the first to know."

Every morning, Draco stood at the edge of the cliff, looking into the water below him. He'd figured out how tall it was...nearly nine hundred feet. Every now and then, he dropped things, just to watch them fall. The first thing he'd thrown over the cliff after moving in was a dinner plate. It was too thin and light, and he hadn't been able to see the splash when it hit the water. Disappointed, he spent the next few days trying to figure out how he could throw things and be sure to see their impact. The pack that had tumbled over the first day he'd been to the cliff had been bulky and heavy and, even though the distance had been great, he'd barely seen the small splash. Finally, he decided to Charm the objects to spark as they fell and then to emit a pulse of light on impact. It worked perfectly and was actually quite spectacular when he dropped things at night.

He started timing how long it took for them to hit the water...six and a half seconds. It seemed like such a small amount of time, but when he watched rocks or dishes or whatever he dropped, make their way down, it seemed he watched for an eternity. Three full breaths...ten heartbeats...four blinks. He'd become obsessed with six and a half seconds as well, trying to find things that took six and a half seconds to do.

For example, an uninterrupted lift could go from the entrance level of the Ministry of Magic to halfway between the third and fourth levels in six and a half seconds, if the journey was not interrupted. He could boil a large pot of water in six and a half seconds. It took him six and a half seconds to walk from the front door of the house he grew up in to the painting of his great-great uncle in a side hallway, the one with the best, most derisive and cutting smirk of any Malfoy he'd seen, the one after which he'd modeled his own smirk.

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Truth be told, Draco wanted to jump off the cliff and fall toward the tumult below. Of course, he did not want to meet the same fate as his unfortunate dishes. No, his deepest desire was to come within inches of death, only to be whisked from its clutches by the broom he Summoned at some point during his fall. But when would he Summon it? Too late, and he would be smashed by the waves and rocks; too soon, and he would be saved outside of those crucial inches, and what would be the point of that at all?

Watching the various objects fall, he felt envious of the precious seconds when they were free...free to tumble this way and that on any whim or breeze. As each object met its fate...crushed and swallowed by the waves and rocks...he cringed slightly. Once he'd even tossed his lunch. In his mind, it could be *him*, dashed to pieces on the sharp rocks, if his calculations were off even slightly.

He wasn't ready to try the jump. He had told Harry and Ron about it once and had since come to regret it. They mentioned it nearly every time they saw him now. And he was no closer to jumping now than he had been when he told them.

"Have a go now, mate," said Ron, motioning over the edge.

Draco shook his head. "Uh-uh. No audience."

"Then when are you going to try? Maybe you should just...go for it."

"Not until I have worked all the angles," he said firmly.

Harry rolled his eyes. "By the time you're done with the angles, Malfoy, you won't be able to recognize a broom from a light post, you'll be old and grey."

Draco shoved him lightly. "Sod off, Potter. I'll do it ... soon."

The issue was not that he was afraid of heights. He was a Seeker, after all; he flew as naturally as he breathed. He supposed that what held him back was the fact that he *wanted* to come close to death, within inches. That did not strike him as the desire of a rational, stable individual. Maybe he secretly wished the calculation would be off just a little bit, maybe even by inches. He did not know why he wanted to jump so badly, so he didn't. He was very logical, very methodical. Almost everything he did was pre-meditated, well thought out and well planned. He didn't like making mistakes, so he did everything in his power to be sure he did things right the first time. He would have adopted the Muggle phrase, "measure twice, cut once" as his own personal motto if he'd ever heard it. Only, he would have said, "measure ten times, cut once." Or, "measure ten times, rethink the need to cut, measure twice again, have a cuppa and a nice lie down, then decide whether or not to cut." So he couldn't very well just *jump*, could he?

After staring down at the water below and throwing a few rocks down, the three friends went inside. Draco gave them a tour, which took all of five minutes. Ron stopped in the second bedroom...more accurately called the "book room"...and gawked at the stacks.

"Blimey, mate, you have almost as many books as Hermione!"

Harry was frowning. "Why are they all on the floor?"

Draco shrugged, herding them out of the room. "Haven't put up shelves," he mumbled.

"Malfoy, you have more money than you could spend in three lifetimes. Get some bookshelves," said Harry.

"I'm thinking about it," he said as they made their way to the main room. They sat.

"What's to think about?" said Ron.

"I have no great need for them."

"You have hundreds of books in stacks on the floor. I think you're approaching 'need' here," said Harry, trying to be helpful.

"I'm getting one for my room, at least," said Draco, a bit defensively. "I decided this morning."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Well, that's something, isn't it? Alert the media; I can see it now: 'Draco Malfoy, ex-Death Eater-Turned-Hero, Buys Bookshelf.'"

Harry grinned and spoke before Draco could make a sarcastic reply. "Malfoy, how many books do you have, exactly?"

"Five hundred twenty three."

"And have you read all of them?"

"Most of them, four hundred or so. I'm slowly working my way through them, and I cannot buy another book until I have read all the ones I already have. I made a deal with myself."

"What happens when you finish?" asked Harry.

Draco blinked. "I will buy a new book," he said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"How long do you think it will take you?" asked Ron.

Draco shrugged. "A year, give or take."

Ron shook his head, chuckling. "You really need a girl, mate."

"You mean, like you've got?" said Draco with a sneer.

"Speaking of girls," Harry interrupted quickly. "Ginny and Hermione are coming over. They should be here soon."

Draco's knuckles turned white around the armrest of his chair. He felt a moment of panic. Ginny. *Andher*.

"Why?" he asked, somewhat warily.

Harry shrugged. "They wanted to see your place."

"Why? It's nothing special," he protested.

"Well, we know that *now*," said Ron teasingly.

Draco glared at him.

Knock, knock, knock.

Draco closed his eyes, hoping that when he opened them he would be all alone with no "friends" in his house and no one else, no one who was unquestionably his friend, outside his door knocking.

Knock, knock.

Blast.

Draco stood and went to the door. He took a deep breath before opening it. Hermione and Ginny were on the front porch holding piles of boxes wrapped in various shiny papers and adorned with bows and ribbons and the like.

"Green door, Malfoy?" said Ginny, frowning slightly.

"I like green," he replied, peering cautiously at the things in Ginny's arms: three wrapped packages, a potted plant and a bottle of Firewhisky.

"I sincerely hope the rest of your house isn't green. It might make me ill."

"What's wrong with my door?" he asked, slightly irritated. First Harry and Ron, and now Ginny. He glanced at Hermione to see if she would say anything about the color, but she was looking elsewhere. "It had to be a color, so why *not* green?"

"It's just that it's so ... typical," Ginny said matter-of-factly. "Predictable. Do you keep snakes in a pit in the back yard?"

Draco grinned. "Why...want to see them?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Do you intend to keep us out here all day?"

"Oh, no. Would you like to come in, then?"

"I'm not just delivering this stuff," Ginny said. She held out the bottle. "This is from Ron. The plant is from Neville. The rest you'll have to open to see whom they're from."

Draco accepted the bottle as Ginny passed; 1967, a very good year. Then he frowned at Ginny's back. "But ... why?"

Ginny either didn't hear him or pretended not to and disappeared into the sitting room. When Draco turned back to the door, Hermione was just inside it, her own assortment of wrapped packages in her arms.

"I like the green," she said as she passed him.

Draco's eyes widened, but he said nothing, shutting the door and following her into the sitting room. "Granger liked the door," he announced to the room.

Ron snorted. "She doesn't count."

"Why not?" Hermione asked, rounding on him, hands on her hips.

"You always go for the underdog. Everyone else is highly offended by the door, so you like it. *That* is typical and predictable."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "No, *Ron*, I just happen to like green."

"Since when?" Ron asked, incredulous.

"Since we haven't been at Hogwarts for three years and have better things to base our life choices on than silly schoolchild rivalries," she replied, setting her pile of gifts on the floor by the armchair and taking a seat on the floor to lean against the wall, as there were not enough seats for all five of them.

Ron mumbled something and sat on the sofa beside Harry.

Draco set the load he had carried on the floor in front of his chair.

"What kind of plant is that?" asked Harry. He was sitting beside Ginny, their hands entwined.

"Oh, you know Neville," said Hermione. "Probably some rare species no one has ever heard of. You might want to ask him if it needs feeding or anything. He tends to forget that the rest of us aren't avid herbologists."

Ron rolled his eyes.

"Well, open one," said Ginny, bouncing a little with excitement.

Draco looked down at the colorful boxes. He frowned. "What is this for?"

"A housewarming," said Ginny.

His eyes widened. "*A what?*"

"Just open," said Ginny insistently.

Draco looked at his feet. There were seven packages, all brightly and festively wrapped. Seven presents for him to open and pretend he liked. Given to him for a

housewarming, as though he really needed things for his house. Granted, it was a bit bare He sighed. Better get this over with.

The Weasleys had given him a framed picture of Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and himself, taken at Headquarters during the celebration after Voldemort was defeated. He, of course, was scowling, but at one point Hermione had poked him, likely in an attempt to get him to smile and unknowingly hitting him in a very sensitive and ticklish spot. He smiled and started squirming to get away from her. He scowled at the picture, but he loved it at the same time.

"Here, hand it over," said Ginny. "I'll see where it should go." She took the picture from him and walked all around the room, frowning in deep concentration. Finally, something made her smile, and she said, "Ah-hah! There!" She proceeded to stick the picture on the large empty wall opposite the window. She smiled, quite pleased with herself, and returned to her seat next to Harry. "Continue," she said.

Charlie had given him a desk set made of dragon leather. Draco's eyes scanned the blotter; it was a deep burgundy color, almost like blood, and it had pockmarks from the dragon feathers. The rest of the set comprised a cup to hold quills, a small box for ink bottles and quill tips, a letter opener whose hilt was a dragon, and a silver quill-sharpener.

The package from Fred and George had been Charmed so that only he could see its contents. They had given him a few new products from their shop. A short note from the twins read: *Use the little bottle on Ron for a laugh.*

Harry and Ginny gave him a vase...Ginny's idea to be sure...and a thin black mat for the fireplace, guaranteed to catch all the stray ash that comes from Floo travel. The bright, flashing sticker in the corner said it would even keep ash off the traveler's clothes.

Though he had not expected ... well, *anything*, Draco was surprised to discover how useful all the gifts would be. Except perhaps that vase. The items from Fred and George would be put to good use, make no mistake. And the desk set he could use for the desk in the sitting room.

Ron's offering was candy from Honeydukes, which prompted Ginny to slap him on the back of the head. "Housewarming, idiot!" she said with a scowl.

But Draco grinned at Ron and ripped open the package, pulling out a few pieces before passing it around the room.

There were now two packages left. They were wrapped in brilliant green paper, almost the color of his door, with lighter green and yellow trimmings. They were almost too perfect to open.

"Guess what Hermione got you," said Ron, smirking.

Hermione glared at Ron.

Draco reached for the smaller package, the one that looked suspiciously like a book. Why was he disappointed that she had only given him a book? He had not been expecting *any* of this, he loved books, and he knew she *always* gave books as gifts. It really should not matter. He slowly removed the paper and ribbons to reveal "Crime and Punishment," his favorite novel.

It was a hardback edition in excellent condition. He ran his fingers over the title, then opened the pages. Ah. It smelled like an old book. But he frowned. Because it was his favorite book, he had at least two copies in his possession already. And she *knew* it was his favorite book, so surely she had to know he already owned a copy. They'd talked very little about actual life things during the War, relegating their conversations to the issues at hand. But books were something they both loved, so on the rare occasions they *did* talk, books was a safe topic. She didn't have a favorite and told him that she loved them all nearly equally.

He looked at her quizzically.

"Second edition," she said with a small shrug. "I tried for a first, but it was a little hard to find. And out of my price range."

That was different. He looked at the book in awe.

"Hey, Malfoy, it's not a brick of gold, or anything," said Ron. "Come on, you've got one more."

He reluctantly set the book on the table...carefully!...and reached for the last package. It too was wrapped in green paper, and he looked at Hermione, again puzzled *Two?*

"Just open it," she said, not quite meeting his eye.

He did. It was a framed painting of the constellation with which he shared his name. The stars that made up the image were brighter than the thousands around them, and all the stars twinkled like tiny precious gems. Occasionally, a shooting star made its way across the sky. He had no words to express how he felt at this gift.

"I thought...for your room," she said, somewhat nervously. "I mean, if you don't like it, then..."

"No, I do," he said, still mesmerized by the painting. Everyone was silent, watching him. "Thanks, Hermione." He paused, still staring. "I mean, 'thanks' isn't enough, really. I...I don't know what to say."

She beamed at him. "I'm glad you like it."

He could only nod.

"So, can we get the tour now?" said Ginny, after a moment of silence.

"Uhm, sure," he said, standing, and putting the painting down...even more carefully! "This is the sitting room. The kitchen is right there," he said, pointing to the room. "There are two bedrooms upstairs. One bathroom, also upstairs." He sat down.

"That's *it*?" said Ginny, unbelieving.

"That's it," he confirmed.

Ginny gaped at him. "You mean, it really *is* as small as it looks?"

He nodded.

Ginny shook her head in apparent disbelief and stood to walk around the house. "Hermione. Care to have a look upstairs with me?" she asked, extending her hand to pull Hermione from the floor. She accepted, and they disappeared up the stairs.

Draco glared at Harry and Ron, who were looking anywhere but at him. "Explain," he growled finally.

"Well, Ginny wanted to see your place, and she'll jump at any excuse to go shopping."

"That explains Ginny and you," Draco said with his jaw set.

"She only told her family about it, Draco; she wanted to do something nice for you. They rounded up a few things too ... so ... surprise?" Harry looked like he was trying to

be convincing but failing miserably.

"Gifts, Potter? Now what...you going to expect thank-you notes or something? With a little 'M' for Malfoy, and wax seals and fancy parchment?"

"No, of course not," said Harry hastily.

Ginny and Hermione returned after a few minutes; there really wasn't much of anything to see, anyway. Hermione was strangely quiet, and she looked as though she were thinking hard about something. His friends and the girls stayed for dinner. He hadn't planned on guests, but he loved a challenge, especially in the kitchen. Fortunately, he didn't care much for shopping, so his freezer was well stocked. A quick spell thawed a couple of racks of lamb loin chops, which he frenched, seasoned and arranged as a crown roast, and placed in the oven along with a pan of potatoes and root vegetables, drizzled with olive oil. A salad of sliced tomatoes and fresh herbs completed the meal. They nibbled on aged gouda, cambozola and Greek olives while dinner cooked.

Ginny especially made it a point to comment on his cooking and the fact that he, Draco Malfoy, former Man-Priss, not only knew the difference between a spatula and a spoonula, but could cook a gourmet meal without burning down the house. She looked pointedly at Harry when she said this. Harry started talking loudly to Ron.

Draco merely smirked and watched as she devoured the meal.

Hermione, however, only picked at her plate. He really wanted her to like it; of everyone presents~~he~~ she had to be the one who liked his food. But she was just pushing it around and frowning.

Then, about three quarters the way through the meal, when he couldn't stand it anymore and was just leaning over to ask her what was wrong, her head jerked around to look at him, a triumphant sparkle in her eyes.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I've got it!" And she promptly stood up from the table and ran up the stairs.

Harry, Ron and Ginny stared at him. "What?" he said.

"What did you do?" asked Ron, suspiciously.

"Nothing! I did nothing! She just went bonkers on me."

Hermione came noisily down the stairs looking quite pleased with herself and resumed her seat at the table. Then she started eating as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Everyone was staring at her, like she really had gone nutty, while she happily took bite after bite.

"Harry, would you pass the potatoes?" she said, looking up. She frowned when she noticed that everyone was staring at her and no one else was eating. "What?" she asked.

"Erm, Hermione. What was all that about just now?" asked Ron. "You ran up the stairs like a madwoman, and now you're ... eating. Just like that."

"Oh," she said, waving her hand in dismissal. "Nothing." They continued to stare at her. She rolled her eyes and said, "I just figured out the pattern and had to check to make sure I was right."

Draco was glad all eyes were on Hermione because his jaw dropped.

"And were you?" asked Harry.

"Of course."

"What pattern?" said Ginny.

Hermione glanced at Draco out of the corner of her eye. He managed to close his mouth as he watched her return her gaze to her friends. "Nothing. Never mind," she said.

Harry, Ron and Ginny whined and pouted and basically refused to allow the meal to continue in peace until she explained. Hermione sighed and looked at Draco again. He gave her the slightest nod, indicating that it was okay with him for her to divulge what she'd done, to reveal his little *quirk*.

"The books. Upstairs. They're organized. I figured out the pattern."

She was again met with silence and incredulous looks from her three friends, but Draco couldn't stop a small smile forming on his lips as he watched her eyes, brimming with excitement at her success.

"That's...disturbing," said Ron, shaking his head as if to shake off the feeling he got when thinking about organizing that many books.

Ginny only shrugged and returned to her dinner. But Harry was looking at Hermione.

"What's the pattern?" he asked her.

Draco saw her cheeks flush, and she looked at him again. Now Ginny and Ron were watching too. Draco raised one eyebrow and folded his napkin, giving her his full attention.

"Author's last name," she started, still looking at Draco, only now as if for confirmation that she had been correct. "Second letter from the end, moving backwards if the letters were the same between names."

Ron dropped his fork; Ginny stared at Hermione, eyes as wide as her plate; Harry looked as though he'd seen a ghost; and Draco was calmly eating again. Hermione looked at her plate and set her fork down.

"You two," said Ron, mouth full, "are sick."

"Agreed," said Ginny.

But Draco noticed that Harry was looking at him and Hermione as though he had never met either of them before. And Draco didn't like that look, not one little bit.

Nothing else happened. His guests stayed for dessert and made more ridiculously witty remarks about his glaringly white walls, then left him in peace. But not before Ginny poked her head back in through the door and said, "I'll be back tomorrow with paint samples. Night, Malfoy!" Then she whipped her head out of the doorframe and was gone before he could protest. Oh, well, maybe the walls needed painting anyway.

Draco made his way slowly to his room, taking the book and painting from Hermione with him. He stopped to peer into his book room and frowned at the books. Then he set the painting and book on the floor in the hallway and spent the next five hours rearranging the stacks of books.

At nearly four in the morning, he finished, then resumed his walk to his room. See if she can figure~~that~~ one out so easily, he thought with a self-satisfied smirk.

Draco hung the picture on the wall opposite his bed. It was only when he stepped back to make sure it was hanging level...precisely two-thirds of the way up the wall...that he saw it.

There, written in silver paint, in the bottom right hand corner, was the artist's signature: H. Granger. Draco stared at the painting with a fresh wave of awe, once again mesmerized. *She had done it. Just for him. He didn't know she painted; he really didn't know that much about her at all.*

He liked it. He *loved* it. But that voice in the back of his head he hadn't heard in a few months was suddenly making itself heard again. It told him he'd never been given a gift like that, that it wasn't the kind of gift a friend gives, much less someone whom he could only consider an acquaintance.

The voice insisted that there was more to the gift than just the painting, that she was trying to tell him something and that he needed to find out what. The voice, however, sounded too much like his mother's voice, and she had already completely addled his mind.

He sighed. The last thing he wanted at that moment was to really think about her and listen to the running commentary in his mind. If he were to let his thoughts run amok, to go wherever they might go ... well, he could not be sure of where they would end.

Because what she'd done, what she'd given him, was more special, more ... intimate, than a gift from a mere acquaintance, if he allowed himself to admit it. More than a friend, even. Maybe a very good friend, but they weren't friends. At all. So he was really confused.

And he was sad. He didn't know anyone, really. Not *really*. Not well enough to know what they were thinking without Legilimancy. And he felt alone, even staring at all the twinkling star-gems surrounding him...Draco, the Dragon.

ooo

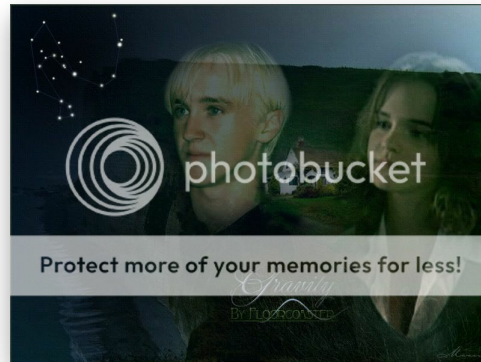
Note: I wanted to get the first chapter of this posted before Deathly Hallows. I've been working on this one for a long time, and I really hope you like it. I have a TON of people to thank for their help on this, and I'll go chronologically. First, to Z, for getting through the first draft and whipping the story around. Next to eilonwy, for being a great beta and telling me that the story needed more work and making me keep going. Then to Buzzy, for her excellent beta job, and finally a little thanks to kazfeist, for helping me with Charlie's gift.

Two

Chapter 3 of 5

Ginny and Hermione return with paint samples and Draco gets familiar with the front steps of his porch.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or any of these characters, but I think their world is an amazing place. No monetary profit is being made from this story.



Chapter 2

Ginny returned as promised the next day with Hermione in tow.

Draco watched with amusement through his peephole as they argued over who would knock. He waited until Hermione rolled her eyes and finally reached her hand up to knock, then opened the door before her hand could make contact. He put a scowl on his face as he swung the door wide. "Would you two please keep it down? I don't want trouble with the neighbors," he barked playfully.

Hermione looked at him as though he'd sprouted an extra nose while Ginny glanced to either side of the house.

"You don't *have* neighbors, you git," said Ginny, shifting her weight onto one side of her body.

Draco grinned and leaned against the doorframe. He felt slightly nervous; he had never been in a casual social setting with these women without Harry and Ron. "Your powers of observation are astounding, Mrs. Potter. How may I help you ladies this afternoon?"

Hermione gave him a small smile, and Ginny said, "I've got the paint samples I promised. Would now be a good time to look at them?"

Draco cocked his head and looked at Hermione.

She shrugged. "I'm here for support."

He nodded and turned back to Ginny. "What exactly does looking at paint samples entail?" Then he held up his hand. "On second thought, it is nearly time for tea. Would you two care to join me?"

Ginny and Hermione both nodded, and Draco opened the door for them to enter. They went into the kitchen, and Draco Conjured two chairs for his guests. While he set a kettle on the stove, he reiterated his question to Ginny.

"Well, I've recently developed an interest in decorating," she began as she pulled stack after stack of paint samples, thin strips of stiff paper with a colour painted on each,

from her bag. She also had a master paint book with all the colours printed in their colour families. "In selecting wall colour, usually you would just ... pick a colour you like."

Draco nodded. "Then you are here to leave those samples for me to look through?"

Ginny gave him a wary look. "Would you really do it?"

He considered the question and the fact that Ginny and Hermione were there. They obviously did not think he could be trusted to accomplish the task. As such, they were there. *She* was there. He guessed that Ginny planned to stay for a while and had convinced Hermione to come along to keep her company.

The kettle whistle went off, and Draco prepared their tea, taking a few scones he had baked that morning out of the breadbasket and setting them on a plate. He levitated everything to the table and sat down.

"No, I do not reckon I would select paint for my walls, at least not in a timely fashion."

Ginny nodded. "That's what I thought. I also thought we could go through them together and pick colours."

"Okay," he said, putting a lump of sugar in his cup.

"Where do you spend most of your time when you're at home?" Ginny asked.

He frowned and started to ask what on earth that question had to do with paint colour when he was interrupted.

"Oh, these are delicious!" said Hermione, having taken a bite of a raspberry scone on which she had heaped a dollop of lemon curd. "Did you make them?"

Draco nodded, feeling a twinge of pride.

"Amazing ... and the curd tastes fresh too."

"I try to make a batch every week."

Hermione nodded, chewing. "Sorry, Ginny," she said.

"I spend most of my time in the sitting room or in here."

"Then let's start with the kitchen since we're here, shall we?" Ginny asked. She pulled out one set of paint samples, bound in one corner. "These are my favorites ... especially the Original Colours. Would you like to use Restoration Colours, Malfoy?"

He blinked, staring at what looked like thousands of colours. "Er ... what kind of colours?"

"Restoration. They are used in restoring homes" She paused. "I had been talking for a while about learning more, so for a gift, Harry enrolled me in a few Muggle decorating classes. They were a lot of fun."

"Whatever you say," he replied. "Restoration Colours are fine."

Ginny beamed. "Excellent. Now ..." She trailed off, looking around his kitchen. "Your cabinets are a very deep wood tone, so I think a light, warm shade would look nice ..." Ginny stood and took the paint book with her into the kitchen.

Draco looked at Hermione, who was looking through another paint book Ginny had brought. "Are you her assistant?" he asked with a smile, knowing full well the answer, but feeling as though he ought to say something.

Hermione looked up and after a moment smiled too. "It was the strangest thing. For some reason, Ginny didn't want to be here all alone with just you," Hermione said, closing the book. "Imagine that."

Draco feigned offense. "I can't imagine why that would be," he said.

Hermione leaned over the table and whispered, "I think she's afraid of you."

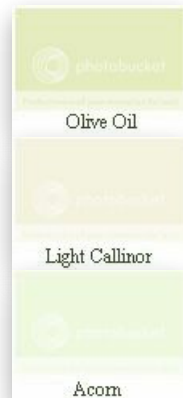
"I can hear, you know," called Ginny.

Draco pretended she hadn't spoken. "She should be," he whispered loudly. "One of my largest snakes got loose in the cupboard this morning."

Hermione's eyes shone. "Oh, my, that sounds dangerous!"

"He's poisonous too ... and hungry"

Ginny returned to the table and sat down beside him. "Not funny, Malfoy. Now, what do you think of these colours?" She pointed to samples labeled Olive Oil, Light Callinor, Acorn, Lemon Tree, Driftwood, Tuscany, and Burton Pink.





Draco squinted at Burton Pink. "That does not look at all pink to me."

"Never mind that," said Ginny. "Do you like any of them?"

He looked from one sample to the next, hoping that something would come to him, that he would understand why people spent so much time and effort in picking out wall colours, and why there were so many different colours to choose from. He felt boggled simply from seven, and Ginny had started with thousands!

"That one," he said, pointing at Olive Oil.

"Hmm ..." Ginny said. "It's a green. I rather thought Tuscany would be nice with the cabinets and the bright white trim."

He looked around the room and tried to imagine Tuscany walls, but it was no use. He did not have an eye for colour.

"What do you think, Hermione?" Ginny asked after he'd remained silent for too long.

"I like Tuscany."

Draco looked at her, then back at the sample, then at the walls again. He shrugged. "Okay."

"Lovely!" exclaimed Ginny. She took out her wand and with a swish, duplicated the Tuscany card and wrote "kitchen" on the back. "Which room should we do next?"

The sitting room took significantly longer than the kitchen. Instead of cabinets, there was only the fireplace to work with, and the mantelpiece was made of dark wood with simple carving. Draco had not wanted anything elaborate, just functional. Ginny spent a good deal more time looking through the paint book and seemed to be having a harder time making her choices.

Draco and Hermione sat quietly on the sofa, watching while Ginny walked round and round the room, muttering to herself. Draco thought it was entertaining, but Hermione eventually pulled out a book she had brought with her and started reading.

Finally, after what felt like an hour, Ginny sighed and walked to the sofa.

"Here," she said, handing him a pile of samples. "Why don't you get started on these while I go and look upstairs?"

He nodded and accepted the paint samples while Ginny headed up the stairs. Then he looked down at the disturbingly thick pile in his hands. He frowned as he sifted through the stack. "There are so many...how am I supposed to choose?" he asked himself out loud.

Hermione shifted on the sofa, bringing her legs up onto the cushions, and closed her book. "Need a little help?"

It occurred to Draco that they were alone together. Unease settled into his gut. "Er ... sure."

"Let me see which colours she chose," Hermione said, holding her hand out. Draco gave her the paint samples, and she too flipped through them. "Well, do you like any of these?" she asked, looking up at him.

He shrugged. "They all look fine to me."

"Well, you can't have all of them; you need to pick one."

"Just one?" he asked, counting twenty-two paint colours.

"Eventually, yes. Your room should only have one colour on the walls. Unless, of course, you want to paint different walls in different colours. I think you agreed on white trim, right?"

He nodded mechanically, and Hermione looked back at the samples. "Are there any you *don't* like? Maybe we can start with those ..." She moved off the sofa to sit on the floor and spread the paint colours out around her. "Just pick five you don't like. It's a start."

Draco sat down on the floor across from her and chose five: Light Wicker, Boxington, Pot Red, Grapevine, and Baked Cherry.





Hermione nodded. "Okay, good. Now remove five more."

Next, he eliminated Garden, Tan Tan, Burton Pink, Dooly, and Whistle.

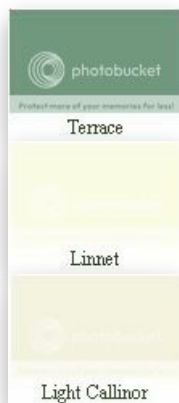


"You don't seem to like warm colours," she said, more to herself. She bit her lip. "I wonder why there are no greys."

"I like grey," he said, looking up at her hopefully.

"There must be a reason Ginny didn't pick any greys ..." Hermione said. "Well, we're down ten. Only another dozen to go."

After an excruciating twenty minutes, during which Hermione became increasingly opinionated and offered many suggestions which Draco was sure she thought were helpful, he narrowed his choices to Terrace, Linnet, and Light Challinor. Hermione called Ginny down to examine the colours and she frowned at all three.



"Hmm ..." she said, looking from one sample to the next. "I had thought ... maybe ..." She pulled a color from the stack of rejected colors. "Here." She handed Draco card

with the colour Twist on it. He made a face at the colour, then at Ginny.



"I don't think so," he said.

"Trust me," she said in a tone that said she had settled the matter. Then she set off for the upstairs again.

"This colour is awful," he said, holding it up. "I would rather have black walls than this."

Hermione cracked a smile. "It's not so bad," she said, taking the sample from him and holding it up. "I quite like it."

He gave her a look that plainly said he didn't believe her.

"Well," she mused, "It's kind of nice. It goes well with black, and the green of your door would make a nice accent colour."

He eyed her skeptically. "You mean it? Green with ... whatever this is." He squinted to look at the tiny print in the bottom right-hand corner. "Twist? What does that even mean? It's not quite blue, but it's not green either."

Hermione gave him a sideways smile. "Of course; I wouldn't lie to you," she said, standing.

Ginny returned after a few minutes and told Draco she had left stacks of samples in each room.

"Have a look at them and pick your three favourites for each room. Let me know if you want help selecting a colour. You'll need to get the paint yourself. We'll help you paint, but you'll need to tell us when you plan to do it. I must be going though; Mum needs my help with dinner tonight. She's cooking for some of Dad's coworkers and wants things to be extra special. I hadn't expected such a lovely tea. Thank you."

Draco nodded. "My pleasure."

Ginny and Hermione made their way out the door.

"Later, Malfoy," said Ginny, waving as she stepped onto the porch. Hermione seemed to hesitate, then followed her out with a half-smile.

Draco frowned at the closed door. He had expected to be relieved to be rid of their presence, but he found the house was suddenly oppressively silent and the walls glaringly white. As he turned around to go back to the kitchen, there was a sharp knock on the door. He opened it. Hermione stood there alone. He arched a single eyebrow in question.

"Uhm, can I have..." she looked at her watch "...fifteen minutes in your book room?"

The question caught him completely off-guard. "Why?"

"Because I have a feeling you reorganized last night." She grinned. "And I'll take your gaping stare to mean I'm right. I'd like to have a go at trying to figure it out."

He nodded, more from shock than actual acquiescence. She darted past him and practically ran up the stairs. Draco stood by the door. She was in his house, with him, alone. It was unsettling. He could either be okay with it, with being alone in his house with *her*, opening the door to all kinds of disturbing and unrealistic ideas, or he could *not* be okay with it and freak out and handle the situation poorly. He vacillated only a moment before choosing the easy path. He decided to think about it later and went outside with a book.

The front porch was much shallower than the back, only deep enough to comfortably sit on a bench, which Draco had not yet purchased. Draco had also set out a small table on which he placed the potted plant from Neville. A small set of stairs led from the porch into the yard, and a worn dirt path led from the steps around to Draco's garden on the south side of the house. He was rather proud of the vegetables and herbs he had grown so far and was already making meticulous notes on ways to improve and expand it for the next growing season.

Beyond the garden was a grassy meadow bordered on the east by the cliff, on the west by a forest a few hundred yards from the house, while to the north and south it stretched for miles, broken only by the sharp drop to the south where the rift had divided the land. The forest covered many hundreds of acres and eventually ran into the Forbidden Forest, magically separated from the rest of the woods.

Draco was reading when Hermione emerged sometime later. "Oh, there you are. I've been looking for you."

"You found me," he said blankly.

She sat down on the top step; he was on the third down. "Well, I haven't cracked it yet."

"Good."

There was a moment of awkward silence that he felt sure should have been very awkward. She shifted. "How long have you been doing that? Arranging your books, I mean."

He shrugged. "I spent a lot of time sequestered in my room with nothing to do when I was younger. It kept my mind off..." He swallowed, suddenly aware of how close they were and of the fact that he was about to cross the invisible line they had drawn between them during the war.

The line was thick, solid and dark, and it said quite plainly that he and she were not friends and would not ever be friends. Even after he had overheard Harry trying to convince Hermione to give him a chance, things had stayed the same. Draco remembered listening at the door. Hermione had said it wasn't about chances, it wasn't about his past...she had accepted his past...but that it was something else that she wasn't sure she wanted to think about. They talked too quietly for Draco to hear more after that.

The deepest conversation he had ever shared with Hermione had been about their favorite books; they had not talked about anything of substance. He heard her speak a great deal, and she likewise. He knew that she knew his altered views on the superiority of blood, believing in causes and sacrifice. He knew that she had lightened up considerably, not taking herself as seriously and accepting one or two of her faults.

Still, none of those revelations were the result of direct interaction between them. He now had the opportunity to change the character of their relationship, if only very slightly, and tell her something about himself. Share. Open up.

But should he?

His initial response was a resounding *NO*. Talking about his life, his past, his feelings, was not something he did voluntarily. Nonetheless, he found that a small part of him

wanted to share something about himself. It was not the act of sharing, per se, but the idea that she wanted to know him. She had asked, and he saw no real harm in answering her honestly. He was going to jump off a cliff, after all, nothing could be as scary as that.

He took a deep breath and said, "Rearranging my books kept my mind off what was happening outside my room. My father ... well, suffice it to say, I did not enjoy being around when he was 'experimenting.' But I still heard things, and by rearranging my books, I could keep my mind focused completely on my task and be essentially oblivious to what was happening elsewhere in the house. At first, I would just dump them all on the bed and then alphabetize them. After awhile, though, I started to know without looking where certain books belonged in the sequence by their colour or a particular feature, and decided to organize them differently. I've been doing it ever since."

"It seems like a decent way to pass the time," Hermione said hesitantly. "Did you ever read any of the books you organized?"

"Yes," he answered. "But only when it was quiet in the house. Reading wasn't enough to distract me."

Hermione nodded and remained silent for a while. Draco thought that perhaps she hadn't been expecting such an answer and was trying to think how to respond.

"So ... may I come back?" she asked.

"Why?" he asked pointedly, grateful that she didn't pursue the topic despite the dozens of questions that must be running through her mind.

"I didn't finish; I would like to try and figure it out."

"Why would you want to do that?"

She shrugged. "It's a challenge, a puzzle. I love puzzles."

He wasn't sure about this idea. "When would you return?"

"Umm, I'm free in two nights."

"What if I want to change them before then?" he asked, knowing full well he would do no such thing.

"Oh. I didn't think of that." She considered the options briefly. "Well, if you must, you must. It'll still be a new puzzle."

"So you definitely want to come back in two days?"

"If it's all right, yes. I wouldn't want to intrude ..." She trailed off, doubt evident in her voice.

"It would be all right. Odd, but fine."

"And rearranging your books every other day isn't," she said with a relieved smile.

"I think trying to discern the pattern is odder than that."

"But you use such ... random patterns."

Neither spoke for a minute.

"I think it is safe to say we are both odd," he conceded.

"Agreed," she said with a smile. She sighed and stood, descending the steps and stopping at the bottom. "Two days then." She gave him a tiny smile then Disappeared.

Draco stared at the space that seconds ago had been occupied by her body, unsure if he should actually believe that their conversation had occurred. Gradually, his eyes dropped to the patch of dirt, part of the path to his garden, below where her feet had been. It was disturbed. Draco sighed and went to the edge of his cliff. He dropped a few rocks, timed them, and went inside feeling slightly out of sorts.

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Hermione returned two days later and successfully identified the system by which the books were organized. She very casually asked him if she should return in three days or the next week. He frowned and said he usually rearranged every two to three days or whenever the mood struck. She came back, and then again and again, until it became a regular occurrence. One, two, sometimes three times a week. She would knock, he would answer. They would engage in small talk, and then she would run off to his book room. He would take something...a book, work, parchment and quill...onto his front stoop and wait for her to finish. Sometimes it was an hour, sometimes it was three. There were a few times when she had to return the next day before she got the pattern.

When she was finished, she would go outside and sit with Draco for a while. They would talk some more, and she would leave. Then he would go inside and bang his head against the wall. Because he had said, yet again, that yes, she could come back. She had even started getting cocky, saying that he couldn't stump her. He wasn't trying to, and anyway, with enough time anyone could figure the patterns out.

This went on for about a month and a half. During that time, their small talk went from brief, passing comments to respectable discussions to full blown conversation. Sometimes, they would actually sit down to talk when she arrived, which might have meant that she was coming for more than just the books. They started asking about each other's days and bringing up things they had talked about the last time. It was approaching normal. Other people's definition of normal, anyway, which for Draco was weird.

Then, one time, she didn't even go up to the book room at all. They just talked. She had gone through a particularly busy few days and wanted to 'toss a few ideas around' with him, as she put it. As though they were friends who did things like that. Not that he minded. He didn't generally get a whole lot of stimulating conversation during his day.

As CEO, COO and CFO of Malfoy Enterprises, he spent his time with people with whom he only talked business. There was no one with whom he held conversations, except perhaps his secretary, and those were limited to brief synopses of their respective weekends, an occasional piece of office gossip, or an exchange of a particularly good recipe one of them had tried and tips for preparing it and possibly improving it as well.

When he first took over Malfoy Enterprises, he had spent an entire month just learning exactly what the business was. Then it took another four months to clean it up. He got rid of shady business partners and employees, ended relationships with other corrupt corporations and developed an entirely new business policy that didn't have 'bribe them, blackmail them, beat them' as the top three procedures for getting things done. Now things ran more smoothly, and Malfoy Enterprises was actually doing better than it had under his father. *Take that, Lucius*, he thought smugly.

So it felt strange, being so familiar with Hermione, and by the time she left that night, he thought she thought so too. Their goodbye was drawn out and awkward from the moment she stood up to leave. He had walked her to the door, still talking. When they reached it, they paused and said goodbye again. But the conversation was resumed, and even after he opened the door and she stepped through, he stood in the doorway and she on the porch for another few minutes, still talking, until she finally said goodnight again.

It was as though they both wanted to end the conversation, yet at the same time neither wanted it to be over. She said she would be back on Friday, but the more he thought of those awkward last moments, the more he wondered if she would have second thoughts.

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Friday morning, Draco took his broom to the edge of the cliff. He had done so many times, but when the light of the morning sun hit his eyes through his window that morning, he knew something would happen that day. Something different.

He could feel the warmth of the sun on his back as he stared down at the dark waters below, the jagged black rocks jutting up from between the waves. Something was different today, though he wasn't quite sure exactly what.

Gulls flew through his field of vision, calling out to him. His heart started pounding, as though it could sense, before his brain had formed the thought, what was about to happen. He gripped the broom tightly to keep it from jumping out of his hands.

He stared out at the sparkling blue water, and time seemed to slow. The waves seemed to move with his breathing. In, out ... in, out. The pulse of the world, in tune with his own.

Without warning, without thinking, he took a running jump off the cliff and quickly pulled the broom beneath him, directing it to fly him out over the water, far below. It was a small step in the ultimate course, but it was a start. He had *started*. The blood was pounding in his ears, and his heart was beating wildly against his ribcage.

He had made the first jump and he was okay. He sat on his broom, letting his heart slow down and his body relax, which took longer than he imagined it would. Then he lazily flew a few hundred yards over the water, admiring its power and beauty. One day, when he *really* jumped, he might miscalculate and end up shredded or broken. A very unpleasant thought. The sea was extremely powerful and commanded respect.

With a small nod of satisfaction directed at the cliff, Draco flew to the top and dismounted. Soon. Soon he would jump without his broom in his hand.

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She arrived promptly at seven-thirty, announcing her presence with a sharp rap on the door. He opened it to admit her, and she smiled as she passed him. But they did not go into the sitting room for small talk, or to the kitchen for snacks, as they had been doing for the last couple of weeks.

"Hey," she said, almost shyly.

"Hi. How are you?" It felt weird now, awkward. He had no idea why, no idea what had happened to insert this ... new, strange thing between them. If he allowed himself to admit it, the last time with her had been ... good.

"I'm good. You?"

He nodded. "The same."

She smiled. So normal, and yet, not. "Good. Well, I'll just be going then."

He shrugged. "Sure."

She practically ran out of the room.

Draco was left standing by the door. Unease crept into his veins, much like it had that first time she had come over alone. It was being alone with her again after the awkward twist. After their last time together, something had made them both run back to their respective sides of the invisible line faster than Crabbe and Goyle ran after sweets.

Draco grabbed a book...the first book he could find...and went to sit outside on the front stoop. Just like always. But this time, he was unable to concentrate. Inexplicably, his thoughts drifted to his mother. He thought about the day she had told him about his father.

Draco had always known his father was cold, calculating and a bit touched in the head. It was common knowledge that Lucius was intolerant, evil, and thought himself superior to most. Draco had even known that his father was deeply involved in the Dark Arts, and a little hidden-away part of him had long suspected that his father was a Death Eater. The only thing was, he had never seen the actual proof. It was not a topic brought up at mealtimes or discussed over tea. So it had not been *real*, and the suspicions did not make it so. The idea that his father could be a Death Eater had remained nebulous. Of course, Draco hated Muggles, and Mudbloods, and television and Coca-Cola like every upstanding, respectable pureblood.

To Draco, however, being a Death Eater meant something entirely different than just hating Mudbloods. He had heard plenty of stories about Death Eaters, even if his parents never talked about them. To him, becoming a Death Eater meant giving your life over to someone who would use and even torture his followers if sufficiently angered. He had decided after his fourth year, after rumors flew of the Dark Lord's return, never to do it, never to become one of *them*, and lose himself to another living being. That summer had been the worst of his life. When he looked back, the signs about his father were so glaring that the only explanation of why Draco hadn't read them was that he simply chose not to. But that wouldn't work forever.

At the end of his fifth year at Hogwarts, Narcissa had met him at the train station alone. Lucius was in Azkaban, thanks to bloody Harry Potter. She held her head high, despite the sideways glances and straight-up glares from other parents and a few older students. She gave him a curt nod and motioned for him to follow her. Once out of the station, she Apparated them both to their house. Still she did not speak, her cold eyes uncharacteristically bright and frantic.

It was a convincing show, and Draco caught himself shivering once or twice as he followed her through the massive house and out onto the large balcony attached to the back of the house. Narcissa walked straight through the double French doors across the patio to the stone railing that edged the balcony. Draco almost thought she would not stop, but she did when she reached the railing and clutched it tightly.

Draco stopped a short distance behind her and waited.

After a few minutes, Narcissa slowly turned around and met her son's patient gaze. She straightened to her full height and said regally, "Draco. There is ... something we must discuss."

Draco nodded, a horrible, sinking weight settling in the pit of his stomach. He had read the *Prophet*, had discussed it with his friends, and even taunted Potter. But it had all been to save face for himself and his father. Now, as he looked at his mother's red, puffy eyes, he knew before she said a word exactly what she would tell him.

Then she proceeded to bring his world crashing around him. He sat staring blankly at the grounds as she told him Lucius was, indeed, a Death Eater, and had, as reported, been at the Department of Mysteries in an attempt to retrieve something. He and a handful of his cronies, Draco's aunt and uncle included, fought with mere children his own age...Harry, Ron, Hermione and others...and had been unsuccessful in their mission.

She stopped then, and Draco looked at her listlessly. She looked as though she were on the verge of wringing the handkerchief she held into pieces.

He shifted his weight and crossed his arms, trying to get more comfortable but to no avail. No amount of physical movement could ease the tumult inside. "I ... I had heard that much, actually ..." He trailed off. When she didn't continue, Draco looked at her again and saw a strange, fierce look in her eyes. The weight in his stomach increased, and he returned to staring at the freshly bloomed roses in the back garden. "There's more, isn't there?"

She nodded and continued. The Dark Lord was angry. Very angry. His trust in Lucius had been shaky at best, and his failure only weakened him in the Dark Lord's eyes. Now, the Dark Lord wanted Draco to step up and take his father's place. Her voice faltered then, and she stopped.

He snapped his head around to look at her then, eyes narrowed. He had a thousand questions, but the big one...WHY?...refused to leave his suddenly dry lips.

Narcissa crossed the patio to him and, after searching his eyes, hesitantly reached a hand up to wipe Draco's long fringe off his forehead. "I do not know what he wants from you," she began. "Bella has given me the little information I have. I do know you will be called before him soon."

Draco peered at her unwaveringly, unsure exactly how much he should reveal of his decision of the previous summer. "And if I refuse?" he asked quietly.

Narcissa turned her back to her son and faced the garden, hiding her expression from him. "You cannot refuse, Draco! It is an honor to be hand-picked by the Dark Lord!"

Despite the confident words she spoke, Draco heard her voice waver and sensed the questioning spirit behind her statement. It was as though she had said the same thing before many times, but only now had difficulty really meaning it.

"I do not want this, Mother."

The tears in Narcissa's eyes swelled. "You have no choice," she declared. "You will go before him, or you will be killed." Then she walked away, never once letting him get so much as a glimpse of her face.

The full weight of his mother's words hit Draco like a stray Bludger. His father was in prison, and Draco and his mother were alone. Lucius had angered his master, and Draco was to take his place as a Death Eater.

Draco avoided his mother after their initial conversation and tried to go about as though it were any other summer. He could not, however, shake the feeling of dread that sucked at his life force like a parasite. Every morning when he awoke, his first thought was, *Will today be the day?*

The waiting ended one night toward the end of July. He came home from seeing his friends to find his mother, his aunt, and a few other Death Eaters milling about in the drawing room. As soon as he entered, his aunt Bellatrix grinned hungrily and went to him, roughly gripping his arm. His mother appeared tense, but she said nothing as Bellatrix informed him that he had been summoned by the Dark Lord. After a few hushed words exchanged between his mother and her sister, the group left the Manor.

He had sworn to himself that he would never give in, never take the Mark, but once he stood before the Dark Lord, he knew his mother had spoken the truth. He had no choice. He made sure to act as though the task he had been given pleased him greatly, even managing to convince himself, for the moment, anyway, that he was beyond thrilled at the opportunity. Temporarily removing himself from his own preferences, his own reality, he seemed to have been successful at convincing not only his mother and aunt, the only other people in the room, but the Dark Lord as well. He was, at the very least, allowed to leave.

When he and his mother returned home that night, his arm was still burning and the Dark Lord's words were etched into his brain. When he closed his eyes, he thought he could see them written in fire on the backs of his eyelids.

Narcissa had not spoken a word since before they had left, and her complexion was as pale as ice. They stood in the foyer, neither quite sure what to do next, but both feeling as though there was something that needed to be said.

Finally, Narcissa looked at him. "Do not be frightened, Draco." Her voice belied her own fears, sounding hollow and nearly cracked.

He chuckled bitterly and looked away. He felt as though he might vomit. It seemed as though his entire life had been forfeited, that instead of a future wide open, he saw only a single goal on which he would be focused until he either accomplished it or died trying.

When he said nothing, she began to cry. She did not sob or moan or weep, only cried small, elegant tears that tugged at Draco's heart unlike anything he had ever felt before.

"I ... I'm so scared, Draco!" she whispered between tears. "I've lost Lucius; I cannot lose you too!"

"You won't lose me, Mother," he said, surprised at the strength in his voice. It really hit him at that moment that he was probably lying to her. Something twisted inside Draco and he tasted bile.

She must have sensed it because she looked at him, tears shining in her eyes. Draco reached out to her, something he had never had cause to do before, and pulled her into an awkward hug. Narcissa clung to him as though afraid he might fade away right then.

Anger welled in Draco like a volcano threatening to erupt. She had no idea, really, all that had happened at the Riddle House that night. The Dark Lord had spoken to him alone at first, in order to provide him with the proper incentive he needed to accept his task willingly in front of Narcissa.

Distantly, he heard that she had begun to speak. She told him everything would be all right, that he needed to put up a brave, unaffected front for everyone and that she loved him.

He started at that final admission and scowled down at her. It did not matter that he had not heard those words from her lips, or anyone's, for that matter, since he was very small. She had no idea what she was talking about. *He loved her*, which was why he was in the mess he was in. If what she had said was true, how could she have put him in danger? Would she have consented to a life where she was not her own master?

"You cannot tell me you did not expect this," he said bitingly, pulling out of her arms. "I never wanted *any* of this, but thanks to you and Father, we are all probably going to be killed."

Narcissa paled and her eyes went wide. "What do you mean?"

Draco hastily recovered his arm. "I *mean*, Mother, that I have now been pulled into his service and given an impossible assignment. Impossible!" he yelled and then laughed almost hysterically. "You and Father have ruined my life! I *have* no life from this moment on, only a death sentence over which I have little control. I *wil* never forgive you!"

He stormed from the room, slamming his door as hard as he possibly could before rushing to be sick in the bathroom. Draco avoided his mother as much as possible for the remainder of the summer, but he did not forget what she said about showing a brave face to those around him. When a friend casually mentioned a broken cabinet, Draco felt relief for the first time since receiving the Mark that would permanently alter the course of his life.

A few drops of water splattered on the dirt path, drawing Draco's attention from his thoughts. He looked up to see dark clouds in the sky, ominous and threatening, and as if on cue, he heard a distant peal of thunder. He expected a shower would begin any moment, but the drops seemed to stop after only a few minutes, though the thunder continued to roll.

He wondered if Hermione had noticed, tucked away in his book room, or if she had been too preoccupied. Draco knew all too well how absorbing the task of rearranging his books could be, and imagined that sorting through them, attempting to discover the link to the order in which they were arranged, would be equally, if not more so, enthralling. In all of her visits, Hermione had not once left the room unless she was either finished or absolutely had to leave in order to get some semblance of a good night's sleep.

Draco stood and stretched. He had been sitting for a long time on a hard wooden step and felt the need to stretch his legs. The impending rain brought his thoughts round to his garden, and setting down the book he had not even opened, he started along the familiar, well-worn path to his garden. The staked tomatoes were at their peaks, and he absently ran his fingers over a particularly ripe specimen, inhaling the fresh scent of the tomato plant. Walking in the dirt kicked up the rich, loamy smell of the earth. Draco nodded in satisfaction as he considered what he would prepare for dinner that night. He did not know if he would be cooking for one or two, but he thought it better to

be safe. He picked a few tomatoes and carried them back to the front porch and resumed his place on the steps.

He loved the feel of the air just before a rain, the crackling tension and the hint of ozone. It had been like this on his mother's birthday the year before, the last time he had seen her. Clouds had threatened all morning, but they held off pouring their offering on the earth until after Draco and his mother had spoken. She had told him many things that afternoon, but most ardently that she was proud of his choice to defect. He told her how hard it was, about the days he spent alone, talking to no one except occasionally the house-elf who for some reason had taken a liking to him. Narcissa had encouraged him to continue, to push through despite his loneliness, and reminded him that he hadn't defected to make friends.

Draco had laughed at that and then they both fell silent.

When she continued, Narcissa told him she did not think she would ever see him marry. He had laughed again, thinking that it was an odd thing to be worrying about during a war when there was no guarantee that any of them would live past the next day or week or month. Marriage was the last thing on his mind ... in fact, not even on his mind at all, and he told her as much.

She had looked at him then and smiled so brightly that it lit her entire face. She told him that he would find someone so amazing, so incredible, that she would change his life forever, change his world.

Who knows? Maybe she'll be a Muggle-born

Draco had scoffed at that, through force of habit more than anything else. He had found that old habits were hard to break.

At that, Narcissa had quirked an eyebrow, cocked her head, and peered straight into the most hidden crevices of his heart and soul, saying, "Son, never say 'never.'"

Her statement was not profound, or deep, or new.

For some reason, his thoughts had immediately jumped to Hermione, probably because she was the only Muggle-born he really spent any time with. From birth, he had known that he was expected to marry a suitable pureblooded witch to continue the Malfoy line. Despite all the changes in his life, it hadn't occurred to him that there might be other options.

And so, months later, Draco's thoughts turned to Hermione, and he thought about the word "never," and the oddest things happened when he did. The entire world went still around him, and then a breeze came up over the field and the forest that surrounded the house. It was one of those slow-building breezes where you hear it and see it before you feel it. He saw the treetops blowing with its force and heard the rustle of leaves and branches brushing against each other in the cool autumn wind. He kept watching the trees sway until he finally felt the breeze reach him. What was odd was that what hit him wasn't nearly as strong as what moved the trees. Maybe nature was trying to tell him something

His mother's words about a witch someday changing his world seemed to be on the breeze, whispering in his ears and running through his hair.

He knew that if Narcissa had been there and had access to his thoughts, she would have laughed at the fact that he was sitting outside his house just because Hermione was inside it. He was hiding from what his mother had said, trying very hard to keep her words from coming true. Because it was Hermione. The one witch he knew who really could change his whole world. And Draco wasn't sure if he was ready for such a change, or if he even wanted things to change at all. His world had already been uprooted and tossed on its side twice, and he didn't know if he could handle it happening a third time.

He often wondered what his mother had meant by her simple yet telling statement. Was she telling him that she would accept someone of impure blood? Perhaps cautioning him against closing doors before he even came to them? Or was there more to it? Did she want him to be with a Muggle-born? Or, more specifically, Hermione?

The simplest and most obvious answer was that she hadn't meant anything by it at all. Snape had once told him about a Muggle churchman called Occam, whose razor said that the simplest explanation was always the most likely. It was a good theory, except there had been a glint in her eyes when she'd said it. Had there been no glint, he would have accepted the razor's theory.

At first glance, it seemed like just a harmless piece of advice from a mother to her son, but Draco knew his mother and believed that something more lay behind the comment. He had tried to recall all the occasions on which he had ever mentioned Hermione around his mother, and could only name a few. Then again, he had mentioned her that day, telling his mother that Hermione alone had remembered or thought to find out about his birthday the month before.

Nonetheless, his mother's comment bothered him, and he often wondered whether she had been consciously trying to push him towards Hermione or simply musing over the possibilities.

In the two months between Narcissa's birthday and her death, Draco had paid attention to Hermione for completely new reasons. He considered the possibility that his mother had known something he didn't know and tried to perhaps see what she might have seen. He noticed that Hermione was pretty when she smiled, that it was cute when she chewed her bottom lip when she was thinking hard, and that her laugh was the most amazing sound he had ever heard.

There was one thought that sent his head spinning till he felt dizzy. If his mother had never mentioned marriage or Muggle-borns, would he have ever started thinking about Hermione in that way? Would he be staring at the ceiling, night after night, wishing she was there with him and tormented by his imagination of a life with her, a life he knew he couldn't have? Would those feelings have ever surfaced, and if they had, would he have been more or less accepting of them?

It always gave him a headache to think about it, and he could never arrive at a reasonable conclusion. He was left trying to push it all aside and resolving to think about it some other time. Tomorrow.

But today, she was here, in his house, looking through his meticulously arranged stacks of books, as though she liked it there, as though she was comfortable in his house. With just him. It was simply too much.

The book lay open in his lap, and he was still staring out at the swaying trees when Hermione emerged from the house.

She sat down on the step beside him this time, and he thought about the line they had recently crossed. He still was not sure what it meant, or if it meant anything at all. He only knew he was moving into uncharted territory, but he seemed to be doing okay. He was even able to admit, finally, that he was comfortable with her company, that he could pass an hour with her without feeling as though he might drown.

When she came out to the porch, she didn't say anything right away. He looked up to see her watching the trees.

"Odd weather," she said. "I think it's going to rain."

"Marvelous observation," he quipped.

"I have always enjoyed the weather just before the rain. Colours seem so much brighter." She looked at him. "Speaking of colour, have you even looked at the samples Ginny left?"

Draco chuckled and leaned over to pick at a tuft of grass. "No."

"She's been asking if you had, as it has been over a month. Eventually, she's going to come back and encourage you to pick the last few colours, and you know what Ginny's like when she's 'encouraging.'"

"Reckon I had better get on it then," he said, feeling disinclined to follow through.

"I think I've got it figured out," Hermione said after a moment of silence.

"And?" he asked, putting the book away and looking at her.

She cast him an apprehensive look, the same way she did every time she was about to reveal her solution to the pattern. "The books are in order by year of publication first; that part was easy. Then they're ordered alphabetically by the author's middle name."

"And if there isn't a middle name?"

"Then by the city of publication."

"You are right."

She let out a deep breath and nodded to herself. "Good."

They spent the next five minutes in further silence. Draco tried to remain completely calm despite the fact that Hermione could not seem to stay still. Either she was uncomfortable on the steps, or she had too much caffeine before coming over. As there was not a lot of room on the steps, whenever she moved she invariably bumped into or brushed against him. The contact made him shiver in a not exactly terrible way.

She fidgeted a *lot*.

"So. Draco. Uhm, how are you?"

He frowned. "I don't understand the question."

"What's not to understand?" she returned, her arm brushing overlong against his.

"How am I? I am fine. Are you under the impression I am *not* fine? Have I said something to make you think that?"

She gave him a small smile. "No, I...it's just ... it's been almost a year since, you know, your mum died, and I thought ... maybe you might want to talk about it. And, well, I was there, so I thought maybe you would be comfortable talking to me."

Annoyance bubbled up inside him. Though he was not ashamed to have cried when his mother died, at the same time he did not like to be reminded of it. Nor did he especially want to talk about his mother, considering that he was quite sore with her at the moment for addling his brain.

"I do not wish to talk," he said shortly.

Hermione bit her lip, and Draco prepared himself for her to insist that he really *should* talk about it, that it would be good for him, healthy even. He had a few retorts prepared as he waited for her next words.

"I figured you would say that."

He looked at her suspiciously. "You did?"

"Naturally. Harry and Ron ... whenever I think they should talk about what might be bothering them, or think about something that they had seen, or something that had happened to them, they just play Quidditch."

Draco laughed. "That sounds just about right."

Hermione looked at him. "I know we're different, and that you are not the kind of man to talk about his feelings. But I also know that sometimes it helps to talk. I ... I just wanted you to know that, if you need someone to talk to ..." She trailed off, looking down at her hands.

He felt a rush of gratitude toward her at her understanding and offer of a friendly ear and very nearly poured out every single thought he'd had about his mother over the year since her death. However, he was still himself, and he was not used to such offers, or to sharing personal details about his life. He thought that, of everyone he knew, she would be the one he really could confide in and trust, even though he wasn't sure of the status of their relationship.

"I miss her," he said in almost a whisper.

Hermione looked at him but said nothing, only moved an inch closer to him so that their arms were in solid contact. It was a simple gesture, but it said a lot. She was there for him if he needed her, if only to hold his hand again while he mourned his mother all over again.

But somehow, he did not think he would. She had wanted him to move on, and he would.

A few glowworms started twinkling by the edge of the woods, and Hermione looked at him and smiled. It was a dangerous moment, and they both seemed to realize it at the same time.

Hermione looked down at her hands where they rested on her knees and deliberately twisted a ring around a finger on her right hand. It was made of some sort of silver metal with a small red stone in a simple setting.

"I should go," she said but didn't stand up. "I guess I'll see you soon, then. Right?"

This was how every night ended. She asked if she could come back, and he always said yes.

But it was so easy. All he had to do to avoid sitting outside on his front stoop while a complete freak tried to decipher one of his freak habits...AGAIN...was to say no. No, she couldn't come back. She couldn't come back because he didn't want to get used to seeing her scowl at the peephole in his front door, or skip steps as she rushed up to the book room, or twirl her curls in her fingers when she was nervous. Just say no, for once, and he would never have to sit alone on his porch again. A traitorous voice told him that the same thing might be true if he said yes enough times. Never alone again.

Of course, this all came to him immediately *after* he shrugged, despite his pounding heart, and said, "Sure, I guess." He would wait until she was gone to bang his head against the wall. Again.

Now she stood. "How about Monday?"

His brain told him how easy a "no" would make things. "Sure."

She smiled. "Honestly, Malfoy. *Do* try and stump me this time," she teased.

His brain was screaming at his mouth for its horrid betrayal. The inner battle made it nearly impossible to form an intelligent response, so he merely grunted.

She said something else that he really wished he could have heard because she had a sparkle in the corner of her eye, but his brain was screaming too loudly. He nodded, and she Disappeared.

Draco groaned and went inside to commence the head-banging.

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A/N: Thank you for reading this chapter! I know it was a long wait, but I think it was worth it, and I hope you just take my word for it! I'm having more fun with this story than I can possibly say.

Many thanks to my three wonderful betas: Z, Eilonwy, and finally Buzzy. Thanks for all the help, encouragement, friendship and have I mentioned help? :D There are not enough words to thank you properly, though I will continue to try.

The beautiful banner was made by the ever-amazing moonjameskitten! Isn't it incredible?

Three

Chapter 4 of 5

Draco finally buys paint, and the Weasleys offer to help.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. This is all for fun.



Chapter 3

Draco woke up one morning and felt it again, that strange burning inside his heart, and he knew, before the sunlight struck his face, that he would jump that day. He got out of bed, quickly threw on some clothes and, without even pausing for a quick bite of breakfast, grabbed his broom and went directly to the edge of the cliff.

He stood there for a while, watching the waves crash against the rocks. He thought about Hermione. She had not returned to poke through his books, as she had said she would, nor once since then. All she gave by way of explanation was a brief note sent by owl that Monday morning stating she was busy and would not be coming over. She had not rescheduled.

On the one occasion he had seen her, at a birthday party for one of the Weasleys, she put distance between them in everything she did. When they were alone in the kitchen for a few brief moments, things between them did not feel the same. There was a strange, electrical tension in the air that he sensed she felt as well. As soon as she could, Hermione left the room.

It both annoyed and relieved Draco.

He was annoyed because she was behaving as if absolutely nothing had happened. They had spent a few weeks where they were more than just two people who were friends with Harry Potter, but it seemed that was to be all. Just a few weeks. Exactly *what* they had been didn't even have a name. He wondered if you could be considered simply an acquaintance with someone you had known almost ten years, someone who had held your hand when your mother died, who had fought by your side and fended off Death Eaters with you, and who had spent time in your house, going through your things and sharing conversation. He doubted it, but they had not progressed to real friendship, leaving them somewhere in between. Their brief relationship, or whatever it had been, remained unnamable.

The fact still remained that it was gone, and it was not his fault. He couldn't think of anything at all that he had done wrong no matter how hard he tried. She behaved exactly the same toward him as she had during the War: friendly but distant, making it clear in silent but obvious ways that she did not want him to be a part of her life.

At the birthday party she had laughed and carried on around him, but never *with* him, not in that easy, casual way you have with friends. If it even looked like they might be nearing that level of intimacy, she was sure to clam up and within minutes she was out of the room, leaving him silently seething.

Draco kicked a rock and watched it sail out over the edge of the cliff and drop towards the water far below.

He stared down at the rocks below as the sun slowly made its way higher in the sky. He took a deep breath, then another, then another. The world seemed to still around him again. He closed his eyes for a brief second, and his mother's face flashed in his memory. When he opened his eyes, he waited one second and then jumped, broom in hand.

Draco counted two full seconds before pulling his broom underneath him. Two full seconds of free fall, of increasing speed, plummeting toward the sharp rocks below. He had fallen for two full seconds. The force of gravity continued pulling him down for a fraction of a second even after he had straddled the broom. He frowned, knowing he would have to examine his fall in more detail and adjust his calculations. Of course he would not stop falling as soon as the broom was beneath him, which he should have anticipated. Timing was crucial to his plan; he couldn't afford to be off even by a fraction of a second.

He repeated the jump a few times and then stayed on his broom to think about this unexpected twist. The idea of jumping off the cliff was scary enough already, knowing that if he messed up even slightly, he could wind up sliced into pieces, food for the sharks. He would have to work out exactly how long it took the broom to catch him and whether that time changed depending on how far he fell before he called it.

Finally deciding to think about the new development another day, he flew to the surface of the water and floated lazily, allowing the gentle waves to lap at the hand he let dangle in the water.

His thoughts returned to Hermione. It wasn't as if he had asked to be part of her life or begged for her to grant him the honor of her presence, and he didn't know why she acted as though the time they had spent together never happened. They had gotten along splendidly, better than he ever would have imagined. Perhaps she had never told Harry and Ron of her visits, and so when they were together, she acted as she had before it all started. But still there remained the fact that she had stopped coming over. He had not once asked her to come over, invited her to come back, or encouraged her to keep coming. Perhaps that was the issue. She might have felt she was putting more effort into the ... whatever it was than he, and then finally, after the visit when she had asked about his mother, she decided he wasn't worth the effort.

Maybe she thought he didn't want her there anymore or felt bad for asking about Narcissa. But had she honestly expected that he would open up to her simply because she asked, simply because they had a few things in common? Had she been offended that he didn't break down and cry about his mother's death?

The one time she had seen him emotional had been completely unintentional: she had been the one who chose to see what the letter he had received was about and found him in his room, rocking back and forth on his bed. She chose to stay with him and comfort him. But after that, he refused to show any sort of emotion, especially around her. One thing he had learned from his youth was that broadcasting his emotions could give others the means by which to hurt him.

But Hermione ... she was different. She fell between the two extremes, neither hot nor cold. She showed emotion as was appropriate for the occasion or circumstances, such that he had always been genuinely touched when, during the war, she turned some of her feelings toward him. Those moments had only been in the interest of furthering the cause, but they still had meant something to him, whether he wished to accept that fact or not.

He had lost the tentative friendship he had begun with her. The one real opportunity he had to open up and let her in, he hadn't even recognized until too late. He couldn't help but wonder why she had made plans to return.

Draco scowled. The last thing he wanted to do was ask her about it.

When it came right down to it, Hermione's rejection of his company without so much as an explanation or a row made him feel as though he was unworthy of her friendship, at least in her eyes. As though he wasn't good enough for her. He did not generally enjoy thinking about "good enoughs," because he already knew he really *wasn't* good enough, especially for someone like her. He would spend the rest of his life with blood on his hands, unable to get it off, while she would remain perfectly clean. Not perfect, not at all...he wasn't deluded. But not like him, not even close.

At the same time, however, he was also relieved. He was back to knowing where they were. More specifically, he knew where he was in that void where only his mother's words and not Hermione's non-friendship attention could screw with his head. Now there was nothing, the way that really, there had always been nothing. It was clear as crystal once again that they were on opposite sides of a line and that was where they would stay.

Knowing this for certain was a relief. Draco did not have to bother trying to deny anything; there was nothing to deny.

He spent a great deal of time not denying it.

Somewhere to his right, Draco heard a splash. He looked and saw nothing, but jumped into the water for a brief swim, leaving his broom to float in the air until he needed it. The water was cool, perfect for the warmth that was already beginning to permeate the day.

After his swim, Draco felt refreshed. He went into his house, and the first thing he noticed was the stark whiteness of the walls.

Draco had never followed through with picking out paint colours for the rest of his house. Two weeks after Hermione stopped spending time with him, Ginny and Harry came on a Saturday, and together they chose the remaining colours. It had felt strange having them in his house now, after it had been suffused with Hermione's essence for so long. Perhaps it had something to do with the change in company. Harry was a good friend, but Hermione's presence in his home had been different. It had made him feel something he had never felt before: she made his home feel full, though he had no idea what that really meant.

They chose Light Wicker for the dining room, Peaceful for his book room and Pale Lupin for his study. With careful thought and a few trips upstairs, Draco chose Morning for his bedroom. Ginny was actually impressed that he had managed to choose a colour all on his own, and with a little conviction behind it. He didn't tell her that he had chosen it to complement Hermione's painting. They left him with five colour samples, two from the previous time and three from that day, and instructed him to purchase one gallon of paint in each.

The walls were unlike everything outside of his house. The sea was blue and green and grey and black, depending on its mood. The grass and trees were a dozen different shades of green, his garden was greens with bursts of other colors: reds, yellows, oranges, purples. Life was meant to be lived in color, and six weeks after choosing paint colors, Draco was finally tired of the white walls. They reminded him of Hermione's visits, and perhaps if he changed them, the memories would fade. He decided to buy the paint that day, as soon as he had eaten something.

He showered first, and as he dressed for the day, he saw, as he did every day, the painting she had given him. The stars were so incredible they twinkled even in the full sunlight.

Every time he saw it, his mind wandered to the question he had been unable to answer: *why had she done that for him?* It plagued him, especially now that she had apparently deemed him less than worthy of her friendship. At one point, he might have been able to argue that the painting symbolized the beginning of something between them, a kind of white flag from her to him, surrendering her earlier reluctance to get to know him better.

Now, though Did she regret painting it or giving it to him? Did she want it back? He had thought briefly about taking it down, but decided it really was too beautiful to put away. Leaving the painting up ensured that he thought of her a little bit every day, and he didn't want that to change. If he didn't think about her often enough, she would be able to sneak up on him unawares when he had let his guard down enough to *really* think about her, in ways that he wasn't prepared to deal with. Anyway, she'd done it for him, and it would stay. Until it drove him mad, quite likely.

But what did it mean?

She had cared enough to paint him something that incredible and personal, but now she could not stand to be in the same room. It didn't make much sense, and he was forced to once again consider what he might have done to upset or offend her. He could not think of anything.

Draco turned away from the painting and fastened a set of cuff links. With a brief nod at his reflection in the mirror, he left his bedroom. He ate a leisurely breakfast before heading to his office in London.

In his professional life, the last two months had afforded him considerably more free time. Now that Malfoy Enterprises was running the way he wanted it to and he had assembled a staff he trusted, Draco had begun delegating some of the day-to-day work, freeing him of the tedium of endless meetings and minor decision-making. He focused his attentions on rebuilding the corporate image and exploring new opportunities, rather than the mechanics of management, which kept him busy, but on a very flexible timetable. He went to the office a few times a week, as needed, and brought reports and contracts that he needed to review back to the cliff house.

Once settled comfortably in his dragon leather office chair, he checked his schedule and had his secretary reschedule his few appointments. As he read his daily mail, sipping on a cup of coffee, it occurred to him that he had no idea where to find paint. He called his secretary into his office.

"Paint?" she asked, frowning slightly. "Why do you want paint?"

Draco shrugged. "My friend says it's better than the magical way."

She quirked an eyebrow. "Are you redecorating the Manor?"

"No, my home actually. A ... friend who has been helping me recommends paint."

"I see. I know very little about it, and not at all where one might procure it. However, I will find out, sir."

He thanked her, and in half an hour he had a list of shops and addresses.

"This one is closest to Diagon Alley and carries the paint you're looking for. I would start at the Leaky Cauldron and go from there," she said.

"They don't sell paint *in* Diagon Alley?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Malfoy. Witches and wizards generally just use their wands. You'll have to go into Muggle London for it."

"The Muggle world?" Draco repeated with some trepidation, scolding himself for not realizing it earlier. He had never, not once, ventured through the Leaky Cauldron's less obvious portal into Muggle London.

His secretary smiled patiently. "Yes, sir."

"All right," he said grumpily. "Thank you."

Draco finished his mail and resignedly Apparated to the Leaky Cauldron. Once inside, he ordered a butterbeer with a firewhisky chaser. He had to prepare himself for the task of finding the paint store. He saw Muggle London every time he went to his office, but he never imagined having to navigate his way through it. Only once since the end of the war had he been required to venture out, and he had allowed Harry to Side-Along Apparate him directly to the restaurant where they were having dinner. He downed his drink and then looked at the door to the bar. He glared at the door, as though angry that it had no answers for him.

He put the glass down and, leaving a few Sickles on the bar, moved to the door. He peered through the grimy glass, trying to see what he was getting himself into, but could barely make anything out at all. All he could see was a lamppost. Well, that seemed normal enough. He pushed the door open and stepped into Muggle London.

It was nothing like Diagon Alley, and he felt like kicking himself for not getting specific directions from his secretary. There were buildings everywhere, and shops, but it was huge. He stared around him, willing the scenery to give him a sign as to which way he should go. After walking for half an hour, he found no sign of the paint store and concluded that he was quite hopelessly lost. He stood on a street corner and, to his chagrin, recognized the run down, dingy entrance to the Leaky Cauldron down one side street. He groaned and went into the nearest shop he saw: a post delivery office.

Draco walked purposefully to the counter where a plump, cheerful woman asked if she could help him.

"I hope so. I'm looking for this address."

The woman gave him a wide smile and then pointed out the window. "Stay on Charing Cross Road and a few streets down you'll come to Shaftesbury Avenue. Turn right. Then three streets on the right, and it's after that. You can't miss it. Called Leyland SDM."

Draco stared at her. "Would you mind writing that down?"

She nodded enthusiastically and did as he asked.

Armed with a piece of paper and a general idea of what he was supposed to do, Draco left the post office.

Another half an hour later, after somehow making a wrong turn and asking an old man to help him, Draco found himself in front of the shop. There was stuff all over the pavement, and he couldn't help but be fascinated. He spent five minutes outside, poking through the bins that contained all kinds of gadgets he knew nothing about. Signs were posted for each bin: roller brushes, paint trays, blotter brushes, buckets and more. There were even a few tall wooden contraptions with two parallel planks connected by shorter, smaller wooden bars. He looked through each bin, wondering at the uses of some of the items with a childlike expression on his face.

When he had gone through all the bins, he went into the actual store. Row after row of gadgets filled his field of view, including a large section of what were called 'power tools.' He looked around and saw a sign that said, 'Paint,' and made his way toward it, stopping to look at anything that grabbed his eye.

When he arrived at the paint counter, he saw there was someone already there. He stood and paid no attention to the petite woman in line in front of him until she spoke. Then the bushy brown curls and posture...standing with her weight on her right leg and her knee cocked out slightly...started screaming at him. He tilted his head to focus on the sound of her voice.

"Granger?"

She spun around, hair flying out behind her. It was obvious from the expression on her face that he was the last person she expected to meet in the paint section of a Muggle paint shop somewhere in the middle of London.

She recovered quickly. "Malfoy? What are you doing here?"

He gave her his best 'isn't it obvious; are you really that thick?' look and held up the paint samples he had brought with him. But his voice was momentarily stolen from him at the complete surprise of running into *her*.

"Finally decided to paint?" she asked, a smug-ish expression on her face.

He nodded and took a deep breath, hoping his vocal cords would vibrate as they were supposed to. "You?" he asked.

"I'm painting my bedroom."

He glanced at the paint sample in her hand and knew that when he dreamt next, it would be of her lying in bed in a room with pale yellow walls.

"Here you are, miss." The man behind the counter set a large can of what he assumed must be paint on the counter, and Hermione turned around to inspect it.

"Thank you," she said, taking the paint can from him.

"You're welcome," he said. Hermione stepped away and the man looked at Draco. "May I help you?"

He stepped up to the counter. Hermione was watching him, a patient, amused expression on her face. "Yes. I need paint."

"Well, this is the right place."

Hermione sniggered.

Draco set the paint samples on the counter. "I need these six colors."

"How much?"

"One Galleon each."

"You mean gallon," the man corrected.

"Yes," said Draco.

The man examined each sample, then said, "Which finish?"

Draco racked his brain trying to remember if Ginny has said anything about 'finish.' He started to panic but Hermione moved beside him.

"Eggshell, I should think."

The man looked at Draco, who nodded, having no choice but to rely on Hermione's help.

"Right. Be about thirty minutes."

Draco blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah. Just got the one machine, mate."

"Okay."

"He'll just wait in the shop," chimed Hermione. The man nodded and started to prepare the paint.

Draco watched as the man took a container of paint from a shelf and pried the lid off. Then he set the open container inside a metal box and, using the paint sample Draco had given him, put information into a computer. Draco had only seen a computer once, when he and Harry had stopped into a Muggle shop in order for Harry to purchase something for Ginny. He had been fascinated and had asked Harry questions nonstop for the next half an hour, trying his best to understand everything he could. He hadn't had much success.

Then Draco saw a few streams of liquid pour from the contraption into the paint container. The man then took out the container, put the lid back on, and put it **aback** into the contraption. He hit a button, and the whole thing began to shake noisily.

He looked at Hermione, who was still watching him in amusement. "Would you ... explain it to me?" he asked.

She smiled. "Sure. Basically, in each of those containers is white paint. Each paint color is made up of a combination of a few basic colors, which are added in small, carefully measured amounts to the white paint, and mixed in that machine. The result is the color on the card."

He nodded, watching the machine vibrate. "Thanks."

A few moments passed between them in silence. Then, "I honestly thought you'd get someone to help you with this. Ginny or Harry, or ... Ron," she finished lamely.

He sniffed. "I am capable of doing things on my own, thank you."

"I know," she said with a patient smile. "But we're in the Muggle world. Are you sure you didn't just follow me here?"

He scoffed. "I don't even know where 'here' is. I've been wandering through this bloody city for over an hour looking for a shop that sells paint." He said it as if he was bragging, but quickly realized he was admitting to her that he had been lost and was essentially still lost. He didn't think he could find the Leaky Cauldron again if his life depended on it. Not that it mattered to a wizard, of course; he could always get himself home.

Hermione giggled. "Really? You could have asked for help."

"I did. In Diagon Alley, and at the post office, and some random old man on the street. Maybe I just didn't need *your* help. Or Ginny's or Ron's."

"Maybe," she said, regarding him and crossing her arms. "All right, if you don't need any help at all, tell me how you're paying."

Bugger. He only had wizard money on him. It must have shown in his face.

She laughed again. "Don't worry, I'll get it. You can owe me."

Draco scowled. He didn't like owing people money. "How much?"

"It'll be about 150 pounds."

He blinked. "Is that a lot?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, a bit."

"Oh. How much in Galleons?"

"Thirty."

He raised his eyes. "Really? I wouldn't have expected it to be so much."

Hermione smiled. "I reckon not, as you've had no experience buying paint or much of anything Muggle. But really, you can afford it."

"Of course," he said with a scoff. "That is beside the point! I could just color the walls by magic and save myself the effort."

"Shh!" she hissed, pushing him into an aisle and out of sight of other patrons. "We are surrounded by Muggles. Watch what you say." She paused. Then, "If you really don't want to paint the Muggle way, you should tell the bloke mixing the paint."

Draco waved dismissively, looking around him, his attention completely elsewhere. "No, I'll do it," he said distractedly. They ended up in an aisle he had not yet perused, and he had just found a display of oddly shaped metal pointy things. He thought they looked like small, twisty knives, but they had no shafts.

"What are all of these?" he asked.

She blinked and followed his line of sight to the wares in question. "Drill bits," she said.

"What's a drill bit?"

She hesitated a moment, then said, "It goes in a drill. You can make holes with drills, or insert screws ..." A smile slowly formed on her face at his blank expression. "Want to know what a drill is?"

He nodded and spent the time remaining until the paint was ready listening to Hermione answer all of his questions about things in the store, especially the power tools. When the paint was ready, she paid for it, and even bought Draco a drill bit. Together they carried their seven cans of paint outside, and Draco shrank the cans to fit into their pockets. He handed hers to her.

"Thanks," she said, taking it from him.

He shrugged and handed her thirty-one Galleons. "Thanks. I guess it was a good thing I ran into you."

She smiled. "Reckon so."

They stood looking at each other for what seemed to Draco like forever. It felt awkward, but it also felt ... almost natural. It was the first time that they had been alone together in almost two months, and Hermione had perpetuated it. She could have left him there in the paint section, but she hadn't. He wasn't sure quite what to make of it.

She smiled again and they both began to speak. She got her sentence out first.

"Are you hungry?"

He resisted the urge to gape at her. In two months, she had not made an ounce of effort to spend time with him, and now, when he had run into her quite accidentally, she had not only stayed in the shop and guided him through the paint purchasing process, but was seeking to extend her afternoon with him. Between his mother and Pansy, he had long ago given up all attempts to understand women, and so he did not even try to figure out why Hermione had asked if he was hungry. Even though he desperately wanted to know.

Then he had to think about her question. He hadn't had lunch, and a glance at his watch told him it was past two, meaning he should be hungry. There was definitely some kind of feeling in his stomach, but he couldn't say for sure it was hunger.

"Yes," he said finally, cautiously.

"Want to grab something?"

One part of him, the prideful, spiteful, vengeful part, wanted to say no. She had ended their relationship without so much as a by your leave, and he should just let her know in no uncertain terms that he preferred the new arrangement. He was also a little scared, deep down inside, because he knew it wouldn't last. They might have lunch, but she was only being polite. Tomorrow, things would return to normal.

Another part, however, had missed her laugh, her smile, the way her eyes lit up when she was passionate about something, and wanted to say yes. This was the part that had said, "Yes," every time she had asked if she could come to his house. He had taken to calling it The Traitor because it encouraged the kinds of thoughts that could only lead to his heart being crushed.

However, his prideful part was soft-spoken when compared to The Traitor, who yelled and screamed and begged. "Sure."

Hermione let out a breath. "Okay. I live near here, so I know a lot of good places. What do you want to eat?"

"You live *here*?"

She blinked. "Yes ..."

"In Muggle London."

"Yes ..."

It made sense, but he had never really thought about where she lived. He looked around him and down the busy avenue.

"You live near here?" he asked, seeing only businesses and theatres lining the streets.

"A few streets over, right on Soho Square. It's a bit pricey, but I love it."

Draco knew nothing about Soho Square and so could only nod. "Oh," he said, looking back at her. "Er ... Something nice."

Hermione nodded and looked up and down the street. "Will French food do? You've had a rough morning," she said with a playful smile. "And I know how much you enjoy eating food that's hard to pronounce. It's a bit pricey, but the food is worth it."

"French sounds perfect," he said.

She grinned. "Good. Follow me; it's just up the street a bit."

He nodded and fell in step slightly behind her and to her left.

After a moment, she turned around. "I didn't mean you had to literally follow me; you *could* walk beside me."

"Right," he said, slightly embarrassed, and he sped up to match her stride, feeling increasingly antsy and fidgety. When had it suddenly become normal to invite him to eat with her? The silence lengthened as they walked back toward Charing Cross, and he wanted to say something, anything, to relieve it.

"So, you live here." He could have hit himself. They had been through that already.

"Yes. A few blocks that way," she said, stopping and pointing. "If you turn right on Charing Cross and take the second street on the left, then it's just a short walk to the square."

"Why here? In Muggle London, I mean."

She shrugged. "I like it. I feel so at peace here. Muggles are always rushing about, and it's fun to watch. Helps remind me to appreciate what I have, what I worked for and the peace we live in now." They walked past Stacey St and Hermione stopped. "Here we are."

Draco followed her eyes and saw a sign that read 'Incognito.' He gave her a sideways look.

"Trust me, the food is amazing. Come on." She pulled him into the restaurant where the maitre'd led them to a small, two-person table in a corner beside a small set of steps.

Draco was thankful for the experience he had gained dining in Muggle restaurants with Harry and Ron when they'd been on missions during the war...small, somewhat unclean places though they had been...and that one time since.

Their waiter approached after they had been sitting for a few minutes and explained the specials, then left to give them time to look at the menu. The prices were all in pounds, but after the experience at the paint shop, he was able to roughly guess at the cost of each plate. He glanced at Hermione, wondering again what she meant by asking him to eat in such a nice restaurant.

When the waiter returned, Hermione ordered the Roast Sea Bass with Braised Endive and Sauce Vierge and a glass of Pinot Grigio. Draco chose the Honey Roasted Breast of Duck with Pomme Fondant and ordered a glass of Chateau Sergeant Bordeaux.

Despite a few moments of napkin-fiddling and awkward glances early on, once the food arrived, not a moment of the meal passed uncomfortably. They ate and talked as though they were friends who hadn't seen each other in a while and were making up for lost time. They had never talked like that before, as though they mattered to each other, even on their most open evenings in his kitchen, though they had come close, that one night when she had not gone up to the book room at all. As he realized it, a small lump formed in the pit of his stomach because he knew how that had ended and did not want to think about it too much.

Draco couldn't believe how easy it was to talk to her. She listened as though she really cared about what he said, making intelligent, thoughtful remarks and asking probing questions. They didn't discuss anything profound or life-changing, but the whole *thing* was life-changing in that small, ripple-effect sort of way. It made just a tiny splash, but the long-term repercussions would be huge. He could feel it.

And they laughed. He couldn't remember ever laughing so hard, or so often, and most definitely not all in one sitting. Something inside him swelled impossibly at the idea, the knowledge, that he could make her laugh like that. The traitorous part of his mind had long ago silenced the prideful part, and his thoughts wandered with little inhibition around the idea of her. With him. *Them*.

They continued talking even after they were finished eating and ordered dessert: Vanilla Pannacotta with Poached Rhubarb and a scoop of vanilla ice cream, which they shared. When they had finished eating and just a few puddles of melted ice cream remained on the plate, Draco felt completely at ease. Then he began to get worried, a tiny worm niggling in his gut, because he did not ever want to stop. He had never felt so sure of the world than when she was smiling at him, sipping gracefully from her glass of wine, her eyes sparkling.

It was a false sense of intimacy, however, and Draco should have paid more attention to the paths his thoughts were taking. He realized that he still very much wanted to know what had happened two months previously that caused her to stop coming over.

He almost stopped himself in time, his conscious mind almost caught up to the stream of thoughts racing beside it, but realization came a moment too late. Draco opened his mouth and asked her the seemingly harmless question he had not been able to get out of his brain.

"Why didn't you come back?"

Hermione's smile faded.

As soon as the words were out of Draco's mouth, he wanted to impale himself on his dinner knife. His mind raced in circles, trying to answer the question he was internally screaming: Why had he done that?

But he had done it, and it couldn't be undone, because everything flew back into place. The prideful part of his mind trounced The Traitor, reclaiming its place at the front of Draco's consciousness, its claws sunk deep.

"Oh, well, uhm, actually ..." she stuttered, looking around at anything but him, clutching at the napkin in her lap. "It's ... a long story ..."

At that moment, their waiter came by with the check and politely reminded them that the restaurant closed at three...now ten minutes past...to prepare for dinner.

Hermione looked as though she would rather do anything than answer him. Then something started beeping, and Hermione jumped. She reached into her bag and rummaged around for a moment before looking at him sheepishly. "Alarm. I ... I've got to meet Ron." She stood, quickly. "I'm sorry, I really am."

Draco's mirth had evaporated when her smile froze and the light dancing in her eyes faded. He wanted to be as far away from her as possible at that moment.

"No problem," he said, reaching for the check, then paused. "I would get this ... I'll pay you back."

Hermione reached into her purse, counted out the required amount for the bill and handed it to Draco.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked, reaching for his moneybag.

"Don't worry about it," she said, looking toward the door. "We can settle up some other time."

"Oh. All right. Go on, I'll take care of the rest." *Leave, already*, his mind shouted.

She stood and gathered her jumper and purse. She took three steps, then turned back to him and said in a rush, "Let us know when you paint. We'll come help."

He nodded and muttered and then she was gone.

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It was three weeks before he saw her again.

Knock, knock, knock.

It was a Sunday, sometime after lunch. He had been reading a few reports, preparing himself for the start of the workweek and he scowled at the interruption. There was another, more forceful knock. Draco sighed as he slowly made his way to the door and looked through the peephole. All he saw was an eye. He jumped back in surprise. Then he shook his head and slowly opened the door.

Fred Weasley was pressed against the door, his face very close to the peephole. When he saw Draco, he grinned. Ginny looked at him as well, an inquisitive and expectant expression on her face. He opened the door wider and saw that Fred and Ginny were not alone. Also standing on his front stoop, and on the grass below, were George, Harry, Ron, Neville, Hermione, Molly and Arthur.

Eyes wide, he looked back at Ginny, who seemed to be leading the group. "May I help you?"

"Well, Malfoy, Hermione told us weeks ago that you bought paint. I waited, expecting to hear from you within the week, two at the most. It's been three, and I finally realized you had no intention of asking for help. So ... we're here to offer our assistance."

"With all ten of us, we'll knock this job out in no time," said Fred, grinning.

"Er ... sure, okay," Draco replied. All six Weasleys plus Harry, Neville and Hermione paraded past him, carrying long wooden poles like the ones that Draco remembered seeing at the paint shop.

Ginny led the group into the sitting room and started handing out assignments. "Fred, George." She held out a few rolls of what looked like large, blue Spellotape. "Go tape off all the rooms...windows, moldings, the door...then move and cover all the furniture with a Repellent Spell. And remember those rags we brought? Transfigure them into drop cloths to cover the floors and be sure to tape them to the baseboards. Once you're done, you two will paint the book room."

"Right-o," said George pleasantly. Fred accepted the blue roll, and they ascended the stairs to begin their task.

"Mum, Dad, once they've finished the taping, you'll take the kitchen. Ron, Neville, the small study area. Harry, you and I will paint this room. Hermione, Malfoy..." She looked at him. "Your room." As she spoke, the pairs moved off toward their designated room, and finally Draco and Hermione were alone with Harry and Ginny.

"Ginny," said Hermione under her breath. The other woman looked at her pointedly, and they seemed to carry on a complete conversation without opening their mouths. Finally, Hermione gave a small huff and said, "Fine."

"All right, well then. Where's the paint?" Ginny asked.

He blinked, still amazed that all of a sudden, his house was full and about to be forever altered. In a way, he felt slightly relieved with the pressure of trying to decide when to paint, how to go about it, and who to ask completely lifted. "It's all in the book room," he said.

Ginny nodded to Harry, who took off up the stairs. Then she picked up two of the wooden poles; only now he saw that each had a fuzzy tube on one end which he also recognized from the paint store. She handed one to Hermione and one to him. "Any questions?" she asked.

Draco opened his mouth, not sure which one he should ask first, but Hermione spoke first.

"We can handle it. I've done this before."

Ginny nodded and picked up a stack of trays. "I'm going to put one of these in each room. Have fun!" she said and left the room.

Hermione sent him a small smile and turned to go upstairs. He followed after she disappeared, passing Harry on the stairs.

"I've put your paint can in your room," he said quickly.

Draco mumbled something and continued toward his room.

He paused outside his bedroom and only then thought to wonder why he had been paired with Hermione. Most of the others made sense, but it would have been equally acceptable to pair him with Neville and Hermione with Ron. He didn't want to think about it too much as it could only lead to trouble.

"Going in?" said Ginny, handing him a tray.

Draco nodded and, as he approached his bedroom, met Fred and George as they left it, tossing the roll of tape between them as they went to the book room. He sighed and entered, his head full of lead, to find Hermione opening the can of paint.

She looked up and motioned for him to approach her. "I need the tray," she said. He handed it to her and she poured in some of the paint. When she finished, she looked up at him. Their eyes locked for a brief instant, then he looked away, and his eyes landed on her fuzzy tube pole, currently lying on the floor.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing. "I saw them at the paint shop but never found out what they do."

She picked it up. "It's a roller brush. See?" She spun the fuzzy tube. "Watch." She put the roller brush in the tray and coated the fuzzy part with paint. Then she went to the wall and started painting. She instructed him to make a "W" pattern over and over with the brush, all over the walls, be careful not to get too much paint on the brush as it would leave clumps, and to use an actual brush in the corners.

"What about the painting?" Draco asked. "Will it get in the way?"

Hermione froze and looked around the room until she saw it. She went to it and reached out as though to touch it, but pulled back. "Yes," she said finally.

Draco carefully took the painting off the wall, set it in his bathroom and shut the door so there would be no chance for anything to happen to it. Then he dipped his roller in the paint tray and started painting. He worked on the wall opposite Hermione, and they both moved clockwise. Draco was surprised at how quickly it went. After twenty minutes, they were done.

"Great!" he said, tossing the brush down and happy to note that not a drop got on his floor.

Hermione looked at him and smirked. "We're not done."

He frowned. "Why not? Walls are painted, aren't they?"

"The walls need more than one coat of paint."

"Why?"

"To make sure to cover all the spots. You'll see. Now we'll cast drying spells on the walls to get the paint dry, then do it all again."

"And then we'll be done?" he asked hopefully.

"Nope, it'll probably take one more coat."

"Three?" he asked, feeling panic well inside him. He was stuck in his room for three coats of paint with Hermione. After the way she had run out of the restaurant the moment he had attempted to discuss their non-relationship, he was extremely reluctant to start anything again.

She nodded. "Come on. Help me dry." Drying the paint took another ten minutes.

About halfway through painting the second coat, Hermione spoke. "I really like this color."

Draco nearly dropped his roller. He was certain he would never understand her, even if they lived a thousand years together. Why would she avoid him for a month, and then tell him she liked the color, as though nothing that had happened between them had meant anything? Why couldn't she just paint like she was supposed to and then leave?

"Oh, er ... thanks," he muttered.

"What made you choose it?"

He looked at her to find that she was looking directly at him *Hmph*.

"Complements my eyes," he lied, straight-faced.

She cocked her head. "Come on, seriously. Ginny said you were quite adamant about this one and, as I remember, you could not have cared less about the other rooms we chose."

He shrugged and looked away.

"Fine. Don't tell me."

Why should I? he wanted to yell at her. They weren't in a place where he could tell her such a thing; they weren't friends. Once again, two parts of him battled for supremacy, one telling him that she didn't deserve an answer, not after the way she had left him, and the other urging him to tell her in order to see her reaction. He had chosen the icy blue because of her painting. The color would look perfect behind the silver-framed, midnight blue painting with diamonds in the sky. If he told her, she might think about it too much and draw a few conclusions of her own.

They finished the second coat and the subsequent drying in silence and started the third and final coat.

Somehow, about halfway through, they ended up next to each other. As Draco painted, he felt something wet on his hand and looked to find small blue dots on the outside of his left hand and arm, the side on which Hermione stood.

"Hey, watch it," he said crossly, wiping the paint to get it off his hand only to smear it.

"I didn't do it on purpose," she said. "Sometimes paint splatters, Malfoy."

"Yeah, well, try not to let it happen again," he said.

"Oh, okay," she said sarcastically.

A moment later, Draco felt more paint on his arm, but when he looked at it, he saw a single, large drop. He looked at Hermione, who was trying to hide a smile, a small, pleased-with-herself, guilty kind of smile. She wasn't trying very hard. He blinked and turned back to the wall, an idea bursting into his mind. She was wearing a sleeveless shirt, and she did deserve it, really. He ran his finger over the fuzzy tube, coating it in blue paint.

He paused; the prideful part of him quietly registered its objection to engaging Hermione more than was strictly necessary. The objection only lasted a brief moment, however, as his traitorous side shouted its encouragement. After all, Draco had something of a competitive nature. He liked to win at whatever challenge was presented. He had been taught that winning was almost as important as breathing, though he had made a conscious effort to curb his inclinations, or at least reserve them for the business arena. But Hermione had started it, and he would not be outdone.

Very casually, he reached over and drew a blue line from her shoulder to her elbow with the paint-coated finger.

"Hey!" she cried, jerking her arm away.

"What?" he asked, daring her to complain. Thinking they were now even, he returned to painting and failed to notice the look of mischief that crossed Hermione's face. In a few short moments, during which she dipped a finger in the paint which she flicked at him, then wiped the finger clean on his shirt, he realized that she had declared a paint war, and in about ten minutes there was paint everywhere, quite a lot of it on them.

Finally, Draco saw an advantage, and backed Hermione into one of the wet walls, getting paint on her clothes and messing up the coat they had just put on the wall as he smeared paint on her forehead. Then he held her lightly but firmly against the wall so she couldn't retaliate. She was smiling at him, blue paint on her nose, right cheek, and in her hair. Draco's heart skipped a few beats as he smiled back at her, getting lost in the depths of her eyes, both of them breathing hard from their battle. He was intensely aware of just how close they were, close enough to see the hesitation in her eyes, close enough to catch a faint hint of her scent through the odour of paint that permeated the room. She smelled wonderful.

He saw Hermione suck in her breath and glance at his mouth. His throat went dry, and he did the safest thing he could do. If he wasn't careful, he would do something for which he would forever beat his head against the wall. Like kiss her. And he really, really wanted to kiss her. But he did not want to face the aftermath of kissing her, and so he took a tiny step backwards.

He smirked. "Looks like I win."

She pushed him off, still smiling, but it was slightly different now. "Just because you're stronger. Not because you're better."

"So? I still win." He retrieved his roller brush and resumed his chore, keeping an eye on Hermione as she cleaned the paint from her clothes and face and then went to work repairing the damage to the paint on the wall behind her.

When they were finished, Draco set his brush down and stooped to pour the remaining paint back into the can from the tray. Suddenly, he felt pressure on his head. He barely had time to wonder what it could be when the pressure started to move and he realized what was happening. Hermione was using her roller brush on his head.

She giggled as she drew the brush from the crown of his head to his neck.

Draco made no comment or sound, but carefully picked up the tray and, quick as lightning, stood, turned around, and poured its remaining contents on her head.

She squealed and wiped paint out of her eyes, but they were still shining, still mischievous. She refused to give him the final word and picked up the paint can, half-full.

Draco's eyes widened. "No," he said, taking a cautious step back.

She was grinning maniacally. "Oh, yes, I think so."

"No," he repeated. They were circling. He couldn't help but smile.

"Too bad. It's going to happen. There's not a thing you can do."

"You're bluffing. You want me to say that you win."

She shook her head. "I *do* win, Malfoy."

"Don't do it, Granger. I'm warning you. Bad things..." *Will happen.* He would have said a lot more, too, that she won and he would pay homage to her as queen of paint, but he didn't get to say anything, because she did it she doused him.

A large, heavy, wet, thick glop of paint hit him in the chest, splashing up into his face and then dripping all the way down his body. He closed his eyes just in time and silently praised the phenomenon that was reflex. Then he stood there, eyes closed, listening to her cackle. He was trying desperately to will the paint away, but to no avail. Then he wiped his eyes and looked menacingly at Hermione. She shrieked. He growled.

"Oh, you're going to get it."

"Really?" she teased. "I don't think so, because, you see, there's no paint left."

He paused. "That's a good point. I've decided we should call a truce."

She cackled again. "Of course, now that you're *covered* in paint! Looks like I win after all."

He shook his head and smiled genuinely at her. "You are right, you know. I think you deserve a great..." he stepped toward her "...big..." another step "...hug!" He ran after

her. She shrieked and ran away from him, running around furniture to get away. She was laughing the entire time, a beautiful, melodious sound.

Draco was faster than she, and he caught her arm and spun her toward him, causing her to almost trip. He wrapped an arm around her waist to both steady her and pulled her tight against him. She struggled, her face buried in his chest, trying to push him off.

Still laughing.

He was too strong though, and she eventually fell still. They stood for a few seconds, wrapped tightly in an unexpected embrace. His heart was pounding so furiously he knew she could feel it. She was breathing heavily, and he felt one of her hands clench around his shirt.

Then he let her go and said roughly, "I win." He tried to appear calm, but his head was spinning.

She crossed her arms, staring at him with wide eyes. Neither spoke for what felt like an eternity and he thought she might be angry, but she finally smiled. Then screamed in frustration.

"Argh! That was so unfair! Why should you get to win?"

"Well," he said, a swagger in his tone that he didn't feel, still trying to keep his heart from leaping out of his chest. "I am faster, stronger, and smarter. Plus, being devious, underhanded and sneaky are things I excel at."

Just then another voice sounded.

"What happened here?"

It was Ginny; she had come to examine their progress.

"We're done," said Draco casually. "Just have a little clean-up to do."

Hermione laughed.

Ginny stared at them open-mouthed. "*A little?* You're both covered! How...no, never mind, I don't think I want to know. Everyone else is finished painting. Would you like to see your place, Malfoy?"

He blinked, and the point of all of them coming to his house hit him in the gut, hard. His entire house was now painted in bright, vivid colours. Most of him thought that no, he did not want to see the rest of his house. Not until everyone was safely away from him, in case he didn't like something. He really couldn't be held responsible for what happened.

"We'll be right down," said Hermione.

He looked at her, but said nothing. Ginny left after a sideways glance at Hermione.

"*We* will be right down? Why did you say that?"

"Because we can clean this up quicker if we work together. And in case you haven't noticed, we're covered in paint. We can't go walking through your house like this."

"Oh. Well ... right. Let's get to it then."

She smiled at him. It was a really nice smile.

"What?" he asked, trying to sound really annoyed.

"Nothing. Only, blue looks good on you. When it's all over you, that is."

He smirked. "Nice, Granger. Look in a mirror lately? It's all over you too."

"You should have seen your face when you realized what I was going to do!" she giggled. "Wish I'd had a camera!"

He shook his head, the picture of her face as she held the paint can burned into his mind's eye. "I didn't actually think you would ~~do~~ it, though. You're crazy."

"You didn't?" she said, her eyes shining. "Hmm ... I'll have to remember that."

They cleaned up the room, getting all the paint off the surfaces where it wasn't supposed to be, including their clothes and their hair. They were about to go downstairs when Draco noticed a little bit of blue left on Hermione's cheek. Without thinking, he reached up and tried to wipe it off; it had dried, so he gently used his fingernail to scratch it off.

"There," he said, drawing away from her. The look in her eyes was incredible and indescribable.

"Thank you," she whispered. She looked at him, right in his eyes. It was more than a casual glance; it was as though she were looking for something. Her eyes were brilliant and shining and radiating their own light.

Whether she found what she sought or not, he didn't know. It had been only a few seconds really, though it had seemed an age. But he felt that it had meant something, if only she would tell him what.

Hermione gave a small sigh and a tiny smile and then left him to mull in a sea of confusion and the crackling of hope and desire.

Which he would promptly do his best to quash.

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A/N: Thank you so much for your patience and for reading! Oodles of thanks to my betas, Z, eilonwy, and Buzzy. Without you ... well, this story would still be sitting on my jump drive, waiting patiently for me to do something with it. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate you! BETAS ROCK!

As always, the beautiful banner was made by the lovely moonjameskitten!

Four

Chapter 5 of 5

Draco spends quality time with friends.



Chapter 4

"Mate, pass the juice."

"Ron, get up and get it yourself."

Ron scowled at Harry, then turned to Draco, his mouth open to speak.

"Weasley, I am most certainly not going to pass you the juice."

"Fine!" he grunted and pointed his wand at the bottle. "*Accio!*" It flew into his outstretched hand. "Thanks for nothing."

"Why should we give you the juice when you can just do that, Ron?" asked Harry, popping a peanut into his mouth.

"Because you're my friend. And I had to get my wand out of my pocket."

"Weasley, could you *be* more lazy?" said Draco, scoffing and tossing a Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Bean into his mouth. Watermelon.

It was the perfect October night. There was not a cloud in the sky and only a thin sliver of the waxing moon, leaving the black velvet sky dotted with millions of tiny points of light. Draco had already located a few of his favorite constellations, including the one that shared his name.

Harry and Ron were over to show Draco what in the world was so fun about camping the Muggle way. During the war, the three of them occasionally had to make camp overnight, always using wizarding tents. After they became friends, Harry would go on and on about Muggle camping, saying that it was really camping, whereas the wizarding version was more like having a portable house. It wasn't the same thing at all.

Ron had pointed out that Harry had never actually **been** camping the Muggle way, and the two of them had made a pact to try it out first thing after the war. They'd bought all the gear, and Hermione had found them books on the subject. Then, because they didn't crack them for two months, she made brief 'need to know' notes from each one. Harry and Ron had fallen in love with camping after the first night and now tried to go as often as possible. They had invited Draco every time, but he had always declined, stating he would rather sleep in the dungeons of Malfoy Manor between rotting corpses than on the ground.

They had finally made a bet with him, and if he lost, he had to join them for one night. If he didn't fall as instantly in love with camping as they had, they would never ask him along again. Draco accepted the bet and lost, only to find out that Harry and Ron had been given information which gave them a distinct advantage. Draco had been so impressed at their devious work that he agreed to go camping, even though they had essentially cheated, feeling certain that he would not adore the activity and one night was worth the promise they would never ask him again. Besides, once they were asleep, he could Transfigure his sleeping bag into a mattress.

Harry and Ron had brought tents and sleeping bags, plus canned food and all the traditional accoutrements of camping. Now they were sitting around a campfire that Harry had started and built without magic in front of Draco's house, tents set up behind them, eating terrible food because that was what you ate when you went camping. Draco couldn't help but think longingly of the pot roast he had in the freezer only a few yards away.

Though he still could not fathom why someone would want to leave the comfort of his or her home and sleep on the ground, he had been forced to admit that up to that point, he was enjoying himself. He especially liked the fire, the way it kept him warm despite the chilly air around him. While that experience was nothing new, he had always seen outdoor fires used as either tools of destruction or a means to stay warm. He had never had the opportunity to simply sit and stare into the fire, watch the flames lick the air, moving, growing, and breathing.

Harry and Ron were presently roasting marshmallows...a white, puffy, and vile food...on long, thin wires in the fire to make what they had called 's'mores.' Draco had agreed to try one despite the funny name, since they both insisted the food was part of the camping ritual and it wouldn't be considered camping with them.

Harry had cooked their dinner over the fire, a bean dish and a can of corn, and they had consumed just enough mead and ale to be well on their way to not being able to feel the ground on which they were to sleep, which was quite fine with Draco.

Ron turned his marshmallow, and Harry gasped and quickly pulled his out.

"Bugger!" he said, blowing out the flames engulfing the white puffy thing.

"Is that not right?" Draco asked.

Harry glanced at him and sighed. "No. You want them to heat all the way through. If they catch fire, they'll just be black on the outside, but cold on the inside."

"Oh," he replied, though he had no idea what Harry meant.

Ron then pulled his out, a nice, medium brown on the outside. "See?" he said, holding it up for Draco to get a good look.

"Er ... that looks great. When may I try a s'more so I can get this part over with?"

"Now," said Ron, putting the confection together. He handed Draco a kind of sandwich with crackers, chocolate, and those marshmallow things. It was sticky and runny, but he tried it anyway and decided he had never tasted anything so delicious. He took a sip of ale to wash it down.

Ron cooked another marshmallow while Harry made himself a s'more. Ron glanced at Harry and then said, "You'll never guess who I ran into yesterday."

Ron was always running into interesting people; he played professional Quidditch for the Tornados.

"Who?" said Harry, sounding slightly too interested after Draco displayed his usual lack of attention whenever Ron told them they'd never guess something.

"Pansy."

Draco spat out the last sip of ale he'd taken. "Bugger!" He cleaned the mess off his shirt and poured himself another glass. Then he looked at Ron. "Pansy. Really."

"Yes."

"When? Where did you see her?"

"We played Marseilles last night and she lives there. After the match, she came by to say 'hi.'"

Pansy. She had been the closest thing to a friend Draco had before Harry and Ron. She had switched sides during the War too, not cut out for the grueling, demanding and gruesome life of a Death Eater...or daughter of one. She had changed alliances before Draco, but with nowhere else to go, she went to him. When she appeared in his bedroom one night, soaking wet and filthy, Draco took her in and hid her in his family's house. He hadn't yet made his decision to defect, but he had to take her in; they'd been playmates as children.

Then Draco switched and went to the Order. He had tried to convince Pansy to join as well, but she refused, claiming that she wanted no part of the war. He told her that the war would affect everyone, in some way, before the end. The confining lifestyle Pansy lived in Malfoy Manor eventually became too much for her, and a year before the Dark Lord fell, she left. Draco hadn't seen her since.

He shook his head at the memories. "How is she?"

"She's good," said Ron, glancing at Harry. "She asked about you." Both Harry and Ron watched him intensely, waiting for a reaction, and Draco got the feeling they'd talked about this already.

"And?" he said, taking another drink.

"I told her you were good." Ron paused.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Fascinating." He popped another Every Flavour Bean...grass..blech. As he chewed, a nebulous idea tugged at the corner of his consciousness. He decided to follow the idea, see where it might lead. "She seeing anyone?" he asked conversationally, even though he already knew she wasn't.

"No, she's not."

"Didn't think so. She hasn't mentioned anyone lately."

Ron's jaw dropped. "You've seen her?"

"No. It's called owl post, Weasley. She lives in France, remember?"

"When's the last time you saw her?" he asked, taking a bite of his s'more.

Both he and Harry were acting strangely. Draco couldn't imagine what Ron was on about, unless ... unless Ron wanted to see Pansy again.

"Ron, just ask him already," said Harry.

Draco looked between his two friends. "Ask me what?"

Ron turned bright red, swallowed his bite, and blurted, "How do you feel about her?"

Draco frowned. "Who? Pansy? She ... is my friend, for lack of a better word; has been since we were very small. Why?"

"Do you, uh, have any deep-seated, repressed, unexpressed, or unrequited feelings for her?" Ron asked, shifting in his seat.

Draco laughed. "You're asking me if I'm secretly in love with her, aren't you?"

Ron grinned sheepishly and nodded.

Draco laughed harder. Harry and Ron exchanged another look, this one clearly telling Draco they thought his sanity had jumped off the cliff. "Oh, you were scaring me there for a minute."

"So ... that's a ... no, then?" said Ron.

"Merlin, yes. No, I'm not pining away for Pansy." He chuckled again. "Why?"

"You're sure? Completely sure?"

"Yes, Ron, I'm entirely sure. Any and all infatuation I might have had for the girl was gone before fifth year started." Draco crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair, enjoying Ron's discomfort. "Now, tell me. Why do you ask?"

Ron seemed somehow more relaxed and more nervous than he had been. "I, well, we had a nice time."

Draco was pleased; listening to the giggling had yielded results. "You like her."

Ron squirmed. "Is that okay?"

Draco studied him. "Why ask me? Shouldn't you be asking her?"

"I plan on getting to that, but first I needed to know you wouldn't rip my arm out if I was interested in her."

"Well, I'm feeling generous right now. After all you made me a s'more. So I won't rip your arm out tonight." Draco paused. For some reason he couldn't identify, he liked the idea of Ron with Pansy. Ron was easy-going, Pansy a bit high strung. Ron was good natured and trustworthy, whereas Pansy was often too trusting with men. She jumped with both feet, never cautious enough. She needed someone who would catch her, keep her from falling flat on her face, and then jump with her.

"Incidentally," Draco said, interrupting Harry and Ron's conversation. "Why do you like her?"

Ron exhaled nervously. "Uhm, I mean, I saw her last night, but we talked for about four hours after the game. We went to a coffee shop, and the hours just passed. She's funny and she laughs so easily."

Yeah, Draco knew about laughter.

"And she's beautiful," Ron added, a far-away look in his eye; Draco smiled. "She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen." He looked at Draco. "So, it's okay with you?"

"Weasley, two things. One, you don't need my permission to go after Pansy. The very idea is absurd. And two, even if for some reason you *did* need my permission, if I said no, you should have the guts to go for her anyway if you really like her." He wanted Ron to *really* like her. Because Pansy was a special girl and she deserved attention and affection from a decent bloke.

"Just say yes, please? I don't want you getting upset with me if you see us together and suddenly remember that you *do* love her."

"Ron, I don't like Pansy that way. I never will. I wish you all the best in your pursuit. Okay?"

"But "

"You're not getting me to say those words. But understand this, Weasley. If you hurt her, then I will rip your arms off. And make you eat them. Clear?"

Ron nodded, and Harry smiled.

"Good. Now let me give you some advice about Pansy. Don't fall quickly." Both Ron and Harry looked at him with puzzled expressions. "You're right, Pansy is beautiful. And she knows people know it. Most guys are just in it for that. Don't be like that. Play hard to get, even. She's a smart girl, though you'd never know it because she doesn't need to be to get attention. But if you make her feel smart, and challenge her, and show her you actually care about *her*, you will win her faster than Hermione can look something up in a book." Draco popped another bean into his mouth. Day-old gum; ick. He spat it out, and then took a sip of his ale.

"That's really good advice, Malfoy," said Harry, eyeing him with something that surprisingly looked to Draco like suspicion. He shrugged, keeping his eyes locked on Harry's. "I thought you claimed to be unfit for such things, yet here you give Ron actual, real, useful, honest advice about a friend of yours. What gives?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Pansy is a family friend; I've known her most of my life, and though I wouldn't count her among my closest companions, she and I are close. We understand each other. She tells me about the things that happen in her life, including...sometimes to my frustration...every detail about every guy she's ever dated. Even through the War, she managed to find ways to get her heart trampled. And after she disappeared, I still heard from her, still heard about what she was up to. And I hate every single guy who's hurt her. I don't want to have to hate you, Weasley, after all those years of hating you."

Ron smiled. "Thanks, mate. I'll definitely remember that. Only ..." He frowned. "I don't know a thing about playing hard to get."

Draco laughed. "Just don't let her know right away that you're interested. And after you do let her know, only let her think you're a little interested. Slowly show your growing interest, and finally, if you fall for her, let her know. But treat her like she deserves. Merlin, I'd love to see her happy finally."

Ron glanced at Harry, then looked back at Draco, an entirely different expression on his face. He was no longer nervous and questioning, but determined. "She asked about you, you know."

Draco arched an eyebrow. "Yeah, you mentioned that."

"She asked if you were seeing anybody."

He snorted. "That's a laugh."

"Is it?" asked Harry, a little too forcefully for casual conversation.

Draco frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What about Hermione?" Harry said.

Draco's heart dropped into his gut and started convulsing. Rapidly. Painfully almost. He had to blink to keep from blurting something out right away. Then he had to remember to breathe. Breathe, Draco, breathe.

"What about her?" he finally managed, sounding just a little bit too nonchalant for his own ears.

"You tell us," said Ron.

He mastered himself with great internal, invisible effort. "There's nothing to tell."

"You two have been spending an awful lot of time together over the last couple of months."

"Have not," Draco replied quickly.

"Have too."

"Have not."

"Have too," said Ron, joining the battle.

"Not."

"Too," said Ron.

"Yes, you have," said Harry, matter-of-factly. "I mean, we're around Hermione a lot. *We* know, you know. She talks about you all the time, about what you two do."

"Yeah, like you took her to a Quidditch game. Quidditch! Hermione! It's almost laughable, but she talks about it like it was the best thing in the world," supplied Ron.

"And she took you to the airport, and you both spent the entire day flying back and forth between London and Belfast," said Harry.

"And then you took her to see some Muggle shows. What was it, Harry? Opla? Ballbet?"

"Opera," corrected Draco absently. "And ballet."

"And what about the time she took you to a football game? A Muggle sport! She said you liked it!"

"Or when you took her to some Muggle ball for your business?"

"That was required. I had to take someone, and she was the most obvious choice," Draco said, getting annoyed but also panicky. Had they really done all those things? How had he missed that? Was he really getting attached to her? He didn't think he wanted to; in fact, he was quite sure the last time he'd thought about it, he refused to think about it. But when was that? He couldn't even remember the last time he refused to think about her. And when did all this start?

With the paint, came the voice in his head. Oh yeah. *That* day. He remembered holding her tightly to him, getting paint all over her. She hadn't looked up at him, but he could feel not just one, but two hearts pounding. Pounding like a bass drum he'd seen when he took her to the symphony.

After that day, things had just moved. Neither of them talked about it, but they started doing things together. At first, they were little things. She showed him her favorite coffee shop; he took her to his favorite bench in the park downtown. She took him to her favorite ice cream parlor; he took her out to his favorite restaurant. Just because it was nearly 100 Galleons per plate didn't mean anything, it was still his favorite restaurant, and he was just reciprocating.

That's how it had started, and that's how it went. The things they shared had escalated into symphonies and airports, but it didn't mean anything else had escalated. There had been nothing to start with, he told himself. He tried to pound it into his brain every time he dropped her off at her place, every time their arms touched during a performance, or when she laughed that laugh when she watched him watch the airplanes take off and land. For hours.

He remembered the way she had patiently sat through that Quidditch game, trying, really trying to see what he saw. She had said she wanted to see it, and she'd tried before, but never saw it. After the game, the look on her face told him she didn't get her wish. Then she had dragged him to a "shopping center" and forced him to look at clothes in shops that were *inside*. He'd found it just plain bizarre, but kept his mouth shut, not wanting to ruin her obvious glee.

He had never once stopped to think about what it might look like to everyone else. He didn't want to think about how it looked, because he knew. When he was least expecting it...in the shower, at his desk, in a meeting...he'd get a shiver that ran all the way through him, and he would smile and think of her. He just couldn't think the words in his mind, couldn't form the sentence. If he did, he would be forced to try and do the honorable thing and push her away, to keep her at a respectable distance.

There was nothing else he could do; he knew himself. But he didn't want to do that, he didn't want to push her away. It was amazing to think that someone actually *loved* him. And she did, she really did.

He also had never bothered to think about what it might look like *to her*. Because he knew she was smarter than that. He knew she wouldn't let herself become interested in him. Too smart. She would stop that train before it picked up too much steam. She wouldn't allow herself to think about him beyond what they were, because she would know that she would never let that happen. Ever. Draco was counting on her to keep the line between them bold and unchanging. Merlin knew, he didn't trust himself not to do something stupid.

" and the time you sent her a box of sugar quills from Honeydukes."

Draco blinked, Harry's and Ron's voices breaking through his hazy thoughts. Were they *still* going on with this?

" and the time she "

"Stop it, all right?" Draco interjected. "I get it. I hear you. I understand what you're saying. But listen *to me* now. There is nothing going on between us. We are friends. I happen to like that we're friends. Okay?"

They exchanged a look that clearly said they weren't buying it. Not for one fraction of a second. "Malfoy, do we look stupid to you?"

He bit his tongue nearly to the point of bleeding to keep himself from answering that question. "Ow," he cried when he'd pressed too hard, and the temptation passed. "I don't really care what you believe. You asked. I'm telling. Do what you wish with the information."

Harry opened his mouth to say something more, but Draco cut him off. "End of discussion, Potter. Now. Let's get to this camping stuff, shall we?"

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"Ready?" she asked.

He looked at the ridiculous contraption in front of him and swallowed hard. It was too late to back out now, though; he knew that. There was a strong bar across his legs and another one that came over his shoulders. And they'd left their wands in a locker so they wouldn't get broken. So there was no way out.

He *knew* that.

But as the sky loomed ever nearer every second, a small part of him remembered that he could still Apparate off this thing. He turned to Hermione to tell her of his revelation, but he saw that she had a ridiculously huge grin on her face and a definite sparkle in her eye. Then he saw her raise her hands over her head and shout with joy. Pure and utter joy.

Draco turned around to face the front. He really shouldn't have. Now all he saw was the sky and before he had time to think, they went over. Hermione was screaming beside him and he felt like he'd left his stomach at the top. The wind rushed past, and they went through loops, and spirals, and twists, and all manner of impossible moves, and in a mere 87 seconds it was over.

"Well?" she asked, pushing the now movable metal bars off her.

He was still catching his breath, unsure if he could trust his legs to support him, and slowly followed her example. Once on solid ground and convinced he could remain upright, he looked at the car they were just in, and the small track the car followed. Amazing, these Muggles.

"It was incredible," he said, grinning ridiculously now too.

"Yeah?" she said, excitedly. "Want to go again?"

"Is Trelawny a crazy bat?"

She hopped a little, gave a small clap, then reached out and grabbed his hand. She proceeded to drag him all the way out of the ride, then back to the long line where they would wait another 30 minutes for an 87 second ride.

"Your people are genius, I think," he said, sitting on the railing.

"My people?"

"Muggles. I mean, I've never seen anything like this thing, this what did you call it?"

"Roller coaster."

"Yeah, right. Ruddy brilliant."

They rode the coaster a total of eight times, which took the entire afternoon. After the eighth time they both agreed that their stomachs refused to allow a ninth.

They collected their things from the locker and made their way to the exit. It was nice that they hadn't had to pay, since they only spent half a day in the park, and only rode one ride. Hermione always got a kick out of standing at ticket booths and waving her hand and saying, "You don't need our money. Move along." He didn't get it, but she was so adorable every time she giggled to herself after she was handed tickets that he didn't care.

As they walked through the mass of people, Hermione suddenly stopped and he almost ran in to her. "Ooh, stay here," she said.

Draco nodded and pointed to a bench nearby. Hermione grinned and then took off through the throng of people, and he lost sight of her. He found a bench near that spot to sit and wait and noticed that more than one girl looked him over with satisfaction. He merely smirked in return, silently wishing they would stay away, and they did, mostly, but one girl came over and sat right next to him.

She started flirting with him. Draco didn't say much at first, hoping the girl would get the hint and leave. She didn't; she even touched his arm...the flawed arm...and Draco winced. He had once been quite adept at the art of flirting and had to consciously avoid returning in kind. He had no desire to flirt with a girl he didn't even know...a girl who wasn't Hermione (even though he never flirted with her)...but it was like second nature, an almost automatic response. It was a lot like learning to ride a broom - you never really forget how. There was an entire gene in the Malfoy strand that was dedicated to wooing the opposite sex.

Then Hermione returned in a blur and sat on his lap, offering him a lick of her ice cream and smiling at him in a way she never had before. Like he was both in trouble and highly delicious at the same time. His blood went cold at that smile. The other girl glared at Hermione and left to rejoin her friends.

Without a word, Hermione moved to sit beside him on the bench and produced, as if by magic, a dish of ice cream for him. Chocolate chunk; his favorite. With chocolate syrup and sprinkles. Obscene amount of time indeed; she knew his most intimate ice cream preferences.

But she glared at him and took a bite of her own ice cream.

"Butterscotch?" he asked, taking a spoonful of his.

She frowned and nodded, and licked her spoon clean. He knew she was upset and refused to let himself think about the myriad possible reasons. She *was* smart, remember? She knew better than to ... well, she just did. He didn't need to think about it. She'd think about it enough for four of them. They ate their ice cream in a silence so full of nothing it seemed deafening.

Then they sat there. Draco knew she wanted to say something, and so did not force her into action. He figured she was deciding between biting his head off, sulking, or just leaving him there. He half hoped she'd just leave, so he could avoid her yelling at him. He was never good in actual fighting, especially with people he cared about. He usually found his tongue oddly tied.

"I don't think we should go to that concert tomorrow," Hermione finally said. "I have so much to do for work, and it's really been piling up because I've been neglecting it, and I could really use the time to get caught up."

He really wished she'd just left him sitting there. Probably torture would have been preferable. Even the Cruciatius. Probably.

He shrugged as if he didn't care. Because he didn't. Intellectually. "Okay," he said casually. She had done it, put the rapidly growing space between them. His first reaction was to widen the gulf, run into the corner and lick his wounds and snap at approaching fingers. And then to nail it down he said, "I'm sure I can find someone to go with. Maybe Pansy."

She offered no visible reaction, which annoyed him to no end. It was supposed to be her turn to poke and needle.

He was surprised at how quickly his anger had materialized. One moment they were walking through the park, their arms brushing when one of them was jostled by the pressing crowd sending heat shooting through his arm. The next, she was breaking off something they were supposed to do together. She had never done that in all the months they'd been... whatever they were. So it told him something. She was upset...very upset. It couldn't have been only because she'd seen him flirting. *It couldn't.*

Then she looked at him, peered searchingly into his eyes, and he was nearly undone. Nearly, but she looked away just in time.

"She'd like it," Hermione said, taking a careful bite of ice cream. "But I doubt Ron will let her out of his sight on a Friday night."

Draco smirked, because he knew better. Ron wouldn't want to let her go, but he would. Ron was falling for Pansy, but he'd taken Draco's advice and hadn't let on about it. Ron wouldn't be overly possessive; therefore, Draco would be free to go with Pansy. If he wanted to, which he still hadn't decided. Maybe a date with a gallon of Ogden's Finest was more in order.

At least Pansy's letters were much happier now, though she only occasionally mentioned Ron. That pleased Draco. It meant Pansy was falling too, and Ron really was treating her right.

"He will," he said. "It's me, after all."

She muttered something that sounded like "insufferable git," but maybe he misheard her.

"Sorry?" he said innocently. "I missed that." There must have been a special switch when it came to her. He was sniping at her like he hadn't done in years.

"Well, have fun," she said, trying hard not to show her annoyance.

"I will. I mean, I'm going for the music, after all." Twist. He knew she would make the connection that would imply he hadn't asked her to go because he wanted ~~her~~ to go. Just someone. And he really couldn't answer why he wanted to hurt her just then. Except, maybe it was because she'd hurt him ... she'd hurt him, he hurt her ... it all evened out.

Her jaw tightened, but she didn't respond.

"Well, it's nearly dinner. And I have guests coming." He stood, anxious to get away from Hermione and that look she kept sending him, like he was less than scum. And honestly, what had he done to deserve that? If she wasn't going to tell him, which obviously she wasn't, he saw no reason to be pleasant. She knew that he knew that she was upset. So it was all on her right now, because she also knew he wouldn't ask about it.

She stood too and huffed. "Of course. Wouldn't want you to be late to your precious dinner." They walked in that odd silence to an empty, out-of-the-way spot, and then with only a look exchanged, Disapparated.

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Draco woke the next morning with that feeling in the pit of his gut. He was growing increasingly familiar with the feeling that compelled him to jump. He didn't fight it.

It was a grey morning at the cliff, and he knew it would probably storm. He loved watching a storm blow in from the sea, a wild, tempestuous, yet orderly natural phenomenon.

A cool wind blew, and he heard his mother's words.

"... change your world ... love a witch ... I won't see you marry ... I love you, son ..."

He missed their few moments together and wished she were there to talk to him now, to help him through this mess. Then again, this mess was largely her fault. Narcissa had put *her* into his mind, and his thoughts. And then *she* had wiggled her way into his life and his heart. Then turned and stomped on it as if it were a bug.

He shivered as a sharp wind blew through his hair. Better go now, before it rains.

So he did.

He waited three seconds before setting his broom under him. He'd set his wand again and it took over half a second to stop falling. Crucial. His calculations had suggested it would take nearly one full second to completely stop if he waited six seconds to right himself, which would result in his untimely death. Five and a half seconds was the maximum time he could wait before getting on his broom.

And none of this accounted for him calling his broom to him. That would take time too. And more figuring. He'd get to that once he'd fallen for the full five and a half seconds. One thing at a time. He didn't feel the burst of life he usually felt when he jumped, and he decided it was because of Hermione. Because he wouldn't be seeing her today. And if his theory held true of their up and down relationship, he wouldn't see her for awhile.

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"Hey, kid."

"Draco!" Pansy stood from her chair and flung her arms around him tightly.

He hugged her back and then pulled away, pushing her chair in for her when she sat. He took the place opposite her.

"Hi, Pansy."

They met in Diagon Alley at an upscale café for lunch. Pansy had recently 'been moved to give England another try,' and had taken a room with the Potters until she found somewhere suitable to live. It was the first chance he'd had to see her.

She gave him a giant smile. "I've missed you."

He smirked. "Can't get enough of me. I knew my incredible wit and these stunning good looks were really a curse."

"Oh, stop it. You're terrible. And quite full of yourself." She gave him a heartfelt smile. "It's good to see that some things don't change."

"How are you?"

"I'm wonderful," she said happily. "I simply must tell you. I'm crazy for someone."

He rolled his eyes. "Already? I haven't even opened the menu. Can't this wait until we've got our food?"

She dismissed his comments with a flourish of her hand. "Of course not. This could take a while."

"Naturally," he said with a grin.

The waiter came then and took their orders.

"So, who is he? Who am I going to have to beat to a pulp now?"

"Draco! Be nice! With any luck you won't have to feel violent thoughts toward this one."

"Okay, you're right. Go on, please."

She looked at him nervously, fidgeting with her napkin. "Ron Weasley."

He arched an eyebrow. "Weasley? Really? I mean, I knew you two saw each other here and there, but you really *like* him?"

"Oh, Draco, I do!" she said. And it was just the way she said it, but it reminded him of Pansy as a little girl, when she'd gotten her first 'grown-up' party dress. She was ten, and innocent, and her eyes full of wonder at the world. The years full of blood and death and hate had taken it away from her, but he saw it again, then.

"He's unlike anyone else I've ever known," she continued. "He's sweet, and kind, and everything I've never had."

Draco took a sip of water and looked at her pointedly. "And does he feel the same?"

She squirmed in her seat. "I don't actually know."

He smiled. "Pansy, my dear, this will be a good thing for you."

She smiled like a million Galleons and then proceeded to talk about Ron for the entire meal. Draco listened, laughed, and smiled as he was supposed to, but very little of her news was actually new. He'd heard a lot of it from Ron, but enjoyed hearing her side too. She provided infinitely more details...a drawback offset by her glowing smile. It was nice to know she was enjoying being with Ron just as much as Ron was enjoying being with her.

When the waiter cleared their plates, Draco thought he was free, that Pansy had somehow, miraculously, forgotten to ask anything about him. Then she wanted dessert. He should have known.

Halfway through, she looked about to burst.

"What is it?" Draco asked with a resigned sigh.

"How are you?"

"I'm good, Pansy."

"What are you up to these days?"

"Oh, business as usual."

Her eyes sparkled as she reached the crux of her inquiries. "Any significant witches in your life?"

"Just you, love," he said so quickly it sounded rehearsed. As if he'd been anticipating her question.

She giggled, but her gaze remained firmly set on him. "How was your concert two weeks ago?" she asked, casually taking a bite of her cake.

Bugger. She knew something. And she was fishing.

"Didn't go," he said indifferently.

"What? Why not? I thought you loved that group."

He shrugged. "Lost interest."

She took another bite and peered at him over her empty fork. "I saw Hermione yesterday."

He blinked.

Bugger. She knew his blinks, and she only raised one eyebrow. She either knew something, or wanted something, or both.

"And?" he said.

"She asked about some concert," Pansy said, taking a bite of her Crème Brûlée. "Only she was shocked to learn I knew nothing about it. Do tell, Draco. What happened?"

He knew she wouldn't rest until she got an answer she deemed satisfactory, and he also knew just how long her patience could last. He exhaled sharply. "She got mad at me for some reason and said she didn't want to go with me after all. I told her I'd ask you, but then I didn't want to go anymore."

"What did you do?" she asked in an accusing tone, frowning severely.

"Me?" he said incredulously. "I ... have an idea, but it's just that, and it's absurd."

She studied him for a moment, then resumed eating. "You could try and find it out."

"Why bother? You know I'm not going to apologize, or try and fix things."

"Why not?"

"Because I know I didn't do anything. Not worthy of the silent treatment she's been giving me for over two weeks. I am capable of knowing when I've done something wrong, and I didn't do anything wrong here. So I won't need to apologize once I learn why she got all bent out of shape. *She* should apologize for getting angry."

She gave him a look that clearly said that she didn't believe him for half a second, but she didn't say anything right away. When she spoke it was very casual, yet probing. "What's going on with you two?"

He freaking blinked again. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Is that the problem, then?"

He looked at her, deflated. "No, Pansy."

"Do you like her?"

Ah, the sixty-four thousand Galleon question. He *liked* her so much he couldn't stand her. Or himself. He could spend every single day ranting about why he didn't like her, but at the end of the day, her smile would melt him. Burn him. Inside out. And since today didn't work, he would just have to try and convince himself tomorrow. Lather; rinse; repeat.

Only he didn't want to like her. And despite all the changes in his life, despite turning to the light side, he was still and always would be *Malfoy*. He couldn't get new blood. Or a new life. Or a different childhood. All he got was a second chance at the hand he'd been dealt. But he was still himself. And his mother had twisted his mind with her knowing eyes and seemingly harmless words. Or maybe, he'd twisted his own mind over her words.

He could pretend that the three months he'd spent with Hermione, seeing her nearly every single day, hadn't affected him. That knowing her, and knowing she really got him, didn't matter. Of course, he had been affected, and it did matter. More than anything. But he'd be declared a holy saint before he went willingly. No, it would be screaming, and ranting, and kicking, biting, pinching, and twisting that would finally win him to her. After that, he'd be all hers. If she wanted him, of course.

She was making it easy on him now, avoiding him and openly hating him. He didn't have to kick and scream and push her away; she wasn't pulling. He didn't want her anyway.

Except that he did.

So much so that now it was painful. When she had cancelled on him, he'd known it was the start of something new; he just hadn't known it was the end of whatever they had.

Draco's mind was in a state of constant warfare. One side wanted him to give up the fight and admit his feelings; the other side completely refused to even think about it. That side understood that he wasn't cut out for a relationship...not at this point in his life, anyway. That side also understood that Hermione deserved absolutely the best he could offer...the best anyone could possibly hope to give...and he couldn't give that to her. He wasn't even sure what his best was.

In the latest battle, she had cast the final blow, inflicting a grievous wound and causing the opposing sides of his mind to temporarily band together. And the ultimate loser, the lightning part of his heart, was waiting to be healed, begging for him to make things right with her. He wasn't helping it; he wasn't anxious for the healing.

The pain meant that he could feel, something he'd wondered about since he was sixteen, and it was good to know he could, even if he only felt pain. Because the pain was from the loss of the warmth she put into his life.

"No," he said solidly, firmly, meeting her gaze and holding it. He didn't like her because he chose not to. When she was light-years away, after essentially rejecting him, he could easily choose not to like her.

"Really?" Pansy asked, obviously surprised.

"Really."

"She's the only girl who'll have you, you know."

He scowled. "Thanks, Pansy. Really nice," he said sarcastically.

"I mean it, Draco. No one else would put up with your oddities like she would. No one else will call you out when you're spouting rubbish. No one else will make you as angry but also as happy as she will." Almost on the breeze, he heard what she didn't say. *She'll change your world.*

He suddenly felt heavy. Like his mother was speaking through Pansy, only he didn't want to listen, couldn't listen.

"Pansy," he started.

"Draco, I think it's time you fell hopelessly and madly in love with someone. Just imagine the odd extremes you'd go to, the things you would do for her. Almost makes me wish it were me." She smiled at his shocked expression. "Almost. Something tells me Ron will treat me better than you ever could. He feels with every part of him. So nauseatingly Gryffindor of him, but alarmingly wonderful at the same time. You should try it, Draco. Really."

"Uh-huh." He sighed. "I can't, Pansy. I can't do that. Fall in love. Any of that."

"Why not? Why not take the plunge? Fall in love with someone, Draco! It doesn't even have to be Hermione. Just someone. You've been alone for so long."

"I'm not ready."

"Sure you are!"

"I ... I know I won't...can't...fall in love with anyone except Hermione."

Pansy gasped and her eyes went wide.

He grimaced and gave Pansy a defeated look. "And I'm not ready to fall hopelessly, madly in love with the only girl who'll have me."

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Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. This is all for fun.

A/N: Thank you so much for your patience and for reading! Oodles of thanks to my betas, Z, and eilonwy. Endless thanks and appreciation for helping to make this story so much better!

As always, the beautiful banner was made by the lovely moonjameskitten!