

You'll Bawl

On the first day of the year after the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione Granger awakened in her camp bed at the Burrow to find a thick envelope in her right hand. A sprig of holly had been doodled where the address should have been, along with something that looked like a small orange radish. Her giggles drew a sleepy "Mwuh?" from Ginny, in her own bed on the other side of the room.

"Interworld mail." Hermione held up her prize.

"Interworld..." Ginny rubbed her eyes and squinted at the envelope. "Merlin's fuzzy red hat. How did they get that here?"

"Maybe they say inside." Hermione pulled on yesterday's robes for warmth and crossed the room in two steps, plopping down beside her friend. "Should we open it now or wait for the boys?"

Ginny considered this. "Open it now and say we didn't?" she suggested. "That way we know if there's anything in here they shouldn't see."

"Good point." Hermione fished her wand out of her pocket and unsealed the envelope, her mind ranging to the person who'd sent it and the bizarre happenings of the past year and a half in both their lives.

In all our lives, really. We still would have managed it without him, but it might have been very different...

Even now, six or seven months afterwards, no one in the wizarding world was quite sure what to make of the strange case of Draco Malfoy. The facts of the case were undeniable—in the summer before his seventh year at Hogwarts, the heir of the Malfoys had quietly changed his personal allegiance and begun working towards the downfall of Voldemort. Under the guise of tormenting the students who remained loyal to the light, he'd protected them from the worst excesses of Amycus and Alecto Carrow, handicapping the student gangs he'd once have headed up.

That much you could put down to a weak stomach, not liking to see people get hurt. But then around Christmas—just over a year ago, how strange to think of it—we started hearing from him ourselves, though we didn't know it was him then...

Hermione brushed her finger across the illustration on the envelope, remembering a small white box left outside the Potters' former home in Godric's Hollow, ornamented with a sprig of holly and a Dirigible Plum. Directly or indirectly, that box had led to the destruction of all of Voldemort's remaining Horcruxes, and had also informed the friends of the joining forces (both professionally and personally) of Draco Malfoy and Luna Lovegood.

Though I suppose it does make some sense when you think about it. He did rescue her from the proverbial fate worse than death—by making all the Death Eaters think he was dragging her off to one himself, how ironic—and who else would have believed him when he said he'd reformed?

Sense or no sense, the two had continued the work Draco had begun alone, helping the Order and the DA throughout the spring, parting only when Luna was among those rescued, with Draco's secret collusion, from Malfoy Manor over the Easter holidays. Their reunion had come when Luna accompanied Harry to Hogwarts for the final battle, and for a few seconds in the Great Hall it had looked as though there would be a final parting between the two.

He'd been found out, Draco had, as the traitor the Death Eaters had been looking for. Voldemort was about to kill him—would have killed him if Ron and I hadn't knocked him out of the way. And then Neville and Ginny flung Luna at him, and there was a flash like a spell, and they vanished...

So much was not questioned. What was in doubt was where, if anywhere, Draco and Luna had vanished to. The most common theory was that the punishment Draco had received from Voldemort for failing to kill Albus Dumbledore had driven him insane, fixing his moral compass at the same time as his mental map went stranger than the Marauder's. The "otherworld" he claimed he visited through his dreams, which he had chronicled in the journal he'd kept all year, was to most people who had read the edited and published version of that journal a delusion as obvious as any of Luna's, and the spell which had supposedly taken Draco and Luna there for good had simply killed them.

That's the rational argument. The reasonable opinion to hold. After all, how could there be a world so much like ours and so very different at the same time? How would a world work with as little secrecy around magic as he said they had? Why should dementors be so out of hand that they become as much of a danger as he talked about? And there couldn't be so many people so similar to the ones in our world, down to the names in most cases. It doesn't make sense. It can't be true.

Except that she was holding in her hand, and Ginny was unsubtly prodding her to get on with opening, a package of letters from that same impossible world. Or, as she saw when she pulled them out of the envelope, one letter and a package of—

"Photographs?" Ginny frowned at the stiff edges visible within their parchment wrapping. "What're they sending us photographs for?"

"Let's find out." Hermione laid the photos on Ginny's quilt, unfolded the letter, and began to read aloud.

Dear everyone,

I suppose I should say I hope this finds you well, but since I already know it does (yes, we've been watching you, you knew we could so don't freak out), that's beside the point.

Things are fine here. Luna and I have moved into Mum's old townhouse, since her new husband has a place of his own. Everybody who's left Hogwarts is settling into the work routine, or as much of a routine as Auror apprentices and novice artists ever get. The younger crowd are already cramming for N.E.W.T.s, though we've declared a studying moratorium for the twelve days of Christmas. In other words, business as usual as it can be around here.

I thought the enclosed photographs might amuse you. This year's Christmas ball was fancy dress. The theme? "Heroes and Villains from Far Away". Add to that four or five competing sprigs of charmed mistletoe, and...well, just go look at them. But not too soon after eating. And I refuse to take responsibility for any injuries resulting from laughter.

If you like, you can try to guess who's who in our little group. The rules are fairly simple:

- 1. Don't think too hard.*
- 2. Only one person you'll see is dressed as a member of the opposite sex.*
- 3. Sibling (or sibling-like) and romantic relationships are the same...mostly.*
- 4. If it would make you say "Oh no they didn't", chances are we did.*

I've written the answers in invisible ink on the back of the "before" group shot, so you can check yourselves afterwards, or you can just find it out now and enjoy the pictures that way. Up to you.

Wishing you a very happy New Year,

DM

Ginny looked at Hermione. Hermione looked at Ginny. Simultaneously, they burst out laughing. Amid her giggles, Hermione flipped over the pictures and unwrapped them, exposing the first one. "This..." She caught her breath and went on. "This must be the 'before' shot he was talking about. There he is right up front with Luna, and all their friends."

"There's the other you." Ginny pointed to a girl nearly the double of the one on the bed beside her, holding hands with an equally-familiar tall redhead. "And her twin, on the other side from Ron. What's his name again? Raymond?"

"Reynard," Hermione corrected. "Reynard Beauvoi, with his Luna—Starwing, they call her, for her owl form."

"That's right, I remember now." Ginny slid a finger lovingly down the pictured face of an unscarred Harry Potter, his arm around her own double, then moved down a row to another couple. "I never would have believed this was Neville before this past year, but he looks a lot like this now. More confident than he was before, stronger. And this must be his girlfriend, Sirius' daughter. Meghan, right?"

"Right. And that's everybody. So we know who we're guessing is inside the fancy dress." Out of curiosity, Hermione flipped the photograph over. A neat list of the names she and Ginny had just reminded each other of met her eyes, along with another note in Draco's handwriting.

I won't make you guess who we're pretending we are, just who we really are. Even Slytherins have their limits.

"Couldn't prove it by you," Ginny muttered, reading over Hermione's shoulder. "All right, shall we?"

"We shall." Hermione set aside the first photo and reached for the next one.

A few moments later, the girls' giggles had returned. A few moments after that, giggles had escalated into outright belly laughs. By the time they were draped on each other's shoulders, gasping for air, they knew this was too good to keep to themselves. Mental damage or not, the boys would have to see these.

"This had better be as good as you say it is," Ron grumbled, buttoning the last button on his pajama shirt. "I could still be sleeping..."

"Oh, it's good." Ginny flipped over the first photograph from the ball with a flourish. "Ta-da."

Ignoring Ron's yelp, Harry inspected the picture, his face straight except for a twitch at the corner of his mouth. "That looks like Voldemort and Bellatrix under the mistletoe."

"It is Voldemort and Bellatrix under the mistletoe." Ginny set it aside and picked up the next one. "And this..."

"Is Voldemort spotting the person with the camera over Bellatrix's shoulder," Harry cut her off. Ron had his hands over his eyes. "And the next one will probably be...Voldemort hexing the bollocks off the person with the camera?"

"Points to the man with the scar." Ginny exhibited the next photograph, which did indeed feature an angry Dark Lord and his female lieutenant, straightening her hair with the hand not holding her wand, both firing spells at the hastily retreating camera holder. "Shall we go on?"

Ron leaned against the bed. "Why not? My brain's not nearly broken enough yet."

"I bet Hermione can make it better if you stay right there," Harry said with a grin, and Ron's ears turned red as Hermione leaned over and flicked Harry in the head.

"A-*hem*," said Ginny with forced patience. "Next up..."

Next up was a picture featuring three kissing couples, each under a different sprig of mistletoe. Severus Snape and Narcissa Malfoy, or possibly her otherworld counterpart Cecilia Black (the "Mum" Draco had referred to in his letter), occupied the center of the frame. To their right was a slenderer Narcissa, decorously lip-locked with her husband Lucius, and to their left was a shorter Severus Snape, wrapped in the arms of the lumpish man Ginny identified as Amycus Carrow.

"So one of them's the cross-dresser," said Harry, squinting at the pair. "Either that or there's something about Snape we never knew."

Ron moaned again. "I didn't *want* to know it!"

The pictures went on. Fenrir Greyback bared his stained teeth at the camera, then spun Alecko Carrow through a series of dance moves no one believed the real witch could have performed. Nagini flicked her tongue across the lips of a skinny, fair-haired man Harry had to identify for the others as Barty Crouch, Junior. He was in the next shot, too, as he and Bellatrix exchanged hexes with the Longbottoms (the back of the photo identified the real Alice Longbottom, Alice Lovegood as she now was, and "Frank" as her second husband Gerald, Starwing's father).

"This is so wrong." Ron glanced up at Hermione. "And you're enjoying it, aren't you?"

"Watching you overreact to things? Why would I enjoy that?"

"She must be enjoying it," Harry said to Ginny. "She's being sarcastic."

"Har har." Hermione flipped the next picture.

"Now that's more like it!" Ron sat up straighter, grinning at the sudden appearance of—"It's us!"

"It's you, you mean," muttered Ginny, but her chagrin was short-lived. "So who do you think they are?"

"Maybe it says." Harry watched his tiny photographic self, his two best friends at his side, firing hexes down the corridor towards Voldemort and the Death Eaters. They had taken out the Carrows in the first few casts, and Snape seemed to have vanished from the scene. "Hermione?"

Hermione checked the back of the picture. "Not this one. It just says *Guess who? We'll tell you in a few pictures so make your wagers now! Hint: don't you just love irony? We do!*"

"All right. And you two aren't allowed to guess," Harry added to the girls, who both looked innocent immediately. "I know you were through these once already. Ron? Any thoughts?"

"Irony is that reversal thing, isn't it?" Ron asked Hermione, who nodded. "Then I'm guessing...we already said that's the other Harry in the Voldemort getup, didn't we?"

"If we didn't, we should have," said Harry. "And Ginny as Bellatrix."

"Right. So then irony would mean..." Ron trailed off, chewing on his lip absently. "Let's see the next one."

The next one featured Hermione in a close-up duel with Greyback, who had Nagini over his shoulders and was using her tail like a whip. "One truly non-human, one supposedly so," the real Hermione murmured as she watched. "A connection."

"Hey!" Ron objected as photograph-Hermione turned Nagini into a garter snake and Greyback into a toy poodle. "No hints unless we ask."

In the photo after that, Ron used the Stunned body of Crouch, Junior, as a human shield against the hexes of the two Malfoys. A snap shot around Crouch's head took down Lucius, and a follow-up using his own recoil for momentum dropped Narcissa in mid-scream.

Ron shook his head in amazement. "I only *wish* I could do that with a wand..."

Finally, the picture that Harry, and everyone else, had been waiting for appeared. A disheveled and grim-faced Harry Potter, his hair in its usual wild disarray and his scar clearly marked on his forehead, alternated Shield Spells with Stunners, Disarmers, and every other offensive spell in his arsenal as he battled with both Voldemort and Bellatrix, fighting to keep them in his line of sight so that he couldn't be surrounded. Ron and Hermione stood just within sight, clearly longing to help him, but he had waved them off twice already. Like his original, he wanted to finish this fight on his own.

At last a Trip Jinx went home, and Bella sprawled ungracefully across the floor. Harry Stunned her, conjured ropes around her, and Banished her to the far end of the room all in three fluid motions of his wand, and Voldemort snarled rage as the Chosen One turned to face him. Two wands rose in perfect tandem, two breaths were sucked in for a final spell—

And a sprig of mistletoe sailed merrily through the air, coming to a halt directly between Harry and Voldemort.

Red eyes and green examined the plant with the same mix of wariness and wonder, flicking back to each other with distrust before returning to the innocent greenery hanging overhead. After several seconds of this, Harry lowered his wand experimentally. Voldemort did the same. Harry took a cautious step forward. Voldemort did the same. A smile broke out on Harry's face, followed by one on Voldemort's (it looked distinctly out of place),

and they walked towards one another, meeting in the center of their erstwhile battleground to clasp hands. Voldemort pecked Harry on the cheek, Harry returned the favor, and they slung arms around one another's shoulders and began, if the lustily moving mouths meant anything, to sing.

"I can't tell for sure," said Hermione, startling Harry and Ron out of their rapt contemplation of this unlikely ending to the Battle of Hogwarts, "but I think it's 'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen.'"

"So." Ginny had draped herself across her bed on her stomach, and was waving her heels gently in the air. "Any guesses?"

"What, to the fancy-dress us?" Ron scoffed. "Harry's dead easy. Got to be Professor Riddle. You know, the one who teaches their advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts and married McGonagall?"

"And she's the one dressed as you," Harry added to Hermione. "Ron's got me stumped, though. Who is it?"

Ginny snickered. "And you're the one who saw all those memories your sixth year," she teased. "Wasn't a certain Headmaster of ours ginger before he went white?"

Harry groaned. "I should have known. Of course that's who it is." He stopped, frowning. "But then..."

"They couldn't keep every romance the same." Hermione flipped over the last picture. "And they found a way to show this one properly."

Ron goggled for a second at the scene presented, then fell over backwards laughing. The photographic Harry and Hermione were kissing fiercely while standing inside the two halves of an enormous gold locket, while Ron sneaked up on them from behind with the sword of Gryffindor. The Death Eaters and Voldemort were standing in a circle around the tableau, laughing and placing bets on whether or not the snoggers would notice their danger in time.

"Fantastic." Harry shook his head, leaning back against his hands. "Just fantastic. I wonder what they're going to do for next Christmas?"

"Whatever it is, I hope we get more pictures," said Ron, sitting up. "That was great. All right. Who wants to guess who's who before we check the answers?"

You'll Bawl You'll Laugh

"And the verdict is..." Ron performed a creditable drumroll on the floor beside him.

Hermione tapped the "before" snapshot with her wand, then flipped it over. "We all got Draco and Luna," she said, perusing the newly visible list of names. "They were dressed as Lucius and Narcissa."

"Goes under 'Don't think too hard,'" said Harry. "The other me and Ginny were Voldemort and Bellatrix, right?"

"Right." Hermione hummed a few notes of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," making Ginny giggle. "And I have no idea how they talked her into it, but they got my counterpart to be Nagini. I suppose it was that or being a man, but I could have told her that's really not so bad once you get past the..." She stopped, suddenly aware that Harry and Ron were staring at her with identical expressions of *please stop talking right now*. "Moving on. Obviously, if she was Nagini, that makes the younger Barty Crouch her Ron, and her brother Ray was Fenrir Grayback."

"A werewolf for a former werewolf's son." Harry nodded. "What about the two Snapes, and the Carrows?"

"I'm getting to that." Hermione dug through the photographs until she found the one of the three kissing couples. "Obviously we know who they are," she said, indicating the Malfoys. "And these two—" She tapped the pair in the center. "—are cheating."

"Cheating?" Ron asked, regarding the kissing Snape and Narcissa dubiously. "How?"

Ginny grinned. "They didn't have to dress up," she said. "They just came as themselves."

"Oh God." Ron covered his eyes. "That was bad enough when I thought it was somebody else dressed as him! Now you're telling me that's actually—oh God."

Hermione had to grab Ginny's hand to stop her from falling off the bed with laughter. Harry was inspecting the picture more closely. "Didn't someone else come as themselves?" he asked when anything could be heard.

"Yes, Mrs. Longbottom did." Hermione excavated the picture in question. "Or I should say Mrs. Lovegood."

"That's right, she married Luna's—Starwing's, I mean—dad. Which makes Neville and Starwing something like brother and sister. So that makes them..." Harry frowned at the picture for a moment. "The Carrows?"

"Well done!" Ginny applauded. "And that should tell you who the other Snape is—"

"Has to be Meghan Black," Ron cut in. "I have no idea why she'd do that to herself, but that's who it is."

"That is who it is, and she did it because Potions is her favorite class and she's learned a lot from Professor Snape." Hermione set the photograph aside. "And that is everybody, or ought to be. Any questions?"

Dear Draco and everybody,

I know you can see us, but it just feels right to write you a letter. Thank you for the photographs—they were hilarious. Ron would like you to know that he's going to start investigating Memory-Scrubbing Charms. Ginny wants to know why we never do anything fun like that. As for Harry and me, we're just hoping you'll send us more pictures next year!

With best wishes for a very happy New Year,

Hermione