

The Cares Not Taken A Strange Way to Save the World

Home by Christmas... well, not quite, but we're a lot closer than I ever thought we'd be on Christmas Eve.

Harry Potter lay in his bunk in the tent he'd been sharing with his best friends for the last several months and listened to them sleep. Ron, as usual, was snoring, but this sounded like one log being sawed rather than the dozen at a time that was his norm. Hermione was curled into a bundle under her blankets, one hand pressed against her mouth.

I swear someone's been helping us...

They should never have got away from the Ministry without someone catching them, he knew, but an escaped animal from the fourth floor, quite possibly one of the "very odd ferrets" he recalled Mr. Weasley mentioning a long time ago, had run under their pursuers' feet and tripped them up.

We knew we couldn't stay much longer at Grimmauld Place after that, but at least we had a chance to regroup and think about where we were going to go, instead of just haring off wildly and probably splinching ourselves in the process.

Then Voldemort had heard about the raid on the Ministry, and the miracle had happened.

He heard we'd taken a locket, and he couldn't help thinking about his locket, and everything that went with it...

In that one moment, all the Horcruxes, their locations and safeguards, had been Harry's.

I'd almost suspect he did it on purpose, except for that little detail about these things trying to kill us. So. We went after the easiest one first...

Harry grinned, remembering his best friend's face as Ron shrank into the form of his younger sister. *He wanted to do something heroic, and that was the best we could come up with on short notice.*

As Ginny, Ron had sneaked into Hogwarts, found the Room of Hiding, and brought the diadem out again, getting away with it by dint of looking like he knew exactly what he was doing at all times. The worst scare had been when he'd nearly run into the real Ginny around a corner, and barely managed to duck into a classroom in time.

Once we had the diadem, Hermione cast that lovely little spell that made the locket and the diadem aware of each other, and Voldemort never has been fond of competition, so of course they hated each other on sight... who'd have thought one of the ways to kill a Horcrux was with another Horcrux?

Out of the six Horcruxes, then, four were accounted for. Two remained.

Bill was able to help us find a few renegade goblins who were offended enough by Voldemort using their work to safeguard his life that they agreed to get into the Lestrage vault and steal the cup for us. They demanded we give it back to them afterwards, though, and the locket and diadem, what was left of them. Harry shrugged. Not like we had any use for that stuff. And whatever goblin magic they used to kill the cup, it worked.

Only the snake left now, and then Voldemort himself...

He pulled the covers up over himself and drifted off to sleep, wondering idly if Father Christmas could find well-hidden tents in the middle of snowy forests.

He drifted towards a snow-covered manor house, hearing the sounds of laughter and singing from within. The edge of a Christmas tree was just visible through the nearest window. He wanted to get closer, to see who was celebrating, but something was holding him back...

“Harry Potter,” hissed a voice from behind him. “How kind of you to come.”

Harry whirled. Lord Voldemort, rendered in washed-out color like an improved ghost, smirked at him. “I had so hoped you would—ah, but you could not help it, could you?” He put his hand to something dangling from his waist and yanked.

Agony shot through Harry’s scar, and he stumbled a pace closer to Voldemort. “What...” He pressed a hand against his forehead, caught his breath, and tried again. “What do you want?”

“Only to find out by what magic you have influenced Draco Malfoy away from my camp and into your own.” Voldemort fingered the fine silver cord he’d jerked a moment before, the cord that ran out of his side and up Harry’s neck before disappearing into his forehead. Similar cords stretched away behind them both into the distance, Harry noticed, though his own looked much stronger than either the one between him and Voldemort or the one linking Voldemort to something else...

Belatedly, he realized he’d been asked a question, if indirectly. “I haven’t done anything to Malfoy. Any of them.”

“Come, come, Harry.” Voldemort twitched the cord again, and Harry shuddered as his scar seared with pain. “Do you really expect me to believe that Draco Malfoy—an obedient child if a sentimental and foolish one—would, of his own accord, have killed my dear Nagini? And, when I discovered him destroying her body with cursed fire, have spit at me and fled bodily into a realm I can enter only in the spirit? No, Harry, I cannot believe he did so much on his own.”

Malfoy killed the snake? And— Harry gasped and staggered in place to another pull on the cord, but his mind was still working beneath the pain. Cursed fire—that sounds like the Fiendfyre Hermione was talking about—

Does this mean Malfoy just killed the last Horcrux for us?

“I have tracked him here through the connection I have with all those who wear my Dark Mark.” Voldemort held up his right hand, and yet another cord, thinner even than the one that bound Harry to Voldemort, gleamed silver in the reflected light from the window. “The Mark is laid, you understand, not only on my followers’ flesh, but on their souls. Thus I can always find them, wherever they seek to hide.” He rubbed a finger on the cord, and it contracted a little, showing a straight line towards the house. “As I thought. Come, Harry. You should see how I deal with those who betray me.”

Souls. These cords have something to do with souls. Harry let himself sag, as if defeated, as he followed Voldemort closer to the house. The ones behind us, could they be linking our souls back to our bodies, wherever they are? Because he said he’d come to this place in spirit, and he looks like a ghost only more so—

He put out a tentative hand to touch the cord which hung loosely between him and Voldemort. *This is probably the bond that’s been between us since I was a baby. Since the day he murdered Dad and Mum—*

He murdered them. Murder tears the soul. And our souls have been linked since that day. I can speak Parseltongue like he can—get inside his head—

Harry’s hand shot up to his scar as the idea fragments flew together into a cohesive whole.

Am I—can I be—

The knowledge sent him to his knees in the snow.

I’m a Horcrux.

I always have been, from the day I became The Boy Who Lived...

Voldemort, brought up short by the tension on the cord, looked behind him and tutted. “Praying, Harry? I doubt it will help you much now.” He tweaked the cord sharply. Harry gritted his teeth and got through the pain without making a sound, though it felt as though a large piece of his skull had come loose and was being smashed against the rest of it with every pull...

Or could it be a piece of soul? A piece that doesn’t quite fit with the rest of me?

If I can just get him to keep doing what he’s doing...

“You’re not going to win, you realize,” Harry ground out, glaring up at Voldemort. “Even if you kill me, you won’t win. Prophecies aren’t perfect. And there can always be another one.”

“But there will not be.” Voldemort smiled. “I will keep very close tabs on my world, Harry. When it is mine, which should not take too long once you are gone. There will never be another child born who will stand against me, for all will worship me and follow where I lead.” He tugged playfully at the cord, like a boy taking a refractory dog for a walk. “Even you will follow me, before you die. Come, Harry Potter, come here...”

Harry fixed his mind on the people for whom he kept fighting. Ron and Hermione, asleep in their tent; Ginny and Neville and Luna, home now for the holidays; even Draco Malfoy, inexplicably become an ally if not a friend. He thought, too, of the ones he’d lost, of his parents, Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore, Moody. Faces and voices chasing one another through his mind, he took a deep breath—

And leaned back, against the pull of the cord.

The pain was worse even than a Cruciatus, because he was doing it to himself, and because it was concentrated all in one place. His scar had never hurt like this, not even when Voldemort had possessed him at the Ministry—he knew he was screaming, because he could barely hear Voldemort’s furious “Come here, I said! You will obey me!” over his own screams, but his world had narrowed down to the twin needs to *keep pulling* and *hold on* —

His scar tore open, and Harry pitched over backwards into the snow. Voldemort swore in Parseltongue, an incomprehensible hiss broken only by two breathy sighs.

I didn't understand him.

I don't speak Parseltongue anymore.

I hope that means what I think it means.

Harry opened one eye a fraction to see Voldemort regarding the jagged shard of silver which had torn free at the end of the cord. “Odd,” the Dark Lord said musingly. “Still, best to be sure...”

He drew a wand, as translucent as the rest of him, from his robes and waved it three times towards Harry. “There. He cannot leave now unless I let him, and I will not until I have ascertained his current location and the charms he is using to remain hidden. Now, to the business at hand.”

And tucking the soul-piece into a pocket, Voldemort strode away in the direction of the house.

He must think the pain knocked me out. Harry waited until his enemy was several yards away before rolling over and pressing his face into the snow, letting the cold soothe away some of the throbbing which remained in his scar. *How kind of him to put me under Cruciatus a few times, so I'd know how to handle it.*

Slowly, he got to his feet, following Voldemort towards the house. To his amusement, the Darkest wizard in a hundred years was peering through a window like a child at a bakery, watching whatever was happening inside avidly.

It sounds like a family having Christmas to me. Harry fought off a throb of homesickness for Hogwarts and the Burrow—he had Ron and Hermione to have this Christmas with. It would be enough.

But what would it have been like, if there hadn't been a Voldemort? If Mum and Dad had never died?

Within the house, a piano began to play an introduction. Harry crossed behind Voldemort as a young man's voice began to sing and peered into the next window over.

*Sure he must have been surprised
At where this road had taken him*

Harry kept himself from yelling only by clamping a hand over his mouth.

The singer had his face.

*'Cause never in a million lives
Would he have dreamed of Bethlehem*

Black and messy hair, bright green eyes, round glasses, every one of his features was duplicated on the young man who was sitting on the stool in the curve of the ebony baby grand, except one.

The singer's forehead had no scar.

*And standing at the manger
He saw with his own eyes*

Most of the other people in the room had the same green eyes as the singer. The chubby little red-haired girl sitting on the floor and gazing up at him raptly, the two black-haired primary-school-aged boys who were eyeing the presents under the tree with longing, and the woman sitting at the piano and singing a harmony line all shared them, as did the teenage girl lounging on the couch with her arm around one of the two exceptions.

The message from the angel come alive

That exception was Draco Malfoy, leaning into the girl's embrace and looking, for the first time since Harry had known him, fully at ease, relaxed, even happy. The thoughtful smile on his face made him nearly unrecognizable as the angry and suspicious boy Harry recalled from school.

*And Joseph said
Why me*

The other person in the room without green eyes stood behind the pianist, turning her pages. He was tall and thin and wore wire-rimmed glasses, and his hair was as disheveled as his sons'.

I'm just a simple man of trade

*Why Him
With all the rulers in the world*

Harry risked a glance towards Voldemort and found the snakelike face contorted with fury. *This has to be driving him mad—he knows he killed these people, but here they are alive and well, celebrating without him, and he can't do anything to them...*

*Why here
Inside this stable filled with hay
Why her*

Malfoy laid his hand over the girl's and pressed it. She turned to smile at him, and Harry suddenly understood Ron's reaction to any boy who dared to come near Ginny.

She's just an ordinary girl

His other self inside the house noticed the movement as well, but simply rolled his eyes and kept singing.

*Now I'm not one to second-guess
What angels have to say
But this is such a strange way
To save the world*

Save the world. The words continued to reverberate in Harry's mind as the piano played its interlude. *Save the world.*

He glanced down at Voldemort again, then at the thin cord leading out from his back and off into the distance, and suddenly knew what he had to do.

*To think of how it could have been
If Jesus had come as He deserved*

Those people in there are having the life I deserved, or at least the one Mum and Dad did. There must never have been a Voldemort in this world.

*There would have been no Bethlehem
No lowly shepherds at His birth*

Harry crept down the snowy lawn, watching Voldemort watch the family tableau like a snake watching a nestful of mice.

He can't have them now. I won't let him.

*But Joseph knew the reason
Love had to reach so far*

Going to one knee, Harry stretched out his hand. *Just a little farther... a little bit... got it!*

The cord that linked Voldemort to his body rested in his palm.

*And as he held the Savior in his arms
He must have said
Why me*

I've always wondered why it had to be me. Why it couldn't have been anyone else who was The Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One.

I'm just a simple man of trade

I'm not anything that special. Except when I have to be.

*Why Him
With all the rulers in the world*

And I'm not willing to let an evil wizard take over everything I love just because I'm scared or I don't know what to do.

*Why here
Inside this stable filled with hay*

Voldemort leaned forward avidly, craning his neck to see something happening inside. Harry got to his feet and backed up the few paces he'd come, letting the cord play out in his hand.

He was just in time to see Malfoy tilting his head awkwardly towards the girl he was sitting next to.

*Why her
She's just an ordinary girl*

The girl smiled at him and leaned forward. His arms went around her, hers slid about him, and they drew one another close.

*Now I'm not one to second-guess
What angels have to say*

Their lips met.

Voldemort hissed in fury and pushed forward through the wall.

But this is such a strange way

Harry dropped the cord to the ground, planted his foot on it, and bore down with all his weight.

To save the world

The cord snapped like a rotten piece of string.

Voldemort whirled around just as the color drained from his body, leaving him the silver-white of a ghost. An instant later, he was gone, evaporated where he stood.

Inside the house, the younger children applauded and cheered as Malfoy and the girl deepened their kiss. The singer leaned back against the piano and cast a world-weary look at his parents, who only grinned back at him.

Hey, it could be worse, Harry silently consoled his other self. At least he seems to be better than he used to be. Still, if he starts to get out of hand, punch him once for me, would you?

Lily hadn't stopped playing, and after a moment the other Harry straightened up again, picking up the end of the chorus once more.

*Now I'm not one to second-guess
What angels have to say*

Harry filled his eyes with the sight of the family within the house, letting it take the place of all the Christmases he'd never had with them.

I'll always miss you. But at least I know you're happy.

*But this is such a strange way
To save the world*

And now I have the chance to be happy too.

He closed his eyes, letting the end of the song take him back to his body.

*This is such a strange way
Such a strange way*

You gave that to me.

Thank you.

*A strange way
To save the world*

Harry opened his eyes to the fabric of the tent overhead. His scar ached, but dully, as though the worst of the pain had been and gone already.

It's over. The war's over. I did it.

The thought got him out of his bunk, out of the tent, put his wand in his hand. A thought levitated the tent free of the ground around it, and another shrank it to the size of his palm without harming its occupants. Cradling it carefully, he rose onto his toes.

I want to go home, he thought, and Disapparated.

Ginny Weasley sat at her bedroom window, staring out at the star-filled sky. It was just midnight.

“Happy Christmas, Harry,” she whispered. “Wherever you are.”

The door creaked behind her. She spun around with a gasp.

A tall, thin shadow stood in her doorway. Starlight sparked off a pair of glasses and a grin. “Somebody say my name?” said the voice she’d dreamed of hearing for the last four months.

Ginny shoved off the wall and was in his arms in two leaps. “What did we used to call Bill’s wife?” she whispered into his ear.

Harry chuckled. “That’s an easy one. Phlegm. But we won’t need questions anymore, Ginny. It’s over.” He bent down and kissed her cheek. “He’s dead. Did it himself... with a little help from me.”

“A little help?” Ginny smiled cheekily up at her boyfriend. “Only a little?”

“Only a little.” Harry wrapped his arms more tightly around her. “Just like I only want a little kiss.”

Ginny gave him what he wanted, and several more to go with it.

“Ron and Hermione?” she murmured in one of the intervals.

“Outside in the tent.” Harry nuzzled at her neck, making her shiver with pleasure. “I think I’ll let them figure out where we are on their own, when they wake up tomorrow.”

“Today,” Ginny corrected.

“Is it gone midnight already?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Well then.” Harry lifted his head and looked into her eyes, holding her close against him. “Happy Christmas, Ginny.”

“Happy Christmas, Harry.”

As their lips met again, Ginny thought she heard music.

The Cares Not Taken Never Tickle a Sleeping Dragon

Under cover of darkness and his Disillusionment Charm, Severus Snape crept up the stairs of Malfoy Manor.

Narcissa always was more sensible than Lucius. She has no wish to see her child dead, but neither does she like the idea of his fully embracing his father's lifestyle. Thus, she was easily persuaded that removing temptation from his way fell under the terms of my Vow to her, to keep him from harm.

Also, she may not be of the Malfoy bloodline, but she is Lucius's wife by magical law. Therefore, the Manor responds to her wishes in some capacity, and now to mine, as her designated representative. I should, with that power, be able to override any charms Draco has placed on his room, and remove Luna Lovegood from his presence while they are both sleeping. A Memory Charm to make him think he tired of her and handed her over to me, and a secure room at Hogwarts for her, and this particular disreputable episode will be done with.

And I will be able to face Dumbledore again.

His last conversation with the portrait of the old Headmaster had been singularly annoying. Dumbledore had seemed unworried by the fate of the Ravenclaw sixth year, being instead far more interested in the precise wording of the conversation Severus had held with Draco about her.

It was as if something amused him about it. And then, when I asked him why he was so interested in one young man who shows absolutely no interest in being redeemed, he had the gall to suggest—no, to outright say—

"Draco reminds me greatly of another young Slytherin I once knew," Dumbledore said, adjusting his spectacles. "He had a stronger personality, but I believe that made it all the harder on him when the foundation of his world dropped away. Still, with time and help, from me and from others, he managed to rebuild himself into a creditable man." The small, vague smile left Severus in no doubt of whom Dumbledore meant. "Perhaps, given that same time and help, Draco may do the same."

The only help you ever gave me was to force me to dedicate my life to protecting the child of the man I hated, Dumbledore. Severus continued on his way up the stairs. If I am anything resembling "creditable" today, the credit— he half-smiled at the unintended pun—must go to Cecilia. Cecilia,

whom I met, or unintentionally created, not long after Lily's death, and who has been my greatest comfort in the years since then...

He had never truly understood why the woman of his dreams had the looks of Narcissa Black—not Narcissa Malfoy, for Cecy had a carefree air that Cissy had lost with her marriage—but he chalked it up to Narcissa being the only other woman of his own age with whom he had been on speaking terms in the years since Lily had died.

Or perhaps, somewhere in the back of my mind, I am attracted to her, but the front of my mind is well aware of how Lucius would treat anyone he even suspected to be meddling with his property. Thus, I fantasize about her, and leave the real woman strictly alone.

"Except for swearing foolish Vows to her for reasons unrelated to her own," he muttered aloud, emerging from the stairs. The pain of killing the only man who had ever helped him, to save an ungrateful boy and further the cause of the Dark Lord he hated, stabbed at him again, but eased as he thought once more of Cecilia and what she had told him after he had wept in her arms that night in his dreams.

"You know the truth, Severus, and I know it as well. And Harry Potter will learn it eventually, and he is a fair-minded young man. He will not hate you so much as to blacken your memory untruthfully. Just think..." Her teasing smile flashed out at him. "He might even name one of his children after you!"

If you do so, Potter, it had best be one with Lily's eyes, Severus thought idly as he came up to Draco's door. I will settle for nothing less. Though do make it a middle name if you can...

He flicked his wand at the door. "Alohomora. "

It will likely not work, but its manner of not working will tell me how to proceed next.

The door swung silently open.

Or perhaps I am dealing with a cocksure boy who does not have the wit even to lock his door at night.

Severus stepped into the room. The little light admitted from the hallway showed him the two occupants of the bed, sleeping nestled together with Luna's back to Draco's front, his arm possessively over her side, and their two right hands—

Ah, I see. He places his safeguard on her, rather than on the room. But anything he can do, I can undo.

He crossed to the bed and lit his wand, shining it on the soft rope holding the two hands together. Their fingers were interlaced, he noticed, and wondered if Luna could already be succumbing to the temptation to think the best of her captor.

More likely he forces her to behave as if she did.

Sometimes.

He went to one knee beside the bed, the better to examine the rope and be sure it was not under an alarm spell. There was no question in his mind that he could deal with Draco Malfoy, but he was not sure that he could do so silently, and it would be better for all involved if no one but himself and Narcissa ever knew about this little expedition.

Most alarms are triggered by simple touch. If this one is, I will have my wand available to silence it immediately.

Wand at the ready, he laid the heel of his left hand against the rope.

Nothing happened.

Can he truly be this lax, this trusting? This foolish?

Then again, I am forgetting with whom I am dealing. Yes, he most certainly can.

In amusement, Severus let his hand relax. His fingers dropped onto the uppermost arm of the pair of children, for a brief instant touching skin to skin.

Draco's lips twitched, and his eyes moved under his closed lids.

Severus tried to jerk his hand away, but it was already too late.

Cecilia Black dropped her book at the loud thump from Draco's bedroom. *What in the world—has he fallen out of bed? Or Luna?*

Lit wand in her hand, she jerked the door open. Draco and Luna were both sitting up in bed, blinking in confusion. Draco was untying the rope that ensured they remained together during the transit from his original world to this one, while Luna was rubbing her eyes with her free hand. "Has someone played a Christmas prank on us?" the girl inquired of Cecy.

"I don't know. Draco, would you turn the light on, please?"

"Yes, Mum." Draco leaned over and flicked the switch on his bedside lamp, filling the room with pleasantly dim light, then scratched his arm. "Something tickled here, just as I was dropping off..."

"I am sorry to hear it." Cecilia put out her wand and stepped over to the hallway door, her heart beginning to pound as she recalled with whom she had recently been discussing her son, and what he had pledged himself to do despite all her tactful efforts to the contrary. *It cannot be... but if he touched Draco at just the right instant...* "Go into my room, you two. You can call a house-elf if you'd like a midnight snack."

"What if I fall asleep again?" Draco objected. "I don't want to transit back to Malfoy Manor by

accident and miss Christmas."

"A good point. Come here." Cecy embraced her son and kissed his cheek, focusing on the precise small changes she wanted his mind to make as he slept tonight. "There," she said, letting him go. "Meddling with sleep is dangerous for long periods, but one night will not hurt you. Your magic will not notice when you pass into dream state tonight, leaving you here with us at Fidelus Manor." She could not be more specific than that without giving herself away, but hoped the unseen occupant of the room, if such there was, would apply his fine mind to the ideas inherent in her words. "If you want to use my bed, feel free."

"I think I would like that," Luna said, covering a yawn. "Come on, Draco, I'm sure you're tired too, after all that work at Godric's Hollow. It was lovely to see Harry and Hermione and Ron again, though."

"And to be sure we got them their packages." Draco chuckled. "I'm looking forward to seeing their faces when they get them open..."

The door closed behind them. Cecilia lifted her wand. *Hominem revelio*, she thought clearly.

The spell swept out through the room and showed her, for one sparkling instant, a crouching form behind the bed.

The spoken form of that spell is tangible to the one so located, but the unspoken form is not... he will not be certain that I know he is present...

But no. He would know that I would check. And he would be ready in case I strike at him.

How to tell him that I suspect his identity?

An idea came to her, from a tale he had related to his own detriment, some years ago. She smiled, lowering her wand.

"Healer Cecilia Black, mistress of these rooms, commands you to reveal your secrets!"

A small noise like a cough, or a stifled laugh. "Mistress only of the rooms?" said a well-known voice, smooth and dark and utterly precise. "Not of the house?"

"Not of the house, no." Cecy laid her hand on the doorframe beside her, steadying herself. She had suspected this. She could not let weakness overcome her at the moment her longest-standing dream came true. "I stay here only because of my son. My home is in London, near that of my cousin Sirius and his family."

"Your home." The voice was considering. "Is it yours alone, or do you share it with another?"

"No, I live by myself. Draco may share my home after he leaves Hogwarts, until he finds a place of his own or unless he prefers to remain here. But I have no one else with whom I share my home, or my life."

"And why not?" The voice took on a tinge of sneer, as though the speaker were critical of her choice. "You are young still, and beautiful. Talented, strong in magic. Generous, loving, kind—altogether, a woman any man would be proud to call his own. Why have you not married long since?"

"I believe you already know the answer to that question," Cecilia countered. "I believe it may even be the answer you would give yourself, if you were asked this same question."

Across the bed, Severus Snape flickered into view, looking at her skeptically. "I," he said, "have never been described as 'beautiful.'"

"Perhaps," Cecy said softly, "that is because you have never asked me to describe you."

Severus gave her one of the disapproving looks his students knew so well.

Cecy only smiled. "You are several years too late for me to think you do not know how I feel about you," she said. "Nor, unless you have lied to me, how you feel about me."

"I had no conception you might be real," Severus said, seating himself on the bed and looking around the room. "I am still unsure that you are, or any of this. You mentioned dreaming to Draco a few moments ago..."

"I believe I can explain." Cecilia Summoned Draco's desk chair and sat down. "If you will let me tell you how we first came to meet, from my point of view."

"I am listening."

Drawing a deep breath, Cecy composed herself to begin. "Some sixteen years ago, I dreamed one night in late autumn of a man who resembled Lord Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts. He asked me to tell him about myself, and I did so, giving him my name, my family, some few details of my life, and my profession—a Healer of the heart and mind. He smiled to hear it, and told me it was for precisely this reason he had sought me out."

Severus had blinked once at Cecy's use of her friend's title, but was now nodding in wary agreement that this sounded suitably Dumbledorean.

"He was Albus Dumbledore, he told me, but an Albus Dumbledore from a world far away from mine. And in that world, there lived a young man who was near-mortally wounded by the death of his love." Cecilia hesitated, but Severus would hardly be harmed by hearing her state the truth. "The death he considered—with some justice—to be his own fault."

A wince greeted this, but so did another nod.

"Dumbledore asked me if I would be willing to befriend this man, to meet with him in a dreamworld that we could share, to let him think me nothing more than a dream, and to help him heal, as best I could." Cecy glanced sideways at Severus, surprised at her sudden shyness. "And when I saw a picture of the young man he meant, I agreed. For I had fallen in love with my world's

version of that young man, but he loved another and had no time for me..."

When her story was finished, Cecilia sighed deeply. "So, now you know the truth. About Draco, about yourself, and about me." The question weighed heavily on her mind, it must be spoken, though the answer would shatter half her life if it was what she suspected it would be. "What will you do now?"

Severus looked down at his wand, which he still held loosely in one hand. Pointing it at himself, he murmured a charm Cecilia did not catch. Then he slid it away and turned to face her, standing up as he did so.

"I will return to my own world, if Draco will be so kind as to transport me back with him," he said. "I will try to survive this war, and to end it quickly. Any help you, and your friends, can provide will be welcome. I am afraid I have little to offer in return—"

"Nothing is needed." How could her heart be beating so loudly, so fast, drowning out even the sound of her own voice in her ears? "We are glad to help."

"And then, if I may prevail upon Draco for one more—transit, I believe he called it—I will return here, to ask you a question." Severus met her eyes, desire and hope warring for place in them. "You answered it once, long ago, in the positive. I dare to hope you will answer the same again."

Cecilia was across the room before she recalled beginning to move.

In the next room, Draco and Luna looked up at a small squeaking noise. "What was that?" Luna asked.

"I don't know." Draco got up and opened the door to his bedroom.

Then he shut it very quickly indeed.

That... was my Headmaster. His hair looked cleaner than usual, but I'm sure it was him. Even if I couldn't see his face, because he was busy snogging my mum.

Oh, Merlin, I'm going to have bad dreams tonight...

Shortly after the New Year, Luna allowed Harry, Ron, and Hermione to rescue her and the sword of Gryffindor from Draco, who did his best to hex them all for old times' sake and to fulfill the conditions under which the sword must be gained. Harry did hit him with a Disarmer, which Draco later discovered had cracked two of his ribs. The sword was used for its intended purpose, and Luna remained with the Trio, after visiting her father briefly to explain to him where she'd be going and why (he was rather intrigued to find that she'd be visiting him in dreams from now on).

Severus presented Voldemort with the Elder Wand as a gift, explaining that Dumbledore had once mentioned it by name. Voldemort, after some internal debate, thanked him rather than killing him. After all, Severus had always been a useful servant, and he could die later if it proved necessary.

Ginny, under direction from a note from Harry (smuggled in, if she had only known, by her Headmaster), stole the remaining Horcrux from the Room of Hidden Things and gave it to Neville, who met the augmented Trio in Hogsmeade with it. When the unliving Horcruxes were safely destroyed, Draco and Severus appeared and captured Harry, taking him to the Headmaster's office, where Harry was forced to watch the relevant memories. Severus then allowed Harry to see him and Draco disappearing together, after having summoned Voldemort and opened a vial of Vanishing Potion in the room where they were. Harry assumed, as he was meant to, that they had committed suicide rather than allow Voldemort to catch them as traitors, and went out to wait for his destiny.

Meanwhile, in the otherworld, Professor Riddle (whose life story had caused Severus a fit of uncontrollable laughter) located Nagini, and Draco made transit back to kill her with Fiendfyre, then Apparated to where he knew the remainder of the Trio was and carried Luna off, waving at them cheerily before he triggered the Dreams-Without-Sleep Charm.

Through the TVP, everyone watched the end of the story avidly. Severus was heard to mutter something when Harry was revealed to be alive, but no one, not even Cecilia, ever pressed him to repeat it. They were married the next day, and Severus took up his counterpart's post as Advanced Potions Professor, since it was the youth and incompetence of students which had so frustrated him in the old days. Teaching only the N.E.W.T. level class suited him perfectly, and he had time for research of his own.

Draco and Luna were married shortly after she left school. The atmosphere of their wedding day, which seemed to cause Hogwarts to vibrate with joy, started Draco thinking, and after the honeymoon, he sought out Severus to ask some questions. A few months later, with Luna's understanding of happiness and Cecy's of how the mind worked to help them, the two wizards managed to brew a potion which, when activated with a simple spell and a good memory in mind, created a fog with the same basic characteristics as a Patronus which lasted for twelve hours before having to be replenished.

The potion was put into mass production immediately. Its creators were awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class, and an undisclosed, but "obscene" (as the *Daily Prophet* would have it), amount of prize money from a grateful world. Draco and Luna used their share to travel for half the year, searching out new types of magical animals, and remain in their home in Wiltshire for the other half, Draco writing and Luna illustrating picture books which contained tales from their home world.

Cecy invested her portion "for the children," by which Severus (who would use his to keep himself in rare ingredients for years to come) thought she meant Draco and Luna, until she told him otherwise. He revived five minutes later, demanded that they give his son a normal name, and passed out again before Cecy could tell him they were going to have a daughter.

And they all, as much as was in their natures, lived happily ever after.

The Cares Not Taken Getting What You Deserve

Peering out his bedroom window, the young man swore bitterly. "Got themselves caught," he said, turning away. "Damn fools."

"What do we do?" inquired the girl sitting on his bed.

"I don't know that there's anything we *can* do." Moodily, the boy toed off his shoes. "Not unless we can take out a whole houseful of Dark wizards by ourselves."

"Does it make a difference that it's your house?" she persisted. "And is there a reason you're taking off your socks?"

"Taking off—am I?" He looked down. "I am. Why am I?"

"I don't know. I'm not you."

"Yes, but I am me, and *I* don't know!" A bare foot touched the floorboards, then another. "What were you just saying?"

"Does it make a difference that this is your house?" She stood up in a fluid motion, stretching her back. "Can't you do things with it?"

"Do things..." He hammered the heel of one hand into his forehead. "Of course. Of *course*. But that only solves one problem, unless I can stay out of sight and just send you—they'll never believe I want to help them...unless..." A sudden, wicked grin spread across his face. "Got it. You up for some playacting?"

"Always." She smiled in return. "Are you going to borrow a face again?"

"Hey, it worked last time. Now we'll only get one shot at this, so we'll have to be perfect. Here's our story..."

Harry Potter fought to keep his feet as the Snatcher who had control of him manhandled him up the front walk of Malfoy Manor towards the imposing house. He could hear stumbling steps behind him, and knew they belonged to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, and that one of the other

Snatchers was carrying the silver sword of Gryffindor Ginny had brought with her when she escaped from Hogwarts. The worst had happened—they'd been caught by the Death Eaters.

And the only reason they haven't called Voldemort already is that they're not sure who we are. Harry grimaced with the pain of the Stinging Spell Hermione had used to disguise him. Well, that and none of them are high-ranking enough to wear the Dark Mark. But Malfoy's got it—both of them, father and son, and possibly Mrs. Malfoy does too—and they could all three identify us if they tried.

"Bring them in," said a woman's haughty voice from nearby. Harry squinted and made out the features of Narcissa Malfoy, standing beside the door to her home. "Draco is upstairs in his bedroom. Wormtail!"

The small, rat-faced man farther back in the hall gave a nervous jump at being addressed.

"Go fetch him down. Tell him to bring the Lovegood girl with him. If he does not know them, she may."

Luna's here? And a prisoner? Harry felt his heart sink even further. I thought she was safe...she sent those messages, she's been on Potterwatch, she even sent us a Horcrux...this doesn't make any sense...

Wormtail scuttled away up the stairs, and Harry and his friends were bullied into a side room, where two figures turned from their conversation beside the fireplace. Ron stiffened, Ginny hissed between her teeth, and Hermione emitted a slight moan as Bellatrix Lestrange started towards them, her mad smile coming into evidence.

"Well, well," the Death Eater witch purred, laughing in her throat through the words. "The little Mudblood returns—and brings her friends with her! A pair of blood traitors, and who is this?" She prowled around Harry, inspecting him from every angle. "Could it be? Is it possible? Has Harry Potter decided to grace us with his presence at last?"

"Which wand is his?" Lucius Malfoy demanded of one Snatcher, to Harry's right. "Quickly, man. Don't dally. Give it here. The Dark Lord was very precise—he must be captured with his wand for the full amount of the reward..."

Harry shifted slightly, feeling the movement of the mokeskin pouch against his chest. Among other things, it contained the two halves of his holly wand, which had been hit by Ron's Cutting Charm in Godric's Hollow. He knew the inherent magic of the pouch would stop anyone emptying it against his will, but had to stifle a snigger as he imagined the Death Eaters' response should they manage it anyway. *An old letter? A used Snitch? A fragment of mirror? What is this garbage?*

Wait, the mirror. It was from Sirius's two-way mirror set, and I thought I saw someone looking at me through it once back at Privet Drive...

But the blue eye might have been a figment of his imagination, and his hands were bound, and

there were four Snatchers and three Death Eaters watching his every move. With Draco Malfoy's arrival, the odds would go to a full two-to-one, with everyone on the other side armed and Harry and his friends wandless. It didn't seem possible for the situation to get any worse.

And then the lights went out.

Narcissa Malfoy screamed at the sudden darkness, and again as her wand was torn from her hand. From somewhere else in the room, she heard her sister's shriek of wrath as the same thing happened to her, and her husband's indignant shout. Red flashes lit the scene for too brief an instant to be consciously seen, but left images behind in their wake—

Flash . Bella collapsing to the floor, along with the stinking werewolf who headed the Snatchers.

Flash. Two more of the Snatchers falling. Lucius was staring open-mouthed at the doorway to the room. Potter, if it was him, and his friends were turning to do the same.

Flash. The last Snatcher went down, and Lucius's figure was briefly outlined in white light as what looked like an Impediment Jinx hit him. The spellcasters stood at the doorway, one the Lovegood girl—but how had she gained a wand?—and the other—

Draco? But why—

The magical candles on the chandelier all flickered back into life at once. Luna Lovegood darted into the room and began to cut her friends' bonds, murmuring to them in a voice too low for Narcissa to hear. Her companion pushed a fallen Snatcher aside with one bare foot and entered more slowly, looking around with a distinct air of hauteur. "So," he said, his voice crisp and disdainful. "This is the home of the famous Malfoys."

He was not Draco, though Narcissa could understand how she had made the mistake. This boy had her son's height and slender build, and she had not been able to see, in the instants of light, his broader and more plebeian features, or the mid-brown curls which surrounded them. In the hand not holding his wand, he carried a wooden cage, in which huddled a rat with a silver paw.

Wormtail. There is no hope of rescue then—not that there was much before, but having one person free and with a wand would be better than none, no matter who that person was...

"Yes, this is Malfoy Manor." Lucius had regained his power of speech, if not his ability to move quickly, and was regarding the boy with the same amount of distrust and dislike the boy was bestowing on him. "And who might you be?"

A cold smile flashed across the boy's face and was gone. "Call me Reflection. It's as good a name as any."

"You're the one who's been on *Potterwatch* ," said Ginny Weasley, straightening up from one of the Snatchers' sides with a handful of wands. "The one who's going to marry Luna."

"Yes indeed." A far more genuine smile lingered on the boy's face this time. "Though I'm still amazed she'll have me."

"Spare me lovers' platitudes," Lucius muttered.

"Not used to them?" Reflection snapped, his wand coming up to cover Lucius. "No, you wouldn't be. I doubt you've ever loved anyone in your life. Except your worthless self."

Narcissa found her eyes drawn to the wand, though Lucius, his mouth opening and shutting like a baby bird begging for food, should have been a more amusing study. Why was her mind so sure that the wand was—

She stiffened in shock. "Where did you get that?" she demanded, pointing to it.

"What, this?" Reflection wagged the wand. "Why do you ask?"

"Because that is my son's! That is Draco's! Take your hands off it at once!"

"Oh, was that your son?" The boy pulled a mock-pitying face. "Poor little fellow. Wasn't good for much, was he?"

Red and black bands shot across Narcissa's vision. "What are you saying?" she heard herself ask, in a voice that did not sound like her own.

"Well, if he couldn't even block a simple Vanishing Charm—"

"NO!"

Hermione whirled at the hoarse cry of fury. Narcissa Malfoy was charging at the brown-haired boy who'd called himself Reflection, her hands held like claws, her face anguished and terrible. Reflection stepped aside and caught her around the waist as she passed, lowering her deftly to her knees. She struck at him, but he dodged and spun his wand skillfully around her hands, cocooning them in rope. "I don't want to hurt you," he said, stepping away. "Just stay there and you'll be all right."

Narcissa lifted her head to look at him. Hermione was unsurprised to see tears forming in the blue eyes, and her voice, when she spoke, was choked. "You have already hurt me more than you could possibly imagine," she said. "If you wish to show true mercy, kill me now."

"No, I don't think so." Reflection turned from her to look at Lucius Malfoy, who stood with shoulders slumped like a beaten man. "You have anything to say?" he inquired.

"How?" Lucius's voice was a whisper, barely audible, and he did not look up. "How did you get into my house, to do this thing?"

"Your house?" Reflection challenged. "You still think this is your house?" He tucked his wand

away, set Wormtail's cage on the floor, and held out his hands, palms down, at waist height. "Let's see whose house it really is, old man."

The floor began to shake. Lucius stumbled and fell, as did Ron, behind Hermione. Harry dropped quickly to one knee and caught Ginny around the waist, Luna grabbed onto the doorframe, and Hermione sat down a little harder than she'd intended, staring at Reflection. He stood perfectly still, the center of movement but not moving at all himself...

Things stilled, and the deep rumbling in the distance stopped.

"Your house," mocked Reflection, drawing his wand again. "But did you ever bother to go looking for its magic? Did you ever link yourself to it or learn about it? Did you ever find out that it hates you, you and your whole stinking corrupted family? That it wants to *die* because of you? No. You didn't." He glared down at the fallen Death Eater, triumph in every line of his body. "I did. And the house accepted me. You know what that means, don't you?"

Slowly, Lucius nodded. "I never..." he began.

"Never what?" Reflection cut him off. "Never went out to play with Muggle girls? Never stopped to think you might have left a little something behind? Never cared for the damage you were doing? God, you're disgusting. Get out." He jerked his head towards the front door. "Wait on the front lawn. Kick a peacock, if you feel like it, but don't go anywhere and don't try anything."

Lucius got to his feet and shuffled towards the door. Against her will, Hermione found herself feeling sorry for the man. If he'd ever cared about anything, it had been his son, and to find out Draco had been killed—more than killed, Vanished, so that there would never even be a body to mourn over—

Though it strikes me that's an awfully convenient story. And with what I thought I knew...

She looked up at Reflection. He was watching his father go, but seemed to become aware of her eyes on him as she held her gaze, and turned to look back at her. A lid dropped over a blue eye in a broad, cheery wink, and then he was beside Narcissa, helping her to her feet. "Do me a favor and haul this lot out to the front, would you all?" he requested over his shoulder. "I'm going to bring the house down before we leave, and I don't want any of them dying that fast."

Hermione picked up her wand from where Ginny had left it beside her, shoved two of the Snatchers together with it, and levitated them both. Harry, his face back to normal, was doing the same, and Ron took the precaution of tying Bellatrix's hands together behind her back before he hoisted her with a "*Mobilicorpus*." Ginny and Luna seemed to have vanished.

But I think I can hear them. Laughing, up there. Hermione cast a glance at the ceiling, though she knew it would yield her no clues. *Did they go upstairs to get something? But what?*

No sooner had she dumped her Snatchers onto the grass in front of the house than the answer shot out of a second-story window. Luna sat at the front of a good-sized area rug, two handfuls of

fringe firmly clasped in her hands, with Ginny beside her holding a large box in her lap. Both of them were giggling, and Hermione found her own lips curving upwards in response. Ron dropped Bellatrix unceremoniously beside the Snatchers and ran towards the carpet, jumping up onto it as Luna brought it in for a landing.

"This," he said appreciatively, setting down the sword he was holding in his off hand, "looks like fun."

"It is," Reflection agreed, tossing Wormtail's cage to the ground, as Harry let his two Snatchers fall on top of Hermione's. "Just one or two more details, and then we can use it." He turned and pointed his wand at the house. "*Avada Kedavra*," he said softly.

The collapse reminded Hermione of nothing more than planned demolitions she'd watched on television—the top story fell in on itself first, then the next, and so on until finally the ground floor settled into place almost gently. The earth shook under their feet, but less than she'd thought it would.

He must be holding it in place.

Lucius watched his house crumble with dull-eyed apathy, as though he had already experienced the ultimate in pain. Narcissa observed it all through slits of hatred, and Reflection wore something like an expression of regret. "I'm sorry it couldn't be better for you," he said quietly as the last beam fell. "Sleep well."

Luna smiled as she watched the tension go out of her love. *It's working, it's all working...just a little longer, and we'll be safe forever...*

"Did you say that to my child as well?" Narcissa hissed. "Did you apologize for his death, did you mouth words of sorrow as you murdered him?"

"I murdered no one," said Draco in a bored tone, which sounded to Luna exactly like the voice he'd used for most of his life. She wondered a little that his mother hadn't noticed, but perhaps she was too caught up in the lie that her son was dead to notice that he was standing in front of her. "I'll explain once we're airborne."

"We?" Narcissa frowned.

"Yes, we. You're coming with us." Draco looked around at Luna's friends. "If that's all right with you?"

"It's your carpet," said Harry. "Just as long as she's not going to call You-Know-Who down on us."

"I'll be sure to keep her Mark covered," Draco answered. "But since we're on the subject..." He aimed his wand at his father. "You can go ahead and press yours."

Lucius laughed, a dry, painful sound. "Why not? What more can the Dark Lord do to me than has already been done?"

He pulled back his left sleeve and laid his finger on the skull-and-snake, and Luna heard Harry suck in a breath. *Don't worry, she willed him. You won't have to hurt much longer. I know exactly what to do.*

"Excellent." Draco twitched his wand once, and Lucius fell to the ground as red light flashed around him. "Just for the sake of fairness." He conjured ropes, binding his father's hands as Bellatrix was bound, then turned to the carpet. "After you, ma'am," he said to Narcissa, politely waving her forward.

Narcissa turned her head away pointedly, staring into the night sky. Draco sighed. "Look, you can either get on by yourself or I can put you there," he said, motioning Harry and Hermione aboard. "It's your choice."

There was no movement from the Malfoy matriarch.

"Fine, then." A swish and flick, and Narcissa rose into the air, her body stiff with disapproval. Draco floated her onto the right middle seat, directly behind Luna, and took the right rear for himself. Ron was already sitting in the left middle seat, and Harry and Hermione were crowded across the rear of the carpet, Hermione in the center, next to Draco.

How sweet. They look just like Ray and Neenie...well, they should, but they look like they fit together, even being who they are...

Luna brought herself regretfully out of the pleasant thoughts—she would have loved to spend a few hours exploring the ramifications, but they had to get away from here before Voldemort arrived—and smiled at her friends. "Everyone ready to go?" she asked.

Eager nods greeted her.

"Then hold on!" She grasped the fringe tightly again and pulled it upwards, pushing forward at the same time as Lady Danger had showed her, and the carpet lifted off from the lawn and began to climb.

"Fickle little blood-traitor," Narcissa said in a low voice as Luna steered the carpet through the thick layer of cloud that had accumulated over the Manor. "Not two nights ago, you were singing love songs to my son, and now you seem equally happy to help his murderer..."

"You heard us?" Luna craned her neck around to look at her love's mother. "I thought we had put up Silencing Charms."

"They failed." Narcissa imbued the word with incredible venom. "I came to investigate the sound, and stayed to listen to you make your music. If I had known you were planning his death..."

"No one's dead," said Draco with a sigh. "Luna, love, can you put this thing on auto yet?"

"Just a moment." Luna pushed the carpet a little more and felt it respond.

"No one is dead?" Narcissa repeated, turning slowly to face her disguised son. "When you told me yourself you had attacked my Draco with a charm he was unable to block?"

"I didn't tell you that, not really." Draco rolled his shoulders, careful not to bump into Hermione, who was watching him carefully. "I said, and I quote, 'if he couldn't even block a Vanishing Charm—' at which point you attacked me. If you'd let me finish—"

"Why should I, when the end is so apparent?" Narcissa snapped as the carpet shot out of the clouds. "You killed him, you destroyed him, and stole his wand to strike down all he held dear!"

Luna drew her own wand, aimed it at the weave of the carpet, and whispered their destination, then let go of the fringe and turned her whole body to watch the unfolding drama, as Ginny already had. Ron was edging away from Narcissa, careful of the edge of the carpet, though Luna could have told him the Safety Charms wouldn't let him fall, and Harry was watching with a guarded expression, as though he weren't sure who to believe.

"If you really think your son held his father dear, you didn't know him at all!" Draco snapped back. "He *hated* him, and well he should have! How would you feel about someone whose choice had predetermined where your life would go, without any consideration for what kind of person you were or whether you were any good at what they wanted you to do?"

"How dare you!" cried Narcissa. "Lucius never forced Draco into anything!"

"Not overtly, no." Draco glared at his mother. "Not with the Imperius Curse, not with threats or violence. Only by bringing m—*him* up to think—oh, damn." His shoulders drooped at Narcissa's sharp intake of breath. The slip had obviously not gone unnoticed.

She deserved to know anyway. Luna sent Draco a reassuring smile. *Courage, love—she will be so happy to know you are alive that she will forgive you nearly anything...*

Ginny shivered at Narcissa's tone, as cold as the air around them. "First you kill him, now you pretend to *be* him? To speak with his voice? How *dare* you!"

"I dare because it's true," Reflection said wearily. "I'm not pretending anything. I really am Draco. I was pretending earlier, though if you think about it I never actually *said* anything that wasn't true, Mother—"

"Do not presume to call me that!"

"Why not? It's who you are!" Reflection shook his head, a motion more of impatience than to say no to anything. "Look, I know you don't believe me. I wouldn't believe me if I were you. So go on, ask me something, anything you like. Anything you think only the real Draco would remember. If I don't know it, I'll have a reason why not."

"I have no doubt." But Narcissa's certainty was shaken, and she was eyeing the strange boy on the back of the carpet with a bit more hope than she had before. "Very well. What was your babyhood nickname? What did I call you, when you sneaked away from Dobby and invaded my private time?"

Reflection blanched, the reaction visible even in the moonlight. "Dear God, Mother—"

"You said anything," Narcissa interrupted, her tone holding a hint of sardonic laughter. "Will you go back on your word?"

"No, but—out loud?"

"Yes."

"In front of everyone?"

"Yes."

Reflection gulped. "You're sure you wouldn't prefer me to jump off this thing instead?"

"Say it," Narcissa commanded.

"All right. Fine." Reflection cast one hopeless glance around at Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Ginny. "What you used to call me when I was a baby. Here goes." He shut his eyes and swallowed again. "It was...Co-co."

Ron let out a laugh that sounded like an Erumpent getting ready to charge, and Hermione clapped both hands over her mouth. Harry was shaking his head, a smile growing on his face, and Ginny found herself giggling even more helplessly than she had as she and Luna ran upstairs to fetch the carpet. *Co-co. God, that's so wrong...*

Draco, as he must be, moaned and hid his face in his hands. "This started out as such a good day, too," he said through his fingers.

Luna drew her wand and cut the ropes holding Narcissa's hands. The older witch smiled a thank-you over her shoulder, then turned back and clasped her son in her arms. "You are alive," she murmured. "That makes it still a good day in my reckoning."

"Yeah." Draco hugged his mother back, tentatively at first, then more tightly as she didn't let go. "Sorry to scare you, but I wanted to make sure they wouldn't come looking for me. Not that they'd find me—I've got somewhere to go they don't know a thing about, and I'll be off there just as soon as I finish a couple last things. You're welcome to come if you like. I think you'd enjoy it."

"Perhaps I will."

"Good." Draco cast a poisonous glance at Ron, who was red-faced and wheezing from the exertion of laughing. "Lay off, Weasley, or I'll see if I can't get you throwing up slugs again..."

"We're just all relieved," said Hermione, regarding Draco curiously. "How did you decide what you'd look like disguised? You almost look like—"

"You?" Draco looked up at Ginny and held out his hands, and she passed back the box she was holding. "Here." He deposited it in Hermione's lap. "My journal of this past year. All the answers you could possibly want, and quite a few you probably don't."

"The only answer I want is, why?" said Harry, speaking for the first time since they'd left Malfoy Manor.

"Why what?" Draco craned his neck to see his former rival. "Why wear a disguise? Why write a journal? Why help you?"

"That's the one I was thinking of. The last one."

Draco shrugged. "Why be loyal to people who purposely set me up to fail? All they ever gave me was pain. I'm just repaying them in kind."

"Yes, but your own father? My sister?" Narcissa interjected. "Really, Draco."

"Yes, really, Mother," Draco retorted. "Everything I said about him goes double for her. They're both mad if they think they'll ever get anything out of their precious Dark Lord except torture and death."

"But to leave them there to suffer it—"

"You want to rescue them?" Draco fumbled within his robes and withdrew a sheaf of wands, holding one out to Narcissa after a brief examination. "Fine. When we land, you can go get them. Just make sure they can't hurt anybody, all right?"

"Oh, I shall." Narcissa slid her wand away, smiling to herself. "I have an idea already for how it should be done."

"What was that you were carrying when you came in?" Ginny asked Draco. "The animal in the cage?"

"What, you didn't recognize him?" Draco grinned. "That was your brother's former pet rat. You want him back?" He looked over at Ron. "Mother can pick him up on her way out if you do—I just dropped him beside his friends, the cage is Unbreakable so he can't get away..."

"Nah," said Ron, shaking his head. "Leave him. Whatever he gets, he'll deserve. Where are we going, anyway?"

"My house," said Luna from beside Ginny. "No one should be there, but the Floo will still work. We can get to Hogwarts from there."

"Why are we going to Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

"Because that's where the last Horcrux is," Draco answered. "And because I think you need to talk to Snape."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "You know an awful lot, Malfoy," he said. "How were you finding this stuff out?"

Draco tapped the box in Hermione's lap. "Read 'em and weep, Potter—oy!" Harry had reached across and, with one swift movement, snatched the wands out of Draco's other hand. "Gimme those back!"

"No."

"Still don't trust me? I'm hurt."

"Fine. Be hurt." Harry sorted through the wands, balancing each in his hand, until he seemed to come to a decision. Taking Ginny's wand from his inside pocket, he passed it up to Ron, then put the others away, leaving out the one he'd chosen. Ron gave Ginny back her wand, and she slid it into her pocket with an internal sigh of relief.

"Figures," Draco grumbled, looking at the wand Harry had picked out. "That's *mine*."

"So take it back." Harry performed a few experimental waves with the wand. "I dare you."

Luna caught Draco's attention and shook her head urgently, and Draco subsided. "Don't really need it now anyway," he mumbled, but the look in his eye was enough to make Ginny glad she wasn't on the receiving side. Harry didn't seem to be bothered.

Probably because he can see the end of the war, and he's just so happy about that he could care less about everything else.

Come to think of it, she was happy about it herself. It would be nice to stop living in a tent and tiptoeing around certain words and topics.

And Harry will finally be all mine, without any stupid You-Know-Who to get in the way...

Yes, this carpet could definitely not get where it was going fast enough.

From the afterword of *The Malfoy Papers* (unexpurgated edition):

I have to admit I wasn't sure how my mum and my mother would take to each other (try saying *that* five times fast!) but after a little awkwardness to start out with, they seem to have decided to be friends. Mother's taken over the London townhouse, since Mum moved in with her new husband at Hogwarts as soon as they got married, which was pretty much the day we arrived. Incidentally, the look on said husband's face when we made that last jump between the worlds was everything I'd hoped it would be. I think he still believed I was delusional right up until that

moment, no matter that Dumbledore's portrait had backed me up all the way.

Luna and I got married on my eighteenth birthday, just like we'd planned, and we're living at Fidelus Manor for the time being. I am a member of the family, after all, and it's not like they're overcrowded! We'll get our own place eventually, probably whenever we start trying for kids of our own, but for the moment it's nice to have the company. Luna Floos back and forth to Hogwarts for her seventh year, though she says she's not too worried about N.E.W.T.s after surviving the war. I didn't bother, since I'm on a different career track these days.

Mother actually fits into the otherworld pretty well. Once she realized that people around here were far more interested in her conversational skills than in her blood status, we were off and running, and I'm starting to think I get more of my sense of humor from her than I ever realized. When she's not making the social round, she's got a couple of little pets to amuse her. Sugar gliders, a mixed pair, Bela (male) and Lucy (female). And before you ask, no, I don't know where she got them. Mostly because, very much on purpose, I haven't asked. She Apparated away from Luna's dad's house when we got there and met us at Hogwarts with them already in their little cage, that's all I know for sure. Really, it's all I *want* to know.

As for the dementors...would you believe what it needed to generate the magic that's going to keep them contained was three couples getting married? Or two getting married—Mum and Snape, and Luna and I—and one, shall we say, getting cozy, Mother hasn't bothered to take any permanent legal steps (I'm not sure she *can*, I'd have to look up wizarding law about the status of a marriage in which one spouse has been transfigured into the other one's *pet*) but I'm not an idiot, Vince Crabbe's dad didn't just *happen* to be having breakfast in her kitchen the other morning when I dropped by to return that book I borrowed...

Ah well. I handled one maternal figure getting married, I can damn well handle the other one shacking up. And the three different set-ups among us—Snape and Mum as a wizard from my home world and a witch from here, Mother and Oddy Crabbe (and no, that's not a value judgment, thank you very much, it's short for Odysseus, though it fits him pretty well in any case) the other way around, and Luna and I both from our home world but living here full-time—that, and the happiness we've all found, most of us when we thought we never would, seems to have affected the flow of magic in this world significantly. So the dementors are no longer a problem.

On the subject of soul-destroying monsters and their downfalls, may I just say, well done, Hermione. Thinking to Polyjuice yourself into my darling Auntie Bella and Weasley into my so-esteemed father, since you knew they wouldn't be around when Voldemort called up the Death Eaters to fight (and you just *happened* to have their wands available for your own use), and then the two of you volunteering to check Harry's "dead" body out there in the Forest—very nice, very nice indeed. I'm sure they approve of your sneakiness, or would if there were room for anything except cuteness in their fluffy little heads. Well, cuteness and the other things male and female animals get up to together. Which leads me right back to the place I didn't want to be, so let's get off that topic.

Though really, there's not much else to cover. We arrived safely here, you lot finished the war over there...we did indeed get that popcorn party together to watch my will being read, and

everyone's faces were just as good as I thought they'd be...Luna and Starwing are currently hip-deep in wedding planning (Starwing's wedding, that is, Luna'd better not have any further plans in that direction!), which means Ray and I are staying strictly out of the way...Mum's been badgering Snape into redecorating his quarters, you can hardly tell you're in the dungeons anymore...and Neenie's almost positive she can get one scroll through the worlds to her counterpart, but she doesn't want to try anything bigger than that. So I'd better wrap up.

Given that I started this whole thing off with "Once upon a time", I think another famous phrase might be called for here, except I'd rather not tempt fate *too* far. So instead, how about this: And we all, as much as is in our various natures, are going to do our best to live happily ever after. Break a leg with that on your side of the worlds as well.

Oh yes, and Happy New Year.

Draco Malfoy

Friday, 1 January, 1999